



Edited by Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek, and Roel van den Oever

# Bodies That Still Matter

Resonances of the Work  
of Judith Butler

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# Introduction

*Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek, and Roel van den Oever*

Since the publication of her bestseller *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990, the American philosopher Judith Butler (born 1956) is one of the most influential thinkers in academia. After studying philosophy at Yale University, she broadened her academic scope to include gender and sexuality studies, and social and political thought, currently serving as Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. In over thirty years of scholarship, she has authored more than twenty books and numerous articles that address socially relevant and politically pertinent topics such as gender normativity, political speech, media representations of war, and the democratic power of assembling bodies and of nonviolence. In addition, she has operated as a public figure and political activist, speaking out on an array of issues including lesbian and gay rights, the Israeli/Palestinian-conflict, America's involvement in several wars, and the Occupy movement.

The arresting academic and public impact of Butler's thought serves as an illustration of critical theory's potential to effect social change. It was this notion that led us to organize a conference on how various scholars have engaged with her work. This three-day conference, titled *Critical Theory in the Humanities: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler*, was held in April 2017 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> We subsequently invited selected conference speakers, plus two additional authors for the sake of comprehensiveness, to submit papers for this peer-reviewed volume.<sup>2</sup> The papers were selected based on three criteria. First, the volume showcases the range of academic disciplines in which Butler's ideas have been taken

1 The conference was financed by CLUE+ (Vrije Universiteit's Interfaculty Research Institute for Culture, Cognition, History, and Heritage) and KNAW (the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences), and organized by Marieke Berkers, Wouter Goris, and the editors of this volume.

2 We wish to express our gratitude to the authors, the peer-reviewers of both the individual contributions and the volume as a whole, Christine Irizarry for the translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Beyond Gender(s)," and Anne Verhoef for her overall editorial assistance.

**Figure 1** Judith Butler lecture at conference ‘*Critical Theory in the Humanities*’, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, April 2017



Photo: Steven Lighthert; courtesy Steven Lighthert

up, including the arts (dance, film, literature, performance art, theater), ethics and philosophy, the study of identity (class, gender, race, sexuality), and the social sciences (linguistics, political theory, psychology). Second, the volume collects the work of early-career scholars as well as established names. Third, the contributions resonate with Butler’s thinking in different ways: while some focus on one particular concept in her oeuvre and explain and critique it, others use her ideas as a springboard to move in new directions. The resulting collection is multidisciplinary, intergenerational, and methodologically diverse, a testament to Butler’s broad and continuing appeal.

The volume *Bodies That Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* brings together essays from scholars across academic disciplines who apply, reflect on, and further Butler’s ideas to their own research. Alternatively, the collection can be taken as a methodological survey. What does it mean to say that an author’s concepts resonate in the work of others? What are the different ways in which scholars engage with existing thought? How does the absorption of critical theory vary across the academic disciplines? Consequently, *Bodies That Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* stands apart from a number of other publications on Butler’s thinking



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that either function as a primer to her thought (e.g., Salih 2002; Brady and Schirato 2011) or discuss her ideas in relation to one particular academic field (e.g., Loizidou 2007; Chadderton 2018; Tyler 2020), expressly choosing a multidisciplinary approach instead.

The volume's variety belies a clear core to Butler's thinking, namely an interest in bodies, be it the exclusion of homosexual bodies from the heterosexual matrix, bodies under attack from hate speech, bodies of war prisoners that cannot be mourned, or the power of assembling bodies. Likewise, we have grouped the essays in this collection into four body-related themes. They are **performativity** (bodies that are performatively gendered), **speech** (bodies addressed and sometimes injured by language), **precarity** (bodies that are vulnerable to different degrees), and **assembly** (bodies that assemble and demonstrate).

