H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ellen T. Armour, Susan M. St. Ville, eds. *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xxi + 311 pp. $28.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13407-1; $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13406-4.

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Published on H-Women (April, 2007)

Religions That Matter

This book has been in the making for quite some time. It grew out of a set of sessions from the 1997 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, at which Judith Butler was present. The editors are to be commended for coaxing oral presentations into chapters, for anchoring the text with relevant articles from other publications, and for providing a helpful introduction not just to the text but to Judith Butler's work as well. Indeed, I found myself thinking that this introduction to Butler might prove handy for an undergraduate course in gender and religion. Say what you will about Martha Nussbaum's critique of Butler, undergraduates find Butler's texts more than a bit forbidding! Scholars of religion who are familiar with Butler's work will delight in the varieties of religious texts and settings that are assembled here. They will be troubled by the lost opportunities for critiquing Butler's work and by Butler's rather scanty attention to these articles in her afterword to the text.

What the editors of this text highlight is Butler's convincing portrayal of the unceasing performativity that materializes the sexes and their "normal" attractions. This portrayal not only brings home the fact that, in the editors' words, "the system is cultural and discursive all the way down" (p. 7), but it also heralds the potentially subversive slippage that is an inescapable accompaniment to repetition. Butler's work prompts scholars of religion to more carefully analyze that which is tagged "natural" or "God-given" in religious texts and institutions, and to illuminate the gender work accomplished in religious texts and settings. Accordingly, the authors in *Bodily Citations* take up this challenge and focus on abjection, citationality, and agency in Butler's writings.

Butler argues that the ceaseless production of two sexes and their properly heterosexual desires for each other necessarily produces improper bodies and desires as the constitutive outside: the abject. These are the bodies that do not matter; they are not valued or protected, let alone celebrated. Nonetheless, they provide pointed contrast to those bodies and desires that can be funded by corporations and even constitutional amendments. Suzanne Mrozik and Claudia Schippert illuminate the ways that religious traditions revalorize the abject.

Mrozik insightfully observes that ascetic discourse on bodies negates bodily differences in seeing *all* bodies as abject: as foul, oozing, and impermanent. She rereads the South Asian Sanskrit Buddhist narrative, "The Story of Beautiful Woman," and argues that the text enjoins asceticism by portraying abjection (in this case mutilation) as a path to virtue. Moreover, she argues that the text pries loose the association of the male body with virtue and *bodhisattva* status through the woman's shape-shifting and her subversion of gender roles by taking on "male" qualities. Consequently, the text conveys Buddha as a radically "alterior" being who is "omnibodied, omnisexed, and omnigendered" (p. 19). I found myself juxtaposing Mrozik's reading of this text with the predominance of the aging, decaying woman's body as focal point for the cultivation of asceticism in Buddhist hagiographic literature.[1] Although religious texts and practices might dissemble the "secular" production of abjection, they frequently gender the abject body as female. Moreover, I was troubled by the competing images of motherhood in this text of the beautiful woman, especially since Mrozik argues that the text portrays the Buddha as a mother and, moreover, as "better than other mothers," specifically starving mothers. A beautiful woman cuts off her breasts in order to feed the starving mother about to consume her newborn son. The bad mother wants to consume her son; the good mother is she who severs or castrates her breasts for her son. Nonetheless, Mrozik's analysis is careful, multilayered, and thoroughly engaging.

Schippert draws on Katie Cannon's assertion that the dominant Christian ethical systems are predicated on the assumption that the moral agent is "to a considerable degree free and self-directing," and that those persons who

do not evidence these characteristics are accordingly, immoral or amoral (p. 163).[2] Cannon establishes, then, the racially marked character of Christian ethics and the abject status of black persons whose lives are marked by constraint and suffering. Rather than seeking inclusion for blacks, Cannon "fundamentally challenges the dominant way of valuing" (p. 165) by reconstructing an ethics from a place "in which no ethics can be done" (p. 165). Schippert compares Cannon's "taking on the abject" (p. 168) to Evelynn Hammonds's portrayal of black lesbian sexuality as a "black (w)hole" in feminist and queer theory, that is, as both a void and a complex entity exerting a distorting and enabling pull on proximate bodies. Schippert agrees with Butler that ethics need not require a voluntary subject, but goes further in elucidating the racially marked categories of dominant ethical theory and practice.

