

## ***Gender Trouble in lambda nordica***

**AS WE PUT** the final touches on this special issue, we, like most people around us, are preoccupied with the war in Syria and the atrocities facing the hundreds of thousands of people on the move to escape terror on multiple fronts. What, we ask ourselves daily as we engage in students and colleagues and complete administrative tasks, mundane and seemingly meaningless, does it mean to be an academic, a teacher, and an intellectual right now? Completing more than a year's work on an issue in honor of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* we might even more to the point ask: What might it mean to do *queer work*, and work on queer livelihoods? In a time where LGBTQ rights are increasingly secured for some and at the same time, Europe is facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War?

Judith Butler has been called the king and queen of queer theory, even if she herself has troubled the very definition of the term queer. It is telling of Butler's significance as a critical thinker in our time that she in fact theorizes precisely in and for situations such as the one we are facing. Indeed, in her post-9/11 book *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler asks a range of questions of continued relevance to a situation which seems only to worsen. Who has rights, and what kind of rights? Whose life counts, is grievable? As a philosopher Butler is concerned with the question of how we become subjects and how we are to live, ethically,

in these times of war and precarity. “Let’s face it,” Butler (2004, 23) writes, “we are undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.” For more than twenty-five years we have certainly been undone by Butler.

The questions that have so profoundly guided Butler’s work, namely who can be a subject, what will count as a life, (cf. Salih 2002, 2) are questions we must continue to ask, especially right now. Given the continuation of human loss on a massive scale, ranging from the shifting shape of the still ongoing AIDS epidemic and alarming vulnerability of transgender lives, to continued war in so many parts of the world, and on many streets, how are we to respond to, and what can be learned from, the suffering and loss that surrounds us? Each of us, Butler contends,

is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. (Butler 2004, 20)

In this moment, we are *also* witnessing how people all over Europe are raising up and demanding, in a range of ways in different settings, political leadership that emphasize humanity and solidarity, not corporate welfare and banks, and above all, who are taking matters into their own hands. We can and we must fight to build a Nordic region and a Europe that cares for its people and those who seek refuge from war, we must do what we can to help, see how our lives are connected. Butler’s forthcoming book, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), we learn from its presentation might offer new perspectives as it argues that “by enacting a form of radical solidarity in opposition to political and economic forces, a new sense of ‘the people’ emerges, interdependent, grievable, precarious, and persistent.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Making Trouble with Gender Trouble**

It is in times of great upheaval and uncertainty that we have to insist on the importance of thinking with, through, and about the subject(s) of

sex, gender, and sexuality. This special issue is dedicated to one single work and author: *Gender Trouble* and Judith Butler, even if it is hard to distinguish from her continued *oeuvre*. The aim is to take stock of some of the impact that a work that has frequently been called one of the most cited queer and feminist works in history, has had in Nordic queer studies. What difference can one body of flesh and knowledge make and how are we to assess it, beyond the tiresome jargon of “turn” or “superstar,” beyond noting the many introductory texts and scholarly works that have been influenced by her work? In the preface to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Gender Trouble*, Butler points out that she had not expected the impact her book would have:

I did not know that the text would have as wide an audience as it had, nor did I know that it would constitute a provocative “intervention” in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory. (Butler 1999, vii)

As Butler’s preface indicates, the canonization of *Gender Trouble* happened quickly; its status as one of the previous century’s most seminal works was already established ten years after its publication.

