



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Loizidou, Elena (2008) The body figural and material in the work of Judith Butler. *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 28 , pp. 29-51. ISSN 1320-0968.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/872/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

**Birkbeck ePrints: an open access repository of the  
research output of Birkbeck College**

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk>

---

**Loizidou, Elena. The body figural and material in  
the work of Judith Butler. *Australian Feminist Law  
Journal* 28. (2008): 29-51.**

---

This is an exact copy of an article published in *Australian Feminist Law  
Journal* (ISSN 1320-0968)

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual  
property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should  
comply with the relevant law.

Citation for this version:

Loizidou, Elena (2008) The body figural and material in the work of Judith  
Butler

London: Birkbeck ePrints. Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/872>

Citation for publisher's version:

Loizidou, Elena (2008) The body figural and material in the work of Judith  
Butler. *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 28: 29-51.

---

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk>

Contact Birkbeck ePrints at [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk)

---

## THE BODY FIGURAL AND MATERIAL IN THE WORK OF JUDITH BUTLER

*Elena Loizidou*<sup>1</sup>

In the moment in which I say “I”, I am not only citing the pronominal place of the “I” in language, but I am at once attesting to, and taking distance from, a primary impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an “I”, a being which has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, spoken to and spoken around, and these impressions are all signs of a certain kind, signs that register at the level of my formation, signs that are part of language irreducible to vocalization.<sup>2</sup>

Althusser in ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’<sup>3</sup> explains how the subject is a product of ideology. ‘Ideology...’ he writes, ‘...interpellates [or, hails] individuals into subjects’.<sup>4</sup> He uses an example from everyday life to demonstrate how this comes about. He asks us to imagine a particular scene. The scene is set on the street. A police officer shouts at a passer-by, ‘Hey, you there!’.<sup>5</sup> The passer-by turns around. Althusser tells us that, ‘[by] this mere one hundred-and eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject’.<sup>6</sup> The turning around is as a moment of recognition. A moment whereby the passer-by ‘has recognised that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was really he who was hailed” (and not someone else)’.<sup>7</sup> By turning around (an act of recognition) the passer-by (the concrete individual) takes his position in the world as a subject (abstraction). For Althusser this ‘concrete’ example, this ‘little theoretical theatre’<sup>8</sup> is merely a demonstration of his wider point that ‘ideology has always already interpellated individuals as subjects...that individuals are always already subjects’.<sup>9</sup> Interpellation or the process of subjectification (of the turning of individuals into subjects) plays a central role in Althusser’s understanding of how the relations of production are reproduced; the very problematic entertained in the cited essay. Interpellation, to recap, is both the process whereby the individual turns into a subject and simultaneously explicates that ‘we are always already subjects’. If ‘we are already subjects’ this means at least two things: (a) that the subject is without history or out of

---

<sup>1</sup> Elena Loizidou is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Law Birkbeck College, University of London. I would like to thank Sara Ramshaw and Judy Grbich for encouraging me to contribute this piece.

<sup>2</sup> Butler Judith *Giving an Account of Oneself* Assen Koninklijke Van Gorcum 2003 48.

<sup>3</sup> Althusser Louis ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)’ *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* New York Monthly Review Press 2001 85–126.

<sup>4</sup> As above at 115.

<sup>5</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>6</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>8</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>9</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 119.

history; and (b) that the subject is somehow maintained constantly in this position of subjectification. Both points are addressed by Althusser. The first point is addressed in relation to Ideology. He states that Ideology *in general has no history*.<sup>10</sup> He also demonstrates that ‘there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject’;<sup>11</sup> that ‘there is no ideology except from concrete subjects’.<sup>12</sup> The subject in this sense is a non-historical entity that becomes an instance of ideology. The second point, which is linked to the first, is explained through our experience of our subjectification; that we feel that we are doing this all on our own.<sup>13</sup> Our subjectification is maintained through a ‘doing’ that enables one, the individual, ‘*freely*’ to enter into subjectification, ‘*freely*’ to turn around to address the call of the police; or that it his/her choice to have or enter into freely. This doing, as you can see, exposes a paradox: it shows that one is only ‘*free*’ to his or her own subjection, or representation as an abstraction. For Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses<sup>14</sup> *do* contribute in their abstraction to the reproduction of the relations of production. But their contribution remains abstract, even as they are realised within the institutions of production through their various processes and mechanisms (for example, the various skills trainings in which we all engage in order to inhabit our role in the production line) as this realisation conceals agonism or a ‘class struggle’. It conceals, in other words, the notion that Ideology as a general or eternal phenomenon is instantiated by and through the struggles that take place between classes within the Ideological State Apparatuses over the determination of which class takes over or rules. The battle, therefore, for the reproduction of the relations of social production is an Ideological battle, a class agonism that is eternal, and therefore ‘without history’. Nobody can be outside this battle and nobody can be outside Ideology. Through time we have seen subjects that are disobedient. Althusser addresses the problematic of disobedient subjects, subjects that do not turn around or do not subject to subjectification; that do not, in other words, recognise that ‘they work all by themselves’<sup>15</sup> or, we may say, do not engage in this ideological battle *as* an aberration or a rarity.

What happens though if we take this rare subject, the disobedient subject, as the focus of our analysis of subjectification. It is at this point that Judith Butler’s rereading of the Althusserian concept of interpellation, or the calling of the subject into being, enters and produces a distinctive insight. Althusser’s explanation of how we come into being overlooks the fact that our formation through power is not only formative but it can also be *performative*.<sup>16</sup> Or, put otherwise, the greeting/addressing brings the subject into being. If we recall, Althusser talks predominantly about the hailing, calling or naming (interpellation) as an action that explicates that we are ‘always

<sup>10</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 108.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 115.

<sup>12</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 115.

<sup>13</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 123.

<sup>14</sup> Ideological State Apparatuses are realities such as religion, family, communications, education, culture. State Apparatuses the other part of the Superstructure are the police, courts, prisons, army, head of state, government and administration. Law is part of the State Apparatuses and the Ideological State Apparatuses. Althusser above note 3 at 96 fn 9.

<sup>15</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 123.

<sup>16</sup> Butler Judith *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex’* Routledge New York London 1996 p 122.

already subjects'. The calling in itself exposes 'the existence of ideology'<sup>17</sup> and, as Althusser would like it '[t]he existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing'.<sup>18</sup> In so doing, he brackets out the sequence of the events that he describes. He tells us so himself.<sup>19</sup> But equally, in so doing, he brackets out the speech act of naming somebody as effective, as performative. Since the hailing is also performative, as Butler observes, it can have a variety of effects. It can indeed effectively produce obedience but it can at the same time produce an array of disobedient acts.<sup>20</sup> It can make someone run away; it can activate 'the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperpole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it'.<sup>21</sup> The effect of Butler's intervention in the Althusserian concept of interpellation is significant on numerous accounts. By focusing on the variety of effects that can be produced through interpellation, she also dismantles or at least questions the power that Althusser gives to the law: 'it calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation'.<sup>22</sup> This anarchic moment, where the subject playfully subjects to the law, and simultaneously defies it through giving back to its command more than it has asked, showing the law that it is not the only source of producing effects — or, to put it in more post-structuralist terms, exposing its fantasmatic grounds (the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation) — it is also an instance of an opening of a different sociality and subjectivity than the one inferred by Althusser. As I have illustrated earlier, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' is concerned with how the production of social relations is reproduced. This reproduction — or the instance of reproduction — is heavily ordered or secured by Ideology and its apparatuses by a centralisation of power and its capacity to form us through the practice of interpellation; our sociality and our subjectivity is therefore unquestionably being bound in Ideology. The ideological class struggle that he points to is a struggle about the assumption of power, of who will occupy the central position and therefore command the reproduction of Ideology in general. Ideology, along with its structures, processes or rituals, does not vanish, it remains. Butler's anarchic reading provides a different alternative. The parodic or hyperbolic effects of disobedience convey in its doing or action or playfulness (without denying that it is a product of power) a sociality that does not want to assume or have a stake in the law, or assume the power that brings it into being, but rather to experiment in a different organisation of life, one that undoes our understanding of centralist power or authority. This type of action/practice is a repetition, as she writes, that can be read as an affirmative response to the violation<sup>23</sup> of being named (a violation that she calls after Spivak, 'enabling violation'<sup>24</sup>). More precisely, being named, even if in injurious terms (an enabling violation),

---

<sup>17</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>18</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>19</sup> Althusser above note 3 at 118.

