



## How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler

Irene Costera Meijer; Baukje Prins

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## How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler

**I**n May 1996 Judith Butler made a short tour through Europe. It started off with a lightning visit to the Netherlands, where her work is followed with much interest. Butler was the guest of the Department of Women's Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Utrecht. To us, her presence in the flesh seemed a good opportunity to put before her our questions concerning such complex notions as the performativity of gender, the construction of sex, and the abjection of bodies, as set out in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler's texts make for fascinating readings but also left us with some intricate puzzles. So, just a few hours after her arrival, Butler found herself assailed by two eager Dutch interviewers. It was the start of a rewarding and inspiring exchange of views. The following day, an intensive research seminar took place in which Dutch women's studies scholars seized the opportunity to pose their most pressing questions. In the evening hours, we listened to a challenging lecture on the limits of restraining instances of hate speech by law. It elicited a lively discussion about the differences between, and the pros and cons of political and constitutional regulations in, the United States and the Netherlands. To us, these events provisionally concluded an extended and fruitful immersion in Butler's thoughts.

The following interview is the result of three rounds of conversation. To be well prepared for our confrontation with Butler, we spent several animated afternoons and evenings discussing her work and its significance for our own theorizing and research. The second round was in writing, wherein Butler gave elaborate responses to our first set of questions. The face-to-face talk in Utrecht, finally, enabled both parties to explain themselves, offer clarifications, try to eliminate misunderstandings, and have a few good laughs as well.

The interview concentrates on three interrelated issues. First, we wonder about the status of Butler's work and about how she expects her readers to understand it. What are its feminist and what are its philosophical

claims? Is it an exercise in careful conceptual analysis, or should we read it as political fiction? Is it a political critique concerning the (un)representability of (some) bodies, or is it a deconstruction of the notion of representability itself? Does it address the epistemological question of how we can possibly *know* our (sexed) bodies, or is it an attempt to understand how (sexed) bodies can *be*—which would be an ontological question? Butler's response is unequivocal: her prime concerns are not those of the “conceptually pure” philosopher but of a theorist in a much more political and strategic vein. She agrees that her claims concerning the existence of abject bodies are downright contradictory. But, so she tells us, they are contradictory on purpose: pronounced as performative formulas, they are meant to *enforce* or *invoke* this “impossible” existence. We may see Butler's work as political fiction—as long as we realize that it offers fictions that want to bring about “realities.” Second, we went more deeply into the meaning of the notion of the “abject.” What kind of bodies would *count* as abject bodies? Tramps, transvestites, madmen? The ragged body, the disabled body, the veiled body? It is clear that Butler resists giving examples. But she explains in detail why that is the case. Finally, the interview introduces questions of sex and heterosexuality. Are there not other axes that govern the exclusion of bodies next to heterosexuality, and does one not run the risk of strengthening precisely that which one wishes to weaken by presenting “the heterosexual matrix” as the source of all evil? Again, Butler's response refers to political and strategic rather than to philosophical or empirical motives: I may exaggerate, she admits, but I fear that putting other categories of exclusion on a par with heterosexuality once again leads to the “abjection” of the homosexual and especially the lesbian body.

*Department of Communication*  
*University of Amsterdam* (Meijer)

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Maastricht* (Prins)



IRENE COSTERA MEIJER and BAUKJE PRINS: Preparing for this interview, we repeatedly came to wonder about what kind of a work *Bodies That Matter* actually is: should we see it as a philosophical exercise in conceptual analysis, as a political critique, or as a strategic project of deconstructivism? Carolyn Heilbrun, in an essay about the value of women's writing, stated: “What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and

live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. . . . Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives" (1988, 37). To what extent does your work fit into such a view of women's writing? Can your project be understood as a way of telling us new stories to live by? Or would you rather see it as an attempt to give us feminists new analytical tools to criticize our lives? In other words, how would you want your ideal reader to read *Bodies That Matter*: as a form of political fiction or as a diagnostic philosophical inquiry?

JUDITH BUTLER: I am sympathetic with the description of my work as political fiction, but I think it is important to stress that not all fiction takes the form of a story. The interesting citation from Carolyn Heilbrun emphasizes "stories" and suggests that it is through narrative that survival for women is to be found. That may be true, but that is not quite the way in which I work. I think that a political imaginary contains all kinds of ways of thinking and writing that are not necessarily stories but which are fictive, in the sense that they delineate modes of possibility.

