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Undoing Gender (review)

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Reviews

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*
New York: Routledge, 2004, 273 pp.

In her most recent work, Judith Butler asks how we can undo the restrictive norms of gender and sexuality and considers the various ways in which we are all undone — by grief, gender, desire, and the Other. Butler maintains that norms are necessary and yet must be exceeded in the name of the future of the human. Perhaps more overtly autobiographical than any previous work, *Undoing Gender* asks what makes a gender livable. Butler’s guiding question is one of recognition: “Will the ‘human’ expand to include me in its reach?” (2).

Not until *Undoing Gender* has Butler seriously addressed the uncertain ontology of the self: the “I” as always already outside of itself, “ec-statically” elsewhere in the intricate web of the social relations that constitute it. With Hegel’s notions of desire and recognition underpinning her analysis, Butler presents a self that does not enter the world on its own but is made only by its entrance into culture and is subsequently undone, over and over. For Butler, that means we must think of our being in the world as a being together, never siphoned off from the Other. Consistently, Butler is concerned most with formulating ethical, nonviolent responses to the question posed to the Other: “Who are you?” That means living with an uncomfortable “unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other that undoes us” (35).

Throughout, Butler theorizes the problem of gender explicitly in terms of recognition and desire. In a work in which she confronts the criticisms of the French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, who sees alternative kinship models as a monstrosity, and in which Butler responds to Rosi Braidotti’s feminist Deleuzism, Butler is also able to pause over the lived lives of gender-deviant persons. Considering Brandon Teena’s story, Butler forcefully asserts that, “no anatomy enters gender without being done in some way” (143). She reflects on the life of David Reimer — a person born with a penis that was irreparably damaged in a botched circumcision, and who subsequently underwent “treatment” to become a woman — and interrogates the medico-juridical discourses that decided the futures of transgenders, transsexuals, and intersexed persons. “Longing for Recognition” turns to Jessica Benjamin’s recent psychoanalytic work on intersubjective recognition. Butler applauds Ben-

jamin for providing new and useful ways for thinking about the self, gender, and desire that dispense with the binary model of relationality. In the last essay, “Can the Other Philosophy Speak?” Butler reveals her own struggle with philosophy, as a philosopher somehow outside of philosophy but one intimately invested in it. One of the most memorable anecdotes is of a twelve-year-old Butler being asked what she wants to be when she grows up. “A philosopher or a clown” (234). Touché.

Before *Undoing Gender*, Butler never addressed the T or the I (transgender and intersex) in GLBTQI in any sustained way. In turning her gaze toward what is unthinkable even for many gays and lesbians, Butler has continued to push against the boundaries of the field she had a large part in creating. *Undoing Gender* constitutes a thoughtful and provocative response to the new gender politics and elegantly employs psychoanalysis, philosophy, feminism, and queer theory in an effort to pry open the future of the human. Butler carefully attends to contemporary culture, asking questions crucial to GLBTQI studies, ones that are ultimately not only about gays or lesbians but are affirmative of the human and all its possible futures.

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Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*.

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, xii + 215 pp.

There be also other imaginations that rise in men, though waking, from the great impression made in sense: as from gazing upon the sun, the impression leaves an image of the sun before our eyes a long time after; and from being long and vehemently attent upon geometrical figures, a man shall in the dark, though awake, have the images of lines and angles before his eyes; which kind of fancy hath no particular name, as being a thing that doth not commonly fall into men's discourse.

(Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 2)

Next to my copy of Gilles Deleuze's *On the Line* lies *Imagine Otherwise*, invitingly open. The reviewer's personal taste may have something to do with this accident. An academic orientation and obligation too may explain this intertextual disorder coextensive to the transitory chaos of a Sunday afternoon. Yet the contiguity seems more telling than that. A certain force outside the books thus assembled and lined up: a Spirit of the Age, maybe.

“To imagine otherwise is not about imagining as the other, but rather, is about imagining the other differently” (Chuh 9). The beauty of the opening formula is more than skin deep. As promised, the collection of four essays, insightfully con-