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## Review: Material Matters: Bodies and Rhetoric

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# REVIEW: *Material Matters: Bodies and Rhetoric*

**Krista Ratcliffe**

Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley, eds. *Rhetorical Bodies*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999. 395 pp.

Mary M. Lay. *The Rhetoric of Midwifery: Gender, Knowledge, and Power*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000. 239 pp.

Mary M. Lay, Laura J. Gurak, Clare Gravon, and Cynthia Myntti, eds. *Body Talk: Rhetoric, Technology, Reproduction*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2000. 308 pp.

**W**hen Gwendolyn Brooks died in December 2000, a *New York Times* obituary quoted her as saying, “I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street. [ . . . ] I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner, and I could look first on one side and then the other. There was my material” (Watkins).

Consider Brooks’s last sentence: “There was my material.”

Such a simple sentence. Such complex resonances.

How may we read Brooks’s use of the term *material*? As the ideas that she wrote about? As the physical and spatial matter in her apartment and on the streets of Bronzeville (South Chicago)? As evidence (as in law) important enough to influence the outcome of a case . . . or a life . . . or a poem? As the language or terms that make up her poetry? As the competing ideologies that informed her life? Or perhaps the term *material* signifies a combination of all of the above? If we take this combination

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as our point of departure, Brooks's sentence offers us a concept of *material* that signifies bodies of knowledge, bodies of matter (people and things), bodies of evidence, embodied discourses, and a corpus of historically grounded cultural structures. What Brooks's "simple" sentence has in common with all the books under review here is a consideration of the term *material* in all its permutations as well as a consideration of its relationship to bodies and rhetorics. In sum, the books under review all pose the following questions: What is a material body? What is a material rhetoric? What are their intersections? And what are the implications of these intersections for rhetorical studies and for life beyond the academy?

Before we explore how the books under review engage these questions, it is worth noting that, in addition to Brooks's significations, the term *material* has a long and checkered history in philosophy, rhetoric, and politics. The most common association that readers of this journal may make with *material* is its Marxist manifestation as historical materialism and its post-Marxist manifestation as cultural materialism. In his "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Karl Marx discusses the practice of *historical materialism* as follows: "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (11–12), whether that "social being" emerges within a hunter-gatherer society, a tribal society, a feudal society, a capitalist society, or a communist one. Within this theoretical frame, Marxist critique works via class consciousness to demystify mystifications of the economic base (which is posited as a material reality that exists outside discourse) and, consequently, to foster revolution to change the economic system that produces class-based inequities. A century later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno describe a practice of *cultural materialism*, which they posit not as a repudiation of Marx's historical materialism but rather as a corrective to it. Rejecting the idea of an objective reality (i.e., positivism), they foreground culture, including language, in their concept of the material: "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. [. . .] The stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers' needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them" (126, 144). Horkheimer and Adorno claim that denying the workings of this culture industry and focusing instead on objective reality results in "blindness and dumbness" about economics, culture, and language (164). Within this theoretical frame, a post-Marxist critique works via discursive and cultural consciousness to expose how discourse mediates culture (which is posited as a material reality that includes discourse) and, consequently, to foster recognition of and intervention in dysfunctional discourses so as to effect social change.

Historical materialism and cultural materialism enact a troubled relationship. For some scholars, these two materialisms engender competing scholarly camps. For example, Teresa Ebert attacks ludic feminism and champions a materialist feminism based on a strict return to Marx's historical materialism, which she defines as economic practices within "a reality independent from the consciousness of the subject and outside language and other media" (24); as a consequence of her stance, she posits clear distinctions between ludic feminists and materialist feminists (24–38). For other scholars, these distinctions are less clear. For example, Rosemary Hennessy argues for a materialist feminism in which historical and cultural materialisms work together to critique the interworkings of the economic, the cultural, and the symbolic (à la Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe)<sup>1</sup> (59–66). Although the ways in which such debates about materialism play out are beyond the scope of this piece, suffice it to say that in its various permutations (and there are many), materialism drives the Marxist, marxist, neo-Marxist, and post-Marxist theories that, in turn, drive contemporary critiques and pedagogies associated with a variety of theoretical camps in a variety of disciplines. Evidence for this claim may be seen in texts that I encountered during the last two days of writing this review. An interdisciplinary journal called *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* takes as its charge the "recovery and renewal of the critical and explanatory potential of classical Marxism" (*Historical Materialism*). In *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique* (2000), Bruce Horner employs Raymond Williams's concept of "the materiality of culture" as the grounds to argue (quite rightly, I think) that the work of composition is too often "separated from the material social conditions of its production, and so imagined as, at most, acting autonomously on, against, or in spite of but not with and within such conditions" (xvii). And in her dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee graduate student Roberta Harvey argues for a composition theory and pedagogy based on the convergence of rhetoric, materialism, and feminism.