In fact, as editors we remember how *Gender Trouble* had reached canonical status already when we were undergraduate students in the mid-1990s. We are “old enough” to recall the impact that reading Butler had on us, perhaps by understanding the impact her work had on our teachers and the discussions that formed us as undergraduate students. For Ulrika Dahl, encountering Butler under the heading “conflicts” in syllabi in women’s and gender studies in the United States largely meant experiencing a strong poststructuralist turn away from static and hierarchical understandings of power to Foucauldian understandings of its discursive, disciplinary, and regulatory workings in the production of subjects as normal or deviant. This also reshaped understandings of how resistance can be practiced and understood. It meant rethinking the psychic life of power, the powers of subversion, and certainly seeing new meanings and potentialities in theorizing queer femininities and masculinities. Read-

ing *Gender Trouble* with students from the mid-1990s and onwards has continued to shed light both on the difficulties in grasping these ideas on identity and trouble, and on their increasing taken for grantedness. For Jenny Björklund, teaching *Gender Trouble* has deeply impacted her own relationship to this book; listening to how the students have struggled with Butler's language but still, in the end, appreciating the beauty of it and how they describe the mind-blowing effect her theories have had on the way they think, is making the book appear new to her each semester.

Of course it is not the aim of our introduction nor of this special issue as a whole to offer a comprehensive overview of the reception of *Gender Trouble* or of its impact on Nordic queer, gender, and feminist research – even if indeed several of our articles present their analyses of such themes. It is clear that *Gender Trouble* was quickly embraced by feminists in the Nordic region, both by academics (see Edenheim 2008; Dahl 2011; Liljeström in this issue) and by activists (see Lööv in this issue). Butler and *Gender Trouble* are widely referenced in *lambda nordica* as well. The first mention is in the first issue after the journal's resurrection (1–2/1995), in ethnologist Pia Lundahl's article "Homosexualitet och gränsen mellan könen: Om lesbiska kvinnors barn- och ungdomsupplevelser" ["Homosexuality and the Boundary between the Sexes: On Child and Youth Experiences of Lesbian Women"]. Lundahl, who presents data from interviews with lesbians on identity in Sweden argues, in line with the time, that lesbian identity is culturally and historically constructed and she points to how dominant theories of gender and sexuality, both scientific and "feminist," form lesbians' shifting understandings of their own gender. For Lundahl's interviewees, an androgynous ideal was understood to be more "feminist" than one that was either too feminine or too masculine identified, as those were seen to be heterosexist. Lundahl then turns to Butler for what she calls an "entirely different point of departure" for understanding gender transgression and a "new" way of understanding gender altogether. There she claims that for Butler, lesbian gender transgression instead "reveal the constructed status of both gender identity and heterosexuality through destabilizing distinctions such as natural and artificial, depth and surface, inner and

outer.” (45)<sup>2</sup> In Lundahl’s reading, which we can now see goes quite against lesbian feminist discussions of identity at the time, Butler helps us see how presentations such as butch/femme or drag do not in fact reveal the legitimacy of heterosexuality but rather its destabilization, by revealing or rendering visible the constructed status of a heterosexual origin through a parody on the very idea of the natural and the original.

In the widely read and cited special issue of *lambda nordica* on queer theory, edited by Don Kulick (3–4/1996), Butler is of course mentioned, first of all, alongside Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Gayle Rubin as a “new” kind of theorist, and part of something that was beginning to be called queer theory and whose “usefulness” was to remain under skepticism for quite some time in some LGBT studies circles. Here historian Jens Rydström offers an introduction to Butler that emphasizes Butler’s use of Austin’s notion of performativity, an idea that he has later relied on in work on gay marriage and other matters (Rydström 2011). Sociologist Margareta Lindholm’s article “Vad har sexualitet med kön att göra?” [“What Does Sexuality Have to Do with Sex?”] gives a substantial introduction to the main ideas of *Gender Trouble* and also raises some reservations that were quite common among researchers invested in thinking about gay and lesbian studies, especially concerning an understanding of Butler where the idea of binary gender is only made meaningful within the heterosexual matrix. Lindholm at the same time insists that,

a concept of gender [*könsbegrepp*] that is interwoven with a concept of sexuality also enables investigations of how gender [*kön*] is presented and experienced, where heterosexual gender categories are not left out, but where gender [*kön*] is still a central social and cultural practice.

