

## 'It is Historically Constituted'

Honkanen, Katriina

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Honkanen, K. (2005). 'It is Historically Constituted'. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(3), 281-295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805054269>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu> Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

**gesis**  
Leibniz-Institut  
für Sozialwissenschaften

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more Information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu> This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der  
  
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

# ‘It is Historically Constituted’

## Historicism in Feminist Constructivist Arguments

Katriina Honkanen

ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY

---

**ABSTRACT** This article explores the historicism of feminist constructivism. It focuses on the work of Judith Butler, and explores how the idea of history and elements of temporality are used in her theory of materialization. It argues that the radical historicism implied in the Jamesonian request ‘Historicize!’ can become a self-defeating enterprise. The hypothesis is that historicism has been used as a kind of ‘black box’ in feminist constructivism. The article points out the way in which constructivists rely much too easily on history as evidence, and talk about history as if it stands outside construction. This ambivalence in constructivist thought is prevalent. The article proposes that feminist theorists of materiality recognize the predominance of self-evident notions of historicity in constructivist theories and start practising a strategic forgetting of history.

**KEY WORDS** Judith Butler ♦ constructivism ♦ feminist philosophy of history ♦ form-matter distinction ♦ historicism ♦ strategic forgetting of history

History has become a commanding meta-narrative, perhaps *the* meta-narrative in Western discourse. (Ermarth, 1992: 20)

I believe, indeed, that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognize that we are suffering from it. (Nietzsche, 1983: 60)

Historicizing and rewriting histories are usually considered necessary and positive operations in an academic setting. To treat concepts or objects ahistorically, or to write universalizing historical narratives, is considered a negative thing. When discussing an object or concept, a sense of epistemological certainty is achieved by referring to the historical specificity of it. Also, constructivist theories often refer to the *historicity* of

constructions; anything that has a history is contingent and *thus* constructed. To understand the meaning of an object often requires knowledge about its history and its historical emergence. In other words, the present state of things is explained through the historicity of meaning. Our understanding of sexuality, for instance, is explained through investigating how meanings of sexuality were historically produced. I point at these tendencies, which I have encountered, to indicate the epistemological value that historical knowledge – this *consuming fever of history* – has gained in feminist thinking. It is my wish to contribute to a feminist theorizing of issues in relation to historicity<sup>1</sup> (Colebrook, 1996, 1997; Ermarth, 1992, 2001; Felski, 2000; Irigaray, 1999). In this article, I propose that it is the epistemological hegemony of historicist constructivism that enables the predominant state of theory within feminism. As a feminist constructivist and epistemologist myself, I want to discuss the meta-narrative status that history has gained. I claim that feminist constructivist arguments depend on such aspects of historical thinking that are otherwise problematized by feminist epistemologists. One of these aspects is foundationalism, with another being universalism.

To make my point, I discuss the ways in which historicity is used in feminist theories, especially Judith Butler's constructivist theories, to see where and how the idea of history stands as a ground for knowledge, as this is one of the most powerful undertakings of the word 'history'.

Generally, there are different uses of the term 'history' in feminist theorizing. First, history can be understood as meaning *being about the past*. History can also be seen as representing the past and the things that actually happened *there*. The strongest usage of the word 'history' implies an understanding where *history has happened* and is *for real*. On the other hand, history can be understood as *fully discursive*. How is history used in feminist constructivist arguments and what makes these usages effective in particular arguments? The different uses of 'history' imply different textual purposes.

My interest in theorizing constructivism in relation to historicity stems from the observation that the debate about the usefulness of poststructuralism for feminist epistemologies often concerns the nature and depth of historicity, and not *historicity* as such. The debate often focuses on whether phenomena should be seen as *situated in history* or *constituted by history*. For example, is 'matter' to be understood through its situatedness in a history that lies 'outside it', as a context, or should 'matter', in a Butlerian sense, be studied in such a way as to show how historicity constitutes matter? What is under debate here is the *depth* and *reach* of construction (see, for instance, Butler, 1993; Carlson, 2001; Kirby, 1997). The question that constantly pops up is 'are things *fully*, or *thoroughly* constituted, or are there remainders of non-constituted constancies?'

