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# The Uses and Abuses of Gender Theory

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* – 25 Years Later

**JUDITH BUTLER'S GENDER TROUBLE** (1990) is arguably one of the most significant texts to have been published in the field of feminist theory and gender studies after Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. No other publication has made a similar impact, be it in the Anglo-American world or in Scandinavia. In the years following its publication, Butler attained a hegemonic position within gender studies, a position that she has sustained throughout these last twenty-five years. This is a feat that should not be underestimated. For me personally, the book constitutes a sea change in my engagement with gender theory; it radically altered my way of thinking about feminist and gender theory, especially in regards to the interconnections between gender, sexuality and power/politics. My copy of the book is today in the process of becoming undone, a sign of frequent use. The cover has loosened from the body of the book and pages have started to fall out. Perhaps this partial disintegration of the book is symptomatic of the status of *Gender Trouble* today, as the most widely used and most frequently cited feminist publication, which in the process has suffered from the effects of uses and abuses, and therefore bears apparent signs of excessive wear and tear?

The first part of this article gives an assessment Butler's critical intervention in *Gender Trouble*, above all through her innovative reading

of the most prominent postwar feminist theorists as well as dominant philosophers of the two last centuries, followed by a discussion of the impact made by *Gender Trouble* on the field of gender studies. The second part of the article launches a critique of *Gender Trouble*, one that to my knowledge has not been previously articulated in the reception of the book, namely Butler's refutation of ontology. My critique of Butler is predominantly based on her problematic reading of Luce Irigaray's ontological questioning of sexual difference.

### **Butler's Radical Reframing of The Question of Gender and Sexuality**

Twenty-five years after its publication, the greatest value of *Gender Trouble* remains for me Butler's unique ability to bring together and to engage with the most prominent feminist theorists and writers from the postwar period up till the end of the 1980s, as well as some of the most influential male figures associated with dominant theoretical and philosophical movements of this time. In this sense, *Gender Trouble* was a timely publication; it signaled a spirit of the time in 1990, a period of great intellectual activity across academic disciplines, movements of thought and political activism. In much the same way, Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* was timely in 1985, when she brought Anglo-American feminist thought into dialogue with French feminist thought. Likewise, Isabelle de Courtivron and Elaine Marks' *New French Feminisms* was a timely publication in 1980, when it introduced, among others, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig into the Anglo-American feminist scene.

But Butler's *Gender Trouble* was also an untimely publication in the sense that Butler went against the grain in feminist thought by bringing together figures that had previously not been considered "politically correct" bedfellows for feminists in her rethinking of gender and sexuality. In order to raise the question of gender and sexuality in a radically new way, she took a step back and found inspiration in Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault to articulate her genealogical critique of feminist theory and thereby brought to the table a philosophical legacy that was

somewhat “out-of-joint” with the period. As Nietzsche once said, he was forced to take a step back and meditate on the legacy from the ancient Greeks in order for him to be truly “modern” in his time. Like Nietzsche in his *Untimely Meditations* (1997), Butler integrates into the question of gender and sexuality in *Gender Trouble* philosophical legacies from both the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And through Nietzsche, who first introduced the method of critical genealogy – a method that Foucault later perfected and introduced into a new poststructuralist context – Butler develops an entirely new and provocative approach to the question of gender and sexuality. Her intervention created great havoc among feminists,<sup>1</sup> and in turn it gave impetus to the emerging movement of queer theory.<sup>2</sup>

Up till 1990, most feminists embraced the conceptual pair *sex-gender*, where “sex” denoted naturally given biological entities – either male or female – whereas “gender” signified the socially and culturally constructed meaning of sex. Butler boldly contests this conceptual model and argues in *Gender Trouble* that sex is not something given by nature, nor is gender the corresponding cultural expression of a naturally given sex. Instead, *Gender Trouble* claims that no identity category – be it of sex, gender or sexuality – can function as a secure and stable foundation upon which feminist theory and politics can be based. By adopting the genealogical method, Butler challenges the feminist assumption of solidity and permanence in the gender categories and argues rather that they are *effects of signification* and that their meaning has undergone significant changes throughout the last two centuries. Moreover, the changes in signification that these identity categories have been subject to, she claims, are the results of alterations in the configuration of power, due to particular sex-gender power regimes.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler relies heavily on Foucault’s discursive analysis from his *History of Sexuality* (1978) and other texts<sup>3</sup> where he makes use of a Nietzschean conception of power<sup>4</sup> to identify the specific configuration of power and knowledge that emerges in the modern nation-state. In his first volume of his study on the history of sexuality, Foucault is able to uncover how modern nation-states succeed in

maintaining and increasing their power – not by concentrating power in a sovereign head of state, symbolized through the “king’s head” – but rather by operationalizing power through its *dispersion*. Power is in the modern nation-state divided into the various state apparatus systems, each governed by a particular configuration of power and knowledge, manifested through a web of discourses through which “subjects” are produced. The “subject” of the state thus becomes a necessary agent for the state apparatuses to operationalize their power regimes.

