The Body as Activity: Butler’s Active Materiality and Derrida’s Sexual Difference

Introduction

Judith Butler is best known for her reconfiguration of the sex/gender relationship in *Gender Trouble*, and the rearticulation of her theory of performativity and materialization in *Bodies that Matter*. The role of matter or the body (sex) in Butler’s theory is often misunderstood. This is due in part to the difficult nature of Butler’s texts, the myriad influences on her work, and the possible shifts that take place between *Gender Trouble* and the later *Bodies that Matter*. It is my contention that a thorough understanding of the body in Butler’s work requires that we focus on the active nature of Butler’s conception of materiality. By turning our attention to the role of active materiality in Butler’s theory of materialization we will come to better understand this theory and Butler’s conception of the body (sex). Further, by recourse to Derrida’s conception of sexual difference we will better understand the active nature of matter and therefore the role of the body in Butler’s theory of materialization.

Butler recognizes the importance of the facticity of the body. This brings her to reject a form of constructivism that would see the body as merely a linguistic construct that can be shaped and changed at will. That is, she maintains the influence of the body in relation to linguistic construction. However, Butler is also cautious of an essentialist position that would see the facticity of the body as completely unaffected by cultural and linguistic practices. For Butler, the facticity of the body does not foreclose on the
possibility of the transformation of this facticity. In contradistinction to these two positions, Butler posits a conception of the body as active materiality, which in combination with discursive practices, works to form and reform the body.

Focussing our attention on the body, we will explicate Butler’s conception of active materiality within the context of her theory of materialization. It is this concept that allows Butler to break with the essentialist/constructivist distinction, and maintain a place for the body in her broader theory. However, the concept of active materiality remains somewhat underdeveloped in *Bodies that Matter*, and for this reason we will turn to Jacques Derrida’s conception of sexual difference to better develop this concept. Through Derrida’s discussion of sexual difference we will come to see the body as an activity that underlies the formation of bodily facticity. Before turning to Derrida we will consider Butler’s concepts of performativity and materialization. This will allows us to better understand Butler’s place in the context of essentialism and constructivism, as well as her theory of active materiality in its own terms.

**Butler and Active Materiality**

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler defines performativity as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains…” (Butler 1993: 2). Following Derrida’s reading of Austin, Butler holds that all speech acts, or discourse, are performative. That is, speaking is never simply a statement of fact, but an action that effects some change. So in naming a body we effect a change in the body, and thus work to (trans)form that body. For example, in times of racial segregation a sign hung outside a restaurant stating “Whites only” works to form White and Black bodies through the
permission that it grants or denies. A “White” body is one that is allowed entry, and a “Black” body is one that is denied entry. The phenomenon of Blacks passing as Whites within otherwise segregated communities points to the arbitrary nature of labels “Black” and “White.” This in turn demonstrates the fact that the race of the body did not precede the racist speech act of the sign. Each time “Whites only” is repeated it has the effect of forming, in this case, radicalized bodies.

The same power is at play in statements regarding sex and gender. The pronouncement of the sex of the child at birth works to form that child as sexed. Butler says, “the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender” (Butler 1993: 7). The “girling” of the girl is the first in set of linguistic practices that will determine the place of the child within a sexed and gendered culture. “But the “girling” of the girl does not end there, on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect” (Butler 1993: 7-8). The pronouncement has real meaning for the way in which the child will be treated and raised, and is only the inauguration of series of similar pronouncements that will work in this way.

By recognizing the effects of performative speech acts, Butler works against an essentialist understanding of sex or sexual difference, which would see the “girling” of the girl as a natural outcome of the biological determination of the child. “Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices” (Butler 1993: 1). We see
here that Butler does not deny the existence of material difference or its relation to sexual difference. Rather, for Butler, sexual difference is never simply the function of material differences, and material difference is always in some way marked and formed by discursive practices. Of course, the first point is an extension of the second. If material difference is always informed by discursive practice, and if sexual difference is a function of material differences, then sexual difference is always to some extent a function of discursive practices. In this sense, Butler’s position might be considered constructivist, rather than essentialist.