My work has always been undertaken with the aim to expand and enhance a field of possibilities for bodily life. My earlier emphasis on denaturalization was not so much an opposition to nature as it was an opposition to the invocation of nature as a way of setting necessary limits on gendered life. To conceive of bodies differently seems to me part of the conceptual and philosophical struggle that feminism involves, and it can relate to questions of survival as well. The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology. I'm enraged by the ontological claims that codes of legitimacy make on bodies in the world, and I try, when I can, to imagine against that.

So, it is not a diagnosis, and not merely a strategy, and not at all a story, but some other kind of work that happens at the level of a philosophical imaginary, one that is deployed by codes of legitimacy, but also, one which emerges from within those codes as the internal possibility of their own dismantling.

ICM and BP: As we understand it, in *Bodies That Matter* you address one of the thorniest problems for a radical constructivist, namely, how to conceive of materiality in constructivist terms. With the help of the notion of the performativity of language, you manage to evoke an image of both the solidity and contingency of so-called hard facts. You build a potent argument with which we think hard-boiled realistic arguments about the undeniability of "Death and Furniture" can be countered (see Edwards,

Ashmore, and Potter 1995). In an attempt to capture the argument of your book, we would say that it shows the constitutive character of discursive constructions. More particularly, it shows that the conditions under which material, sexed bodies come into being simultaneously concern their existence, their knowability, and their legitimacy.

JB: I very much like this last summary of my claims. However, I think it may be a mistake to claim that *Bodies That Matter* is a constructivist work or that it seeks to take into account materiality in constructivist terms. It would be equally right—or possible—to say that it seeks to understand why the essentialism/constructivism debate founders on a paradox that is not easily or, indeed, not ever overcome. Just as no prior materiality is accessible without the means of discourse, so no discourse can ever capture that prior materiality; to claim that the body is an elusive referent is not the same as claiming that it is only and always constructed. In some ways, it is precisely to claim that there is a limit to constructedness, a place, as it were, where construction necessarily meets its limit.

ICM and BP: In the preface to *Bodies That Matter*, you admit that there is a certain necessity and irrefutability to primary experiences, such as bodies living, eating, feeling pain, dying. “But,” you continue, “their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means” (xi). Here you suggest that you will address questions concerning knowability, that is, concerning the constitutive effects of affirming primary experiences *apart from* their “being” irrefutable and primary. On the other hand, you regularly emphasize that *Bodies That Matter* is more than “just” an epistemological project. It appears that you also wish to address questions of how the world *is*, independently of how we perceive/construct it. In this respect, we were puzzled by your use of the phrase “there is.” Most often, as in “there is no doer behind the deed,” it is used in the negative mode. With such phrases you intend to deny the “originality” of the entity in question — not its existence as such. But what then is the status of “there is” in affirmative statements, such as “there is a matrix of gender relations” or “there is a [constitutive] outside” (8)? If they do not suggest the prediscursive character of the heterosexual matrix or the constitutive outside, what do they refer to?

JB: This is a good question, one that I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to. For me, the question of how one comes to know, or, indeed, the conditions of the possibility of establishing that one knows, are best answered through turning to a prior question: Who are “we” such that this question becomes a question for us. How has the “we” been constructed in relation to this question of knowledge? In other words: How does the epistemological question itself become possible? Foucault pro-

vides another step, made possible by the kind of work that he does. This has to do with asking how it is that certain kinds of discourse produce ontological effects or operate through the circulation of ontological moves. In part, I see myself as working within discourses that operate through ontological claims — “there is no doer behind the deed” — and recirculating the “there is” in order to produce a counterimaginary to the dominant metaphysics. Indeed, I think it is crucial to recirculate and resignify the ontological operators, if only to produce ontology itself as a contested field. I think, for instance, that it is crucial to write sentences that begin with “I think” even though I stand the chance of being misconstrued as adding the subject to the deed. There is no way to counter those kinds of grammars except through inhabiting them in ways that produce a terrible dissonance in them, that “say” precisely what the grammar itself was supposed to foreclose. The reason why repetition and resignification are so important to my work has everything to do with how I see opposition working *from within* the very terms by which power is reelaborated. The point is not to level a prohibition against using ontological terms but, on the contrary, to use them more, to exploit and restage them, subject them to abuse so that they can no longer do their usual work.

There is, however, another point here to be made, and it relates back to the question of constructivism. Phrases like “there is a matrix of gender relations” do appear to refer, but they also refer laterally, within language, to the conventions of ontological ascription. They are philosophical “mimes” in the sense that Irigaray has described. They refer to certain kinds of philosophical conventions. But I also want to claim that the ontological claim can never fully capture its object, and this view makes me somewhat different from Foucault and aligns me temporarily with the Kantian tradition as it has been taken up by Derrida. The “there is” gestures toward a referent it cannot capture, because the referent is not fully built up in language, is not the same as the linguistic effect. There is no access to it outside of the linguistic effect, but the linguistic effect is not the same as the referent that it fails to capture. This is what allows for a variety of ways of making reference to something, none of which can claim to be that to which reference is made.

