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# Being in Trouble

In the Company of Judith Butler

**I FIRST READ** *Gender Trouble* as a graduate student. It is hard for me to imagine now where I would have travelled if this text had not been one of my companions. *Gender Trouble* grabbed me from the first sentence of the preface.<sup>1</sup> It grabbed me because of how it claimed trouble. Let me remind you:

Contemporary feminist debates over the meaning of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate on in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do, precisely because that would get one in trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise into my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. (Butler 1990, vii)

We can witness immediately the rather startling ambition of this text: how it weaves together an approach to feminism and its own troubles, the anxiety of what might follow not having a stable or agreed object to bind feminism together; with a reorientation toward trouble as not just or more than a negative sense; and a re-thinking of trouble as pedagogy,

trouble as how we are taught the mechanisms of power (“my first critical insight”). I want to think in the company of Judith Butler about how trouble can be understood as feminist political ontology: as something we can claim *to be*, as feminists, which is to say, something *we do*, without assuming ourselves as behind that deed. Trouble can be a consequence of what we are not trying to avoid. It can cause trouble if you do not aim to make not causing trouble your cause. Trouble can be what we are we willing to be *in*. In returning to the trouble in *Gender Trouble*, I will also be more or less directly reflecting on my own intellectual journey as a scholar who resides in the fields of gender, sexuality as well as race studies (the life of a feminist scholar is hard to separate from the life of her fields) and how, by taking up the question of willfulness in my most recent work, I was picking up a lead from *Gender Trouble*.

A book can give us many leads. A book has many lives. In her preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999, vi) notes, “the life of the text has exceeded my intentions, and this is surely in part because of the changing context of its reception.” As her many readers know, *Gender Trouble* has travelled far and wide: within the academy (it has been cited over 30,000 times!), it has been picked up across a range of disciplines, from law, to literature, to philosophy, to Gender Studies, but also beyond the academy, becoming a reference point for activists, as well as those who work with sexual minorities and communities. Some of this travel might seem surprising given that this book is academic and rather difficult, in terms of its references, its languages. But we learn from this: that if a text can give words *for* something, a difficulty, a violence, an injustice, a dynamic, perhaps something that is coming up, in social life, in institutional life, as trouble; if it can name something that had yet to be named in quite the same way (even though it does not begin a new train of thought but continues a train of feminist thought) then people will find it, even if they do not find the language a lead; they will grab hold of it; they will persist with it.

A text can have many lives; a life can be lived through many texts. What we pick up can depend on where we are. Why did I find the language of trouble so appealing? Before I turn to the specific question of sex

and gender, of the trouble Butler exposes in or with these terms, I want to share the context of my own reception, and explain why the trouble in this text registered as an appeal. I first read this text when I was a feminist PhD student studying in a Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory (although it was not on the syllabus). It should not have been a problem to be a feminist student in such a centre. But I kept coming up against that environment of that centre (now I would call this coming up against *walls*); I kept asking questions or making suggestions that seemed to be “out of place,” questions that seemed to cause trouble. Sometimes this difficulty manifested as conflict: one tutor got so cross with me in an argument about Derrida’s use of the figure of “woman,” that she threw her cup of coffee down on a table and stormed out of the room. The coffee spilled all over me. I was startled, often, by the trouble I seemed to cause.

A question can be out of place. So what is in place? I remember one tutor teaching us that a theory has “two sides,” a story of desire and a story of the phallus. We were told, basically, to bracket the second story in order to engage with and be engaged by the first. I began to wonder whether “doing theory” was about engaging with a body of work by putting questions like phallogentrism or sexism into brackets. In effect we were being asked to bracket our concerns with the sexism at stake in what was read *as* theory as well as what we read *in* theory. Some of my questions were out of place as they were questions about what was in brackets and, in effect, questions about that bracketing. A question can dislodge a bracket.

The trouble a question can cause became my feminist pedagogy. Later, I remember submitting a critical reading of Derrida’s *Spurs* for one of my essays: a reading that later formed part of my chapter on “Woman” in my first book, *Differences that Matter* (1998). I was concerned with how statements made by some of the teachers like, “this is not about women,” often statements that assumed “women” as a referent that was as it were “outside” the texts of philosophy, were used to bypass any questions about the utility of the figure of woman within a male intellectual tradition. I kept noticing how students<sup>2</sup> as well as teachers used arguments about the arbitrary relations between signifier and signified to detach or even

“free” signifiers from their history: another style of bracketing, another cutting off point. And when the essay was returned to me the marker had scrawled in very large letters: “This is not theory! This is politics!” I thought then: if theory is not politics, I am glad I am not doing theory!