It is especially in relation to materiality and the 'constructedness of

materiality' that the place and nature of historicity should be rethought. Butler is concerned with 'unsettling' an understanding of matter where matter is presumed and operates as a foundation for meaning (Butler, 1993: 30). I welcome this unsettling and want to broaden its space by questioning the place of historicity in relation to matter. Feminist constructivists who attempt at unsettling 'matter' should be wary about using historicity as a 'black box'.

Some work has been done within feminist theory that attempts to rethink the constructivism with which feminism has operated (Braidotti, 2002; Butler, 1993; Carlson, 2001; Cheah, 1996; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Grosz, 1994; Schriempf, 2001; Vasterling, 1999). One of the key issues here is a call for a return to the biological roots of the body, or to materiality, and a simultaneous effort not to anthropologize the whole issue of constructivism (Cheah, 1996; Irigaray, 1999). Instead of bypassing the materiality of bodies, these theorists have wanted to look at not just the meanings and ideologies that categorize bodies, but also at bodies themselves. In spite of the feminist critique of essentialism there is, in the mainstream of science, a neo-deterministic and discriminatory trend (Braidotti, 2002: 137) in attempts to 'return to biology'.<sup>2</sup> In my view, feminists need to historicize the ways in which matter has been understood. Historicizing becomes problematic only when it becomes self-evident and when the place of historicity (and *discursiveness*) is fixed in relation to matter as that which 'constitutes or effects matter'.

Against this background, I take a closer look at some of Judith Butler's constructivist arguments, which are widely cited and used within feminist theory. Moreover, I argue that in current feminist theory there is a tendency to collapse constructivism into history. This limits the possibilities for thinking about change. A rethinking of discursiveness and materiality, as simultaneous processes, is hindered by a historicism that privileges the force of discourse in its relation to matter and materiality (Irigaray, 1999). Thus, unquestioned historicism also has consequences for theories of corporeality.

## THE FORM-MATTER DISTINCTION

Within different constructivist theories, historicity is a central part of theoretical argumentation. As an example of this, one can consider Judith Butler, who argues that 'history is constitutive of discourse itself' (Butler, 1993: 282), or Rosi Braidotti, who argues that history is 'a destiny for everybody' (Braidotti, 2002: 41). In feminist accounts that use historicity, there are two ways of understanding history. The first is to understand history as a form affecting the meaning of matter in different ways yet still leaving matter the same. For example, when history is seen to affect the

meanings attached to women's bodies. The second is to understand history as constitutive of matter. For example, when history is seen to constitute the materiality named 'women's bodies'. In that case, the process of materialization is seen as a historical process, making matter (in a Butlerian sense). The first line of argument understands history to be a concrete material phenomenon, 'the past' that is given a certain form through the writing of history. The materiality of history, or the past, is unchangeable, whereas the narratives and forms given to it are variable.<sup>3</sup> In the second line of argument, historicity predates matter.

An example I wish to use in this article is the sentence 'Women in Finland got the vote in 1905'. Particular historical sentences, such as this, can be read as consisting of true statements concerning what has happened in a particular context in the past. It can be argued that this sentence is performative in its capacity to produce a textual meaning as a part (prop) of my argument in this text. The problem with the above sentence is that it is a 'false description of facts'. The correct sentence is as follows: Finnish women got the vote in 1906 (Manninen and Setälä, 1990). The materiality of history, or the event (1906), is unchangeable whereas the narratives and forms given to it are variable.

In the second line of argument, historicity predates matter. History in this case is made of sets of norms, or intelligibilities and is in a sense equated with 'meaning' (in general). It consists of sets of powers that are formative of matter and that operate through materialization. In this case, historicity is there before the 'vote' and even the chronology, which enables the entity '1906' to appear, is historically constituted.