Despite the common association of materialism with Marxist and post-Marxist theories, materialism predates Marx. Time, space, and the rhetorical purpose of reviewing books prevent me from engaging the standard history, tracing materialisms from pre-Socratic thinkers through Aristotle and Lucretius through Kant and Marx and beyond to Althusser and post-Althusserian theories. But my rhetorical purpose does demand that I emphasize an important move made by twentieth-century theorists: namely, their complicating the idea of materiality as well as its relationship with bodies and discourse. As Hennessy argues, post-Althusserian theory "reformulates the empiricist notion of materiality based in an objective reality outside discourse by including the discursive within the materiality out of which the social is produced" (75). No longer is language imagined as a transparent tool that anyone may use, first, to demystify reality and, second, to explain it clearly; instead language

is imagined as ideologically implicated in its historical grounding, not simply representing reality but constructing (in varying degrees) our perceptions of reality.

Feminist theory in the twentieth century provides a fertile forum for exemplifying this shift in materialism's relationship with language. In 1929, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* asserted the importance of the material body to women's writing (in both process and product), arguing that "[t]he book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (78). For Woolf, the sentence and the sequence of women's writing must be adapted to the rhythms of women's bodies if women's writings are to possess truth and integrity. In decades that followed, feminist critics furthered Woolf's line of reasoning about the body to produce the "first principle" of early women's studies programs: that is, the distinction between sex and gender, with *sex* signifying biological differences between men and women and *gender* signifying socially constructed differences in attitudes and actions associated with men and women. As a result, sex was imagined as grounded in the body; gender, in culture. The result? Gender became a theorized cultural category; sex became an untheorized material given. Then in 1993 Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* challenged this untheorized given by asking "how and why 'materiality' has become a sign of irreducibility" (28). In other words, how and why did *sex* become a protected term, located somewhere outside analyses of gender? After all, Butler argued, just as our understanding of gender is filtered through language, so too is our understanding of sex. For all of us are born into already-existing language systems with already-existing categories for *both* sex and gender; hence our identifications and disidentifications and our identities emerge in relation to these terms, even (perhaps especially) if we resist them.<sup>2</sup> For Woolf and Butler, the material matters of body and discourse clearly matter. Conversations about these matters are continued, indeed complicated, by the books under review.

Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley's *Rhetorical Bodies* emerges from the 1997 Penn State Rhetoric Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, which explored the material in terms of material bodies and material rhetorics. For contributors to this book, *bodies* signifies people (e.g., Demi Moore), cultural artifacts (e.g., medical patents), knowledge (e.g., genetic coding research), and cultural spaces both public and private (e.g., memorial sites and homes wherein HIV tests are conducted). In Crowley's afterword (a must-read), she credits feminists from "Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Daly" with beginning conversations about the body's materiality and its rhetoricity (358), which is not surprising given that "[t]he connection between [women's] inability to own property and their inability to claim legal rights to their own and their children's bodies was not lost on first-wave feminists" (359). Crowley argues that such conversations encourage us not just to "understand" the material body and discursive constructions of the body but also to "intervene" in constraining constructions (359). Desiring to intervene in the mind/body duality as it works

to constrain bodily boundaries in U.S. culture, Crowley contemplates “the interestedness of boundary-drawing and distinction-making”: she argues that “when someone is named as a witch, a factory worker, a rustic, or an illiterate, someone else profits from that distinction” (363). Given that naming and negotiating profit fall solidly within the material realm (which includes both bodies and rhetorics), Crowley demonstrates how the physical body and the rhetorical body are one-yet-not-the-same: they are one in that rhetorical constructs of *body* are embodied within physical bodies of people; they are not the same in that the matter of bodies is not the matter of discourse. In making such a move, Crowley challenges, and invites readers to challenge, the binary logic (such as mind/body) that haunts Western culture.

