

In several of her works, Judith Butler examines the ambiguous nature of identity claims. According to her, it is necessary to claim certain identities, such as “I am a woman,” for political recognition and the effecting of political change. However, it is also necessary to be very cautious and critical of identity claims because of the ways in which identity is involved in reinforcing exclusionary practices. In attempting to find a way in which to reconcile this ambiguous nature, that is to develop a method for navigating between the need for identity and the need to critique that identity, Butler proposes a theory of risk. In this theory, she suggests that the process of identification involves recognizing the potential dangers of identity claims but yet still risking those identities. For her, the category of identity is a necessary risk—one that must be claimed.

In this paper, I will develop Butler’s theory of risk. First, I will examine her understanding of identity, that is, why it is so problematic and why it is so necessary. Then, I will look at Butler’s theory of risk and how it offers a solution to the problem of identity. Finally, I will offer my own understandings of the problems and possibilities of the concept of risk for discussions of identity and identity politics. –

I. Butler’s Theory of Risk
a. Identity as problematic

According to Judith Butler, the concept of identity is problematic. Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault and his tracings of the processes and regulatory practices that have functioned to shape us as individuals and as subjects, she argues that the traditional understanding of identity as a coherent, unifying description attributed to a stable, ready-made subject, fails to recognize the ways in which identity regulates and produces subjects. It is her contention that identity is not just a descriptive feature of experience, but a normative ideal, one that dictates which behaviors are deemed intelligible (that is, recognizable and identifiable) within discourse and therefore legitimate and which behaviors are deemed unintelligible and illegitimate. For her, asserting identity is a task that includes more than unproblematically appealing to certain labels to describe oneself, like “I am a woman” or “I am a lesbian.” Instead, it involves the regulation and production of an ideal identity promoted and controlled by a process of intelligibility.

This process, which Butler calls a process of signification, is regulated by a specific set of rules that all subjects must follow in order for their identity to be recognized within discourse. As a process of signification, Butler understands identity and the specific set of rules to be involved in an elaborate and unending sign-chain in which individuals’ identities have their own history of “interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.” In contrast to a traditional understanding of identity that suggests that identity is a label that gains meaning through the subject it identifies, Butler’s understanding of identity as part of a sign-chain suggests that identity has its own meaning and significance apart from any subject and that, when an individual asserts a certain identity that identity actually shapes and creates the individual and the type of meaning it will be granted within discourse. As a

result of this, individuals do not have complete control over the effects of the identities they claim.

For Butler, this process of signification and the elaborate sign-chain of identity is problematic because the rules and regulations that shape identity and the rich and varied history of its meanings are not readily visible. In fact, these rules are not explicitly stated within discourses on identity, but are instead implicitly accepted, hidden behind the seemingly coherent and a priori 'I' that is understood to be asserted, not produced. In other words, identity is understood to be a natural and absolute truth in order to conceal the actual ways in which it is produced through a complex system of regulatory practices. As Butler states it in *Gender Trouble*, "'I' only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own markings and to naturalize its effects."

As a result of this, when we assume that identity is an unproblematic description of an individual and their behavior and experiences, we fail to see the ways in which identity claims are involved in reinforcing certain rules and (re)producing certain hegemonic ideologies. According to Butler, if we recognize that the actual process of identity has been concealed by this false naturalization, we can begin to question identity, exploring both the ways in which identity is shaped and regulated and how the various ideologies that are perpetuated through the acceptance of certain identities over others.

In exploring and critically questioning identity, Butler focuses, both in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, on the ways in which individuals gain intelligibility through the process of gender identity. It is her contention that the overarching structure (or hegemony) that establishes the rules of gendered intelligibility is based on a system that excludes and abjects all individuals that do not follow the rules of heterosexuality. As she states in *Gender Trouble*, "'intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire." In other words in order to have an intelligibly gendered identity, a subject must follow the supposedly natural patterns of desire and sexual behavior dictated by heterosexuality. Either one must be (1) a male who desires a female or (2) a female who desires a male. No variations are recognized as intelligible. Because certain identities do not follow these established set of rules, they are labeled abject beings who exist in locations that are "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" and represent identities that are illegitimate and unintelligible by the dominant discourse.

