

Roundtable on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* at Thirty—or Thirty-Five

On Method and Mourning in Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity

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The loss that melancholy affirms will also be the occasion for the persistence of passion.

—Judith Butler, “Thresholds of Melancholy,” 1995

“There may well be a psychic theory of performativity at work that calls for greater exploration” (Butler 2006, xvi). This is how Judith Butler ends a paragraph-long discussion in the preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.¹ That discussion concerns the split status of the metaphor of an internal psyche. On the one hand, the book “clearly dr[aws] upon the metaphor of an internal psyche in its early discussion of gender melancholy” (Butler 2006, xvi). On the other hand, the theory of performativity presented in the book seems to turn all internality inside out as nothing but the “effect of a set of stylized acts” (Butler 2006, xvi).² Rather than trying to develop performativity’s own psychic theory, which would amount to something like a unified theory of the psyche according to performativity, I want to inquire into a psychic theory of performativity. In other words, I want to ask about the psychic forces that get the theory of performativity itself going.

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¹ *Gender Trouble* was originally published in 1990. The original edition has its own preface. A second edition was issued in 1999 with its own preface as well. *Gender Trouble* was issued a third time in 2006 in a Routledge Classics edition that includes both the 1990 and 1999 prefaces. That third edition, so to speak, did not add its own preface. All my page references to the second (1999) and first (1990) prefaces are from the 2006 edition.

² In the same preface from which I am quoting, Butler’s own response to this split status is that “although [they] would deny that all the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts, [they] continue to think that it is a significant theoretical mistake to take the ‘internality’ of the psychic world for granted” (Butler 2006, xvi).

Given that Butler's theory of performativity makes its formal debut with the original publication of *Gender Trouble*,³ I begin my inquiry with that text and its paratext—that is, with the prefaces, endnotes, and interviews that orbit *Gender Trouble*. In fact, the ninth endnote to the preface supplies us with some of Butler's own reflections on the psychic forces operating in the book:

Jacqueline Rose usefully pointed out to me the disjunction between the earlier and later parts of [*Gender Trouble*]. The earlier parts interrogate the melancholy construction of gender, but the later seem to forget the psychoanalytic beginnings. Perhaps this accounts for some of the “mania” of the final chapter, a state defined by Freud as part of the disavowal of loss that is melancholia. *Gender Trouble* in its closing pages seems to forget or disavow the loss it has just articulated. (Butler 2006, 206n9)

Even as “the melancholy construction of gender” is under interrogation in *Gender Trouble*, melancholy itself seeps from and, in turn, exerts increasing pressure on the analyses of the category of *gender* carried out chapter to chapter. Given the late nineteenth-century provenance of psychoanalytic discourse, we might say, then, that there is a hydraulics of melancholy operating in *Gender Trouble*.

In their allusion to Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” which explicitly ties mania to melancholia,⁴ Butler's own remarks suggest that melancholy accompanies *Gender Trouble*'s analyses at least up to the point at which resistance to the loss that melancholy affirms turns into mania. In an interview with Sara Ahmed, Butler adds: “I sometimes think about [*Gender Trouble*] as a manic defense of activity. At least the ‘incessant’ quality of performativity, understood as a kind of action, seems to dominate the final pages and seems to constitute, for some, the main theoretical contribution of the text... Perhaps I was trying in a preliminary way to think about marking, losing, acknowledging, and acting (Butler 2016, 482).” To read Butler's list of gerunds as a sequence of consecutive moments is to trace how the mania of “acting” reaches for a line of flight from the gravitational pull of melancholy's “losing.” To read the list of gerunds as a set of recursions is to apprehend how “marking, losing, acknowledging, and acting” fall again and again within melancholy's orbit. In the sections that follow, I aim to highlight both movements—the attempted line of flight and the recursive falling—in Butler's theory of performativity as it emerges in *Gender Trouble* and thereafter.

So, returning to the ninth endnote from the preface quoted above, what is “the loss [*Gender Trouble*] has just articulated” to which melancholy and mania respond? How is this loss marked by Butler's analyses of the category of *gender* and indeed by Butler's method of analysis in *Gender Trouble*? How do the ensuing melancholy and mania critically influence the emergence of Butler's theory of performativity and its subsequent trajectory in monographs like *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* and *The Psychic Life of Power*? Might there yet be a different trajectory available for performativity? I contemplate these questions with the desire to think anew how Butler's theory of performativity accompanies those of us who study religion.