Also evoking the theme of one-and-yet-not-the-same, Jack Selzer’s introduction, “Habeas Corpus,” takes on a significant problem confronting rhetorical studies: a dearth of theorizing about the material, materiality, and materialisms. Although these terms emerge in rhetoric and composition scholarship, they are usually used in service of other projects and rarely engaged on their own terms; James Berlin and John Trimbur’s 1992 claim—that the “connections between Marxism and rhetoric by and large remain to be made”—still resonates in 2001 (7). To address this problem, Selzer asks readers to imagine the body as physical entity and, simultaneously, as rhetorical construct; he also asks readers to imagine discourse as physical entity and rhetorical construct. Within this framework, Selzer poses a plethora of important questions about the material, the body, and the study of rhetoric:

If the question of materiality has indeed been deferred in rhetoric, why is that so? What barriers have stood in the path of articulating a more material rhetoric? How would a material rhetoric permit us to rethink what is, and what is not, the province of rhetoric? How does a “material” notion of rhetoric contrast with “idealist” notions? What is the fit between particular rhetorical theories and the material, historical events that generated them? In what ways is rhetorical theory tied to the circumstances of physical embodiment? [. . .] And how will material rhetorics delineate ethics for a culture confronting material crises in public policy: the politics of race and ethnicity; the issues related to “family values” that revolve around sexual and gender identities; or the choices revolving around reproduction, DNA codings and genome projects, and the spread of disease? (10–11)

Too long to quote here in its entirety, Selzer’s list of questions not only frames this collection but should inform disciplinary conversations about material bodies that live within complex webs of material signifying systems. Many yet-to-be-written dissertations, articles, and books no doubt lie within Selzer’s questions. To justify such research, interested scholars need look no further than to Berlin and Trimbur, who argue that “[i]n a sense the ‘failure’ of Marxism detaches it from the political parties and state systems of Soviet orthodoxy, making it available again as a critical and utopian project” (8).

The fifteen contributors to *Rhetorical Bodies* examine cultural bodies in relation to signifying systems. Specifically, the contributors locate different cultural sites where material discursive webs are attached to material reality. (For readers of Virginia Woolf, the contributors' method echoes Woolf's claim that "fiction is like a spider's web, attached [to reality] at all four corners" [41].) By focusing on cultural sites and their associated discourses, the contributors demonstrate that materiality may be introduced into rhetorical studies not just in terms of the subjects/objects studied but also in terms of their associated discourses. Collectively, the contributors' arguments repudiate dominant folk theories of language in the U.S. (which posit language as a transparent medium for conveying thought) and celebrate the tropological function of language as well as the material effects of this function.

For example, Carol Blair points to public memorial sites, such as the Vietnam Women's Memorial, the AIDS memorial quilt, the Civil Rights Memorial, and the Witch Trials Tercentenary Memorial, as spaces where materiality may be introduced to complicate twentieth-century rhetorical studies' fascination with symbolism (18) and "the residue of liberal humanism" (21). Susan Wells offers medical dissection (specifically the practices of nineteenth-century women physicians) as a material site that also functions as a trope, which enables us to "imagine an object of inquiry that is both material and stable, and also constructed and signifying" (69). Christine De Vinne presents cannibal bodies from the American West as a site "for evidence of the cannibalizing potential within all discourse" (77). Karyn Hollis suggests working women's poetry as a site for exposing bridges between "the textual and mental" and "the material and corporeal" (99). Wendy Sharer proposes the "physical and material conditions of historical research" as a site for refiguring material influences on historiography, offering insightful comments for those of us who read and write histories of rhetoric (120). Peter Mortensen submits the rustic body for consideration, specifically its continually being troped "illiterate" within a class-conscious society so that non-rustic bodies might pursue their own "social advancement" (163).