Butler argues that this failure to recognize certain identities and the resulting understanding of them as abject beings is more than just an exclusion of these certain identities. In this process of intelligibility and identification, acceptable identities require the existence of these abject beings. Existing on the fringes of normal society, these abject beings serve as the boundaries for subjects, representing the limits of what is normal. They function as examples of what normal subjects are not and serve as a constant threat of what normal subjects, if disobedient and deviant, could become. In the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes the status of these abject beings and their necessity.

The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life. . . This zone of 'uninhabitability' will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.

If we take the example of heterosexuality and its rules, this description is suggesting that subjects are produced through the threat, "the dreaded identification," that they will become what gays and lesbians are—non-subjects. This constant threat works to regulate subjects' behaviors. By looking to the unacceptable behavior of abject beings, that is, their failures to follow the rules of only linking certain genders with certain desires, and their resulting punishments, that is, their banishment to the fringes of representation and the stripping of their power, figured as castration, subjects can learn what boundaries to never cross. If they wish to have intelligible identities and to be properly recognized within discourse, they must follow the rules of heterosexuality, that is, if they are a woman they must desire men and if they are a man they must desire women.

This recognition of identity as a complex process that works to shape and reinforce identities through exclusion and abjection is particularly important for political discourses such as feminism. As suggested by Butler in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, feminist politics are typically based on the model of identity politics, where a singular and unifying identity serves as the foundation of political theorizing and action. In the case of feminism, this foundational identity is woman, where 'woman' becomes a "rallying point for political mobilization" and as such "appear[s] to hold out the promise of unity, solidarity, universality" for women within feminism.

One readily apparent problem with this understanding of woman is that woman has traditionally been defined in very narrow, limiting terms that fail to recognize women's varied and complex experiences of race, class, sexuality that women. Attempting to respond to this, feminists have tried to offer more inclusive definitions that account for all different types of experiences. For Butler, this emphasis on inclusivity does not ameliorate the problem, but in fact aggravates it because all of the descriptions of woman fall short of fully accounting for women's varied experiences. "The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class and able-bodiedness," Butler claims, "invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc' at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete."

According to Butler, this inevitable "etc." indicates that the problem with feminist identity politics is not one that can be solved by changing or expanding the definition of woman. This solution is still based on an unproblematic acceptance of identity as a descriptive foundation. Instead, feminists must examine the ways in which identity is itself a political term that is involved in an elaborate sign-chain process that does not merely describe individuals but creates and regulates them. Feminists must recognize that as a part of a sign-chain process, identity categories are not just willed into existence by

the individuals who claim them but are instead situated within a series of signifiers that are linked together through a historical process that continually recreates itself in different and unexpected ways. As a result of this sign-chain, identity claims can never fully be under the control of those individuals who claim them and they can never provide final or definitive descriptions of subjects.

In understanding the problems with identity and identity politics, feminists must also recognize that not only is an emphasis on establishing a unified, coherent identity 'woman' impossible, but it is also created at the expense of those individuals that do not fit into the system of intelligibility that is perpetuated by the dominant hegemony. Moreover, such an emphasis on "fixing" women into one singular identity of 'woman' or multiple unified categories of 'women,' forecloses the potential for finding future ways in which women, in all of their varied experiences, can relate to one another. In lamenting this, Butler suggests that the understanding that different experiences of race, class or sexuality are merely separate categories to be added to an ever-growing list "produce[s] a greater factionalization, a proliferation of difference without any means of negotiating among them." The presentation of different identities as coherent and discrete "fails to understand that the very subject-positions in question are themselves a kind of 'crossing,' are themselves the lived scene of coalition's difficulty." In doing so, identity politics forecloses the possibility for future, democratic contestations and coalitional alliances between various subordinated groups. In other words, by continuing to perpetuate the idea that identity can fully describe individuals, identity politics is closing off politics to the future possibilities of democratizing new identities.

b. Identity as necessary

It would seem that if identity is so problematic, involving a process of regulation where certain identities are excluded and abjected and others are reinforced in order to perpetuate the dominant hegemony, that identity should be rejected. However, this is not the goal of Butler's critical inquiry of the process of identity. As she argues in "Contingent Foundations," "to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it: rather, it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims." In other words, in her critical examination of identity and the revealing of the processes that create it, Butler does not reject identity, she only wishes to engage it more critically in the hopes of opening it up to new possibilities and meanings. She does not believe identity to be a solely debilitating category but, in fact, feels that "it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used."

