

# Giving an Account of Butler

***Judith Butler: Live Theory***

**By Vicki Kirby**

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**Reviewed by Fiona Jenkins**

This book contributes to a fast growing critical literature assessing Judith Butler's writings as a whole. Butler's wide renown owes most to her oft-cited and often misunderstood account of gender performativity. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) has been a hugely influential text, seminal in the development of queer theory and of critiques from within feminism of identity politics. It is also significant—more broadly—for its central emphasis on identity as something that is 'done' rather than being something that 'is'. Misunderstandings and radical simplifications of that central thesis concerning the performativity of gender have prevailed, however, in much of the reception of this early work. A key claim of *Gender Trouble* is that it is necessary to *deconstruct* the nature/culture opposition that has been foundational for accounts of gender (by showing that 'nature'—or 'sex'—is itself discursively constituted and cannot provide an unproblematic point of reference). Despite this, Butler's thesis is often read as some version of radical constructivism. Hence multiple objections to her thesis have assumed that she is denying the existence of nature or of sexed bodies rather than interrogating the discursive and normative work that assumptions about their originary or self-evident character have been made to do. Butler's focus on 'doing' rather than 'being a gender', meanwhile, has very frequently been taken to entail possibilities of freedom no more demanding than the choice of attire or behaviour, despite Butler's explicit and forceful rejection of such an interpretation.

In subsequent work, beginning with *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler has sought to philosophically extend and refine her account of the socially inscribed body and of the subject generated by social norms and practices of identification and address (or 'interpellation', to use Althusser's phrase). Her work is throughout characterized by its concern with political potentialities, and thus with the problem of what kind of agency is available to a subject whose normal assumptions about freedom and individuality themselves belong to highly problematic forms of social interpellation (on this theme, see especially *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, both 1997). More recently, Butler has focused on questions of ethics construed, on the one side, as the problem of living life in relation to, but also in excess of normative claims; and on the other,

as centrally bound up with issues of responsibility, and thus of answering the address of another (*Giving an Account of Oneself*, 2005). The question 'whose life matters?'—a question Butler has always addressed in terms of both that which 'matters' (in terms of value) and as that which materializes in a recognizable and persisting form—animates a series of interventions into politics, law and culture; providing a critique of contemporary geopolitics (*Precarious Life: Essays on Mourning and Violence*, 2004), as well as of legal and political interpretations of hate speech, pornography, homosexual self-declaration and censorship. The philosophical depth of her discussion comes through rich and nuanced readings of theorists of the self and sociality, notably Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Althusser. An interest in theorizations of violence and non-violence within a modern Jewish tradition also especially marks her recent work, and here Butler references Adorno, Levinas and Benjamin.

Such range and influence, as well as the philosophical subtlety of Butler's writings, clearly warrant the focused attention her work is currently receiving. Judging by other volumes in the series, the aim of Continuum's 'Live Theory' is to highlight and interrogate thinkers whose work has just this kind of interdisciplinary resonance and a particularly contemporary life and significance. A sense of live and productive engagement does come through strongly in what is often Kirby's fairly critical, but also rich and nuanced reception of Butler's work. A concluding interview also adds to the 'liveness' of Butler's voice. There is much useful work done here in terms of laying out Butler's distinctive debt to and take upon a range of critical theorists. The reading offered stresses Butler's limitations as well as her useful contributions and does so from a perspective informed by Kirby's own ideas on embodiment. This leads to an interesting angle on certain key issues, but one that nonetheless tends to reiterate and seek to confirm some well-rehearsed objections to Butler's project. It is a strong reading that attempts to point up un-productive paradoxes and contradictions in Butler's position—suggesting that these indicate the need to go beyond her views. The book cover's claim that it will guide the reader through Butler's complex ideas in an introductory way is thus somewhat misleading. To my mind, the book is aimed at the reader who already has quite considerable familiarity with Butler's oeuvre and influences and as such I would hesitate to recommend it as a general introductory text for undergraduates. The book's tight focus restricts its general usefulness, for the central argument turns on issues that are critical to Kirby's own particular interests in the body or, more precisely, 'corporeality' rather than providing a more introductory, broad-minded, and up to date assessment of Butler's importance.