ICM and BP: The pun of your title is very felicitous: “bodies that matter” simultaneously materialize, acquire meaning, and obtain a legitimate status. Bodies that do *not* matter are “abject” bodies. Such bodies are not intelligible (an epistemological claim), nor do they have legitimate existence (a political or normative claim). Hence, they fail to materialize. Nevertheless, your claim is also that abject bodies “exist,” that is, as excluded, as a disruptive power. At this point, we feel a bit lost: Can bodies that fail

to materialize still “be” bodies? If you intend the concept of the “abject” to refer to bodies that “exist,” would it not be more adequate to say that, although abject bodies are constructed, have materialized, and gained intelligibility, they still fail to qualify as fully human? In other words, is it not the case that abject bodies *do* “matter” ontologically and epistemologically but do not yet “matter” in a normative-political sense?

JB: Indeed, in a strictly philosophical sense, at once to say that “there are” abject bodies and that they do *not* have claim to ontology appears to be what the Habermassians would call a performative contradiction. Well, you could become kind of medieval and scholastic about this and say, oh yes, certain kinds of beings have more fully ontological being than others, etcetera, etcetera. Then you would remain within a certain kind of philosophical framework that could be *conceptually* satisfying. But I would like to ask a different kind of question, namely, How is it that the domain of ontology is itself circumscribed by power? That is, How is it that certain kinds of subjects lay claim to ontology, how is it that they *count* or *qualify* as real? In that case, we are talking about the distribution of ontological effects, which is an instrument of power, instrumentalized for purposes of hierarchy and subordination and also for purposes of exclusion and for producing domains of unthinkability. This whole domain of ontology that the good, the conceptually pure, philosopher takes for granted, is profoundly tainted from the start. Now, we cannot look at grammar and say, if I say that there *are* abject bodies, then I must be able to reason back from the claim “there are” to a prior ontology. Hardly, hardly. I could say “there are abject bodies,” and that could be a performative in which I *endow* ontology. I endow ontology to precisely that which has been systematically deprived of the privilege of ontology. The domain of ontology is a regulated domain: what gets produced inside of it, what gets excluded from it in order for the domain to be constituted is itself an effect of power. And the performative can be one of the ways in which discourse operationalizes power. So, I am performing a performative contradiction, *on purpose*. And I am doing that precisely to confound the conceptually proper philosopher and to pose a question about the secondary and derivative status of ontology. It is for me not a presupposition. Even if I say, “there *are* abject bodies that do not enjoy a certain kind of ontological status,” I perform that contradiction on purpose. I am doing that precisely to fly in the face of those who would say, “but aren’t you presupposing . . . ?” No! My speech does not necessarily have to presuppose. . . . Or, if it does, fine! Perhaps it’s producing the *effect* of a presupposition through its performance, OK? And that’s fine! Get used to it! But it is to roundly inaugurate an ontological

domain, it is not to presuppose an already given one. It is discursively to institute one.

ICM and BP: Still, it remains difficult to grasp the notion of the “abject” in your work, which may be due to the highly abstract character of most of your definitions and descriptions. You seem somewhat reluctant to give more concrete examples of what could be considered abject bodies.

JB: Well, yes, I certainly am. For, you know, typologies are usually exactly the way in which abjection is conferred: consider the place of typology within psychiatric pathologization. However, to prevent any misunderstanding beforehand: the abject for me is in no way restricted to sex and heteronormativity. It relates to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be “lives” and whose materiality is understood not to “matter.” To give something of an indication: the U.S. press regularly figures non-Western lives in such terms. Impoverishment is another common candidate, as is the domain of those identified as psychiatric “cases.”

ICM and BP: We agree that being outspoken on this subject approaches the limits of what can be spoken of. Still, could you elaborate on this issue?