Ken Stone asserts that Butler's work encourages biblical scholars to "focus upon the instabilities and ambiguities in texts." These gaps might, in turn, represent "weak spots in the supposed biblical foundation for the heterosexual contract" (p. 54). For instance, Stone provocatively observes that heterosexual desire does not emerge "naturally" in the creation accounts in Genesis, but is, instead, commanded as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Stone refreshingly moves beyond providing a careful exegesis of Genesis to speculate on the variety of ways political movements might engage with these alternative readings of biblical texts.

Karen Trimble Alliaume's study of the Roman Catholic magisterium's insistence that priests must be male because Jesus is male is thoughtful if not innovative. She recommends Butler's notion of citationality, which captures the performative instability of all identities, as opposed to the Church's insistence on an economy of imitation, which has no place in which to insert women as women insofar as salvific identity is "originally" male. Yet I would caution against any optimism regarding how a proliferation of copies of Jesus might entail liberating possibilities. (Indeed as early as John of Damascus, d. 753, Jesus is said to be the first image that permits the reproduction of subsequent images.) Alliaume writes, "The historical Jesus is the body that haunts feminist Christological reconstructions" (p. 115). But why not exorcise this ghost from her text? It is surprising that she does not explore Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's recommendation that we jettison Jesus and focus instead on the emergent Christian community.

Christina Hutchins provides a fascinating comparison of Alfred Whitehead's process theology and Judith Butler's poststructuralist performativity. I particularly liked how her interpretation of Whitehead's analysis of the "tedium" or "cultural fatigue and listlessness" that results from repetitions that "lack 'width,' variety, subversion, critical novelty, from repetitions that gradually shrink public spaces of becoming" prompts us to reflect on the psychic burden of the production of gender and heteronormative desire (p. 142). I would have liked Hutchins to explore this area of Butler's work. So, too, the comparison of Whitehead and Butler begs pursuit of Stephen K. White's argument that Butler's work ought to be read as an alternative ontology.[3]

Teresa Hornsby's contribution exemplifies, for me, one of the major limitations of Butler's theory of power. She opens her essay with the pious observation, "Judith Butler rules" (p. 71). The problem with Butler's rule, she goes on to note, is that she makes scholarship (especially scholarship that fancies that its progressive or feminist readings can undo oppressive relationships) exceedingly difficult. This is the case because Butler insists that all academic and political moves are caught up in the very power structures they denounce or attempt to subvert. There is no pure place to stand. This is surely an important and indisputable truth. These insights frame Hornsby's critique of mainstream and feminist readings of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet (Luke 7: 36-50). Although she does not do justice to the nuance of the positions she critiques, she does prompt readers to consider the presence of non-normative desires in this text (although she does not focus on Jesus' desire). She concludes her study by avowing what she takes to be Butlerian convictions–convictions that make Butler, like the woman in Luke, "annoying." She writes, "I am sure this reading does its own damage in some ways," and "while this reading may not topple dynasties or rewrite laws, it whittles away at a bedrock that holds these kingdoms in place" (p. 86). These statements, taken together, are more than jarring. They reveal that Hornsby falls into the same trap as does Butler. Butler once asked, "How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?"[4] Butler has not supplied such criteria. Hence, every scholarly and political effort is, as Hornsby's comments uncritically exemplify, a mysterious amalgam of destructive and subversive power. If, as Butler maintains, power is paradoxically and simultaneously productive and repressive, then it is impossible to distinguish, let alone promote, enabling power from destructive power.

Rebecca Schneider, from the field of performance studies, poses a provocative challenge to Butler. Schneider traces the emergence of the distinction between re-

spectable "theater" and primitive "ritual" as reflecting the insidious binary opposition of text and body. She then illuminates an additional binary operative in theater: the disembodied viewer and the embodied, but blind actor. Schneider notes that although Butler invokes her body in her writing she quickly erases it, thus reproducing this binary in her own work (p. 238). Indeed, the reader cannot help but wonder what she is supposed to do with the vision of bodies unknowingly, involuntarily, citing their genders and desires–a vision conjured by Butler's writings. Schneider is interested in the persistence of this denial of the body's knowledge (what she refers to as the "vision machine") and the attempts to undo this on the part of performance artists who retrieve the category of "ritual."