<sup>20</sup> Butler above note 16 at 122.

<sup>21</sup> Butler above note 16 at 122.

<sup>22</sup> Butler above note 16 at 122.

<sup>23</sup> Butler above note 16 at 124.

<sup>24</sup> Butler above note 16 at 122.

brings one into being, an act that also gives the possibility to one to undo the violation, to reclaim a name or re-invent a name. The important point that is made here is that a violation does not always catch us in a circle of violence to which the only response will be one of violence itself or a constant repetition of a trauma. As she explains further:

The compulsion to repeat an injury is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat the injury in the same way or to stay fully within the traumatic orbit of that injury. The force of repetition in language may be the paradoxical condition in which a certain agency — not linked to a fiction of the ego as master of circumstances — is derived from the impossibility of choice.<sup>25</sup>

Butler's perverted offering of interpellation has been most often read as providing an account of the embodied subject as being an effect of language, as a linguistic or figural subject, bereft of any connection to its material existence. Butler's 'bodies' have been more generally understood as the effect of discursive practices. This particular criticism has been strongly voiced within feminist theory. I will engage below with some of these criticisms, but I want to stipulate that there is an alternative reading to this. Butler, as I will demonstrate later on, does not dismiss the material body. She never did, even in her earlier work. She has always been interested in the relation between the material and the figural body. Consider, for example, the following quote:

For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these 'facts', one might sceptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. But their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means.<sup>26</sup>

We can understand from this quote that in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler sets out to make sense of this relationship between the material and the figurative body; that she tries to understand how certain ways of coming into being, through being hailed for example, might both subjectify us but also enable our survival, precisely by providing us with the possibility to disobey. Despite evidence to the contrary, Butler's work has been represented as privileging the figural body. The next section briefly discusses some of these criticisms. The aim is not to offer a thorough depiction of these criticisms, but rather to account for them and show that one of the effects of these criticisms is what I call the securitisation of knowledge about the body. As you will see, all of the authors that I talk about below tend to privilege the material body over the figural body. Their understanding of materiality differs from author to author. For Nussbaum<sup>27</sup> the material body is understood as the real body, the body that needs to be nurtured, fed and so on. Frazer's materiality<sup>28</sup> refers to the redistribution of primary resources that can make life sustainable and better for bodies.

---

<sup>25</sup> Butler above note 16 at 124.

<sup>26</sup> Butler above note 16 at xi.

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum C Martha 'The professor of parody: the heap defeatism of Judith Butler' (22<sup>nd</sup> February 1999) *The New Republic* 37–45.

<sup>28</sup> Frazer Nancy *Justice Interruptus: Rethinking Key concepts of a Post-Socialist Age* Routledge New York 1997.

Grosz's<sup>29</sup> understanding of the body is biological, 'what the body can become'. And, finally, for Braidotti<sup>30</sup> the body is an amalgamation of material intensities that cross time and space, a temporal/spatial body that is endlessly becoming.

As I will show, this privileging of the material over the figural, tends de facto to provide us with an 'absolute knowledge' of what the body is, without considering whether there is a relationship between the two bodies. This omission, I suggest in the next section, endangers not only the possibility of material bodies to survive by adhering to a politics of securitisation, but also promotes these politics in the production of knowledge about bodies within the academy. The third part of this article, as I make apparent at the end of the following section, will expose how Butler shows that the bracketing of the one form of body over the other, the material over the figural or vice versa, is not sustainable.

## 1.0 MATERIALISTS' CRITIQUES OF THE BODY

The body, as is well known, has been subjected to some interrogation in feminist theory.<sup>31</sup> Through varied theoretical pathways (existentialism, deconstruction, deleuzian philosophy, psychoanalysis, science-studies, phenomenology and others) feminist theorists offer us a rich exposition of the ways in which the body has been disavowed as a legitimate source of knowledge from philosophy. Simultaneously, through the practice of writing (their writing), feminism recuperates this loss. Critical theorists like Butler amongst others (see for example, Ahmed<sup>32</sup>, Irigaray<sup>33</sup> have provided us with a sustained corpus of writing which demonstrates how gendered, racialised and queer bodies interrupt this philosophical proposition. Their writings signpost bodies as loci of knowledge and a challenge to totalising ontological claims on life. Most often, though, this type of recuperation or philosophical practice has been criticised by feminists<sup>34</sup> in general, leftist Marxists theorists<sup>35</sup> and 'new materialist feminists' who work with Deleuzian

---

<sup>29</sup> Grosz Elizabeth Space, *Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Body* Routledge New York 1995,

<sup>30</sup> Braidotti Rosi *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* Polity Press Cambridge 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir de Simone *The Second Sex* Penguin London 1972, Irigaray, Luce *The Sex which is not One* Cornell University Press Ithaca New York 1985, Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Routledge London and New York 1990;1999 and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge London and New York 1993, Cornell, Druccilla *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harrassment* Routledge New York 1995, Grosz, Elizabeth Space, *Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Body* Routledge New York 1995, Braidotti, Rosi *Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* Columbia University Press New York 1994, Haraway, J.Donna *Simian's, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature* Routledge New York 1991, Ahmed, Sara *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1998 and *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press Durham 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed, Sara *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1998 and *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press Durham 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Irigaray, Luce *The Sex which is not One* Cornell University Press Ithaca New York 1985.

<sup>34</sup> Nussbaum above note 2737–45.

<sup>35</sup> Frazer above note 28.

theory<sup>36</sup> for its politics or, more precisely, for its political effects. Judith Butler's work in particular has been taken up as the target of this critique. This critique adheres to the claim that the political effects of such recuperation remain untouched by the reality of life and the effects that it has on material bodies. To put it simply, Judith Butler has been accused of promoting a type of politics that remains textual, that remains, if you wish, internal to the realm of discourse and a privileged academy, and thus fails to articulate the needs that material bodies have for either political recognition or economic equality.

My aim in this article is not to offer a detailed analysis of these debates but rather to expose the *effects* that they may have on both knowledge and life. These criticisms are well known. We are all familiar with Nancy Frazer's materialist critique of post-structuralism in *Justice Interruptus*,<sup>37</sup> Nussbaum's hostile review of Butler's work in *The New Republic*,<sup>38</sup> or Grosz's<sup>39</sup> and Braidotti's<sup>40</sup> 'new materialist' criticisms on deconstruction and, in particular, of Judith Butler's work. However, as a reminder, I offer a schematic representation of the aforementioned theorists' criticisms of Butler's conception of the body and the limits that it might pose on the question of life.

Let us take them in turn. Martha Nussbaum in 'The Professor of parody'<sup>41</sup> undertakes a review of four of Butler's books; *Excitable Speech*, *The Psychic Life of Power*, *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble*. Her review is rhetorical and undermining towards Butler's work.<sup>42</sup> Bell beautifully summarises Nussbaum's critiques as follows: (a) Butler's work as professed bears no relation to women's lives nor does it propose any ways of transforming women's lives; (b) her writing is dense and unclear; (c) her propositions are banal and rely on sophistry and rhetoric; (d) her work is unscholarly, lacking sufficient analysis of texts that are being cited; (e) her critique of sexual difference is unconvincing and; (f) her concept of resistance needs to be supplemented by a normative concept of justice.<sup>43</sup> There are a lot of examples that I can pick up from the review to demonstrate her critique of Butler's work, but let us take as our example her critique of parody. This particular critique is important for the purposes of this article, as I have already shown, as parody is one of the concepts that Butler uses to engage critically with Althusser's concept of interpellation.