*Gender Trouble* helped me to make sense of such experiences, and indeed to think of “making sense” as feminist theory. A bracket could be understood as a container. And what I learnt from this text is that trouble too often works as a container: if you bracket what causes trouble you put trouble *out of action*. When you bring up what is bracketed, trouble leaks out of its container. Trouble is put *into action*. And what a mess: things spill all over the place. *Gender Trouble* helped me to think of this spillage as what we are working toward. This text refused to contain trouble: it thus did its own theoretical work (the questioning or subversion of identity, community, universality) by what it does *not* bracket, by how it makes sex and gender into the philosophical questions that allow us to retell what are assumed to be more general questions (including questions about desire).

And more than this: *Gender Trouble* teaches us how power is often naturalised through the *containment of trouble*. In other words, some things are troubled or viewed as trouble as a way of not troubling other things. So: gender can be admitted as something constructed, contingent, made, a fiction, as a way of not troubling “sex,” as a foundational category; and I might now add, ethnicity can be admitted as something constructed, contingent, made, a fiction, as a way of not troubling “race” as a foundational category. Trouble becomes something over *there*, as a way of not troubling what is *here*. Butler teaches us that the categories that are assumed as untroubled (we might say, uncontested because they are not contested) are the categories we must trouble. Trouble when it leaks from its containers, *throws everything into question*.

*Gender Trouble* by exposing the trouble not only of gender but also of sex (and indeed the trouble *with* the sex/gender distinction) throws everything into question. If you refuse to bracket certain questions when doing theory, you get into trouble. No wonder Butler’s work helped me to make sense of the trouble I kept “getting into” as a student of theory.

So I have no doubt that I have been influenced by specific arguments, concepts, and words (such as performativity) but I think what had the biggest impact on me was as much a certain stance or style I recognized as a kind of feminist disobedience; a preparedness “to make trouble,” by how one engages with a body we call “theory.”

*Gender Trouble* gave me an expanded idea of what a feminist theorist could do and could be. I had been encountering so much restriction. As a student I was told I had to give my love to this or that male theorist, to follow them, not necessarily as an explicit command but through an apparently gentle but increasingly insistent questioning: are you a Derridean; no, so are you a Lacanian, no, oh, ok are you a Deleuzian, no, then what? If not, then what? Maybe my answer should have been: if not, then not! I was never willing to agree to this restriction of possibility. No wonder I ended up writing a book on willfulness! It was the work of queer feminist philosophers such as Butler; it was the trouble of and in that work, that taught me how to refuse the demand to follow the official paths laid out by disciplines such as philosophy. If we can create our paths by not following, we still need others before us, those who, even if they began on the right philosophical tracks ended up being “derailed,” to borrow Butler’s own word for describing her intellectual trajectory.<sup>3</sup> In travelling on less stable grounds, queer feminist philosophy thinks with as well as on its feet. And this is what reading Butler’s work did for me: it put a spring in my step.

Making trouble: it can be the ground for a new kind of feminist work. We learn from being in trouble. We stay in trouble. We aim to stay in. As Butler (1990, vii) writes, again in the opening paragraph of the first preface: “Hence, I concluded that trouble was inevitable, and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.” Let us think again of why “trouble” is pedagogy, of why trouble can be an invitation to inhabit something in a way that is *better*. After all, we know from experience that getting in trouble can be hard. Trouble is often used as a threat (“don’t do that *or*”) or a reprimand (“you have done that *so*”). When we fear getting in trouble, we are shaped by its address. It might work like this: if you are not a woman in this way, if you are not a woman in the right way, you will

get in trouble. In order not to experience the consequences of being not, we might come to aim not to be “not.” We can note from this aim (not to be not) how trouble falls on subjects unevenly: you are more like to be in trouble the closer you get to what you are not supposed to be. Trouble becomes even more of a threat for those who live at the edges of social life: you are more likely to get in trouble, to fear the consequences of this “in,” or to fear this “in” as a consequence, the more you stray from the paths that are supposed to lead to happiness. Your body, your desires, might be registered as error: to err is to stray; to err is to go the wrong way. When you slip out of what or who you are supposed to be, you slip into trouble.

