

Margaret Sönser Breen and Warren J. Blumfeld, eds.: *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

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1 The title's witty declaration "Butler matters" in combination with Butler's portrait as frontispiece, and the collection's final sentence that confirms, "the lesbian and gay movement needs, among its advocates, scholars like Judith Butler" (204), suggests more dedication than Breen and Blumfeld's collection of essays actually has. Although the majority of the thirteen articles maintains the importance of Butler's thinking for a number of disciplines, among which Feminist and Queer Studies are only the most prominent ones, Vicky Kirby's and Kirsten Campbell's contributions probe into inadequacies and inconsistencies of Butler's theory.

2 The collection opens with Judith Butler compiled by some of the essay contributors and Susanne Baer, Lynda Hall, and Robert Shail. In this interview, Butler addresses a number of issues which she explores in more detail in her recent book *Undoing Gender* (see the review by Dirk Schulz in this issue), such as transsexuality, disability, the performativity of race, the return of essentialism in feminist and queer studies that she sees at work in debates on the "gay gene", and gay marriage, which Butler considers an "assimilation to the norm" (20). Butler emphasises that the fight for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual rights does not need to be based on essentialised identity politics: "One can still organize as a lesbian, but one has to be open to the notion that we don't yet know who else will ally with that sign, or when that sign will have to be relinquished in order to promote another potential goal" (23). In the collection's first essay, "Becoming Butlerian," Frederick S. Roden examines the popularity of *Gender Trouble* and argues that not only Butler's theses but also the philosophical tradition of acclaimed thinkers she places herself in contributed to the book's broad reception, which exceeded the usual readership within Queer and Gender Studies. Roden comments on the controversy which *Gender Trouble* caused internationally among feminists, paying particular attention to Martha Nussbaum's polemical critique in *The New Republic*, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler." A number of the essays return to this article and make Nussbaum the figurehead for those feminists who oppose Butler's theory on the ground of its supposedly non-political and playful character.

3 The most critical assessments of Butler's impact are gathered in the collection's second part on language, melancholia, and subjectivity. In "When All That is Solid Melts into

Language," Vicky Kirby revisits her criticism of Butler's foreclosure of matter that she previously elaborated in her study *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (1997). Kirby argues that notwithstanding Butler's critique of Žižek's concepts of foreclosure, she repeats the psychoanalytic logic when her theory forecloses everything that is not language. Therefore, according to Kirby, "our sense of the materiality of matter, its palpability and physical insistence, is rendered unspeakable and unthinkable in Butler's account" (45). Kirby states that Butler restricts her considerations to the changing morphology of the body, i.e. its matter, rather than its "vulgar, lived sense of bodily substance" (54), and therefore remains at "the surface of the surface" of the body and "stops short of going all the way" (54). Although Kirby's valid criticism is well-argued, she herself does not seem to go all the way, either, by pointing out the supposed inadequacies of Butler's theory rather than offering an — however provisional - account of "substance." Accordingly, her concluding sentence is rather evasive and vague: "by putting the sign [of matter] into question and exploring and exploding identity on the atomic level of its constitution, matter may well become a curious subject" (56). While Kirby contests basic assumptions of Butler's theory from without, Kirsten Campbell's "The Plague of the Subject: Subjects, Politics, and the Power of Psychic Life" criticises Butler's thinking from within Butler's framework. Campbell exposes one of the troubling contradictions in Butler's theory of subject formation: If the prohibition of the same-sex parent as object of love triggers the melancholic incorporation which results in the assumption of gender, how can the as yet non-sexed child be forbidden to love the same-sex parent? Likewise, Campbell shows that Butler fails to theorise the outside of social intelligibility, i.e. the realm of the bodies that do not matter. Moreover, she argues that Butler conceptualises the subject as the conscious self, thus offering a theory of identity rather than the psychoanalytic self. I would contest Campbell's claim that "the unconscious remains the unthought in Butler's theory, functioning as its aporia" (91), as the very concept of gender melancholy, tackled by Campbell herself, is based on unconscious processes; thus, Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power* that "what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal" (147).

4 In "Excitable Speech: Judith Butler, Mae West, and Sexual Innuendo," which at times tacitly contradicts Campbell's stance, Angela Failler offers a convincing and entertaining account of Mae West's comedy in terms of Butler's concept of resignification. Failler aligns Butler's assumption that speech involves but is unconscious of its foreclosures and that "the unspeakable lingers as a silent but animating presence" (98) in all speech acts, with West's sexual innuendo, which is principally based on the unspoken but implied. Apart from offering

West's memorable punch lines, such as "Women with 'pasts' interest men because they hope that history will repeat itself" and "Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before," Failler convincingly illustrates the workings of (queer) resignification in West's oeuvre and its adaptations. Failler's contribution is one of the articles which fit the collection's dedication "For our students," in that it provides accessible and even entertaining examples that could help to teach Butler's complex and abstract theory. In "Judith Butler and the Images of Theory," Mena Mitrano examines Butler's thinking from the unusual perspective of painting and literary images. Taking into account Kafka's notion of subjectivity and contrasting it with the paintings of Willem de Kooning, Mitrano identifies "an affinity to the visual reactions against European modernism" (61) in Butler's writing and places it in a tradition of "American gestural, expressive poetics that reacts to European anxieties" (61). According to Mitrano, Butler, like de Kooning, substitutes the European immobility of the subject before the law — as represented in Kafka's texts but also in theoretical European writing such as Kristeva's — with the "glamorous negativity" (65) of performativity. Although Mitrano's analysis of Butler's philosophical influences is convincing and the association of her theory with art is original, her insistence on the difference between Europe's "old starving guardians" and Northern American theory's "contemporary intellectual nurture" is irritatingly reminiscent of Donald Rumsfeld's phrases about "old Europe" — an "intellectual nurture" hardly to be associated with Butler's thought.

