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**‘The Lady Doth Protest Too Much’:  
Theorising Disidentification in Contemporary Gender  
Politics**

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# **‘The Lady Doth Protest Too Much’: Theorising Disidentification in Contemporary Gender Politics**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that a solid understanding of the concept of ‘disidentification’ may provide us with stronger analytical insights into several key dimensions of contemporary political identities, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. However, I argue that the concept of disidentification, in the existing literature, remains under-used and under-theorised. This paper hopes to rectify this by developing a detailed theoretical conception of disidentification, as well as exploring in some detail its relevance for a number of key aspects of contemporary feminism. More specifically, I begin by engaging critically with the work of Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz and Jose Medina, all of whom have sought to use the term in a productive fashion to advance our understanding of contemporary forms of gendered and sexualised identity formation. In so doing, I problematise the conception of disidentification refers to the dialectic of identification and counter-identification (captured by Medina’s paraphrase of line from *Hamlet* ‘to be *and* not to be’). Drawing on Judith Butler, Diana Fuss and Astrid Henry, I argue that the term has greater resonance and analytical bite when linked it to notions of disavowal and repudiation (also condensed into a line from *Hamlet* ‘the lady doth protest too much’). After making the theoretical case for this particular conception of disidentification, in the second half of the paper I draw attention to two more empirical instances in which this particular conception of disidentification proves illuminating. Both drawn from the contemporary British context, these are, first, the character of hegemonic discourses on contemporary “young” womanhood and second, the relation between “third wave” feminist subjectivities and previous generations of feminism. I conclude with some reflections on the paper’s normative implications.

## Introduction

Much recent theoretical discourse has centred upon the character of post-foundational conceptualisations of identity and subjectivity. However, within these discussions, the notion of “disidentification” is sometimes mentioned, yet rarely theorised. This, I argue, represents a major oversight. My contention is that an understanding of the concept of “disidentification” is crucial if we are to successfully get to grips with the formation of contemporary gendered subjectivities, as well as the types of subjectivities that may be required to contest hegemonic gender discourses.<sup>1</sup> Symptomatic of this oversight, I have found that those works that do grapple with the notion of disidentification tend to work with an insufficiently differentiated conception of the term. Thus, the task at hand is to outline a number of different ways in which the concept of disidentification has been utilised, before providing a defence of one particular conception of disidentification, and finishing up with some indications of how this particular conception of the term sheds light on a number of key processes at work within contemporary gender politics.

More substantively, my argument evolves out of a critical engagement with the work of Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz and Jose Medina, all of whom have sought to use the term in a productive fashion to advance our understanding of contemporary forms of gendered and sexualised identity formation. All three authors operate with similar understandings of the term – indeed, Medina’s use of it is explicitly drawn from Butler – and yet, my sense is that the way they utilise the term affords it insufficient distinctiveness to have significant analytical usefulness. When both Butler and Medina explicitly use the term, they link it to notions of “misrecognition” and “uneasiness” – the notion that one identifies with a given subject position (such as “woman” or “gay”) but at the same time feels a certain distance from hegemonic or normative conceptions of what that identification might entail. In this context, disidentification refers to the dialectic of identification and counter-identification encapsulated in Medina’s phrase ‘to be *and* not to be.’ This dialectic is fundamental to the assumption of gendered and other subjectivities, but one could reasonably argue that it is now received wisdom within post-foundational theories of the formation of identity. As I shall argue, Muñoz’s conception of the term is somewhat different, but in my reading is largely analogous to a number of core concepts in contemporary theories of political resistance, such that the term remains insufficiently distinctive.

To give the notion of disidentification more distinctiveness and analytical bite, I argue that – taking the lead from Diana Fuss as well as Astrid Henry’s work on feminist generational relations – it would be more fecund to link it to the notion of disavowal and the logic of repudiation as found in Butler’s work (noting that Butler does not explicitly link these processes to disidentification). After making the theoretical case for this particular conception of disidentification, in the second half of the paper I draw attention to two more empirical instances in which this particular conception of disidentification proves more illuminating than the more commonsensical version advanced by Medina. Both drawn from the contemporary British context, these are, first, the character of hegemonic discourses on contemporary “young” womanhood and second, the relation between “third wave” feminist subjectivities and previous generations of feminism.

## **‘To Be and Not to Be’: Existing Conceptions of Disidentification**

In this section, I shall briefly run through a variety of existing conceptions of disidentification that one finds in the literature, thus clearing the ground for the advancement of the particular conception that I shall defend later. My argument, for the most part, is not so much that existing uses of the term are “wrong” or flawed in any strong sense, but rather that it would be desirable to operationalise disidentification in such a way that it maintains a distinctiveness which, for me, existing conceptions lack.

### *1) Disidentification as non-identification*

The first conception of disidentification is a purely hypothetical one, i.e. I have not found any literature that uses the term in this manner, although for the sake of clarity it may be useful to distinguish between disidentification – as outlined below – and non-identification. *Non-identification* refers to a simple non-identification with a given subjectivity, such that that non-identification is not antagonistic, and possibly apathetic. For instance, one may say “I am not a doctor” or “I am not a birdwatcher” without these statements indicating any affective investment in an antagonistic relation with either doctors or birdwatchers.