JB: OK, I’ll do that, but I have to do something else at the same time. I could enumerate many examples of what I take to be the abjection of bodies. We can notice it, for instance, with the killing of Lebanese refugees: the ways that those bodies, those lives, don’t get figured as lives. They can get counted, there’s outrage generally, but there is no specificity. I have seen it in the German press when Turkish refugees are either killed or maimed. Very often we can get the names of the German perpetrators and their complex family and psychological histories, but no Turk has a complex family or psychological history that *Die Zeit* ever writes about, or at least not that I have seen in my reading of this material. So, we get a kind of differential production of the human or a differential materialization of the human. And we also get, I think, a *production* of the abject. So, it is not as if the unthinkable, the unlivable, the unintelligible has no discursive life; it *does* have one. It just lives within discourse as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure for something that is not yet made real. But it would be a terrible mistake if one thought that the definition of the abject could be exhausted by the examples that I give. I want to hold out for a conceptual apparatus that allows for the operation of abjection to have a kind of relative autonomy, even emptiness, contentlessness—precisely so that it is not captured by its examples, so that its examples don’t then become normative of what we mean by the abject. What very often happens is that people give their abstract theories of something like abjection, then they give the example, then the example becomes norma-

tive of everything else. It becomes paradigmatic and comes to produce its own exclusions. It becomes fixed and normative in the rigid sense.

ICM and BP: So, abjection is a process? A discursive process?

JB: I think so! I think it has to be, yes.

ICM and BP: So, it is not about bodies themselves, but about the ways bodies figure in discourse? We, for instance, asked ourselves whether the oriental, the veiled body, the female body that is veiled when she/it enters public space, counts as an example of the abject. We hesitated about this, because this body, this woman, acts according to an established norm. Somehow we could not combine abjection and normativity.

JB: This question opens up a couple of different issues. So, let me give you a couple of answers to that. One is that I think that discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood. And nobody can survive without, in some sense, being carried by discourse. So, I don't want to say that there is discursive construction on the one hand and a lived body on the other. But the other point, which may be more important here, is that we also have to worry about certain ways of describing orientalism and especially describing orientalism as it pertains to women, women's bodies, and women's self-representations. For instance, there are many debates about the veil. And there are some scholars, feminist scholars, who have argued that the veil is actually very complex and that very often a certain kind of power that women have within Islamic countries to express themselves and to exercise power is facilitated by the veil, precisely because that power is deflected and made less easily identifiable. So, if you were to say to me, "the veiled woman," do we mean in Iran? Do we mean a woman of a certain class? In what context, for what purpose? What is the action, what is the practice that we are thinking about? In what context are we trying to decide whether or not the veiled woman is an example of the abject? What I worry about is that, in certain cases, we would see that as an abjection: in the sense that this woman is literally not allowed to show her face and hence enter into the public domain of faced humans. On another level, however, we might say that we as Westerners are misrecognizing a certain cultural artifact, a certain cultural and religious instrument that has been a traditional way for women to exert power. This particular debate over the veil has plagued feminist debates. The question is: Are feminists being orientalist when they assume that the veiled woman is always an abject woman? I want to keep that question open; that's why I think there must be a relative incommensurability between the theoretical elaboration of abjection and the examples. And it may well be that the example works in some contexts and not at all in others.

ICM and BP: Now that you mention context, is this not the other side of the “there is” question? As you said earlier, one of the functions of the “there is” formula is that you engage yourself in a debate about ontology, of what is and what can be thought. In *Gender Trouble*, you intervene in the debate on the construction of gender identities. As you notice here, “the internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system” (22). Our question concerns the assumed *necessity* of the *heterosexual* character of practices that generate stable identities. Does the heterosexual matrix not also obscure the performative powers of the sexual divisions *among* women? Feminist historians have shown that the stability of gender identities does not automatically depend on heterosexual negotiations but also on the differences *between* “proper” women and other women, between “proper” men and other men (Costera Meijer 1991).

To call the normativity of heterosexuality into question is a powerful gesture, but does it not obscure the fact that people construct notions of difference not only through gender but by *sexual(izing)* divisions *within* genders through categories of race, class, or physical abilities? Disabled women suffer from being stigmatized as less feminine than their more able-bodied counterparts. On the other hand, black women are sometimes stereotyped as more female, whereas in other contexts they are considered less ladylike than white women. The construction of gender identities, we suggest, was made not only by repeating the difference between female and male, femininity and masculinity but also by constantly affirming the hierarchical opposition between femininity and *unfemininity*, between masculinity and *unmasculinity*. What are your thoughts about the claim that the opposite of femininity is often not masculinity but *unfemininity* and that these two notions often do not coincide?

JB: I very much like the idea that the opposite of masculinity is not necessarily femininity. I have no problem with that. But the relationship between sexuality and gender, the way that you frame it here is based on *Bodies That Matter*. In fact, in *Gender Trouble* I wrote something very similar to what you suggest here. Although in *Bodies That Matter* I emphasize that sexuality is regulated through the shaming of gender, that of course could not work if gender were not itself rendered proper only in the context of a certain regulation of sexuality. So, I see no problem there. But I have read much feminist history that assumes that both the proper and the “unproper” in women’s sexuality are kinds of heterosexuality (within marriage

and outside marriage or domestic and prostitution). The question I want to pose has to do with what is left outside these binaries, what is not even speakable as part of the improper or improper. I fear that the question of female homosexuality becomes muted precisely through those kinds of feminist historical frameworks that remain uncritically attached to those kinds of binarisms.