For Lindholm then what is useful is that,

the theoretical point of departure is this open concept of gender, that is not independent of society’s gender order and sexuality order, but that get different meanings precisely in the breaks between (and that may be a break from) them. (50)

What becomes vividly clear looking back is that in the Scandinavian and Swedish speaking academic setting, *Gender Trouble* and its insistence on sex as an effect of gender, to put it crudely, raises a range of questions for a discussion in which gender as a concept has strong social constructivist connotations and where sex [*kön*] operates simultaneously and here the implications of this work produces new and different interpretations, especially among lesbian and gay researchers (see also Edenheim 2008, among others). Indeed, since the late 1990s, *Gender Trouble* is referenced in almost every issue of *lambda nordica*. In articles in Swedish and Danish, as well as, later on, in English, Butler's ideas are used on a range of topics. It is noteworthy that a significant number of *lambda nordica*'s authors from literature conduct readings of the queer work, characters, and livelihoods of Nordic authors such as August Strindberg (Ann-Sofie Lönngren, 1/2002, 4/2008), Selma Lagerlöf (Lisbeth Stenberg, 2/1996, 3/2008), Agnes von Krusenstjerna (Rita Paqvalén, 1–2/2003) Barbro Alving (Eva Vaihinen, 1–2/2004–2005), Karen Blixen (Dag Heede, 1/1999, 3–4/2002), as well as of Jeanette Winterson (Olu Jenzén, 1/1999; Lene Henriksen, 3/2001). Here it is particularly cross-dressing and gender transgressive characters that are in focus and Butler's significance is often clearly stated. For instance, in 1/1999, Dag Heede, who also contributes an essay to this issue, drew on *Gender Trouble* in an analysis of work of Danish author Karen Blixen. There Heede describes Butler as an "American post feminist" and already before its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Gender Trouble* as "influential." According to Heede, the gender trouble presented in Karen Blixen challenges the human or subject category on all three "Butlerian" levels; sexuality, gender, and identity (13). He contends that Blixen's work can be understood as a proposed answer to Butler's closing question in *Gender Trouble*: "What other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such." (25)

Butler's theories of gender performativity and subversion are also put to work on historical lesbian materials (Inger Ehn Knoblock, 2–3/1999; Marie Carlsson, 3–4/2004–2005) and in studies of political lesbianism (Camilla Kolm, 4/2006) and shifting desires (Lovise Haj Brade, 1/2011), drag (Ulrika Dahl, 1–2/2008; Tiina Rosenberg, 1–2/2008), gay leather

cultures (Mark Graham, 2/1996) and critical studies of masculinities (Dirk Gindt, 1–2/2008; Niclas Järvklo, 1–2/2008). *Gender Trouble* is also referenced in studies of heteronormativity in schools (Jukka Lehtonen, 1–2/2003; Irina Schmitt, 2–4/2010) and family (Christel Stormhøj, 3–4/2002), as well as in studies of queer family making (Petra Nordqvist, 1–2/2006). Eva Reimers (3–4/2002) draws on *Gender Trouble* in an attempt to develop a queer theology.

Not all articles have been enthusiastic or all-embracing of Butler's arguments or in agreement with how her work has been taken up and understood. In one of her earliest essays on Butler, historian Sara Edenheim (1–2/2003), who also writes in this issue, discusses the uses of a Butlerian approach to gender and desire for her study of intersex as it is legally and medically constructed in Sweden. Edenheim also comments on contemporary debates at the time and the tendency towards strong tensions with regards to certain problems of feminist sexual politics, concerning both the status of the subject and issues such as pornography and prostitution, whose status were fraught between differently positioned feminist researchers at that time. She questions an increasingly popular epithet of "queer feminism" (coined among others by Tiina Rosenberg's widely read and cited book *Queerfeministisk agenda*, 2002). According to Edenheim, what is increasingly called queer feminism in the Swedish/Nordic context is ultimately the same as poststructuralist feminism and a shift in understandings of power and subjectivity. She argues that "the division that is happening between 'feminism' and 'queer theory' in different places today run the risk of confusing rather than developing feminist theory" and insists that queer theory should belong, or return to feminist research (148). Edenheim urges feminists to recognize that debates within feminism, that can ultimately be tied to different understandings of power, between structuralists and post-structuralists, should be understood as productive and part of theoretical development (160–1).