### *2) Disidentification as counter-identification*

By contrast, the concept of disidentification has been used – particularly in the social psychology literature – as referring to an *active* non-identification with a particular subjectivity such that there is an affective investment in an antagonistic relation to a particular subject position or group. As Elobash and Bhattacharya point out, disidentification – in this sense – is to be distinguished from non-identification: the latter is ‘a state in which one has neither connection to nor separation from an issue or person because one does not care about it,’ in contrast to active ‘cognitive dissociation from groups they feel are not self-defining’ (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001: 394). In the context of their paper, Elobash and Bhattacharya follow up this discussion with an empirical study of people who actively “cognitively disassociate” themselves from the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the USA, such that they stand in an engaged, informed and actively antagonistic relation to the NRA. There is nothing intrinsically “wrong” with this approach, although I feel the term “counter-identification” is better suited to the antagonistic relations to the NRA described by Elobash and Bhattacharya, as it lacks several important caveats of the notion of disidentification I wish to advance here (linked to notions of repudiation, disavowal and incorporation).

### *3) Disidentification as a dialectic of identification and counter-identification*

A more subtle conception of disidentification – which I shall engage with at greater length – is that advanced by Judith Butler and appropriated by Jose Medina. Much of Judith Butler’s work speaks indirectly to the political and social implications of disidentification within the context of gender and sexuality, although only rarely is

she explicit about the precise role of disidentification. Towards the end of *Bodies That Matter*, Butler explicitly links disidentification to the experience of misrecognition, ‘the uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong’ (Butler, 1993: 219). In this context, therefore, disidentification refers to a dialectic in which one both identifies and counter-identifies with a given subjectivity at the same time. However, a number of issues arise regarding the status of disidentification. The above short soundbite from Butler is lifted from a series of open-ended ruminations on the potentially fruitful political possibilities of acknowledging the impossibility of the promise of unity in specific signifiers such as “woman” or “feminism.” This would suggest that Butler uses disidentification to refer to an active, conscious and lucid awareness of the “trouble” involved in the assumption of subjectivities such as “woman” or “feminist.” In this context, therefore, disidentification is an ontic, regional process, referring to specific moments in which subjects become actively cognisant of this sense of uneasiness and misrecognition.

However, elsewhere in Butler’s work there is a sense that this process of ‘standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong’ is constitutive of *all* social life, in which case disidentification would become an integral part of identity formation *in toto*. For Butler, gendered subjectivity is made possible through the repeated citation of a normative ideal of gender, but whereby the variability of contexts across time and space will be such that each performative citation of the norm will inevitably be at a distance from – and thus able to subtly alter – the normative ideal that is cited (Butler, 1993; 1999). Thus, “misrecognition” and “uneasiness” become ontological conditions, brought about the subject’s inevitable failure to fully assume the normative ideal that is cited. Here, all gendered (and indeed other) subjectivities are characterised by a dialectic between identification and counter-identification.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the key question which remains ambiguous in Butler’s work is: does disidentification refer to the *ontological* dialectic between identification and counter-identification inherent in all identity formation, or does it refer to ontic, context-specific instances in which that ontological experience of misrecognition is brought clearly into focus?

Similar ambiguities arise in Jose Medina’s laudable attempt to explore the notion of disidentification in a systematic manner. Medina begins by drawing from the same passages from Butler’s work referred to above. However, at the outset Medina implicitly suggests that disidentification refers to an ontic – rather than ontological – process. He asserts that ‘disidentification could be described as a particularly lucid kind of identification or counter-identification; that is, as a way of identifying with the members of a family without losing sight of one’s differences with them, or a way of counter-identifying with the members of other families while seeing one’s similarities with them’ (Medina, 2003: 664).<sup>3</sup> Throughout, Medina sees the value of the concept of disidentification as inhering in its capacity to capture the “messiness” of social life, which is not adequately captured by the tendency within sociology to “compartmentalise” different aspects of one’s identity (*ibid*: 669). This is certainly a commendable enterprise, but Medina’s contribution ultimately adds relatively little to the table. Throughout, he suggests that it would be wrong to construe disidentification in overly simple terms, as a “mere” ‘special case of identification and counter-identification’ (*ibid*: 664). This suggests a commitment to moving towards a more complex notion of disidentification to that provided by Butler: indeed, Medina argues that the challenges of feminist solidarity ‘cannot be met by the unitary logics

of identification and counter-identification. They require a *pluralistic* logic of disidentification which can effect the diversification and pluralistic transformation of identity groups' (*ibid*: 666). And yet, Medina remains a little unclear about how, if at all, a pluralistic logic of disidentification is to be differentiated from a dialectic of identification and counter-identification with a particular subject position. Furthermore, this suggests that disidentification is something that is actively and consciously brought about, as opposed to a general ontological condition. However, later in the same paper Medina says that one aspect of disidentification – as with Butler – is 'our uneasy feeling that we do and do not belong to a family reveals that our identity is never exhausted by membership in one family, that there is always an excess in us' (*ibid*: 668). In this context, disidentification refers to the *general* sense of uneasiness and non-belonging that inevitable arises from any identification (although the extent and character of that uneasiness will no doubt vary across contexts).