The concept of gender **performativity** was Butler's first major contribution to critical theory. She initially outlined her ideas on this topic in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), to then flesh them out in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* ([1990] 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* ([1993] 2011). Butler understands performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2011, xii). She applies this notion to the process of assuming a gender identity within a social order in which gender and sexuality are intimately connected in a heterosexual matrix. What these regulatory norms constitute is not only a gendered identity, but also the materialization of "sex" on the body. In other words, sexed identities and the sexed matter of bodies are produced in the process of citing and repeating gender norms. Bodies that do not materialize in accordance to the heterosexual matrix (think, for instance, of bodies that do not adhere to the binary division of masculinity and femininity) are denied intelligible social existence. Together with the "properly" sexed subject, then, zones that are unlivable spring up, inhabited by those who are abject. As Butler writes:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject. (Butler 2011, xiii).<sup>3</sup>

3 Butler derives the theme of abjection from Lacanian psychoanalysis. From *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* ([1990] 1999) onwards, she not only draws on psychoanalysis, for instance on Freud's notions of mourning and melancholia, but reformulates

Butler's propositions on gender performativity have evoked countless responses and critiques, three of which are taken up in this volume. To begin, performativity does explicitly not pertain to the acts of a willing subject that freely chooses its gender identity and can change it at will. Or in Butler's famous application of Nietzsche, "there is [no] 'doer' behind the deed" (1999, 33). This has compelled Butler to rethink the traditional notion of agency, a project that Adriana Zaharijević retraces and advances in "On Butler's Theory of Agency." Next, Butler's descriptive distinction between subjects and object beings has raised the question how we can theorize the form of subjectivity that precisely the abjected nonetheless experience. This issue is addressed by Eyo Ewara in relation to race in "The Psychic Life of Horror: Abjection and Racialization in Butler's Thought." Finally, Butler's theory of gender performativity has been met with queries of genesis: Where does gender come from? What is the impetus for gender performativity? A novel approach to sex and gender is presented by Jean-Luc Nancy in "Beyond Gender(s)," an essay that we here publish in both its original French and an English translation. Nancy posits "sex" as a *prima materia*, that engenders gender among other things.

One of the main sources for Butler's understanding of gender performativity is J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). She would address the topic of the performative effects of **speech** more directly in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997a), which opens with the central question: "When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make?" (1). Butler considers the wounding power of words in the context of a number of heated public debates in which speech is equated with harmful bodily conduct, including hate speech regulations, feminist anti-pornography arguments, and the former American military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell-policy. Drawing on the Althusserian doctrine of interpellation, she develops a theory of speech acts that considers being addressed by an injurious name as a discursive occasion for social existence, however painful. Moreover, the addressee can repurpose the injurious address through a subversive repetition of the name, in this way redefining its meaning.

Butler's interest in the performative effects of speech resonates in three contributions to this collection. In "The Performative Edge of Non-Politicians:

psychoanalytical insights as well. Examples are her exploration of the lesbian phallus in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* ([1993] 2011, 28-57), her dialogue between Foucault's understanding of power and a psychoanalytical account of how power and love become interrelated in the psyche in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997b), and her critique of the Lacanian law of the father in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000).



Populism and Shifting Legitimacy in US Presidential Politics,” Julia Peetz posits that populist speech acts pose a challenge to the theory of performativity, for their success is based not in an affirmation of the authority that makes a performative speech act felicitous, but precisely in a disavowal of this authority. Tingting Hui enters into a dialogue with Butler’s take on hate speech in “Talking Back as an Accented Speaker? Reframing Butler’s Idea of Subversive Resignification.” Where Butler emphasizes that the addressee of hate speech can subvert the harmful address, Hui shifts the focus to accented speech that betrays the speaker as an Other and makes her vulnerable to bodily harm. In “What’s in a Name? Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and *Private Romeo*,” Roel van den Oever, too, discusses how speech can turn against the speaker’s intentions and body. In a reading of the film *Private Romeo* he shows how the recitation of Shakespeare’s heterosexual play-text *Romeo and Juliet* overturns the visual representation of gay interaction between male bodies.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Butler’s central concern was **precarity**, a concept that can best be explained in relation to precariousness. The latter term describes the claim that all human life is interdependent, given over to others, and therefore never autonomous. For instance, in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler posits an ethics in which the self is considered as always already interrupted by the other and as embedded within prior social structures. In the opening essay of *Undoing Gender* (2004b), she calls this the human predicament of being “beside oneself” (17). Precarity, in contrast, signifies that this vulnerability is not equally distributed, but instead is impacted by social inequality. As Butler writes in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009): “Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). As a result, some bodies and lives are discursively constructed as worthwhile, while others are not. For Butler, this distinction is for example operative in America’s violent response to the experience of loss after 9/11, which she describes in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004a).

