

In 1999, Judith Butler reflected upon the surprising impact of her book, *Gender Trouble*. “As I wrote it,” she explained, “I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as I understood the text to be part of feminism itself” (1999, vii). This “embattled and oppositional relation,” which has continued in her work since *Gender Trouble*, involves a shifting of traditional feminism from an identity politics to a radically democratic politics.

In promoting this shift, Butler is arguing for a feminism that critiques itself. It is her contention that the radical commitment to simultaneously asserting and interrogating one’s political claims is crucial for feminism. In contrast to the tendency among many feminists to work for the resolution of the various tensions within feminism, Butler understands the continued interrogation and nonresolution of these tensions to be the source of life and vitality for the movement. They serve as the groundless ground of feminism as radical democracy.

Central to her project of radical democracy is the understanding that feminist politics involves risk. Throughout her work in *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, *Feminist Contentions and Contingency*, *Hegemony and Universality*, Butler argues that risk offers a fitting description of and prescription for the theory and practice of feminist politics.

In this presentation, I wish to discuss the usefulness for feminism of Butler’s project of radical democracy as it is articulated through her theory of risk. This discussion will begin with an examination of both Butler’s critique of feminism as identity politics and her promotion of feminism as radically democratic politics. I will frame this discussion in terms of Butler’s understanding of the riskiness of politics and the risking of politics. Then, I will raise some important questions that point to the need for a further exploration of both risk and the process/practice of radical democracy. Finally, I will address these questions— by offering some thoughts on the connection between risk and tragedy. It is my contention that thinking about risk in terms of its potentially tragic consequences enables us to more effectively understand the practice of radical democracy.

I. Judith Butler and the politics of risk

a. Risky Politics

I will begin my discussion of Butler’s project with her understanding of the riskiness of politics. According to Butler, for the most part, feminism is an identity politics, one in which the identity of “woman” serves as the subject of feminism, and as such, is understood to be the foundation of the movement. All political and theoretical feminist projects are done in the name of woman and by women.

Over the past twenty years, many theorists have challenged the notion of “woman”, arguing that this identity has often been defined in very narrow and limiting terms that fail to recognize women’s varied and complex experiences. In offering these

challenges, these theorists have pushed for more inclusive definitions of women—ones that address issues of race, class, and sexual preference, not just gender.

In her own understanding of the problem of identity, Butler argues that these added definitions continue to fall short of fully accounting for women's varied experiences. "The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class and ablebodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list...[and] invariably fail to be complete" (Gender Trouble, 143).

For Butler, this embarrassed etc. and failure to be complete indicates that the problem with the identity "woman" 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 foundational description of a stable feminist subject. It assumes that subjects will identify themselves into existence for the purpose of describing themselves and that these identities serve to incorporate subjects' varied experiences into one unifying term—in the case of feminism, woman.

Butler strongly refutes this, arguing that individuals do not create identities, but assume them, and in doing so, enter midstream into the process of identity and subject formation, being shaped by the meanings the identity has had within discourse. Because identity categories have their own history of meanings apart from us, "we never fully own" the identities that we claim. And, because identity is situated within an historical process, one that is constantly taking on new meanings and significations, identity is never fixed or fully complete. ! In this way, descriptions of woman that involve the enumeration of different, discrete categories, such as race, class, sexual preference, can never fully account for the continually changing ways in which identity is being (and will be) configured.

For Butler, the problem with identity is not just that it can never provide final descriptions of individuals or that it is politicized category. The problem is also that the rules and regulations that shape identity and the varied history of its meanings are not readily visible. Ø In the case of the identity of "woman", its promotion as a unifying, definitive description conceals both how women's behavior is actually regulated and the ways in which identity claims are involved in reinforcing certain rules and (re) producing certain hegemonic ideologies. Moreover, it conceals the fact that identity is a complicated, unpredictable process, one that does not produce coherent, discrete identities, but provisional ones that serve as the convergence point for a number of different meanings. Such an emphasis on 'fixing' women into one singular identity of 'woman' or multiple unified categories of 'women,' "produce[s] a greater factionalization, a proliferation of differences without any means of negotiating among them" (1993, 115).

