

**Head Games:**  
**Conceptualizing Judith Butler's Idea of the Materiality of Sex in *Bodies That Matter***  
**Amanda Piccarreto**

**ABSTRACT:**

This essay discusses Judith Butler's concept, "materiality of the body," and illustrates the power of repetitive language, which arguably structures the binary systems not only of gender, but also of sex. This essay raises ethically-important questions in order to provoke thought about the oppressive nature of projecting language onto our bodies by labeling them based on certain parts; the biological and psychological problems with a binary idea of gender and sex; and the innate inequality created by separating people into sexes, which is the heart of gender-based violence.

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"Oral sex" perfectly exemplifies the importance of language. Language is laden with the invisible power to create images that stick with us through repetition, thus evoking specific emotions, which is necessary in literature and art, but poses a problem when projected onto the body in an attempt to construct set ideas on gender and sex. The way I started this essay may have surprised you because two simple words can create an entire scenario in your mind, and using them out of that context causes shock and confusion. When using the term "oral sex," I mean applying spoken language to our bodies, thus creating fixed notions of sex and gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explores this concept, which she calls "materiality of the body," and raises awareness of the dangers involved in doing so. Butler poses the question "*What about the materiality of the body?*" This question is ethically important for several reasons: the oppressive nature of projecting language onto our bodies by labeling them based on certain parts; the biological and psychological problems with a binary idea of sex and gender; and the innate inequality created by separating people into sexes, which is the heart of gender-based violence.

First, we must take a closer look at the power of language, so we may unveil its capability to insidiously enslave us. Though we have the ability to speak freely, our words oppress us when we project them onto the body and create our own societal constraints. Butler writes, "And if I persisted in this notion that bodies were in some way *constructed*, perhaps I really thought that words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance." Accordingly, if we persist in this notion that we have constructed our bodies through language, which I insist that we do, then words hold incredible power which we have succumbed to by allowing society's repetitive drumming of "man is this" and "woman is that" to limit our expression of true self. I admit this notion feels slightly preposterous, except for brief moments when I sense deep in my gut that this is the truth, which makes me wonder if even our thoughts are shackled by the deep-rooted history of "oral sex" creating labels based on the apparent materiality of the body. If this is true, then the language-induced materiality of the body is dangerous; with oppression comes rebellion, and the bastard child of the two is usually violence.

Since we will persist with Butler's notion that sex is constructed through language, we need to understand both how this happens and why it matters. Without fully conceptualizing these two issues, needed change cannot transpire. Butler emphasizes the need for understanding how this comes about by asking, "How precisely are we to understand the ritualized repetition by which such norms produce and stabilize not only the effects of gender but the materiality of sex?" Plainly stated, how do we create ideas through language, which otherwise do not exist, and then live under the assumption that they have always been? The

obvious answer lies in her question, repetition, but there is much more living in the latent substance of this entire concept, and that hidden part is essential. And even if we cannot completely access that obscured portion, can our thoughts on it alone decompose the prevailing structure built by old language, shifting the power into our hands to implement change? If language is in fact powerful and our thoughts are constructed by words, then “yes” seems to succeed as the appropriate answer. So, the next natural question which Butler asks is, “And can this repetition, this rearticulation, also constitute the occasion for a critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms?” This question is imperative, as it brings up gender norms, a monster that “oral sex” has created by labeling sex and gender based on the materiality of the body. Butler points out, “Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender.” With that said, what happens to those who do not fit perfectly into the binary mold of gender, such as hermaphrodites or transgendered individuals? How do we classify them when we don’t know exactly what they are, according to the rules relating to the materiality of the body? Or, as the question should be, why do we feel the need to shove them into one of our dualistic classifications, in which they feel out of place? Furthermore, what happens when a person we consider a woman undergoes a hysterectomy or a person we consider a man endures a testectomy? One would think that the person is no less woman or man than before the surgery. But, why is the person now without a womb somehow superior in the respects of “womanhood” to the person born with a penis who feels that they fit into the category of beings that society labels female? Somehow, simple semantics separate us in such a way that inequality is inevitable. If we took these gender categories away, or if we kept them and added more based on an attribute other than simply the materiality of the body, would that change who we are? If the answer is yes, then who are we really? I’d hope that there is more material to us than the “linguistic substance” created by “oral sex.”

Moreover, how does violence arise from using language to label anyone born with a penis and testicles “man” and anyone born with a vagina, ovaries, and a womb “woman”? Butler states, “To claim that sex is already gendered, already constructed, is not yet to explain in which way the ‘materiality’ of sex is forcibly produced.” The key word in her statement is “forcibly.” After all, what is done forcibly that does not either provoke violence itself or instill the fear that the lack of conformity will result in such? The nature in which sex and gender have been produced inherently produces violence. “Force” is a cunning word, which sounds fairly innocent, until language exudes its power to expose its ferocious connotation. *Forced* sex is rape, the *forced* taking of another’s possessions is robbery, the *forced* infliction of pain onto another person is abuse, *forced* labor is slavery, and so on. However, there is no term for *forcing* people into a set idea of sex and gender. Does that not impact their lives enough to deserve a designated word? If one, such as a homosexual, refutes the role society enforces, the enforcer will dislike this act of rebellion, which opens the door to violence. Is that not the root of hate crimes against gays? Furthermore, the violence is not limited to those who choose to rebel, in this binary system. As “oral sex” creates two separate groups based on the materiality of the body, it allows room for one side to take on the dominant role; separation through language signifies inequality, does it not? Would some people still make practice of forced female circumcision if gender labels did not exist based on the materiality of the body?

I cannot pretend that I know the answers to all of the questions that Judith Butler or even I have posed, but that is not to say that these questions are not important; the questions in need of the most attention are those that come without definitive answers. We need to ask ourselves, who will we hurt by asking such questions? And arguably more important, who are we hurting when we choose to ignore such questions? One might argue that the degree of change necessary to reconstruct the binary idea of sex and gender based on the materiality of the body is impossible. To that, I must ask why? Simply thinking about these ideas creates possibility that may not have previously existed. For instance, when you first read “oral sex,”

what image came to mind? How did you feel? And, did that feeling change once you gained the understanding of how I meant it, so that each time you read those words in this paper you related it less to a sexual act and more to the projection of language onto the body to create an idea of sex and gender? We have looked at the power of language and its creation of an extensive idea that has insidiously oppressed us our entire lives, abjected innocent people due to inherent problems in its binary structure, and created inequality harboring the capacity for violence. If language created this structure, let us see if our thoughts can bring about words to deconstruct the impacts of "oral sex," and build something into which we can *all* fit comfortably.