Nussbaum reads Butler's use of parody as obscuring the real needs of women or, as Nussbaum writes, 'For women who are hungry, illiterate, disenfranchised, beaten, raped, it is not sexy or liberating to re-enact, however paradoxically, the conditions of hunger, illiteracy, disenfranchisement, beating, and rape. Such women prefer food, schools, votes, and the integrity

<sup>36</sup> Grosz Elizabeth *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Body* Routledge New York 1995, Braidotti Rosi *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* Polity Press Cambridge 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Frazer above note 28.

<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum above note 27.

<sup>39</sup> Grosz above note 29.

<sup>40</sup> Braidotti above note 30.

<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum above note 27.

<sup>42</sup> Bell, V 'Feminist thought and the totalitarian interloper: on rhetoric and the fear of "dangerous thinking"' (2002) 31(4) *Economy and Society* 573–587.

<sup>43</sup> As above at 575–6.



of their bodies.<sup>44</sup> She throws at Butler a series of facts that raise doubt as to whether Butler cares about or takes seriously the material conditions of life that constrain our formation as subjects. And, consequently, she reads Butler's parodic acts of resistance as analogous to Marie Antoinette's apocryphal line to the starving protestations of the women of France prior to the 1789 Revolution, 'Let them eat cake.' In her eyes, Butler is guilty of failing to understand that excluded or foreclosed subjects will not achieve an agentic position through the exercise of parody. Parody, as she writes, can only be a useful act of resistance when one is a tenured professor at a liberal university.<sup>45</sup>

Nancy Frazer's *Justice Interruptus*<sup>46</sup> offers a critique of the 'cultural turn' associated with deconstruction. Put crudely, the book puts forward a plea for keeping claims of recognition distinct from those of redistribution. In relation to claims adhering to the labour market, the division of labour within the market is read as being directed or addressing the problematic of redistribution of material needs. Identity claims, on the other hand, and especially gay and lesbian identity claims, are political-social gestures for recognition, for 'cultural recognition'.<sup>47</sup> Why? As Butler says, explaining Frazer's position in her essay, 'Merely cultural',<sup>48</sup> '[h]omophobia ... has no roots in political economy, because homosexuals occupy no distinctive position in the division of labour, are distributed throughout the class structure, and do not constitute an exploited class.'<sup>49</sup> Frazer explains that in keeping apart the question of recognition from redistribution she does not intend to suggest that claims by gay and lesbian subjects are 'merely cultural' and not material. This is what she says:

In my conception, injustices of misrecognition are just as material as injustices of maldistribution. To be sure, the first are rooted in social patterns of interpretation, evaluation, and communication, hence if you like, in the symbolic order. But this does not mean they are 'merely' symbolic. On the contrary, the norms, significations, and constructions of personhood that impede women, racialized peoples, and/or gays and lesbian from parity of participation in social life are materially instantiated-in institutions and social practices, in social action and embodied habitus, and yes, in ideological state apparatuses. Far from occupying some wispy, ethereal realm, they are material in their existence.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Frazer still holds a distinction between questions of redistribution and recognition. While she does not deny that to be misrecognised prohibits individuals from entering the socio-symbolic sphere, she sees this 'as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation' and 'not as a consequence of a distributive inequity (such as failing to receive one's

---

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum above note 27 at 43.

<sup>45</sup> Nussbaum above note 27 at 43.

<sup>46</sup> Frazer above note 28.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler 'Merely cultural' (1998) 227 *New Left Review* 33–44 at 39.

<sup>48</sup> As above at 39.

<sup>49</sup> Butler above note 47 at 39.

<sup>50</sup> Frazer Nancy, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler', (1998) 228 *New Left Review* 140–149 at 144.

fair share of resources or ‘primary goods’).<sup>51</sup> True, *Justice Interruptus* does not deny the injuries that social groups, especially gay and lesbians groups, face. Nevertheless, by saying that such injustices are a result of institutional interpretive devaluations allows her both to appreciate such claims as real, but nevertheless devalue them as non-material. I am not concerned at all here with whether Frazer’s appreciation is correct politically or philosophically. What interests me here is that she does not question her understanding of the relationship between language (which, from the quote above, can be seen as being represented via the practice of interpretation) and materiality (which is presented as the fair distribution of resources). On the contrary, in supporting recognition of injustices she appears to suggest that to assert that such claims are claims of material demands is misguided. Thus, — whether consciously or not, she relocates the poststructuralist analysis of such claims, and more specifically that of Judith Butler, as not understanding the relationship of materiality to capital, of bodies to the redistribution of goods. In so doing, in critiquing Butler in the way she has done, she leaves unquestioned the understanding of the relationship between language and bodies; or builds her critique on a certain type of knowledge about bodies and language. Consider this quote:

...the economic disabilities of homosexuals are better understood as effects of heterosexism in the relations of recognition than as hardwired in the structure of capitalism. The good news is that we do not need to overthrow capitalism in order to remedy those disabilities — although we may well need to overthrow it for other reasons.<sup>52</sup>

When gay and lesbian groups contest injustices against them, Frazer takes it for granted that they are not doing so in the name of transforming their life conditions and specifically their material conditions. As I already stated, I am not interested so much in whether Frazer’s analysis is correct or not. But I am interested in its effects. The effects of such a position, I would argue and explain more generally later on, leaves unquestioned precisely whether we need to think again, and again, about the relationship between language and materiality. It assumes that material conditions cannot be transformed through practices that contest (which are also but not only challenged through language) the hegemony of heterosexuality but, rather, through the reorganisation of the means of production and its distribution. Her reading of the conditions of political transformation is deeply embedded in conserving a particular knowledge about the relationship between language and materiality, a relationship that sets up a hierarchy, perhaps (surely) unwittingly, of the latter over the former. In doing so, and this is the crux of the argument that I want to put forward through Butler’s critical engagement with the question of the body, she promotes a type of politics of security, a politics that promotes a certain knowledge about what the body is, and works towards securing the boundaries of this knowledge. Such a politics, as I will show later on, risks more than it secures.

Braidotti and Grosz, are two feminist philosophers that are extensively engaged with the question of the body and life in philosophy. Grosz in *Space Time and Perversion*<sup>53</sup> addresses

---

<sup>51</sup> As above at 141.

<sup>52</sup> Frazer above note 50 at 147.

<sup>53</sup> Grosz above note 29.

specifically the issue of its status in philosophy, its rearticulation in feminist theory and philosophy and, subsequently, critiques feminist theory that is engaged with the discursive body. The body, as she eloquently points out, has become a source of knowledge for feminist theory but, irrespective of this, she finds that very little attention has been paid in formulating a theory of the body.<sup>54</sup> She articulates how feminist theory has been critical of certain theoretical concepts such as biology, essentialism, ahistoricity but, nevertheless, she finds that certain terms have been embraced almost uncritically and have been used routinely. She is referring to the concept of the discursive or linguistic body. As she writes, ‘feminists and cultural theorists...insist on the discursivisation...of bodies as a mode of protecting themselves from their materiality’.<sup>55</sup> She therefore takes on the task of thinking the materiality of the body. Grosz makes her focus the discussions surrounding the gendered/sexed body. Again, I want to reiterate that I am not intending to provide an elaborate discussion of how she understands the body but, rather, to indicate that through her conceptualisation of the body Grosz offers a certain understanding of the relationship between language and materiality, an understanding that perpetuates a certain securitisation of knowledge. Let us see how she conceptualises the body through her critique of the discursive body. Grosz is specific about her object of critique: she criticises Butler’s presentation of gender as an expression of sex, and the linguistic play that Butler introduces to de-stabilise the gender-sex categories. For Grosz sex is not a concept that can be of second order to gender, but rather an entity (concept) of its own.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, she asks us to consider ‘that there is an instability at the very hard heart of sex and bodies, the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture’.<sup>57</sup> She therefore asks us to consider the body as being an entity that goes beyond the historical, cultural and power discursive practices that Butler and others have offered and, in doing so, to rethink it as a vital organ that constantly becomes other than itself. Or to put it in her words, ‘the body is what it is capable of doing’ and as this capability lays in a future temporality, in what it will become, the body is therefore outside the constraints of our cultural discourses. This understanding privileges the biological or, better, the natural body, a position that Grosz explores further in a more recent book the *Nick of Time*.<sup>58</sup> This book, as Grosz herself states, ‘is an exploration of how the biological prefigures and makes possible the various permutations of life that constitute natural, social and cultural existence...’<sup>59</sup> and an explanation of how ‘[t]he natural world prefigures, contains, and opens up social and cultural existence to endless becoming’.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Grosz above note 29 at 31.