Gradually, there is a sense in which Butler's impact in itself becomes reason for caution and reevaluation. In an article from 4/2006 sociologist Martin Berg presents Judith Butler as,

foremost famous for being the one who once and for all twisted the problematizing knife in the heart of the discussion about gender identity as a safe and unified category to do theoretical and political work from. (7)

He presents *Gender Trouble* as “almost canonized as a queer theoretical primary source [urkund]” and aims to develop a critique of her arguments from a social psychological perspective where he takes issue with her recourse to psychoanalysis by instead turning to symbolic interactionism. The aim of this thorough reading, Berg suggests, is to insist on the importance of understanding the individual as an actor who acts. In his conclusion Berg thus argues that Butler’s theory about performative gender,

must include performativity and theatrical performance simultaneously since the individual, when he or she operates within the boundaries of intelligibility, will play out a dialogical drama where society and individuality is woven together: a game where the individual’s entrance on the stage is enabled by the very limits of the stage. (22)

In a revised version of an undergraduate thesis, Matilda Lindgren (4/2007) investigates the possibility of an asexual position in key works in queer theory. At the time, asexuality was a politicized “identity” promoted in queer subcultural and activist contexts, and Lindgren argues that this raises questions about what gendered bodies are expected to desire and find pleasurable. In this rereading of *Gender Trouble*, Lindgren is interested in how we can understand the desire to identify with something that is not desired or practiced (57). What are the implications for the imagined trinity of sex/gender/desire for desire and the absence of desire if gender is to be understood as performative, Lindgren asks, in this attempt to consider asexuality as something that is potentially more than a discursively constituted negation.

These are only a few examples of the discussions and invocations of *Gender Trouble* that have been published in *lambda nordica* over the years. To the extent that our journal can be read as reflective of a growing field of LGBTQ studies in the region, we can certainly note that few, if any



other works, have been put to use in such a wide array of studies. If Butler has shown us what it means to be subjected to norms and to be subjectivated, that is made into a subject, the deployment of her ideas have pointed both to the ways in which norms oppress and repress and how they generate new readings and strategies.

### **Celebrating *Gender Trouble* in *lambda nordica***

Against the backdrop both of the importance of *Gender Trouble* in shaping the development of this journal and of the broader fields to which it contributes, for this issue we asked a wide array of scholars to offer theoretical perspectives as well as personal reflections on *Gender Trouble* and its status as one of the most important works of contemporary feminist theory. Those who were able to commit, like those who have engaged her previously, form a broad selection of scholars from different generations. Some of them have been of undeniable importance in introducing *Gender Trouble* to the Nordic region, while others began their academic careers when Judith Butler's hegemonic status was already established.

Lisa Folkmarson Käll addresses Butler's concept of performativity by tracing elements of phenomenology in it. While Butler refers to phenomenological theory in an article from 1988, which anticipates her discussion of performativity in *Gender Trouble*, these references are missing in *Gender Trouble* even if some of the passages from the article appear almost unaltered. However, as Käll shows, reading Butler's concept of performativity in the light of phenomenology offers a productive way of avoiding the understanding of performativity as either voluntarism or determinism, since it draws attention to a doubleness of performativity of the subject as both culturally constructed and subjectively lived.

Ellen Mortensen explores Butler's critical intervention in *Gender Trouble* and discusses its impact on the field of Gender Studies. But Mortensen also draws attention to the fact that *Gender Trouble* contains unsolved questions that have to be addressed. In her article Mortensen focuses on how Butler treats the question of ontology and engages in a critique of Butler's reading of Luce Irigaray's ontological questioning of sexual difference.

Marianne Liljeström's article deals with the early reception of *Gender Trouble* in Finland. She explores how *Gender Trouble* was used and discussed in the national Finnish gender studies journal *Naistutkimus – Kvinnoforskning* during the 1990s but also discusses four PhD theses from this period. By using theories of the hermeneutics of suspicion and paranoid/reparative readings, Liljeström argues that the immediate positive reception of *Gender Trouble* in Finland was due to the kind of reading which has been labelled "symptomatic" and which eventually led to the book's canonical status within gender studies.

