

Can Queer Theory Radicalize “The

by Susan Driver

Le désir lesbien juxtaposé à celui d'être mère peut servir de point de départ pour le questionnement des théories sexuelles

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radicales plus ouvertes concernant la représentation maternelle.

That's one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick 8)

Questions of desire have become forefronted in “queer” theory and practice, giving rise to bold discursive displays of sexual passion and pleasure which defy the staid pragmatism of conventional political thinking. Such an embodied process risks exposing the instabilities of the desiring self within public spaces. Yet it is precisely through the courage to act in the face of vulnerability that the field of politics will open up to those who cannot survive the moral imperative to assume a coherent and normative identity. Paradoxically, it seems a very serious and difficult project to entertain the playful and perverse without shunning social responsibilities. This tension is magnified in a cultural context where a commitment to social values has become associated with the denial and denigration of the erotic body. The creativity of AIDS activism has underscored how crucial it is to build a politics at the conjunction where desire meets analysis and practice. While the deadly stakes of thinking and acting in an honest relation to our sexualities have never been so eloquently articulated as they are in contemporary lesbian and gay texts, we need to start thinking and writing about libidinal excesses in relation to a broader spectrum of social subjects.

This article will focus on the tricky intersection of lesbian desire and motherhood, in order to raise some critical questions around how radical sexual theories might be useful in opening up the prudish parameters of mater-

nal representation. Simultaneously, the biases within “critically queer”¹ theory which valorize those individuals who have disinvested from the family romance, and have unhinged their emotional and sexual lives from any single social location, will be opened up for discussion. What is up for grabs is the question of whether or not the maternal subject is once again assigned to the margins of desire.

Where to locate “the mother” in Judith Butler's queer citations?

There is a tension in poststructuralist theory between the promise of an unlimited expansion of sexual categories and an implicit privileging of “masculine” subject positions. In order to support this contentious statement, I am going to focus on the treatment of maternal subjectivity in the work of a thinker who has chosen to draw attention to the semiotic constitution of gender. Judith Butler's writings offer unique insights into the contingency and mobility of all aspects of identity. But although she challenges the foundations of many forms of gender, racial, and sexual reification, I am troubled by the insidious return in her work of a division between the sexual subject who transgresses social taboos and codes and “the mother” who stands outside such transformative possibilities. Not surprisingly, depictions of lesbian fantasy and desire are either abstracted from reproductive and familial relations, or staged as a resistance to their prohibitive structures. What gets reinscribed is a dichotomy between the lesbian outlaw who forsakes familial security and the procreative woman who embodies a relatively “straight” relation to cultural norms. This suggests that some unexamined assumptions of sexual difference, which support the disassociation of the sexual from the maternal, have become unwittingly reiterated by one of the most vigilant critics of essentialism.

For Butler psychoanalysis offers a nuanced reading of the unconscious dimensions of subjectivity. Emphasizing the unruly configurations of identification and desire, rather than coherent alignments of gender identity and sexual object, Butler provides a way of respecting the irreducibility of psychic differences. Psychoanalysis becomes an analytic tool for understanding linguistic processes of displacement and repetition rather than a teleological theory of stages. Butler uses psychoanalysis as method of reading psychic contingency rather than a conceptual paradigm. Against the ontological claims of psychoanalysis, Butler counterpoises insights from deconstruction, speech act theory, and discourse analysis to think critically about processes of citation, parody, and performativity within language. This complicates her

Mother's" Body?

understanding of gender reproduction such that no set of binary terms can be taken for granted. Butler challenges the paternal values of oedipal models, and she equally repudiates feminist fixations on the pre-oedipal maternal. By exposing the signifying practices behind all theories

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of the natural body, Butler challenges truth claims about reproductive sexuality used to anchor women's identities. Her nuanced analysis of philosophical equations of maternal receptivity with an eternal female substance seems a positive moment in the recasting of maternal metaphors within contemporary thought. The problem arises when no new images of motherhood are projected, leaving a void in the symbolic landscape. The fact that the "mother" has often come to represent a lack of desire and erotic agency cannot easily be overcome. By turning directly to a discussion of sexuality without undertaking an analysis of the asymmetrical weight of maternal and paternal as cultural and social institutions, Butler suppresses an analysis of why some genders are more easily refracted, theatricalized, and hyperbolized than others. Effectively changing the dense symbolic meanings that encase "the mother" in eternal values may require a sustained effort to resignify, theorize, and provide the social conditions for non-exclusive mothering relations. Only such an extensive project would enable desiring selves to take on aspects of motherhood without becoming severed from erotic life.

Butler's attention seems more directed to reconceiving the imaginary conditions through which the phallus is transferred and reconfigured in lesbian fantasy. It is in the passages of her text where Butler disperses erotic signifiers that the alterity of lesbian fantasy is most creatively explored:

the phallus is but one signifier among others in the course of lesbian exchange, neither the originating signifier nor the unspeakable outside. The phallus will thus always operate as both veil and confession, a deflection from an erotogenicity that includes and exceeds the phallus, and exposure of a desire which attests to a morphological transgression and, hence,

to the instability of the imaginary boundaries of sex. (Butler 87-88)

Certainly Butler's "lesbian phallus" is a radical concept that disrupts the heterosexism of psychoanalysis, but it does not upset the symbolic division between a complex lesbian desire and the passive maternal body. While she alludes to contradictory imaginary constellations, Butler pays little attention to the specificity of "feminine" morphologies as a way of challenging the primacy of phallic metaphors. In the light of her one-sided focus on the desiring body without considering its exclusionary tendencies, the blindspots of Butler's project become clear. Butler's rejection of maternal feminisms now seems less motivated by a desire to include the "the mother" in a more pleasurable and innovative range of psychic and social relations, than by a desire to erase her figure from lesbian desire altogether.

