Power Trouble: Performativity as Critical Theory

Amy Allen

Although Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender has been highly influential in feminist theory, queer theory, cultural studies, and some areas of philosophy, it has yet to receive its due from critical social theorists.[1] This oversight is especially problematic given the crucial insights into the study of power – a central concept for critical social theory – that can be gleaned from Butler's work. Her analysis is somewhat unique among discussions of power in its attempt to theorize simultaneously *both* the features of cultural domination in contemporary societies *and* the possibilities of resistance to and subversion of such domination. Although I will maintain here that this attempt is not entirely successful, I nevertheless argue that Butler's account makes crucial contributions to a feminist critical theory of power; as a result, it merits much more serious attention from critical theorists.

I begin by claiming that feminist accounts of power have reached a critical impasse, the result of which is a demand for an analysis of power that can *simultaneously* theorize both the domination relations that create and sustain certain groups as subordinant and the possibilities for resistance to and subversion of those relations. In order to demonstrate that Butler's account of power attempts to meet this demand, I go on to lay out the conception of power implicit in *Gender Trouble*,[2] Butler's early formulation of the theory of performativity. In that work, Butler adopts a Foucauldian framework and, hence, her account of power inherits a Foucauldian problem (all-to-familiar by now to this audience): the problem of agency. As a result of this inheritance, *Gender Trouble* founders on the traditional philosophical cleavage between determinism and voluntarism. After laying out this troubling implication of the early version of performativity, I examine Butler's recent reformulations – in her books *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*[3] and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*,[4] and in her contributions to *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*[5] – which attempt to overcome this problem by appealing to the Derridean notion of citationality or iterability. I maintain that this notion allows Butler to make the crucial link between sexed individuals and the culturally hegemonic norms that govern their production that was missing in her early formulation. Citationality thus solves one of the problems plaguing the theory of performativity and allows Butler to begin to move feminist discussions of power beyond their current impasse. Despite its solution of the Foucauldian problem of agency, however,

significant problems remain. I conclude by discussing two limitations to Butler's analysis of power that must be overcome before her account can be truly productive for critical theorists.

The Power of Feminist Theory

Let me begin by explaining why critical theorists should concern themselves with the development of a conception of power adequate for feminist theory. I accept Nancy Fraser's characterization of critical theory as, to quote Marx, "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age."[6] As Fraser interprets this definition, it requires critical social theory to "frame its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest."[7] Thus, if we accept that the feminist movement is engaged in one of the significant struggles of our age, then the conceptual framework of contemporary critical social theory should be able to illuminate, among other things, women's subordination. Given this requirement, it becomes crucial for critical theory to investigate what kind of a conception of power will allow us to fully understand male dominance and female subordination.

Thus far, feminist theorists have yet to provide a conception of power that is adequate for this task.[8] Although power is clearly a central concept for feminist theory, there is as yet no agreement upon a conception of it. Many feminists seem to assume that "power" equals "domination"; for these feminists, critiquing power entails unmasking male dominance. These theorists tend to assume that power, or the ability to dominate, is something that men exercise and women do not. Once they have equated power with domination and claimed that men exercise it and women do not, they are left in the uncomfortable position of having a difficult time accounting for women's individual or collective resistance to male dominance. As a result, those who accept this view of power, whom we might call "domination theorists," have been widely criticized for portraying women as victims.[9]

In part as a response to this portrayal of women as victims, other feminists have rejected the equation of power with domination or mastery. Under the influence of French feminism (for Continental theorists) and ethic-of-care feminism (for Anglo-American theorists), these theorists have rejected the domination-theoretical view on the grounds that it entails a masculinist conception of power and have sought to appropriate the term "power" and reinterpret it as affirmative, empowering, and transformative. While they certainly agree with domination theorists' claims that men are in a position of dominance, these feminists claim that there is a transformative and enabling power that grows either out of a peculiarly feminine way of being in the world or out of a particular set of traits (such as caring) or practices (such as mothering) that are, for the most part, unique to

women. They urge that we reject the masculinist conception of power as domination or mastery and embrace instead a positive, affirmative, enabling conception of power as empowerment; hence, we might call them "empowerment theorists."[10]