³ Development of Butler's theory of performativity began before *Gender Trouble*. In 1988, they published “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” wherein they began to lay out what would become a fuller articulation of their theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble* by teasing out the difference between *gender performance* and *gender performativity*. As the concluding line in that article states, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (Butler 1988, 531).

⁴ Freud is not the first to note a close relationship between melancholy and mania. As Jennifer Radden notes in her introduction to *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, “earlier medical writing had from time to time noted the swings between melancholy and more elevated moods.” She cautions, however, “even allusions to mania... as a part or aspect of melancholia are confusing because of the broad use by which melancholia sometimes covered every kind of mental disorder” (Radden 2000, 15). Heeding this caution, I concern myself in this article with just the form of mania that can be distinguished within psychoanalytic discourse as something like melancholic mania.

LOSS AND METHOD

Although there are doubtless personal and social losses that inform both the writing and varied reception of *Gender Trouble*, there are at least two losses that Butler's method itself marks. The first loss is that of a seemingly firm philosophical ground upon which feminist theory can orient itself. Remarks from yet another preface—this time the preface to *Bodies that Matter* (1993)—report on an acutely loud response to this loss:

Theorizing from the ruins of the Logos invites the following question: “What about the materiality of the body?” Actually, in the recent past, the question was repeatedly formulated to me this way: “What about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?” I took it that the addition of “*Judy*” was an effort to dislodge me from the more formal “*Judith*” and to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorized away.” (emphasis original, [Butler 2011](#), viiii–ix)

Butler here registers the intensity of distress felt by readers of *Gender Trouble* who refuse to let bodily life be “theorized away,” which is to say, they refuse to let the persuasive analyses of the book and the method by which those analyses are carried out lead them to an unwanted loss of assurance in seemingly firm philosophical ground. As Kristin Bloomer shares in her own contribution to this roundtable, even feminists who “in the late 90s” were much less hostile to and indeed welcoming of *Gender Trouble*'s implications still felt that “with the freedom came tremendous anxiety.”

Let us consider a key passage on method from the preface to the first edition of *Gender Trouble* to understand how the method marks troubling loss.

To expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power requires a form of critical inquiry that Foucault, reformulating Nietzsche, designated a ‘genealogy.’ A genealogical critique refuses to search for origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view: rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. (emphasis original, [Butler 2006](#), xxxi)

Butler's genealogical method in *Gender Trouble* reverses temporal and logical order by revealing how origin and cause are “in fact the effects” of political practices. The book's genealogical method also displaces what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call “the arborescent” ([Deleuze and Guattari 1987](#), 16)⁵ by showing how “institutions, practices, [and] discourses,” which produce the effect of identity categories as origin and cause, have themselves “multiple and diffuse points of origin.” Butler's genealogical method scrambles temporal succession into a sort of uneven simultaneity, what Walter Benjamin, who becomes an important interlocutor for Butler when thinking about mourning, would call history as “a whirlpool” ([Benjamin 1999](#), 502).

This method is expressed in the book's form of argumentation. Butler brings different discursive domains together and reads across discursive moments in a way that is neither linear

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari describe “arborescent systems” as “hierarchical systems with centers of significance and subjectification... [I]n the corresponding models, an element only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along preestablished paths” ([Deleuze and Guattari 1987](#), 16). In the translator's foreword, Brian Massumi analogizes the rejection of “the ‘arborescent model’ of thought” to the “attack” on “phallogocentrism” by “deconstruction-influenced feminists” ([Massumi 1987](#), xii). Although “the arborescent” is not an explicit object of critique in *Gender Trouble*, phallogocentrism is. Nonetheless, in Butler's reading of Monique Wittig, they directly engage Deleuze and Guattari on the shared salient matter of “the limitless proliferation of sexes” ([Butler 2006](#), 161). The footnote to that section in *Gender Trouble* confirms “Deleuze's [own] Nietzschean effort to displace the speaking ‘I’ as the center of linguistic power” ([Butler 2006](#), 225n39). Butler's genealogical method, however, seems to differ in significant ways from the rhizomatic approach that Deleuze and Guattari present.