However, this position should not be mistaken as one of a “radical linguistic constructivism” (Butler 1993: 5). On this model, we only have access to sex, or the body, through language. We might posit a body prior to language, but this positing itself is always made within language, and is therefore only an effect of language (Butler 1993: 5). Therefore, for all intents and purposes the body is nothing other than language, a fiction or fantasy (Butler 1993: 5). Butler explains: “For something to be constructed, according to this view of construction, is for it to be created and determined through that process” (Butler 1993: 6). To this she contrasts her own position.

Rather than see sex as a fiction or fantasy in contrast to truth or reality, Butler considers the truth and reality of sex, asking “do these very oppositions need to be rethought such that if “sex” is a fiction, it is one within whose necessities we live, without which life itself would be unthinkable? And if “sex” is a fantasy, is it perhaps a phantasmatic field that constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility?” (Butler 1993: 6). Here, Butler suggests that despite the construction of sex through discursive practices, sex does affect our lives and to some extent works to constitute them as
liveable. Sex, or the body, is not merely a fiction or fantasy, and asserts some influence upon us. The relation of the body to language is central to Butler’s project.

For Butler, the material differences of sex and the constituting power of language are in a constant and inseparable play. Butler explains:

Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different (Butler 1993: 69).

This relationship should not be thought in terms of a simple dialectic. Neither is it the case that materiality or language can be said to exist independently before their relation with one another, nor is it the case that the product of the relationship is some third term beyond the very interplay of materiality and language. They are neither two discreet terms, nor reducible to one another.

Importantly, this is a dynamic, rather than a static relationship. This perpetual negotiation of the materiality and language demonstrates the constitutive role of matter. Radical linguistic constructivism would place the active principle solely in language and conceive of the body, matter, and sex as merely passive sites of discursive construction. Contra this position, Butler sees an active principle in both language and matter (the body, sex).

However, matter should not be thought as a substance imbued with an active principle. Rather, matter itself is an active principle, a force or process. Matter for Butler is “a process of materialization” (Butler 1993: 9). Matter is always a becoming material. This occurs through the interplay of the forces of discursive practice and regulatory norms. The stable site or surface that we think of as matter is the outcome of this
process. Matter is a process “*that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (Butler 1993: 9). The activity of materialization, as force or process, precedes the stable surface of “matter.” The mistake we have made in the past is, on the one hand, to think of matter as stable and fixed, and, on the other hand, as something that only undergoes change as the effect of external forces. Rather, matter is a process or activity that, in combination with the discursive forces, produces stable forms, which are always undone or “destabilized” through these same forces (Butler 1993: 10). It is this concept of matter as a process of materialization that we call active materiality.

The conception of impersonal power posited by Butler helps to clarify the indissociable nature of matter and language in terms of the activity of matter. If we return to the position of radical linguistic constructivism, we see that agency rests solely in the discursive practices of the speaking subject. This position presupposes “a voluntarist subject who makes its gender through an instrumental action” (Butler 1993: 7). Thus radical linguistic constructivism retains a conception of agency based upon a ‘subject-object’ grammar. That is, despite positing certain aspects of the subject as constructed, this is a construction of objects by a subject that is itself beyond construction. This is simply a reiteration of a humanist position that would posit the subject as a centre of freedom unaffected by relations of power. That is, it undermines the tenets of constructivism by positing an agent beyond the effects of construction. For this reason, Butler rejects radical linguistic constructivism.

However, Butler would also avoid the alternate pole, a structuralist constructivism that posits Power or Discourse as the agent of construction. On this model, the subject is
constructed through external forces. Thus, it avoids the return to humanism. However, it fails to rid itself of the traditional grammar of agency. So that certain aspects of the subject might be understood as constructed, linguistic constructivism simply shrunk the limits of agency to some impenetrable core of the subject. In contrast, structuralist constructivism places agency wholly outside of the subject. However, in doing so it simply inverts the subject-object relation: agency is taken from the subject and invested in Power or Discourse, and the subject is reduced to an object. The human subject is stripped of its agency, and can thus be seen as constructed from top to bottom, but the structural relation of subject-object is maintained. Power becomes the agent of construction, and the “subject” becomes the object of this activity.