Rejecting jeremiads about new technology and making a compelling case via cross-cultural and transhistorical examples, Lester Faigley offers the World Wide Web as a site for re-cognizing "that literacy has *always* been a material, multimedia construct, even though we only now are becoming aware of this multidimensionality and materiality" (175–76). John Schilb (who coins the anthology's best title, "Autobiography after Prozac") puts historical materialism into play with "psychological materialism" (defined as the meeting of the brain and the mind) and offers the convergence of these two materialisms as a site for contemplating how the popularity of antidepressants and the accompanying "new accounts of selfhood" may "affect autobiographical rhetoric" (203). To expose material links between words and experiences, Christina Haas explores the dynamic between conceptual constructs (the public-private dyad) and cultural artifacts (a legal document, specifically the perma-

nent injunction “issued [by] the Court of Common Pleas in Dorset County, Ohio, and posted on the front door of an abortion clinic” [219]). And in a similar move, J. Scott Blake examines Confide, a Johnson and Johnson home HIV test kit, and the discourses associated with it. Drawing from the lives of Malcolm Forbes, Joey Stefano, Rock Hudson, and Liberace, Melissa Jane Hardie offers the “figure of the beard” as a site for theorizing “the rhetoricity of bodies and the material effects of rhetorical acts” (283). Barbara Dickson proffers the pregnant body of Demi Moore on the 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair* as a site for exploring how “multiple discourses and material practices collude and collide [. . .] to produce an object that momentarily destabilizes common understandings and makes available multiple readings,” which may (or may not!) impart agency for change (298). Yameng Liu looks to the body of Dick Morris and the discourses associated with his fall from power to ask about “the nature of political interests,” “the relationship between rhetoric and politics,” and “the relationship between rhetoric and ethics” (324). And Catherine Condit fingers the body of knowledge about DNA as a site for exposing the fact that language (like genetic coding) is both a “coding system” and “a complex set of material processes,” not simply a “neutral site or conveyer of abstract information” (327).

Although all contributors envision a connection between material sites and their associated discourses, they offer an even more important contribution to rhetorical studies: evidence that discourse is itself a material object and a material practice. They demonstrate that discourse possesses an agency of its own, an agency that always produces material effects, whether we are overwhelmed by it or whether we harness it for our own ends. Just as radiation fields permeate bodies and (un)consciously affect our cell functions, so too do cultural discourses permeate our bodies and (un)consciously socialize our attitudes and actions. So to hark back to Crowley, once we understand the materiality of this discursive phenomenon, we increase our potential not just for understanding it but for intervening in its dysfunctions.

One such intervention is demonstrated in Mary M. Lay’s *The Rhetoric of Midwifery: Gender, Knowledge, and Power*. As the title indicates, Lay’s study focuses on material bodies and material rhetorics—specifically, the connection of midwives’ bodies to concrete language and abstract knowledge about midwifery. The study emerges from Lay’s ethnographic research on the 1991–95 Minnesota hearings that investigated whether or not to license direct-entry midwives, who are also known as “lay, empirical, independent, or traditional” midwives (4). (By the way, I love the serendipity of Lay’s stumbling upon these hearings when meeting a friend for lunch.) Although the hearings resulted in no change in Minnesota’s licensing practices, leaving direct-entry midwives in that state “to practice in legal limbo” (15), the book offers fascinating commentary on relationships among individual women’s experiences and the social construction of woman, on ideologies of birth, on expert vs. nonexpert



knowledge, on constructions of science, and on the function of narrative and argument as evidentiary genres. Influenced by the voices of Michel Foucault, Carol Smith-Rosenberg, and the women participants in the midwifery hearings, this study not only narrates a history of midwifery for scholars and activists but also delineates policy issues and definitions that might help other organizations engaged in grassroots efforts to legitimize midwifery within medical and government institutions.