in presentation nor historicist in approach. For example, the second chapter of *Gender Trouble*, “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix,” brings together readings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Jacques Lacan, Joan Riviere, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Gayle Rubin. The reading of Freud comes after the reading of Lacan, and this reversal in chronological order is followed, as if in a whirlpool, by a whiplash turn to Foucault and Rubin. Part of the task of the second chapter, then, is not to render a historical account of the development of gender categories in psychoanalytic theory. Rather, it is to reveal the multiple and even contradictory ways in which gender categories (can) operate in psychoanalytic discourse.⁶

Butler’s critical genealogy of gender categories in psychoanalytic discourse intervenes in narratives of historical origin within feminist theory. The same, second chapter begins by noting:

On occasion feminist theory has been drawn to the thought of an origin, a time before what some would call ‘patriarchy’ that would provide an imaginary perspective from which to establish the contingency of the history of women’s oppression... [A]lthough the turn to a prepatriarchal state of culture was intended to expose the self-reification of patriarchy, that prepatriarchal scheme has proven to be a different sort of reification. (Butler 2006, 47–48)

As Butler outlines, feminist theory desires (“is drawn to”) the historical contingency of patriarchy not only to imagine a moment before patriarchy but also to claim that if things were once different then they can be different again. This claim of possibility is, for feminist theory, the political promise of a narrative of historical origin and indeed of historicism more generally.⁷ Yet, the reification of a prepatriarchal scheme, as Butler ends the quotation above, betrays the claim of a different possibility other than what is phantasmatically made available in the present. “The question needs to be pursued, however, whether these powerful critiques of gender hierarchy make use of presuppositional fictions that entail problematic normative ideals” (Butler 2006, 49). That the putatively recovered or at least reimagined past—claimed for purposes of a new feminist future—would strikingly resemble gender categories at work in the present is, actually, part of historicism’s analytic purchase. Therefore, just in the first few pages of the second chapter, Butler, through their genealogical method, reveals a contradiction in feminist theory’s historicist framework. The contingency of structures of power upon which it claims political possibility is undercut by the ongoing determinacy of those structures in the practice of its politics. Even radical reimagining of gender categories bears the trace of the historical contexts against which it strives.

The second loss, then, is that of the possibility for meaningful action that the first loss seems to entail. Again, let us consider the second chapter of *Gender Trouble*. The second chapter’s middle sections wade through Lacanian and Freudian theorizations of melancholy and their relation to gender categories in psychoanalytic discourse. Butler focuses on how, for Lacan, “a melancholy that is essential to the feminine position as such” effects a masquerade (Butler 2006,

⁶ Butler confirms that this is indeed part of the task when they ask: “Is psychoanalysis an antifoundationalist inquiry that affirms the kind of sexual complexity that effectively deregulates rigid and hierarchical sexual codes, or does it maintain an unacknowledged set of assumptions about the foundations of identity that work in favor of these hierarchies?” (Butler 2006, xxxiii). Butler’s genealogical method responds by suggesting that answers depend on who and how you read.

⁷ Historicism itself has its own historicity, including its use within feminist theory. I bring up the term within this paragraph to draw out the deeper implications, as I perceive it, of Butler’s critique of narratives of historical origin, the production and deployment of which are important for much historicism. As Ronald Mendoza-De Jesús has recently redefined: “Historicism is the sense-configuration within the history of history that instituted the possibility of historical appropriation by endowing the historian with the power to transform the past in general into a possible onto-phenomenological region or site through its representation within historical narratives” (Mendoza-De Jesús 2023, 4, 98). With that redefinition in mind, Butler’s critique not only reveals how historicism can be betrayed by the reification of an alternate history (confusing the possible for the actual), but also suggests that historicism may not guarantee possibility, at least not of the kind feminist theory desires.

62). Unable to be the Phallus, “a woman ‘appears’ to be the Phallus” by taking up “the mask [as] part of the incorporative strategy of melancholy” that “conceals this loss but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment” (Butler 2006, 62, 66, 67). Butler importantly notes, however, that this Lacanian melancholy as mask “essential to the feminine position” vis-à-vis the Phallus is true for men as well, insofar as “men are said to ‘have’ the Phallus, yet never to ‘be’ it” (Butler 2006, 62). This melancholic masquerade of women and men is “in Lacan’s terms, finally to be understood as comedic failures that are nevertheless compelled to articulate and enact these repeated impossibilities” (Butler 2006, 62).