5 The collection's third part, "Body Matters," assembles articles which investigate Butler's impact on archaeology, literary studies, and pedagogy. In their article "Past Performances," Elizabeth M. Perry and Rosemary A. Joyce examine the benefit of Butler's theory for archaeology. Although only a small number of archaeologists employ Butler's work in their field, their research has become an important direction in the archaeology of gender according to Perry and Joyce. The authors show that because Butler's work questions categories that have been naturalised, it offers a groundbreaking theoretical basis for archaeology, in which otherwise "unanticipated diversity in past gender expressions may be conflated into socially preconceived categories of 'feminine' and 'masculine'" (114). As archaeology invariably has to examine material remains, the discipline demands an adaptation of Butler's theory that takes into account materiality. The article offers interesting examples of reconstructed gender identities that depart from the naturalised binary, such as the transgendered Kolhamana in historic Zuni communities. Belinda Johnston's "Renaissance Body Matters" draws together the performative model of gender in Renaissance theatre and the practice of witch-hunting, which increasingly naturalised the female body. Johnston

employs Butler to illuminate the discursive association of witchcraft with the maternal body, which involved a biologically grounded sexual difference that already departed from the one-sex-model (see also the gender forum article "Performing the Demonic" by Kramer for a association of Butler's theory and the discourse on witchcraft). Taking into account the notion of the abject, Johnston demonstrates how "the discourse of female witchcraft worked to promote appropriate maternity and to suggest the radical difference of maternity itself" (136) and argues that theatrical stagings of witchcraft, such as Macbeth and Middleton's *The Witch*, performed a subversive reiteration of the discourse and depicted gender as a much less stable category.

6 Breen's article "*Gender Trouble* in the Classroom" argues that the epistemological entrenchment of gender prejudice makes the reading of *Gender Trouble* in the classroom difficult but rewarding. Breen does not address the theoretical complexity and the challenging style of Butler's writing, which additionally complicate the reading for students, but her subsequent analyses of literary texts in the light of Butler's theory show ways of making Butler accessible for students. Reading Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* together with Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* as intertexts, Breen not only offers a convincing and innovative reading of Kafka's story, but also proves the merit of Butler's theory for literary analysis. Her reading of Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* shows how the novel subverts contemporary sexological theses and participates in a Butlerian destabilisation of gender. Breen highlights the astonishing parallels to Stoker's *The Man*, which, however, provides a more normative account of gender transgression. In contrast to Kirby's claims, Nathalie Wilson's article "Butler's Corporeal Politics: Matters of Politicised Abjection" argues that Butler does consider matter as substance in her theory of abject bodies. In her illuminating readings of abject physicality in Barbara Gowdy's *Mister Sandman* and Katherine Dunne's *Geek Love*, Wilson demonstrates that Butler's theory of the intersection of language and matter is a helpful tool for literary analysis.

7 The final part of the collection investigates agency, poststructuralism, and political pragmatism in Butler's work. In "Strange Tempest: Agency, Poststructuralism, and the Shape of Feminist Politics to Come," Edwina Barvosa-Carter argues that Butler's concept of agency beyond autonomy was one of the crucial reasons for the unusually intense response to her writing. Barvosa-Carter criticises that Butler has as yet left unanswered which factors enable agency within iteration and proposes to expand Butler's notion of cultural "tools" in order to theorise agency. Contesting Nussbaum's assertion that Butler's theory cannot be put to use in political practice, Barvosa-Carter claims that Butler offers the philosophical weapons and

radical perspective needed by political practice. The final article "Changing Signs: The Political Pragmatism of Poststructuralism" follows the same trajectory and offers more concrete examples of how to use Butler's philosophical weapons. Robert Alan Brooke and Diane Helene Miller argue that poststructuralist gender theory has merits for the fight for sexual rights and that it should complement identity politics, whose drawbacks, such as the marginalisation of minorities within a minority and the "errors in essentialism" (197), the authors highlight. As an example for the political efficacy of Butler's theory, Brooke and Miller expand the Butlerian inversion through which heterosexuality becomes a copy rather than the origin of which homosexuality is an imperfect copy: "By performing the type of political inversion outlined by Butler, sexual rights advocates can begin to shift the argumentative burden so that the issue of discrimination, rather than sexual identity, becomes the primary focus of the debate" (201).

8 Through its three thematic foci and its interdisciplinary approach, *Butler Matters* offers a complex and stimulating account of Butler's controversial reception, although it concentrates, with a few exceptions, on the reception within the USA. The only drawbacks of the study are its somewhat belated publication and its unclear addressee. All contributions but Mirano's and Breen's have first appeared in a special issue on Butler in the *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* in 2001, also edited by Breen and Blumfeld, or elsewhere. As a result, the collection does not take into account Butler's more recent work, such as *Antigone's Claim* (2000), her response to 9/11 *Precarious Life* (2004), *Undoing Gender* (2004), and *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality* (2000), co-authored with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. Moreover, the selected essays address dissimilar readerships. While some articles, such as Roden's introductory survey and Breen's and Failler's contributions, meet the volume's dedication, others, such as Kirby's and Campbell's articles, clearly call for scholars who are intimate with Butler's oeuvre. Nonetheless, *Butler Matters* is an important contribution to the field of Gender Studies, which ideally complements earlier studies on Butler, which focus on the explanation of Butler's theory and do not, as *Butler Matters*, mainly explore the fruitfulness of Butler's thinking both for a variety of academic disciplines and for political practice.