To be able to better understand the complex relationship between materiality and historicity, I use the form-matter distinction as a tool in my discussion. Concerning this Judith Butler writes:

We might historicize the Aristotelian notion of the schema in terms of culturally variable principles of formativity and intelligibility. To understand the schema of bodies as a historically contingent nexus of power/discourse is to arrive at something similar to what Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* as the 'materialization' of the prisoner's body. (Butler, 1993: 33)

Schema means form, shape, figure, appearance, dress, gesture and grammatical form. Butler states that matter never appears without its schema, its form. In this sense, Butler opposes a notion of matter where it is seen as something that is just there, awaiting varying forms. What is notable is that Butler historicizes the form. The historically contingent formative level is a materializing power. Is history there 'before' any matter, enabling materialization? What is this history 'composed of'? If the form is historical, then the materialization, or the formation of matter, is also historical. Butler's constructivist argument further states that

feminists should not take materiality as an irreducible phenomenon, rather they should conduct a critical genealogy of its formation (Butler, 1993: 32). This genealogy of formation is a *history* of form(ation). In order to broaden the feminist critique of essentialist accounts of materiality, I propose that the place of history in relation to matter is problematized. I also suggest that, for the sake of conceptual clarity, the materiality involved in our notion of history should be investigated.

One interesting aspect in the relationship between these two uses of the form-matter distinction, which I have just described, is that they use the same 'source material'. In the first case, the concrete materialities of the past, events, acts, changes and continuities are seen as 'historical material' that is 'about the past or from the past'. The second line of investigation, the line of 'materialization', also needs its historical and empirical objects, be it that these are read as instances of materialization or of a social constitution. The second approach also needs to use empirical objects that are 'about the past' or 'from the past', even if these might now be those invested in present bodies 'carrying the past in them'. In both cases, history is formative: either history is conceptualized as a way to *form narratives* based on past materialities, or it is conceptualized as a way to account for/narrate the *formation of matter*. It seems that the same tool is utilized for telling different stories about construction. The same grammar rule can be used for different purposes. Placing the word in another sentence has effects. From the ontological point of view, the tool is the same: the historical being of objects. There have to be objects that 'carry history', that in their very being *are historical*. Historicity should be rethought at its ontological level in order to make a difference (Laclau, 2000: 183).

## CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE FIELD OF HISTORY

For the language of history to be useable for either positive or negative purposes, it has to be connected to the real or the 'empirical' in one way or another. Full-blown narrativism that denies this connection evacuates some of the political force that history is invested with. This is to say, it questions history as history, making it another form of literature. I think theorists of materiality should think through the interconnectedness between materiality and historicity. This is helpful in theorizing the connections between the discursive and the material.

Within the field of history, it is possible to talk about either the construction of facts (or knowledge?) or the construction of objects and materialities. It is possible to make a distinction between on the one hand, social and historical facts that are constructed, and, on the other hand, 'brute facts', or physical facts (natural laws, phenomena) (Carlson, 2001: 112; Hacking, 1999: 23). What is interesting here is that historical facts are usually

considered constructed in the sense that they are based on temporal facts – the events that are seen to have happened. The brute facts of history are the 'events' and the fact that they 'happened' ('the vote'). What is also asserted is the 'chronology' (1906), the fact that time goes forward and cannot be reversed. I wish to bring into consideration my question that whether postmodern or not, historians honour the 'brute facts' by adhering to strict methods of investigations, including such aspects as source criticism and epistemological discussions. History cannot be narrated without a connection to the 'real' – to events. My perspective, where the relationship between historicity and materiality is problematized, highlights, of course, the empirical foundations of the historians' work. I think that the foundational aspects in the way that feminists think about history also reside in these 'brute facts', in chronology and in the events that are connected to 'history as the past'. I think feminist constructivist theorists need to highlight the empiricism to which history is connected in order to be able to further think through the problematics involved in the connections between the discursive and the material.

Historical objects can be conceptualized as constructed in the sense that they are 'made', 'crafted' or 'formed' by past human agents, but to understand their historicity as constructed and to question them for being brute facts from the past, is usually considered a kind of unbelievable 'irrealism'.<sup>4</sup> Within the historians' world, this is an area that constructivism cannot enter, without becoming an absurd antirealism:

If there is any appeal of Realism which is wholly legitimate it is the appeal to the commonsense feeling that of course there are tables and chairs, and any philosophy that tells us that there really aren't – that there are really only sense data, or only texts, or whatever, is more than slightly crazy. (Putnam, 1995: 163)

This commonsense realism concerning the 'there is' (tables and chairs), also has its historical dimension in the 'there was'. The commonsense feeling about there being chairs is as commonsense as being concerned with the fact that, of course, there 'has been'. The meaning of chairs can vary, but the materiality of chairs is a brute fact with a historical dimension. The materiality of the chair, or with my example, '1906', is a foundation and, the empirical nature of history as a science relies on this foundation.

