Troubling genders, subverting identities: interview with Judith Butler

Vasu Reddy interviews Judith Butler

In this interview we engage Judith Butler, one of the most challenging, influential and refreshing thinkers of our time. Given the diverse readership of Agenda we engage Butler on some important aspects in her oeuvre. The interview considers, in part, how ideas and problems in relation to the empirical context of 'Africa' could enter into a meaningful dialogue with Butler's work. Likewise the issues and ideas in this issue provide Butler with an understanding of how her work is understood and interpreted within this continent.

It is difficult to summarise the work of Butler, especially when we designate her corpus as Butlerian. In one sense her ongoing tenacious interrogation of the ontology of language and discourse is critical to her thinking. Yet in another crucial sense this does not imply that her work repudiates the social and political. Whereas some critics have venomously indicated that her work represents a verbal politics as opposed to a concern with the material conditions of women's lives, Butler's work (indeed her ideas), however, demonstrate otherwise. Since the publication of Gender Trouble, her work continues to shape, impact and influence different fields of inquiry, including and especially gender and sexuality studies, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies and, to some extent the humanities academy as a whole. In the preface to the second edition of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1999: xvi), a foundational text in critical gender studies, Butler writes:

Despite the dislocation of the subject that the text performs, there is a person here: I went to many meetings, bars, and marches and saw many kinds of genders, understood myself to be at the crossroads of some of them, and encountered sexuality at several of its cultural edges.

Her work disturbs, provokes and challenges the relationship between politics and the critique of identity, thereby implying that her experiential ground continues to remain intact in relation to her verbal politics (1999: xxii):

What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the 'human' and the 'livable'.

It is especially in this context that we invite (and encourage) our diverse readership to consider Butler's thinking in relation to how men and women may continue to engage theory and analysis from an activist perspective.

Vasu: You have been critical about the essentialism in some feminist work, including the reluctance of some feminists to return to biology. You are also critical of the essentialism evident in some aspects of the gay and queer movements. Added to this is your view that categories such as 'man', 'woman', 'male' and 'female' are too displaced. Why?

Judith: The debate between essentialism and social constructionism was strong about ten years ago. I find that the terms have become complicated recently. It is no longer possible to take a strict view on either side. I was part of a group of feminists (there were many I would
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include in this group) who were very concerned about how the categories of ‘woman’ or ‘women’ were used and understood in feminist discourse. You ask that the categories such as ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘male’ and ‘female’ are displaced, and we have to consider what displacement means. They may have lost their traditional place in a kind of political argument, but that does not mean that they cease to be an urgent political theme. If I want to be able to refer to the gender that I am, the sex that I am, the way I see the world, and I need these references in order to define myself, I better know what these terms imply before I commit myself to them as part of any self-description. It is for this reason, if not for others, that it is crucial to find out the meaning of the category of ‘women’ as it has been historically wrought and politically mobilised.

Vasu: You turn to performativity as a possible improvement on social construction. You emphasise that identity or, for that matter, gender identity is a performatively construct? What is the logic in conceiving identity in this way? Could you also respond to the criticism your usage of this concept has generated amongst scholars, especially concerning whether it enables or forecloses agency, including the possible death of the subject.

Judith: The first point to understand about performativity is what it is not: identities are not made in a single moment in time. They are made again and again. This does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes some time for identities to be brought out; they are dynamic and historical. In fact, if we ask what is distinctive about ‘being’ human, it will probably turn out that human being is always about becoming. There is always a question of what I will become, even if I am living in such a way that seeks to refuse that question. There is always a question of whether what I was yesterday will be precisely the same as what I become in time. Tomorrow, is there a possibility for me to become otherwise than what I am? This is not just a question of a private struggle with the self, but of the social terms by which identities are supported and articulated. In this sense, it is always in the context of a certain constellation of social power that I am able to pose the question of my own becoming differently. Through what constellations of social discourse and power was I brought into the world? And how is it that I might inhabit or revise the world such that my own way of being might also change? We are interpreted by social means; the language we have for what is most intimately our own is already given to us from elsewhere. This means that in the most intimate encounters with ourselves, the most intimate moments of disclosure, we call upon a language that we
never made in order to say who we are. In this sense, we are exposed to the social, impinged upon by the social, in ways that precede my doing, but any doing that might come to be called my own is dependent upon this very unchosen domain. My view is that there are norms into which we are born – gendered, racial, national – that decide what kind of subject we can be, but in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to rearticulate them in order to revise their power. Norms cannot be embodied without an action of a specific kind, and they cannot continue to enforce themselves without a continual action. It is in the thinking through of this action that change can happen, since we are acting all the time in the ways that we enact, repeat, appropriate and refuse the norms that decide our social ontology. You will see that I subscribe neither to free will nor to determinism in these debates. Social terms decide our beings, but they do not decide them once and for all. They also establish the conditions by which a certain constrained agency, even a decision, is possible on our parts.