These two feminist conceptions of power do not, of course, encompass all of the current feminist perspectives on the matter. Many feminists have been highly critical of each of these conceptions. For instance, socialist feminists have criticized domination theorists for presuming a master-subject model of domination that fails to make sense of the complex structural mechanisms that both reinforce and provide the opportunity for subverting women's subordination.[11] Feminists of color have opposed domination theorists' claim that men exercise power and women do not on the grounds that such a claim ignores the myriad ways in which privileged white women wield power over women of color. Empowerment theorists have been criticized for tending to offer an essentialist view of women – a view which embraces the very practices (like mothering) and traits (like care and nurturance) that have themselves traditionally been mechanisms of women's oppression and that have been forced on women in the name of "the eternal feminine."[12]

Such criticisms are significant and they highlight the importance of developing a conception of power that will be adequate to the task of theorizing power relations in all of their complexity. However, thus far, critics of domination and empowerment theorists have failed to draw attention to the most problematic aspect of each of these conceptions of power: its conceptual one-sidedness. Given its exclusive theoretical orientation to *either* domination *or* empowerment, each is capable of telling only one side of the story of the power relations with which feminism is concerned. This conceptual one-sidedness is problematic for two reasons. First, looking at only one of these aspects of power at a time – either male domination or female empowerment – obscures the other axes of subordination that are intertwined with women's subordination.[13] Conceptions of power that have a one-sided focus either on male domination or on female empowerment miss the ways in which some women play integral roles in the subordination of others by virtue of racial, class, or heterosexual privilege, and in which different women are differently empowered by particular norms, practices, and institutions. Second, a one-sided approach renders each conception of power incapable of making sense of the complex and multifarious power relations in contemporary societies, which are such that individuals can be both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of one and the same norm, institution, and practice.

Investigating only one side of power inevitably distorts our understanding of power relations and leaves us in the uncomfortable position of being asked to choose between two incomplete conceptions of power. If we are to develop an account of power that will be suitable for feminism's critical aims, it is crucial that we move beyond this current impasse. In order to do this, we require a conceptualization of power that will allow us to think both domination and individual or

collective empowerment/resistance simultaneously. Or, as Judith Butler puts it, we require an account that will enable us to "think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution."[14] I read Butler's theory of gender performativity as an attempt to provide just such an analysis of power.

Performativity: Take One

Butler's first formulation of performativity theory, *Gender Trouble*, starts with a reflection on the category of "women." She criticizes various approaches to feminism that turn on unproblematized notions of identity and identity politics. Such approaches ignore both the Foucauldian insight that all identities are effects of productive/repressive power regimes, and the objection, raised by many feminists of color, that the category of "women" has traditionally excluded everyone except white, middle-class, academic women. Instead of assuming that there must be a universal basis for feminism, Butler claims that "feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought."[15] In other words, feminist critique requires a "*feminist genealogy* of the category of women" (5).

Gender Trouble offers just such a genealogy, and it yields two potentially surprising results. First, it challenges the sex/gender distinction. Throughout the seventies and eighties, feminists, with few exceptions,[16] accepted the distinction between "sex" – the natural, physical differences between biological males and females – and "gender" – the socially and culturally constructed patterns of femininity and masculinity that are tied to biological sex and reified into the categories of "men" and "women." Feminist critique restricted itself to an assault on gender and the unjust system of domination that comes along with it; sex, on the other hand, was considered to be biologically based, natural, and therefore out of the bounds of critique. Against this received wisdom, Butler argues that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts."[17] The first result of the feminist genealogy of "women," then, is the contention that sex is every bit as culturally produced as gender; far from being natural, sex has been culturally constructed and falsely naturalized.

The second result is the theory of performativity itself. Butler contends that "gender" is not a noun with a fixed set of attributes. On the contrary,

> gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. . . . [Paraphrasing Nietzsche] there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted

by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (25).