I suppose that you want to suggest that improper sexuality is a larger rubric, one that might take into account all kinds of sexual practices. But I am worried that the proper/improper distinction seeks to elide the question of homosexuality. And I think there I am probably willing to commit a sort of rhetorical excess in order to keep the question of homosexuality, and lesbianism in particular, alive. Which is not the same as saying that all scholarship ought to do that or that it is the primary oppression, or the key, or whatever. It rather indicates where I enter into critical discourse these days.

ICM and BP: By putting heteronormativity at the center, do you not run the risk of reproducing its importance? Is it not a relapse? When we want to study the concept of woman in a certain time and place, when we want to know who counted as a woman and who did not, would it not be more informative to look “sideways,” for instance, at the notion of the unwomanly or unfeminine?

JB: Well, you know, what I worry about is this. If lesbianism were to be understood as one among many forms of impropriety, then the relationship between sexuality and gender remains intact in the sense that we don’t get to ask under what conditions lesbianism actually unsettles the notion of gender. Not simply the question of what is a proper woman or an improper woman, but what is not thinkable as a woman at all! This is where we come back to the notion of abjection. I think that abjection tries to signal what is left outside of those binary oppositions, such that those binaries are even possible. Who gets to count as an “improper” woman? Who gets named as the improper in the text that the historian studies? What kinds of acts get classified or designated or named? And which are so unnameable and unclassifiable that they are improper to the improper, that they are outside of the improper? I am referring to acts that constitute a domain of unspeakability that conditions the distinction between improper and proper.

We are still not able to account for those acts and practices and ways of living that were wildly expelled from the very binary of the proper and the improper. They are not its benign prehistory but, rather, its violent unspeakable underside. And that’s what I want to continue to turn to.

ICM and BP: So, we come back to the abject.

JB: I think so. What's going to be really interesting is how you do a history of that; the traces of which have been, or are for the most part, erased. That is a very interesting problem for a historian. How to read the traces of what *does* get spoken. I don't think it is impossible to do it, but I think it's a really interesting problem: how to do a history of that which was never supposed to be possible.

ICM and BP: In your desire to extend the domain of "bodies that matter" you are not alone. This ambition is shared by intellectuals who come from quite different philosophical backgrounds. We especially think of science studies scholars such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. However, their proposals to broaden our minds on this issue are not exclusively focused on the domain of (what could qualify as) *human* bodies. They also wish to transform our views of "Nature" and "Things," in order to develop more radical accounts of ecology and technology. For that reason, they prefer the notion of the "actor" to the (humanist) notion of the "subject." Contrary to subjectivity, agency is not the prerogative of humans. Animals, trees, machines, — for example, anything that has an impact on or affects something else — can be perceived as an actor. Both Haraway and Latour use the notion of the "hybrid" to refer to this vast realm of actors that are not (seen as) human. How do you assess the relationship between your own theorizing of abject bodies as disruptive challenges to what counts as fully human and the affirmation of (nonhuman) hybrid actors by science studies scholars such as Haraway and Latour? For instance, does your concept of "abject" bodies leave room to include the possibility for nonhuman bodies to come to "matter"? Or does it remain restricted to the realm of what is "livable" as fully human?

JB: I think that the work of Haraway and Latour is very important. And I don't have a problem with the notion of the actor. Still, I think there are reasons to work with the notion of the subject, reasons that have everything to do with the way in which it is bound up with the legacies of humanism. I would suggest as well that the notion of the subject carries with it a doubleness that is crucial to emphasize: the subject is one who is presumed to be the presupposition of agency, as you suggest, but the subject is also one who is subjected to a set of rules or laws that precede the subject. This second sense works against the humanist conception of an autonomous self or self-grounded human actor. Indeed, "actor" carries a theatrical resonance that would be very difficult for me to adopt within my own work, given the propensity to read "performativity" as a Goffmanesque project of putting on a mask or electing to play a role. I prefer to work the legacy of humanism against itself, and I think that such a project is not necessarily in tension with those who seek to displace

humanism through recourse to vocabularies that disperse agency across the ecological field. They are two ways of undoing the same problem, and it seems important to have scholars and activists who work at both ends of the problem.

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