According to Butler, the current sex-gender regime, which she calls the heterosexual matrix, is characterized by binary gender categories and compulsory heterosexuality. It is not the will of the individual that speaks in the diverse discursive practices through which power is operationalized in the modern nation-state, but rather the impersonal and institutionalized “wills” of the state apparatuses. The subject is created as an *effect* of the discourses, that is, as an effect of the particular power/knowledge regime in its current discursive configuration. Consequently, it is this specific configuration of power/knowledge that gives meaning to any identity category, be it of sex, gender or sexuality, and *not* a pre-discursive individual standing behind and before the utterance.

Prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*, most feminists had theorized sex, gender, and sexuality on the basis of an expressive logic. This expressive model presumed that there was a given biological sex (male or female) that found its cultural expression in a synchronic and harmonious gender identity (either masculine or feminine), which again naturally acquired a heterosexual desire, thus forming a heterosexual union, grounded in and legitimized by nature. Butler successfully dismantles this expressive model, in part through her genealogical critique, but also by marshaling insights from theorists like Gayle Rubin, Monique Wittig, and Ester Newton, who all brought to the fore the different ways in which compulsory heterosexuality implied a whole range of prohibitions, prescriptions, and regulations in the service of normative identities of gender and sexuality, by imposing constraints in verbal and bodily practices.

Through her critique of the heterosexual matrix, Butler was able to show that what was previously thought to be an expression of nature

was to a large extent the results of a complex set of prohibitions and regulations, imposed through discursive and bodily practices. These practices in turn created a *semblance* of natural categories of sex, male and female, and their corresponding binary gender identities, masculine and feminine, as well as the semblance of innate heterosexuality. Butler undermines these expressive, naturalized and normative notions of gender and sexuality by introducing an alternative theory of gender, centered on a conception of bodily inscription and performativity. By invoking the Nietzschean dictum that “the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything,” (Nietzsche 1969, 45) coupled with Foucault’s notion of the continuous process of cultural inscription on the body – where “cultural values emerge as a result of an inscription on the body” (Butler 1990, 130), Butler is able to affirm that the shaping of the body takes place through the very act of inscription:

In other words, acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 1990, 136)

What was previously considered to be a *cause* in feminist conceptions of sex and gender proves, upon Butler’s critical scrutiny, to be an *effect*. For Butler, normative gender identities must now be understood as the *effect* of reiterations of verbal and bodily practices, enforced by the prohibitions and regulation of the heterosexual matrix. Through a *dispersive* model of power, whereby the embodied subject becomes discursively produced – one that is marked by binary gender categories and compulsory heterosexuality – the modern nation-state secures its stability and continuity.

Butler's critical insights also greatly impacted her visions of how to politically counteract and undermine this state of affairs. Since sex no longer is to be considered a fact of nature and the current gender and sexuality norms now must be considered to be the effects of a particular power apparatus that is made operative through verbal and bodily actions, the political strategy for change must accordingly be altered. What she then calls for is a discursive and gestural rebellion, which implies unfaithful performative acts, where reiteration no longer conforms to normative practices, but instead wreaks confusion and havoc in the signifying machinery. The subject or agency – the doer of deeds – is in a sense doomed to repeat discursive practices and becomes a subject in and through these repetitions. However, language not only contains the constraints that culture imposes on the speaking subject; language and bodily acts also allow for certain enabling possibilities of *signifying otherwise* and to insert a twist that in turn might create instabilities and indeterminacy in the norms that they were meant to uphold and solidify. Butler consequently asserts that through practices of parody, *different* gender configurations might emerge,

in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalized narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman.” The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As an effect of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamental phantasmatic status. (Butler 1990, 147)

Through her critical intervention into the way in which sex, gender, and sexuality had been understood and the ways in which feminist thought up to 1990 was entangled with theoretical and philosophical discourses,

Butler discovered a new radical potential for political change. For her, the potential for political change is lodged within the very discourses themselves, as their *enabling constraints*. To Butler, there is no ontology prior to the signifying process, and the categories of identity that are operationalized must be treated as what they are: provisional *phantasmatic* and *fabricated* discursive constructions, lacking any foundational ground. Instead, these fabrications constitute the mirage of the ideological “will” of the state.