On the above model, power is personified and placed in the subject position, it is seen as the agent or origin of activity. It is this personification of power that forms the locus of critiques levelled against the Foucauldian conception of power that Butler adopts (Butler 1993: 9). In contrast, Butler offers a conception of impersonal power that breaks with the grammar of the subject-object relation. The model of “subject-verb-object” is replaced with pure activity; agency is freed from the restrictions of an agent or subject. Against a conception of power as possessor of agency, Butler states “There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (Butler 1993: 9). Power is dissociated from the personal in that it is removed from the grammar of agency. The subject position, whether occupied by the human or Power, is discarded. Power is a pure activity, which works to form the human and the inhuman alike.

However, this impersonal conception of power should not be mistaken for a
deterministic position. Subjects are not simply constructed once and for all (Butler 1993: 8). Because any construction sets a boundary and enacts exclusion through this delineation, there remains a possibility for change, for reconstruction. However, that which is excluded also works to constitute this boundary – that which is inside is always defined in relation to that which is outside. This outside presents the constant possibility that the boundary can be reset, destabilized and reconstructed (Butler 1993: 8).

Therefore, this outside is constitutive of the boundary and any further formation or construction. It is this admission of the constitutive nature of the excluded, or outside, that allows for the possibility of change and the instability of any construction. That is, it is the constitutive nature of the outside that ensures that the process of materialization never comes to a rest.

**Derrida and Sexual Difference**

Derrida’s conception of sexual difference as multiplication and dispersion will help us to understand the body as activity. For Derrida, sexual difference is the originary possibility of the multiplicity of sex. That is, sex is not to be thought in terms of the binary of “man” and “woman.” Further, it is the body that provides the active force of differentiation. That is, the body as activity works to form itself as sexed. By explicating this theory of sexual difference we will come to a better understand of Butler’s theory of active materiality, and the role of bodily facticity in this theory.

Elisabeth Grosz ‘teases out’ Derrida’s position on the relation between ontology and sexual difference. According to Grosz, this rests upon a distinction between “sexual
opposition” and “sexual difference” (Grosz 2003: 250). She describes the former as “a binary structuring of the relations between the sexes into a strict model of presence and absence, positive and negative,” and the latter as “a nonbinarized differential understanding of the relation between the sexes, in which no single model can dictate or provide the terms for the representation, whether negative or positive, of all sexes” (Grosz 2003: 250). The first model presents a traditional understanding of sexual difference, in which man and woman stand in a binary and oppositional relation to one another. The logic of this model dictates that anything that is not-man is woman, and vice versa. The second model posits a conception of difference that breaks from these binary and oppositional structures. Here, not-man is not necessarily woman. Thus, the categories of “man” and “woman” lose their strict determinations. This reading rests in large part upon Derrida’s “Geschlecht: Sexual difference, ontological difference,” in which Derrida begins an analysis of the term “Geschlecht” in Heidegger’s corpus.

The above distinction made by Grosz is central to this work in which Derrida explicates a conception of sexual difference as power. According to Derrida, Heidegger marks the ‘neutrality’ or ‘asexuality’ of Dasein (Derrida 1990: 155/171). Thought on the logic of sexual opposition, this might be taken to mean that Dasein is without sex, and represents a kind of unformed matter prior to the determination of sex. That is, if Dasein is asexual, then Dasein is neither male, nor female, and therefore without sex. However, Derrida suggests, “the a-sexual neutrality does not desexualize,” (Derrida 1990: 155/71) does not mean that Dasein is “deprived of sex” (Derrida 1990: 156/72).

Rather, the asexuality of Dasein moves away from the binary logic of sexual opposition. “Here one must think of a pre-differential, rather a pre-dual, sexuality…”
Here, that which is neither man, nor woman is not necessarily without sex. That is, according to Derrida, Heidegger posits the asexuality of Dasein as a means of doing away with the strict dichotomy of “man” and “woman.” Here “neutrality” or “asexuality” does not mark a lack of sex. Rather, these terms stand for the as of yet undetermined possibility of sex. Dasein is not predetermined as man or woman, but this does not preclude the possible determination of sex. However, this determination will not necessarily fall along the lines of this male-female dichotomy.

