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Judith Butler, *Gender, Radical Democracy: What's Lacking?*

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While Judith Butler may be recognised foremost as a theorist of gender, what is less often remarked upon is that Butler's work on gender is firmly located within a "radical democratic" politics, and indeed that it is in the name of a notion of radical democracy that Butler's work proceeds. This essay, then, critically interrogates the nexus of gender and democratic politics in Butler's work, with a view to tracing the connection between Butler's ontological commitments and her brand of radical democracy.

This essay is in two parts. The first takes issue with Butler's account of the relationship of gender and materiality, arguing that Butler's gender performativity thesis ultimately entrenches a radical disjunction between materiality and discourse. The second part of the essay suggests that the problems with Butler's account of the relationship of gender and materiality persist in her strategy for radical democratic transformation. The essay ends by gesturing towards a more radical refiguring of the relationship between matter and the political than Butler's work allows.

Troubling Gender and Ontology

Butler's work on gender forms part of an overarching theoretical project that is concerned to ceaselessly unsettle the ease with which we can distinguish between the real and the discursive. This concern continues in her approach to democratic politics, and in her assessment of the possibilities for radical democratic transformation. It is thus my contention that coming to terms with Butler's democratic theory requires close attention to the relationship between gender and ontology that is developed in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. This is so not because we should see Butler's work on gender as a stage through which she moves on her way to taking up more general issues in political theory. On the contrary, this close attention is due because Butler's work insists that our understanding of gender is wholly implicated in the political.

Butler has characterised her work as animated by a desire to contest the separability of ontology and politics, in one place describing her project as one that seeks to provide "an interrogation of the construction and circulation of what counts as an ontological claim" ("Force of Fantasy" 105). Indeed, Butler's influential thesis of gender performativity is conceived as an explicit response to the use of an ontology of sexual difference as a justification for norms of gendered behaviour. At the same time, Butler is intervening in the debates within feminist theory, challenging the adequacy of the sex/gender distinction as a response to the argument that "biology is destiny." Butler seeks to disrupt a model of sexual difference that sees sex as a natural bedrock that is then overlaid by cultural construction—"gender." In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that accepting the sex/gender distinction obscures important questions: "[c]an we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is 'sex' anyway?" (6). Butler thus bids us to inquire into the means by which sex becomes

naturalised as ontology, undertaking a genealogical inquiry into ontology (5). She challenges the distinction between an unconstructed natural sex and a culturally constructed gender, emphasising instead the utter constructedness of both conceptions (that is, of both sex *and* gender). Butler argues that sex comes to have the appearance of ontological truth only as an *effect* of the workings of discourse and culture (*Gender Trouble* 7).

Butler offers her thesis of gender performativity as a means of challenging the apparently immutable status of sex as ontological substance. Gender, Butler argues, rather than being an “abiding substance,” must be continually maintained, or performed, in order to appear as such (*Gender Trouble* 24). Thus, gender, in Butler’s now famous words, “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” (33). Butler sees it as her task to disrupt any notion of a stable ontology, “[t]o expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity,” and to unmask the “various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies” (33).

Gender Trouble mounts a thoroughgoing criticism of the traditional notion of ontology. For Butler, ontology is not some natural, pre-discursive fact, but rather its appearance as such is the most pernicious effect of regulatory regimes that institute and maintain the coherence of sex and its expression as gender. Butler’s gender performativity thesis, at least as it is laid out in *Gender Trouble*, means that, for Butler, the body “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (136).

Butler’s position on gender has come under sustained criticism for its idealist implications. In one of the most convincing critiques, Stella Sandford suggests that Butler collapses the notion of ontology into performativity, such that ontology (sex) becomes the effect of performativity (gender) (Sandford 23). The consequences of this are significant: as Sandford puts it, the subsumption of ontology by effect means that “the radical conclusion *must be* that ‘being’ itself is an effect of discourse” (23). Ontology, rather than existing independently outside of or preceding discourse, has the appearance of a prediscursive existence only as a result of being posited as such from within discourse itself. As Sandford summarises, “[t]hat which is posited as prediscursive, *precisely because it is posited*, in fact belongs to the order of discourse, and cannot be said to exist prior to or outside it” (23). And in what seems at least an implicit acceptance of these criticisms, Butler herself revises her performativity thesis in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”*

Bodies That Matter is, at least in part, an extended response to concerns raised about Butler’s approach to the ontological in *Gender Trouble*. Butler seeks, in *Bodies That Matter*, to provide a sustained interrogation of the domain of “sex,” conceding, in an interview, that the category of “sex” required more attention than afforded in *Gender Trouble*: “I think that I overrode the category of sex too quickly in *Gender Trouble*. I try to reconsider it in *Bodies That Matter*” (Butler “Gender as Performance” 32-33). At the same time, however, Butler disputes any suggestion that she need return to sex or matter as an ontological bedrock to ground her theory.