<sup>55</sup> Grosz above note 29 at 31.

<sup>56</sup> Grosz above note 29 at 212–13.

<sup>57</sup> Grosz above note 29 at 213.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Grosz *The Nick of Time: Politics, evolution, and the Untimely* Duke University Press Durham London 2004.

<sup>59</sup> As above at 1.

<sup>60</sup> Grosz above note 58 at 1–2.

Grosz's work, along with Braidotti's, can be located within a new theoretical perspective that has been branded as 'new materialism'.<sup>61</sup> As Ahmed points out in surveying some of the literature promoting 'new materialist feminism',<sup>62</sup> this 'new' theoretical approach grounds its theory on reading discursive feminism as prohibiting discussions on materialism or biology. Braidotti's *Metamorphoses* carries along, in written style and ideas, the energy of the 'new materialism' movement. As she sets down at the very start of the book, one of her aims in the book is 'to explore the need and provide illustrations for new figurations, for alternative representations and social locations for the kind of hybrid mix we are in the process of becoming'.<sup>63</sup> But, as she quickly points out, these figurations should not be taken or be understood as linguistic utterances, 'but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied positions'.<sup>64</sup> Braidotti 'take[s] the body as a complex interplay of highly constructed social and symbolic forces: it is not an essence, let alone a biological substance, but a play of forces, a surface of intensities, pure simulacra without originals'.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as she explains further:

The body remains a bundle of contradictions: it is a zoological entity, a genetic-data bank, while it also remains a bio-social entity, that is to say a slab of codified, personalized memories. As such it is part animal, part machine but the dualistic opposition of the two, which our culture has adopted since the eighteenth century as the dominant model, is inadequate today. Contemporary science and technology in fact have reached right into the most intimate layers of the living organism and the structures of the self, dissolving boundaries that had been established by centuries of humanistic thinking. This means that we can now think of the body as an entity that inhabits different time-zones simultaneously, and is animated by different speeds and a variety of internal and external clocks which do not necessarily coincide.<sup>66</sup>

Braidotti's 'body', as can be seen, is not a simple body, it is one that is always in the process of becoming, but its becoming is at the hands of time-space and intensity. It is a body that is very much material (natural and technical) but which, at the same time, 'lives' its becoming and its becoming is 'pure simulacra'. Any humanistic understanding or conceptualisation of the body, or the linguistic body, has no space in our contemporary plenitude. There is no doubt in her writing about what this 'body', my 'body' and 'yours', 'is' in this process of becoming; there is no 'doubt' that it is sheer materiality, at least in the way she understands materiality.

As I have mentioned previously, I am not concerned with evaluating the theoretical projects engaged in by the above feminist theorists. My concern is simply to point out that their

---

<sup>61</sup> Hird Myra 'Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference' (2004) 5 (2) *Feminist Theory* at 223–32. For a critical engagement with the new materialist feminism see Ahmed Sara 'Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism"' (2008) 15 (1) *European Journal of Women's Studies* at 23–39.

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed as above.

<sup>63</sup> Braidotti as above note 30 at 2.

<sup>64</sup> Braidotti as above note 30 at 2.

<sup>65</sup> Braidotti as above note 30 at 21.

<sup>66</sup> Braidotti as above note 30 at 21.

analysis of the body and its relation to life is built upon a critique of the figural or linguistic body, a critique that privileges the material body. The material body or materiality has, as we have seen from the above expositions, various configurations: it is the real body or real life (Nussbaum), it relates to the sources of production and redistribution (Frazer), it refers to the biological body (Grosz), and to a force of geo-temporal intensities in Braidotti. What are the effects of this diverse set of theories? In privileging materiality they leave unquestioned the relationship between language and materiality and, more specifically here, the relationship between the figural/material bodies and life. I want to suggest that by stipulating the vital importance of the material body in forming a better understanding of the needs of life, such theories or critiques forget or bracket out that what passes as a material body is articulated within language. If we take as our example Grosz and Braidotti's conceptualisations of the body, the body as becoming, this becoming — through time and space — is affective or it is felt at the moment of doing. But at the same time it is articulate; it is articulated and spoken about in language, it is at the same time a linguistic body. What are the effects of this? This forgetting or bracketing from memory that the articulation of the body as material is a linguistic construct, allows us to read that these theorists are making somehow an ontological claim: a claim as to 'knowing what a body is'. The problem with this is that consequently it has the potential of totalising and conserving what passes as knowledge — what passes as knowledge about the body. The second effect relates to the politics of this critique. Despite its intention to the contrary, this type of criticism ends up promoting a type of politics of *security* (based on having the ultimate knowledge about what a body 'is' and what is vital for the good life). It polices what passes as knowledge and any form of knowledge that reads the body differently is read or understood as not only a threat to knowledge but also a threat to life. Just think of Nussbaum and consider once more the following quote from Grosz: 'feminists and cultural theorists...insist on the discursivisation of bodies as a mode of protecting themselves from their materiality'.<sup>67</sup> The above sentence implies that feminists, like Judith Butler, who have been the centre of these attacks, risk through their theories their material bodies.

While we might consider my reading of the criticisms levied on post-structuralist thought as sophistry, or as a critique at the epistemological level that bears no effect on life, I would like to suggest the opposite. Any critique that attempts to foreclose the production of knowledge, our understanding of how we come to be the bodies that we are and, instead, lays the grounds for such an understanding, falls short of grasping the ongoing struggle that we have in accounting for who we are, what we need, desire or what we are running away from. They fail to grasp that our articulation of who we are in language and our materiality are not causally reduced to one another, and the reduction of one to the other is what increases the threat to life.

We just need to remember the paradigm<sup>68</sup> of Jean Charles de Menezes.<sup>69</sup> The Brazilian electrician was on his way to work on the 22nd of July 2007 when the Metropolitan Police shot

---

<sup>67</sup> Grosz above note 29 at 31.

<sup>68</sup> I use the word paradigm here as discussed by Giorgio Agamben in a lecture given at the European Graduate School in August 2002 and entitled 'What is a Paradigm?' (<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html>) downloaded on 01/03/04. Agamben suggests that the paradigm does not move from the universal to the particular or the other way round but rather from particular to particular. What does this mean exactly? We can understand the paradigm as being a hypothesis that only in its exposition we can understand its intelligibility. In response

him dead at Stockwell tube station, South London. His death was the outcome of, amongst other things (the Metropolitan Police were found guilty of making 19 ‘catastrophic errors’ in breach of *The Health and Safety at Work Act* of 1974 that led to de Menezes’ death and were ordered to pay £175,000 in damages and £385,000 in court costs. No officer of any rank was found responsible for the shooting and death), a misreading of both the way he conducted himself on the way to work from his flat and in the train carriage at Stockwell tube station,<sup>70</sup> but also a misreading of who he was, taking his physical appearance,<sup>71</sup> the colour of his skin, as corresponding to Hussain Osman, the fugitive-failed bomber that they were seeking. I do not need, I think, to say too much to demonstrate how material knowledge of the body could jeopardise precisely the lives of bodies that it claims to secure. A politics of securitisation of knowledge — of knowing what a body needs or can do — ends up accounting for the body (accounting for it as dead) and disavows, even disallows an account that it can give of itself — an account that no matter how contested it might be, it does provide a possibility for the survival of life literally, not only in allowing someone to live like de Menezes but also in holding in itself (in the account) the possibility of the renewal of the conditions of life more generally. Just remember that to be interpellated as a subject also requires a hailing, a calling somebody into being and, simultaneously, a recognition of the hailing. There was not even a hailing here, not a mere possibility of at least recognising oneself and, of course, no possibility of allowing one to account for oneself. This is not to say that the figural body should be privileged over the material, but rather to signpost that the exclusion of the one over the other fails to account for: (a) why, when we lay claims on the primacy of the one over the other, let us say the material over the figural, the latter returns and agonises over the claims that the first puts forward? And (b) how can we account for this

---

to the readers that have asked me to offer more paradigms, if we follow, which I do in this case, a serialisation of cases that support more paradigm will defeat our understanding of a paradigm. The point that I want to make in this article is that paradigm is an ‘original phenomenon’ without an origin and its exposition allows to makes sense of it.