In “Rethinking Counseling from a Relational Perspective: From Alleviating Suffering to ‘Becoming Human,’” Carmen Schuhmann proposes to reconsider the aim of counseling practices to minimize vulnerability in light of Butler’s take on precariousness as a human condition. Simon van der Weele shifts the discussion from precariousness to precarity in “Bridging Conversations: ‘Paradigm Cases’ of Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler.” Both Butler and the philosopher Eva Kittay have formulated an ethics based in vulnerability,



yet their respective proposed normative systems are markedly different, because where Butler has the refugee in mind, Kittay works within the context of disability studies. In “Dancing the Image: Complicity, Responsibility and Spectatorship,” Noa Roei applies the concept of precarity to the performance *Archive* (2014), in which the choreographer and dancer Arkadi Zaides engages onstage with footage of human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories. Another intersection between precarity and art is discussed by Friederike Sigler in “Santiago Sierra’s *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid*: Precarious Labor in Contemporary Art.” She discusses how the artist Santiago Sierra performatively highlights the precarity of the immigrants whom he, by necessity illegally, pays for their participation in his performance art.

The volume’s final section revolves around Butler’s *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), in which she takes up the topics of performativity, speech, and precarity again, and develops a political theory of assembled bodies protesting, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. For Butler, an **assembly** is a public manifestation of precarious bodies, demonstrating (meaning both dissenting and showcasing) rather than verbalizing a demand for a more equal distribution of livability. An assembly can thus be read as performative persistence, “asserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living” (Butler 2015, 18). Subsequently, Butler suggests that Hannah Arendt’s theory of the political as expounded in *The Human Condition* (1958) needs revision, for it distinguishes the material conditions of living from the political realm. As such, Butler argues, Arendt conceptualizes political speech as separate from the acts of bodies, thereby failing to acknowledge the importance of the latter. In contrast, for Butler, the public realm is one of bodily appearance as much as of expression in speech.

In “Rethinking Radical Democracy with Butler: The Voice of Plurality,” Adriana Cavarero draws on both Arendt and Butler, and touches on the ideas of Roland Barthes and the German-language author Elias Canetti, in order to hypothesize that the germinal moment of democracy lies in a plurality (instead of a mass) of voices speaking. Erika Fischer-Lichte connects Butler’s ideas on political assembly to the aesthetic assembly that occurs in theater. In “Strategies of (Self-)Empowerment: On the Performativity of Assemblies in and as Theatre,” she discusses three key periods in German theater history that gave rise to a sense of collective agency to both spectators and actors. The volume closes with a new essay by Butler titled “Bodies That Still Matter,” in which she asks how an assembly of precarious bodies that are silenced can nonetheless performatively demonstrate (against) the structural violence that comes with certain instances of biopolitics, such

as the structural femicide in Latin America and the precarious lives of war refugees at the borders of Europe.

At the time of writing this introduction, early June 2020, we seem to be only in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that eerily resonates with one of the central questions in Butler's work: Which bodies and lives matter?<sup>4</sup> At intensive care units in hospitals across the globe, for instance, physicians face the question which patients to admit and whom to refuse (with or without health insurance, the young or the aging). A large part of the world's population does not even have access to proper health care facilities, which once more demonstrates that we have translated our shared precariousness into a deeply unequal distribution of precarity. And what remains of the performative persistence of the precarious when assemblies are (temporarily) outlawed as health hazards?<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 infuses the title of this volume, "Bodies That Still Matter," with a current urgency.<sup>6</sup> These uncanny echoes highlight both the continuing timeliness of Butler's work as well as its potential for generating yet more academic, artistic, and social resonances.

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4 Due to the Corona pandemic, the publication of this volume was postponed by six months.

5 For Butler's first take on the COVID-19 crisis, see her blog post "Capitalism Has Its Limits" (2020a).

6 For a short discussion of Black Lives Matter in relation to speech act theory, see Butler's "Performativity and Black Lives Matter" (2020b).





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