Amy Hollywood faults Butler for subsuming bodily practices and rituals into speech acts. She notes that ritual remains relied upon but undertheorized in Butler. This shortcoming in Butler becomes apparent when she is attempting to account for the "force of the performative" in the subjection of speaking and acting subjects. Hollywood takes time to retrace Butler's critique of J. L. Austin (for whom the intention of the sovereign speaker supplies performative force) and to fault her for critiquing Jacques Derrida's supposed inattention to context. I would rather she had developed a sustained analysis of force in Butler and unpacked more fully her linkages between Butler and Catherine Bell's work on ritualization. In my view, what some of the authors of this volume hint at and what is suggested by Butler's unwitting oscillation between speech act and ritual, is the dialectic of language and body in the materialization of what is. In other words, Butler makes it clear how it is that citationality sediments certain kinds of bodies. What is less clear or remarked upon is how categories or fictions rely on bodies to be effective, real, and powerful. Although Butler points to this early in her work, she does not subsequently develop it. She writes of "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions."[5]

Saba Mahmood also spies in Butler an overreliance on a theory of signification. Consequently, Butler is unable to contribute to the development of a "vocabulary for thinking conceptually about forms of corporeality that, while efficacious in behavior, do not lend themselves easily to representation" (p. 203). Mahmood also critiques Butler for relying upon a notion of agency as consisting in resistance or resignification–a common assumption of left liberal feminist theorizing.[6] Mahmood wishes, instead, to elucidate the agency that is acquired by habits entailing even modesty and submission. Whereas a number of the authors in this volume see an unproblematic correlation between agency and resistance in Butler, Mahmood effectively problematizes this linkage particularly as feminist theorists seek to understand the motives and practices of women in different cultures. I have written about these profound limitations in Butler's work and have cautioned feminist scholars of religion to resist appropriating Butler's work in their analyses of women's agency in religious contexts.[7]

Judith Butler's afterword is the truly disappointing section of the book. Although she recognizes that "resistance" does not get at the complexity of agency, there is little evidence that she recognizes the challenge that truly taking account of religious bodies, practices, and histories poses to her analyses. In other words, these articles suggest that Butler's rendering of the field of bodies that matter (and the concomitant field of abject bodies) is parochially secular. Butler's secularism is perhaps most obvious in her attempt to dismantle what she believes is a widely shared Western myth of the sovereign and self-made "man." She writes, "The address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy. In this sense, an 'injury' is performed by the very act of interpellation, the one that rules out the possibility for the subject's autogenesis (and gives rise to that fantasy)."[8] Of course, Butler does not point to a source for the fantasy of autogenesis, nor does she notice that the circulation of such a fantasy is certainly questionable given widespread belief in a creator God. As Mary Keller has written, "From my perspective, the world's religious traditions become important resources for thinking about agency because they have been engaged in developing ethical arguments about and community responses to nonvoluntaristic accounts of human agency for a very long time."[9] The editors state in their introduction to Butler's work: "We are not advocating only that religionists learn from Butler, however; it is our conviction (given concrete form by the essays in this volume) that scholars of religion offer Butler rich resources" (p. 11). I would have liked the editors to elaborate on what these articles reveal about the limitations of Butler's work.

Nor have these essays mined the religious residues in Butler's work. What remains to be explored, for instance, is the relationship between "subjection" and religious discipline. Indeed, Butler points out the religious valence that attends subjection. In order to bring home the profundity of subordination entailed in subjection, she cites approvingly Louis Althusser's insistence that the discursive formation of subjects (what he terms "interpellation") necessitates the "unique and central Other Subject"

(God). According to Althusser, each subject is "*a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject.*"[10] Butler expands upon Althusser's point; she notes "the paradox of how the very possibility of subject formation depends upon a passionate pursuit of a recognition which, within the terms of the religious example, is inseparable from a condemnation."[11] So, too, if she proceeds carefully, Butler's turn to Jewish left messianism in the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno might provide a critical counterpoint to Slavoj Žižek, who while gesturing toward the same authors, nonetheless, champions the powers of "unplugging" that he finds in Paul's Christianity.

Notes

[1]. See Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[2]. See Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2.

[3]. See Stephen K. White, "As the World Turns: Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler," *Polity* 32 (1999): 156, 165.

[4]. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 241.

[5]. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms, Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 273, emphasis added.

[6]. I am glad to see that Mahmood has discovered additional limitations in Butler. Compare this essay with her earlier "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202-235.

[7]. Elizabeth Pritchard, "Agency without Transcendence," *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 3 (November 2006): 263-289.

[8]. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 26-27; emphasis added.

[9]. Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 97.

[10]. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 178, 179.

[11]. "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 12; see also 16.

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Citation: Elizabeth Pritchard. Review of Armour, Ellen T.; Ville, Susan M. St., eds., *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13109

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