Despite the undetermined nature of the neutrality or asexuality of Dasein, these terms do not “necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous and undifferentiated…” (Derrida 1990: 156/72). That is, the sex of Dasein is not simply an undifferentiated mass awaiting designation into the categories of “man” and “woman.” Derrida here stresses the difference of sexual difference: Sex is not a unitary homogeneity; rather it is an absolute heterogeneity. It is in this sense that difference can be thought as other than simple opposition. It is this absolute difference as the ontological asexuality of Dasein, which allows for the possibility of sexual difference beyond sexual opposition.

Derrida goes on to stress this point by describing Dasein as sheltering within itself “the internal possibility of a dispersion or a factual dissemination (faktische Zerstreuung) in the body proper (Leiblichkeit) and “thereby in sexuality” (und damit in die Geschlechtlichkeit)” (Derrida 1990: 160-161/75). Dasein, which is always embodied, exhibits a possibility of dissemination, what Heidegger terms a “multiplication.” This multiplication of Dasein, “is not a simple formal plurality of determinations or of determinities (Bestimmtheiten), it belongs to Being itself.” (Derrida

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1 “Every proper body of one’s own [corps propre] is sexed, and there is no Dasein without its own body.” (Derrida 1990: 161/75)
One of the ontological characteristics of Dasein is this multiplicity or dissemination, which can be contrasted to the categories of “man” and “woman.” Because of this, the sexuality of Dasein can be thought of neither as homogenous, nor as limited by the dichotomy of male and female.

With his ontological conception of sexual difference Derrida gives us the means of thinking beyond “man” and “woman” that is in line with Butler’s project. That is, thinking sex outside of this binary structure is necessary if we are to “open… sexual difference… as a site of proliferative resignification” (Butler 1993: 89). Sexual difference, rather than sexual opposition, is necessary for Butler’s conception of the materialization of sex as process. However, according to Derrida, this conception of sexual difference is also an ontological difference, which seems at odds with Butler’s hesitancy regarding ontology. For example, in Bodies that Matter, we find a warning against a reintroduction of, or recourse to, “an ontological thereness” (Butler 1993: 8). However, I argue that Derrida’s ontological understanding of sexual difference is not of the order of that against which Butler warns us, but rather is akin to her own “notion of matter” as “a process of materialization” (Butler 1993: 9).

In fact, it is Butler’s conception of active materiality that aligns her project with the conception of sexual difference suggested by Derrida, despite her apparent objection to “ontological” conceptions of sexual difference. The key here is that Derrida’s conception of sexual difference as ontological is not a theory of matter as a static Being preceding change and becoming. “The representation of a grand original being whose simplicity was suddenly dispersed (zerspaltet) into various singularities must also be avoided” (Derrida 1990: 162/76). Rather, sexual difference, for Derrida, is a power or
potentiality that is prior to duality of sex. That is, much like Butler’s conception of active materiality, Derrida’s conception of sexual difference is not to be thought as a stable surface or site. I believe this to be evidenced in the conception of sexual difference as multiplication.

Derrida stresses that this is not to be thought as a simple multiplicity, or plurality (Derrida 1990: 162/76). Multiplication (*Mannigfaltigung*) is distinguished from multiplicity (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) insofar as the former is *dynamic* while the later is *static*. That is, multiplication here describes an action or process. In this way, sexual difference is not a static Being underlying definitive, stable categories of “man” or “woman”. Rather, it is a *dynamic possibility* that allows for the infinite multiplication of sex. For this reason, Derrida is able to understand sexual difference as a kind of absolute difference contrasted against an oppositional or binary difference, as described above. However, this multiplication goes beyond the absolute difference of sexual difference in that it is conceived as a force or power that drives the process of this differentiation.