The term gender plays only a muted role in *Bodies That Matter*. Butler instead focuses on developing a form of constructivism that can account for the “materiality” of sex. In other words, she wants to push her constructivist thesis further, and ask how the very materiality of sex is produced through performative reiteration. As such, Butler signals an even more thoroughgoing interrogation of ontology in *Bodies That Matter*. Indeed, Sandford suggests that “the most significant difference between [*Bodies That Matter*] and the earlier *Gender Trouble* is the acknowledgement of the necessity for the theorization of the *ontological* status of the body and/or sex, or the tacit acknowledgement of the need for a radicalized notion of ontology in general” (26).

What Butler sets out to do in *Bodies That Matter* is to recast our understandings of both ontology and construction. To do so, she contends that we must understand matter differently. Instead of

being simply a brute facticity that awaits enlivening by inscription, Butler insists that we approach the idea of matter “not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter*” (9). On this understanding, sex is not a pregiven attribute of bodies; rather, sex becomes naturalised “[a]s a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice” (10).

Butler is aware that her formulation of constructionism will do little to allay the concerns of sceptics who will perceive it as just another form of linguistic monism. Her response to this is twofold. The first is to suggest that we need to look into the impulse to insist that there is some part of sex or matter that is unconstructed. Butler argues that any claim in this regard is also formative of the very unconstructed site that it supposes to exist prelinguistically:

To “concede” the undeniability of “sex” or its “materiality” is always to concede some version of “sex,” some formation of “materiality.” Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs—and, yes, that concession invariably does occur—not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it concedes? To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. (*Bodies That Matter* 10)

Her second response is implied in the first—to set out in detail her understanding of the mutual implication of matter and signification. Butler disputes a view of signification that sees it as mimetic or representative of some “outside” to language. In this regard, her figuring of the relationship between embodiment and signification is illustrative:

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified as prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification. (30)

Given such an assertion, it seems legitimate, at this point, to ask how this approach differs from an idealist one that turns matter into the stuff of language. Butler avowedly insists that there is a distinction to be drawn here. She emphatically rejects an understanding of the body as “a unilateral or causal *effect* of the psyche in any sense that would reduce that materiality to the psyche or make of the psyche the monistic stuff out of which that materiality is produced and/or derived” (66). As such, Butler acknowledges a limited form of bodily materiality that is in some sense “undeniable,” allowing that

It must be possible to concede and affirm an array of “materialities” that pertain to the body, that which is signified by the domains of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, weight, age, metabolism, life and death. None of this can be denied. But the undeniability of these “materialities” in no way implies what it means to affirm them, indeed, what interpretive matrices condition, enable and limit that necessary affirmation. (66-67)

Butler’s next move is crucial for an understanding of her approach to matter—for she argues that, rather than conceding that these domains mark some materiality of the body, it is instead more productive to claim that “what persists here is *a demand in and for language*” (67). Butler understands her position to avoid idealism because she conceives of materiality not as a blank

slate, but rather as a “*constitutive demand* [on language]” (67). And here is the key to Butler’s understanding of the relation of language to materiality, for she sees language as impelled by its noncoincidence with materiality, its originary lack of coincidence with the referent that it repeatedly attempts (and fails) to capture. Later she elaborates further, suggesting that a radical difference subsists between referent and signified, and that the function of the referent “is to persist as the horizon and the ‘that which’ which makes its demand in and to language” (69). Matter, then, persists in language only as an “absence or loss, that which language does not capture, but, instead, that which impels language repeatedly to attempt that capture, that circumscription—and to fail” (67).