There is an ongoing debate within the field of history, where postmodernist historians are seen to stand for the possibility of this kind of antirealism, denying the reality of Napoleon, '1906', the Berlin Wall, the Holocaust and so forth.<sup>5</sup> It is my attempt to try to understand this debate in order to advance poststructuralist feminist thinking about historicity. I think it is a telling example of the clash between historical empiricism and constructivist arguments. The empiricist historians consider objects real *and* historical in their physicality or materiality (for example, a pair of

sandals found in Luxor – 'Tutankhamen's sandals' – which are kept in the Egyptian museum in Cairo). The historicity of objects is considered to be a part of the real. It is one thing to state that the meaning of an object is constructed (the meaning of the sandal), which is upholding a constructivist epistemology, but it is another thing to endorse constructivist arguments on an ontological level (the sandal as a physical object). Are one's claims for constructivism ontological or epistemological? There is a possibility for slips between these levels (Hacking, 1999: 29; Vasterling, 1999: 19), where one shifts from talking about *ideas* to talking about *objects* and, I think it is the source of a lot of confusion. Consider the following denial:

The materialities, which phenomenologically appear to us as referents outside the semiotic, are not real objects, but rather truth-effects. (Chouliaraki, 2002: 92–3)

Statements like this seem absurdly antirealistic for the empiricist historian if they are understood to be about the material reality (ontology) of historical objects (about the sandal as an object). The argument denies the materiality of objects and, for a historian, this would amount to a denial of the materiality of past events and a denial of the possibility for real events (there are no sandals). The difference between real events and illusionary events can be drawn in a way that becomes devastating to the writer of history. If I want to write history, I cannot give up the materiality and historicity of the sandal. When feminists use historicity to make constructivist claims, they should think through the materiality that historicity implies. If feminists, on the other hand, argue that all histories are narrations, they should, for instance, clarify how narrative history manages to 'constitute discourse itself' (Butler, 1993). Within historiographical debates, 'antirealist constructivist' arguments are usually questioned by examples from some trends in historical revisionism, especially 'holocaust denial' (Iggers, 1998: 112; White, 1987: 76–82, 230). Are we to see the Holocaust as a truth effect? If one were to write a book titled *The Social Construction of the Holocaust*, or, using my example, *The Social Construction of 1906*, what would such a book be about (see Hacking, 1999: 4)?

I think that these complex issues and the problem of the historical real should be thoroughly theorized and taken seriously. It can be claimed that materiality always comes with a form. However, I can also argue that historicity is enabled by materiality, as historical narratives need material 'props' that are labelled 'empirical'. They need these to become referential and factual. Materiality is not solely constituted by historicity and theorizing. I do think that 'Tutankhamen's sandals' are a real materiality and one that I use as a 'prop' in this, my narrative about historicity. For a feminist theorizing of materiality, this means that we need to question the power of historicity and analyse the ways in which historical narratives *use*



materiality. It is important to prevent feminist accounts where the historical forms thrive on a 'silencing of matter', as Luce Irigaray (1999) has written.

### THE NECESSITY OF HISTORICITY

History is everyone else's and hence also women's destiny. (Braidotti, 2002: 41)

When the practice of historicizing is seen as a universally legitimate way to ground knowledge claims, all disciplines in an interdisciplinary scientific setting have become/are historical. What does it mean to see historical requirements as a destiny for 'everyone'? What theoretical necessity turns history into 'norms', 'expectations' and 'power'?

