

Notes: judith butler gender trouble

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Notes: Judith Butler — Gender Trouble PREFACE (1999) Gender Trouble has been received as a “provocative ‘intervention’ in feminist theory” and as a “founding text of queer theory.” “In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences. It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (viii). “...the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.” (viii) “Gender Trouble sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions.... What worried me most were the ways that the panic in face of such [minority gendered and sexual practices] rendered them unthinkable” (ibid) - influence of French Feminism, poststructural theory, but Butler discusses how the two come together in her work to produce something different, something in the vein of cultural studies or critical theory. Lesbianism — “...how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man?” (xi). “the first formulation of ‘gender trouble’” = “normative sexuality fortifies normative gender...one is a

woman...to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender" (xi). Thus "gender trouble" is the fear of losing one's place in gender, and this is a "crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language" (xi-xii). - she draws a distinction between gender hierarchy and gender normativity and between gender and sexuality, the latter with the condition that there exists a sexual regulation of gender that forms an active dimension of homophobia (xiii). Performativity — two key aspects. 1st she's mapping a concept from Jacques Derrida onto gender studies; that "the anticipation conjures its object," in other words, that "...the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself" (xv). 2nd is that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (ibid). In other words, "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body...what we take to be an 'internal' feature for ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures" (xv-xvi). - she addresses the critique about the complexity of her language in elaborating these ideas but claims that the style and complexity are born of the subject. Drawing upon Monique Wittig, she claims that "the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given" (xx). Butler asks, "What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial

standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does 'transparency' keep obscure? " (xx). - She makes a distinction between a descriptive and a normative account of gender. Claiming that " a descriptive account of gender includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas a normative account seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable and which are not..." (xxii), but she argues that these two accounts are intertwined. - Key questions = " How do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human? What are the means by which we come to see this delimiting power and what are the means by which we transform it? " (xxiii) - " reading the body" — what are the categories through which one sees? " what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. " " The naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality" (xxiv) - political agency — where is it in this conversation? She says that " the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility (xxv). In this conversation she describes the speech act as an instance of power, speech which belongs not to corporeal presentation nor to language" (xxvii). Agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes (xxviii). PREFACE (1999)

CHAPTER 1: SUBJECTS OF SEX/GENDER/DESIRE 1. " Women" as the Subject of Feminism Butler begins the book discussing two controversial terms of feminist interests: politics and representation (representation as the process of extending visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects but also

representation as the normative function of language said to reveal or distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women). She points out that the development of a language that can adequately represent women has seemed necessary to create political visibility of women and also that juridical power “ produces” what it claims to merely represent (so power has two functions: the juridical and the productive), YET the very process of trying to establish a category for representation described as “ women” is problematic. There is no common identity covered by the term “ women” because the term is not exhaustive, gender is not always constituted coherently/consistently in different historical contexts and gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities. She says: “...it becomes impossible to separate out ‘ gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (4-5). There is thus no universal basis (founded upon identity) for feminism nor is there a singular form of the oppression of women. “ Universal patriarchy” no longer holds the credibility it once did. B. suggests that: “ the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions” (6). She therefore argues that the attempt to make a stable category of women produces multiple refusals to accept the category and also opens itself up to charges of gross misrepresentation (6-7). B. suggests that feminism must reformulate a representational politics based upon some other need than one for a stable, unified subject. The category of “ women” only finds stability within the context of the heterosexual matrix, and thus a new feminism should take into account the variable construction of gendered

identity specifically as a resistance to the proscription that gender be fixed within the heterosexual matrix. “ the identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, “ representation" will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of ‘ women’ is nowhere present" (8)

2. The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire Butler defines the traditional arguments posed for distinguishing sex and gender only to challenge these limited understandings. In common understanding, there is some sort of equation of sex with nature and gender with culture. In face of this, she describes how the presumed binary system of gender has a strangely mimetic relation to the binary system of sex (though it should not necessarily be mapped in that way), and she asks if sex (as well as gender) is constructed by science in this binary way to serve political and social interests. She argues that sex is, itself, constructed as a gendered category, and as a result, gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘ sexed nature’ or ‘ a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘ prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. " Further “ This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender. How then does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production? " (10).

3. Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate In the discussion of the construction of gender, Butler suggests that there is a determinism of gender meanings inscribed on

anatomically differentiated bodies where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. In such cases, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny. Butler uses Beauvoir and Irigaray to discuss the fundamental structures by which gender asymmetry is reproduced. Simone de Beauvoir suggests there is a degree of volition or agency in the construction of gender. Butler assesses her work and determines that “ the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender” (12). In this light, Butler determines that gender is a signification. Luce Irigaray, takes up the position of women in language saying that women constitute the unrepresentable, the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity because of the closed phallogocentric signifying economy. For Irigaray, the feminine “ sex” is a point of linguistic absence, the impossibility of a grammatical denoted substance, and, hence, the point of view that exposes that substance as an aiding and foundational illusion of masculinist discourse. For Butler, the masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified (15). This illustrates a problematic circularity of a feminist inquiry into gender which is underscored by the presence of

positions “ which, on the one hand, presume that gender is a secondary characteristic of persons and those which on the other hand, argue that the very notion of the person positioned within language as a ‘ subject,’ is a masculinist construction and prerogative which effectively excludes the structural and semantic possibility of a feminine gender” (15). 4. Theorizing the Binary, the Unitary, and Beyond Though Irigaray broadens the scope of feminist critique by exposing the epistemological, ontological, and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy, the power of her analysis is undercut precisely by its globalizing reach. It identifies the masculinist signifying economy as monolithic and monologic. She then states that: “ Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (18). So she’s raising the question of the universality of female identity as well as of masculinist oppression. So Butler supports a model of coalitional politics as a “ dialogic encounter in which variously positioned women articulate separate identities” with political intent. A coalition is an assemblage of positions that cannot be figured in advance. Though coalitions typically resort back upon some notion of unity that is, in the end, exclusionary, Butler argues for a coalition that does not assume solidarity/unity as a prerequisite for political action, and she argues for us to interrogate the power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities. She calls for “ acknowledged fragmentation, ” incompleteness, and an “ antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics,

and the model she describe is one in which identities as a group come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. She says that “ Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition then will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (22).

5. Identity, Sex, and the Metaphysics of Substance

Butler claims that questions of identity cannot proceed questions of gender identity because “ persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. She asks if regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity and if “ identity” is a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience. “ incoherent” and “ discontinuous” gendered beings appear as persons but fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. With another round of circular assessment, Butler argues that discontinuity and incoherence are produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the expression or effect of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice (23). Butler argues that identity is an effect of discursive practices--regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality, and gender identity is understood as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. Within the spectrum of French feminist and poststructuralist theory, there are very different interpretations of how

regimes of power produce the identity concepts of sex, but central to each view is the notion that sex appears within hegemonic language as a “substance,” as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being achieved through a performative twist of language or discourse that conceals the fact that ‘being’ a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible (26). According to grammarians, the mark of gender concerns “substantives” and they talk about it in terms of function. Aretha Franklin (30). One is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair. This conception of gender presupposes a casual relation among SEX/GENDER/DESIRE (that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire) and the metaphysical unity of the three is assumed to be truly known and expressed. This dream of symmetry is presupposed, reified and rationalized (31). So the appearance of an “abiding substance or gendered self” is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence. Butler then claims that the “ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous” (34). THUS the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Gender proves to be performative within the discourse of the metaphysics of substance. Performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to BE. She challenges us to rethink gender outside the categories of the metaphysics of substance, and consider that: “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.” (34) 6. Language, Power, and the

Strategies of Displacement Here Butler is analyzing whether or not the destruction of a metaphysics of substance allows for an agent. Monique Wittig's "materialist theories" maintain that it does. "The differences between the materialist and Lacanian and post-Lacanian positions emerge in a normative quarrel over whether there is a retrievable sexuality either 'before' or 'outside' the law in the mode of the unconscious or 'after' the law as a postgenital sexuality" (39). There is a need to recognize that power relations continue to construct sexuality for women even within the terms of a 'liberated' heterosexuality or lesbianism (41). She discusses how to rethink subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power, and she argues that there is a possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation but its displacement. Thus "The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories...Thus gay is to straight not as copy is to original but rather as copy is to copy. The original is nothing more than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original (43). Butler then asks the crucial question: "What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself? What possibilities exist by virtue of the constructed character of sex and gender (44). "If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing" (44). "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort

of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity...is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies" (45). Butler calls for the " mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (46).