Vasu: Your theory of materialisation renders the material category of sex into a site of permanent contestation? If this is a correct assessment, why do you hold this view, and what spin-offs does it hold for understanding agency and the subject?

Judith: I began the theory of materialisation in response to the question of the physical matter that is said to constitute lived bodies. But I did not finish that job, and there are some people (Cynthia Kraus in Switzerland, Gayle Salamon in California) who are doing a better job than I did. I’m very grateful to them, most especially for producing work from which I stand to learn. I think if we want to accord dignity to bodies, to their suffering, to their desires, then we cannot reduce the body in advance to the status of pure matter. The body is a site of vulnerability, of longing, of suffering, disease, reproduction (sometimes), dying and death. To understand any of these profoundly human dimensions of bodily experience, we have to consider the body as something that not only occupied specific sites and places, but something that is also in time, temporalised. It is impinged upon, for instance, by social norms, but it also enters into extended ways of living, modes of appropriating and re-encoding social norms, ways of giving material substance to norms that can only be described as processes in time. So whatever concept of ‘materiality’ we come up with to describe the living and dying of bodies will have to be one that takes time into account, not as a contingent feature of bodily experience, but as a necessary one. It would be wrong to
think about bodies as inert matter, except in those cases where they have ended up in that state by virtue of death. Even then, though, they signify, or should. Bodies are only inert matter when they are dead, so if we insist on a social description of bodies that takes inert matter as its condition, we have invested a certain death in the body prior to any description. Most biological approaches to the body refuse the inert matter thesis as a matter of course. Cultural imprints on the body become a part of the very physiology of the body, so that it becomes impossible to separate the biological from the cultural in ways that some people used to do. Our responses to social environments over time are part of what produces the so-called ‘facts’ of the biological body. And all such a formulation implies is that it will not work to separate the body from cultural discourse. That said, causal models that reduce culture to biology or biology to culture misrepresent the dynamic and historical process of their interplay. It is not what is complicated. As a consequence, we should not treat the body as a kind of slate or surface on which cultural meanings are imposed. The body is that which embodies and enacts certain kinds of social meanings. And certain social meanings cannot even take place becoming embodied in a material way through time.

**Vasu:** Contemporary narratives of the transition to democracy in Africa continue to give the impression that gender is irrelevant to politics. African gender scholars and activists address women’s oppression, such as women and violence, women and politics, and women in relation to democracy and citizenship. When we unpack these concepts, they disclose many interconnected levels of gender oppression. It is at these levels that key questions about social justice and human rights are raised. Do you have any comments about this and the argument about issues of democracy and citizenship?

**Judith:** Let me make a distinction. It is one task to produce Allied African Nations, especially if this is part of an effort to establish a bloc of political power over and against the US. It is quite another task to seek to build this alliance by sacrificing gay rights and a wide-ranging and effective AIDS education and treatment programme for the region. I can understand something of this bind from what I read, but I believe it can always and only be radically illegitimate to refuse basic enfranchisements to people, especially when HIV and AIDS remain such urgent issues for the region. I gather that there are those who say that pro-gay organisations are operating under the sign of cultural infiltration of America or other forms of cultural imperialism. But that argument once again effaces the number of gay people in the region, and seeks to minimise the horrific effect of the continuing AIDS crisis. National or regional identities are much stronger if they accommodate the existing diversity and complexity of those who live there – or try to live there. Forcing people into a falsified picture of ‘unity’ in the name of solidarity is a sure way to undermine any legitimate claims to solidarity. Sexuality takes so many social forms, some of which are monogamous, some of which are not; prostitution takes various forms; lesbian, gay, bi- and trans life takes many forms. If the task of ‘nation-building’ requires an effacement of the social forms in which sexuality lives, then the ‘nation’ will come to require the suppression of the actual ways in which sexuality is socially organised. Any nation that seeks to shore up its claims to legitimacy, to representing and supporting modes of social organisation, would have to ask how people actually do relate to one another, with what social and medical risks? Under what conditions does reproduction take place? And how are the ill or the elderly cared for; provided for? What are the conditions of healing and of dying? Are these actual modes of life – actual ways of living the materiality of the body in time – recognised by the law, or is the point of the law to efface the social organisation of life in the name of national unity? Is the law in the business of protecting and promoting an idea of what the nation should be like, and is this
normative aspiration of the law working to efface the ties of kinship and community that actually constitute the social body during these times?