This historicist-constructivist argumentation is so frequently repeated that it is taken for granted. Consider historicity in the following as an example of this self-evidence:

If post-modern-feminist critique must remain theoretical, however, not just any kind of theory will do. Rather, theory would be explicitly *historical*, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and *periods* and to that of different groups within societies and *periods*. Thus the categories of post-modern feminist theory would be inflected by *temporality*, with *historically* specific institutional categories such as the modern, restricted, male-headed nuclear family taking precedence over *ahistorical*, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering. Where categories of the latter sort were not eschewed, they would be *genealogized* – in other words, framed by a *historical* narrative and rendered *temporally* and culturally specific. (Nicholson and Fraser, 1999: 114; my emphasis)

The language of history is predominant in this argument. Theory should be explicitly historical, the categories used should be historically specific and 'ahistorical' categories should not be used unless framed by a historical narrative. The emphasis that I have added to this quote highlights the necessity to read historicity as a language and, also, to question its function in constructivist arguments. In my reading, there seems to be nothing but history and temporality upholding this particular demand for good feminist theory. The argumentation relies on history and is firmly situated within history. It is clear, here, how history is understood as a form, imposed on matter and capable of 'freeing' matter from functionalism (causality) and, of course, from ahistoricism (biologism, naturalism, determinism). This is certainly an example of what Linda Hutcheon referred to with her statement that:

One of the effects of post-modernism is that it reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining. The paradox of the post-modern is that

---

it simultaneously problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. (Hutcheon, quoted in Heise, 1997: 14; Ermarth, 1992)

The text by Nicholson and Fraser argues for a theory that is explicitly historical. For a theory to be explicitly historical, the categories that it uses must be contextualized historically. This means that according to this very model, every feminist theory is historically specific *except* for the theory of historical specificity. The theory of 'historical specificity' is not a historically specific theory. It becomes a method of constructivism and a universalizing rhetorical device.

I suggest that the necessity of historicity is also connected to a certain metaphoric use of history. In a metaphoric use, the question is not anymore about *finite and particular* narratives, i.e. histories, but, rather about the *historicity of meaning*. As an example, consider Butler when she argues for 'materialization' in favour of 'social construction':

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effects of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense. (Butler, 1993: 9–10)

Here, Butler refers to matter as a process instead of as a surface or a site that is influenced by history. To conceptualize matter as a process of materialization means that one has to investigate this process. The notion of matter is reconceptualized and historicized. It is historicized through the notion of form, through keeping the form–matter distinction operative and rendering 'form' historical. The 'process of materialization' is thus a *historical process*, where the 'regulatory power', the norms (that also are referred to as regulatory schemas, regulatory power), are seen as *historical forms* that materialize and stabilize over time (this is 'the Foucaultian sense'). Matter always comes with a meaning. To matter is to mean (that matter) and it is this meaning that in the end is formative, it is made of historical form (history here also guards against linguistic monism, whereby everything would be only and always language; although history is a language itself, it can be used in this way).

To summarize: feminist constructivist theories can argue through recourse to historical events and the presumption about the material realities of the past, as was the case in the example taken from Nicholson and Fraser. Second, feminist constructivist theories can argue through recourse to the historicity of meaning without reference to actual historical events in the ordinary sense. In both usages, history as a mode of thought and as a language enables the constructivist argument.

## TEMPORALITY AND CONSTRUCTIVISM: JUDITH BUTLER'S 'ALWAYS ALREADY'

In this section I use Judith Butler's theorizing as an example of constructivist rhetoric. I do this because her valuable constructivist language is widely cited by and useable for feminist theoreticians and should, therefore, be elaborated upon. When Judith Butler offers a critique of the prevailing ideas concerning woman, feminism, power, solidarity and the subject, the use of temporal expressions becomes most frequent. It is in instances of refuting a certain universality or essentialism, naturalism and these unquestioned and, thus, seemingly fixed notions or ideas that Butler relies on temporal terminology, such as 'from the start', 'pre', 'before', 'always already', 'in advance', 'never'. Here are some examples of the way that Butler uses temporality in her arguments: 'the "I" who would select between positions is *always already* constituted by them and the positions that the "I" claims must be given *in advance*'; 'Agency is *always and only* a political prerogative'; 'Subjects who institute actions are themselves instituted by *prior* actions'; 'Sex does not describe a *prior* materiality, but produces . . .'; 'Identity categories are *never* merely descriptive'; 'The cultural context is *already* there as the disarticulated *process* of the subject's production' (Butler, 1995: 42, 43, 46, 50). I have paraphrased Butler here to show what kind of arguments I have considered in my discussion. What is notable in these sentences is that 'constitution' and 'construction', or 'production', are often articulated together with the temporal notions 'always', 'already', 'prior', 'in advance'.