Kirby's book offers what ought to be a useful structure for assessing the virtues and limitations of Butler's thought, and some of this it indeed does well. Chapters organized around critical readings of Butler's major works up to 1997 foreground the contributions each make to areas in which she has been highly influential

in forming contemporary accounts of identity, the body, language and power. Each chapter then turns to consider the limitations of Butler's own way of conducting her project, throughout arguing that 'the radical drive in Butler's work to reconfigure the subject might, on its own cognizance, be taken further' (18). This makes way in Chapter Four for a critical presentation of Butler's account of materiality and signification that appeared in an earlier version in Kirby's 1997 book *Telling Flesh*. This chapter is one of the most substantial and interesting in the book, locating Butler in relation to Derridean and Lacanian theories of signification and pointing out limitations in Butler's conceptualization of materiality as a way of approaching *corporeality*.

Yet although this focus on the question of corporeality is important, it is hard not to feel that too much of the book's overall argument turns on Kirby's own claim to pursue the 'radical drive' of Butler's project more thoroughly than Butler herself. Moreover, Butler is throughout charged with falling back into problematic positions on the subject; in particular, Cartesianism, or mind/body dualism (83), and a version of constructivism that 'surreptitiously' reinstalls the opposition of nature and culture it claims to surpass (68). Very little attention is paid to Butler's post-1997 work, and this not only seems to date Kirby's engagement but fails to fully assess the extent to which Butler's work has taken new directions while developing old preoccupations. Although very brief reference is made in the penultimate chapter on *The Psychic Life of Power* to the more sophisticated account of normativity offered in *Undoing Gender* (2005), all reference to the themes elaborated around responsibility in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) are missing, even though versions of Butler's argument were already published in the *Diacritics* article of the same name from 2001 and, through a German publisher, in book length form in 2003. The essays of *Precarious Life* (2004) are also entirely absent. This suggests an intellectual engagement somewhat less 'live' than it might have been and a problematic lack of interest in specifying why Butler's intellectual trajectory has developed as it has. Kirby's conclusions about the limitations of Butler's work are certainly based upon a fairly selective reading of texts and ignore some of Butler's own developments of her ideas. More importantly, perhaps, Kirby arrives at her conclusions through reading strategies and argument evaluation that systematically downplay the ways in which these texts foreground the interest and importance of rhetorical strategy and posit paradox as a productive space.

Whereas I would argue that Butler's texts are attentive to the importance of the figurative aspects of language (such as metonymy, metalepsis and metaphor), Kirby's text is structured by a rather literal argumentative strategy. Kirby then pins Butler down to a commitment to positions which—if one looks across Butler's entire oeuvre—are rather more complex than Kirby states, since they engage rather than straightforwardly reject paradoxicality. This, for instance, is what allows Kirby to specify the ways in which Butler 'falls back' into positions

on the subject that she ought to have surpassed. Paradox in Butler's work is identified, and then specified as problematic and unproductive insofar as Kirby reads tensions between claims according to a quasi-foundationalist model that assumes that one set of claims *must* have priority over another. Accordingly, Kirby seeks to identify the *fundamental* theoretical commitments Butler is bound to sustain, even if elsewhere Butler would appear to qualify their force by admitting them to be in tension with other claims. For Kirby, this means that Butler typically tries to have things both ways, and to negotiate between irreconcilable positions (notably those derived from her theoretical debt to Foucault as opposed to the debt to Freud in her work). However, if we take seriously Butler's suspicion of foundationalism (see especially her contribution to *Feminist Contentions* (1995)) then we should not be surprised to find in her writing moves that are *by their nature* at odds with linear and axiomatic (foundational) reasoning. In short, if Kirby's strategy allows her—in typically intriguing ways—to set forward her own thesis concerning the relation between language, signification, materiality and 'fleshy' corporeality, this space is too often opened at the cost of allowing some rather dismissive gestures to replace the detailed critical reading she claims, in her preface, to espouse. Moreover, what is occluded in Butler's text by this reading strategy has an importance internal to the question of what a 'discursive materiality' might be.

I would now like to briefly respond to Kirby's central criticism of Butler, that she 'falls prey to the same naïve foundationalism that she criticizes' (34). In particular, Kirby builds much of her interpretation on the claim that Butler, despite her Foucauldian leanings, holds an account of power as juridical and repressive. This suggests that Butler remains committed to truths of identity and desire that lie behind the ruses of power (35, 41, 45, 62). Butler is, further, held to assume there is some pure 'outside' of language that exceeds our representations, an 'in itself' that in its very inaccessibility or 'absence' might bear the emancipatory political function of serving to call our 'constructions' into perpetual question (78, 80). The latter position carries obvious and well-known problems, negotiation with which has characterized a great deal of the German Idealist and post-Nietzschean tradition so important for Butler. Kirby reserves little discussion for this, but notes Butler's own careful gestures in attempting to distance herself from some of these difficulties; her way of following Nietzsche, for instance, by drawing attention to what constructionist claims *do* (their performativity) and how they reinforce nostalgia for lost origins. It is just this nostalgia, however, that, on Kirby's reading, proves inescapable for Butler; it permeates her work, and centrally appears in her frequent references to Freud's narrative of the formation of sexual identity as involving, for women, the repudiation of an 'originary' homosexual desire (desire for the mother).

Here, in Kirby's view, the psychoanalytical model stressing the prohibition of desire (the repression and incorporation of loss) becomes problematically

conjoined with a Foucauldian emphasis on the discursive production of the body to create a mish-mash of theoretical tensions. In effect, Kirby holds that Butler is unsuccessful in maintaining her distance from melancholia; she is charged with having an 'investment in original loss' (106) that causes her to fall back into all the old dualities organized around the opposition of mind to body, and culture to nature. Butler works to maintain a relationship to psychoanalytic theories of subject-constitution alongside Foucauldian ones. But on psychoanalytic accounts, power is repressive, not productive; and so, Kirby holds, Foucault's insights into the discursive operation of power (on which Butler's originality and importance as a theorist rest) are necessarily lost sight of. Hence, Kirby writes, in a very characteristic sentence: 'Butler consistently represents power, *first and foremost*, in terms of prohibition, injunction and repression. But ... must power be possessed of an intention, a goal or desire at all, let alone one that is inherently normative and negative? Butler's own argument, at least in certain places would certainly contest this, and yet she consistently attributes power with design—"the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities"'(46).

It is not possible in the space available here to develop the full terms of my disagreement with this reading. However, as a starting point, I would suggest there is something overly forceful about Kirby's construction of 'what comes first' in Butler's argument, what its alleged 'foundationalism' amounts to. Indeed, I would ask whether this is not in fact at many crucial points being projected onto the text. Kirby refuses to allow the disruptive force of a play of tensions in Butler's text (through which, as I read it, Butler is always seeking to negotiate, evoke and elucidate the paradoxical capacity of power to issue 'injunctions' *without* being the work of a subject, and thereby giving a Foucauldian *reading* of Freud). Kirby seeks to pin Butler down to her '*first and foremost*' commitments and thence, to a 'nostalgic' emancipatory politics premised on recovering something *hidden*, something underlying power's deformations. Such a reading simply misses the importance of Butler's highly Nietzschean interest in the effects of what can be made to 'seem real' or 'compelling' as part of an order of appearance that *conjures* underlying realities in ways that make it seem as if it is necessary to *presuppose* them (in general it is problematic that Nietzsche's influence on Butler is almost entirely overlooked by Kirby, and especially his *rhetorical* analyses of the critical principle he advances that there is 'no "doer" behind the deed'—see *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Four Great Errors', as well as *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1: 13).

In a crucial chapter in which Kirby analyses the *Psychic Life of Power* (112-123), she overlooks how centrally Butler is concerned with articulating a space between Freud and Foucault that will depend upon developing sensitivities to the rhetorical strategies and structure of their texts, rather than simply taking literally their claims about power. Throughout *Psychic Life*, Butler is concerned

to foreground the problematic terms on which accounts of conscience in Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault and Althusser elaborate the paradoxes of reflexivity, the 'turning back on oneself' that is here conceived as a vital aspect of the constitution of subjectivity through power. This centrally involves a meditative critical reading of the gestures and tone of selected key texts. It seems particularly extraordinary in the context of this project to charge that Butler has a 'foundational commitment to a juridical notion of power' (122). But if Kirby's reading is able to make it seem as if throughout her work Butler's orientation is rather crudely psychoanalytic and ultimately preoccupied with the aim of discerning an originary homosexuality beneath distorting socio-cultural overlays, this depends upon thoroughly down-playing the way in which Butler's work constantly *stages* the force of the temptation to fall back into culturally normative assumptions, just as it stages and seeks thereby to foreground the subtle theoretical lures and temptations of constructivist accounts of identity. In *Gender Trouble*, for example, it is clear that everything most original and 'Butleresque' about this work strives to expose sexual orientation as a conjured 'ground' of identity rather than falling back into agreeing that it is a real—even if absent and lost—foundation of being. In other words, what Butler offers is a critical-rhetorical analysis of the force and persistence of foundationalist thinking rather than a simple reiteration of its gestures.