There are therefore some crucial ambiguities in both Butler and Medina's conceptions of disidentification. For one, Medina refers to it as a dialectic of identification and counter-identification – 'to be *and* not to be' – whilst also suggesting that it refers to something more complex, indeed "pluralistic," although it is never entirely clear exactly how these pluralistic logics of disidentification could be effected. These issues remain ambiguous in both Butler and Medina's work. More generally, however, Medina's discussion, whilst lucid and interesting, does little to move much beyond established orthodoxies within post-foundational conceptions of identity formation. Notions such as the messiness of identity, uneasiness and misrecognition, the overlapping of identity categories, and distance from normative ideals have been well established within feminist and poststructuralist theory for many years (notwithstanding a chronic anxiety within feminist theory around the question of "intersectionality") (Butler, 1993, 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Norval, 1997, Scott, 1997). Consequently, if "disidentification" simply refers to these core principles of poststructuralist theories of identification, my sense is that it is insufficiently distinctive to be of real use for the analysis of concrete instances of (gendered) identity formation.

#### 4) *Disidentification as subversive rearticulation*

A further conception of disidentification – which nonetheless overlaps significantly with the third conception outlined above – can be found in José Esteban Muñoz's excellent *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*. Muñoz's key concern is with how queer latina/o subcultures negotiate racist and homophobic hegemonic norms through performance art. He does this through readings of a number of case studies of different modes of cultural production by "queers of colour" in the US. Throughout, Muñoz describes "disidentification" as a form of resistance to hegemonic norms that serve to marginalise and repress those subcultures he describes. However, as with Medina and Butler, this process of "disidentification" is to be distinguished from counter-identification, as the former entails a subversive appropriation of dominant norms, whilst the latter entails a straightforward refusal. As Muñoz puts it, disidentification 'is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse,

reinstates that same discourse' (Muñoz, 1999: 97). However, Muñoz makes it clear that disidentification is a specific mode of response to being on the receiving end of the violence (symbolic or literal) inflicted by hegemonic norms. It is thus not in any sense an ontological category, but a way of reappropriating and reworking aspects of dominant discourses in which subjects are imbricated. As he puts it, 'disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical practice of decoding mass, high or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy' (*ibid*: 25).

Consequently, Muñoz's conception of disidentification – as with Medina's – owes much to Butler, but for Muñoz, disidentification, being an unambiguously ontic category, stands at a less high level of abstraction than in Butler's work. Whereas Butler ruminates on the *possibility* of politicising disidentification (Butler, 1993: 219), for Muñoz disidentification refers to that very process of politicisation. Therefore, Muñoz's notion of disidentification could be seen as roughly synonymous with Butler's notion of subversive (or parodic) performative citation. As Butler puts it, 'in a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition' (Butler, 1999: 185). Thus, a specifically political or subversive repetition/citation is one that specifically aims to alter or undermine the terms of the norm that is being cited (Chambers and Carver, 2008: 152-157). In Muñoz's accounts of queer Latina/o performance art, we see multiple instances of dominant norms through which the subjects are constituted – such as hegemonic gender norms among Cuban Americans – being appropriated and reconstituted, often for both comedic and political effect.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the way in which Muñoz works with the notion of disidentification (as largely analogous to subversive performative citation) has resonances with a number of other developments in contemporary social and political theory. If the key nugget of Muñoz's conception of disidentification is that it entails subversive re-workings of hegemonic norms, rather than simple opposition to those norms, then it brings to mind the notion of "rearticulation" in Laclau and Mouffe's work. Their notion of rearticulation refers to the inherent capacity of signifiers to have their meanings altered in such a way that hegemonic norms or understandings of particular issues may be undone and reconfigured (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 105). Think, for example of Mouffe's efforts to "rearticulate" contemporary understandings of liberalism in a bid to radicalise contemporary liberal politics (Mouffe, 1993). However – and especially in the latter stages of the book – Muñoz's conception of disidentification arguably resonates more strongly still with Linda Zerilli's recent Arendtian feminist championing of freedom as a "world-building" practice. In opposition to an epistemologically-grounded feminism, Zerilli champions a return to conceiving the radicality of a feminist politics in terms of its capacity to bring into existence new ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding the world, without recourse to knowledge claims (Zerilli, 2005).<sup>5</sup> This overlaps strongly with Muñoz's concluding assertion that 'the minoritarian subject employs disidentification as a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking. The promises made by disidentification's performance are deep. Our charge as spectators and actors is to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones' (Muñoz, 1999: 200). Overall, therefore, in terms that have resonance with Butler, Foucault, Laclau and Zerilli/Arendt, disidentification is, for

Muñoz, a transformative practice in which minoritarian subjects create space for themselves, and resist hegemonic discourses, by remaking their conditions of existence *both* with and against the hegemonic norms through which they are constituted. The resonances with these various thinkers are neatly condensed into Muñoz's claim that 'the force of performances that I collect in this book is performative as opposed to epistemological energy. Disidentificatory performance's performativity is manifest through strategies of iteration and *reiteration*. Disidentificatory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and reform the world. This reiteration builds worlds' (*ibid*: 196).

