

BOOK REVIEW

## Bodies that Still Matter: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler

Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek, and Roel van den Oever  
(Editors). Amsterdam: : Amsterdam University Press, 2021

Elisabeth Paquette

University at Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo, United States  
Email: [epaquette@buffalo.edu](mailto:epaquette@buffalo.edu)

(Received 27 November 2023; accepted 8 December 2023)

Published in 2021, this edited collection consists of thirteen chapters, and an introduction co-written by the editors, Annemie Halsema, Katja Kwastek, and Roel van den Oever. The text itself is a product of a three-day conference titled *Critical Theory in the Humanities: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* that took place in April 2017 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (9).

While the title of the edited collection draws our attention to Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), as a whole the book exceeds that text to engage with Butler's work more broadly—including *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Excitable Speech* (1997), *Precarious Life* (2004), and numerous other of her texts—engaging collectively in over thirty years of Butler's work (spanning 1987 to 2020).

International in its scope, and intergenerational by design, this book offers novel approaches to Butler's work, ensuring its continued relevance today. The book is divided into four sections, which circulate around four concepts: Performativity, Speech, Precarity, and Assembly. The following summary of the text is divided into three sections.

To begin, various chapters in this edited collection seek to develop Butler's project in a new manner, pushing her work in ways that are still consistent with her project.

For instance, Adriana Zaharijević's essay titled "On Butler's Theory of Agency" (21-30) seeks to develop a theory of agency as already present in Butler's work, and having not yet received due attention in the scholarship or by Butler herself. Zaharijević's claim is that agency exists within Butler's account of performativity, as situated within historical conditions (6) and yet recognizing a role for processes of becoming (26) as embodied and relational. Furthermore, Zaharijević argues that this account of agency challenges current dominant conceptions of agency within continental and analytic philosophy (28), both of which are laid out in her chapter.

Roel van den Oever's essay titled "What's in a Name?: Don't Ask, Don't Tell and *Private Romeo*" (77-88), engages in a cinematic analysis of the film *Private Romeo*

(2011) through Butler's *Excitable Speech*. While the film attempts to offer an affirmative narrative about two cisgender men who fall in love, van den Oever's analysis of this film makes evident that the film achieves the opposite, by turning to how the film is culturally scripted as heterosexual, and normatively encoded through homophobia (87).

Adriana Cavarero's "Rethinking Radical Democracy with Butler: The Voice of Plurality" (141-154) reads Butler's *Note Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* through the writings of Hannah Arendt in order to debate the significant differences between "plurality" and "mass." This analysis allows for Cavarero to name and discuss political soundscapes through "plural vocal expressions," or what she calls "pluriphony" (145), which she distinguishes from the voices of the masses (152).

Second, and in a similar vein, various chapters are successful at applying Butler's work to new, important, and timely contexts.

For instance, Julia Peetz chapter titled "The Performative Edge of Non-Politicians" (53-63) engages with contemporary populism and speech acts. While noting the existence of populism in Europe (54) Peetz focuses her attention on US presidential elections. Therein, she claims, in conversation with Butler's *Excitable Speech*, that right-wing populist speech acts "might be seen as working performatively to shift legitimacy in ways that controvert the rules of how performative speech acts are commonly assumed to function" (54) through paradoxical performativity. Such an intervention holds incredible importance globally given the rise of anti-establishment right-wing populist movements.

Carmen Schuhmann's essay titled "Rethinking Counseling from a Relational Perspective: From Alleviating Suffering to 'Becoming Human'" (91-101) seeks to apply Butler's ethical model to the realm of counselling. Schuhmann develops Butler's account of self-transparency from *Giving an Account of Oneself* to critique the model whereby counsellors seek transparency on the part of clients (95) towards a model that seeks to foreclose injury, rather than a model that prioritizes opacity. In line with this turn to opacity, Schuhmann advocates for a relational approach to counselling, one that develops a way to respond to "those who injure us that does not cut us off from them" (98), as a model for "becoming human" (99).

Noa Roei's essay titled "Dancing the Image: Complicity, Responsibility and Spectatorship" (113-125) seeks to apply Butler's work on violence, opacity, and responsibility to an hour-long performance by Arkadi Zaides called *Archive* (2014). Zaides is Israeli, and his work seeks to address the violence of Israeli settlers and border patrol against residents of Palestine (117). Therein, Roei describes how Zaides seeks to invoke collective responsibility from all spectators (120), as well as engaging in a "countervisual practice" (121), and contesting modes of image consumption (122). This text continues to carry significant importance in 2023.