In highlighting these problems with feminism, Butler is challenging three main feminist assumptions about the nature and practice of politics: (1) feminism requires a stable subject (2) that can stand outside of power and (3) that serves as the unproblematic foundation of its politics. These assumptions suggest that, as the subjects of feminism, women stand as ready-made, "instrumental actor[s]" (1995, 46-47) who exist prior to

and outside of the dominant systems that they wish to critique. These assumptions also suggest that feminism is a politics that is predicated on a clear, unproblematic subject. Without this type of subject as its foundation, feminism is understood to be impossible.

However, for Butler, this stable, unproblematic subject is a “phantasmatic construction” (1990, 142), one that is promoted in order to cover over the “political construction and regulation of the subject...” (1995, 47). For this reason, there is no possibility for standing before or outside of power. Subjects are always already implicated in the power that they wish to resist and transform. In the case of feminism and its identity politics, the fact that “woman” is constructed in and through the dominant systems of power that it wishes to resist and transform, reveals that feminism politics is very risky.

In claiming that it is risky, Butler is not suggesting that feminist politics is not possible. Instead, she is identifying her own work as participating in the “tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke a critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs” (1999, vii). In doing so, she is arguing for the importance of self-critique within feminism. Central to this self-critique is the examination of the subject, that is, how it is constructed through power and how that power is concealed. In offering this self-critique, Butler is not wishing to reject the subject altogether. Instead, this critique is a rejection of a particular understanding of the subject, one that offers “a pristine notion of [it], derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always and only opposed to power” (1993, 117).

Through this process of self-critique, Butler hopes to shift the focus of feminism and change the very nature of its theory and practice. This new configuration of politics would no longer be an identity politics, one that focuses on the identity of woman as its foundation. It would be a radically democratic politics, one that focuses on the importance of keeping the terms of politics, including “woman,” open for critique and for reworking in possibly more democratic and inclusive ways. This shift in politics also represents a shift in Butler’s use of the notion of risk, from risky politics to risking politics. In promoting feminism as a radical democracy, Butler wishes to emphasize the importance of engaging in politics, regardless of its risks. She believes that it is through this process of risking that feminists are able to transform their politics.

b. Risking Politics

Butler emphasizes the importance of risking politics in three key ways: In a feminist radical democracy, (1) all claims must be left open and recognized as ultimately unrealizable (2) in order to allow for a perpetual contestation of the terms of democracy. (3) This contestation does not point to the impossibility of politics, but serves as the source of its future transformation.

At the heart of Butler’s understanding of radical democracy is the idea of a radical openness. This radical openness involves the recognition that feminist politics is never “commensurate with any of its ‘realizations’” (2000a, 161). In promoting this radical

openness, Butler is challenging the traditional goal of feminist politics. For her, the goal should not be to find the answer or the way in which to do politics, but to “defer realization permanently” (2000a, 161) in order to safeguard the continued openness of politics.

To explain this concept of radical openness, Butler contrasts it with the fully fixed nature of feminism as identity politics and its assumption that politics must be grounded in some foundation and normative vision. For Butler, this assumption limits the effectiveness of politics and forecloses the possibility for thinking of politics within the process of action. In the case of the identity of “woman”, its presentation as a stable subject prior to politics, assumes that its terms are already fixed and cannot be contested. Such an understanding “produces coherence at the cost of [women’s] complexity” (1993, 115). This leads to the questions: What is the impetus for continuing to struggle for transformation if all of the terms have already been set? And, how can we find connections between women, when we only understand them as discrete and separate subjects?

Butler’s project of radical democracy is about more than just the continued openness of politics, however. Her project is also about a second element, the perpetual questioning and exploring of terms within politics that that openness allows. Whereas Butler’s first element focuses on the safeguarding of openness and the ultimate unrealizability of democracy, this second element focuses on the safeguarding of questioning both politics and the process of working towards the realization of democracy. In this way, Butler understands feminist radical democracy to be involved in a “critical relationship to ‘realization’ itself” (2000b, 268), one in which feminists keep certain questions in mind, even as they are working towards the realization of their goals. These questions include, “how ought such ideals to be realized, if they are to be realized? Through what means, and at what price? Do these ideals justify any and all means of implementation” (2000b, 268)?

According to Butler, these questions do not suggest that feminist politics, or any of its terms, are wholly ineffective and should be rejected. Instead, they suggest that wherever these terms are used, “there will also be a foundering, a contestation. That such foundations exist only to be put into question is, as it were, the permanent risk of the process of democratization” (1995, 51). For Butler, this permanent risk indicates that the process of contestation and radical openness is the source of transformation for feminist politics.