As I see it, Judith Butler challenges prevailing ideas about 'woman', 'agency' and so forth, through claiming that these have *other* meanings *because* they have a temporal 'pre' or 'before'. This other temporal location sets meaning in motion and also renders phenomena historical.

Usually 'always' means 'at all times' and 'already' means 'before this time'. Following from this, 'always already' would mean 'at all times before this time'. What is further notable is that 'already' is connected to the past, whereas 'always' is connected to the eternal or infinite.<sup>6</sup> With a combination of these meanings and usages, I argue that chronology is a central reference point in Butler's constructivist argumentation. Hence, the combination between chronology and constructivism should be theorized (for more on this, see Honkanen, 2004) to broaden the scope of feminist constructivist argumentation.

For Butler, (past) meaning is always part of the constitution of the subject *in its making* and the (past) meaning is reworked in its present iteration. Actually, the temporal 'before' is embedded in the eternal or infinite 'always already', regardless of any finite historical totality. The 'before' is 'always already' present in the articulation of meaning. The logic, or formal account of the mechanisms of construction where the 'before'

'always already' has to be in the 'now', operates regardless of its particular place in history. The fact that the 'new' – or the present – is always implicated in the 'old' – the before – is not considered to be a historically contingent fact. The old is in the new, the before is in the now. The temporality invested in the formal account of the mechanism constructivism is, in this sense, ahistorical (which is not to be confused with the non-historical as the ahistorical is grounded in a radical historicism).<sup>7</sup> It is this kind of formality that feminists should consider when using elements of temporality. These formal elements have to be theorized and thought through by feminists who attempt to change and transform constructivist thinking.

If one problematizes historicizing within constructivist theories, it is on the level of nows, before, afters, on the level of events, notions of 'happening' and the temporality of 'acts': historicizing hides the minute empiricism that temporality implies. The 'constitutive moment' is understood as an empirical event because the moment has the character of the temporal now. The moment can be put into a chronology because it is 'of time', because it is datable, locatable and measurable, it is real, it is '1906'. In this way one can see the empirics and the materiality that a notion of time implies. It seems to me that chronology materializes time and history.

Chronological order involves an idea of the 'before' of the present (the past) – and the 'after' of the present (the future). Simple succession would mean *indistinguishable* instants (Ricoeur, 1985: 53). Chronology is the trick that manifests the 'real real' as minutely empirical, as measurable instants that follow one another. Conceptualized as events, dates, or years of the past (the stuff of history – '1906'), chronology is used as the empirical material that historical narrative is built upon. Chronology is easily conflated with an objective, measurable time. Chronology, as it is commonly used, refers to the quantitative aspect of time (Lindroos, 1998: 11–12).<sup>8</sup>

Chronological order is stronger than simple linear succession. Linear succession can change direction without losing its character of linearity. Chronology implies a stricter arrangement of events in the order that they have occurred. A chronological order, when used in historical narratives, is causal – the first thing leading to the next and not the other way around. The theory of materialization when so influenced by historicizing constructivism, poses the question whether feminists universalize chronology without acknowledging and problematizing this.

## A STRATEGIC FORGETTING OF HISTORY

I call my own counter-approach to historicism 'virtual non-historicity'. This figuration describes the space of a feminist philosophy of history. It

is a place that follows from feminist philosophies of history in their habit of strategically forgetting history. Feminist philosophies of history share an interest in problematizing historicity. Conceptualizing historicity as self-evident and necessary is opposed to my project of a strategic forgetting of history. Virtual non-historicity is a feminist response to the demand to always historicize. Methodologically, virtual non-historicity implies a deconstructive reading of historicist texts. A deconstructive reading traces the possibilities and places for 'outsides', it seeks to find the textual places where history or historicity is used as foundation – elsewhere. A deconstructive reading pauses at places where historicity becomes unresolvable. Virtual non-historicity is sceptical towards the use of history and understands historicity as problematic in itself.