But does this figuring of matter exempt Butler from the charge that she continues to privilege the discursive over and against the ontological? I contend that it does not. Certainly, Butler has responded to a number of challenges that have been made to the adequacy of her approach. The charge that Butler considers everything that exists to be always and only language is convincingly refuted in *Bodies That Matter*, and, on this ground, the contention that Butler endorses linguistic monism clearly fails. Likewise, she does not conceive of an ontological “thereness” that is mimetically represented by language. However, I suggest that she entrenches, rather than overcomes, a radical disjunction between matter and discourse. Further, she continues to conceive of language as providing differentiation and meaning to materiality. Language is what makes matter “matter”—what makes it have significance in the political sense. As a consequence, rather than refiguring ontology as itself forceful, dynamic and wholly political, she reasserts the primacy of the discursive against the material, and treats the realm of signification, because variable, contestable and dynamic, as the proper locus of the political. In fact, materiality is knowable only as negativity, as loss, in Butler’s schema, and any attempt to attribute positive content to it is, in her view, to reify a contingent formation as a pre-political ontology. [1]

Matter appears in *Bodies That Matter* only as negativity, as the absence or loss that impels signification. But how does this understanding of the referent as that which *impels* signification tally with Butler’s contention, regarding embodiment, that the conception of a prediscursive body that exists outside of and prior to signification is actually the performative *product* of the signifying process? [2] Although these formulations of what is outside to signification may at first appear contradictory, in Butler’s schema they in fact intimately presume one another. For Butler, matter subsists as that which exceeds representation; that which can never be fully captured by signification. Indeed, signification is *impelled* by the (always insatiable) desire to represent the ontological. That is, signification gains its futurity in its repeated efforts to capture the referent. Crucially, however, these attempts to represent this outside must occur from within the discursive realm, and, hence, any rendering of the outside will in fact be a *product* of discourse.

So, Butler is right when she insists that she is not a linguistic monist. She does not contend that language *constructs* the ontological. Nevertheless, as a consequence of her contention that matter is that which is never fully present to signification, Butler concludes that the ontological, the in-itself of matter cannot—and should not—be the focus of political attention. Butler’s attention fixes instead firmly on signification, asking why and how, through what configuration of power relations, a *particular* representation of the outside to discourse becomes reified *as* material, natural, prediscursive. [3] And her answer to this is precisely her performativity thesis; her argument that matter should be seen as the product of “*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter*” (*Bodies That Matter* 26). This approach also explains her understanding of what is denoted by “sex”: it too comes to appear natural, material, only as an effect of reiterative practices.

Negativity and Political Contestation

Butler’s understanding of the structure of the matter/language relation informs, in turn, her strategy for radical democratic transformation. She takes this up through her commentary on

Slavoj Žižek's approach to political contestation. [4] She finds an affinity between her approach to signification, and that of Žižek, and is thus interested in his figuring of the role of signification in the political field. Holding to the Lacanian distinction between the real and the symbolic order, Žižek argues that the symbolic is always plagued by what it must foreclose in order to represent itself as coherent and systematic. Butler explains:

[A]ny attempt to totalize the social field is to be read as a symptom, the effect and remainder of a trauma that itself cannot be directly symbolized in language. This trauma subsists as the permanent possibility of disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality. It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of "reality" fails to include. (*Bodies That Matter* 192)

Butler also endorses Žižek's psychoanalytic account of subject formation, which holds analogously that the subject is formed through a founding act of foreclosure. Žižek argues that, in order to become intelligible, the subject must define itself against others: it must refuse and repudiate what is "not-I." But, of course, this means that the subject is paradoxically dependent upon what it refuses, what it delimits itself against. What is repudiated thereby lingers as a constant threat to identity that must be perpetually guarded against. As a consequence, "[t]he subject is . . . never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject" (*Bodies That Matter* 190). What results is an account of subject formation that presumes, at its heart, a "defining negativity."

What this means for the political is that any claim to or on behalf of identity is a *phantasmatic* one—identity will always remain unable to fully represent its purported constituency (*Bodies That Matter* 188). This, for example, is the situation of claims made on behalf of "women." Political signifiers like "women" do not describe a pre-existing group. Rather, they are constitutive of those very groups, and are, in fact, "empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds. No signifier can be radically representative, for every signifier is the site of a perpetual *méconnaissance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved" (*Bodies That Matter* 191). But the very impossibility of identity categories to be fully self-identical is also their political promise, for this ensures that subjectivity is never given once and for all, and is always incomplete, unstable and contingent.