If gender is continually enacted and performed, then, according to Butler, it is possible for individuals to alter their performances in ways that might subvert the heterosexist norms that govern its very production. Everything turns, in other words, on how we perform our gender (for, make no mistake about it, we are all compelled to perform in one way or another): if I perform the role of "woman" timidly and faithfully, my performance is likely to uphold heterosexist domination; if, on the other hand, I perform flamboyantly, irreverently, and parodically, my performance subverts such domination.

In this way, Butler attempts to account for the interrelation between oppressive gender norms and the possibilities for resistance to such norms that are opened up by gender performance. Moreover, she denies that the possibility of such subversion is the result of either a humanist assertion of the will or of an existentialist authentically free choice. "If power is not reduced to volition, . . . and the classical liberal and existential model of freedom is refused, then power relations can be understood, as I think they ought to be, as constraining and constituting the very possibilities of volition. Hence, power can neither be withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed" (124).

It is at this point that the traditional philosophical distinction between determinism and voluntarism begins to cause Butler trouble. Her claim that power can be neither withdrawn nor refused is cast as an explicit attempt to avoid voluntarism. This, in turn, raises the question of how it is possible that the relations of power with which feminism contends can ever be changed; that is to say, it raises the question of how Butler's denial of voluntarism can avoid falling into determinism. As Seyla Benhabib asks, "If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and let it rise only if one can have a say in the production of the play itself? Isn't this what the struggle over gender is all about?"[18]

Butler insists that her analysis avoids determinism because it contains a viable conception of agency: agency, according to Butler, consists in the ability to introduce a potentially subversive variation on the compulsory repetition of normatively prescribed acts. On Butler's view, the theory of performativity avoids determinism because it views individuals as capable of performing heterosexist norms in such a way as to make them into a "site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality."[19] Yet it is precisely this claim that raises the spectre of voluntarism once again. Her idea that we may accomplish a subversion of compulsory heterosexuality by performing parodically rather than faithfully – by dressing up in drag, for example – implies that we are capable of consciously and willfully deciding how to enact our gender. The question is, how, in the light of the complex cultural and social norms that Butler has analyzed, is such a decision possible? And *who* could

be making such a decision? Furthermore, how do we know that such parodic performances will subvert, rather than uphold or leave untouched, the gender norms that they attack? The problem, as Allison Weir sums it up, is that Butler "provides no account of a process of mediation between norms and acts."[20] As a result, if we accept Butler's analysis of the compulsory norms of heterosexist domination, then her account of the agency of sexed and gendered individuals becomes hard to swallow, and vice versa.

The upshot of this problem is that readers of *Gender Trouble* are left with the paradoxical feeling that resistance is either completely impossible or too easy. The early formulation of gender performativity is unsuccessful at simultaneously conceptualizing both heterosexist domination and the possibilities for resisting such domination. What Butler needs, but doesn't yet have in this early work, is an account of that which mediates between the compulsory norms of heterosexist domination and the sexed/gendered individuals who perform them. This is what she finds in the notion of citationality or iterability.

Performativity: Take Two

In the preface to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler discusses the voluntarism/determinism problem raised by her first formulation of the theory of performativity.

> For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* its gender.[21]

If the theory of performativity is interpreted in this way, then it can easily be seen to rely upon a voluntaristic – and humanist – notion of choice and agency that is antithetical to the theory's constructivist aims. On the other hand, Butler asks, "If gender is not an artifice to be taken on or taken off at will and, hence, not an effect of choice, how are we to understand the constitutive and compelling status of gender norms without falling into the trap of cultural determinism?" (x). Her later formulations of the theory of performativity attempt to rethink this worrisome implication of *Gender Trouble*.[22]

In her contribution to *Feminist Contentions* – an exchange between Seyla Benhabib, Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser – Butler begins to deal with this problem by clarifying what she means by performativity. She indicates that her understanding of performativity is not derived from a behaviorist model according to which, as Benhabib put it in the passage quoted above, "we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform."[23] Instead, she bases her use of the term performativity on J.L. Austin's account of performative

utterances. In Austin's speech act theory, a performative is an utterance that enacts or produces that which it names (e.g., "I now pronounce you husband and wife"). However, speech act theory is problematic because it tends to presume a humanist subject who has the power to call certain phenomena into being through his or her utterance (e.g., the priest, minister, or justice of the peace who is vested with the power to marry heterosexual couples). To avoid this implication, Butler draws on Derrida's reformulation of the performative. In this reformulation, the performative utterance becomes a derivative citation rather than a founding act by an originating subject. Derrida asks, "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?"[24]