Then, Butler focuses on how Freud’s own understanding of “the internalizing strategy of melancholia” has implications for the prohibitions and repressions that set the Oedipal complex into motion. Butler writes: “This process of internalizing lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation when we realize that the incest taboo, among other functions, initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego and this ego recuperates from this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire” (Butler 2006, 79). However, while noting that the incest taboo in the Oedipal complex implies a taboo against homosexuality, Butler points out that “if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and indeed, *to become* that object through the construction of the ego ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity” (emphasis original, Butler 2006, 86).

In addition to the contributions of Siobhan Kelly and Biko Mandela Gray to this roundtable, which rightly take Butler’s critique of the melancholy formation of gender further by highlighting respectively the internalized prohibition of transsexual desire and the interdiction against gender in anti-Black violence, I find that what is at stake for Butler in their own critique of Lacan and Freud is the assumption that impossibility, prohibition, and repression are total in their power. The apparent effect of totality, however, is not just a function of, say, a Lacanian structural analysis. It is also the logical conclusion of Butler’s own genealogical method. The second loss to which their methodical analysis leads is the possible loss of being able to take meaningful action from within a whirlpool of discursive history.

What is the psychic life of those who take up or rather find themselves flung about within Butler’s genealogical method? As it turns out, this genealogical method entails a proliferation of losses—the loss of a prepatriarchal if not prediscursive origin for purposes of guiding recovery, the loss of historicism for purposes of claiming change over time, and the seeming loss of agency in the face of a lack of firm grounding. To where do these multiple losses lead if not to melancholy?

No wonder the last section of the second chapter is titled “Reformulating Prohibition as Power.” This last section, which leads right into the formal presentation of the theory of performativity in the following chapter, insists by way of Foucault on the subversive generativity of power. Butler’s Foucauldian emphasis on the subversive generativity of genders and sexualities is marked by melancholy. Disavowed in the turn to performativity’s “manic defense of activity” (Butler 2016, 482), melancholy is nonetheless generative in *Gender Trouble*. By disavowing not the melancholy construction of gender per se but the melancholy that ensues from the genealogical method’s own totalizing power—itsself the effect of the method’s fragmenting simultaneity—Butler turns the rest of the text over to mania.

It is important to note here that Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” begins its discussion of mania by stating that “the most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania—a state which is the opposite of [melancholia] in its symptoms” (Freud 1953, 253). The essay continues, “The content of mania is no different than that of melancholia... both disorders are wrestling with the same ‘complex,’ but... probably in melancholia the ego has succumbed to the complex whereas

in mania it has mastered it or pushed it aside... [T]he manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexes" (Freud 1953, 254–55). It would be wise to put phrases like "mastered the complex" and "liberation from the object" under erasure because, as Freud's own account suggests, "the delight in movement and action" that often characterizes a manic state can be misread as "cheerful" when it is the other side of the same coin—that is, mourning's grip on the subject (Freud 1953, 254).

As two sides of the same coin, then, melancholy and mania differ in their respective temporalities of mourning. Whereas melancholy is drawn out in a seemingly endless succession that turns into simultaneity, mania is characterized by the sudden and momentary break. What does this mean for a theory of performativity that not only emerges in the last instance against melancholy but also continues to be read, manically so perhaps, against melancholy?

MELANCHOLY AFTER MELANCHOLY

Mourning's grip holds in *Bodies that Matter* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, even if only from its marginalized position within both texts. Let us look at some key moments. In *Bodies that Matter*, melancholy appears by name only in the conclusion titled "Critically Queer." Although much celebrated as a key theoretical statement in the bifurcation of mainstream gay politics and radical queer politics at the time of its publication in 1993, "Critically Queer" includes a section that goes by and large unremarked—namely, "Melancholia and the Limits of Performance." In that section, Butler responds to bad readings of performativity as mere performance in the sense of sheer will or choice (Butler 2011, 178). Butler allows melancholy back into the frame to highlight the loss constitutive of gender performance and drag performance in particular. In other words, melancholy is allowed back in for its critical and corrective force on a theory of performativity misunderstood.⁸