### **From Women’s Studies to Gender Studies**

There is no denying that the publication of *Gender Trouble* created trouble in feminist thought, almost overnight, and as a consequence changed the very fields of feminist politics and feminist studies. The reception of the book exceeded all expectations, including Butler’s own, a fact that she expresses in the introduction to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999, vii). The decade that followed the first publication of the book could arguably be called “Butler’s decade,” since hardly any feminist politics or academic publication failed to make reference to *Gender Trouble*, whether it was made in the form of overt praise or harsh criticism.

But the most significant repercussions of the publication was, in my view, the change that it effected in feminist politics, especially queer politics, and the practice of academic feminism. Butler’s critique of the term “woman” as a founding category, around which the whole feminist movement had rallied, triggered political as well as institutional conflicts, precisely around the question of theory. “Queer politics” and “queer theory” emerged in the wake of *Gender Trouble*, demanding that Butler’s queer insights into the cultural construction of categories of gender and sexuality be reflected in the way politics and academic activity be undertaken. Violent political and institutional battles ensued, in the Anglo-American world as well as in Scandinavia. Oftentimes, these battles marginalized feminist activists who still embraced the political strategies of second wave feminism, and feminist academics wanting to preserve the institution of “Women’s Studies,” which they had fought

hard to establish during the 1970s and 1980s. In hindsight, it is possible to conclude that queer activists and academics prevailed in most of these battles during the 1990s and the following decade. The simple fact that there occurred a widespread change in terminology from “feminist” to “queer” activism, and a change from “women’s studies” to “gender studies” in academe, attests to the paradigmatic shift that took place in the wake of *Gender Trouble*, one that acknowledges the importance of *questioning* gender categories, rather than taking them for granted.

Some remnants of the resentment felt by many (predominantly heterosexual women) by this ideological and theoretical “overturn” is still lingering in the wings in many political factions and academic branches of the feminist movement. In this context, Toril Moi’s criticism of Butler’s theories in her book *What Is a Woman* (1999) is perhaps symptomatic of the resistance to some of Butler’s theories of gender and her hegemonic position within gender studies during this time. In her book, Moi takes issue with what she claims is Butler’s blatant neglect of women’s bodies and lived bodily experiences in her conception of gender as a socially constructed category. Moi insists on the need for feminism to retain the category of “woman,” and argues accordingly for the preservation of the term “women’s studies.” Moi’s critique is one that is shared by many other feminists, especially in regard to what they perceive as Butler’s failure to account for the body, a criticism that Butler tries to respond to and counter in her next book, *Bodies that Matter* (1993).

What many of these critics often fail to mention, is the way in which feminism as a political and academic movement since its inception had marginalized lesbians and other minority women. According to Butler herself, it was the unacknowledged heterosexual bias in feminism that initially motivated her to question the founding categories of feminism, as well as her desire to correct this heterosexual bias, in politics as well as in academe.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, her aim was from the beginning overtly political; she wanted create “gender trouble” and hoped in the process to make a difference in the lives of the LGBT population. As such, it must be concluded that *Gender Trouble* has been a huge success; for it could be argued that what transpired in feminist politics and academe in the

wake of *Gender Trouble* has positively influenced – at least indirectly – public opinion in regards to awareness of and support of LGBT causes.

### **Lingering Problems and The Question of Ontology**

Irrespective of my appreciation of and indebtedness to Butler's contribution, not only through *Gender Trouble*, but through her entire production, there are still lingering problems and unresolved questions that in my estimation need to be addressed. I have elsewhere articulated some of the problems and questions that have emerged in my reading of *Gender Trouble*, as in some of her later texts (Mortensen 2003, 7–19). Suffice it to say that there are many instances where Butler's arguments beg further clarification.

Some of the lingering problems are to a large extent due to her convoluted and often impenetrable style, which has been a point of contention in much of the critical reception of the book. In my view, her “arduous” style is the result of a specific rhetorical strategy. By using a series of interrogative sentences which follow upon each other, and which are never directly answered but are left hanging, it often becomes unclear what her argument actually tries to convey. She likewise makes extensive use of hypothetical clauses; these sentences are for the most part initiated by “if,” followed later by “then,” thus performing a form of logical inference in the construction, without actually making a clear postulation. In the preface of the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler speaks to the recurring complaint of the difficulty of her style. Her response is that it is above all the material with which she is engaging that forces her language to be complicated. In a rhetorically clever response to the criticism, Butler (1999, xviii) hides behind an utterance by Drucilla Cornell, where Cornell, in the tradition of Adorno, reminds Butler that, “there is nothing radical about common sense.” Some will perhaps say that this is taking the easy way out in a response to a recurring criticism of obscurantism.