Butler adopts this Derridean understanding of performativity as citationality and recasts the performativity of gender accordingly. In *Bodies that Matter*, the hegemonic cultural definitions that govern the production of sexuality (and, thus, of sexed bodies) cannot reproduce and sustain themselves; rather, they must be cited by individuals in order to be reproduced and sustained. "[P]erformativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms."[25] The necessity of this reiteration opens up the space for citations or reiterations that subvert the very norms they are supposed to reinforce. As Butler puts it, "a citation will be at once an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation" (108). It is crucial to note that, in this later formulation of performativity theory, a citation is only an *occasion* to subvert a norm; it is no *guarantee* that the norm will be subverted. Although this point was far from clear in her earlier formulation, Butler now acknowledges that some citations will unwittingly reproduce the very norms they seek to subvert. For instance, in her analysis of the film *Paris is Burning*,[26] Butler emphasizes that "there is no *necessary relation* between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms."[27] By underscoring this point, Butler responds to Nancy Fraser's objection[28] that the theory of performativity assumes but fails to explain why resignification is necessarily subversive rather than reactionary or simply ineffectual. Butler insists now that resignification isn't necessarily subversive; the fact that norms must be cited in order for them to remain in force does not mean that citationality is a sufficient condition for subversion, only that it is a necessary one.

Once the idea of citationality is introduced, it becomes clear that performativity "is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance."[29] It

is the introduction of the concept of citationality or iterability and the claim that performativity is not an "act" that enables Butler to finesse the divide between determinism and voluntarism. Gender performance is not an act by a voluntarist subject who simply chooses which sex or gender to be; rather, it is a compelled reiteration of norms that constructs individuals as sexed and gendered. In more recent work, Butler makes it clear that this reiteration is compelled via the force of interpellation; thus, she writes, "the performative is not a singular act by an already established subject, but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations."[30] However, the very fact that it is *necessary* for norms to be reiterated or cited by individuals in order for them to maintain their efficacy indicates that we are never completely determined by them. As Butler puts it, "to the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate."[31] Gender norms are, in principle, unrealizable: "Such norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction" (237). If we were completely determined by gender norms, there would be no need for us continually to cite and reiterate them; that we are continually compelled to do so gives us good reason for thinking that we are not so determined.

The introduction of citationality thus allows Butler to think through the paradox of subjectivation that she inherits from Foucault. As Butler puts it, "the paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms" (15).[32] That is, one is paradoxically both *subject to* the power of the heterosexist cultural norms that constrain and compel one's performance of gender and simultaneously enabled to take up the position of *a subject* in and through them. While Butler's second formulation of performativity theory "accepts as a point of departure Foucault's notion that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls, that power is not only imposed externally, but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed," it goes beyond Foucault to claim that the constitution of sex as an effect of such regulatory power is both "reiterated and reiterable" (22). As a result, Butler's account improves upon Foucault's insofar as it offers citationality as that which mediates between regulatory power and the individual subjects that are both produced and controlled, enabled and constrained by it. The result is a mediated account of the subject that enables Butler to navigate the divide between deterministic norms and voluntaristic acts.

By incorporating the notion of citationality or iterability into her account of performativity, Butler is able to move beyond the Foucauldian paradox of agency and to negotiate the complex dialectical interplay between the domination enforced by heterosexist norms and individual refusal of, resistance to, or subversion of those norms. In this way, her reformulations of the theory of performativity succeed,

to some extent, in thinking "power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution" (240). As a result, Butler's work makes a crucial contribution to a critical theory of power aimed at illuminating women's subordination that is attempting to move beyond the domination/empowerment impasse diagnosed above.