As with the accounts above, I have no real substantial disagreement with Muñoz's account: indeed, it is a very engaging piece of work that neatly ties together both its theoretical perspectives and its empirical cases. However, my worry is that framing disidentification in these terms (as a politically transformative practice) blinds us to the role of disidentification in the formation of subjectivity. Formulating disidentification as a structure of identity-formation, as opposed to a mode of politicisation, affords the term greater distinctiveness and analytical bite, whilst also throwing up some interesting questions about what it means to *respond* in a political fashion to a disidentificatory relation (a question which Muñoz's work can undoubtedly help us with). In the rest of the paper, I make a case for applying the term (in what could be seen as a more psychoanalytic fashion) as a specific mechanism of identity formation which, I argue, will shed light on a number of key dimensions of contemporary feminism and gender politics.

### **The Lady Doth Protest Too Much: Disidentification, repudiation and disavowal**

In order to flesh out a distinctive conception of disidentification that can shed light on key aspects of contemporary gender politics I want to turn to a slightly different strand of Butler's work on the assumption of gendered subjectivities, namely, that relating to abjection, repudiation and disavowal. Whilst Butler herself does not explicitly refer to this as disidentification,<sup>6</sup> my sense is that – if operationalised in this way – disidentification becomes more distinctive and thus more analytically useful.

It is worth exploring in some detail Butler's precise understanding of the logic of repudiation. In the context in which it is articulated, Butler discusses the character of the assumption of gendered subjectivities and their relation to sexuality. She contends that the assumption of a heterosexual identity requires an abjection of homosexuality. However, rather than this being a simple exclusion or bracketing out of homosexuality, Butler argues that 'the abjection of homosexuality can take place only through an identification with that abjection, an identification that must be disavowed, an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it, an identification that institutes that abjection and sustains it' (Butler, 1993: 112). Thus, in this context, disidentification refers neither to a simple counter-identification, or even to a dialectic between identification and counter-identification. Rather, it refers to a process by which subjects sustain their identity through a repeated denial of a primal, perhaps threatening identification that has already been made. As Butler puts it, 'this is not a buried identification that is left behind in a forgotten past, but an



identification that must be leveled and buried again and again, the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary' (*ibid*: 114).

Similar ambiguities arise with regard to this conception of disidentification as with those outlined above. At one level, Butler appears to suggest that the repeated disavowal of a primal identification with an abjected homo- or heterosexuality is a necessary component of all instances of assuming a sexual identity. However, at a more empirical level, the extent and character of that disavowal will of course vary: as Butler point out in passing, 'it is not always or necessarily the case that heterosexuality be rooted in such a full-scale repudiation and rejection of homosexuality' (*ibid*: 111). Thus, to maintain a strong conception of disidentification as repudiation at a deep, ontological level, seems at least a little problematic: Butler's writings on these issues sound somewhat reductive and they give rise to questions about what sort of disidentifications – if any – are entailed in "weaker" forms of sexual identifications, or within different forms of bisexuality.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, I wish to keep hold of this basic conception of disidentification as referring to the constant repudiation of an identity which, at some level, has already been made. I would be deeply sceptical of any claim that such a mechanism is constitutive of all identity: instead, I want to claim that this logic of disidentification sheds light on a number of specific concrete instances of contemporary identity formation.

But what, in substantive terms, is involved in a logic<sup>8</sup> of disidentification? For one, a logic of disidentification – in the ontic, context specific sense – occurs when one's behaviour, social situation, self-presentation or other salient category entails, at some level, an identification which, for context specific reasons, is perceived by the subject as threatening, even loathsome and horrific. In this sense, my operationalisation of disidentification resonates with Julia Kristeva's work on horror and abjection. She describes abjection in the following terms:

'A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are safeguards. The primers of my culture' (Kristeva, 1982: 2)

In view of this, I want to claim that a logic of disidentification thus occurs when a deeper, more fundamental identification, is perceived as potentially undermining the stability and coherence of one's identity. In particular, I want to suggest that this deeper identification may often be disavowed because it takes the form of a bodily incorporation that is perceived as threatening. Thus, disidentification may take the form of a deeper, bodily identification which is then rejected at the level of discursive consciousness. I am aware that pitching the problem in these terms implies some form of distinction between materiality and the discursive, which I would consider highly problematic (see, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, [1987] 2006), but it helpfully points to how the deeper, potentially troubling, identification, may manifest itself bodily. A few admittedly fairly mundane examples may help to clear up any ambiguities.

For instance, groups of heterosexual men may, in specific contexts, use homophobia as a regulatory mechanism for policing the boundaries of what is deemed to be

acceptable conduct in specific types of space (such as the workplace, bar or sports club). One may claim that ritualised forms of homophobia constitute a relation of disidentification with homosexuality: the bodily practices of homosociality (as opposed to homosexuality) perhaps – bodily – suggest some level of a deeper, hidden identification with homosexuality, which then has to be ritualistically disavowed in order to sustain the constitutive heterosexual norms of a homosocial space.<sup>9</sup>

A further example might be a rebellious teenager who disidentifies with his or her family. Clearly, at some level, hegemonic kinship relations presuppose that an identification with his or her family has been made, but this identification may be perceived as threatening to stifle the teenager's attempt to carve out a distinctive identity for his or herself. This may then result in an exaggerated distancing from, or denial of, any shared characteristics with other family members.