My own lingering problems and questions in relation to *Gender Trouble* are above all connected to Butler's treatment of the question of ontology, which not only implicates her reading of Jacques Lacan and

Foucault, but above all her reading of Irigaray. Even though I partly commend Butler's reading of Nietzsche and Foucault on the question of genealogy and their emphasis on agency and the deed, rather than on the doer, I take issue with her understanding of ontology. One of the recurring assertions in *Gender Trouble* is Butler's categorical refusal of ontology, for in her view, there is no ontology prior to the moment of inscription, which always happens within the law and its enabling constraints. Hence her statement:

There is no ontology on which we might construe a politics, for gender ontologies always operate with established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility. Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground. (Butler 1990, 148)

The most problematic part of this position is that Butler subsumes all ontological thinking under the aegis of the metaphysics of presence. But in so doing, she neglects Martin Heidegger's lifelong meditations on the ontological difference between Being and beings, which made a lasting impact on philosophy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including a marked influence on Foucault and Lacan, who both integrated Heidegger's ontological thinking in their respective understanding of language.

For Heidegger (1962, 21–63), Being is the groundless *ontological* ground of beings, the condition of possibility for any *ontic* beings in language, yet Being, what allows beings to *be*, is absent in metaphysics, that is, in what is appropriated as an object for a subject. There is a fundamental difference between Being and beings, and according to Heidegger, what characterizes metaphysics in the wake of Plato, is the forgetfulness of Being. This Heideggerian insight into the ontological difference between Being and beings becomes indispensable for Lacan

as he works out his psychoanalytic theory of language. According to Lacan, phallic symbolic language is founded on and determined by the absent Phallus, the master signifier that is hidden from view, but which nevertheless constitutes the condition of possibility for meaning in phallic symbolic language. It is in this context no coincidence that Lacan translated Heidegger's famous essay on Heraclitus' fragment "Logos" during a period when he worked out his theory of language.<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger's ontological thinking likewise serves as an important philosophical legacy for Foucault, not least in his readings of Nietzsche,<sup>7</sup> but also in his understanding of discursive practices. For Heidegger, language is the always-already existing "as-structure," through which the subject is constituted: *Die Sprache spricht*, Heidegger claims. Language speaks the subject, not the other way around. Thus Heidegger undermines the notion of subjective intentionality as it has been understood in metaphysics since Descartes. Foucault indirectly pays heed to Heidegger's ontological insight when he claims that the speaking subject is both formed by and disciplined through the language that it is forced to enter, and which always predates the subject.<sup>8</sup>

When Butler refuses to accept any ontology prior to the moment of (phantasmatic and fictive) articulation, she wrongfully attributes this understanding of ontology to both Lacan and Foucault. By understanding ontology exclusively in terms of the self-identical and substantive presence of Being in beings, she fundamentally misrepresents what both Lacan and Foucault understood as ontology. As I read them, they both accepted Heidegger's thinking on the ontological difference between Being and beings, and thus language remains for the both of them a discursive structure that hides the ontological ground upon which it precariously rests. The ontology of linguistic utterances is therefore *not* to be understood as Being, showing itself as substantial and self-identical in beings. Linguistic utterances are, according to Heidegger, rather to be considered as part of an "as-structure," which always belongs to a horizon of space and time. This horizon predates the subject, and the "as-structure" is therefore continuously changing. As such, linguistic utterances are provisional projections, "beings," that are indebted to Being,

which hides itself while letting beings be as temporal beings.

Metaphysical language and its beings constitute for Heidegger the mode of language that is most forgetful of Being. Being is what hides itself in metaphysical language, as the groundless ground of metaphysics. And for Heidegger (1971, 91–142), only in poetic language, in rare instances when the poet is receptive and “listens” to the call of Being, might *a saying* occur in the Open that allows for the *poietic* emergence of new beings in language, beings that harken back to this ontological difference. In my view, this observation has far-reaching implications for evaluating Butler’s misguided attack on ontology, since she consistently refers to ontology in terms of Being as inscribed *presence*, as substance and self-identity. It is somewhat surprising that Butler makes this fundamental error, given the fact that in *Gender Trouble* she repeatedly invokes Jacques Derrida and his deconstructive reading of the metaphysics of presence.

But this is not the only instance where her thinking proves to be less than incisive on the question of ontology. These shortcomings become most apparent in Butler’s reading of Irigaray. Although Butler (1990, 13) in *Gender Trouble* clearly credits Irigaray for broadening the scope of feminist critique by “exposing the epistemological, ontological and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy,” she simultaneously accuses Irigaray of epistemological imperialism, above all through her notion of sexual difference. For Irigaray (1993, 5–19) sexual difference constitutes an *ontological* difference; in addition, it is the most universal of *ontic* differences. Butler contests Irigaray’s understanding of sexual difference as the most universal of differences and in a rhetorical twist, Butler strategically hides behind a series of questions, when she writes:

Is it possible to identify a monolithic as well as monologic masculinist economy that traverse the array of cultural and historical contexts in which sexual difference takes place? Is the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression itself a kind of epistemological imperialism, one which is not ameliorated by the simple elaboration of cultural differences as “examples” of the self-same phallogocentrism? (Butler 1990, 13)

Butler opposes any notion of universalism; hence the accusation of epistemological imperialism. In *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* (2011), Elizabeth Grosz responds to Butler's accusation of epistemological imperialism in Irigaray, a response which can also serve as a pertinent example of the ability of a feminist theorist to address a complex problematic, while using a style of language which is both clear and eloquent:

In brief, for Butler, Irigaray's account of sexual difference reduces sexuality to a version of heterosexuality [...]. While I certainly agree that sexual difference is universal, an ontological condition of life on earth rather than a performatively produced artifact as Butler's work claims, it also seems fair to suggest – as Butler and Cornell do – that it may not be directly relevant to or the most significant thing about other forms of oppression (sexual, religious, racial, ethnic, class, and so on).

But Irigaray never claims that in addressing other forms of oppression we should consider sexual difference the most important, only that we should consider our oppression where it affects each of us the most directly, where it touches each of us in our specificity. (Grosz 2011, 107)

Butler, like other queer theorists, contest Irigaray's notion of sexual difference, both as an ontic and as an ontological difference.<sup>9</sup> For Butler, there is no ontology of gender and sexuality prior to or after the law and its inscription, and accordingly, she is skeptical of any projection of sexual difference or “the feminine” prior to its cultural inscription. She asks: “[I]s the specifically feminine pleasure ‘outside’ of culture as its prehistory or as its utopian future?” (Butler 1990, 30) What Butler perceives to be a lack of clarity in Irigaray's notion of sexual difference is troublesome to her, and it is a question to which she returns on several occasions, among other, in *Bodies that Matter*, the text immediately following *Gender Trouble*.

In a lengthy and detailed discussion of Irigaray's reading of Plato's *Timaeus* on the question of the *chora*, Butler takes issue with Irigaray's reading, which she deems heteronormative. According to Butler, Plato

understands *chora* as a receptacle, that which is “prior” to philosophy. Plato’s *chora* is therefore philosophically and mathematically un-thinkable; it is nameless and formless, but constitutes all the same “the receptive womb” into which specular beings eventually return. In Irigaray’s reading of Plato, the *chora* comes to designate the excluded, ontological *feminine* material ground that *exists* prior to and beyond the inscription of femininity in metaphysics. Irigaray claims that when Plato aligns the highly valued “form” [*eidos*] with the masculine, and the less valued matter [*hypodochē*] with femininity, he excludes the ontological feminine in the very act of naming femininity (Butler 1993, 36–49). In Irigaray’s view, Butler argues, it is the ontological, maternal and material *feminine* that allows Plato to make the distinction between “form” and “matter,” and to subsequently align them with opposing gender characteristics. Butler claims that in Irigaray’s mimetic and figurative reading of Plato’s *chora* as the excluded, *hidden* feminine material ground, she inadvertently ends up performing a mimetic redeployment of paternal thinking:

And insofar as the Platonic account of the origin is itself a displacement of a maternal origin, Irigaray mimes that very act of displacement, displacing the displacement, showing that origin to be an “effect” of a certain ruse of phallogocentric power. In line with this reading of Irigaray, the feminine as maternal does not offer itself as an alternative origin. For if the feminine is said to be anywhere and anything, it is that which is produced through displacement and which returns as the possibility of a reverse-displacement. Indeed, one might consider the conventional characterization of Irigaray as an uncritical materialist, for here it appears that the reinscription of the maternal takes place by writing with and through language of phallic philosophemes. This textual practice is not grounded in a rival ontology, but inhabits – indeed penetrates, occupies, and redeploys – the paternal language itself. (Butler 1993, 45)

In my view, Butler here falls prey to some facile and hasty conclusions. When Irigaray projects the feminine as an anterior maternal ground that is hidden from view and excluded and forgotten in metaphysical

language in general and in Plato's metaphysics in particular, this does *not* imply that the feminine "is said to be anywhere and anything," as Butler claims in the above quote. Irigaray is very careful *not* to make such a claim in her ontological inquiries into the feminine.

In fact, Irigaray's ontological meditations are quite specific, and her method is one of deconstructive mimicry, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) as in her other texts where she explores the texts of Nietzsche and Heidegger while meditating on the question of the elemental and its ontological implications. Instead of pursuing Irigaray's ontological thinking in these texts – be it in Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche and the pre-Socratic notion of *phusis* (in particular the element of water) in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991) or in Irigaray's reading of Heidegger and the element of air and fire in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (1999)<sup>10</sup> – Butler could have been able to question Irigaray's feminine ontology in its "right element," namely as an ontological inquiry.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Butler exclusively critiques Irigaray's projection of sexual difference as an ontological difference by concentrating on Irigaray's first text, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), a text where Irigaray never explicitly talks about the *chora* in terms of sexual difference as an ontological difference.