The theoretical gains that Butler's theory of performativity offers to a feminist critical theory of power can be best understood if we consider how Butler has put this theory to work in the illumination of specific problems or issues. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler applies her theory of performativity to several of the most pressing political questions of our day: racist hate speech, pornography, and the discourse about gays in the military. In order to see precisely how Butler's conception of power benefits critical social theory, I shall briefly examine her application of it to the feminist debate over pornography.

Butler frames her discussion as an evaluation of Catharine MacKinnon's trenchant feminist critique of pornography. According to Butler, MacKinnon's view is overly deterministic: MacKinnon believes that pornography seamlessly constitutes women's reality, inexorably constructing them as sexually subordinate.[33] In this way, Butler indicates that she might agree with my characterization of MacKinnon above as one of a group of feminists who have focused on domination to the exclusion of agency and resistance and, thus, have unwittingly portrayed women as victims. The problem with this sort of view is that it grants too much power to pornography and not enough to women; Butler insists that the power evinced by pornography is "more frail and less deterministic" than MacKinnon makes it out to be (67). Butler's account of the power relations at work in pornography, by contrast, draws on her theorization of the complex dialectical interplay between domination and resistance. According to Butler, pornography offers a depiction of a set of gender norms that individuals are compelled to cite; however, given Butler's understanding of performativity, these norms are in principle unrealizable and the very fact that they have to be cited opens up a space for their subversion. Thus, Butler writes,

> pornography neither represents nor constitutes what women are, but offers an allegory of masculine willfulness and feminine submission (although these are clearly not its only themes), one which repeatedly and anxiously rehearses its own *un*realizability. . . . Indeed, one might suggest that pornography is the text of gender's unreality, the impossible norms by which it is compelled, and in the face of which it continually fails (68).

Because MacKinnon relies on too simplistic a notion of power, her solution to the problem posed by pornography – ideally, abolishing pornography altogether – is too easy. According to Butler, "our work is more difficult, for what pornography delivers is what it recites and exaggerates from the resources of compensatory gender norms, a text of insistent and faulty imaginary relations that will not disap-

pear with the abolition of the offending text, the text that remains for feminist criticism relentlessly to read" (69). Since Butler's conception of power emphasizes the role that women play in citing and potentially subverting the gender norms that they are compelled to repeat, her analysis of pornography avoids the problem of portraying women as victims, while still taking seriously the way that pornography figures in women's subordination.

A detailed discussion and evaluation of this contribution to the feminist pornography debate would require more space than is available here. However, such a detailed discussion is unnecessary for our purposes. The brief account that I have sketched of Butler's application of performativity theory to an analysis of pornography can provide enough of a sense of the gains afforded by such a theory. Since the theory of performativity provides a complicated account of the interplay between individuals and socially and culturally hegemonic power structures, when it is applied to a specific issue such as pornography, the result is an analysis that simultaneously accounts for both the cultural domination that is depicted in and reinforced by pornography and the possibilities of resistance to and subversion of such domination.

Limitations to Performativity

However, if the theory of performativity offers gains to critical theorists, it incurs some losses as well. Two of these losses are significant enough that they make me hesitant to claim that Butler's account of power is completely successful in moving us beyond the domination/empowerment impasse. First, Butler is uncomfortable with claiming that there is a normative dimension to her analysis. She writes, "If there is a 'normative' dimension to this work, it consists precisely in assisting a radical resignification of the symbolic domain, deviating the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world."[34] But it is not clear that the call for resignification *is* a normative demand. The fact that Butler places the word "normative" in quotation marks indicates that she is uncomfortable with labeling it in this way. Given her equation of normativity with exclusion, there is good reason for this discomfort; in "Contingent Foundations," she writes, "identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, *and as such, exclusionary*."[35] Nancy Fraser has aptly described the implications of this equation: "deconstructive critique – critique that dereifies or unfreezes identity – is the privileged mode of feminist theorizing, whereas normative, reconstructive critique is normalizing and oppressive."[36]