<sup>69</sup> For details of this Stockwell One: Investigation into the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell underground station on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2005. (IPCC, London, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2007).

<sup>70</sup> 13.4 On seeing CO19 officers on the platform ‘Ivor’ got up from his seat and placed his foot by the train door to prevent it from closing. He shouted ‘he’s here’ and indicated towards Mr DE MENEZES. He heard the word ‘police’ shouted and turned towards Mr DE MENEZES who had got up and walked towards the police officers. ‘Ivor’ considered that Mr DE MENEZES was agitated and noticed that his hands were held below his waist and slightly in front of him. He continued to walk towards ‘Ivor’ and fearing for the safety of everyone on the train he grabbed Mr DE MENEZES around his torso and pinned his arms to his side. He then pushed Mr DE MENEZES back into the seat that he had been sitting on. (63)

13.7 Charlie 2 was convinced Mr DE MENEZES was a suicide bomber about to detonate a bomb. He states that he honestly believed that unless he acted immediately everyone present was about to die. He formed the opinion that the only option was to shoot the man in the head and kill him instantly to prevent any detonation. Charlie 2 ran forward and reached over the top of ‘Ivor’ shouting ‘Armed Police’. He held his gun to Mr DE MENEZES’s head and fired. One: Investigation into the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell underground station on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2005. (IPCC, London, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2007) 64.

<sup>71</sup> 12.9 Shortly before 9:39hrs ‘James’ saw Mr DE MENEZES walking in UPPER TULSW HILL towards TULSE HILL. He described him as about 5’10” tall of stocky build with collar length black hair and stubble, with wide face. He described his complexion as being similar to a light skinned North African. ‘James’ examined the photographs provided to him during the briefing and was of the opinion that the ale was ‘possibly identical’ to the subject NETTLE TIP. ‘Tim’ heard ‘James’ describe Mr DE MENEZES as a ‘good possible likeness to the subject NETTLE TIP’ (IPCC, London, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2007) 55.

agonism, for this type of relationship, without reducing the one to the other? What does it do? What are its effects on knowledge specifically and on the problematic of life more generally?

I have explained elsewhere<sup>72</sup> that ‘life’ is a consistent theme in Butler’s work. In *Subjects of Desire*<sup>73</sup> she offers a reading of desire that is inextricably linked to life. In *Gender Trouble*<sup>74</sup> life takes the form of gendered life, as in *Bodies that Matter*<sup>75</sup> and *Undoing Gender*.<sup>76</sup> *Excitable Speech*<sup>77</sup> reflects upon injuries inflicted on lives by speech acts. In her more recent work, *Antigone’s Claim*,<sup>78</sup> *Giving an Account of Oneself*<sup>79</sup> and *Precarious life*<sup>80</sup> she complicates claims made upon life by the ethical, political and legal sphere and unveils their discursive and material limitations. Nevertheless, despite the attachment to the concept of ‘life’, Butler makes no ontological claims regarding ‘life’ but, rather, articulates the practices involved in draining, restraining, or even destroying ‘life’. And she analyses the possible ways in which we may subvert restrictions imposed upon us by state apparatuses (such as governmental officials and legislative limitations), disciplinary regimes, and norms — all so as to make possible livable lives. Butler’s concern for how we may create better conditions for life entails an agonistic relationship between the various spheres of life, ethical, political, legal. The body is central to her articulation of all these three spheres of life. It is also well known that her understanding of bodies is one that sees them being formed by and through norms (linguistic or otherwise). But, as I explain below, her bodies are neither figural nor material but, rather, both. And as the various spheres of life, if they are to achieve better conditions for life, they must retain an agonistic relationship to one another; the same agonistic relationship must be sustained in relation to our knowledge of the body, or between the two competing bodies (figural and material). Her subversive reading of Descartes’ *First Meditation* in ‘How can I deny...?’<sup>81</sup> below, exposes a certain refusal of the figural body to be reduced to the material and the material to the figural. It exposes an agonistic relationship between the two types of bodies; a relationship which unsettles the politics of security (that holds on to the totalisation of knowledge) and fearlessly confesses to a certain lack of knowing how to think of the relationship between the figural and the material body. And, thus, what is the consequence? To show that we have not as yet been able to think adequately about the relationship between the figural and the material body offers a doubt or a rupture to the self-confident mentality of security or sovereign governmentality, the very mentality that threatens life in the name of protecting it. It offers a different politics of the body and knowledge, a politics of discomfort.

<sup>72</sup> Loizidou Elena *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law Politics* Routledge-Cavendish Abingdom 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Butler Judith *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflection in Twentieth-Century France* Columbia University Press New York 1999.

<sup>74</sup> Butler Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Routledge New York 1990;1999.

<sup>75</sup> Butler Judith *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* Routledge New York 1993.

<sup>76</sup> Butler Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge New York 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Butler Judith *Excitable speech: A Politics of the Performative* Routledge New York 1997.

<sup>78</sup> Butler Judith *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* Columbia University Press New York 2000.

<sup>79</sup> Butler above note 2.

<sup>80</sup> Butler Judith *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* Verso London and New York 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Butler Judith ‘How can I deny that these hands and this body are mine?’, in Cohen, T, Cohen, B, Miller, J, and Warminski, A (eds), *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory* University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis and London 2001 pp 254–273.

The analysis that follows focuses explicitly on Judith Butler's essay 'How can I deny...?'. It explains the ways in which the figural and material bodies contest each other over the domain of knowledge, and articulates how either the collapse of the one into the other or the privileging of the one over the other leaves un-acknowledged and un-contested the normative foundations upon which such claims are made, a limitation that consequently narrows down any possibility of a renewal of life.

## 2.0 BODIES FIGURAL AND MATERIAL

Thus, the constructive dimension of language is overridden in favor of one that assumes that language remains anterior to the object it represents. Of course, the theory of construction immediately raises the fear of a complete linguisticism, ie that the object is nothing but the language by which it is construed. But this kind of linguistic reduction must be resisted. The second problem with the claim that language represents power relations which, in turn, back or support linguistic practice, is that we fail to understand the way that power works through discourse, especially discourses that naturalize and occlude power itself. Again, this is not to claim that power is nothing but discourse, but it is to claim that the one cannot be thought without the other ... But to focus on linguistic practice here and non-linguistic practice there, and to claim that both are important is still not to focus on the relation between them. It is that relation that I think we still do not know how to think.<sup>82</sup>

In 'How can I deny ...',<sup>83</sup> Butler engages explicitly with the relationship between language and the material body. In doing so, she takes an unusual route — different to the one that we have grown accustomed to her following when she talks about the body. Instead of directly talking about gendered bodies and engaging with feminist, queer and post-structuralist accounts and critiques of the body, she focuses her attention on Descartes' 'First meditation: about the things we may doubt'.<sup>84</sup> Her overall account, of course, is directed towards feminist and queer discourses, as her objective in the essay is to settle some criticisms levied against feminist thought that argue that there are no stable differences between the sexes and that reduce everything to language.<sup>85</sup>

The 'First meditation' is where Descartes sets out to demonstrate that the senses (or rather certain sensual experiences) cannot ground truthful or scientific knowledge. He sets out to demonstrate that doubt enables the possibility of the formation of true knowledge or, as Felman puts it, 'doubt strikes first the senses as a foundation of knowledge'.<sup>86</sup> The meditation begins with Descartes describing where he is and what he does. From the very start, he is detailed and visual

---

<sup>82</sup> Butler Judith 'Politics, power and ethics: a discussion between Judith Butler and William Connolly' *Theory & Event* (2000) 4(2), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/toc/index.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/toc/index.html) (accessed on 15 of September, 2006) 9.