Thus, for Žižek, as for Butler, the symbolic order and subjectivity are fundamentally dependent on absence, lack, negativity. Butler equates this lack with contingency, in the sense that the lack constitutive of all identity suggests that this identity could be otherwise, and is never determined once and for all (*Bodies That Matter* 195). This contingency is the hinge upon which the theory of radical democracy, formulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and taken up by Žižek, rests. As Butler sets out, Laclau and Mouffe argue that:

[E]very ideological formation is constituted through and against a constitutive antagonism and is, therefore, to be understood as an effort to cover over or "suture" a set of contingent relations. Because this ideological suturing is never complete, that is, because it can never establish itself as a *necessary* or *comprehensive* set of connections, it is marked by a failure of complete determination, a constitutive contingency, that emerges within the ideological field as its permanent (and promising) instability. (*Bodies That Matter* 192)

Butler agrees that this is indeed the promise of radical democracy—its emphasis on negativity and contingency provides a permanent "resistance to all essentialism and all descriptivism" (*Bodies That Matter* 195). Thus, she is in broad sympathy with Žižek's political project. Žižek's account of the contingency of all identity proceeds by positing that subjectivity and the symbolic order can never be fully coherent and self-enclosed. They are always troubled by what exceeds

symbolisation, what must be left out of signification in order to present itself as systematic, as identity. To this point, Butler concurs, asserting that “Žižek is surely right that any theory of the discursive constitution of the subject must take into account the domain of foreclosure, of what must be repudiated for the subject itself to emerge” (*Bodies That Matter* 190).

But it is when Žižek attempts to tie this understanding to a more fully articulated account of the real—as the “lack/loss of the phallus,” that secures oedipal sexual difference—that Butler parts ways with him. Žižek reifies submission to the law of castration as *the* law through which entry into the symbolic is secured, and subjectivity (which is always a sexed subjectivity) is assumed. By doing so, he affirms a heterosexist and masculinist form of sexual difference as invariable and prediscursively determined. Butler vehemently disputes this formulation of the real/symbolic distinction, arguing that what Žižek does is to elevate castration from its status as a *contingent* regulating principle of the borders of the symbolic to the status of the *universal* structuring principle of subjectivity. As a result of this elevation, Butler maintains, forms of sex and sexuality that do not obey this structuring principle are rendered abject, unspeakable—indeed, unthinkable (*Bodies That Matter* 190-91).

Butler, then, highly critical of Žižek’s account of the real, seeks to formulate a different account of what is left outside of symbolisation, one that renders such an outside *truly* contingent. Such an approach treats the outside as a contingent formation; one that appears as an outside as a result of relations of power that are neither universal nor pre-political. As such, it also renders the contents of this outside permanently contestable and revisable. This, for Butler, is far more compatible with a radical democratic project:

That there is always an “outside” and, indeed, a “constitutive antagonism” seems right, but to supply the character and content to a law that secures the borders between the “inside” and the “outside” of symbolic intelligibility is to preempt the specific social and historical analysis that is required, to conflate into “one” law the effect of a convergence of many, and to preclude the very possibility of a future rearticulation of that boundary which is central to the democratic project that Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe promote. (Bodies That Matter 206-07)

Thus, Butler emphasises the political significance of an “outside” that is the performative product of symbolic reiteration. As a product of signification, this outside is both constituted by, and constitutive of, the boundaries of symbolic intelligibility. As such a product, this outside is produced not by some invariant law, but rather by contingent cultural and historical relations. And this is where the radical political possibility of such a formation inheres: in the permanent necessity for that distinction between inside and outside to be reiterated, there lies the potential for it to be articulated differently.

For Butler it is the permanent loss of the real that propels signification. She insists that such a loss can only ever be figured *as* loss; nevertheless, signification is ever incited by a desire to give content to this absence. Thus it is the very character of the real as a lack that calls upon signification that yields Butler’s performative model of political contestation. [5] The contingency and futurity of the political is guaranteed by the referent’s insistent demand to be represented, and the fact that this demand is always responded to imperfectly. What results is that any rendering of the contents of the outside to signification is generated from *within* signification. We can now see why Butler advocates a suspension of the question of ontology: her interest lies not with ontology *per se*, but rather with the *conditions of signification of the ontological*. [6] It is the way in which contingent articulations of the ontological become reified within discourse as *the* ontological that is Butler’s focus, and this is what Butler wants to claim as contingent, contestable and dynamic.