Further, even if we agree for the moment that the call for a resignification *is* a normative demand, it is not the only nor is it even the most significant normative dimension of Butler's theory of performativity. The call for resignification relies on a prior normative claim that is implicit in Butler's analysis – namely, the claim that gender and sex *ought* to be subverted because they are unnatural cultural

constructs that are falsely presented as natural. When a performance succeeds in being subversive it does so "to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and *disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness*."[37] If oppressive sex/gender norms function by taking on a mask of naturalness, then subverting such norms turns on exposing them as unnatural and falsely naturalized, on what Butler calls a "denaturalization of sex" (131). But why should we resignify these norms? Why expose them as unnatural? Why denaturalize sex? The answer has to be that unnatural constructs that parade as natural are, in some sense, bad and deserve to be subverted.

My point is not that Butler's work lacks the kind of normative foundation that grounds critique. My point is that her theory of performativity already fundamentally relies on such a not-so-contingent foundation, whether Butler acknowledges this or not. As Nancy Fraser has put it, "Butler has explicitly renounced the moral-theoretical resources necessary to account for her own implicit normative judgments."[38] As a result of this renunciation, we are left without a good reason for agreeing with her that sex/gender should be resisted and resignified because they have been falsely naturalized. Without a specific argument to the contrary, there seems to be no reason to agree with Butler that such unnatural constructs are, in themselves, objectionable. What is so bad about the unnatural? I would think that, at most, unnatural constructs would be normatively neutral, rather than normatively problematic. One might respond that what is wrong with these constructs is not that they are unnatural, but that they are *falsely* naturalized. Then, one could say that the only motivation in exposing them as unnatural is to tell the truth about sex and gender, to expose them for what they *really* are. Indeed, at times Butler sounds as if she is making just this sort of claim. However, this sort of motivation presupposes precisely the kind of representationalist view of language that Butler claims to be moving beyond;[39] as a result, it does not seem to me to be an option that is open to her. I think that a better option is for Butler to admit without so much hesitation that she needs some normative concepts (feminist theory cannot get along without them), and to spend some time and energy defending the ones that are already lurking in her text.

The second hesitation I have about Butler's analysis has to do with the difficulty she has in theorizing collective resistance. In order to be adequate to feminism's critical aims, a conception of power ought to be able to say something about the kind of power that nourishes collective oppositional social movements like the feminist movement, and that sustains coalitions between this movement and other social movements, like the gay rights movement, the anti-racism movement, new labor movements, and so on. One consequence of Butler's radical critique of identity and identity politics is that it becomes difficult to conceptualize such collective power. Indeed, it becomes difficult even to conceptualize collectivity at all. Near the end of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler returns to the problematic category of women with which *Gender Trouble* began. It is necessary,

Butler writes,

> to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds, and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation.[40]

Butler's hesitant avowal of the category of "women" makes it difficult to see how one could theorize the kind of collective power that sustains and nourishes the feminist movement – the power of solidarity. Indeed, Butler assumes that solidarity is inextricably linked to problematic notions of unity or identity; thus, she contends that solidarity is "an exclusionary norm . . . that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts."[41] Allison Weir sums up the problem with Butler's linking of solidarity with exclusion: "it becomes impossible to see the affirmations of existential and political identities which provide a sense of meaning and solidarity to participants in feminist, gay and lesbian, and black struggles for empowerment as anything other than paradoxical affirmations of the identitary logic of domination and exclusion."[42]

The problem is not just that Butler is suspicious of the notion of solidarity, for one might agree with her for the sake of argument that this term is too loaded with presumptions of original unity to be part of a contemporary political vocabulary. Even more problematic is her suspicion of consensus or agreement *per se*. She writes, "the ideal of consent . . . makes sense only to the degree that the terms in question submit to a consensually established meaning. . . . But are we, whoever 'we' are, the kind of community in which such meanings could be established once and for all? . . . Who stands above the interpretive fray in a position to 'assign' utterances the same meanings?"[43] Thus, in Butler's view, dialogic models of collective action and identification run the risk of "relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes 'agreement' and 'unity' and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought."[44]

However, this suspicion of consensus allows Butler to leave untheorized crucial domains of social analysis. As Jodi Dean puts it, theories such as Butler's