Butler offers several reasons for continuing to use categories of identity. First, identity is a necessary category for existence. Looking to the theories of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, Butler argues that it is through the process and regulations of identity that we become represented within discourse and gain the ability to speak as an 'I.' In fact, it is through the processes of identity that we are created as intelligible subjects. The rules and regulations that dictate those identities shape and influence us and our

behaviors. In such a way, to reject identity categories, is to reject ourselves. According to Butler, such a rejection is not possible because “none of us canÁ fully answer to the demand to ‘get over yourself!’” We need identity to exist within discourse.

For Foucault, this need for identity is understood in terms of disciplinary power. The “making of a subject” requires a type of power that “not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject.” In other words, because they actually bring subjects into existence, the various types of power that allow identity to function are necessary. For Althusser, the need for identity is understood in terms of recognition within discourse. According to Butler, Althusser believes that the granting of identity, which he calls naming, is a process of interpellation, where individuals are brought into discourse when (and only when) they are named, hailed or addressed by others. Although these names have the potential to injure those that they name, that is, by calling an individual a name that ridicules them or negatively classifies them, the process of naming is necessary because existence is necessary and strongly desired. Describing her position as an ‘I,’ Butler states:

Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially.

This last quotation indicates how identity, as a requirement for existence, is not just necessary to be recognized, it is desired.

In connection with this first reason for continuing to promote identity, Butler contends that identity is necessary because it is the way in which we are politically recognized. Speaking specifically about feminism and the promotion of the identity ‘woman,’ Butler states that

Surely, that is the way in which representational politics operates, and in this country, lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics. So we agree that demonstrations and radical movements need to make claims in the name of women.

Ultimately, the political system is based on granting rights and privileges to individuals who are recognized within social discourse. Therefore, for Butler, without recognition within political discourse, individuals cannot “become recipients of health care” or “have partnerships legally recognized. . . .” Due to the political structure, the ability to be recognized as individuals with specific identities within political discourse is absolutely necessary in order to effect political change, such as abolishing oppressive policies or extending rights to more individuals.

Recognizing this necessity for identity but also recognizing the harmful and injurious ways in which identity shapes and regulates individuals, Butler’s theory on identity (and the theories of Foucault and Althusser) are left in a dangerous position. According to

these theories, individuals are in the tenuous position of having been formed and brought into social existence by the very powers that injure them and which they wish to resist.

In light of such a situation, several important questions come to mind: How will we reconcile this need for identity with its harmful effects? How will we ensure that the identity claims we politically assert do not reinforce the regulations that have negatively produced us and have created the very need for political assertions? In terms of power and its negative and positive effects, "How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?"

c. Identity as risk

It is in context of all of these questions that Butler discusses the idea of risk. Although she never explicitly theorizes this risk, her repeated discussion of it and frequent appeal to it offers an implicit theory that suggests that identity claims are a necessary risk. Throughout several of her discussions of identity, Butler uses the word risk to describe the way in which to approach identity claims. Because she believes that we must use identity categories, but must also be cautious of the exclusionary practices of these identity categories, she argues that risking identity is our only option. We must risk the claiming of identities regardless of the possible costs.

For Butler, these possible costs are centered on the fact that the identity claims we make are not completely under our control. We can assert them with specific political goals in mind, but the identity categories will take on meanings and purposes that extend beyond our intentions. When we risk claiming an identity, we become vulnerable, leaving ourselves open to the multiple ways in which our identity can be harmful. For example, the identity claims we make may actually exclude other individuals that we wish to include under the identity we have claimed. The identity claims we make could be used against us, allowing us only to be recognized under a negative sign. Or, the identity claims we make now may be ineffective or actually injurious to future generations.

Although Butler recognizes that these possible costs could have very negative effects on those claiming identity, she still wishes to promote identity as a necessary risk because she believes that the ambiguous and risky nature of identity categories allows for a type of radical democracy in which the identities we claim are left open and continuously challenged and reassessed for future (and possibly better) use. By leaving them open, categories can be more flexible and able to respond effectively to critique.