**Vasu:** In the past decade, the world has witnessed an increase in the homophobia displayed by several African leaders. Like Zimbabwean president Mugabe, his counterparts from Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Uganda and Kenya have virulently opposed homosexuality, labelling it a 'scourge' that goes against Christian teachings and African traditions. In *Excitable Speech* (1997) you address some of these issues in relation to hate speech. Are these expressions of 'excitable speech' in any way unique to Africa, and what observations do you have about this beyond the description that these utterances are examples of hate speech and homophobic discourse?

**Judith:** You know, I think that there are questions that arise when Mugabe makes his claims comparing homosexuals to animals or saying that lesbian and gay people sacrifice their very status as human beings by virtue of their homosexuality. In such extreme statements, it is not only a matter of Mugabe having the right to express his private view. His speech is public discourse, and it affects employment, it affects where people can move, it affects who can make a housing claim, who may secure adoption rights, who has access to health care, who lives and who dies. I fear that these are murderous words.

**Vasu:** In *Bodies That Matter* you raise the question of 'freedom of choice' and that our gender choices are limited rather than 'free'. In what ways are our gender choices limited, and what concerns does this raise for questions about agency?

**Judith:** Many people tend to think within the terms of a classical political liberalism, assuming that either we are free or we are restrained. For me, though, restraint is a condition of freedom. By the fact that we are socially constructed, we were born into a world we never made. We do not have a lot of choice about who our parents are, who raises us. There are many things that come and to us from the outside that we do not choose. And yet there is always the question of how to live these various conditions. You’ll note that 'live' becomes a transitive verb. And I do not believe that these various conditions determine us absolutely, although sometimes social power can take away our lives or the lives of others, and agency is vitiated. Social conditions that determine us absolutely, restrict us absolutely and actually produce victims of all of us. Sometimes this describes the situation well, especially when we are, quite against our will, subject to an annihilating violence. But it would be wrong to devise a theory about social construction that takes that model as the norm. If we were to do so, then, we are always already victims. And no political agency can be derived from this view. On the other hand, the classical liberal position tends to counsel that it does not matter what your social conditions are. If freedom is an inherent attribute of every human, then every human can and ought to 'rise above' social conditions and act. I accept neither the social determinism view nor the classical liberal one.

We cannot become anything we want. You know, there is one reading of *Gender Trouble*, which suggests that a person can become one thing one day and then something radically different the next. I don't think that's true. There is another reading of *Gender Trouble* that concludes that we are fully constituted, we are fully constructed and that means that there is no freedom. I do not think that is true either. I think they are both misunderstandings of what I'm trying to do — understandable misunderstandings, since they subscribe to the two oppositional moments within the framework that I am trying to displace. What is the dilemma of what it is to be constructed, to live that construction, to be part of an ongoing process of constructing? What is done to me, and what is it I do with what is done to me?

**Vasu:** Like *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter,* and *Excitable Speech*, *The Psychic Life of Power* extends your argument about identity, focusing on how gender 'accomplishments' such as masculinity and femininity, and 'achievements'...
such as heterosexuality come about. Here too you situate homosexuality at the heart of a 'homosexually panicked' culture. Could you expand on your thinking here?

**Judith:** It comes down to the question of whose lives are regarded as worthy lives, and whose illness is worthy of treatment, and whose dying and death is worthy of acknowledgment and grief. These are issues raised by gay politics during the AIDS crisis, but they are compounded now as the AIDS crisis continues in Africa, and racialisation within the contemporary geopolitical sphere compounds each and every one of these questions. In the North American context, grieving became a political issue with the onset of the AIDS crisis in the '80s and early '90s, and indeed continuing into present time. One of the reasons that lives lost through AIDS were difficult to grieve in the US, and why there was such an important activism centring on public mourning, such as the Names Project, The Quilt, is that it seemed that homosexuality was in this culture, not a real love, and gay lives were not as visible and real as others, and so their deaths, especially their deaths from a stigmatised disease remained, at first, unspeakable, and unmournable. Members of the dominant culture looked over at gay people and silently and openly concluded, 'well their lives are not real lives anyway' and 'their loves are not real loves anyway', and 'their losses are not real losses anyway'; they are just 'copying' or they are just living in a 'shadow world', or an 'unreal world', they haven't 'grown up', or their relations are not legitimate in the way that heterosexual marriages are, then it follows that these lives are devalued, lost before they are lost, unworthy of public grief. Now what that means for the dominant culture that performs that act of de-realising gay lives, is that the loss of gay people, the loss or losses from AIDS in particular; become part of a mainstream melancholia. They know that some population has disappeared, has died, but there is no way to mark or acknowledge the loss. If the part of the population that has died is the one we never loved, then they are also those we never lost. And yet, there is an elusive death that haunts dominant culture in ways that cannot be readily explained. I think it is important to understand that melancholia is not just an individual issue; it is not just an individual psychopathology, or an individual neurosis, but it can be a form of cultural life when certain kinds of lives are precluded from being mourned, or being griefed, or being valued like they have become in a way the unacknowledged attachments we have that we cannot acknowledge and we cannot mourn.