The “constant rifting” that this type of politics supports, has important consequences for feminism. First, it opens up the political terms of feminism, releasing them “into a future of multiple significations” and giving them “play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear” (1995, 50). This enables feminists to explore other possibilities for their politics. Second, this constant rifting provides feminists with “a way to both occupy” feminist terms, such as the identity woman, “and to subject them to a democratizing contestation in which the exclusionary conditions of their production are perpetually reworked (even though they can never fully be overcome) in the direction of a more

complex coalitional framework” (1993, 115). This emphasis on working for coalitional frameworks that are more complex and less exclusive, allows for a feminist politic in which the differences among women are taken seriously and engaged with. Finally, this constant rifting produces a vitality that “open[s] up new fields of possibility and...instil[ls] hope where a sense of futility is always threatening to close down political thinking altogether” (2000a, 162). For Butler, radical democracy invigorates the politics of feminism. It provides it with a much-needed critical edge, one that does not reduce feminist theories and practices to an identity politics and its ready-made s’ubject, woman.

II. An Assessment of Judith Butler’s Project of Radical Democracy

Butler’s radically democratic project is compelling and valuable for a number of different reasons. First, her shift from feminism as an identity politics to feminism as a radically democratic politics results in the reshaping of feminism. This reshaping moves feminist politics beyond the debilitating question of how to develop a coherent definition of “woman” that addresses all of the different experiences of women.

Second, Butler’s refusal to assume the givenness of any its terms, points to the complexity of politics. Her flexible and critical model of identity allows Butler to extend 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 those different experiences intersect and relate. e

But, even though Butler’s project is valuable, it still leaves us with some troubling questions. Perhaps the most important question to ask of Butler’s project is the most basic one: Is it enough? Does Butler’s radical democracy provide us with a substantial enough vision, one that can encourage and sustain political thought and action?

Butler’s project is based on the risking of politics and the safeguarding of a radical openness, one that allows for the constant questioning of its terms. But, she never discusses what exactly it means to engage in the risking of politics. How exactly do we keep our political terms open? What does the difficult work of perpetual contestation look like?

These questions can be raised on three different levels. First, the notion of radical democracy, with its emphasis on risk, places politics in a tenuous and fragile position. According to Butler, there are no guarantees that feminist politics will result in a better, more democratic future. Such an understanding can lead to frustration and hopelessness. Is it really enough to say that we need to keep our politics open? Is Butler’s project compelling enough to provide the hope that feminists need in order to continue to engage in politics? In fact, how can her project sustain feminists?

Second, the radical openness of Butler’s project leaves us without any specific content. For Fiona Webster, in her article, “The Politics of Sex and Gender: Benhabib and Butler

Debate Subjectivity,” it becomes a significant problem within feminist politics if “woman” is viewed only as an empty sign. “[W]hat does this effectively mean for the political representation by the feminist movement of “women” and “women’s concerns,” Webster asks. Does this suggest that feminists “invest [woman] with whatever meaning we choose at any given time” (Webster 2000, 15)? To this, I would add my own concern about responsibility to these claims. If politics is so radically open, how do we have accountability to it? And, through what process are we able to commit to these fluid terms?

Third, Butler’s description of radical democracy points to a specific process through which feminists could work for radical openness and better futures. Envisioning this openness as one in which differences between women are taken seriously and not reduced to “an unthinkable fetish of alterity” (1995a, 140), Butler recognizes the need for the difficult labor of, what she calls, “cultural translation.” She describes this translation as the hard work of developing “forms of differentiation which lead to fundamentally more capacious, generous, and ‘unthreatened’ bearings of the self in the midst of community” (1995a, 140). However, even though she offers this description, Butler rarely goes beyond it to describe, more specifically, what this cultural translation entails.

III. Conclusion

In asking all of these questions to Butler and her project, I am suggesting that a more careful analysis of feminism as radical democracy than the one given by Butler is needed. It is not enough to say that radical openness and contestation is something that we must do and leave it at that. We need to carefully examine the process of radical democracy and its relationship to risk. This examination should begin with a discussion of the consequences of feminist politics. In particular, I am thinking of the harmful and potentially tragic consequences that can occur when political claims are not risked or when these claims fail to succeed. Connecting risk with this idea of tragedy enables us to think about risk and radical democracy as more than a postmodern game of fluctuating, ungrounded politics. Moreover, it allows us to provide some substance to Butler’s own thin account of risk.