Similarly, Friederike Sigler's essay titled "Santiago Sierra's *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid*: Precarious Labor in Contemporary Art" (127-137) applies Butler's conception of precarity to the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra's art installation in Berlin in 2000. For Sigler, Sierra succeeds at exposing Butler's articulation of techniques of precarious labor that also demands a new bodily ontology (129) by reproducing working conditions, that are typically outsourced, within the art space (133) so that visitors to the art show must confront and contend with the vulnerability of the workers (135).

Erika Fischer-Lichte's "Strategies of (Self-)Empowerment: On the Performativity of Assemblies in and as Theatre" (155-175) draws a correlation between the Butler's concepts of assembly, appearance, and precarity to three periods in German theatre history, from 1750 to today. Doing so not only highlights the role of theatre historically, such as

the role of audience as participants (160) and the kind of self-empowerment it was supposed to invoke (167), but also serves to draw a connection to the Occupy movements (172).

And finally, various chapters offer ways of moving beyond Butler's work, posing important questions to Butler, questions that point to a gap or a limitation in her project. In each instance, such critiques are offered in a generous manner.

For instance, Eyo Ewara's "The Psychic Life of Horror: Abjection and Racialization in Butler's Thought" (31-41) engages with Butler's discussion of abjection as her model for addressing racialization. Therein Ewara's notes that Butler's use of abjection serves to recenter the experiences of white folks, over racialized folks. Ewara's argument centers on the link between abjection and (white) anxieties about race, and the absence of addressing the harms experienced by racialized subjects from racism within Butler's model. Ewara concludes his essay by offering a compelling way out of this problem through Butler's conception of "precaritization" (38).

Tingting Hui's essay titled "Talking Back as an Accented Speaker?: Reframing Butler's Idea of Subversion Resignification" (65-76) offers a similar challenge to Butler's work, this time focusing on her generalized account of linguistic vulnerability. Therein, Hui describes accented speech as both protection and obstacle (66), as triggering, inviting, and serving to justify hostility and violence (67). Within this framing, she asks: "what does it mean to claim that one is hurt by one's own speech?" (67). Hui exceeds Butler's account of hate speech by way of an intervention by addressing differential relations, and "entitlement", to language (74).

Simon van der Weele's essay titled "Bridging Conversations: 'Paradigm Cases' of Dependency in Eva Kittay and Judith Butler" (103-111) seeks to bring Kittay and Butler's respective, and divergent (107), forms of care practice into conversation by analyzing what he calls "paradigm cases." Therein, van der Weele notes limitations for each theorist's conception of dependency given the cases they have chosen (PIMD for Kittay, and refugee for Butler) thus noting the divergent forms that dependency can take in relation to violence and consent.

A cherished feature of this edited collection is that it also includes an essay by Jean-Luc Nancy titled "Beyond Gender(s)"—in both the original French (47-50) and translated by Christine Irizarry into English (43-46)—as well as an essay by Judith Butler, titled "Bodies That Still Matter" (177-193), the latter of which serves as the end-cap to the edited collection. In her essay, Butler returns to a question about the possibility of a relation between politics and vulnerability. Butler cautions her reader against (too quickly) developing a "politics of vulnerability or a politics of care" (178). To this end, she insists on maintaining a "materialist point" whereby bodies are defined through interdependency, bound up in a network of relations (191), rather than vulnerability as individualism (192).

Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, originally published in 1993, continues to be taught across various disciplines today. And the relevance of Butler's work over the past three decades shines through in this edited collection. This edited collection is inter-disciplinary—moving between philosophy, political theory, gender studies, film, art, theatre studies, and counselling—which continues to ensure the cross-disciplinary relevance of Butler's work. As such, this edited collection will be of interest to theorists from a broad range of disciplines. This book will also be of interest to those working on performativity, speech, precarity, and assembly, given the multitude of perspectives beyond, and even interventions with, Butler's work.

Finally, this book is an excellent reference for anyone who is teaching Butler's work in an advanced undergraduate, and/or a graduate level course. It offers various timely and important engagements with Butler's work. Furthermore, each chapter is self-contained, clearly written which is a benefit for a broad (and undergraduate) audience, and is relatively short (approximately ten pages in length).

**Elisabeth Paquette** is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her book, titled *Universal Emancipation: Race beyond Badiou* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), engages French political theorist Alain Badiou's discussion of Négritude and the Haitian Revolution to develop a nuanced critique of his theory of emancipation. Currently, she is working on a monograph on the writings of decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter. She is also the Founder of the Feminist Decolonial Politics Workshop, that takes place annually during the summer.