A strategic forgetting of history is a feminist answer to historicism. Historicism requires that history always be remembered. This way it operates as a stop-sign, hindering transformation and new theoretical insights. Historicism leads to a temptation to repeat and speak in the language of history. A strategic forgetting of history is a major methodological tool that enables virtual non-historicity and a feminist philosophy of history.

The possibilities that a strategic forgetting of history enables become clear in relation to feminist theories of materiality. In theorizing constructivism and materiality, feminists gain from entering a virtual space. In theorizing materiality, it is essential to question the place of historicity in order to be able to broadly think towards transformation. In theorizing materiality, some feminists (Butler, Grosz, Irigaray, Braidotti, to name just a few) attempt to deconstruct the form-matter distinction. In theorizing the form-matter distinction, forgetting history means that 'the formative' is not prioritized by referring to the existence of 'historicity' and to the historicity of the form and its capability to 'constitute matter' without explicating the content and place of 'historicity'. To me, this means a widening of the space for feminists to continue theorizing materiality.

When theories of corporeality need historicity to support the constructivist argument about the historical constitution of matter, the room to theorize bodies and materialities without historicity is delimited. To think about materiality in a space of 'virtual non-historicity' becomes suspect and might even be accused of essentialism. I want to defend the possibility to forget history at strategic theoretical places in order to widen the scope of constructivist theorizing. Within a historicizing setting, a strategic forgetting of history, in times where materiality is theorized, is impossible. Every thing has to be thought of as being firmly inside the fixity of contingent, historical and contextual meanings. This kind of thinking hinders a deconstruction of the form-matter distinction and upholds the distinction by prioritizing the form, the discursive and the historical.

## NOTES

1. With historicity, I refer to a mode of thought that enables the entity history to become an object of science, for instance, or to become a personal investment, or a shared horizon of reality, or a narrative. Historicity is part of the way we think. At times I have chosen to write the language of history, the grammar of history or the word history. I do this to highlight the fact that I analyse rhetoric. What are the rules of grammar that control the intelligibility of the word 'history' and what are the limits of this language in the particular text under analysis (for example, Judith Butler's theory of 'the performative' in excitable speech)? I use the word 'word' to distance myself from the heavy reality-effect that the ordinary understanding of the word 'history' carries.  
 In my usage, the word history refers to the different ways in which historicity, the historical part of our thinking, is made use of (White, 1987). 'History' refers to accounts that are told or written within historicity, within the language of history. All different histories are enabled by historicity as a mode of thought. The word history also refers to an understanding of history as the past. With the word 'historicizing', I refer to practices of knowledge construction within historicity. Historicizing is a set of techniques used to construct histories. This use of the word 'historicizing' departs from the ordinary grammar of the word. Usually, historicizing is used to talk about 'taking into account the historicity of a phenomenon', or when 'accounting for' the historicity that a phenomenon is thought to have.
2. For example, there have been several attempts to understand history through Darwinism and evolutionary theory in the recent debates on the 'H-History and Theory' email discussion list. One can also see a psychologizing trend. For all the discussion logs, see [www.historyandtheory.org/](http://www.historyandtheory.org/). *History and Theory* also published a theme issue on the implications of evolutionary theory for historical scholarship. See *History and Theory* (1999). For an example of evolutionary perspectives on history, see Landon (1999). See also, Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001), for a discussion of the implications of a 'biological turn' for the understanding of history.
3. Hayden White has theorized the forms that historical narratives take and the content embedded in narrative forms (White, 1987).
4. The historical object is usually considered empirical in one way or another. The documents that are used as sources have to be empirical in the sense of being material. The events – the objects of study – are considered to be empirical; *they must have happened* and *they must be considered real*. The empiricism or fundamental materiality and physicality of objects is already historical.
5. See, for instance, Iggers (1998: 112); Kellner (1995); Megill (1998: 8–9); McCullagh (1998) and *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* (Vol. 40(4), 2001).
6. Butler's frequent use of terms such as, from the start, in advance or prior to, always already and always and already, permanent or process hints at the centrality of eternity and infinity in constructivist argumentation.
7. I read this as an operationalization of the idea of time as a flow of now-points, now-points that are 'of chronology'. In this sense, temporality is an operationalization of chronology whenever it implies causality and whenever temporality implies an irreversible order of the succession of events (see Honkanen, 2004).