Although melancholy's appearance in the conclusion to *Bodies that Matter* is short-lived, banished once again after providing the critical force necessary to correct bad readings of performativity as mere performance, its critical force haunts the last section titled "Gendered and Sexual Performativity" in questions like "How to think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution? How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification... and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition? But how, also, to rethink the terms that establish and sustain bodies that matter?" (Butler 2011, 184). Perhaps it is in questions like these, these characteristically Butlerian series of questions, where the melancholy haunting performativity at once releases and mitigates its critical force most intensely, most manically.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, melancholy is turned public dialogue. The last chapters are literally a dialogue between Adam Phillips and Butler. This form of presentation models the content of Butler's suspicions about melancholy's political efficacy or lack thereof. Rather than sustaining an internal monologue that can mimic the internalizing (read: solipsistic) movements of melancholy, the book exteriorizes its own thought in the dialogic form. It exposes its melancholy

⁸ Nonetheless, desire to read performativity as performance continued to be of such intensity that in the 2016 interview with Ahmed, Butler again had to respond by calling it a "voluntarist account of performativity" and distinguishing that account from their own (Butler 2016, 483). Regardless of whether the arguments in *Gender Trouble* have been understood or even read, vociferous rejectors as well as uncritical celebrants of Butler's theory of performativity take it as part of present struggles over the future. For the former, "gender ideology"—a phrase with which detractors gloss the theory—threatens the continued stability of assumed to be fundamental categories (see Butler 2019). For the latter, performativity announces a fluid future now, an announcement that as Butler has warned "is a bad reading, which is unfortunately the most popular one" (Bankowsky and Kotz 1992, 83). Whether apocalyptic or utopian, responses to Butler's theory of performativity activate powerful narratives of futurity in social and political life.

to dialogue, seeking to empty that melancholy back out into a social world from which inter-nalization putatively turns away. Meanwhile, tracing the movement of ambivalence and rage in public demonstrations of mourning in response to the 1980s and 1990s AIDS epidemic, Butler writes, “melancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crushed... [but] revolt in melancholia can be distilled by marshalling aggression in the service of mourning, but also, necessarily, of life” (Butler 1997, 190–91). What makes melancholy important in *The Psychic Life of Power* is, again, the critical force it bequeaths when emptied out into a publicly recognizable social world of mourning.⁹

By tracing performativity’s melancholy and mania as the psychic dynamism generated by *Gender Trouble*’s genealogical method, we can illuminate how complex temporalities of mourning are precisely what shape the trajectory of Butler’s theory of performativity. How we relate to the losses that form us, both from without and from within the methods we use, makes a difference. To transpose the question of the temporality of mourning into an aesthetic register—at what pace and rhythm we relate to those losses makes a difference.

In “After Loss, What Then?” (Butler 2003), the afterword to an edited volume on the politics of mourning, Butler turns to Walter Benjamin’s own study of the aesthetics of the temporality of loss in his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, originally published in 1928. Although Butler focuses on the sections that explicitly theorize melancholy, which marks an important release from a strictly Freudian theorization of melancholy as melancholia, I am drawn to some lines from the beginning of the foreword: “In its persevering, thinking constantly begins anew; with its sense of the circumstantial, it goes back to the thing itself. This continual breathing in and out is the form of existence most proper to contemplation” (Benjamin 2019, 3).

I wonder, then, how in our persevering, in our “loyalty to the world of things” (Butler 2003, 472)—as Butler glosses Benjamin’s understanding of melancholy—thinking with Butler’s theory of performativity can begin anew. As the various contributions in this roundtable demonstrate, what populates the world of (lost) objects can differ widely, from Black life (Gray) and transsexual desire (Kelly) to understandings of morphological iconography (Petro) and spirit possession (Bloomer). Yet, joining Cameron Awkward-Rich’s call, let us not rush “to rehabilitate the subjects/objects of our knowledge” or “min[e pain] for resources for perverse or resistant pleasures” (Awkward-Rich 2017, 824). Rather, what would the continued accompaniment of Butler’s theory of performativity sound like, feel like, if we let it stay with the melancholy that enabled its own emergence? Acknowledging our own persevering in our analyses as scholars of religion might just renew the kind of thinking that breathes in and out at its own melancholic pace, even and especially when the urgency of now seems most pressing.

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⁹ These notions find greater expression in Butler’s explicit theorization of the performativity of mourning in a book published after *The Psychic Life of Power*—namely, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Butler 2004).

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