Accordingly, it is necessary to be sensitive to the ways in which Butler *reads* the theorists she engages. She does not, as I think Kirby assumes, simply seek to blend their positive theoretical positions (which would *inevitably* produce a mish-mash of ideas). It is consequential, for instance, that Butler's writing is often framed by series of question-marks, by 'perhaps' and 'maybe', specifying the conjectural nature of her engagements. Kirby gives us no detailed reading on this level to support the claim that Butler remains wedded to the positions she ostensibly also opposes. This is telling in several ways, and not least because Butler's thought typically unfolds in whole paragraphs that, in Hegelian vein, pursue a twisting, turning path constructing a force field of meaning irreducible to its single parts. Such writing demands a more thoughtful approach to the problem of reading style and strategy as opposed to determining the strict content of claims. It is especially important within this that Butler is often working at once with and against narratives—for instance those Freud describes in his account of sexual development. These she treats not as canonical in the sense of providing us with foundational knowledge but rather, as she describes it in her interview with Kirby, as quasi-allegorical (146-7)<sup>1</sup>. To treat an account as allegorical, Butler suggests in the interview, is at once to suspend what might seem obvious about the temporal sequence within which a meaning unfolds and to highlight the normative elements of that narrative over the descriptive

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<sup>1</sup> See also Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 65, cited by Kirby 57, but with no comment on the term 'allegorical'.

function. It is ironic, then, that so many of the charges Kirby pins on Butler turn on the simplified reading she makes of Butler's frequent recurrence in her work to the significance of melancholia in the Freudian account of heterosexual identity formation. The reading Kirby gives of Butler's version of that—one in which a primary homosexuality is repressed through the imposition of a compulsory heterosexuality in a straightforward narrative sequence of development—are quite explicitly rejected by Butler in her interview (146-7) as indeed elsewhere in her work. Sadly in that interview Kirby's ensuing question to her subject in no way engages what might seem to be an important and revealing point of dispute between them.

This leaves us with a very thin account of the political potentials that Butler is interested in discerning at the sites of failure of normative power, because Kirby seems to assume that at such points Butler thinks a more authentic reality appears. What is largely passed over or misread here are the strategies Butler uses to identify and counter the *specific* articulations of contemporary power that act in and through the constitution of abject bodies, or as Butler also puts it 'ungrievable' lives—bodies and lives that trace the unequal materialization of meaning. To put a point very briefly here, Butler does not, as I think Kirby assumes, focus on the critical salience of what cannot be represented—the unknown 'thing in itself'—as a simple reminder of contingency; but, rather, is interested in elucidating the rhetorical constitution of the 'de-materialized' or 'spectral' being or event; that which leaves its *trace* in the material world and, to this extent, evidences the failure of repression. Very often, what Butler is interested in eliciting from her rhetorical analysis of language is how threats of violence bound up with this spectral life of power are conjured, negotiated and distributed; and with how temporal narratives, such as those that involve the positing of 'foundations' and of what is 'first and foremost', constitute normative spaces. Intervention into such fields of meaning thus requires a nuanced understanding of the orders of force—physical, normative and symbolic—in which they are implicated. But this is a very different way of figuring the operation of discursive and normative power than that offered by the romantic imagination of ubiquitous cultural impositions deforming a more originary nature. Butler thus gives an account of the 'trouble' in gender (and at other critical sites of discursive force-fields) that does not turn on simply revealing 'contingency' or the failure of hegemonic norms in abstract ways; but rather, demands a persistent effort aimed at 'undoing' the violent potentials of normative life, something that Butler makes central to the meaning of a 'non-violent' ethics.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Foucauldian account of power as a form of relationality, and hence of the ethical potentials of modes of interpellation and address, has recently been extended in Butler's work; and this in directions that re-infect her reliance on

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Jenkins, 'Toward a Nonviolent Ethics'.

psychoanalytic theory (in *Giving an Account*, for instance, Jean Laplanche comes into proximity with Levinas). Kirby's version of Butler's thought would, however, make little sense of this development. And perhaps that is why there is no discussion of these topics offered here.

In conclusion, I think it may be worth saying that the editors have done Kirby's book no special favours. Much in it suggests a hurried project; for instance it is organized around already published work and is less than up-to-date. The book does include a very comprehensive and helpful bibliography of Butler's writings. However, in a work such as this, one might also have expected a fuller bibliographical coverage of the large existing critical literature which is only very scantily described. I also found myself frequently confused by ambiguously worded sentences and a range of typographical errors. I hope, nonetheless, I have understood enough of the book to find myself in serious but productive disagreement with it.

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## **Works cited**

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