As a result, Butler’s conception of the relation between ontology and politics continues to privilege the political, treating it as the locus of power, force and dynamism. Butler’s formulation of the matter/signification relation continues to subordinate matter to language, to render it mute

except as a demand on language, and to examine matter only for its salience as a sign. Matter itself is afforded neither dynamism nor differentiation in Butler's account—this is ceded to an account of signification that confines its insights to the political domain. What this means is that Butler's preferred model of political contestation is peculiarly bodiless, and retains the privilege on signification that Butler sets out to contest in *Bodies that Matter*. Indeed, it is the very negativity of the ontological that Butler sees as enabling radical democratic possibility.

Butler's attempt to reconceive the relationship of matter to construction allows force to the ontological only to the extent that it can make a demand to language to explain it, to render it intelligible. Ontology *must* remain an absence in Butler's framework, for it is as a consequence of this originary lack that signification and the political gains its futurity. Because never fully representational, signification is engaged in an endless process of reiteration that, over time, gains the appearance of ontological reality. [7] It is in the possibility of articulating this process differently that Butler locates the potential for political transformation. I contend that while Butler has offered much to a critical appreciation of what is at stake in thinking through the ontology-politics relation, this relationship can be yet more radically reconceived. Such a reconception would require affording the ontological a complexity and variability that is in Butler's work ascribed only to the political. [8]

Butler's great concern with giving body to the ontological seems to stem from the belief that any rendering of the ontological will become a coercive and determinative regulating principle—one that will authorise and deauthorise certain forms of being as natural. Such a concern is an important one, but one that is not best responded to by insisting upon the ontological as a lack or absence that is inevitable, and indeed required for radical democratic politics. This absence proves for Butler that no formation of the ontological can lay claim to its natural status once and for all. Yet such a move merely serves to evacuate materiality from the political, once again locating the proper domain of the political on a plane separate to the material. Doing so draws a boundary between politics and materiality, depriving the latter of power, and rendering it unknowable and unspeakable. We must instead acknowledge that matter itself is variable, and that political futurity, far from being based upon the inevitable absence of the ontological from signification, is an eminently material transformation.

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Endnotes

1. For related critiques of Butler's figuring of the matter / signification relationship, see Vicki Kirby's *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, and Pheng Cheah's "Mattering." See also Kirby's overview of Butler's work in *Judith Butler: Live Theory*.
2. Consider Butler's claim that "[t]he body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action. . . . [The signifying act] is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification" (*Bodies That Matter* 49).
3. Kirby points out that Butler's view also assumes that signification is defined by lack, arguing that "[f]or Butler, what defines language *as* language is the play of substitution, enabled by a founding absence that the sign attempts to fill. In other words, the sign is a

'sign of' or a 'substitute for' something other than itself" (Kirby 109).

4. Butler aligns herself broadly with Laclau and Mouffe's work on radical democracy, as well as Žižek's. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. And see the exchange between Butler, Laclau and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*.
5. There are points in *Bodies That Matter* where Butler appears to dispute such a characterisation of the real/symbolic relationship. For instance, she argues that treating the real as "resistance to symbolization," offers no means of politicisation of the relation between language and the real: "[t]he fixity and universality of this relation . . . produces . . . a prepolitical pathos that precludes the kind of analysis that would take the real/reality distinction as the instrument and effect of contingent relations of power" (207). Nevertheless, it is my contention that Butler overwhelmingly does position the real as absence or loss, and as a result focuses her analysis on the power relations that regulate the way in which the real/reality distinction is signified in language.
6. Butler, in "The Force of Fantasy," argues for a "problematizing suspension of the ontological" (106). In *Bodies That Matter*, she similarly promotes a suspension of the "question of the 'referent'" (217).
7. Butler reiterates this position in her collection of essays, *Undoing Gender*.
8. For example, Elizabeth Grosz's recent work provides an approach to ontology that locates dynamism and the potential for transformation wholly within materiality. On her approach, ontology, rather than being barred from us as an absence that can only be approximated in language by the political, is precisely what is varying, transforming, becoming-other in what is conventionally thought of as the political or cultural realm. See her *Time TravelTime Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, particularly the essay, "The Nature of Culture."

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