As the subtitle indicates, Lay uses the Minnesota midwifery hearings to theorize intersections of power, knowledge, gender, and discourse. So in addition to making pertinent claims about midwifery, Lay's study also serves as an excellent model of ethnographic research and contributes to conversations about the intersections of gender and rhetorical theory. In terms of ethnographic method, the study strikes an effective balance between narrative and analysis, specifically between participant narratives and observer analyses. Readers hear the participants' voices in the debate, yet they also hear Lay's self-aware voice framing the participants' voices. As any ethnographer knows, given the plethora of research data collected (especially during four years), this balance between narrative and analysis can be hard to achieve. Beginning ethnographers, especially, would benefit from close study of Lay's method and resulting product. In terms of rhetorical theory, Lay's last chapter challenges readers to think more deeply about the following issues: (1) positing women's bodies as a ground of knowledge; (2) according women the social status needed to make an argument; (3) rethinking the (im)possibilities of government genres, such as policy statements, for expressing women's issues; (4) developing "collaborative processes that grant equal rhetorical standing to all voices" in a policy group (184); (5) using women's body knowledge to challenge institutionalized knowledge, particularly AMA medical knowledge; and (6) linking perceptions of personal power to bodily functions, such as giving birth or assisting in birth. In Lay's examination of these issues, she exposes how gender, power, and knowledge are mediated by language in ways that either afford or deprive women of a sense of agency. Her conclusion? Agency emerges when women's experiential knowledge is validated; agency wanes when experiential knowledge is not validated.

In *Body Talk: Rhetoric, Technology, Reproduction*, Lay joins Laura Gurak, Clare Gravon, and Cynthia Myntti in editing the work that resulted from a 1995 interdisciplinary conference, hosted at the University of Minnesota and entitled "Women, Gender, and Science: What Do Research on Women in Science and Research on Gender and Science Have to Do with Each Other?" The book's controlling question is—to whom should we listen? This question is posed by the editors in the following terms:

Technoscience and technomedicine permeate private lives, turning intimacy inside out, appropriating even the language of the self. If we listen only to the experts, a vista of expanding human control over nature is optimistically displayed. If we listen also

to the women who are the targets of the new knowledge, a more ambiguous future and a more conflicted discursive landscape displace the clinical cheer. (ix)

Divided into three sections and framed by the editors' introduction and afterword, *Body Talk* examines myriad devices, drugs, and procedures associated with women's reproductive health and argues that, like language, these are not merely medical tools but also material sites whose rhetorics may be analyzed in order to understand and critique culture (3). With a nod to Foucault, the editors assert that their book is about "bio-power and its relationship to authoritative knowledge systems, what we call body talk—how language constructs bodies and reproductive technologies" (6); they further assert that the "chapters look at how discourse creates realities and perceptions, empowers and marginalizes certain voices, shapes bodies and technologies, and frames public policy" (7), its purpose finally being to redress women's feelings of "guilt, failure, and anxiety" often associated with (the perceived need for) reproductive technologies (x).

Because the interdisciplinary articles collected here perform rhetorical analyses of diction, argumentative strategies, motives, and visuals, they not only perform the editors' desire to critique cultural constructions of reproduction, but they also join scholarly conversations about rhetorical theory and praxis. In the first section, entitled "Historical Bases of Reproductive Discourses," Jeanette Herrle-Fanning explores how eighteenth-century male physicians professionalized their own status by constructing concepts of women's reproductive bodies in ways that co-opted the role of midwife for themselves and denigrated women actually practicing as midwives. Kathleen Marie Dixon analyzes the rhetorical tactics in C. T. Javert's "psychogenic theory of spontaneous abortion," or miscarriage (49), in order to critique more generally "discourse patterns of science" (51). Martha H. Verbrugge, quite interestingly, traces how physical educators constructed menstruation from 1900 to 1940, arguing that their curricula and rules conceived menstruation "in terms that enhanced their authority over the female body while undermining the claims of other experts" (68). And Chloë Diepenbrock shows how gynecological case histories, written up in women's magazines from 1977 to 1990, "indoctrinat[ed] our daughters and granddaughters with messages about the normality of assisted reproduction, inviting our collusion" (100).