> cannot account for the positive and communicative dimensions of our lives. Not only are microdisruptions and performative reiterations hardly enough to challenge the continued brutalization of women in their homes, the reinvigorated homophobia of the Right, and the continued economic exploitation of women across the globe, but such disruptions and reiterations themselves, as their theorists admit, can backfire, either manipulated by their opponents or coopted into new practices of violence.[45]

Dean fails to acknowledge that communicative agreements might also backfire; nevertheless, she is correct in noting that Butler's suspicion of such agreements makes the theory of performativity fall short of providing an analysis of the collective empowerment that grows out of the feminist movement and, in turn, serves as a resource for individual women who are struggling with heterosexist domination in their daily lives.[46] Further, this suspicion, coupled with Butler's uneasiness about normative concepts, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain important distinctions between normatively beneficial and normatively problematic forms of collective action, between agreements based on persuasion, bargaining, and genuine overlapping of interests, and those based on coercion, intimidation, and brute force.[47]

This failure is evident in Butler's analysis of gay activism. Activist projects such as cross-dressing, gay pride parades, ACT UP's die-ins, and Queer Nation's kiss-ins are analyzed solely as instances of hyperbolic performativity that destabilize the naturalness of heterosexist gender norms.[48] While it is certainly interesting and productive to view these projects through this theoretical lens, it is also possible and, indeed, necessary to analyze them as instances of consensual, reciprocal action that are possible because of the collective self-empowerment of participants, which in turn sustains such action and serves as an important normative resource for individuals struggling against the hegemony of heterosexism.

The two limitations of Butler's analysis turn out to be related. Each stems, I think, from Butler's uneasiness with normative concepts like justice, right, and reciprocity. This uneasiness seems all the more problematic given her implicit reliance on the other halves of these normative dualisms: wrong, injustice, and coercion. Like it or not, feminism has emancipatory aims; for that reason, it simply cannot get along without normative concepts.

Conclusion

In order to be adequate to feminism's critical aims, we require a conception of power that moves beyond the domination/empowerment impasse that I diagnosed above. Although there are some limitations in Butler's account that will need to be overcome, her work takes significant strides in this direction. While her early formulation of performativity founders on the determinism/voluntarism divide and fails to offer a satisfactory account of agency, the introduction in her more recent work of the concept of citationality allows her deftly to negotiate the complicated dialectical interplay between domination and resistance.

Thus, despite its blind spots, the theory of performativity turns out to make a significant contribution to critical theory. Moreover, that there are blind spots in her account would probably come as no surprise to Butler. As she writes in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, "this demand to think contemporary power in its complexity and interarticulations remains incontrovertibly important *even in its impossibility*."[49] Butler is so convinced of the importance of the task and the

demand to attempt it that she is willing to run the risk of meeting up with its impossibility. Rather than being suspicious of the theory of performativity, or, as is perhaps more often the case, simply ignoring it, I submit that critical theorists should take up Butler's challenge.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Nancy Fraser, Johanna Meehan, members of the Midwest Critical Theory Roundtable, and the anonymous reviewers of *Constellations* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

3. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

4. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

5. Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, and Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

6. Karl Marx, "Letter to A. Ruge, September 1843," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. L. Coletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York, 1974), 209. Quoted in Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," in Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 113.

7. Fraser, 113.

8. In the remainder of this section, I present a condensed version of an argument that I develop much more extensively in my "Rethinking Power," *Hypatia* 13: 1 (Winter 1998): 21–40.

9. A number of theorists embrace a view of power similar to the ideal type sketched here. A (by no means comprehensive) list of those I have in mind would include so-called "radical" feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Carole Pateman. See MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1979); and Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

10. Again, a number of theorists have presented such a view of power. For examples, see Hélène Cixous, "Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon," *Revue des sciences humaines*, 168 (octobre-décembre 1977); Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988); Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

11. For an example of this kind of critique, see Nancy Fraser, "Beyond the Master/Subject Model: Reflections on Carole Pateman's *Sexual Contract*," *Social Text*, 37: 173–181.

