
Introduction

[W]e demand that sex speak the truth . . . and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault suggests that the acquisition of sexual identity is closely bound up with the acquisition of selfhood. In the modern era, sexuality is perceived to lie at the heart of the self, such that to ‘come to terms’ with the truth of sexuality is to come to terms with the truth of the self. In this respect, identity and selfhood are conjoined.

It is with the almost inextricable relation between identity and selfhood that this book is concerned. The sexual identity in question here is bisexuality, the self that of Simone de Beauvoir. A proliferation of newspaper, academic and biographical representations¹ all comment on, and in that commentary are constitutive of, a self which is attributed to de Beauvoir, such that it is perceived to be her property and her responsibility. Significantly however, while *de Beauvoir*, as I will show, is differently constituted in each of the three fields of cultural production, the representation of bisexuality remains, for the most part, consistent: it is inchoately produced across all three ‘genres’.² This suggests that the discursive possibilities of bisexuality are either limited or enabled by the very same techniques and practices which produce de Beauvoir as an intelligible and coherent self. I will argue that it is the multitude of techniques by which de Beauvoir is produced as an individual that *simultaneously* serve to erase bisexuality, again and again, as an identity which pertains to the self.

The textually mediated figure of de Beauvoir then, provides the vehicle

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Identity without selfhood

through which to explore the ways in which identity and selfhood come to be wedded, and the occasions when they might be separated. It is for this reason that the focus of this book lies not on discourses which address sexuality *per se*, but on those which attend to selfhood in all its various aspects. Thus with the exception of a brief analysis in the following chapter, I will not, on the whole, be examining in any real detail the recent theoretical and political interventions into sexuality debates which have been made by writers who identify as bisexual and/or who are interested in bisexuality. The burgeoning attention conferred on bisexuality does indicate however, that bisexuality is not *always* an identity without selfhood, as I suggest here. As chapter 1 will illustrate, it is clear that bisexuality can, and frequently is, claimed as a property of the self.

Nevertheless, although this recent explosion of literature on bisexuality is clearly a site where bisexuality is explicitly produced (and reproduced), it is also the case that sexual identities are constructed in spheres where sexuality itself is not the immediate and principal issue at stake. In the texts that I analyse here, texts which focus on a variety of cultural formations and identities which are constitutive of the self, bisexuality is not understood to be anchored to de Beauvoir's body or to be housed in her soul where it might reveal the 'truth' of her self. Instead, bisexuality exceeds the individuality ascribed to de Beauvoir in a number of ways. This, then, is the double axis on which the analysis here rests and the tension which it explores: how is it that de Beauvoir is produced as a self? In representations of de Beauvoir, what contemporary notions of selfhood, one of the aspects of which might or might not be individuality, preclude the possibility of de Beauvoir being perceived as 'bisexual'?

It is through an exploration of the variety of ways that sexuality *and* selfhood are produced that the analysis herein, although confined to a single individual, has implications *beyond* the singularity of de Beauvoir. Throughout this book I will be exploring some of the well-documented 'techniques of the self' which constitute the boundaries of what is considered, in the West,³ to be 'intelligible' selfhood. These techniques may work in conjunction with each other, they may contradict each other, or they may simply produce the self in different ways (for example, temporally or spatially).⁴ By exploring those techniques which render the figure of de Beauvoir intelligible, it is possible to illustrate:

the connections between the truths by which human beings are rendered thinkable – the values attached to images, vocabularies, explanations and so forth – and the techniques, instruments and apparatuses which presuppose human beings to be certain sorts of creatures, and act upon them in that light.

(N. Rose 1996: 296. See also Foucault 1988a)

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Even contemporary feminist and queer theories of the self, as I will illustrate in chapter 2, are not always entirely distanced from conceptions of selfhood which are often understood to include, for example, boundedness and individuality. In this respect the study of bisexuality here goes some way to demonstrate what is at stake in recent analyses of the self and why it is that sexuality, in particular, often lies at the cutting edge of these debates.

The book will draw, principally, on Deleuze's analysis of Foucault (1988). The conceptual associations between the two thinkers have been strengthened by Deleuze's claim that Foucault's work has changed 'what it means to think' (Deleuze 1988: 120) and Foucault's announcement that 'this century will be known as Deleuzian' (Foucault 1977: 165). Rosi Braidotti suggests that: 'With the Foucault–Deleuze connection philosophy becomes creative, affirmative, critical work' (Braidotti 1991: 67) and that no account of Foucault's work would be complete without reference to Deleuze because he, 'more than any other, accompanied and in many ways pursued the Foucauldian project well beyond the aims intended by its initiator' (Braidotti 1991: 66). Braidotti's assertion is confirmed in this book: I will be suggesting that while Foucault's work provides a useful analysis of techniques of the self, his own conception of the self, an aesthetics of the self, is not ultimately sufficient to account for 'bisexuality' as it is produced here. The study of the ways in which bisexuality *fails* to be constituted as an identity bound to selfhood, also renders the *cost* of intelligible selfhood, to the self which is produced through a variety of techniques, explicit:

It is . . . a question of the thousand petty humiliations, self-denigrations, deceptions, lies, seductions, cynicisms, bribes, hopes and disappointments, that are the price, the other side, of these 'civilising' processes. (N. Rose 1996: 322)

It is in this light that the epigraphs which frame this book were chosen and the conclusions at the end of the analysis will be drawn. It is in this light also, that I have attempted to avoid reinstating a one-to-one relation between desire and selfhood and, rather than claim that de Beauvoir is 'really' bisexual, consider what possibilities are engendered by the notion of an identity without a self. I have employed Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire to do this because, significantly, they offer a conception of desire where subjectivity is not posited as its ultimate arbiter.

1

Identity and selfhood

It is not unusual in much contemporary, and particularly post-structuralist, social and cultural theory to preface any analysis of ‘identity’ or ‘subjectivity’ with the caveat that these are subject positions without essence and, to a greater or lesser extent, to assert that selfhood itself is socially and/or discursively constructed. These claims, which might loosely be situated under the umbrella of ‘deconstruction’, have been of special interest to those who seek to politicise the self and, in so doing, to expose the naturalised and universalistic notion of the self for what it is.¹ Feminists such as Rosi Braidotti, for instance, argue that it is precisely because ‘systems of knowledge and scientific discourse at large’ (Braidotti 1994: 152) conflate the specifically White masculine point of view with the generally human standpoint, that a history of Western feminism from Simone de Beauvoir’s work in the 1950s through to 1990s feminist post-structuralist theory, has constantly questioned, revised and produced concepts of identity and difference.²

While the move away from a notion of identity as fixed and immutable has been welcomed, particularly because it calls attention to differences within and among ‘women’, it has nevertheless produced its own share of tensions. Feminists have shown that there is much pleasure to be had in ‘having’ an identity, and that sometimes having an identity, or passing as a particular identity, is not a question of pleasures, but of life and death (Phelan 1993). Patricia Waugh (1992) notes that the deconstruction of concepts such as identity, history and agency is itself a privilege; they must exist before they can be dismantled. While broadly in favour of the destabilisation of identity, Braidotti herself has also noted that: ‘contemporary philosophical discussions on the death of the knowing subject . . . have the immediate effect of concealing and undermining the attempts of women to find a theoretical voice of their own . . . in order to deconstruct the subject

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

one must first have gained the right to speak as one' (Braidotti quoted in Benhabib 1995a: 32). Waugh and Seyla Benhabib also point out that post-modern theories are themselves not free of the 'patriarchal metanarratives' (Waugh 1992: 199) which they seek to deconstruct: 'it [should] be important to note right at the outset that much of the post-modernist critique of Western metaphysics itself proceeds under the spell of a metanarrative, namely . . . that "Western metaphysics has been under the spell of the 'metaphysics of presence' at least since Plato . . ."' (Benhabib 1995a: 24). Nevertheless, the problems with, and within, these theories might not necessarily have a bearing on the question of whether feminism should or should not build alliances in this area. Alice Jardine for example, argues that it would be a 'fatal mistake' (Jardine 1985: 257) to dismiss modernity entirely since it offers a number of theoretical concepts which may be useful to feminist theories and practices. Elizabeth Grosz too, suggests that feminists should acknowledge rather than disavow 'patriarchal frameworks, methods, and presumptions' and, further, that it is the '*immersion* [of feminism] in patriarchal practices (including those surrounding the production of theory) [which] is the condition of its effective critique of and movement beyond them' (Grosz 1995: 57).

The 'deconstruction' of identity then, raises a number of issues for feminists and has forced further reflection on the concept of 'feminism' itself, as well as on the category 'women' which is usually assumed to be its foundation. For example: although the act of deconstruction – and especially the deconstruction of the notion of an 'essence' of identity – has been acknowledged to have 'radical' implications (not least because it reveals that processes of knowledge production, and knowledges themselves, are not neutral), it is also the case that identity and selfhood remain the privileged terrain from which a politics can be articulated (such as the identity 'woman', for example, in feminist politics).³ In response to this paradox, Gayatri Spivak has suggested that although 'it is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism . . . strategically we cannot' (Spivak 1984/5: 184). And indeed, the value of strategic essentialism was recently illustrated when a number of anti-gay politicians and activists in America revealed themselves to be eager to situate homosexual identities in the arena of voluntary choice rather than biological essence:

The response of antigay politicians and activists to the recent wave of biological reports on sexual orientation has been a uniform 'It ain't so!' When former Vice President Dan Quayle was asked in 1992 about the brain and genetic studies, he said 'My viewpoint is that it's more of a choice than a biological situation . . . it is a wrong choice.'

(LeVay 1996: 249)

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Identity without selfhood

If homosexuality is a choice, rather than an inherent essence, then it may also be figured as a ‘wrong’ choice (as Dan Quayle puts it). A further implication here is that, *as a choice* (rather than a biological or genetic attribute), homosexuality may be ‘unchosen’. Biological essentialism – and the assertion of an identity which cannot be wilfully ‘detached’ from the self – may therefore be used to shield lesbians, gays and bisexuals from the wave of anti-gay discrimination. As culture and choice are themselves deployed as essences, biology and genetics are transformed from that which oppresses to that which can protect homosexuals.⁴

It is in the face of such stark and reductive dismissals of identity once its ‘essence’ – whatever form that essence might take⁵ – has been disputed, and in an attempt to maintain *both* an anti-humanist position *and* some working notion of ‘identity’, that some feminist theorists have turned their attention to Michel Foucault’s work. In the short but important article ‘What is enlightenment?’ (Foucault 1991a), Foucault outlines the reasons for his rejection of humanism and situates his own work against it. Although arguing that ‘not . . . everything that has ever been linked with humanism is to be rejected’ (Foucault 1991a: 44), he is critical of the way that humanism, leaning ‘on certain conceptions of man’ (1991a: 44) – such as the conception that human consciousness is ‘the original subject of all historical development’ (Foucault quoted in Deleuze 1988: 21) – subsequently colours and justifies these assumptions ‘to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse’ (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, while Foucault argues that the subject cannot be understood to be the originary source of discourse, this stance does not lead him to dispense entirely with an analysis of identity and selfhood. On the contrary, in what has become known as his genealogical phase (Foucault 1991b), he addresses the production of subjectivity and argues that discourse is constitutive not only of statements but of the subject itself, as both the target and object of power. In other words, the speaking subject, as a discursive site, is implicated in the very same power relationships that allow the theoretical text to function.

It is this redefinition of discourse, where discourse constitutes the bridge between the material and the theoretical (Braidotti 1991: 78–9, 88–9), which has been one of the most productive and significant features of Foucault’s work in the context of post-structuralist feminist theory. For this reason, it is worth considering it in more detail.

Foucault’s neo-materialism

The shift from the textual to the material corporeality of the subject, Deleuze argues, begins when Foucault focuses his attention not just on ‘the

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

primacy of the statement in knowledge' (Deleuze 1988: 33), as in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1992a), but also on 'the form of the visible, as opposed to the form of whatever can be articulated' (Deleuze 1988: 32).⁶ In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1979b) for example, the penal code is understood as that which *articulates* criminality, while the prison itself makes the criminal *visible* and itself constitutes a visibility, the Panopticon: 'a visual assemblage and a luminous environment' (Deleuze 1988: 32). Hence the visible, a further dimension of discourse, does not refer simply to what is, literally, 'seeable' (such as the material form of the prison or empirical bodies), but is also productive of what we are and are not able to visualize: 'For example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century masses and populations become visible, and emerge into the light of day' (ibid.). In this respect, unformed matter is formed into substances, which 'are revealed by visibility' (Deleuze 1988: 77).

According to Deleuze then, *Discipline and Punish* marks a turning point after which the visible and articulable are linked – by knowledge as well as by power, which are themselves bound to each other. Knowledge does not appear where power relations are suspended; rather, all knowledge expresses or implies a power relation. Because power has no essence (no independent form or content), its domain is strategic: power is a *strategy*, or non-formalised relation, whose effects are attributed 'to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings' (Foucault quoted in Deleuze 1988: 25). While the domain of power is *strategic*, that of knowledge, by contrast, is *stratic* (Deleuze 1988: 112). Knowledge arranges, regulates and normativises. Concerned with forms, it forms substances (formed matter, which is revealed by visibilities) and formalises functions (which are revealed by statements).

Foucault develops the notion of a 'diagram' which is 'a display of the relations between forces which constitute power' (Deleuze 1988: 36). Two forms of regulation, description-scenes and statement-curves (which correspond to two systems: that of light and that of language, visibles and articulables), realise the diagram of forces. Thus:

The *diagram* is no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map, a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field . . . It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak. (Deleuze 1988: 34)

It is the very blindness and muteness of power, and that it does not 'reveal' anything of itself (any hidden depth or meaning), which incites *us* to see and to speak.⁷ This is because in itself power is only 'virtual, potential, unstable' (Deleuze 1988: 37); it is affirmed, realised, or 'integrated' (ibid.) only when it is carried out. And conversely: 'Seeing and Speaking are

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Identity without selfhood

always already completely caught up with power relations which they presuppose and actualise' (Deleuze 1988: 82). Power is therefore productive before it is repressive, it may incite, induce, seduce and provoke:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1991c: 61)

Foucault's redefinition of power as productive, as a microphysics which informs the whole social field, coupled with his emphasis on the way that knowledge forms substances as well as formalises functions, lends what Braidotti calls a 'neo-materialis[t]' (Braidotti 1991: 265) aspect to his work: 'materialism [is redefined] in such a way as to include the bodily materiality of the subject' (Braidotti 1991: 89). The term *assujettissement* describes subjectification as both an active (subject of) and passive (subjected to) process connected to power and knowledge through discourse. The definition of truth too, is extended. Not only a system which produces and regulates statements, truth is now inextricably linked to power: "'Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A "regime" of truth' (Foucault 1991c: 74).

This redefinition of discourse enables Foucault to consider the material effects of processes of subjectification while at the same time, because the subject is understood to be produced through a matrix of power relations, displaces the concept of an essential and transcendent self, a humanist self which 'runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history' (Foucault 1991c: 59). From now on, the self is perceived to be the site of an historical problem where even the question 'What kinds of human beings have we become?' (N. Rose 1996: 294) represents a historically and culturally specific project. Lois McNay suggests that in the final phase of Foucault's work: 'Established patterns of individualization are rejected through the interrogation of what are held to be universal, necessary forms of identity in order to show the place that the contingent and the historically specific occupy within them' (McNay 1994: 145).

It is this focus on the self and particularly processes of individualisation, without recourse to humanism, which enables Foucault, as Elspeth Probyn argues, to develop 'a mode of theory that is not organized around individuals but that with force offers us a space where we can take seriously how we are individuated' (Probyn 1993: 136). Thus for example, Foucault reveals that the author appears in discourse at a 'privileged moment of

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy and the sciences' (Foucault 1991d: 101). This means not that an act of volition on the part of the individual produces that individual as an author, but rather that the subject position 'Author' contributes to the production of individuality (see chapter 3 especially). As Rosalyn Diprose says, 'the operation of power is ahead of conscious intervention' (Diprose 1994: 29). Hence even if the individual were to attempt to overturn the 'traditional image' (Foucault 1981: 59) of the author, by setting out, for example, 'to write a text on the horizon of which a possible oeuvre is prowling', it would still be from 'some new author-position' that this 'trembling outline' (*ibid.*) would be cut. Critiquing reflective Cartesian consciousness, Foucault displaces the centrality of the self in favour of 'a process of knowledge production where . . . the code precedes and is independent of the message' (Braidotti 1991: 89).

That power relations can penetrate the body without first having been mediated by consciousness indicates that Foucault's analysis of subjectivity extends further than the analysis of the stratic or formalised relations of knowledge and the relations between forces (power). Foucault identifies a third axis, 'the axis of ethics' (Foucault 1991a: 48), which is folded force and which constitutes subjectivity:

What I want to show is how power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representation. If power takes hold on the body, this isn't through its having first been interiorized in people's consciousness. (Foucault 1980b: 186)

Whereas in his earlier works Foucault defined the subject as derivative of the statement, in his later work the 'interiority' of the subject, and indeed the subject itself, is understood as an in-folding of the outside or the folded inside of the outside. The fold, therefore, is not something other than the outside, nor does it reflect the outside. Instead, it is 'precisely the inside of the outside' (Deleuze 1988: 97), a 'doubling' movement whereby the fold relates 'back to itself' and in this folding back, a relation to the self emerges ('subjectivation'). In other words, subjectification is *constitutive of interiority*. Deleuze writes:

This is what the Greeks did: they folded force, even though it still remained in force. They made it relate back to itself. Far from ignoring interiority, individuality or subjectivity they invented the subject, but only as a derivative or the product of a 'subjectivation'. (Deleuze 1988: 101)

How did the Greeks do this, what Deleuze calls 'subjectivation'? In his analysis of Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries AD, of

Cambridge University Press

052162357X - Identity without Selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and Bisexuality

Mariam Fraser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Identity without selfhood

Christian spirituality and of the monastic principles developed in the fourth and fifth centuries of the late Roman Empire (Foucault 1988b), Foucault demonstrates: ‘the *problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which these problematizations are formed’ (Foucault quoted in Probyn 1993: 122). In other words, Foucault makes explicit the way that the self under examination is itself the *result* of the processes which attempt to explore and/or describe it. Confession is no longer the only instrument which produces truth (as implied in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*);⁸ Foucault turns his attention to the *variety* of techniques which enable individuals to affect ‘their own bodies, their own souls, their own thought, their own conduct’ (Foucault quoted in Probyn 1993: 120). Hence subjects not only perform operations on their own bodies and thoughts, but also, in so doing, transform and modify themselves. I will outline some of these operations briefly, since the implications *for* the self, of techniques – such as self-reflection, writing and confession – *of* the self, will be examined throughout this book.

Greco-Roman and early Christian techniques of the self

In Greek and Roman texts the injunction to care for the self is ‘a *real activity* and not just an attitude’ (Foucault 1988b: 24. My emphasis.). The Greeks developed a ‘mirror relation’ (Foucault 1988b: 31) to the soul, believing that the truth lay within it, while the Stoics subjectified truth through a mnemotechnical formula: they memorised their teachers’ statements and converted them into rules of conduct. The constant writing activity undertaken during this period served to intensify and widen the experience of the self. Foucault argues therefore, that writing about the self was an established practice long before either the Reformation or romanticism.

Although the method through which the Stoics subjectified truth was different to that of the Greeks, for them too, these practices constituted a permanent principle of action, which were, additionally, subject to examination: ‘Is this truth assimilated enough to become ethics so that we can behave as we must when an event presents itself?’ (Foucault 1988b: 36). Notably, in what Foucault describes as a ‘pre-Freudian machine of censorship’ (Foucault 1988b: 38), the self was to watch over and weigh up its own representations of its thoughts in order that they may be controlled. In a similar vein, monastic techniques of the self required the self to scrutinise its thoughts continually (in order that they might always be directed toward God) and, in order to purify them, to continually verbalise them to a higher authority: ‘scrutiny is based on the idea of a secret concupiscence. [. . .] It