<sup>83</sup> Butler above note 75.

<sup>84</sup> Descartes Renee *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* Penguin London 1968 pp 95–101.

<sup>85</sup> Butler above note 75 at p 254.

<sup>86</sup> Felman Shoshana 'Madness and philosophy or literature's reason' (1975) 52 *Yale French Studies* pp 208–228.



in his descriptions: ‘ I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a dressing-gown, with this paper in my hands, and other things of this nature.’<sup>87</sup> As Winders points out, this detailed description lures the reader to follow Descartes’ thought;<sup>88</sup> perhaps it even acts as a prop, transporting the reader who is elsewhere to the scene of the meditation. Whatever the case, Descartes does not fall short of entertaining the possibility that he might be delusionary — like the mad — impotent of producing true-knowledge, and to this effect he writes:

And how could I deny that these hands and this body belong to me, unless perhaps I were to assimilate myself to those insane persons whose minds are so troubled and clouded by the black vapours of the bile that they constantly assert that they are kings, when they are very poor; that they are wearing gold and purple, when they are quite naked; or who imagine that they are pitchers or that they have a body of glass. But these are madmen, and I would not be less extravagant if I were to follow their example.<sup>89</sup>

He swiftly disavows the possibility of being mad, calling such consideration an extravagance, and moves on to consider other sense-related stages, such as sleeping, and their relation to knowledge formation:

However, I must here consider that I am a man, and consequently that I am in the habit of sleeping and of representing to myself in my dreams those same things, or sometimes even less likely things, which insane people do when they are awake. How many times have I dreamt at night that I was in this place, dressed, by the fire, although I was quite naked in my bed? It certainly seems to me at the moment that I am not looking at this paper with my eyes closed; that this head that I shake is not asleep; that I hold out this hand intentionally and deliberately, and that I am aware of it. What happens in sleep does not seem as clear and distinct as all this. But in thinking about it carefully, I recall having often been deceived in sleep by similar illusions, and, reflecting on this circumstance more closely, I see so clearly that there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep, that I am quite astonished by it; and my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I am asleep now.<sup>90</sup>

After reflecting on the blurring of the states of sleeping and being awake, he invites us to meditate on the relationship that sleep has to knowledge:

Let us suppose, then, that we are now asleep, and that all these particulars, namely, that we open our eyes, move our heads, hold out our hands, such like actions, are only false illusions: and let us think that perhaps our hands and all our body are not as well as we see them. Nevertheless, we must at least admit that the things which appear to us in sleep are, as it

---

<sup>87</sup> Descartes above note 84at p 96. For more on this, see J A Winders, ‘Writing like a man (?): Descartes, science, and madness’ in S Bordo (ed), *Feminist Interpretations of Rene Descartes* Penn State University Press Pennsylvania 1999 114–40.

<sup>88</sup> Winders above at 122.

<sup>89</sup> Descartes above note 84 at 96.

<sup>90</sup> Descartes above note 84 at 96–7.

were, pictures and paintings which can only be formed in the likeness of something real and true.<sup>91</sup>

Once he completes his meditation on sleep, he concludes that dreams, despite being fictitious, nevertheless resource themselves from real materials, such as colour or images that exist in reality. As Foucault suggests, this creates a differentiation between madness and dreams, which eventually allows Descartes categorically to conclude that madness cannot be the source of true knowledge.<sup>92</sup> This exclusion is even more apparent if compared with his entertainment of the idea of being mad. As Foucault astutely remarks, Descartes does not proceed to doubt this proposition. Since doubt is at the centre of the exercise, this omission operates to exclude madness from the realm of knowledge formation while, as we can observe from his entertainment of dreaming, doubt plays a pivotal role.<sup>93</sup>

Butler — unlike Foucault<sup>94</sup> and Derrida<sup>95</sup> who univocally focus their exegeses on how Descartes treats madness and dreaming — moves the discussion in a different direction. She focuses upon the treatment of the body within the meditation. She proposes that the text reveals that Descartes' mistrust of the body exposes a certain tension. On the one hand, he doubts the body and, on the other, '... the very language through which he calls the body into question ends up reasserting the body as a condition of his own writing. Thus, the body that comes into question as an "object" that may be doubted surfaces in the text as a figural precondition of his writing'.<sup>96</sup> This, she argues, destabilises the distinction between the material and the figural that his text intends to create. It is important to note here that Butler does not exclusively focus on the mind(soul)/body distinction that we so often see at the centre of discussions around this text, but instead she questions the way he uses language in order to doubt that the body is a capable source for the formation of knowledge. Or, to be more precise, Butler reminds us that in order to doubt the body, Descartes uses language. This reminds us, as Foucault did, that meditation is a practice or exercise, and that, as Derrida reminded us, meditation is a text, but also that it is both of these things; a text and an exercise. But Butler does not only focus on meditation as an exercise but also on the exercise that goes into producing the text and its effects (namely the exclusion of the body as a source of knowledge); that is writing. And, in strengthening this claim, she adds that despite the fact that Descartes' meditation is introspective, he omits to say what took place before the writing of the meditation, allowing her to offer the following remark, '... the writing appears as contemporaneous with his introspection, implying, contrary to his explicit claims, that meditation is not an unmediated relation at all, but that it must take place through language'.<sup>97</sup> In deconstructing the text, she exposes the ambiguity that resides in meditation

---

<sup>91</sup> Descartes above note —84 at 97–8.

<sup>92</sup> Foucault Michel (2000) *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984 volume 2*, Faubion, D J (ed), London: Penguin (2000) pp 391–417.

<sup>93</sup> As above at 393.

<sup>94</sup> Foucault above note 92 at 393–417.

<sup>95</sup> Derrida, J (2001) *Writing and Difference*, London and New York: Routledge pp 36–76.

<sup>96</sup> Butler above note 81 at 258.

<sup>97</sup> Butler above note 81 at 259.

regarding the body. Here, it is also pertinent to bear in mind her method of reading. Butler works from the effects of a process to question the process itself and, additionally, to point out to the political potentiality the limits of the process. This is exactly what she does here. At first she observes that she has before her a meditation, an exercise or a practice that aims, through deep thinking or emptying of the mind, to arrive at some conclusion about something. Secondly, she observes that this exercise comes to her in the form of a text. And, finally, she is alerted to the fact that the text was produced through another exercise, that of writing. Putting all this together she is able to work from the resulting product to the ways in which this product comes to relate to the body.

As I implied at the very start of this section, Butler focuses on this particular text of Descartes so as to settle accusations levied against certain types of theory, including her own, that are most commonly interpreted as denying either sexual difference or materiality. In this particular essay, she addresses the relationship between materiality and language. However, in relation to these accusations, she shows that paradoxically they simulate Descartes' denial of the body. Here is how she comes to this conclusion. Descartes and '... his ability to doubt the body ...' she writes, '... appears to prefigure the skeptical stance toward bodily reality that is often associated with contemporary constructionist positions'.<sup>98</sup> Drawing similarities between Descartes' and constructionist theory appears rather peculiar and odd at first but, on second blush, this similarity is not so unusual. Descartes, while using language to doubt the body, either ignores or never pays any attention to the ways in which language acts; in other words, he appears to comprehend language as a mere passive vessel in which his intentions travel. But, moreover, if we undertake an analysis of the ways in which language is used in the text, as Butler does, we can see that the method (doubt) used and his language do not necessarily correspond with one another. This point will be explained further below. Constructionists, on the other hand, pay attention to language; for example, they will not hesitate to suggest that the body is a linguistic invention<sup>99</sup> but, in doing so, they avoid asking questions such as 'in what way?' and 'to what extent?'<sup>100</sup> and effectively end up saying that the body 'is not made by language, but of language'.<sup>101</sup> Like Descartes, constructionists fail to pay attention to the ways in which language acts, to ask the important questions such as 'to what extent is this possible?' and 'how does it happen?' By ignoring the difference between being made by something *and* of something, as she critiques, they literalise 'the tropological functioning of language'<sup>102</sup> and inevitably end up establishing a kind of linguistic totalitarianism. So, by deconstructing Descartes, Butler hopes to demonstrate, contrary to him, that language acts, and that its very action returns to the text the body as a figuration. At the same time, she is demonstrating that the figuration cannot wholeheartedly capture the materiality of the body. On the contrary, what she shows (as I suggested earlier and of which we will see more soon) is a relationship between the figural and the

---

<sup>98</sup> Butler above note 81 at 258.