What Butler insinuates in the above passage and which she overtly argues toward the end of this chapter is that Irigaray's projection of the feminine, prior to and beyond the moment of inscription, amounts to a reinforcement of conventional notions of sexual difference, in alignment with phallic ideology and language. For Butler, sexual difference in Irigaray comes to mean a privileging of binary gender identities where the feminine is predominantly associated with her procreative and generative capacity to reproduce phallic language and its gender demarcations, thus echoing and redeploying Plato's gendered understanding of the *chora*. Toward the end of the chapter, Butler characteristically concludes in a semi-questioning rhetoric:

It may be, as Irigaray appears to suggest, that the entire history of matter is bound up with the problematic of receptivity. Is there a way to dissociate these implicit and disfiguring figures from the "matter" that

they help to compose? And insofar as we have barely begun to discern the history of sexual difference encoded in the history of matter, it seems radically unclear whether a notion of matter or the materiality of bodies can serve as the uncontested ground of feminist practice. In this sense, the Aristotelian pun still works as a reminder of the doubleness of the matter of matter, which means that there may not be a materiality of sex that is not already burdened by the sex of materiality. (Butler 1993, 54)

Irigaray would be the last to object to the dangers of phallic contamination involved in deconstructive mimicry, but that does not imply that one should refrain from undertaking an inquiry into sexual difference as an overarching problematic, and into the *feminine* in its ontic and ontological figurations. Butler, like many other queer theorists, fails to take into account Irigaray's distinction between the ontological and the ontic, a distinction that becomes crucial for Irigaray, even as the two dimensions remain interconnected. This interconnectedness between the ontological and the ontic does not mean, as Butler claims, that "the feminine is said to be anywhere and anything."

Rather, the feminine as an ontic category is according to Irigaray predicated on the ontological feminine, which allows the ontic feminine as well as the ontic masculine as gender categories to *be*. A most relevant intertext here would be Irigaray's critique of Heidegger's understanding of *logos* as that, from which "world" emerges. In Irigaray's ontological meditation on the element of air in *The Forgetting of Air* (1999), air takes part in the hidden elemental *phuein*, which for Irigaray is always already prior to *logos*. She writes:

*Physis* is always already subjected to technology and science, that is, to the science and technology of the *logos*. In these, something of the manner of physical beings grow is lost. Things, cut from their natural enrootedness, float about, wandering the propositional landscape. The *phuein* of physical beings is forgotten in the *physis* of the *logos*. The physical constitution of beings is forgotten in the metaphysics of Being. Nature is recreated as *logos*. [...]

Isn't to resubmit to language in fact to resubmit oneself – and to resubmit *physis* – to *techne*? Doesn't Heidegger's move amount to making *physis* out of *techne*? To making *phuein* from the *logos*? (Irigaray 1999, 86–7)

What further complicates the matter is that Irigaray does not, like Heidegger, establish a *radical separation* between the ontic and the ontological, even though she does differentiate between the two. Whereas Heidegger insists on the ontological difference between the two, Irigaray understands there to be *interconnectedness* between the ontic and the ontological. She writes:

Is not air the whole of our habitation as mortals? Is there a dwelling more vast, more spacious, or even more generally peaceful than that of air? Can man live elsewhere than in air? (Irigaray 1999, 8)

For Irigaray, there is a fundamental connection between the ontic, that is beings on earth, and the ontological ground, which she understands as *the sensuous transcendental*. The elemental – air, fire, earth and water – or *physis* (in pre-Socratic thinking) is the sensuous transcendental ontological ground that gives Being. Mortals dwell in the sensuous element of air, but we remain forgetful of this indebtedness. The elemental constitutes, as the ontological ground, the condition of possibility for speaking and thinking beings to dwell on earth. And this elemental ground is for Irigaray “feminine;” it is the hidden and silent material ground that allows speaking beings to live and breathe on earth, and which allows living beings and language to exist: “[A]ir would be the forgotten material mediation of the *logos*. Eluding both the sensible and the intelligible, it would permit their very determination as such.” (Irigaray 1999, 11)

This ontological dimension of the “feminine” is connected to, but cannot be equated with “the feminine,” as it appears in the “as-structure” of language, which is always ontic. Butler understands sexual difference as the “partition” between genders in language, whatever form or formula-

tion this may take in space and time, but for Irigaray, sexual difference is always already intimately interconnected with and indebted to the ontological “feminine,” but can never be equated with it. Nor can the ontological “feminine,” thought as the elemental, be equated with “the biological,” as Butler understands it, the latter term being an *ontic* term through and through, articulated within the cultural construct of (meta-physical) language.<sup>12</sup>