This critique, which Butler calls a "democratizing contestation," is a process in which "exclusionary conditions of their [identity categories] production are perpetually reworked (even though they may never be fully overcome) in the direction of a more complex coalitional framework." The goal of this coalitional framework is to account more effectively for differences and to bring individuals together through an exploration

of the various ways in which their experiences intersect at crossroads (a la Gloria Anzualdua).

Ultimately for Butler, the goal of risking identity is to ensure that sites of identity, such as “woman” or “queer,” are never promoted as final or totalized. Instead, they are understood to be provisional identities, ones that temporarily serve to assert certain claims but are involved in a constant tension with the dangerous potentials of identity. As Butler states it in *Bodies That Matter*, “the necessary error [or risk] of identity (Spivak’s term) will always be in tension with the democratic contestation of the term. . . .” Due to this tension, identity claims are under a constant critique, one that allows for them consistently to be reconfigured and redeployed so that they will not foreclose future political discussions. Using the example of the identity “queer,” Butler argues that in order for identity to remain an open category, those who claim the identity “queer” must let it [queer] be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments.

In offering this theory of risk, Butler is responding to the questions that were posed earlier in this paper. To the question: “How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose,” Butler responds that we don’t. It is not possible for us to foresee all of the ways in which the identities we assert will be used. To deal with such uncertainty, we must risk identity, that is, we must make identity claims, but we must consistently critique those claims and leave them open for new reconfigurations and meanings.

II. An Assessment of Butler’s Project and Its Implications

Butler’s project of examining identity categories and her theory of risk are compelling and valuable because they present both an effective way in which to understand the complexities and problems of identity and they suggest politically fruitful ways in which to navigate the ambiguities and vulnerabilities of identity claims and their risks. In presenting identity as a risk, Butler offers an incredibly rich method for describing how individuals do relate and prescribing how individuals should relate to their claims of identity.

First, by suggesting that identity claims involve risk, Butler is providing an accurate description of the tenuous process of identity formation. As mentioned earlier, identity claims are situated within a sign-chain in which their meanings and significations have different and unpredictable histories. Therefore, identity is precarious because there is no way in which to fully predict or fully describe what an identity can come to mean in any situation. Butler’s emphasis on identity as a risk serves to highlight this dangerous, yet significant element of identity. It recognizes that we are no longer able to make claims with total confidence and certainty because those claims

can be exclusive and are beyond our control. It also recognizes that identity claims are not unproblematic assertions that can easily be made. Instead, they are filled with complexity and uncertainty.

Second, Butler's theory of risk also provides for a good prescription, indicating how to reconcile the need for identity claims with the dangerous implications of those identity claims. In emphasizing risk, Butler suggests that the only method for dealing with the tenuous position of identity claims is to recognize the dangers involved in identity claims and still assert them. In this way, the understanding that identity is a risk does not just offer a description of identities being risky because they are complicated and uncertain, it also offers advice on how best to approach these problematic identity claims. Specifically, it suggests that we must make identity claims even though we recognize that these claims can gain negative meanings that exclude and abject or these claims can be rendered obsolete by future generations. Ultimately, making identity claims is a risk because individuals must situate themselves in the process of identification and become involved in the process of critique and democratic contestation, where identities are always being investigated for new meanings and significations.

In addition to effectively describing and prescribing identity, Butler's theory of risk allows for a very flexible understanding of identity—one that accounts for a variety of different experiences— and a flexible understanding of the relationships and strands of connection that exist between different individuals. This flexible and critical model of identity extends the solution to the problem of exclusion among identity politics beyond the simple and continuous enumeration of different identities to the complicated and detailed process of critically examining different experiences to find the locations in which these different experiences intersect and relate.

In the case of feminism and the term "woman," this more flexible understanding of identity enables feminists to critically examine the ways in which women are diverse without just merely listing off the varying levels of that difference, such as race, class, sexual preference, age, by viewing woman as an open-ended "permanent site of contest." As a site of contest, the identity "woman" is flexible and open to how experiences of race and gender, for example, intersect and influence each other. As a result, "woman" is recognized to be more than the unproblematic foundation for a feminist identity politics. It is, itself, political and therefore must be critically explored.

For all of these reasons mentioned above, Butler's project of risking identity is beneficial. However, for me, her project still raises some troubling questions. To begin with, in responding to the ambiguous status of identity categories by contending that we must risk identity and allow it to undergo democratic contestation, Butler places identity in a precarious position.