<sup>99</sup> Butler above note 81 at 255.

<sup>100</sup> Butler above note 81 at 255.

<sup>101</sup> Butler above note 81 at 256.

<sup>102</sup> Butler above note 81 at 256.

material. Butler, as the introductory quotation of this section suggests, believes that this relationship between the figural and the material has not been adequately thought out, or that we have not yet thought beyond the exposition of this relationship.

I have explained elsewhere in detail how philosophers like Nancy relate to the materiality of life and construe that the linguistic is superseded by the material.<sup>103</sup> But what remains still under-analysed in such philosophical work is an account of how language labours and what effects this brings. For example, while Nancy takes further Heidegger's proposition that the dwelling of beings *is* language, he demonstrates that language is always in proximity to being. Instead of investing his philosophical trajectory in questioning the meaning of this proximity, Nancy takes up what appears to be the effect of Heidegger's position and argues that materiality is supreme. In doing so, it appears that he excludes from the analysis any questioning of the relationship that we have with language, the effects that come about when we are named, and when we resist certain type of naming. I highlight this because I want to point out not only that what remains politically important is the non-exclusion of either language or materiality, but, more pertinently (and this is Butler's point), that the exclusion of the one over the other hides in it the ways in which subjects are rendered unintelligible. What should be sustained is an open-ended and, therefore, inconclusive movement between the two. Then we can firstly demonstrate that what is rendered as unintelligible always pertains to the foundation of intelligibility (it is not something that we are to strive to achieve but rather is something that happens) but, moreover, we can expose the inadequacy of what is understood as a normative and universal realm. Butler, in her essay, 'Competing Universalities',<sup>104</sup> suggests that counter-universal claims made by gay and lesbians or people of colour, immigrants, and so on, should question and put their demands in such a way as to demonstrate that their positions are universal; that they are, in other words, intelligible. By stating that one form of body is superior to another, say the figural over the material or *vice versa*, what we have is the exclusion of the one over the other, an exclusion of certain forms of intelligibility over others, without in any respect reflecting on either of the two fundamental questions that such an exclusion brings about, namely: on what grounds do we produce these exclusions and how do they affect our understanding of the political sphere?

However, I now want to return to Butler's analysis of Descartes' 'First meditations' so we can see in more detail how Descartes' doubt of the body returns the body in the text to its figural form and haunts his very intentions, namely to establish reason as the very foundation of all knowledge. As she suggests, he ameliorates the very possibility of thinking about the body's indubitability by leaving behind any previous knowledge and sensibilities that he might have gathered throughout his life. What might appear as an innocent and justifiable act, nevertheless aims at establishing a narrative coherence to his method. By excluding any previous knowledge and sensibilities from the method, Descartes wants to wipe from his hard-drive any reference to his own biography or history, to produce inevitably a meditative 'I' that is free of the cares of the

---

<sup>103</sup> Loizidou above note 72 at 130–40.

<sup>104</sup> Butler Judith 2000 'Competing Universalities' in Butler, J, Zizek, S and Laclau, E *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*; Verso London and New York 2000 pp 136–81.

pre-meditative 'I', to cast off his own material existence from his method.<sup>105</sup> But, as Butler goes on to show, this splitting does not produce the narrative coherence anticipated. Consider, for example, as she does, Descartes' description of the surroundings where the meditation take place, 'although we know them through the medium of the senses, for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a dressing-gown, with this paper in my hand'.<sup>106</sup> This sentence produces a paradox. Descartes does not deny here that the senses produce knowledge.<sup>107</sup> The senses occasionally are represented as being able to produce truthful knowledge. Butler finds this both intriguing and ambivalent. In the above sentence, we observe, as she does, that these senses produce a 'here', a spatial/temporal location that can be doubted, in the sense that his 'here' is not the here in which we are located: '[c]learly it is not here; the "here" works as an indexical that refers only by remaining indifferent to its occasion'.<sup>108</sup> In other words, despite the fact that Descartes invokes a 'here', to ground undoubtedly the space that we find him, this 'here' is a 'deictic' one<sup>109</sup> (that is, it refers to an extra-linguistic context) so he introduces an ambiguity, one that precisely opens up a way to interpret this 'here' as being *any* here. This is what I take Butler to mean when she writes that this 'here' remains indifferent to its occasion or happening, in other words, where it takes place. One of course can suggest that the fact that the 'here' can open itself to interpretation precisely demonstrates Descartes' point, that the senses are a doubtful source of knowledge. But, for Butler, the important point lies not so much with the doubtability of the senses or the body, but rather with the way that what is to be doubted returns to support the doubt. What is important for her is that we can see in this that language acts in ways that are not necessarily intended by the writer.

This draws our attention even more acutely to the limits of the two facets of Descartes' thought. The first facet is obviously the philosophical facet. As we have seen from the very start, he proposes that the 'I' of meditation is one that rids itself of any biographical-memorial thoughts. But here he is precisely invoking a biographical 'I'. The second facet alludes to his narrative. Here, we can see with Butler, that the 'I' exceeds the spatial/temporal dimension in which it tries to ground itself.<sup>110</sup> The 'here' gains a dimension outside the parameters that Descartes intends. What then is the effect of all this? Butler uses the moment at which the method employed by Descartes fails to correspond with his narrative that follows to indicate that Descartes' attempt to create a separation between the materiality of his body, his memory or biography, returns to haunt him through both the material body and figural 'I' in at least two senses: (a) the figural 'I' returns in the narration; and (b) the material body returns through the invocation of the reader of the text. So, the exclusion of either the figural or the material cannot be sustained.

---

<sup>105</sup> Butler above note 81 at 259.

<sup>106</sup> Descartes above note –85 at 96.

<sup>107</sup> Butler above note 81 at 260.

<sup>108</sup> Butler above note 81 at 261.

<sup>109</sup> Butler above note 81 at 260.

<sup>110</sup> Butler above note 81 at 261.

In the same train of thought, she highlights that throughout the text Descartes firstly invites us to imagine the body and then proceeds to doubt it. This invitation *prima facie* aims to establish that the mind is the producer of truth. But, simultaneously, it intends to demonstrate that the only intelligible subjects are the ones that can doubt the body and its ability to form truthful knowledge. But, what is even more paradoxical, is that this method relies heavily on imagination to sustain it. Imagination is often understood to be the product of the senses. In Descartes' imagination, as Butler indicates, it is the product of the cognitive realm. How does Descartes then try to establish this? Descartes asserts that his imagination does not come from things that he does not know or of which he does not have any prior knowledge. His imagination, in other words, is not perceived as being capable of *inventing* things. Butler proceeds to the etymology of the word 'invent', used by Descartes to negate a sense-based root of imagination. We are told that the word has its roots in the Latin term *effingo* and it means both to 'form an image' and to 'make a fact'. Now, what Descartes does is to use one of the meanings of invention to contrast it with imagination. He uses the meaning of invention that describes it as forming an image, and he cuts out from his explanation the meaning relating to the formation of a fact. However, this does not sustain his position that imagination is a fact-making process. When we are invited to suppose or imagine that he is asleep, for example, he creates a paradox: he wants us to imagine as *not* a fact, what at the same time arises from a fact. This equivocation between what is imagined as not a fact and being made from a fact is made, as Butler proposes, on semantic rather than conceptual grounds.<sup>111</sup> The idea of imagination that he invokes here does not belong to the ideas they are based upon but rather on the meaning of words. In this case, it is the privileging of the meaning of the word invention as image making that allows him to ground imagination as fact making. But this attempt to use the body as being separate or apart from the mind registers a return of the body in the text as a figural term.<sup>112</sup> The return of the figure in the text captures an interesting relationship between the material and the figural. As Butler writes, every time Descartes tries to suppose the body so as to doubt it, the body returns as a figuration.<sup>113</sup> Each time this happens what we see is not the supremacy of the figuration over the material body or, to put it another way, we cannot say from this that the figure can capture the body in its totality but, rather, we can observe something more interesting taking place:

The act by which the body is supposed is precisely the act that posits and suspends the ontological status of the body, an act that does not create or form the body unilaterally (and thereby not an act in the service of linguisticism or linguistic monism), but that posits and figures, one for which positing and figuring are not finally distinguishable.<sup>114</sup>

The positing returns the body as a spectrality, a linguistic trope, but, simultaneously, it reveals the inconsumability of the one into the other.<sup>115</sup> This inconsumability reveals not only that the figural

---

<sup>111</sup> Butler above note 81 at 265.