Irigaray’s main project in all of her books from the 1980s was marked by a sustained attempt to think *the difference – yet interconnectedness* – between the ontic and the ontological. It is therefore interesting that Butler in *Bodies that Matter* predominantly refers to Irigaray’s first book, *Speculum of the Other Woman* and her reading of Plato when she attempts to critique Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference as an ontological difference. By failing to engage with the serious attempts made by Irigaray to pursue ontological inquiries, a project that Irigaray predominantly undertakes in the three books on the elemental (which, I might add, had all appeared well before Butler wrote *Bodies that Matter*), Butler’s dismissal of Irigaray’s thinking on sexual difference in its ontological implications becomes highly problematical, and hence lacks persuasive power.

The last textual instance in which Butler returns to the question of ontology in Irigaray is in the essay “The End of Sexual Difference?” in *Undoing Gender* (2004). What she refrains from overtly asserting in *Gender Trouble*, but which she seems to suggest already then, is that Irigaray remains within the confines of cultural norms of gender and sexuality in her understanding of sexual difference (Irigaray 1993, 5–19). In fact, what hides behind Irigaray’s musings on the ontology of sexual difference and her projection of “the feminine” appears to Butler to be the re-inscription of compulsory heterosexuality and its binary gender norms. She writes:

[H]ow are we to understand the ontological register of sexual difference? Perhaps it is precisely that sexual difference registers ontologically in a way that is pertinently difficult to determine. Sexual difference is neither fully given not fully constructed, but partially both. That sense

of “partially” resists any clear sense of “partition”; sexual difference then operates as a chiasm, but the terms that overlap and blur are perhaps less importantly masculine or feminine than the problematic and construction of itself; that what is constructed is of necessity prior to construction, even as there appears no access to this prior moment except through construction. (Butler 2004, 185–6)

Let us briefly recapitulate what Irigaray actually says about sexual difference. In her essay “Sexual Difference” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), Irigaray claims, while referring to Heidegger, that each epoch is given *one* question to ponder, and that the question for our age is the question of sexual difference. To Irigaray, this would imply that:

A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic, the macrocosmic. (Irigaray 1993, 6)

But this articulation of sexual difference as a questioning to come, a task of thinking for our times, does not seem any less problematic for Butler, who argues:

As I understand it, sexual difference is the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological and the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered. Understood as a border concept, sexual difference has psychic, somatic, and social dimensions that are never quite distinct. Does sexual difference vacillate there, as a vacillating border, demanding a rearticulation of those terms without any sense of finality? (Butler 2004, 186)

Symptomatically, Butler hides rhetorically behind the amassing of questions, which are not genuine questions, but rather assertions posing as

questions, giving a semblance of being questions. It is a rhetorical strategy that appears less like postulations, and is therefore not likely to get attacked as assertion. But the major problem with Butler's discussion of sexual difference is that it does not in any serious manner engage with texts where Irigaray actually performs an ontological questioning of sexual difference. Instead, the discussion is obscured by general observations and digressions into Rosi Braidotti's reading of Irigaray, as well as the Vatican's efforts to restore "sex" as a solid ground upon which to found their sexual politics.

And furthermore, what is evident in the above quote is that Butler understands sexual difference ultimately in *ontic* terms, and not as an ontological problematic. Sexual difference is for Butler (2004, 186) a border concept that has psychic, somatic, and social dimensions; it is also the chiasmic "site where a question concerning the relation of the biological and the cultural is posed and reposed." But psychic, somatic, and social dimensions as well as biology and culture are all metaphysical concepts, and as such, they are clearly *ontic* terms, whose ontological condition of possibility has been obscured in metaphysical language.

Sexual difference as an ontological difference comes into play in another register than what is at stake in queer theory's challenge to heteronormative gender figurations, and yet the ontological difference will have implications for these ontic categories. When Irigaray calls for the need to think sexual difference as an irreducible difference between the sexes (without thereby determining the number or the manifest figuration of the sexes), she projects sexual difference as an ontological foundation upon which a new ethics and a new epistemology can be constructed as ontic entities. Yet these ontic entities are necessarily indebted to and interconnected with ontological sexual difference, which is projected *prior* to their ontic manifestations; it is hidden from view, but nevertheless constitutes the condition of possibility for the being of sexed existence.

For Irigaray, there can – by implication – be no queer desire whereby one feminine body desires another feminine body, unless a *prior* ontological distinction of sexual difference has been made. How can one

know which body or which gender one desires unless at least two sexes have been differentiated *prior* to this determination? Even transgender becomes incomprehensible, unless there has been a prior distinction of sexual difference, since the “trans” category requires, like the masculine and the feminine, that boundaries of sexual difference be established in order to make sense. What is to be transgressed in transgender, if no gender boundaries exist?