In terms of a feminist radical democracy, tragedy can be understood in two important ways. First, tragedy is the failure to risk politics. It is the act of succumbing to the overwhelming despair that our current political situation engenders. As Cornel West states in “Restoring Hope,” “To live is to wrestle with despair...we know that the evidence does not look good. The dominant tendencies of our day are unregulated global capitalism, racial balkanization, social breakdown, and individual depression” (West, xii). Offering a similar description in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon Welch suggests that this type of tragic descent into despair leads to death—not necessarily physical death, but “the death of the imagination [and] the death of the ability to care” (Welch, 20). These very real and tragic consequences demonstrate that risking politics is not something that we choose to do, it is something that we must do in order to survive.

But, tragedy is not limited to the failure to risk politics. It is also an important part of the process of politics. Because the riskiness of radical democracy does not allow for certainty or guarantees, there is always the possibility that feminist politics will not be successful. In fact, as Welch argues, the uncertainty and tenuousness of feminist politics suggests that “we cannot imagine how we will win”; that “there are...no particular strategies that can convincingly guarantee that the many forces and structures of exploitation can be stopped” and that “we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetimes” (Welch, 19-20). A second understanding of tragedy involves the recognition that feminism might not always be successful in achieving its goals and that its politics might have some unexpected (and damaging) results.

If we connect risk to these two forms of tragedy, we can begin to develop a more substantial understanding of risk and radical democracy. Such an understanding provides us with some compelling reasons for why risk is an effective description of and prescription for feminist politics. But, this examination of the connection between tragedy and risk must not be limited to descriptions of that tragedy. In order to make these notions of risk and radical democracy useful for feminism, we must also explore the process of/ risking politics in the face of potential tragedy. What does it mean to continue to engage in feminism regardless of the risks or consequences?

In my mind, a response to this question should include an exploration of the qualities that feminist must possess in order to cope with the despair and uncertainty that is present in the political situation. Two such qualities are courage and strength. In closing, I would like to suggest that an examination and redefinition of courage and strength from a feminist perspective could provide us with some valuable clues for understanding what it means to risk feminist politics.

In her article, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” Bernice Johnson Reagon offers an excellent description of the strength and courage that is needed for feminists as they work through the pain and difficulty involved in coalition building and forming connections across differences. As they engage in this work, feminists are constantly aware of the potentially tragic consequences of their action (or inaction). They recognize that coalition building is dangerous work that makes you “feel as if [you’re] gonna keel over any minute and die” (Reagon 1983, 356). It requires strength and courage because these coalitions are not nurturing and supportive places that offer a home where you can always be with people that think and act like you. “You don’t go into coalition because you just like it,” Reagon argues. “The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure out to stay alive” (Reagon 1983, 356-357).

This last sentence indicates some specific ways strength and courage can be redefined for a feminist radical democracy. First, both courage and strength are not skills developed by individuals and employed on the individual level. Instead, they are skills that are created within and through communities. In discussing the origins of courage

and strength for feminists, Susan Bickford claims: “Our strength may come from those around whom we grew up, those who taught us our racial heritage, incited our religious passions...As we live on, our strength may come from others discovered or created as an ‘us,’ those whom we come to share an ethics, a politics, a set of practices” (Bickford 1997, 119). In contrast to the traditional notion of courage as involving the heroic individual, Bickford’s reformulation of courage suggests that it involves communities. In the case of Butler’s radical democracy and the riskiness of politics, Bickford’s reformulation suggests that courage is developed within feminist communities and that the process of radical democracy cannot be limited to the work of solitary individuals.

Second, within a feminist understanding, courage and strength are not necessarily about the willingness to risk death and become a martyr for one’s politics. In contrast, they are about “the willingness to sustain life...to fight for freedom as bearers of life...” (Sparks 1997, 90), And, to risk the uncertainties of politics in order to transform the world and its dominant systems of power. For Reagan, this courage to live and survive is the ultimate goal of politics: “None of this matters at all very much if you die Qtomorrow... It only matters if you make a commitment to be around for another fifty or more years...What would you be like if you had white hair and had not given up your principles? It might be wise as you deal with coalition efforts to think about [that] possibility” (Reagon 1983, 361).

When we apply these ideas of tragedy, courage and strength to Butler’s project of radical democracy, the result is a much more effective feminist politics. And, if these ideas are explored further, they could help to create a political vision that encourages and sustains a transformative feminism.