If gender is slippery, which gender surely is, gender is more slippery for some than others. Butler’s work teaches us about how we learn about gender. Gender is what we are assigned with; gender is how we are addressed in a certain way. Gender is thus what we receive from others, which is why gender trouble leads us to ask questions about vulnerability, questions that Butler takes up more explicitly in her recent work.<sup>4</sup> Being a lesbian can mean having trouble with gender, because the assignment of gender is impossible to separate from the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality, as Butler’s use of Monique Wittig in *Gender Trouble* made clear. Being a girl who wants a girl troubles the meaning of girl, and girl is already a troubling designation. Indeed, the sixth sentence of the first preface of *Gender Trouble* turns from the trouble of gender to the trouble of femininity: “that trouble sometimes euphemized some fundamentally mysterious problem usually related to the alleged mystery of all things feminine” (Butler 1990, vii). If being a lesbian makes you trouble the meaning usually assigned to being women (as being for men) and if women are already trouble, being a lesbian troubles trouble; double trouble, or at least, more trouble.

We learn more *about* assignments the more trouble we have completing them; trouble becomes a task because it is how we fail a task. A difficult history is the site of subversion; it is the opening of possibility. And this too is what I learnt from *Gender Trouble*: that possibility is opened up by what we fail to become. Possibility does not always feel good. Getting into trouble can be costly, painful. A feminist and queer

politics of trouble might require that we share the costs of getting into trouble; that we find ways to support others in the project of creating what Butler calls “liveable lives.” Indeed in her preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes:

[T]his book is written then as part of the life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have, some success in increasing the possibilities for a liveable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins. (Butler 1999, xxvi)

Can we think of trouble making as a collective struggle?

It is hard to be trouble, on your own; and being in trouble can often mean feel lonely, like you are being cast out or cast away, no longer nurtured or protected by those who are supposed to love you, those for whom you have failed (and thus exposed) a condition of love. In my recent work I have taken up willfulness as a way of exploring the collectivity of trouble. Willfulness like trouble can be more than a negative valence even if that valence has exhausted much of its history. Willfulness as trouble can be pedagogy; we learn from this assignment, we are often assigned willful when we have failed an assignment. Willfulness helps me to think the relation between “gender trouble” and what we can call simply “feminist trouble.”

Why willfulness? Let me share with you a typical definition of willfulness: “asserting or disposed to assert one’s own will against persuasion, instruction, or command; governed by will without regard to reason; determined to take one’s own way; obstinately self-willed or perverse.” We can learn from a dictionary definition; we can bring it back to life. Those who are not persuaded, who disobey a command, are judged as unreasonable, obstinate and perverse. Judgments can litter our worlds. Willfulness teaches us something about whom or what is deemed trouble: to become a feminist, one who speaks of gender politics as gender trouble, you become understood as *the cause of your own trouble*. And this is my lead: to work out, to work through, in the company of Judith Butler, how trouble sticks or how trouble becomes *sticky*.

To declare oneself as a feminist is to be willing to get into trouble. And when you are willing to get into trouble you become willful. Just the word feminism is heard as an assertion of will “against persuasion, instruction or command.” If feminists are often called willful, then feminism is understood as a problem of will: a way of going one’s own way, a way of going the wrong way. The word “willfulness” exists in close relation to other words, such as stubborn, obstinate and contrary, as words that imply a problem of character. If feminists speak of wrongs, this speech becomes understood as unreasonable, a product of having an obstinate and unyielding nature. When we speak *of* wrong we are *in* the wrong. No wonder feminism is trouble. The labour of doing feminist work – of showing say that heterosexuality is not natural or inevitable – requires giving support to trouble makers.

In my recent book, *Willful Subjects* (2014) I explore how feminist, queer and anti-racist histories can be thought of as histories of those who are willing to be willful, who are willing to turn a diagnosis into an act of self-description. Alice Walker, for example, describes a “womanist” in the following way:

A black feminist or feminist of color [...]. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one [...]. Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (Walker 2005, xi, emphases in original)

Walker suggests here that the word willful conveys what being a black feminist or feminist of colour is all about. Even if feminists are trouble makers some of us make trouble for feminism. The angry black feminist or feminist of colour is a trouble maker within feminism. We trouble feminism; double trouble, or at least, more trouble.