8. Elsewhere I have argued that a notion of 'cairological' time is more compatible with Judith Butler's theoretization than chronology (see Honkanen, 2004).

## REFERENCES

- Braidotti, Rosi (2002) *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1995) 'Contingent Foundations', pp. 35–57 in S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell and N. Fraser (eds) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlson, Åsa (2001) *Kön, kropp och konstruktion. En undersökning av den filosofiska grunden för distinktionen mellan kön och genus*. Stockholm: Symposium.
- Cheah, Pheng (1996) 'Mattering', *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 26(1): 108–39.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie (2002) 'The Contingency of Universality: Some Thoughts on Discourse and Realism', *Social Semiotics* 12(1): 83–114.
- Colebrook, Claire (1996) 'Feminist Ethics and Historicism', *Australian Feminist Studies* 11(24): 295–307.
- Colebrook, Claire (1997) *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth D. (1992) *Sequel to History: Post-Modernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth D. (2001) 'Agency in the Discursive Condition', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 40(4): 34–59.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Felski, Rita (2000) *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Post-Modern Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Fitzhugh, Michael L. and William H. Leckie Jr (2001) 'Agency, Post-Modernism, and the Causes of Change', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 40(4): 59–81.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hacking, Ian (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* London: Harvard University Press.
- Heise, Ursula K. (1997) *Chronoschisms. Time, Narrative, and Post-Modernism: Literature, Culture, Theory*, Vol. 23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- History and Theory* (1999) Theme Issue 38: 'The Return of Science: Evolutionary Ideas and History'.
- Honkanen, Katriina (2004) 'Historicizing as a Feminist Practice. The Places of History in Judith Butler's Constructivist Theories', *Meddelanden från Ekonomisk-statsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi Ser. A*: 547.
- Iggers, Georg (1998) 'Interview', pp. 100–13 in Ewa Domanska (ed.) *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Post-Modernism*. London: The University Press of Virginia.
- Irigaray, Luce (1999) *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Kellner, Hans (1995) 'Introduction: Describing Redescriptions', pp. 1–20 in

- F. Ankersmith and H. Kellner (ed.) *A New Philosophy of History*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Kirby, Vicki (1997) *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. London: Routledge.
- Laclau, Ernesto (2000) 'Structure, History and the Political', pp. 182–212 in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Åiæek (eds) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso.
- Landon, John (1999) *World History and the Eonic Effect: Civilization, Darwinism, and Theories of Evolution*. Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corporation.
- Lindroos, Kia (1998) *Now-Time – Image-Space. Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art*. Jyväskylä: SoPhi, University of Jyväskylä.
- McCullagh, C. Behan (1998) *The Truth of History*. London: Routledge.
- Manninen, Merja and Päivi Setälä, eds (1990) *The Lady with the Bow: The Story of Finnish Woman*, trans. Michael Wynne-Ellis. Helsinki: Otava.
- Megill, Allan (1998) 'Introduction', pp. 1–12 in Ewa Domanska (ed.) *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Post-Modernism*. London: The University Press of Virginia.
- Nicholson, Linda and Nancy Fraser (1999) 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Post-Modernism', pp. 99–115 in Linda Nicholson *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Post-Modern*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1983) *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary (1995) 'The Many Faces of Realism', pp. 163–81 in R.B. Goodman (ed.) *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1985) *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Schriempf, Alexa (2001) '(Re)fusing the Amputated Body: An Interactionist Bridge for Feminism and Disability', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 16(4): 53–79.
- Vasterling, Veronica (1999) 'Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 14(3): 17–38.
- White, Hayden (1987) *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Katriina Honkanen started her research in the Gender System Graduate School in Finland and later moved to the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies, to defend her thesis at the University of Utrecht, Department of Women's Studies. This article is based on her dissertation ('Historicizing as a Feminist Practice: The Places of History in Judith Butler's Constructivist Theories', *Meddelanden från Ekonomisk-statistikvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi Ser. A*: 547). Currently, she is working as a research fellow in the Institute of Women's Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Address: Institute of Women's Studies, Åbo Akademi University, FI-20500 ÅBO, Finland. [email: katriina.honkanen@abo.fi]