12. For examples of this kind of critique, see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) 15; and Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs*, 13:3 (1988): 405–36.

13. On this point, see Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 140–1.

14. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 240.

15. *Gender Trouble*, 2.

16. Two exceptions to this rule that come to mind are Catharine MacKinnon, whose claim that all differences are simply the reified effects of dominance can easily be interpreted to cover sex differences as well as gender differences, and Jane Flax, who has a conception of the priority of sex

over gender similar to Butler's. See MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," in *Feminism Unmodified*; and Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

17. *Gender Trouble*, 7. See 106–111 for an extended critique of scientific attempts to explain the naturalness of sex differences.

18. Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," in Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, and Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

19. *Gender Trouble*, 124.

20. Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 122.

21. *Bodies that Matter*, x.

22. See *Bodies that Matter*, xii. To be sure, the determinism/voluntarism problem is not the only difficulty that her reformulation of performativity is designed to resolve. For instance, *Bodies that Matter* also addresses at length the objection that the theory of performativity fails to take into account the materiality of the body. See *Bodies that Matter*, passim. More recently, Butler addresses the worry that *Gender Trouble* failed to take into account the psychic workings of gender that may not be evident in the performance of that gender. See Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 144ff.

23. Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminist Contentions*, 21. Butler seems to think that Benhabib willfully misreads her work and "chooses not to consider what meaning of performativity is at work [in *Gender Trouble*]" (Butler, "For a Careful Reading" in *Feminist Contentions*, 134). However, this seems unfair to Benhabib given the fact that Butler does not provide a clear account of the theoretical roots of her usage of performativity in her earliest formulations of the theory.

24. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited, Inc*., Gerald Graff, ed., trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 18. Quoted in Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions*, 134; *Bodies that Matter*, 13; and *Excitable Speech*, 51.

25. *Bodies that Matter*, 95.

26. Elsewhere, Butler acknowledges that seeing *Paris is Burning* prompted her to rethink the claim that parody always entails subversion. See the discussion in John Rajchman, ed., *The Identity in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 134.

27. *Bodies that Matter*, 125, emphasis added.

28. See Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions*, 68.

29. *Bodies that Matter*, 95.

30. *Excitable Speech*, 160.

31. *Bodies that Matter*, 231.

32. Cf., *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1–2. For Foucault's formulations of this paradox, see Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler takes a markedly different approach to the question of subjectivation, an approach that attempts to bring together the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis and a Foucauldian analysis of power. Because this approach differs substantially from the one that I have been discussing, a full account of it is beyond the scope of this paper.

33. See *Excitable Speech*, 65–6.

34. *Bodies that Matter*, 21–2.

35. "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminist Contentions*, 50, emphasis added.

36. Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions*, 71.

37. *Bodies that Matter*, 125.

38. Fraser, "Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn," in *Feminist Contentions*, 162.

39. Allison Weir makes a similar point in her discussion of Butler's critique of language as identitarian. Such a claim, Weir notes, rests on the presupposition that language always misrepresents the plurality and non-identity that really exist. See Weir, 118–120.

40. *Bodies that Matter*, 222.

41. *Gender Trouble*, 15.

42. Weir, 113–14.

43. *Excitable Speech*, 86–7.

44. *Gender Trouble*, 15.

45. Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 66.

46. For an account of how the normative and social resources generated by the feminist movement serve as resources for individual women (even women who do not identify themselves as feminists), see Jane Mansbridge, "The Role of Discourse in the Feminist Movement," paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, September 2–5, 1993.

47. For a similar argument against: Derrida, see Thomas McCarthy, "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism," in McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 110; against Foucault, see Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," in Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 32.

48. For a somewhat different account of Queer Nation's die-ins, one which understands them as ways of staging the melancholic grief that is culturally proscribed for the loss of homosexual love, see *The Psychic Life of Power*, 147–8. Although Butler refers to the die-ins here as "collective institutions for grieving" (148), she nevertheless falls short of understanding them as a source of collective empowerment based on the consensual, reciprocal action of the participants.

49. *Bodies that Matter*, 19, emphasis added.