What a charge. Willfulness is a charge made by someone against someone: a negative charge. As with trouble, we can wrestle this word away from a history of negation. Willfulness can become a charge in Walker’s sense: being *in* charge. If we are charged with willfulness, we can accept and mobilize this charge. To accept a charge is not simply



to agree with it. Acceptance can mean being *willing to receive*. I distinguish between willfulness as a character diagnosis (as what is *behind an action*) and willfulness as the effect of a diagnosis (as what is required to *complete an action*). Sometimes you can only stand up by standing firm. Sometimes you can only hold on by becoming stubborn. No wonder that so many words cluster around feminists, words that imply a problem with being feminist, and even, more strongly, a problem with *feminist being*.

Sometimes we have to become what we are judged as being to survive that judgement. Trouble becomes a matter of being; willfulness, too. We can take these judgments on; we can turn these judgments into rebellious commands. Of course our own rebellion is still judged by the very terms we take on. To be filled “with will” can be to be emptied “of thought” as if speaking about injustice, about power, about inequality, is just another way of getting your way. Those who “get in the way” are often judged as “getting their own way.” Critique and opposition is diagnosed as self-interest. No wonder willfulness is required in becoming feminist. You might have to be willful to persist with being feminist or a feminist being.

You are judged as intending the disruption you cause. Trouble itself becomes assumed as what you are intended to cause. Perhaps to do trouble better, we are willing to cause what we are assumed to have intended. Trouble becomes a style of politics; willfulness, too. When willfulness becomes a style of politics, it means not only being willing not to go with the flow, but being willing to cause its obstruction. There is a long history here: of how we put our bodies in the way. We might think of the suffragettes chaining their bodies to gate posts; we might think of hunger strikes, the obstruction of the passage into the body, demonstrations that aim to stop the flow of human traffic, as well as the general flow of the economy.

Willfulness might be required to march on the streets, to come out and populate the world as feminists. But willfulness could also be required in more ordinary places. If as women we are constantly being looked over, silenced, we might have to become willful just to appear; just to be heard. We might have to become willful to keep going, to keep

coming up; as well as to keep bringing matters like phallogentrism and sexism up. When we bring such matters up, we become trouble, all over again. Even when trouble seems inevitable, we have to work to grasp its nettle, to keep going or persisting with it, because trouble can sting. If we cause trouble, trouble can only become our cause through shared effort or work. To share trouble is to be in company as well as to be in trouble; it is a better way of being in trouble.

In following a lead from trouble to willfulness, I have been travelling in the company of Judith Butler. A companionship of trouble makers is a feminist companionship.

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## NOTES

1. This comment piece is primarily based on the first six sentences of the preface of the first edition of *Gender Trouble* (1990).
2. One time I challenged a fellow student for his constant use of a swear words that refer to female genitalia, he cited Saussure as self-justification.
3. Butler used this term during a discussion in a roundtable discussion at the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis, Amsterdam, on April 19, 2013.
4. In an interview with Butler (forthcoming) I asked her about the relationship between trouble and vulnerability. This was Butler's response: "You ask about vulnerability, and I want to say that it is there from the start. 'From the start' in *Gender Trouble*, but also 'from the start' for any of us, so my answer is something of a joke. If, for instance, we think about gender assignment as 'being called a name' then we are affected by gender terms before we have any sense of what they mean or any understanding of what kind of effects they have. Indeed, this follows, I think, from the fact that we are affected by the ways we are addressed, and those modes of address start early and against our will; they are there, as it were, from the start. Sometimes those modes of address embrace and animate, but they can inaugurate a chain of injury as well. So from the start, we are affected, even if 'being ignored' or 'being called by injurious names' are the modes of address that affect us, install themselves in us, move or stop us in various ways. So we might say that gender assignment finds us, from the start, vulnerable to its effects. We are both vulnerable and animated by those effects, so I do not mean to associate vulnerability with pure passivity or being without a will. It may be that the will is formed precisely through this process."