In the second section, "Reproduction, Language, and Medical Models," Celeste M. Condit explores the changes in women's medical "choices" as U.S. culture shifts from a germ model of disease to a genetic model of disease—facilitated, of course, by the human genome project (125). Laura Shanner argues, quite convincingly, that women employing new reproductive technologies (NRTs) often find their clinical experiences to be "disturbingly negative in ways that surpass physical discomforts and medical risks: common linguistic and visual images of women in North American, Australian, and British infertility clinics are often insulting, diminishing, and

objectifying rather than supportive” (142). Lyn Turney examines the clinical discourse associated with surgical sterilization as contraception and questions the accompanying representation of women’s bodies—that women’s bodies are being transformed from “the dangerous reproductive body into an uncomplicated site of sexual pleasure” (179). And Lisa M. Mitchell compares “pregnancy guidebooks popular in Greece and in Canada in order to illustrate the ways in which rhetorical constructions of pregnant women’s bodies and experiences are culturally distinct” (184); for example, the dominant patient-practitioner model in Canada resembles a “consumer-provider relationship” (199), while the dominant patient-practitioner model in Greece resembles “a more authoritarian and paternalistic” relationship (200).

In the third section, “Reproduction and Legal/Policy Issues,” Beth Britt astutely argues that a 1987 Massachusetts mandate (An Act Providing a Medical Definition of Infertility) and its associated discourses normalized infertility and fertility in the following ways: the act “both places the infertile within the realm of standard medical practice (thereby helping the infertile feel less isolated and more normal) and authorizes a system that differentiates the infertile from the fertile (thereby reinforcing their abnormal status)” (209). Drawing from her midwifery research, Mary Lay critiques 1990s legal statutes associated with lay, or direct-entry, midwives across the U.S. to show how these legal discourses construct “birth [as] a risky business best handled in a hospital setting” and “birth at home [as . . .] not only unusual but also potentially irresponsible” (228). Beverly Sauer examines a 1994 warning, issued by the state of Maine, that advises pregnant women to avoid eating lobster livers (tomalleys) because high levels of dioxin had been detected in them; specifically, Sauer wonders why other populations, such as children, were not targeted, and she argues that this government warning “reflects an underlying system of values that targets women as the site of reproduction and reproductive responsibility” (258–59). And Mary Thompson traces how the FDA decided that “silicone breast implants do indeed serve ‘public health’ interests” (263) (in part because “the inner self [is] inherently gendered” [273]), and she employs Anne Balsamo’s *Technologies of the Gendered Body* to conclude “that feminists cannot uncritically dismiss or embrace new technologies like breast implants; rather, [Balsamo’s] work enables feminists to consider new technologies as discursive sites for the deployment of power” (274).

Because all the books under review focus on the material in terms of bodies and rhetorics and because they all invoke different voices, research sites, and disciplinary groundings, I can imagine using any of these books in my upper-division undergraduate rhetorical theory course as a means of connecting students’ study of rhetorical theories to their analyses of culture; I can also imagine using these books, coupled with Marx and Foucault and Ebert and Butler, in a graduate seminar. But enough.

Having opened this review with the words of Gwendolyn Brooks, I want to give her the final words on material matters. In Brooks's poem "The Egg Boiler," the persona describes how "fools" write poetry:

We fools, we cut our poems out of air,  
 Night color, wind soprano, and such stuff.  
 And sometimes weightlessness is much to bear.  
 [. . . . .]  
 We fools give courteous ear then cut some more,  
 Shaping a gorgeous Nothingness from the cloud. (ll. 5–7, 12–13)

While describing a seemingly ethereal moment of poetic creation, Brooks also points to the material: even "Nothingness" has shape and is grounded in a cloud. Her point is echoed in all the books under review here. We cannot escape materiality. We can only better define it, better critique it, and better engage it.

## NOTES

1. For interviews foregrounding the connections of Laclau and Mouffe with rhetoric and composition studies, see Worsham and Olson, "Hegemony" and "Rethinking."

2. For an assessment of Butler's contribution to rhetorical studies (as well as a brief description of the famous Judith Butler/Martha Nussbaum debate), see Crowley.

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