A final example, similar to the one above, is the phenomenon of “matrophobia” described by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, which, as Astrid Henry points out, resonates strongly with the notion of disidentification (Henry, 2003: 221). Matrophobia, for Rich, refers to the process by which women, to assume a distinctive identity of their own, often feel compelled to disavow and repudiate any identification with the mother. As she puts it, ‘matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery’ (Rich, 1976: 236). Rich's characterisation of matrophobia is more than a little reductive, but it is nonetheless helpful in that it hints at the notion of bodily incorporation of something that is perceived as threatening, something for which “radical surgery” is required.

In practice, therefore, we can see that relations of disidentification – in the sense advanced here – are characterised by a tendency to perform ritualistic and exaggerated denials and denunciations of particular identifications. It could in some respects be seen as a species of what Jason Glynos has called ‘fantasmatic overinvestment’ characteristic of what he calls ideological modes of enjoyment, whereby what is involved is an overinvestment in an antagonistic relation to something which is perceived as threatening (Glynos, 2008). As implied in the notion of overinvestment, these performative repudiations are often enacted such an extent that their force and veracity renders them denial somewhat unconvincing. The sense of it being unconvincing is key to Rich's account of matrophobia, and indeed one can easily imagine a scenario in which a teenager reiterates his or her denial of commonality with his or her parents to such an extent that one senses that deeper down, the teenager acknowledges that such a commonality does indeed exist. Recall that Medina described relations of disidentification in terms of a paraphrasing of a line from *Hamlet* – ‘to be *and* not to be.’ By contrast – but continuing the *Hamlet* comparison – one could say that the conception of disidentification advanced here could be encapsulated in the phrase “the lady doth protest too much.” Indeed, I shall flesh out this conception – whilst also highlighting its fecundity for empirical research – in the following section, which is characterised by a number of examples of “ladies protesting too much.”

## Disidentification in contemporary gender relations

In this section I want to claim that the usefulness of disidentification as an analytical device is particularly acute when one interrogates the character of gender relations in the contemporary British context. Here, disidentificatory relations play a key role both in relation to young women's attitudes to feminism, and in the construction of hegemonic feminine subjectivities. This comes to light in the recent work of Angela McRobbie, who, for me, provides the most persuasive account of the character of hegemonic feminine subjectivity under present conditions. McRobbie's point of entry is an attempt to complexify theories of 'backlash' – the belief that gender politics in the present conjuncture consists of a to-and-fro movement between clearly delineated progressive and conservative forces.<sup>10</sup> Instead, McRobbie emphasises (rightly, in my view) the blurring and mutual contamination between pro-feminist and anti-feminist forces.

In this context, the notion of disidentification becomes extremely useful in helping us understand the character of contemporary gender relations. Here, McRobbie highlights how feminism has been mainstreamed into a wide variety of institutions throughout civil society, such that feminism is "taken into account" across a wide variety of domains. However, this very "taken into accountness" occasions the *undoing* of feminism by invoking it as something no longer relevant and necessary. McRobbie argues that within the context of a widespread acceptance *and* disavowal of feminism, to "count" as a girl today requires, she argues, a 'ritualistic denunciation' of feminism (McRobbie, 2004: 7). Thus, the pervasive "taken into accountness" of feminism is such that it does yield something of a spectral, background existence, such that young women's identification with feminism is one that therefore must be (to quote Butler again) 'leveled and buried again and again.' This dialectic between "taken into accountness" and disavowal can, I believe, be usefully captured by the term 'post-feminist disidentification.'<sup>11</sup>

For McRobbie, there are two key means by which post-feminist disidentification is manifest. The first is the 'post-feminist masquerade,' whereby women who have entered the previously male-dominated worlds of work and education are compelled to disavow the potentially destabilising social effects this may yield by ironically adopting a 'masquerade' of conventional femininity. She contends that 'this new masquerade refers to its own artifice, its adoption by women is done so as a statement, the woman in masquerade is making a point that this is a freely chosen look.... The masquerade disavows the spectral, powerful and castrating figures of the lesbian and the feminist with whom they [the women adopting the masquerade] might conceivably be linked' (McRobbie, 2007a: 725). This in some respects represents a paradigmatic case of disidentification: whilst the bodily practices of women within the public sphere carry the traces of a potentially socially threatening identification, this potential is disavowed through the adoption of an exaggerated and hyperbolic performance of conventional femininity and repudiation of feminism.

The second strategy through which women disidentify with feminism, so as not to endanger the hegemonic gender regime is via the adoption of the position of the 'phallic girl,' who takes on certain elements traditionally associated with normative masculinity, but within a context where, again, the figures of the lesbian and the

feminist are repudiated. For McRobbie, the phallic girl is assumed to have gained equality with men, and thus feminism is assumed to be old-fashioned, no longer relevant. On this basis, some features of traditionally patriarchal privilege (such as greater sexual agency, participation in the labour market, socially sanctioned heavy drinking) are afforded to young women, but on the proviso that critique of hegemonic masculinity is withheld. Consequently, the 'post-feminist masquerade' and the 'phallic girl' are both presented as strategies or options available to young women in which certain post-feminist freedoms are available for enjoyment, but on the proviso that the basic structures of masculine privilege are not radically put into question.

In her recent work, McRobbie talks in terms of the invocation of female freedom as a *means* through which feminism and radical sexual politics come to be undone. She writes: 'on these grounds my own account of post-feminism is equated with a 'double movement,' gender retrenchment is secured, paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom and (putative) equality. Young women are able to come forward on the condition that feminism fades away' (*ibid*: 720). Crucial here is the attribution of capacity to young women as bearers of New Labour's egalitarian yet meritocratic understanding of social and economic participation. This, according to McRobbie, is especially apparent within New Labour's employment and education discourse: in these spheres, the removal of barriers to women's participation in the labour market is taken to embody the new meritocracy (see also Walkerdine, 2003). Consequently, however, this enthusiastic invocation of female freedom implicitly or explicitly negates the need for further feminist political efforts: the figure of the feminist is always old, ugly, puritanical, and thus in opposition to the individualised pursuit of consumption, hedonism and economic participation.

These formulations undoubtedly get to grips with certain features of the current gender regime in ways which narratives of 'backlash' fail to grasp. What McRobbie aptly highlights is the way in which hegemonic discourses are, for the most part, not simplistically anti-feminist, but are supportive of certain modes of female freedom and independence on the assumption that feminism is outmoded and no longer necessary. Furthermore, the post-feminist masquerade might be seen as referring to modes of exaggerated femininity prevalent in *Sex and the City* or, as McRobbie points out, in the fashion pages of the quality press, whilst the 'phallic girl' provides a more analytically rigorous account of the 'ladette' and new forms of female sexual assertiveness. More fundamentally, however, the notion of 'disidentification' – which is used by McRobbie in this context although only sparingly – helps us understand the mechanisms at work in the construction of contemporary feminine subjectivities in the UK that cause feminism to have a shady, spectral existence. The notion of disidentification pertinently captures of the character of a range of at times exaggerated and hyperbolic denunciations of feminism which characterise much contemporary "girlhood." This is, one could argue, particularly the case with regard to sexual agency, whereby young women are incited to adopt an exaggerated, heterosexualised mode of sexual subjectivity modelled largely on gender representations within mainstream heterosexual pornography (Gill, 2007: 258-259; Levy, 2005: 74).<sup>12</sup>

Despite this, more empirical work could usefully be done in these areas: problems arise from the fact that McRobbie remains a little imprecise in terms of the precise

strategies that are deployed in order for young women to disidentify with feminism. Thus, her work would benefit from a series of more in depth case studies of instances in which female independence is encouraged but whereby feminism is shunned and repudiated, and would also benefit from further work on the varying extent and character of feminist disidentifications in different contexts (such as class and ethnicity).

However, the notion of post-feminist disidentification not only helps characterise contemporary gender relations, but also enables a critical purchase on certain aspects of contemporary feminist discourse. As Astrid Henry has pointed out – writing in the US context – much contemporary feminism has become overdetermined by generational logics in a manner that may prove divisive, by virtue of a prevalence of disidentificatory relations. As Henry puts it, ‘writers of all ages, feminists and non-feminists alike, were describing feminist intergenerational relationships in familial terms. As my project progressed, it increasingly centred on how the mother-daughter relation seems to be *the* central trope in depicting the relationship between the second and third wave of US feminism’ (Henry, 2003: 211). It would seem that there is nothing intrinsic to the “wave” metaphor that means it will inevitably be thought of in generational terms (see, for example, Howie and Tauchet, 2007). However, there is a sense that the relation between second and third wave feminism is increasingly a site of disidentificatory relations.

This arises from the fact that, at one level, third-wave discourse does of course identify with second-wave feminism, whereas on another level its very identity is predicated on its distancing from second-wave feminism. As Henry points out, third-wave feminists’ ‘simultaneous identification with and rejection of second-wave feminism is what grants them an identity to call their own’ (Henry, 2003: 215). She writes: ‘paradoxically, many of these third-wave writers attempt to recreate the exhilaration and freedom of the feminist past by breaking away from feminism’ (*ibid.*: 220). Frequently within the discourse of feminists who identify as “third wave,” we encounter a tendency to characterise the third wave as opening up a new, diverse and inclusive space for feminism, in contrast to the second wave which is frequently presented as domineering, narrow and puritanical (indeed, like an overly strict mother) (see Dean, 2009; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). Thus, some iterations of third-wave feminism are cast in what might be termed relations of disidentification with second-wave feminism. As a result, a strong case can be made that the crucial paradox facing third-wave feminism in this context is that its disidentification with second wave feminism in fact mirrors, and is thus complicit with, the hegemonic logic of post-feminist disidentification described above.

As we saw, in McRobbie’s account of post-feminism, she casts contemporary young women as standing not in a relation of simple non-identity with feminism but, rather, in a relation of *dis*identification with the figure of the (implicitly second-wave) feminist. The forceful denunciations of feminism that McRobbie describes implicitly come about because the (depoliticised) promotion of female freedom risks invoking the spectre of the feminist. As such, in post-feminist discourse, the fear of the feminist arises from the fact that, at some level, an identification *with* the feminist has in fact already been made. Thus, one can argue that the disidentificatory relations which permeate contemporary third wave discourse seriously curtail the radicalism of third wave feminism by virtue of the way in which it seems to tie in with a logic of

disidentification with second-wave feminism which is in fact complicit with dominant post/anti-feminist discourses. In this sense, the characterisation of second-wave feminism as domineering, prescriptive and constraining invokes the very same mythical figure of the (hairy, dungaree-clad) feminist invoked in post/anti-feminist discourse.

Furthermore, this logic of disidentification with second-wave feminism is tied to the continuous framing of feminism in terms of a mother/daughter trope that seems to reproduce a certain heterosexual/oedipal/intergenerational conflict among women which poses little threat to what McRobbie calls the ‘patriarchal symbolic,’ although perhaps a phrase along the lines of “hegemonic discourses of masculine privilege” might be preferable, given the somewhat reductive Lacanian overtones of McRobbie’s terminology. Nonetheless, McRobbie eloquently express the concerns related to generational logics within feminism in asserting ‘these feminist concerns with generation remain locked into normative temporalities and spatialities which have been dictated by the reproductive dynamics associated with the norms of heterosexual family life’ (McRobbie, 2007b). Indeed, it is now well-established that the mainstream media relishes a “catfight” between different generations of feminists, which, in a British context, typically takes the form of Germaine Greer lambasting a younger feminist. The emphasis on drawing clear boundaries between these different generational cohorts has, Astrid Henry argues, caused contemporary feminism to become overdetermined by the mother/daughter trope in a manner which is unhelpful and at times destructive. Using such a trope, Henry argues, accentuates inter-generational conflict between feminists and heightens the attraction for third-wave feminists of breaking away from their (symbolic, second-wave) mothers (Henry, 2003: 215-220).

Therefore, if we operationalise disidentification as an ‘identification one fears to make only because one has already made it,’ then it becomes apparent that the present conjuncture is characterised by a multiplicity of disidentificatory relations between young women and feminism. Crucial here is that the logic of disidentification moves us beyond simplistic accounts of the present situation as characterised by an ongoing backlash against feminism. Logics of disidentification enable us to understand the contemporary role of feminism as something that often has a shadowy, spectral existence: thus, rather than being excluded in the sense of being simply pushed aside (which would be a likely outcome of widespread *counter*-identification with feminism), the fact that young women frequently *disidentify* with feminism is such that it continues to have a latent, background existence. Furthermore, foregrounding relations of disidentification brings to light startling similarities between hegemonic “post-feminist” discourse and third wave feminists’ discursive characterisations of their feminism. Whilst the latter clearly stand in a more conscious and engaged relation to second-wave feminism than the former, there is a sense that they both assume the form of a generational disidentification with a prescriptive, motherly, second-wave feminism. Both non-feminist and feminist young women are in many senses dependent on the figure of the second-wave feminist: the former through embodying the feminist principles of female autonomy and independence, the latter through appropriating certain ideals and precepts from earlier forms of feminism. However, for both, there is a sense that whilst they embody certain elements of second-wave feminism, the overdetermination of that relation by generational logics is such that the figure of the second-wave feminist becomes threatening: too close an

identification with the second-wave feminist would risk the destruction of a distinctive identity for young feminist and non-feminist women to assume. Consequently, both feminist and young feminist women stand in what, following Adrienne Rich, we might term relations of “matrophobic disidentification” with second-wave feminism.

Astrid Henry prompts us to ask what the costs are to feminism of continuing to preoccupy itself with generational identities. She contends – and I would be tempted to agree – that the relations of generational disidentification that proliferate in contemporary feminism risk promoting divisiveness and mutual suspicion between feminists. The ongoing tendency to reproduce generational division curtails scope for feminist voices – in all their diversity – to be both spoken and listened to (Henry, 2003: 227-228). Overall, my sense is that the overdetermination of third wave subjectivities by generational logics risks undermining the threatening and radical dimensions of feminism by casting it in terms that are complicit with hegemonic heteronormative models of conflict between women. This risks rendering feminism unthreatening, indeed perhaps even comical, from the point of view of an anti-feminist onlooker.

### **Conclusion: beyond disidentification**

Throughout this paper I hope to have made a convincing case for a specific conception of disidentification, drawn from Butler’s work on the logic of repudiation and Astrid Henry’s reading of generational logics within contemporary feminism, and shown how such a conception is useful for the understanding of a number of key aspects of the formation of both feminist and non-feminist subjectivities among young women. However, I want to conclude by offering some more normative reflections on the character of disidentification. The bulk of the paper has reflected on the efficacy of disidentification as an analytical device. And yet, as no doubt became apparent towards the end of the previous section, an engagement with the concept of disidentification has significant normative implications. When the focus moves from the descriptive/analytical to the normative, further key differences emerge between the conception of disidentification advanced here, and the conceptions advanced by Butler, Medina and Muñoz. This arises from the way in which both Butler and Medina see a multiplicity of fruitful political possibilities emerging from relations of disidentification. Medina, for instance, argues that, normatively, disidentification provides an occasion for moving towards an ethos of reciprocal exchange across identities that is denied by logics of counter-identification, such that disidentification reminds us that the similarities and differences that unite and separate families are subject to fluctuations; and indeed disidentification itself is an occasion for the rearticulation of these similarities and differences’ (Medina, 2003: 668). Thus, according to Medina’s conception, disidentificatory relations open up scope for solidarity within and across social categories, and potentially militate against the tendency to think of membership of social groups in divisive and exclusive terms. Similarly, Muñoz repeatedly emphasises how disidentification is an unambiguously positive social force integral to both the deconstruction of identity barriers and minoritarian cultural production and political mobilisation.<sup>13</sup>

However, according to the conception of disidentification advanced here, disidentification is assumed to do the exact opposite, as it relates to the exaggerated and hyperbolic denunciation of identities that are perceived to be threatening. In the examples outlined above, disidentificatory relations risk exaggerating the differences between groups and limiting space for solidarity between – in the cases described above – different age cohorts of feminists. This gives rise to the question of whether disidentification is always something which, normatively, should be resisted. At one level, one could potentially envisage a situation in which one disidentifies with an oppressive or conservative discourse or subject position. By contrast, one could say – following the work of Jason Glynos – that the response proper to a democratic politics is to seek to effect modes of dissolution of logics of overinvestment characteristic of disidentification, bringing about ‘an alternative ethos which signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters’ (Glynos, 2008:17).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, here Muñoz’s work on specific minority groups’ development of critical relations to the hegemonic norms that constitute them could function as exemplars of the type of critical responsiveness that Glynos has in mind. More generally, however, I want to claim that a crucial task for contemporary progressive gender politics is to interrogate ways in which we can develop critical responses to disidentificatory relations. Clearly this is no easy task, but – as I hope this paper makes clear – the acquisition of a solid understanding of disidentificatory relations within contemporary discourses on feminism and gender is a necessary first step.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst this paper focuses on subjectivities related to gender and sexuality, this should in no way be taken to imply that I regard disidentificatory relations as irrelevant for other dimensions of subject-formation.

<sup>2</sup> The same (or similar) is also the case for Diana Fuss, who stipulates that ‘identification sets into motion the complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition that brings a sense of identity into being’ (Fuss, 1995: 2).

<sup>3</sup> In this context, when using the term “family” Medina uses it not in the literal sense of a biological (or indeed, social) family, but – after Wittgenstein – as a metaphor for sets of identities that share certain features in common (see Wittgenstein, 1958: § 67).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Muñoz’s account of different modes of drag, and the ways in which drag may both parodically subvert and shore up hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, offers a useful and empirically grounded counterpoint to Butler’s reading of the parodic qualities of drag in the latter pages of *Gender Trouble* (which many have taken to be simplistic and over-celebratory).

<sup>5</sup> For a more thorough account of Zerilli’s conception of freedom – which also compares it to Laclau and Mouffe’s work – see Dean (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Diana Fuss in summarising Butler’s work on these issues, does however use disidentification in this way (Fuss, 1995: 6-7). Astrid Henry’s work on feminist generations (referred to below) takes Fuss’s lead and also operationalises disidentification in this way. However, neither Henry nor Butler explore the political aspects of disidentification in any significant detail.

<sup>7</sup> In her extremely lucid work on bisexuality, Clare Hemmings draws attention to how bisexual subjectivities problematise the assumption made by Butler and other psychoanalytically informed theories that a logic of repudiation/abjection is a necessary part of any gendered and/or sexual identity (Hemmings, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> My use of the term “logic” is grounded in a post-marxist conception of politics. Here, a logic is intended to characterise certain regularities within social and political life but without attributing any essential or foundational status to those regularities, and in this sense is largely analogous to Wittgenstein’s notion of “rule following” (Howarth, 2005: 322-326; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Thus, the lexicon of a “logic of disidentification” draws attention to how disidentificatory relations share a set of certain commonalities, but are (fundamentally) subject to variations across contexts.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Nixon (2003) for a cogent discussion of the normative regulation of homosocial spaces within the advertising industry.

<sup>10</sup> For accounts that are guilty of this fallacy, see Faludi, 1992 and Whelehan, 2000. Works by Hollows, 2000 and Walby, 1997 both seek to move beyond a simplistic account of ‘backlash,’ but are less thorough and systematic in their treatment of the issue than McRobbie.

<sup>11</sup> This state of affairs is phrased in slightly less theoretical terms by Aapola, Gorwick and Harris in their assertion that ‘there is considerable evidence that many young women are reluctant to use the term feminist to describe themselves to describe themselves although they may espouse feminist ideals, such as equal pay for equal work’ (Aapola, Gorwick and Harris, 2005: 195). For more empirical analyses of processes of disidentification with feminism (though not necessarily pitched in those terms), see Griffin, 2004; Jowett, 2004; Pilcher, 1998; Tibballs, 2000 and Howard and Tibballs, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this hints at a further key dimension of the performative citation of post-feminist femininity, namely, a latent homophobia in which the figure of the lesbian is rendered abject and in need of hyperbolic repudiation. This is particularly interesting given that, consciously, a post-feminist subject is also likely to be “post-homophobic,” at least with regards to male homosexuality (as evidenced by the cliché of the “gay (best) friend”). The role of heteronormativity in post-feminist disidentification is addressed by Christina Scharff (2008).

<sup>13</sup> A further example of a normative favourably account of disidentification can be found in Aletta Norval’s reading of Jacques Rancière’s account of political subjectification: Norval argues that, for Rancière, ‘the irruption of politics is always a matter of subjectification through *dis*identification, a removal from the naturalness of place, rather than one of identification (Norval, 2007: 142).

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in responding to the question “what is an authentic political act?” Glynos has argued that a politically expedient response is to affirm that which is disavowed for a given symbolic order to function (Glynos, 2003).