Anna Olovsson Lööv explores how Butler's use of drag as an example of gender performativity is used in Swedish drag king contexts in the early 2000s. She compares Butler's theory of the "drag moment" with Sara Ahmed's discussions of the moment of "wonder" and shows how it is used by drag kings as a theoretical base for feminist activism. As such the drag kings' understandings of Butler strengthen their belief that change is possible and thus lead to empowerment. But the intimate connection between theory and practice also makes the drag kings vulnerable because it offers them limited possibilities of articulating experiences of marginalization, such as racism, and because they embody a political debate on subversion.

In the first of three essays in this special issue, Sara Edenheim returns again to what she has argued before, namely the Nordic (mis)reading of the psychoanalytic dimensions of Butler, this time with the aim of avoiding a (neo-)liberal appropriation of political organization and activism. In a rereading and reinterpretation of several texts by Butler, Edenheim contends that while gender is reproduced and manifested through performativity, performativity itself does not constitute gender. Returning to heterosexual melancholy, she argues that it is through this melancholy that the incorporation of gendered desire/desired gender takes place and that gender is thus a symptom of this melancholy.

As Edenheim shows and Tiina Rosenberg further points out in her essay, there are many possible interpretations of *Gender Trouble*. Rosenberg has chosen to highlight three aspects of *Gender Trouble* which she finds of particular contemporary importance: the idea of gender as per-

formance; the performative-theatrical character of gender; and Butler's attempt to understand and define "the human." Rosenberg identifies the question of what it means to be a human being as a major theme in Butler's work as a whole.

In the third essay, Dag Heede revisits four books which were of vital importance to him at different times in his life, and some of which he has written about previously in *lambda nordica*. Heede refers to *Gender Trouble* as an academic earthquake and describes how it came to influence his own PhD thesis on Karen Blixen: Butler's work offered him a language, which helped him organize his readings of Blixen and understand her literary characters.

Finally, in this issue's *We're Here* section we are pleased to present an essay by Sara Ahmed, who takes "the trouble" in *Gender Trouble* as her point of departure. She argues that trouble can be seen as a kind of feminist political ontology; by *being* and *doing* trouble feminists challenge status quo and demand change. Trouble making becomes a collective struggle that opens up new possibilities. Ahmed also reflects on her own intellectual journey and explains how she picked up a lead from *Gender Trouble* when she explored willfulness in her latest book. As editors, we might add that Ahmed's own work has in recent years become an often used and cited extension of Butler; where the approach that Ahmed takes in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), for example, in showing how subjects can be in or out of line with heteronormative and other kinds of orders is one of the ways in which Butler's ideas have been reworked. Of course there are many others that are not outlined in this issue.

It gives us great pleasure to introduce this celebratory issue, which we hope will be useful to readers both within and beyond the Nordic region and we look forward to see where readings both of and by Judith Butler will go in the future, a future which to many looks quite bleak at the moment. Can one lead a good life in a bad life, Butler (2012) asked a few years ago in one of several talks on the ideas of vulnerability and interdependency. In times like ours, philosophers such as Butler help us address big questions, questions that cannot be asked without placing the very processes through which we become intelligible as (gendered,

sexed) subjects with lives that matter. As the current situation impacts us all in different ways, we may recall Butler's (2012) contention that "we are, as bodies, vulnerable to others and to institutions, and this vulnerability constitutes one aspect of the social modality through which bodies persist." For Butler, this does not mean striving for an equal distribution of vulnerability in the sense of an equally unlivable life, but rather that,

only through a concept of interdependency that affirms bodily dependency, conditions of precarity and potentials for performativity can we think a social and political world that seeks to overcome precarity in the name of liveable lives. (Butler 2012)

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## NOTES

1. <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674967755> (accessed 2015-10-1).
2. All English translations are by us.