**Vasu:** Could you comment on your assertion in *Psychic Life of Power* that the “truest” lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the “truest” gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man.

**Judith:** Let us think first about what melancholy means and how it is distinguished from mourning. Freud goes back and forth about whether he thinks this is a stable distinction, but in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ when he does think it is a stable distinction, he claims that melancholy is disavowed loss; it pertains to disavowed loss, whereas mourning or grief knows what it has lost, and can acknowledge what it has lost. To be in a state of disavowed loss means that one has lost something, even though one does not know precisely what one has lost. Freud says there that it could be a person or it could be an idea. But one is haunted by it, and the sign of that haunting turns out to be a vacillation between manic behaviour and highly depressive behaviour. And it seems to me, the melancholic is haunted and animated by a loss that he or she cannot name and cannot grieve. Now my thinking is that the repression of homosexuality is very deep for most straight people; that repression is considered, I think, very fundamental to the development of the ego in Freud, and certainly much psychoanalytic thinking. It would seem, however, that if there ever were any primary sexual attachments for a child, some of those would be homosexual, and those become precisely the attachments that cannot be acknowledged in adult life. Indeed, we might even conjecture that the unspeakability of
those primary homosexual passions is what qualifies someone as an 'adult' in the established terms of dominant, straight culture. What does it mean that we have each apparently undergone certain kinds of losses that remain nearly or fully unnamed, and that this that cannot be named constitutes who we have become, that is to say, operates as the very foundation in terms of which our psychological formation takes place.

I guess the other point that Freud makes here is that the melancholic tends to incorporate some of the traits of the one who is lost, especially the one who is lost through disavowal. If a woman has disavowed her early homosexual attachments, and lost those objects, those other women, those other girls, as possible objects of love, cannot even acknowledge that she has lost them, or cannot even acknowledge that she has loved them; she incorporates them as parts of herself, modes of identification, and this means that they come to survive for her as her own character traits. She incorporates them – makes them, in a way, into her own body, her own bodily sense and comportment, and this incorporation is precisely the opposite of – and the consequence of – unacknowledged loss. So the act of incorporating those traits is a more or less unconscious way we try to keep the lost one alive in our person, in the lived experience of our own body and its gender. Freud talks about the fact that when we lose loved ones, we tend to put on their clothes, we start to walk like them, we find ourselves talking like them, there is a kind of unconscious appropriation of their traits that goes on. How does this apply to gender? In the case of gender, the woman cannot avow other women she has loved and lost. It may be that she incorporates that loss in her person, exacerbating her own feminine traits. And those exacerbated feminine traits reveal a sense of a loss to not acknowledged homosexual life. Similarly, for men, it could be the exacerbation of masculine traits is the sign that he has incorporated the love of other men or boys, the love that can be neither acknowledged nor grieved. Now it will be a mistake to say that if we are all hypermasculine or hyperfeminine it is the consequence of melancholic incorporation. There are gay male forms of masculinity that will be very complicated to explain in this form, and hyperfemme forms of lesbianism that will be very hard to explain in terms of this formula. But I guess I am talking about heteronormative masculinity and femininity when it is linked towards the repudiation of homosexuality.

Vasu: In What's Left of Theory? you engage at length with the political uses of theory and literature. Some related questions: Is it still appropriate to talk about the political uses of theory and literature? Is literary theory dead? Where is theory today?