<sup>112</sup> Butler above note 81 at 266.

<sup>113</sup> Butler above note 75 at 267.

<sup>114</sup> Butler above note 81 at 267–8.

<sup>115</sup> Butler above note 81 at 268.

and the material are inextricably linked or related to each other but, moreover, and this is the crunch of her argument, each time we exclude the one from the other, this exclusion leads to the totalitarian political: one that by the force of exclusion establishes itself as a practice that is grounded naturally and, therefore, rationally. The spectral or figural body brings to the fore our formation into subjects, which is grounded upon some pre-existing history or biography: who we become precedes our coming into being, but the material body is there to remind us that, despite this dispossession, despite the fact that we do not possess our own coming into being, we always find ourselves resisting this dispossession, always sighing that our livability does not always correspond with the normative assumptions that the figural promotes. But we would not have been able to address this without the attachment to the figural. When we contest our material and cultural conditions, what we address at the same time is the figural presumptions that brought us to this struggle in the first place.

It is precisely this relationship, the relationship between the figural and the material, that Butler's work on gender formation articulates. Her political project has been one whereby she unveils at the very local level, at the level of gender formation, this relationship between the material and the figural and its political potential. Lately, her work has turned towards a critique of the formation of a wider range of subjects and identities — such as the 'detainees' in Guantanamo Bay, the Palestinians, the Israeli state — but I would argue that what remains integral to her thought is the centrality of the body in analysing conflicting political situations. The political potentiality of any subject, its survival and more particularly its ability to re-invent its life and make itself intelligible, relies precisely on invoking this doubling of the body.

As explained earlier, various critiques of the political appear to engage with the materiality of the body and, in doing so, forgetting the ways in which language acts upon the body, ignoring the biographical, or imagining that some bodies are purely passive towards the powers that bring them into being, being submitted to an uncontested regime of sovereign-governmental power,<sup>116</sup> without adequately explaining how some bodies escape this totality of power. Butler's 'bodies' contest the primacy of the material by pointing out the complexities, which emerge when practices, such as writing, introspection (meditation), surgery and a plethora of others, begin to articulate the body, but without concurrently posing a supremacy of the figure. This doubling of bodies that she promotes is not a philosophical sophistry, but merely a demonstration of Butler's intellectual ability to unravel the ambiguities and ambivalences within philosophy. It is, on the contrary, a political impasse to think of this doubling and to think of what it does. I want to suggest that there is an implicit idea in 'How can I deny ...?', namely that by thinking about the doubling of the body and its endless moves, we could make intelligible (a) the ways in which power operates and (b) bodies that were cast as unintelligible.

If we were to go back a step and take another glance at the start of Butler's analysis of Descartes' 'First meditation', we could now see even more clearly how we can read what I have just suggested above. We are aware by now that, in order to perform this meditation, Descartes unloads his mind from any previous fixtures. As Butler suggests, this requires him to sever memory and dismember his body in order to proceed. But, towards the end of the meditation, he

---

<sup>116</sup> Agamben Giorgio *State of Exception* Chicago University Press Chicago and London 2005.

invokes his memory when he considers the infallibility of God. He particularly asks himself to remember that any opinions that doubt this are unreliable and fallible.<sup>117</sup> The meditation becomes something that will enable him to rewrite the memory of these opinions.<sup>118</sup> We not only have here a situation where that memory, that ‘... inner discourse of the body’<sup>119</sup> returns to haunt the text, but we find in the methodological approach that the very one who required the meditative or reading subject to dismember itself in order to be able to doubt the reality of the body and sensual world, to be suddenly projecting a different goal. As Butler observes, the ‘[m]editation now appears as a particular kind of action, one that claims, must be repeated, and that has as its goal the forcible imprinting ... of this same thought on the memory, an imprinting that is apparently forceful as God’s engraving is profound: indeed, both convey a certain formative violence, a rupture of surface, as the effect of writing’.<sup>120</sup> What then does she mean by this? While initially the meditation was set up as a process whereby the method of doubt would be used to establish what is the truthful source of knowledge, now it appears that the repetitive character of the meditation has as its primary aim to rewrite a certain memory, the memory of those that doubt the will and infallibility and paradoxically necessitates the engagement of memory: Descartes needs to remember and to remember he needs to write this memory, to include what he has already repudiated (the body) into writing. What this shows is that the meditation cannot be effective unless it engages force. In this case this force is parallel to the way in which God inscribes his will on Descartes. In order for Descartes to demonstrate that he is a rational being, he needs to inscribe on his memory the ridding of his old memory from his hard-drive, in the same way that God inscribes his will. But this rational subject does not come to him unmediated. It is the outcome of a rewriting of the body, of unwriting the body, which forcefully returns, both spectrally and materially, in written language. If the method of the meditation is contradicted in practice then, what one cannot help concluding, is that the formation of subjectivity cannot be founded naturally, by will of the God or a sovereign figure (whether this is the Sovereign *per se* or the law), nor is it a natural consequence of a cause, but it is rather a practice (meditation, writing) that requires discipline, the discipline of repeating what is considered to be already there (God, in the case of Descartes) in order to undo the violence that constitutes a differentiation and therefore an exclusion. But what we have also seen is that this performative act leaks through a body, a body that is both material and figural. A body that through its re-inscription into the text enables a wilful (agentic) subject to come into being. Butler’s reading of Descartes’ text allows us to see how integral is the body to the formation of subjects but, as already indicated, the body that she proposes or reveals is a body that is both material and figural. Moreover, she shows that this body is not naturally given, but rather it comes into being through practices and this allows us to see the phantasmatic character of the belief of a natural-foundational given subject to be found either in the will of God or by the mind. Descartes forces the body in and out of the ‘First meditation’, and in forcing it in and out, we can see both the power that enables this to be done

---

<sup>117</sup> Descartes above 84 at 99–100.

<sup>118</sup> Descartes above 84 at 99–100.

<sup>119</sup> Goodrich Peter *Languages of Law: From Logics of Memory to Nomadic Masks* Weidenfeld and Nicolson London 1990 at 34.

<sup>120</sup> Butler above 81 at 267.



(God) and the resistances this produces (the body). The political significance of this is enormous. Butler, like Foucault, is able to propose that the production of subjectivity is an ongoing process that, despite attempts to produce normative subjects, is always going to meet resistance.

### 3.0 POSTSCRIPT

This article was not meant to be a critique of Judith Butler's conceptualisation of the body. I rather wanted to show that criticisms on her work, criticisms that take her understanding of the body to be denigrated to the realm of language, have often omitted to comment that her work has been an ongoing exploration in understanding the relationship between the figural and the material body. I have shown how, in her essay *How can I deny?* she explains how the exclusion of the figural over the material or vice versa resurfaces the one excluded over the other, showing a non-causative relation to one another but nevertheless a relationship that we need to begin articulating. The paradigm of the Charles De Menezes' killing served as a reminder of precisely this: that the exclusion of the figural body, the body that materialises through speech, exposes us to a certain threat to life, a certain devaluation of life, an annihilation of his life, if our only understanding of the body remains within the constraints of knowledge based on material facts/acts. The possibility of a renewal of life, a life that can be worked outside the perimeters of a securitised knowledge, knowledge based merely on materiality can be attained within a certain politics of insecurity. Such a politics might require us to recognise that with our knowledge alone we cannot comprehend the relationship between our figural and material bodies. ●