Butler shifts away from issues of gender identity and development to discursive processes that have no single point of reference, and yet she makes no effort to read the mother differently. While Butler rejects the nostalgic presentation of motherhood within psychoanalytic frameworks, she offers no indication of how to theorize the sexuality of a lesbian subject who is also maternally situated. In such an awkward intersection that crosses some of the most entrenched and normalizing institutions, it is undoubtedly difficult to mobilize lesbian mothering as a mode of gender subversion. Since the notion of motherhood is deeply embedded in associations with the social, familial, and psychological functions of heterosexual procreation, it is one of the most difficult notions to reappropriate for a "queer" sexual politics. Maternity seems bound to universal beliefs and knowledges that make it difficult to recognize its culturally diverse realities. Ways of thinking about maternity often conceal its discursive constitution and in this sense it seems more advantageous to expel it from "queer" sites rather than to undertake the arduous process of multiplying its social and subjective meanings.

The subtlety of Butler's approach is very appealing, yet as I look in her work for a range of subjects who exemplify those troubling and multi-layered identifications that disrupt heterosexual norms I find a predominance of butch/femme lesbian, cross-dressing gay, and phallicized dyke figures, but alas, nothing in the way of a "queer" maternal. Why are there so few indications of how lesbian subjects might take on the role of mother with a performative motility that allows for the dialogical variance evoked by the "lesbian phallus"? Is it that only certain psychosocial beings are susceptible to the vagaries of libidinal

contradiction? Or is this a clear case of authorial desire that has no access to alternative feminine imaginaries? My suspicion is that it reveals a much more systemic incapacity to overcome conventional views of motherhood, and more specifically, that this view pervades even the most adventurous deconstructions of identity.

The obstacles to transforming fantasies and social practices of motherhood seem to call for a more sustained analysis of gendered kinship structures and the hegemonic powers that resist local intervention. The only discussion Butler gives of alternative kinship relations are those of an all-male gay drag community where an inventive reworking of the emotional bonds and caretaking roles traditionally aligned with families of origin are displaced onto loosely organized and non-biological families of choice. Her discussion of the resignification in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, of key terms such as "house" and "mother" hints at the queering of family life:

These men "mother" one another, "house" one another, "rear" one another, and the resignification of the family through these terms is not a vain or useless imitation, but the social and discursive building of community, a community that binds, cares, teaches, that shelters and enables. (Butler 137)

I find it interesting that Butler comments on affirmative features of gay family life in an exclusively male setting where there is no evidence of children or child care. Does this leave the realm of reproductive relations outside the radical vision of queer cultures? Is this a replication of gender asymmetries through which masculine desires, practices, and spaces are theoretically valorized and politically strategized?

Signs of change

Refiguring motherhood as a potentially audacious and permeable site of desire may require a conscientious effort to articulate heterogeneity in the subjective meanings and social practices of lesbian mothers. To unleash the hybridity of mothering so that its cultural values and sexual fantasies find no common centre would promote a queer politics that does not disregard its social importance. In sum, the very methods of reading and writing for differences that Butler elaborates, might be productive in opening up the category of "the maternal." In Butler's words: "How might such socially saturated domains of exclusion be recast from their status as 'constitutive' to beings who might be said to matter?" (Butler 189). The point is not to collapse queer desire and motherhood, but to put them into a productive dialogue so that the fluidity and partiality of sexual relations and identities can intersect with those solidly demarcated areas of maternal love and responsibility which have come to symbolize the totality of a mother's life. Only then will one of the most oppressive and fetishized aspects of gender be opened up to the

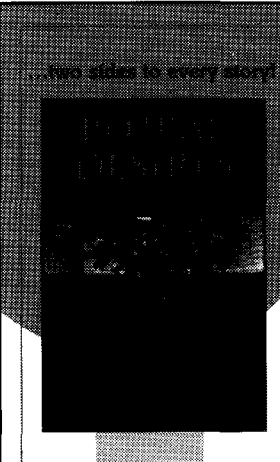
vicissitudes of desire that have become the soul of queer politics. I feel hopeful that there are no intrinsic limits to the range of subjects capable of "performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the desexualization of the lesbian" (Butler 233).

Susan Driver is a Ph.D. student in Social and Political Thought at York University.

¹This is the title of a chapter in Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.

References

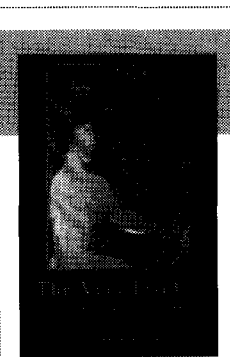
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