Judith: When some critics claim that 'theory is dead' it seems to me that the statement 'theory is dead' is an effort to drive a nail into the coffin
and that, in fact, proves that theory is alive. So rather the statement is an effort to accomplish something and make theory into past history. In fact I think it has evolved into a new kind of scholarly work that is much more engaged in cultural practices and popular culture. Most significant is the way that new theory 'moves' between social theory and literary criticism, economic analysis or political theory; it has become disseminated into various disciplinary frames. Certain theoretical questions have hardly gone away. For example, how do we think about the subject? How do we think about explanation? How do we think about interpretation? What is the nation? What is the political? We have to be able to speak not only about this or that political institution or structure, this or that national formation, but the political as a way that groups live together in power. Surely it is theoretical to ask, how might we live with the notion of the future? Literature engages in the charting of possible worlds; theory engages in the charting of possible worlds, it schematises possibility, it does not always tell us what possibilities to realise, or where to go with them, but it opens up a way of seeing the world that can be very disorienting, that can produce another sense of reality, that can destabilise the status quo, that can question deeply what we take for granted as naturalised or realistic versions of the status quo, and that helps open up possibility. There are some people who say what good is theory if it opens up possibilities but does not furnish a measure by which to determine which possibilities you ought to realise. Perhaps one must turn around and remind others that there are those who live in a world where there seems to be no possibility, where they are dying from a lack of possibility, in which there is literally despair. The idea of producing possibility is a precondition to deciding which possibility to realise; there must first be possibilities established, and this is a crucial task, hardly simple. If theory does this, then it can be absolutely exhilarating in so far as it opens up this world we thought was so closed to us.

**Vasu:** In Antigone's *Claim* you interrogate, through the figure of Antigone how a culture of normative heterosexuality obstructs our capacity to see what sexual freedom and political agency could be. This text offers various perspectives on obedience, assimilation and resistance to authority. Michael Wood asks, 'could Antigone offer a model for feminism?' Was this an intention in writing this book?

**Judith:** I do not think Antigone is a model for feminism and I would never say we should all follow Antigone's lead or model our action upon hers. Antigone stood up courageously to despotic authority, insisting on the right to bury her brother and to publicly grieve when there was no right given to her by public authority. And that is great; I mean that's like Rosa Parks sitting in the front of a bus when racist laws prohibited her from doing that. It is like traditions of civil disobedience that finally cast doubt on the legitimacy of racist and despotic authority. But the problem with Antigone as a model is that she died. I mean, she took her stand, knowing that she would not be allowed to live after having taken it. And you know, there is a way of reading that play in which she is the one who caused her own death, and Creon is but an instrument of her suicidal will; he only fulfills his role by sentencing her to die and refusing to withdraw that sentence at any point. So I don't want to recommend suicidal action; in this sense, she is no model. We should be able to live in a world in which our demands for justice do not cost us our lives. We want to survive; we want to make such claims and survive. So the question that Antigone raises for me is, what kind of world would it have been or could it be in which Antigone could survive? Most commentators accept that death is the only possible conclusion for her. But what if someone outside the law is trying to bring public attention to dying and death that the public does not acknowledge, whose 'crime', as it were, is precisely to open up a new possibility for public grieving? Under what conditions is such an effort punishable by death? It is only when the state itself does not want to be exposed as a death machine.

Antigone is constrained as a woman, unmarried, not a citizen. What could she speak in a public
sphere? How will that speech be taken? And yet she works within that constraint and calls that constraint into question. So you can see her as exercising the kind of agency I was referring to before, exemplifying performative to the degree that works within and against norms at the same time. Antigone, however, is not successful in the sense that she does not survive. She is successful, on the other hand, in so far as she becomes what that play must fathom again and again. She does not survive, but the play that traces her death continues to be read again and again and is produced for all kinds of political reasons. There was an Argentinian version of the play that spoke to the situation of the disappeared. Where are these bodies? Why have they not been mourned or seen? There was a North African version that talks about colonialism and being disempowered in the public sphere. And there was, most recently, a Palestinian version, performed on the rubble of a decimated city. Does the media record those deaths? That the play can travel between these political scenes, can connect with audiences again and again, is a sign that it continues to bear relevance for thinking about the stakes of resistance.

Publications: books


Publications: co-authored


Publications: co-edited


Judith Butler received her PhD from Yale University in 1984. She is currently Maxine Eliot Professor in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature and Chair of the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California (Berkeley). Her credentials and honours include a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship, a Duncan Fellowship for Women in Philosophy, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship. She is the recipient of a Critics Choice Award for Gender Trouble, a Crompton-Noll award, and an award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at Johns Hopkins University. Butler's corpus is extensive and reflects broadly her intellectual project for approximately two decades. A complete list of Butler's books (co-authored and co-edited collections, excluding articles) is indicated above. Email: jpbutter@socrates.berkeley.edu

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