She does not guarantee that certain identities will never be injurious or that they will ever be helpful. Nor does she suggest that the rules and regulations that dictate which identities are intelligible and which are not will ever be abolished. With such an

uncertain future, the possibility for feelings of frustration and hopelessness exist. This raises two important questions: (1) Is it really enough to say that we must risk identity? (2) Is Butler's project of risk compelling enough to provide the hope that we need in order to continue to engage in this process of risk? In asking these questions, the intent is not to discount Butler's project, but to recognize that it is itself a risk. In engaging with Butler's theory of risk we risk becoming filled with despair and frustration.

In connection with this, another set of questions that are raised by Butler's project involve the specifics of theorizing risk. When Butler implores us to risk identity, what does this actually mean? What are the implications of risk? Although Butler frequently uses the word risk or expresses ideas of risk, she never specifically engages with the term by exploring exactly what risking identity claims mean or what the word risk could imply.

For me, these questions point to several different areas in which further discussion and elaboration could strengthen Butler's position. The first area concerns Butler's promotion of the idea of strategic provisionality. She promotes this strategic provisionality as being different than strategic essentialism. However, in examining this provisionality and its suggestion that we risk claiming identities in order to be politically recognized or in order to speak as an 'I,' I wonder how different this is from those who support strategic essentialism and its suggestion that we claim identities and provide essential definitions of an identity in order to critically critique the system or in order to be represented in that system. Butler is herself sympathetic to strategic essentialism, but she emphasizes that it is not her position. For me, this distinction between essentialism and provisionality is not clear enough. Both positions suggest that identity must be risked for strategic reasons and that identities are not fully descriptive, but temporary and are used in critical ways. In order to clarify and strengthen her position, Butler needs to specifically discuss the ways in which her project of strategic provisionality differs from strategic essentialism.

A second area that needs to be further developed is that of the effects of risk. As mentioned above, risk can lead to despair and frustration. In addition to this, risk can also be used as a way to excuse one's actions or assertions. Because risking identity is so uncertain and unpredictable, the danger is that one could use this risk as a way to justify any behavior. Discussing the risk of essence in *Men in Feminism*, Peggy Kamuf suggests that the logic of risk implies that "if you fall into 'essence' you can always say it was an accident." In light of this, I would like to know what type of accountability Butler suggests in her project. I think that Butler's idea of risk is exciting and compelling, but it must include an examination of the ways in which individuals have at least some responsibility in the risks that they take.

A third and final area that needs to be further examined, is that of the actual process of risk. In using the word risk, Butler sets it up as the only choice for individuals. In such a way, the implications are that the risking of identity is a necessary error and that risk is a negative but essential part of identity. Risk is used to describe a negative process that must be undertaken in order to achieve the positive effects of a more flexible and

open category of identity. To this understanding of risk I ask: What are the positive elements of the process of risk? In what ways can we understand the actual process of risk to be more than a necessary error?

In asking these questions, I am suggesting that a more careful analysis of risk than the one given by Butler is needed. Ultimately, Butler's project of examining the process of identity and its risks is a very important project. It provides us with an effective method for understanding identity and its political implications. However, it is important that we further develop the theory of risk, so that it does not merely refer to risk as something that must be done, but looks at risk as a complicated process with a number of implications and effects for discussions of identity.

Perhaps for me, the most important result of a more detailed investigation of risk could be the recognition that Butler's claims for identity involve both faith and hope. When we risk a certain identity, we express a certain amount of hope that our identity claim will prove to be helpful and politically beneficial. Without this hope, there would be no reason for us to risk making an identity claim. Additionally, when we risk identity, we are involved in a process of faith. By claiming certain identities, we actually take a leap of faith, one in which we have trust and hope that these certain identities will provide us with effective ways in which to challenge and reverse the negative effects of identity categories. In recognizing the importance of faith and hope to the process of identity and the challenging of identity, the possibility for demonstrating how the political and religious and ethical realms intersect and connect in discussions of identity exists. For, the terms faith and hope both have deep religious and ethical meanings.

I think that a potentially fruitful direction for this theory of risk is to further develop the religious and ethical implications of identity claims. Not only would such an investigation provide for a deeper and more complex understanding of the risk of identity, but it would also provide for a specific example of how discussions of religion and ethics can and do make important contributions to current discussions about identity and identity politics.

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