The lingering problems and unresolved questions that I have addressed above do not, however, undermine the importance of *Gender Trouble* as a seminal text for our field of study. Butler’s thoughtful engagement with Irigaray’s texts – albeit inadequate when it comes to Irigaray’s ontological thinking – and with a host of the most significant texts in feminist theory and with the major philosophers and theorists of our time, was truly innovative. *Gender Trouble* is in this sense a rare text, and the full extent of its impact has perhaps yet to be assessed. But as we celebrate the twenty-five year anniversary of Butler’s publication, we reserve the right to challenge some of its premises and arguments. A proof of a great text is, in my view, the amount of discussion and engagement that it generates. In this respect, few texts can match *Gender Trouble*. Great battles have been fought over the book and new movements have been generated in its wake, engaging a whole generation of activists and academics. No wonder that its cover and pages are torn, after twenty-five years of wear and tear.

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## NOTES

1. Few feminist theorists have throughout the last two decades suffered more public attacks than has Butler, perhaps with the exception of de Beauvoir in the wake of the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949. Yet, no attacks on Butler have been as vicious as the character assassination of Butler from Martha Nussbaum, an attack, which was published in *The New Republic* under the heading, “The Professor of Parody” (1999).
2. The Italian film scholar and feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis has been credited with coining the term “queer theory.” In 1991 she edited a special issue of the feminist cultural studies journal *differences*, entitled, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.” de Lauretis was inspired by the activism performed by members

- of the Queer Nation, who created havoc in heterosexual hubs like shopping malls by making out in public under the slogan: “We’re here, We’re queer, Get used to it!” She introduced the term “queer theory” to mark a similar academic engagement.
3. See above all Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), but also *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (1980).
  4. Nietzsche speaks of power in a number of texts, but it is predominantly through his notion of “the will to power” that he elaborates on his thinking on the dispersal of power. See the posthumous work, *The Will to Power* (1968).
  5. See “Introduction,” in Butler (1990).
  6. See also Lacan’s (1956) translation into French of Heidegger’s essay on the Heraclit’s fragment “Logos,” a translation that predates most of his writings published in *Écrits* (1977).
  7. Foucault was evidently familiar with Heidegger’s work on Nietzsche, as well as Heidegger’s elaboration of language as the “as-structure” in *Being and Time* (1962), which hides the ontological ground on which it rests, and the horizon of time and space out of which the “as-structure” emerges.
  8. Although Foucault has been notoriously elusive on the question of a Heideggarian strain in his thought, other scholars, like Hubert L. Dreyfus, has explicitly made the connection between the two thinkers, above all in his papers “Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault” (1996) and “Heidegger and Foucault on the Subject, Agency and Practice” (n. d.).
  9. A number of queer theorists could be mentioned in this context, but suffice it to mention at this juncture Ofelia Schutte’s “A Critique of Normative Heterosexuality: Identity, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference in Beauvoir and Irigaray” (1997).
  10. In this context, Anne van Leeuwen’s (2010) study of the Irigaray/Heidegger nexus with a view to the question of ontological difference in *The Forgetting of Air* is both interesting and to the point.
  11. Irigaray also broaches some of the same questions in *Sharing the World* from 2008, where the Heideggearean influence on Irigaray’s thinking is quite apparent. Yet, this is a publication that appears well after all the works by Butler that deal with the question of sexual difference. I have therefore opted to disregard this book in the discussion of the nexus Irigaray/Butler/Heidegger.
  12. I have previously written extensively about this problematic, among others in “A Difference of Air,” in *Touching Thought: Ontology and Sexual Difference* (2002), but also in *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1994). I likewise explored sexual difference an ontological problematic in a paper on *Elemental Passions* entitled “Affective *poiesis*: Irigaray’s Elemental Ontology” (2014).

## SAMMENFATNING

I denne artikkelen foretar forfatteren en lesning av Judith Butlers *Gender Trouble* (1990) og vurderer bokens betydning for feltet kjønnsstudier, både i Skandinavia og i den vestlige verden forøvrig. Uten å rokke ved den hegemoniske statusen som *Gender Trouble* innehar, nemlig som den mest innovative og toneangivende teksten innenfor kjønnsteori i løpet av de siste tjuefem år, foretar forfatteren en kritikk av Butlers lesning av Luce Irigaray og Butlers forståelse av ontologi. Denne kritikken rammer ikke bare *Gender Trouble*, men også senere tekster av Butler, som for eksempel, *Undoing Gender* (2004).

**Keywords:** feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory, sexual difference, ontology