Further, this distinction between multiplication and multiplicity can be thought in terms of what Derrida, following Heidegger, names “originary dissemination (*Streuung*)” and “dispersion (*Zerstreuung*)” (Derrida 1990: 162/76). The originary dissemination is the possibility of dispersion; dispersion the determination of dissemination (Derrida 1990: 162/76). It is as originary possibility that sexual difference as multiplication can be thought of as a *power* (*puissance, Mächtigkeit*) (Derrida 1990: 155/71). Moreover, because this power precedes bodily determination it is an activity without an actor. That is, sexual difference is a power or force (multiplication, dispersion) that founds the

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2 We might contrast this understanding of ‘multiplicity’ with that of Deleuze and Guattari, which, as a network of *forces*, is much closer to Derrida’s ‘multiplication’. 
determination of material difference (multiplicity, dissemination).

However, this power or possibility cannot be thought as separate from the body. Dissemination is the determination of an originary possibility of difference. This difference is always a bodily difference; dissemination appears in the facticity of the body (Derrida 1990: 160-161/75). As Derrida says, “the dispersing multiplicity is not primarily due to the sexuality of one’s own body; it is its own body itself, the flesh, the *Leiblichkeit*, that draws *Dasein* originally into the dispersion and in due course [*par suite*] into sexual difference” (Derrida 1990: 161/75). Here we clearly see that the power, the possibility of sexual difference, is the body itself. This is not to say that the body is always already determined as sexed. Rather, the body itself is the activity or power, the possibility, of this determination. The body as originary possibility precedes the determination of the body as sexed.

It is neither the case that the body is determined through external influences, nor that the body is somehow the agent of determination apart from the effect, or that, which is effected. The body as originary possibility and power collapses the distinctions between agent, activity and object. Here we see the resonance with our earlier description of Butler’s process of materialization in terms of power. The body as active materiality breaks, on the one hand, with an essentialism that would see the body as always already sexed, that is determined, and, on the other hand, with a constructivism that would posit the body as a passive site of inscription, and place the agency of this inscription solely outside of the body. The body as active materiality is both the possibility of its own determination as sexed, and the activity of this determination. That is, the body is an active materiality.
Through his conception of sexual difference as multiplication, Derrida offers us a means of thinking of sexual difference that does not rely upon the binary categories of “man” and “woman.” That is, he allows us to move away from conceptions of sexual difference that posit the body (matter) as wholly constitutive of sex, while still maintaining the importance of the body in determining sex. He does this by positing the body as a process or activity. In this way, we see that the body or matter can be thought of as active. From this perspective we can better understand Butler’s conception of active materiality. That is, we see how the body as activity contributes to the formation or determination of sex. However, Butler goes beyond Derrida’s explication of Heidegger by stressing the importance of language or discursive practice to this process. For Butler, sex is not a product of only the activity of the body. Rather, the activity of the body, or materiality, stands in relation to the (per)formative activity of discourse. However, it is Butler’s affinity with Derrida, found in her conception of active materiality, which moves her beyond a linguistic constructivism.

Conclusion

From here we are able to see the way in which Butler accepts the facticity of the body. Against radical linguistic constructivism, she claims, “there are, minimally, sexually differentiated parts, activities, capacities, hormonal and chromosomal differences…” (Butler 1993: 10). That is, as we have seen above, the body does play some part in the formation of sex. However, Butler remains suspicious of claims to the undeniability of these facts: “To “concede” the undeniability of “sex” or its “materiality” is always to concede some version of “sex,” some formation of “materiality”” (Butler 1993: 10).
Despite Butler aversion to radical linguistic constructivism, she is equally weary of the essentialist position of the “undeniability” of sex. Here it is not the facticity of sex or the body that Butler wishes to deny, rather she rejects the idea that these facts exist in some state of static predetermination. Rather, the activity of the body ensures both the stabilization of these facts or surfaces, which work to inform discursive practices. Here the facticity of the body informs regulatory norms, which in turn work to shape the facticity of the body. Further the meanings of these differences are always reinterpreted, and the facts themselves transformed through discursive practice. That is, Butler rejects static facticity of the body in place of a conception of the body as a process that constantly forms and reforms a dynamic facticity. In this way, we understand the interplay of active materiality and language, the role of the body and discourse, in the formation of sexual difference.

Works Cited:

