RECITATIONS: THE CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS

OF JUDITH BUTLER'S RHETORIC

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By

CHRISTINA BROOKS, B.A., M.A.

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AUTHOR: Christina Brooks, B.A. (University of King's
                   College), M.A. (McMaster University)

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ABSTRACT

"Recitations: The Critical Foundations of Judith Butler's Rhetoric" explores the textures and patterns in the writing of Judith Butler. Notoriously difficult, Butler's rhetoric has garnered much scholarly and journalistic literature, and yet, to date, there remains no book-length study on this topic. At the same time, Butler scholars have tended to theorize her style as "subversive." Such a defense readily connects with Butler's general effort to contour and challenge the lines of social and cultural intelligibility, lines that deem some identities, especially sexual and racial ones, unacceptable. However, I argue that the framework of "subversion" ultimately reduces some of the generative tensions central to Butler's ideas, which I draw out by focusing on the ambiguity of "recitation."

Drawing on cultural and literary theory, particularly at the intersections between poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, and semiology, I reframe Butler's writing through the questions of inheritance, paradigms, and critical alliances. Focused on three major works, I identify and research the thought of her key sources, and so the dissertation doubles as a study of G.W.F. Hegel (Butler's *Subjects of Desire* (1987), Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault (*The Psychic Life of Power* (1987), and Emmanuel Levinas (*Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Focusing on the ways that Butler re-articulates and revises the language of these influential writers, I develop a theory of Butler's style of critique that seeks to move discussions of her writing past the notions of "subversion" and "liberation." More broadly, I interpret the ambivalent scenes of identification and disavowal that Butler's writing stages to shed light on problems of modern critical subjectivity, marked by the inheritance of intellectual, social, and cultural structures that may trouble us, but that also form our identities and our relations to others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used for parenthetical reference within the text.

Works by Judith Butler

BTM	*Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*
ES	*Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*
GT	*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.*
GA	*Giving an Account of Oneself*
PLP	*The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*
SD	*Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France.*
UG	*Undoing Gender*

Additional Work

HS	Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1: *An Introduction.*

INTRODUCTION

The Generative Tensions in Judith Butler's Rhetoric

Evidently, Butler is attempting to do something with her prose; in other words, the language she deploys is performative rather than constative.

> —Sara Salih, *"Judith Butler and the Ethics of Difficulty" (45)*

The speech act, as the act of a speaking body, is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, ... it always says something that it does not intend, and... it is not the emblem of mastery or control that it sometimes purports to be.
> —Judith Butler, Excitable Speech *(10)*

The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; *in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. ... [M]imicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy... Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline... [that] poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary power.*

> —Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture *(122-3; emphasis in original)*

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Sara Salih writes that "the language [Judith Butler] deploys is performative rather

than constative." What does Salih mean, "performative rather than constative"? She

means that Butler's speech *acts*, in the vocabulary of J.L. Austin's grammar lectures,

How to Do Things with Words (1962). The performative is the notion that words are

"doing something as opposed to just saying something" (133), and that this

"illocutionary" doing imbues all utterances with the force of "convention" (128).[1] In

her theory of performativity, Butler herself cites Austin's theory of the illocutionary,

non-iterated "acting" of any speech as it affirms, reifies, and recites a set of

linguistic/social conventions that govern the intelligible and the legible, and does so

beyond the control of the individual speaker (*ES* 2-3, 24-5). Thinking through

Butler's writings themselves as active processes of predication, incorporation, and

recitation, this thesis argues that Butler's style is integrally related to her ethics and

her politics, specifically in her rhetorical struggle to become critical of the

conventions and thinkers that at once limit and enable her thinking. Offering a

genealogy of that struggle through specific textual encounters, I focus my study on

Butler's relation to G.W.F Hegel in *Subjects of Desire* (1987), Michel Foucault and

Sigmund Freud in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), and to Emmanuel Levinas and

"the turn to ethics" in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). I argue that these three

texts pronounce, in their organization and performance, the tense relation between

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[1] Austin introduces his theory of the performative as an argument "for philosophers and grammarians" against the notion that language merely describes things (2). He writes, "it was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (1).

Butler's critical autonomy, the agency of intervention, leverage, and distance; and

Butler's critical subjection, marked by strong lines of debt, and crucially, the

reproduction of the same tensions and limitations she is attempting to describe.

Butler's work is "highly dependent on other theorists" (Roden 26), and some have

said that she is limited by her commitment to Hegel (Tuhkanen 3-4, 24), and by her

reliance on Foucault (McNay 178). Engaging these sharply critical readings, my

dissertation draws out these limitations with patience and interest, setting them as

ultimately part of an aggregate pedagogy about the difficult task of critique as the

difficult task of inheritance.

Foucault formulates "critique" as a mode of philosophical inquiry figured as

power turned against itself. The disciplinary authority invested in the critic reflects

the formation of the subject within the regulatory strictures of social institutions, and,

in turn, "critique" situates the critic/subject as the site of potentially transformative

work. That is to say, critique uncovers the historical contingency of disciplinary

values in politicized genealogies, and through concerted "processes of conflict,

confrontation and resistance attempts" (qtd. in Raunig 3). In strategic statements of

insubordination, Foucault claims, "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a

Marxist, and I have never been a structuralist" ("Critical Theory and Intellectual

History" 114). In another conversation, he evokes the naturalized effect of paradigms,

saying, "I quote Marx ... without quotation marks ... When a physicist writes a work

of physics, does he feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein?" ("Prison Talk"

52). Foucault's anti-authoritarian notion of "critique" informs and helps explain

Butler's style of inquiry, particularly in its intent to model and understand the social subject's constitution within signifying practices that seem to have the effect of inevitability. However, instead of staging postured refusals, Butler offers postured identifications with the paradigms that form her thinking, and seems to say, "I have always been" invested with the contingencies of my education, and in ways that I cannot fully assimilate. This Butlerian style of reflexive critique mirrors the social subject's partial opacity to the full meaning of its actions, yoking the questions legacy and inheritance to questions of responsibility. Thinking these matters of critique and inheritance together, I offer a study of Butler's writing as a contour of politicized symbolic activity, marked by tense, but also generative, dynamics between reinstatement and revision.

Judith Butler is one of the most famous and prolific humanities scholars in the academy today. The enormous bulk of scholarship on her work, the breadth of her influence, not to mention the wide range of theoretical strands she draws on, have been difficult to untangle. The present study, informed by my dual training in literary studies and critical theory, focuses on the texture of Butler's rhetoric, joining a thread of criticism that emerged in the controversies over *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), her most well-known book. My general contention is that, to date, the close readings of Butler's work remain overly geared towards defending her style as subversive, an emphasis Butler perhaps cues in her own reflections on her writing style and her intentions for it, but which does not account fully for the complexity of her rhetoric.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that gender identifications accrue through scripted practices of impersonation and approximation that obtain the effect of, rather than emanate from, "internal coherence" (23). She writes, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (33). Through patterned acts of signification and resignification, the marks of gender come to be attached to a sexual disposition, imbuing the continuities between sex, gender, and desire with pre-social destiny. Concerned with legitimizing non-normative practices of gender and sexuality, Butler's constructivist theory of "gendering" in *Gender Trouble* was intended to "open up the field of possibility for gender" given that "gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions" that deem some lives unlivable ("Preface [1999]" viii). Despite Butler's aims to promote a "more democratic and inclusive life" (vii), the difficult style of *Gender Trouble*— marked by repetitive and knotty formulations, as well as innumerable references to other theorists—marked the book for some as overly-theoretical and politically irresponsible (Pollitt 9; Nussbaum 38; Gubar 880-1, 894). To further introduce Butler's theory of gendering, and to highlight Butler's particular stylistic idiosyncrasies in her work that have caused so much debate, I want to quote from *Gender Trouble* at length:

> The presumption here is that the "being" of gender is *an effect*, an object of genealogical investigation that maps out the political parameters of its construction in the mode of ontology. To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the 'real' and the 'authentic' as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to

> suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of 'the real' and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitious self-naturalization. (42)

> If it is possible to speak of a 'man' with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a 'man' with a feminine attribute, whatever it is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender. But once we dispense with the priority of 'man' and 'woman' as abiding substances, then it is no longer possible to subordinate dissonant gendered features as so many secondary and accidental characteristics of a gender ontology that is fundamentally intact. If the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then it seems that gender as substance, the viability of *man* and *woman* as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal modes of intelligibility. The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self ... is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence. (32-33)

In these passages, we see some of the themes that recur throughout Butler's writing.

First, she argues that where the subject is thought to *be* a stable kind of being

(ontology), that stability is a sustained illusion drawn from particular kinds of *doing*

(performativity). It is worth emphasizing that, for Butler, the illusory stability of

identities cannot be contrasted with an authentic or real stability; rather, *Gender*

Trouble wants to understand the very difference supposed between the "artificial" and

the "real," and develop a critique of "the discursive production of [that binary's]

plausibility" (42). Second, Butler conjoins the ontology of the subject with the

grammar of nouns, adjectives, predicates, and verbs, conflating issues of acceptable

grammar—one *is* a woman—with issues of cultural intelligibility. And third, Butler

introduces the necessity of re-evaluating "culturally established lines of coherence,"

as part of the politics of cultural struggle and the contestation of seemingly natural

social meanings.

These key interventions, written out in a decidedly "difficult" style, suggest

that Butler takes matters of rhetoric and grammar very seriously. The reading

heuristic that Butler's writing itself *acts* emerged in Salih's "Judith Butler and the

Ethics of Difficulty" (2003) and Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb's volume *Just*

Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena (2003), which includes

Butler's own essay "Values of Difficulty" as the final chapter. Butler's defenders ask,

why does Butler write the way she does, and what is the potential value in difficulty?

Most of these discussions are structured as replies to Martha Nussbaum's well-known

attack in "The Professor of Parody" (1999) and by the editors of *Philosophy and*

Literature who gave Butler the Bad Writing Award in 1998.[2] Attaching the difficulty

of Butler's writing to a failure to address social realities, Nussbaum writes, "It is

difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what

they are … Her written style … is ponderous and obscure. … [An] audience eager to

grapple with actual injustices … would simply be baffled by the thick soup of

Butler's prose, by its air of in-group knowingness" (38).[3] For Salih and for the writers

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[2] Dennis Dutton, the editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, cites "anxiety-inducing obscurity" that "beats the reader into submission" ("The Bad Writing Contest"). Granting Homi Bhabha second place in the competition, Dutton clarifies in this same press release that the award is granted to only "well-known, highly-paid experts," that is, acclaimed and credited writers published by distinguished presses, and so "Bad" inflects "morally wrong" rather than "unseasoned." The backlash against this award was so concerted that it was discontinued.

[3] There are numerous other attacks on Butler's style in this vein, both academic and journalistic, including Katha Pollitt's 1996 article in *Nation,* "Pomolotov Cocktail,"

in *Just Being Difficult*, these charges against Butler provoked a revaluation of

transparency and accessibility, and how, paradoxically, these notions, or "norms," as

Moya Lloyd calls them, obscure the relations of power and language that Butler

attempts to illuminate (*Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* 22).[4] These defenders

concentrate on Butler's unconventional formulations as an important part of a

"radical democratic project," defending Butler's "counterintuitive processes,"

"defamiliarization," and "provocation to think outside received categories" (Salih 42;

Culler 47; Warner 117; Palumbo-Liu 174). Further, they link the demand for

transparent language to the political force of common sense and sedimented

knowledges.[5] John McCumber writes that Butler's "linguistic challenge to common

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which assesses the writing as "self-infatuated" and "silly" (9). See also Susan Gubar's "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" (880-1, 894). In his explanation of Butler's "bad" writing, Dennis Dutton claims that she "mimic[s] the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work…beat[ing] readers into submission and instruct[ing] them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it" ("Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professors" W11).

[4] For an excellent discussion of these debates, and a thorough deconstruction of the binary between accessibility and inaccessibility, see Patti Lather's "Troubling Clarity: The Politics of Accessible Language" (1996).

[5] It has been well noted that some of Butler's more recent books, *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Undoing Gender* (2005), are decidedly less difficult to read. See Marjorie Jolles's 2007 review of *Precarious Life* (371), Erin Gray's 2005 review of *Undoing Gender*, and Cristina Masters's "Judith Butler" (124). Although it may be tempting to argue that *Precarious Life* and *Undoing Gender* represent Butler's resolution to write more accessibly, it is important to add that these books focus on the powers of the broadly accessible, that they mobilize a language that suits the audiences she seeks to address, and that, even as they are perhaps easier to read through, they are no less intellectually demanding than *Gender Trouble* or *Bodies that Matter*. *Precarious Life* speaks to an American public consciousness informed by the post-September 11th media, and *Undoing Gender* analyzes the supervision of gender at work in art, social policy, and psychology, for example, the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) condoned by medical professionals in North America. As Henry Giroux notes,

sense … deserves to be called emancipatory" (69). Focusing on Butler's sentences, Salih argues that Butler's repetition of words we might call specialized—"the subject," "ontology," "hegemony," "normativity"—conducts the work of contestation and revision through processes "of becoming" ("Judith Butler and the Ethics of Difficulty" 45, *Judith Butler* 2-3). For example, Salih defends the "insistent repetition (or, better, 'iterability') of the word 'subject,' the very term whose coherence is at issue" ("Ethics of Difficulty" 45). Culler explains that "sentences wishing to argue that [nouns] are themselves produced through repetition turn back on themselves in ways that may make them hard to read" (47). Interestingly, these analyzes echo Butler's reading of the rhetoric of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in her first book, *Subjects of Desire*. As I outline more fully in Chapter 1, Butler had already asserted in 1987 that Hegel's language "ruptures the assumptions that ordinary language lulls us into making… [and] conveys the elusive nature of both the grammatical and human subject" (*SD* 18). Indeed, this line of defense of Butler's difficult writing aligns with Butler's intentions: to open up the possibility of thinking through the limits of social intelligibility instated by the grammatical rules of subject predication. In response to these charges, Butler strategically identifies as a "bad writer" in "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back," alluding to Louis Althusser's figure of the "bad subject."[6] He writes that

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"Butler does write for multiple audiences and… her prose is often oriented to fit the uniqueness of specific groups of readers" ("On Pop Clarity: Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Language").

[6] I believe that the title of Butler's article is a play on *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. This book foregrounds the counter-literatures generated by the colonial processes of education and cultural

the "vast majority" of subjects "work by themselves" to reproduce the strictures of ideology, "with the exception of bad subjects, who on occasion provoke ... intervention" (323). The Bad Writing Award, according to Butler's response, only calls attention to the processes that circumscribe intelligible subjects through the insistence of a policing norm. She argues that language "ruled out as... unintelligible" can be a "resource ... to rethink the world radically," and "to ... provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world" ("Values of Difficulty" 201; "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back" A27).[7]

My initial proposal for this research project emerged in direct alliance with these defenses of the subversive in Butler, which is readily linked to *Gender Trouble*'s general aims to unsettle and rewrite the coarsely normative regulation of gender identity and the sexed body. Immersed in Butler's concern with the discursive, psychic, and material processes that exclude minority and incoherent subjectivities, especially those processes that masquerade as the extension of transparent representation (*GT* 7-9, 37, 153, 186-188; *BTM* 8, 37-39, 189, 208), my working hypothesis was that she not only theorizes the possibility of contesting and altering

assimilation, drawing out the challenges to the "imperial centre" (4-5) posed by, and encoded in, postcolonial literature written in English.

[7] To enunciate the political force of common sense, Butler reflects that, "for decades of American history, it was 'common sense' in some quarters for white people to own slaves and for women not to vote. Common sense, moreover, is not always 'common'–the idea that lesbians and gay men should be protected against discrimination and violence strikes some people as common-sensical, but for others it threatens the foundations of ordinary life. If common sense sometimes preserves the social status quo, and that status quo sometimes treats unjust social hierarchies as natural, it makes good sense on such occasions to find ways of challenging common sense. Language that takes up this challenge can help point the way to a more socially just world" ("'A Bad Writer' Bites Back" A27).

social regulations; the writing itself contests and alters. Critical agency, as her works *demonstrate*, is the espousal of disciplinary practices so as to reveal their limits and contingencies, a rewriting that enacts the project of imagining them differently. However, over the course of my readings of Butler under this hypothesis, I have come to see this defense as structured in the suppression of an ambiguity in Butler's writing, and as perhaps underestimating its complexity and its potential.

Dense with the language of other thinkers, Butler's writings enact the double-process of revising by reinstating, and, as Jane Campbell and Janet Harbord argue, that double-process in Butler's writing begs the question of circularity. In their essay "Playing it Again: Citation, Reiteration, or Circularity?," Campbell and Harbord articulate this question as it hangs over Butler's work, observing that she

> enacts a repetition of dominant theories, such as those of Freud and Lacan, but reiterates them differently, moving into the gaps and ellipses that repetition allows. Thus her work offers a reworking of dominant paradigms that at moments may appear simply as repetition, heavily weighted with a kind of debt to the critics and traditions of poststructuralism that seem to act as a[n]... obstacle to her more radical theorizations. (232)

This analysis suggests that there may be a need to imbricate the theoretical circularity in Butler's work with a close study of her rhetoric, and to complicate our reading of Butler as subversive by focusing on these strong lines of debt. Wavering between the radical and the overly indebted, Butler's writing figures inheritance through a style of repetition and revision. At times, as in response to the Bad Writing Award, Butler identifies her own writing as contestation and subversion; at other moments, she emphasizes the melancholic processes of reinscription and reinstatement, as "a certain

principle of humility and a certain principle of historicity ... a historicity that exposes

the limits of my autonomy but which I would also say is the condition of my

autonomy" (Bell, "On Speech, Race, and Melancholia: an Interview with Judith

Butler" 166).

I do not mean to argue that the readings of Butler's rhetoric as subversive are

incorrect; rather, in the defensive response to Nussbaum and the Bad Writing Award,

the rejoinders seem to over-emphasize the "emancipatory" quality of her writing,

which runs significantly at odds with the circularity and reiteration that condition her

agency. In her review essay "Dwelling in Ambivalence," Heather Love observes that

"because of attacks such as Nussbaum's, Butler's fans may feel a certain pressure to

defend her as a politically engaged and ethical scholar," and that the confident

defenses of Butler's work can, paradoxically, "ha[ve] the effect of reducing [her]

ethical force and complexity"(19). Suggesting that we "dwell in" the ambivalences

legible in Butler, Love opens up a more specific set of questions pertaining to

Butler's inheritance: "ambivalence is the keynote of the philosophical traditions with

which Butler has engaged most deeply over the last couple of decades" (18). Taking

my lead from Love and from Campbell and Harbord, who begin to think through the

circularities in Butler in terms of inheritance, I embark on the project of reading of

Butler with a provisional suspension of "subversion" as a rubric. I focus specifically

on her rhetoric and on the architecture of her texts, with the aims of drawing out some

of the paradoxes and conflicting desires internal to Butler's ideas, and of beginning to

account for the conflicted, sometimes mutually exclusive, readings her work has garnered.

Butler's Agency

Butler engages the poststructuralist critique of the self-directing subject who acts in accordance with a harmonious will. Presuming the subject as an active site for the reproduction of social constellations of power and hierarchy, Butler argues that the subject hardly knows what it is doing; that is to say, its investments and motivations are not properly its "own." In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that the marks of gender—ways of dressing, acting, talking—are not expressions of either nature or free will, but rather the discursive, ritualized chains of significations through which an intelligible gendered subject is produced and achieves the effect of a natural and stable disposition.

Reversing the causality between "doer" and "deed," her work combines three poststructuralist concepts to generalize a theory of the subject as an effect rather than the cause of its actions. The first is Jacques Derrida's notion of "citationality," which he theorizes through Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* in the essay "Signature Event Context" (1972). In Derrida's account of speech act theory, all utterances recite previous utterances, and function according to particular conventions of usage that the speech reproduces, and not necessarily in alignment with the meaning intended by the speaker (13-14). At the same time, citationality implies the instability of meaning:

conventions can only partially condition the meaning of an utterance, which can come to signify in ways that the speaker does not intend (17, 18).

The second concept is Althusser's "interpellation," which figures the subject as a secondary effect of "the hail" of ideology ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 321). Althusser distinguishes between the regulations of the state, the law, the courts, and the police, which regulate citizens by force, and the regulations of ideology, which compel conformity through the non-coercive, seemingly private cultural institutions: family, education, sexuality, and religion. In Althusser, these institutions "interpellate" subjects, that is, produce them without any force of violence into intelligible social beings. As noted above, Althusser theorizes "bad subjects" as those who embody a refusal of these non-coercive apparatuses and can sometimes obtain the effect of intervention (323).

The third concept is Foucault's "discursive power" which, as in Althusser, attempts to think through the way that power functions through the production and regulation—rather than the constraint and suppression—of subjects. In this view, especially as it is articulated in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, power cannot be localized to the state or to a group of persons; instead, "power comes from below" (*HS* 94), and works "tactically" through the reproduction of historically established discourses. In turn, resistance must take tactical and strategic, rather than oppositional, forms, exploiting systems of conformity and control that materialize through subjects.

Through each of these concepts, the sovereignty of the subject is undermined; however, each also posits the possibility of intervention through acts of reversal. Conjoining "citationality," "interpellation," and "discursive power," Butler's general political impulse is to gain leverage, within the processes of signification, over the discourses that structure social identities by exclusion and inequality, and, in the practice of critique, over the tropologies of Enlightenment philosophy that rely on a pre-discursive, rational subject to negotiate social, existential, and critical problems. In the texts I focus on in this dissertation, namely, *Subjects of Desire*, *The Psychic Life of Power*, and *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler deploys the deconstructive method of re-reading and re-writing discourses of Western thought to destabilize and unhinge its certainties. This work follows Derrida's famous essay "Structure, Sign, and Play," and his deconstructions of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Claude Levi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* (1967), as well as Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), which advocates the work of "jamming the theoretical machinery" in her readings of Plato and Freud (Irigaray 78). In this tradition, the possibility of intervention abides in the playful variations that from time to time emerge in the repetition of thought; as Butler writes in the spirit of deconstruction, "to be constituted by discourse is not to be determined by discourse" (*GT* 143).

Intriguingly, although most of Butler's work dialogues closely with French philosophy and criticism, Butler's first book is composed in resistance to efforts in France to disengage the legacy of Hegel, whose *Phenomenology* was held up as a prime example of the fantasy of the self-sufficient, omniscient subject in the early

writings of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault.[8] These same poststructuralist thinkers will be key interlocutors for Butler throughout the 1990s, particularly in her effort to revise and reimagine the strictures of gender, sexuality, the body, and the psyche. But in her 1987 book *Subjects of Desire,* Butler focuses on forging an alliance between Hegel and poststructuralism, and considers the implications of Lacan's, Derrida's, and Foucault's tense, absorbing desire to disengage and exclude Hegel's legacy. For Butler, the gestures of disengagement and exclusion emulate the "founding struggles" of the *Phenomenology*, which play out through dynamics of negation (*Verneinung*) (*SD* 230). Beginning with *Subjects of Desire*, Butler's focus continually returns to the effort to transcend the historical and social conditions that form us. She frames this problem in *Subjects of Desire* in metaphysical terms as "the negation of desire" (2); in *The Psychic Life of Power*, in psychoanalytic terms of the denial of "passionate attachments" (6); and in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in ethical terms as the "condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation" of the other (46). Butler's commitment to subverting and revising the strictures of domination, subordination, and exclusion is activated, paradoxically, by special emphasis on matters of inheritance and incorporation.

0The Ambivalent Scene of *Gender Trouble*

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[8] Moya Lloyd also reads *Subjects of Desire* in terms of Butler's resistance to some of the thinkers in France who would come to feature centrally in her work through the 1990s (*Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* 12).

To elaborate the generative tensions in Butler's style, I want to take a further look into *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which places "subversion" directly in the title, marking its explicit intention to disrupt and reorganize the terms that dominate certain forms of collective feminist rhetoric. To many, Butler did so successfully, "rock[ing] the foundations of feminist theory" (Heinnämaa 20). Yet Butler garners the strength to propose and execute that subversion by looking to the moments *within* feminism where the category of "woman" is brought to question, offering a "*feminist genealogy* of the category of women" (*GT* 9; emphasis in original). As Frederick Roden and Nussbaum both note, *Gender Trouble* is "highly dependent on" and "dense with allusions to" other theorists (Roden 26; Nussbaum 38). Reframing *Gender Trouble* as a book about transformation through *inheritance*, I read this text's effective work as the marshalling, consolidating, legitimizing, and accumulating the leverage to trouble, from the inside, two major injunctions of feminism: 1) the constative representation of women in their current and historical disempowerment; and 2) the formation of identity-based solidities, "women's groups," and also the substance of "woman" as a sexed and gendered body (3-9). She asks, does feminism describe an empowered identity for women (constative), or does it produce, substantiate, and idealize "woman" as a sedimented, even natural, identity (performative)?

Butler draws heavily, even parasitically, on French feminisms in the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote *The Second Sex* on the cultural compulsion to

"[become] a woman" (249).[9] To analyze the mythic construction of gendered identity,

she draws on Monique Wittig, who argues that women are not a "natural group" and

that the "myth of woman" and its material effects are imposed on the consciousness

and bodies of women (2014, 2016), and on Luce Irigaray, for whom the unexamined

difference between the sexes underlies "the logic of every discourse" (73-4).

Interrogating the mythic logic of gender difference that underpins the project of

feminism, Butler asks, what if "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively

constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation"

(*GT* 4)? Alongside these threads in deconstructive French feminisms, which I

consider further in their critiques of Freud in Chapter 2, Butler borrows from

Catharine MacKinnon in *Feminism Unmodified* (1987), who argues that gender

identification is "the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men

and women" (6-7). She also looks Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" (1975),

which, like Wittig's "One Is Not Born a Woman," envisions the opening up of a field

of infinite critical and sexual possibilities through the eradication of gender (Rubin

204).

 Gender Trouble is a *heteroglossia* of recent and long-standing questions of

gender identity and sexed bodies. Channeling these critiques into a concerted

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[9] In the "Preface (1999)" to *Gender Trouble*, Butler insists that "French Theory" is "a curious American construction"(x). While granting that *Gender Trouble* is perhaps "Francocentric," she wants to point out that, in its "intellectual promiscuity," *Gender Trouble* is unmistakably American, and that the book by no means represents the life of those theories in contemporaneous France, noting that only a few French publishers initially translated the book for circulation at the risk of "Americaniz[ing]" the theorists she engages (x).

challenge, *Gender Trouble* labours to show that feminism is *already* divided,

multiple, and internally "embattled," which she seeks to represent, allow, and account

for through an ambivalent identification as a feminist. In her 1999 "Preface," Butler

writes, "I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain

forms of feminism, even as I understood the text to be part of feminism itself" (vii).

As Butler notes in this preface, that ambivalent identification has a key precedent in

Denise Riley's *Am I that Name?: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*

(1988), in which, as the title implies, the insistence on identifying as a "woman" and

as a "feminist" is articulated as a source of anxiety. That anxiety, for Butler, bespeaks

the pressure of a norm that regulates what can count as an engaged critical/political

position; years later she would reflect, "I was really guilt-tripped by feminism"

("Gender as Performance" 116–17).[10] I frame *Gender Trouble* this way to emphasize

its style of democratic inheritance, which draws on continental feminisms in order to

represent a formative conflict of identity and conscience. The text's sustained

ambivalence is therefore essential to this revision rather than the mark of an impasse.

Describing her identification as a feminist as "a necessary error," Butler highlights

the need for conditional, provisional, and flexible foundations within feminist politics

(*BTM* 230).[11]

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[10] Butler is reflecting on her 1982 essay, "'Lesbian S & M – The Politics of Dis-
illusion.'"

[11] Between 1980 and 1999, feminist principles such as liberation, the extension of
visibility, and global sisterhood, foundational to the second wave, were brought to
trial in postcolonial and critical race studies as well, with a new focus on the
exclusionary and colonizing effects of well-intentioned, white western feminisms.
See bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist*

Butler uses these ambivalent effects and moments of dis-identification to conduct a disruptive, long-needed, and enormously productive encounter between feminism's dependence on the category of "woman" and an emergent discourse of non-identitarian queer politics, which would surge and expand in the ensuing decade. Queer theory emerged as the investigation and deconstruction of categories of sexed and gender identities, taking the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s, initially marked as "the gay plague," as one of its key historical contexts of urgency. Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), published the same year as *Gender Trouble*, introduces an analysis of "homosexuality" as structured around contradictory logics of knowledge and secrecy, logics that Sedgwick posits as being at the basis of all of western epistemology. Butler's and Sedgwick's large-scale critiques of knowledge and social institutions through the lens of "queerness" fueled the development of queer theory through, for example, Michael Warner's volume *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), an collection of essays on heterosexism in theory and culture, and Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1995), which elaborates the necessity of resisting a generalized queer project.

Butler's *Gender Trouble*'s contribution to the foundations of queer theory lies in its critical attention to "the heterosexual matrix," a "compulsory order," from which emanate all aspects of culture: family, law, labour, health care, education,

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Theory: From Margin to Centre (1984), Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), Susan Friedman's *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), and Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999).

etc.(*GT* 9). In turn, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* analyze sex and gender as *effects* rather than causes of these social institutions, which appear natural through "suppressing and redescribing... ambiguities and incoherences within and among heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual practices" (*GT* 42). Pursuing principles of democratic inclusion but sidestepping the rhetoric of a collective identity, Butler argues that, if gender and sex are indeed not there at birth, then the subject may be, as it *has been*, instituted differently, and feminism must work towards a politics of radical inclusion.

In a review of its genealogy, Butler argues that feminism not only can be, but also has been, instituted differently too. Butler questions feminism's corroboration of "the heterosexual matrix," the cosmos of relations, destinies, practices, and economies that deems certain kinds of lives unrecognizable and unlivable, and that takes gender identity as the key to personhood (8-9). If the identity of "woman" is a citation of that matrix, and if, in the history of feminist theory, that citation has formed ambivalences and anxieties surrounding the identification as a feminist, then feminism must be willing to take itself critically and articulate itself anew: "within feminist political practice, a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity appears to be necessary in order to formulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds" (8). *Gender Trouble* organizes and carries out that discursive work of re-citation and re-formation. That is, what remains appealing and important about *Gender Trouble* is that it effectively consolidates a widely resonant quandary, and performs the kind of reflexivity so badly needed if we

are to dwell with the risks and dangers of the rhetoric of a collective, while continuing to mobilize the spirit of feminism as the fight against identity-based exclusion and oppression.

As already suggested in my discussion of the defenses and criticisms of Butler's opaque style, there are divisions on the question of whether Butler's *Gender Trouble* is *frustrating*, "completely debunking any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" (Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance" 21), or *liberating*, "opening the discursive field that many of us have been exploring ever since" (Tukhanen 7). The varied reactions to *Gender Trouble* bespeak some of the dualities internal to Butler's ambivalent identification as a feminist. But also, as some Butlerian scholars have noted, these divisions testify to broader disjunctions and disagreements within the humanities that come to clash in debates about Butler's importance. Campbell and Harbord suggest that how we appraise Butler's version of agency, "a question of how signification and resignification work," will "depend on where [we] situate [ourselves]… in terms of poststructuralism" (*GT* 44; "Playing it Again" 232). Vicky Kirby similarly argues that the varied reactions to Butler's representational politics, and to Butler's interrogation of the way terms such as "agency" and the "subject" are circumscribed, "depends on the importance attributed to such concerns" (130). That Butler's work serves as a crucial nexus where wider debates come into relief is evident in the question of Butler's contribution to feminism. Seyla Benhabib's famous critique of *Gender Trouble* as a "complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" goes alongside a

rejection of the extreme moments in postmodernism—the deaths of the subject, of

history, and of metaphysics—which she argues are incompatible with an engaged,

active feminism ("Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance" 21).[12] For

Benhabib, the strong theses of postmodernism "undermine the possibility of

normative criticism at large. Feminist theory can ally itself with this strong version of

postmodernism only at the risk of incoherence and self-contradictoriness" (*Situating

the Self* 213). Benhabib's debate with Butler in the symposium-style volume *Feminist

Contentions* (1995) centres on a disagreement about the "doer" and agency: "If

[Butler's] view of the self is adopted, is there any possibility of changing those

"expressions" which constitute us? ... Isn't this what the struggle over gender is all

about?" (21).

As Campbell and Harbord suggest, this reaction to Butler reads like a

repudiation of the poststructuralist critique of the subject, and indeed, Benhabib is

using Butler as a prime example of how decadent and irresponsible certain modes of

critical theory can be. Evoking "what the struggle over gender is all about,"

Benhabib's critique seeks to define the proper sphere of feminist politics *against*

Butler and the heterogeneous, evolving, internally conflicting schools of thought that

Benhabib metonymizes as "postmodernism." Following Benhabib, Susan Gubar also

uses Butler to propose a fundamental incompatibility between feminism and

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[12] Benhabib's essay appears in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*
(1995), a book of dialogic writings between Benhabib, Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and
Nancy Fraser. The book is meant to illustrate, and value, some of the internal
conflicts within feminism, especially in light of poststructuralist critiques of identity
politics.

poststructuralism in "What Ails Feminist Criticism?," and Ann Brooks evaluates

Butler's argument as "unconvincing at the level of the operation of agency, which for

both feminist theory and politics is the essential dynamic for the articulation of

resistance" (*Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* 102). In

her analysis of Butler's investment in symbolic contingency, Lois McNay values the

"nonvoluntarist" account of agency Butler provides, but argues that, in her

"overwhelmingly symbolic account of identity formation," Butler "does not really

consider how this symbolic indeterminacy relates to … social structures and how it

may catalyze or hinder change" (190; 176). Citing Benhabib, Kathy Dow Magnus

agrees that "Butler does not … adequately convey the extent to which a 'subject' may

work to determine herself in accordance with her own desires and purposes" ("The

Unaccountable Subject" 189).

I have listed these skeptical feminist readings of Butler in close succession to

show that, in the repeated exclusion of Butler, a tropology of what counts as agency,

what counts as feminism, and what counts as ethics obtains the effect of common

sense for this network of feminist thinkers. In the essay "Contingent Foundations"

(1995), Butler responds to Benhabib by analyzing how "the political contest over the

subject is summarily silenced" in the construction of postmodernism as an unviable

framework (36).[13] In her book *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, Moya Lloyd

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[13] Exposing "postmodernism" as a projected unity onto which anxieties about the
future of criticism are often unloaded, Butler writes, "These characterizations are
variously imputed to postmodernism or poststructuralism, which are conflated with
each other and sometimes conflated with deconstruction, and sometimes understood
as an indiscriminate assemblage of French feminism, deconstruction, Lacanian

assesses these arguments against Butler as tenaciously defending the need for a

grounded, coherent agent; that is, they re-enunciate the very concept of agency that

Butler is attempting to revise (60-65). In Lloyd's reading, Butler debunks not "any

concept" of agency (Benhabib), but rather a *particular* concept. To conceive of

agency and subjection as "inextricably intertwined" is to raise questions about what

forces activate the subject beyond the opposition conceptualized between free will

and determinism (Lloyd 65). Lloyd rightfully observes, "Butler does not conceive of

agency as a personal attribute or capacity ... . [A]gency ... inheres in the regulatory

repetition of the very norms that sustain the system" (65). To add to Lloyd's analysis,

I want to re-orient our understanding of Butler's notion of agency by highlighting the

function of criticism, the power of signification processes, and the life of iterations

beyond what we may understand as our intentions.

Turning to Butler's 1997 publications, *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life*

of Power, I read these texts as responses to the backlash towards the concept of

"agency" that *Gender Trouble* articulates. In each book, a discussion of agency

surfaces immediately in the introduction, and elaborates directly on the idea that

agency is "a question of how signification and resignification work" (*GT* 44). In *The*

Psychic Life of Power, she writes, stammeringly,

> agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say the
> purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the
> extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption
> of a purpose *unintended* by power... that operates in a relation of
> contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which

psychoanalysis, Foucauldian analysis, Rorty's conversationalism and cultural studies"
("Contingent Foundations" 36).

> it nevertheless belongs. This is, as it were, the ambivalent scene of
> agency. (15; emphasis in original)

Through repetition and reversal ("agency ... power"; "power ... agency"; "agency ...

power"), Butler co-implicates the existence of norms with the existence of agency,

suggesting that, precisely because power depends on the repetition of normalized

activity to naturalize its operations, it therefore remains open to reversals and

resignifications. Butler may seem to be answering the question, how do I theorize

agency's possibility in this "ambivalent scene" of subjection? This inflection for the

question of agency emerges in her interview "Changing the Subject" (2004) as well,

when she reflects on these debates as expressive of "a certain anxiety about

everyone's effect—that is, what effect are any of us having, and what effect can we

have? ... We don't know what effects, if any, the intellectual (especially the

intellectual in the humanities) can have on the larger social world" (Olson and

Worsham 733–4). The question seems to be: how do I *begin* to act?

If we look to *Excitable Speech*, however, the question is instead, how to do I

transform, *rather than recuperate*, a discursive regime that excludes, negates, and is

violent? That is, how do I handle the contingent agency of my speech? In *Excitable

Speech*, Butler focuses on the power of language to injure, insisting that agency is not

to be thought of as a possibility, but instead as the inescapable condition of being

formed discursively. A speech act—especially an empowered and widely circulated

one such as *Gender Trouble*—cannot passively stand by while the real business of

politics goes on elsewhere; what we say has a life and takes action in the world:

"language [is] a figure for agency, one whose 'reality' is incontestable" (*ES* 7). For

Butler, the action of a speech act is unpredictable and uncontrollable, and has an agency that is not productively thought of as the agency of the speaker: "the writer is blind to the future of the language that she writes" (8). These arguments, that agency is a fact rather than a theoretical possibility, anticipate Butler's theory of responsibility in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. There she argues that what we say always has material consequences, potentially violence, and that the defense, "that is not what I meant to do," amounts to a renunciation of accountability. To me, the movement in Butler's corpus from *Subjects of Desire,* to *The Psychic Life of Power* to *Giving an Account of Oneself* is marked by an increasing concern for "how best to handle—and to honour—this constant and necessary exposure" if our speech will always work beyond our intentions (*GA* 31). This development, as I argue in Chapter 3, has to do with Butler's continued reflection on her own varied reception, on the agency and influence of her speech and writing in academia and at large.

Recitation and Its Discontents

Butler seeks to lay bare the difficult scene of agency rather than resolve or overcome it. In this sense, Butler can *at best* set an example of the subject riveted by the historical traces that produce it. Accordingly, my project contours the limits of Butler's reflexivity by looking at her specific textual engagements with Hegel, Freud and Foucault, and Levinas. My title, "Recitations," reflects the ambivalence I read in Butler's work, and the pressure I seek to maintain on the difference between the transformative intentions of parody and the recuperative effects of reinstatement. As

Butler calls for an ongoing effort to examine the terms that delimit cultural and

textual intelligibility, there remains the sense that this work is endless, and that it will

continually misfire so long as those terms maintain their hegemony. In Homi

Bhabha's theory of postcolonial parody, the "ironic compromise" of mimicry is

"stricken by an indeterminacy" and "constructed around an *ambivalence*"; in the

potential to "[pose] an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and

disciplinary power," mimicry also produces a subject that is "incomplete" and

"virtual" (86; emphasis in original).[14] As Irigaray argues, mimetic parody "hopes" "to

make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain

invisible" (*The Sex Which is Not One* 76). However, the proximity of the imitated to

the imitation, what Butler calls "intimacy" in another context, structures that

performance in ambivalence: "It is, I would argue, impossible to perform a

convincing parody of an intellectual position without having a prior affiliation with

what one parodies, without having and wanting an intimacy with the position one

takes in or on as the object of parody" (Butler, "Merely Cultural" 34).[15] I read

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[14] In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha advocates practices of imitation –
"almost the same, but not quite"-- as "menace" in the situation of colonial authority
and the "normalization" of the Other, and suggests that in this phase of mimicry, the
colonized subject will suffer in that ambivalence for the sake of posterity (86).
[15] Butler writes this in response to the Sokal hoax in an 1998 essay in *New Left
Review*. Also known as the "Sokal affair," this was a publishing hoax in which
physicist Alan Sokal submitted to *Social Text* what he conceived as a sarcastic parody
of left academics in the humanities. The article, "Transgressing the Boundaries:
Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," made it through
review and appeared in *Social Text*'s Spring/Summer 1996 issue. In "Merely
Cultural," Butler reflects on this parody in terms of identification and appropriation:
"in the hoax of last year, we saw a peculiar form of identification at work, one in
which the one who performs the parody aspires, quite literally, to occupy the place of

Butler's postures—in their intimacy, their virtuality, their sincerity—as enacting a

regimen of self-criticism and responsibility: what we say, write, and thereby *do* has

valences, consequences, pasts, and futures that are incalculable but nevertheless

formative of our responsibility. Butler's performances of Hegelian, Freudian,

Foucauldian, and Levinasian modes of organizing the world, where they are

subversive and where they are reinstative, therefore have pedagogical resonances

worth exploring beyond the presumption that subversion is the value against which

we measure the success of her work. Chapter by chapter, I trace the development and

sophistication of Butler's ambivalence within the compromise of "recititation," as she

moves from "rhetorical agency," the work of appropriating language so as to reveal

its limits and contingencies (*Subjects of Desire*), to "melancholia," the psychic

conflict of dependence on a discourse we never chose but nevertheless sustains our

agency (*The Psychic Life of Power*), to "self-opacity," the basis for an ethics of

intersubjectivity that affirms her exposure and vulnerability to the conventions that

embattle her, as way of accepting the same in the other (*Giving an Account of*

Oneself). Over the course of these various figurations of agency and subjection,

Butler moves away from the question of the subversive, which dominated her texts in

the 1990s especially, towards the question of accepting the limits of self-examination

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the one parodied, not only to expose the cultural icons of the cultural Left, *but to*
acquire and appropriate that very iconicity, and, hence, to open oneself happily to
public exposure as the one who performed the exposure, thus occupying both
positions in the parody, territorializing the position of that other" (34; emphasis in
original).

in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, which is also in some ways a return to *Subjects of Desire*, a book about inheriting legacies that both trouble and compel us at once.

Through close readings of *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, Butler's revised doctoral dissertation, Chapter 1 of my thesis generates an analysis of how Hegel's legacy lives on in Butler's work at the level of style and structure. Butler's study of Hegel's *Phenomenology* engages metaphors of theatre to argue that Hegel's narrator is a "Don Quixote" who, through "instructive fictions" and paradoxes, *stages* and *undermines* the gesture towards transcendence as a defining feature of the bungled destiny of consciousness (23; 21). I focus on *Subjects of Desire*'s first section, a controversial formalist reading of the *Phenomenology*, and on the last sections, where Butler ambitiously pursues the Hegelian gesture towards transcendence as a constitutive pattern of the rejection of Hegel after 1960 in France. Thinking through the book's structure, her use of poststructuralist concepts to interpret Hegel (especially Lacan's *mésconnaissance* and Derrida's *différance*), as well as the institutional contexts surrounding the development and publication of Butler's first book, I read it as the ambivalent struggle of a Hegelian desiring alliance with an anti-Hegelian school. In this drama of predication and inheritance, Butler constructs a conceit that unifies Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault with Hegel, and, along the way, idealizes the subversive and the ironic in the *Phenomenology*.

My analysis of *Subjects of Desire* enters a discussion of how Butler's early encounter with Hegel is important to understanding the formation of her work. Vicky

Kirby (*Judith Butler* [2006]) and Moya Lloyd (*Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*

[2007]) both read how Hegel is deliberately preserved in Butler's writing, although

their focus lies mainly on thematics (Kirby 1-18, Lloyd 14-20). On the other hand,

Mikka Tuhkanen's "Performativity and Becoming" (2009) looks at the final section

of *Subjects of Desire* as an attempt to disengage Hegel. In Tuhkanen's view, Butler is

"haunted" by unexamined legacies, and this fault should motivate us to reconsider

Butler's contribution to contemporary theory (3). While I tend to agree with Kirby

and Lloyd that Butler never aims to get beyond Hegel's system, I want to combine

these divergent readings in order to draw out some of the productive paradoxes in this

first book, which Butler seems to anticipate by introducing *Subjects of Desire* with

the idea of the "philosopher" as "a paradigm for psychic integration" (2).

In Chapter 2, I read *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* as

"The Psychic Life of Butler." In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler deploys a

Foucauldian theory of power to account for the formation of the psyche, using

contradictory pairings to describe the patterns of the acting subject, destined to "retain

and resist" through "reliving and displacing," "denial and reenactment," and

"resistance …[and] "recuperation" (13; 8; 9; 13). Looking at the organization, the

epigraphs, and the trajectory of *The Psychic Life of Power*, I argue that Butler at once

retains and *resists* Foucault, who rejected psychoanalysis for its deployment of the

repressive hypothesis. Although Foucault's theory of subjectivation initiates and

sustains her inquiry, Butler's replication of Foucault's theory of power through the

language of psychoanalysis embodies the "reiterated acting" *and* the "instability" of

that theory's discursive future, figuring the possibility of gaining leverage over Foucault through this act of regrafting (*BTM* 9). To give context to Butler's Foucauldian psychoanalysis, I look at this 1997 book as part of a wider effort in queer theory, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies to address the vexations of minority subjects and subjectivities by thinking the psychic and the social together, which may seem like "different kinds of objects," as Heather Love notes, or "attendant antitheses," as McNay observes (*Feeling Backward* 10; "Subject, Psyche, and Agency" 175). I link this effort back to Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis—the distinction between psyche (in here) and social life (out there)—which acts as a roadblock to understanding the disciplinary forms of modern power (*HS* 94-95). Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* thinks through the psychic pain of exclusory identifications, and seems to ascribe, as Michael Snediker points out in *Queer Optimism*, a permanence to the melancholia of "retaining and resisting" within the juridicial tactics of psychic and sexual identity that Foucault exposes.

In Chapter 3, I argue that *Giving an Account of Oneself* thinks through the instability, uncontrollability, and unpredictability of iteration not in terms of the possibility of subversion, but in terms of "the unfreedom at the heart of our relations" (*GA* 91), a theme that underpins each of *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power*. I attribute this shift to Butler's belated engagement with Emmanuel Levinas, whose notions of "singularity" and "exposure" eclipse the language of performance that proliferated her work in the 1990s, bespeaking a shift towards a Levinasian notion of inescapable responsibility: I am already acting on the other, and frightfully,

in ways that I cannot narrate or control in a review of my intentions and my memory.

Drawing on poststructuralist criticism of memoir and autobiography, this chapter

pursues Butler's use of first-person narration, which frames her book as both a

rumination on the limits of giving an account of oneself, and an attempt to display the

limits of that process, figured as a tense dynamic between "the I," an object for

theory, and "I" the subject and the seat of self-accounting. The effect is of a speaker

"overwhelmed" within the symptomology of self-opacity (54). Butler posits self-

opacity as the basis for an ethics, arguing that the ethical demand to give a transparent

account of one's actions paradoxically inflicts violence on the subject who can never

bring them to full analysis, and obscures the relations of volatility and vulnerability

that form our responsibility to others. Although Butler never explicitly states it, I read

this book as a guilt-stricken, perhaps metonymic response to a particular demand

from her adversaries: to formulate—transparently—a livable, viable ethics, said to be

absent from her work. As Annika Thiem argues in her book *Unbecoming Subjects:*

Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy and Critical Responsibility, Butler's ethics since

Subjects of Desire have always taken the form of exposing the violent effects of

moralization (7-9). I take up Thiem's excavation of Butler's ethics as an aid for

thinking through the exasperation that informs *Giving an Account of Oneself*, tracing

how the demand to "become ethical" interpellates Butler into a specific set of

frustrated identifications. Engaging the enigmatic in Butler's ethics, I review her

resistance to normative injunctions and moralization in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies*

that Matter, an important backdrop to her reluctance about the turn to ethics, and

interpret her essay "Ethical Ambivalence" (2000) as an expression of "bad conscience," or paralyzing guilt, she felt in reading Levinas, whose work is redolent of her post-Holocaust education in Judaism. Butler's struggle to account for and analyze her resistance to ethics and to Levinasian thought, part theoretical and part autobiographical, offers a living reflection on, and within, the problem self-opacity.

I examine these books in chronology, each published nearly a decade apart, in order to landmark the roots and progression of Butler's corpus, as she adapts her thinking to the demands of her critics, and also returns to the same set of problems to uncover greater dimensions of their meaning. Although chronologically arranged in this project, Butler's work has a non-linearity that I seek to emphasize as well; these books are also productively read as a series of echoes, returns, repetitions, and re-articulations, or "mobius strips" as Salih puts it (*Judith Butler* 3). To that end, I will highlight some of the self-critical references Butler makes to her own works across texts, and more importantly, flag the recurring themes and questions that structure the movements of her work in both progression and circularity. Butler's oeuvre continually loops back to the same set of problems, which themselves seem to beg an ongoing review of the terms of their articulation: namely, that truth and reality are contingent on the linguistic and grammatical conventions that produce its meaning, and that conventions, likewise, depend on reinstatement, and can therefore be revised; that the frames of social, cultural, and textual intelligibility tend to self-naturalize through exclusion and violence; that coherence seems to come at the expense of

incoherence, and that the latter seems to be a more accurate account of subjective life;

and finally, that ethics dispenses with incoherence only at its own peril.

CHAPTER ONE

Butler's Hegel: *Subjects of Desire*
and the Idealization of Subversion

Whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or
Nietzsche, our entire epoch struggles to disengage itself from Hegel.
                    —*Michel Foucault, "Orders of Discourse" (28)*

Because one's critical position always involves paradigmatic choices,
an ethical approach entails a simultaneous adherence to and distance
from such perspectives, a duality that can be achieved through
developing a consciousness of one's location.
                    —*Mikko Tuhkanen, "Performativity and Becoming" (3)*

In the first chapter of *Subjects of Desire*, "Hegel: Desire, Rhetoric, and Recognition,"

Butler gives a formalist reading of the language and structure of G.W.F Hegel's

Phenomenology of Spirit. Moving between close analyses of Hegel's sentences and

an overview of the book's structure, Butler's interpretation of Hegel offers insight

into Butler's own stylistic impetus: to test the bounds of what constitutes the

ontological subject through tactical manipulations of the grammatical subject and its

predicates. Highlighting the way the verb "to be" is persistently slippery in the

Phenomenology, she argues that the procession of Hegel's syntax and structure

"convey the elusive nature of both the grammatical and human subject" (18). In her

reading of Hegel's formulation, "Substance is Subject," we can see Butler's own

rhetorical struggle with the verb "to be" as she attempts to theorize its elusiveness:

> When Hegel states, "Substance is Subject," the "is" carries the
> burden of "becomes," where becoming is not a unilinear but a
> cyclical process. Hence, we read the sentence wrong if we rely on
> the ontological assumptions of linear reading, for the "is" is a nodal
> point of the interpenetration of both "Substance" and "Subject"; each
> *is* itself only to the extent that it *is* the other because, for Hegel, self-
> identity is only rendered actual to the extent that it is mediated
> through that which is different. (18; emphasis in original)

Introducing the idiosyncrasies of Hegel's writing as symptoms of the subject's

constitution in alterity and difference, Butler labours to frame Hegel's "is" as a

challenge for ontology. She argues that Hegel's knotted formulations compel us to

loop back to the sentence's starting point once we arrive at the end, in a movement

both "cyclical and progressive at once" (19). And yet we can see in the above

paragraph that Butler enters the grammatical quandary of the copula: the scare quotes

allow her some critical distance from the verb, with the italics emphasizing the

slippage between "itself" and "the other," and yet she also enacts a repetitive reliance

on the "is" in the last clauses, perhaps excessively. The verb "to be" proliferates in

Gender Trouble as well, surfacing in the moments where she articulates her key

theses: "gender is not a noun… gender proves to be performative—that is,

constituting the identity it is purported to be"; "identity is performatively constituted

by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results;" "ontology is, thus, not a

foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself

into political discourse as its necessary ground" (33; 33; 189). The tension of the

copulas here ("gender is not a noun," "ontology is … not") indicates that Butler's

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effort to trouble the category of "being" is to some degree limited by the proprieties of grammar. Jessica Cadwallader explains this difficulty as a limit embedded in the English language, noting that French and German contain a greater potential for revising ontology at the grammatical level: "for the most part [Butler's] articulation of her argument is delimited by an English dependence upon the copula, creating a temporal, causal and/or logical hierarchy and implying an ontology as a result" ("How Judith Butler Matters" 290). What interests me in Cadwallader's reading is that she suggests Butler is labouring to revise conditions that are perhaps *inescapable*. This tension between inheritance and revision serves as a microcosm of Butler's rhetorical performances overall: in the enterprise to reveal the processes that regulate and produce a world that seems inevitable, Butler seeks to gesture towards a reformation of that world through parodic repetitions; however, over the course of those repetitions, Butler clearly remains within the quandaries she is attempting to revise.

In her reading of Hegel, Butler at times seeks to collapse this tension— between revising and reinstating—in favour of the revisionary in her reading of Hegel. In an overview of the *Phenomenology*'s syntaxes, she insists that Hegel "seems to defy the laws of grammar and to test the ontological imagination beyond its usual bounds," "disrupting the ontological assumptions that ordinary language use lulls us into making" (17, 18). Foreshadowing the intervention she would make in *Gender Trouble*, she writes that "every effort at identification [in the *Phenomenology*] is finally subverted" (21). At other times, however, Butler seems to value the

Phenomenology's tension, between the narrator's attempt to overcome the limits of its thinking and its "tragic" and "comic" reinstatement of those limits. In her discussion of the organizing structure of the *Phenomenology* as a whole, she argues that the narrator's philosophical journey "is suffered, dramatized, enacted" in a narrative of "comic myopia" that layers increasingly sophisticated philosophical mistakes (18, 21). She describes the first two sections of Hegel's text, "Consciousness" and "Self-consciousness," as "provisional scenes" and "instructive fictions" (21), arguing that Hegel exaggerates, stages, and displays the *pathos* of the bungled quest for self-knowledge: "Hegel's provisional scenes, the stage of self-certainty, the struggle for recognition, the dialectic of lord and bondsman, are instructive fictions, ways of organizing the world. ... These scenes are ... consistently undermined by that which they unwittingly exclude, and are forced to reassemble as more complicated arrangements, now including that which brought the previous scene to dissolution" (21). The certainty and sincerity of the narrator's elaborations within each provisional scene "[implicate] the reader indirectly and systematically" (19), and "[ask] us to suffer the inevitable failure of that subject's quest for identity within the confines of that scene" (21). Butler argues that, over the course of those failed attempts, the tension between the narrator's rhetorical gestures and his grasp of those gestures is heightened, emulating the internal paradoxes and errancy of the quest for truth as a "structure in human longing" (xix), and the "dramatization of desire" (34). Putting the dynamic another way, she suggests that, "as a rhetorical agency, the Hegelian subject always knows more than it thinks it knows, and by reading itself rhetorically, i.e.,

reading the meanings it unwittingly *enacts* against those it explicitly *intends*, it recovers ever greater dimensions of its own identity" (31; emphasis in original). The errors and tensions of Hegel's "rhetorical agency" therefore enable, rather than simply encumber, the journey's success.

In these metaphors of theatricality, performance, and staging, I read the kernel of Butler's understanding of "performativity" and the rhetorical "acting" of speech. This chapter generates a reading of how Hegel's legacy lives on in Butler's work as the catalyst for her investment in performativity, in the critical powers of irony and reflexivity, and in the capacity of language to enunciate the limits of self-awareness and autonomy, paradoxically, by flaunting and enunciating them. In the *Preface* to the 1999 edition of *Subjects of Desire*, Butler maintains that "in a sense, all of my work remains within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions" (xiv), particularly the question of how the subject is formed by conditions that it cannot fully analyse: "how is it that the constitution of the subject entails a radical and constitutive relation to alterity?" (xiv). Thinking through the grammatical/ontological process of subject-formation in terms of predication, incorporation, and recitation, I want to suggest a stronger thesis about Butler's relationship to Hegel, one more "radical and constitutive": I read Butler's corpus as the evolving, profuse articulation and expression of her subjection to Hegel. Consider, for instance, that Butler returns to Hegelian questions and themes in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where she considers his theory of "the Unhappy Conscience" as a precursor of Foucault's paradox of subjectivation, and in *Antigone's Claim* (2000), reading Antigone's resistance to

Creon through Hegel's understanding of the play and of kinship, more broadly, as

bordering and forming the ethical/political order. Additionally, Butler reasserts her

defense of Hegel's system as "open" in each of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*

(172-175) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (26-30). These instances of explicit

return to Hegel by name indicate an ongoing engagement with Hegel; however, these

specific references are less interesting to me than how Butler's texts figure and

refigure the Hegelian drama in the sentences and structures of her texts, themselves

organized into "scenes" of confrontation, dissolution, and reformation, and invested

in the rhetorical agency of those movements. I read *Subjects of Desire* as it initiates a

"radical and constitutive relation" to Hegel, a relation that is cyclical and progressive

in its agency, as Butler metaphor of orbiting suggests.

The title of this chapter, "Butler's Hegel," has two meanings. First, I want to

suggest that Butler's version of Hegel is highly mediated, and that it is shaped,

specifically, by the Hegelianisms in twentieth-century France that she takes as the

object of her study. One of the most frequent formulations of this kind is "Kojeve's

Hegel,"[16] since, as Butler observes as well, Kojeve's glossed translations of Hegel,

published in 1930, heavily imbued and reframed the text with semiological,

existential, and psychoanalytic orientations that some find to be misinterpretations.

Towards the end of the chapter, I will return to these issues—of contingent

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[16] This formulation appears in *Subjects of Desire* (xiii), Robert R. Williams's *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (13, 407), and Tom Rockmore's *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism, and Being* (54). In Catherine Kellogg's *Law's Trace: From Hegel to Derrida*, the first chapter on the reception of Hegel in France is entitled "Tracing the Sign; The French Reception of Hegel; Kojeve's Hegel; Hyppolite's Hegel; Derrida's Hegel."

interpretation, the historicity of reading acts, and the amorphous question of intentions—in order to foreground Butler's Hegel as a projection, but one critically fruitful in terms of understanding Butler's corpus overall. The second implication of my title, slightly veiled by the impropriety of contractions in formal writing, suggests that "Butler is Hegel." In the mode that Butler interprets Hegel's phrase "Substance is Subject," I mean to imply an ontological difficulty presented in the texture of Butler's rhetoric. Where we would tend to view Hegel as an ostensibly external influence on the individuated thinker, "Judith Butler," I provisionally suggest instead that her corpus is an extension, addendum, or continuation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Indeed, much of what she writes about Hegel's *Phenomenology* could be read as describing her own work. She writes, "Hegel's sentences enact the meanings that they convey; indeed, they show that what 'is' only is to the extent that it is enacted" (18). As I indicated in the introduction, Butler's analysis of Hegel's rhetorical agency foreshadows the defenses of Butler's own difficult writing. She claims "if we refuse to give up the expectation that univocal meanings linearly arranged will unfold from the words at hand, we will find Hegel confused, unwieldy, unnecessarily dense" (*SD* 19).[17] These insights suggest not only that Butler's debt to Hegel might be productively thought of as an issue of style, but also that she inherits some of the rhetorical ambiguities of the *Phenomenology*. While I will return in the second half of

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[17] Against Martha Nussbaum's "The Professor of Parody" (1999), Salih defends Butler's difficult language as "a self-conscious strategy with serious ethical and political aims": "on a first encounter at least, many of the sentences themselves pose hermeneutic problems, since they deliberately refuse to conform to the standards of what Butler calls 'ordinary language' or 'received grammar'" ("Judith Butler and the Ethics of Difficulty" 44).

this chapter to the *Phenomenology*'s strikingly varied interpretations and meanings, I begin by introducing her reading of Hegel's sentences as a way to understand Butler's politics of style, and to foreground her investment in the rhetorical dimensions of thought. I locate the emergence of performativity in the initial chapters of *Subjects of Desire* to suggest that there has never been a time that Butler was not preoccupied with the active *process* of philosophical articulation. In the first sentence of the first chapter, she takes "a preliminary turn to the question of how philosophical themes are introduced and 'argued'" (17).

Founding Struggles

My analysis of *Subjects of Desire* enters a retrospective discussion of how Butler's early encounter with Hegel is important to understanding the formation of her work. The question of Butler's attachment to Hegel as a matter of structure and style is opened up by Vicky Kirby in her book *Judith Butler* (2005), and by Moya Lloyd in *Judith Butler: from Norms to Politics* (2007). In an introductory section, Kirby explores Butler's "fascinat[ion]" with the "strange internal architecture" of the *Phenomenology* (3). Particularly, Kirby looks at how the text "reflects the internal ambiguities of language itself and the impossibility of fixing a text in any final way," which is "not specific to the Hegelian oeuvre" but is, according to Butler "dramatize[d]" in Hegel (2).[18] Moya Lloyd devises four key components of Butler's

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[18] In her introduction, Kirby traces Butler's debt to Hegel in the themes of desire and recognition, remarking that "for Hegel and for Butler, the operations of language exemplify [these] process[es]" of desire and recognition, and "that we begin to

debt to Hegel: the idea of the desiring subject, the tension between subjectivity and

alterity, the movement of dialectical thought, and finally, "the relation between

Hegel's rhetorical style and Butler's own writing style" (14). Although Lloyd stops

short of a full textual analysis of *Subjects of Desire*, she notes that "Hegel's writing

style embodies the dialectical movement of his phenomenology ... [and] Butler's

writing also performs the project it is advancing" (20-21). Lloyd's general suggestion

is that Butler deliberately and strategically preserves Hegel in a "friendly and

responsive" (14) critical relation. Kirby draws similar conclusions, insisting that

Butler's aim is "not so much the 'trumping' of Hegel" but rather "to envisage

different futures" for the text (3, 4). In their sympathetic readings of Butler's project,

Kirby and Lloyd emphasize that Butler's *Subjects of Desire* never sets out to

transcend Hegel; each of them evokes Butler's contention regarding efforts to

disengage Hegel in twentieth-century France, that "references to a 'break' with Hegel

are almost always impossible ... only because Hegel has made the very notion of

'breaking with' into the central tenet of his dialectic" (*SD* 183-4).

   To nuance these accounts of Butler's Hegelianism, I read *Subjects of Desire*

as a performative conceit that indeed "trumps" Hegel, but precisely by refusing the

posture of breaking with him. In *Subjects of Desire*, Butler dramatizes the mode of

intervention that she will repeat throughout her works by reinstating Hegel—but

differently. Drawing out this paradox will also help me to account for some other

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perceive that even reading is a form of recognition that must constantly undo itself
through movement" (6). She leaves her analysis of Butler's style (discussed in my
introduction) to the final chapter, where Hegel is not mentioned.

readings of *Subjects of Desire* that, by contrast to Lloyd's and Kirby's, interpret the text as Butler's effort to disengage Hegelian dialectics. This reading appears in an early review, which sets *Subjects of Desire* as "an attempted movement away from Hegel" (Megill 125), and, more recently, in Mikka Tuhkanen's "Performativity and Becoming" (2009). I think these contrasting sets of readings should be thought together; the text can be figured as a simultaneous movement towards and away, although lateral metaphors perhaps fail us here. At the same time, I want to trace my disagreement with Tuhkanen's argument, which looks to the final chapter of the text, when Butler appears to propose an achieved distance from Hegel through Foucault's "history of bodies." For Tuhkanen, this turn to Foucault marks the emergence of performativity in the early Butler. And yet, as Lloyd, Kirby, and I suggest, "performativity" is Butler's Hegelian style of embodying the philosophical processes she describes. In simplifying "performativity" to indicate only a set of ideas and themes, Tuhkanen frames Butler's corpus as an ongoing endeavour to transcend Hegel, occasioning the argument that Butler fails to achieve her goal and falls into an unwitting, spiraling contradiction of unexamined inheritance. Using Butler as an example of a scholar "haunted" by "the contingencies of [her] education" (3), Tuhkanen enjoins the critic to cultivate a better grasp of our "paradigmatic choices" (4) and "allegiances" (24): "because one's critical position always involves paradigmatic choices, an ethical approach entails a *simultaneous adherence to and distance* from such perspectives, a duality that can be achieved through developing a consciousness of one's location—consciousness that pedagogy is responsible in

inducing in young scholars" (3; emphasis added).[19] As a rejoinder to Tuhkanen's

analysis, I interpret the cyclical and progressive movement of *Subjects of Desire* as a

commentary on inheritance and paradigms—"a consciousness of one's location"—

that has a "dramatic integrity" (*SD* 23) in its adherence to and its distance from Hegel.

I want to carefully engage Tuhkanen's suggestion, that Butler's integrity is "undone"

by her reliance on Hegel, and to show that this not a critical weakness that "young

scholars" must avoid, but rather an aesthetic effect that Butler anticipates, one with its

own pedagogical function.

Giving new meaning to Butler's "limitations" in *Subjects of Desire*, I will

draw out some of its ambivalences, paradoxes, and tensions of this text as Butler's

endeavour to "[develop] a consciousness of [her] location" (Tuhkanen). In the first

pages of the "Introduction" to *Subjects of Desire*, Butler describes the character of the

"philosopher," as "a paradigm of psychic integration," "who knows what he wants

and wants what he knows" (2). Her general contention, which resounds with a vision

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[19] Tukhanen proposes a break with Butler's Hegelianism, looking to Deleuzian rhizomatics and Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) as alternatives. Looking at Butler's perhaps brief, indeed dismissive, treatment of Deleuze in *Subjects of Desire* (205-217), Tukhanen argues that Butler's work is haunted by Hegelian dialectics, and, however "open" she claims Hegel to be, Butler's reliance on futurity, dialectics, and productive oppositions has imbued the entire field of queer theory with an inability to account for rhizomatic and nomadic thought. I tend to agree with Tukhanen on this point, that Butler resists the possibility of rhizomatic and nomadic thought: in *Subjects of Desire,* we already see her argument that "no subject can emerge without [an] attachment" (*PLP* 8). If desires are shaped through attachment, then the claim to nomadic and rhizomatic thought would be a block to reflexive self-knowledge in Butler's view. However, a Butlerian deconstruction of nomadic and rhizomatic thought remains beyond the scope of this project. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus my rebuttal on Tukhanen's moral for "young scholars" as based on a partial reading of *Subjects of Desire.*

of desire's function in "an entire history of Western discourse" and "the philosophical pursuit of knowledge" (236, 2), is that the figure of the philosopher as a rational, self-knowing agency produces an impossible morality: "moral psychology ... has assumed a moral ontology, a theory about what a being must be like in order to be capable of moral deliberation and action, in order to lead a moral life and be a moral personality" (5). For Butler, this version of morality has an underlying wish to emulate the discrete and harmoniously-willed subject as a philosophical norm. In Aristotle, Spinoza, and Leibniz, "the unified subject is a theoretical requirement, not only for the moral life, but for the grander effort *to secure a pre-established metaphysical place for the human subject*" (5; emphasis in original). In *Subjects of Desire* Butler formulates these large-scale philosophical processes as "the negation of desire" (2), a notion that will morph and recur in *The Psychic Life of Power* as the denial of passionate attachments (8), and in *Giving an Account of Oneself* as the "purg[ing] [of] ... one's opacity" through "condemnation" and "excoriation" (46).

In its style and in its themes, *Subjects of Desire* foreshadows the rest of Butler's works. What Butler gleans from Hegel is the aesthetic effect, and pedagogical value, of "the illumination of [the subject's] own opacity" (*SD* 24). This process, for Butler, has instructive purposes in terms of how inheritance functions in both willed and unwilled ways, and offers an important counter-example of "the philosopher" disintegrated by desire. To emphasize the *Phenomenology* as a self-thwarting journey towards a unified philosophical life, she compares the narrator to unreliable, errant characters, including Don Quixote (23), Mr Magoo (21), and Faust

(36), who magnify the "tragic blindness" and "comic myopia" of the subject's

attempt to know itself (21). For Butler, that process "congeal[s]" over the course of

the narrative to produce an aesthetic thesis (and, importantly, "congeals" is the verb

she will use to describe the process of gender ontology in *Gender Trouble* [*SD* 152;

GT 43]). Paradoxically, the momentum Hegel gives to the subject's errancy thus

rigorously and efficaciously undermines the possibility of a fully-conscious, infinitely

justified position that is often attributed to Hegel's concluding chapter, "Absolute

Knowledge."

To understand Butler's reading of Hegel's conclusion, I want to foreground

how the *Phenomenology* shifts philosophical inquiry from a metaphysical

understanding of knowledge towards a social and historical understanding of

knowledge (Pinkard 22; Lukács 466). Hegel takes a Cartesian point of departure,

"immediate or receptive" (section 90) individual consciousness, assumed to be

discrete enough to serve as a starting point, as it comes into contact with a world that

appears to be outside it; over the course of these meditations, he develops a critique of

that point of departure, revealing the distinction between consciousness and the world

to be a dynamic of mediation. Against empiricist principles that were dominant in

1807, the first section, "Consciousness," establishes that it is not the senses that give

us knowledge, but our moment-to-moment acquaintance with objects via a persistent

configuration of universals: the "now," "here," "this," and the "I" (section 100).

Within the constellation of these universals, the subject and the object are continually

produced through the process of reflection, and produced as ostensibly distinct

entities: "consciousness alternately makes itself, as well as the thing ... into independent matters. ... The thing exhibits itself for consciousness apprehended it, and is at the same time reflected back into itself via consciousness" (section 122). The progression of these meditations suggests that discrete consciousness—Hegel's starting point—is a necessary effect of the senses, and also a mistake: "consciousness is only the play of these abstractions" (section 131). Self-consciousness, rather than a solipsistic given, as a secondary effect of that play is "essentially the return from otherness" (section 167). The abstractions through which we encounter and reflect on "otherness" are given by a social community that licenses the use of specific schemata of recognizable terms, classifications, and explanations. That is, what seems to be "our" consciousness turns out to be preemptively mediated by a historical context. Within "the discipline of service and obedience," self-consciousness is a historical, "formative activity" (section 196). To emphasize that self-consciousness as historical material, Hegel conflates issues of psychology with historiography. In a telling inability to unravel that conflation, Rudolf Haym, the nineteenth-century biographer and critic of Hegel, finds the *Phenomenology* to be a confused text, since it remains unclear whether history or psychology is its chief logic. He writes, "the *Phenomenology is a psychology confused and thrown into disarray by history, and a history hopelessly fragmented by psychology*" (qtd. in Lukàcs 467-8). Such confusion, fragmentation, and disarray of history by psychology and vice versa represent, for Butler, the crucial entangling of those logics as a route to thinking

through consciousness as historical material.[20] In presuming history as "out there,"

we repress the historical constitution of the subjective site of consciousness; if we

presume consciousness as "in here," we repress the historical milieu through which

that subject emerges as a productive being with socially intelligible reflections.

Understanding the totality of history, then, becomes the goal of consciousness's quest

to know itself. In Chapter VI, Hegel narrates the struggle for recognition in its

historical manifestations according to a linear, rational evolution of Western political

states since the Ancient World. Hegel's sweeping historiography advocates, and

claims to offer, a complete awareness of "universal history" as an atonement for the

historical mediation that incepts self-consciousness, and therefore a kind of "end" to

history. In other words, the success of Hegel's journey depends on the possibility of

an omniscient consciousness, a subject at one with its historicity via a complete

understanding of history's totality. In Butler's reading, Hegel means that absolute

knowledge *would* constitute a complete apprehension of all historical processes that

have accrued in order to produce contemporary consciousness, and that apprehension

is, for Butler, effectively staged as an impossible but *necessary* ideal for philosophy.

Her thesis about Hegel's final sections is that "absolute truth in the

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[20] It is possible that Butler's focus here, on consciousness as historical material in the *Phenomenology*, was also influenced by Antonio Gramsci's remarks about "historical traces." In his *Prison Notebooks*, he writes "The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited you in an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory, [therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory]" (324). The bracketed words here are Edward Said's translation from Gramsci's original *Quaderni del Carcere*; he notes that the phrase was omitted from the English translation I have cited (*Orientalism* 25).

Phenomenology is thus something like the dramatic integrity of a comedy of errors"
(*SD* 23). Butler labours to show how, in the staged myopia of Hegel's narrator, the
purported dénouement at the meditation's close functions as only another mistake in
the finally endless journey, and Hegel offers "a subject as perpetual striving" whose
errancy "confirms the impossibility of that system's completion and closure" (13, 12).
That is, Hegel does not sincerely anticipate *Aufhebung*, the philosophical term that
describes the complex of ideas typically attributed to Hegel: synthesis, absolute
knowledge, and transcendence. Rather, Hegel *displays* the fantasy of *Aufhebung* as
the subject's bungled destiny. If staging is the true principle of the *Phenomenology*,
as Butler argues, then the work's idealistic close does not *prescribe* a regulatory
epitome with "Absolute Knowing," but rather *illustrates* that "desire is an idealizing
process," and that subjects of desire cannot help but move toward synthesis and
transcendence in ever more complex and nuanced ways (69). Butler's key thesis is
that the analysis of these processes will never guarantee our distance from these
processes. Indeed, the very desire to achieve a distance from them is further evidence
of their persistence. The necessity and impossibility of critical distance is the
difficulty that Butler dwells in with *Subjects of Desire*, and which, I argue, informs
her oeuvre as a whole.

The Formation of *Subjects of Desire*

To conduct her reading of Hegel, Butler deploys a central tenet of
poststructuralist theory: that the process of signification is primary rather than

supplementary to philosophy, and that the process itself will be bound to socially-contingent chains of signification, and to a situated, historical "I." In Lacan, the identification with the fixed "I", a social, linguistic, and specular signifier, "tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other" ("The Mirror Stage" 737). Rather than a moment of self-recognition or self-knowing, this identification with the "I" is a grounding mistake, constitutive trauma, or *méconnaissance*, that makes the subject an essentially alienated structure; all of its energies prattle in the attempt to establish that autonomous, transparent identification through what Derrida will call "the *overabundance* of the signifier" (*Writing and Difference* 290; emphasis in original). Exposing criticism's overconfidence in the constative, referential sign, Derrida sets the subject as grounded in denial of the *différance*—a discrepancy and a postponement—between signifier (that which is written) and signified (that to which the writing refers). In the rubric of *différance*, Derrida re-conceptualizes writing as a series of physical marks that betray the absence of a self-same speaker and registers "the alterity of the unconscious" (21). As the expression of anxiety in the endless effort to overcome *différance*, Western philosophy is "the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*" through "the *overabundance* of the signifier" (290; emphases in original). For Butler, Hegel's subject openly suffers its own demise again and again through the very quest—the writing of a giant book—to delineate itself: "it is not that articulation offers forth a 'content' which is then reflected upon by a consciousness doggedly watching from an ontological elsewhere, but consciousness reveals itself as an articulated phenomenon,

that which only becomes itself as articulation" (31). Butler reads the *Phenomenology*,

which "narrows the distance between philosophical form and content" (*SD* 20), as the

integration of the process of signification and the enactment of subjectivity. In

Butler's view, the *Phenomenology* is an instructive pantomime of *méconnaissance*

and *différance*, a lengthy, overabundant chain of signifiers that draws attention to the

place of self-consciousness as the process of articulation itself. If the subject "must

externalize knowledge in its linguistic form" and if "consciousness is 'of' the world,

in the sense that it appears in the world," then as a kind of material history, the

writing on those pages serves to exemplify or model the way that the subject emerges

through that which is other to achieve consciousness qua self-reflection, a dynamic

structure whose essence remains paradoxically and self-thwartingly external (*SD* 30).

This reading of Hegel also serves as a reading of *Subjects of Desire*, which is

structured in anxiety, conflict, and longing for synthesis. If we look to Butler's post-

secondary education, we can read Butler's imbrication of post-structuralist theory

with Hegel as a way of handling her debt to the latter—by means other than

repudiation—in the face of new alliances with poststructuralism. In the "Preface to

the Paperback Edition" (1999), Butler explains the specific set of institutional

contexts and encounters that inform her 1987 book (vii). Having studied Hegel and

German Idealism at the Heidelberg Universität, and continental philosophy at Yale,

Butler wrote her dissertation, "Recovery and Invention: The Projects of Desire in

Hegel, Kojève, Hyppolite, and Sartre" (1984),[21] on the *Phenomenology*'s life in

France after Kojève's 1930 translation. With that commitment to Hegel in place, she

encountered French poststructuralist theory in Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida only after

her doctorate was complete (vii). These thinkers compelled her toward questions of

embodied subjectivity, especially in the study of gender and sexuality, which would

shape her corpus through the 1990s. Yet poststructuralism remained grounded in

firmly anti-Hegelian sentiments. *Subjects of Desire* is the doctoral dissertation on

Hegel's *Phenomenology* revised to incorporate the Lacanian, Derridean, and

Foucauldian critiques of Hegel. In other words, as a confrontation with the traditions

that shaped her at Heidelberg and Yale, Butler's *Subjects of Desire* can be read as the

ambivalent struggle of a Hegelian student desiring alliance with an anti-Hegelian

school.[22]

This foundational ambivalence is figured in the structure of *Subjects of*

Desire, which begins with the formalist reading of the drama, reflexion, and irony of

the *Phenomenology*, and brackets historical context and reception. The ensuing

chapters of the book uncover two generations of French Hegelian scholarship as they

unfolded after 1930, giving increasing context to her reading in the first chapter. In

the first generation (1930s and 1940s), Kojève, Hyppolite and Sartre read the

Phenomenology through existential, semiotic, and psychoanalytic frames, and use it

[21] Lloyd, not Butler, provides us with the dissertation's title in *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (13).

[22] In the "Preface to the Paperback Edition," Butler writes, "it was not until I left Yale and became a visiting faculty member and then a postdoctoral fellow at Wesleyan University from 1983-86 that I became open to French theory in ways that I mainly resisted while at Yale" (vii-viii).

to understand the social conditioning of historically responsible, engaged

subjectivities (*SD* 62). At this stage in *Subjects of Desire*, it becomes clear that

Butler's close reading of Hegel borrows heavily from Kojève, who glossed his 1930

translation with a focus on desire (I will return to Kojève towards the end of this

chapter). The last sections focus on the generation of French scholars who studied

under Kojève and Hyppolite—Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze—for whom

devising a rupture with Hegel's *Phenomenology* becomes aligned with the effort to

deprive philosophy of ideals of synthesis, ontological harmony, and absolute justice.

Butler interprets this second generation as a "rebellion" against the first, in

which Hegel becomes a "projected unity" and "a convenient rubric for a variety of

positions that defend the self-sufficient subject" (176, 185, 176). Reading that

reaction through the rubric of desire, Butler argues that, since 1960 in France, "the

difference from Hegel is a vital and absorbing one" (*SD* 175). In 1977, André

Glucksmann described Hegel as "one of the four major thinkers who have led the

modern world into … repressive or totalitarian ideas or practices" ("Les Maîtres

penseurs" 1977; qtd. in Kelly 266). Levinas describes the *Phenomenology* as the

"adventure of a return to his native island—a complacency in the Same, an

unrecognition of the other: ("The Trace of the Other" 346). In Levinas, Hegel's

journey towards closure relies heavily on the hope to assimilate, homogenize, and

colonize individuals in a "melting pot" (Levinas, *Outside the Subject* 76), servicing

the cultural politics of assimilation that fuel colonial and neo-colonial strategies of

domination. Butler's work suggests that Hegel's bad reputation has a genealogy in the

poststructuralist reception of the *Phenomenology* after 1960. Robert Pippin supports

this view in his review of *Subjects of Desire*: "the most damaging aspect of the

contemporary French Hegel reception is that its highly critical emphasis on the

metaphysical issues of identity, rationality, and historical closure, have so obscured

Hegel's idealism, especially his history of reflection" (Pippin 131).

It is perhaps because of this "highly critical emphasis" of the poststructuralist

generation in France that Butler's negotiation of the tension between

poststructuralism and Hegel looks strikingly wayward in a review of Hegelian studies

in the U.S. in the 1980s, which illustrates the influence of the important French

thinkers of the time. During the time *Subjects of Desire* was developed and published,

a handful of American critics were writing towards a new Hegelianism that hoped to

re-instate the relevance of his work in the age of deconstruction by giving it more

modest ambitions. Gently rejecting his idealism, these pro-Hegelians write about

"Hegel's Return" (Stoekl 1988), "Hegel as Deconstructor" (Cresap 1985), and "A

Plea For an Open, Humble Hegelianism" (Veken 1986), arguing that the notion of

absolute knowledge can be discarded in favour of a less "arrogant" mode of Hegelian

inquiry. As Jan van der Veken writes:

> Is it possible to interpret Hegel himself in this "humble" fashion? The
> general impression gleaned from reading Hegel's explicit statements on
> the role of philosophy points in rather a different direction—whence his
> arrogant reputation for desiring that his system be perceived as nothing
> less than *sophia*, the conclusion and the end of philosophy's quest.
> Nevertheless, there are presently a number of authorities on Hegel's
> thought who feel that "absolute knowing" can likewise be understood as
> a humble and open search for understanding. (111)

These new Hegelians of the 1980s look to Hegel's dialectic, once extracted from the

general idealistic framework, as a potentially "open" system that consents to the importance of endless dialectic, opposition, and intersubjective critical relations.[23] This move to extract the "good" parts of Hegel at the expense of his idealism appears in discussions of Marx's debt to Hegel as well. Althusser grants that Marx borrows Hegel's privilege of historical processes as the proper business of philosophy, but rightfully strips it of all teleological inklings (*For Marx* 56-7). In *The Young Hegel*, György Lukács, suggests that "if we consider the real content and the real implications of Hegel's method for a historical view of the evolution of man, its affinities with the view Marx advances in *The German Ideology* are very striking (*setting aside the general idealistic framework of Hegel's system for the moment*)" (466-467; emphasis added). This kind of Hegelianism hopes to be open in two ways: by explicitly embracing Hegel and offering new ways of being Hegelian, and second, by remaining unrestricted by the philosopher's "general idealistic framework."

Although "openly" Hegelian like Veken's work, Butler's *Subjects of Desire* is less optimistic that we can overcome Hegel's idealism; instead she looks to the *Phenomenology* as a guide to understanding how ideals are inevitably posited through tropes of separation, exclusion, and individuation. Fighting against the way Hegel is obscured by his rejection in France, *Subjects of Desire* ambitiously pursues the desirous gesture towards transcendence as a constitutive pattern of the poststructuralist rejection of Hegel. Over the course of a proposed rupture, in Butler's

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[23] For Veken, this is "Whiteheadian" Hegelianism, a critique of absolutism which concedes that "there never has been any exact complete system of philosophical thought" (110).

argument, the Hegelian trope of transcendence is unintentionally reinscribed, and exposes the irony and anxiety of this "merely imagined [satisfaction]" (*SD* 185). As I mentioned above, the hypothesis of her review of Hegel's legacy in twentieth-century France is that "references to a 'break' with Hegel are almost always impossible… only because Hegel has made the very notion of 'breaking with' into the central tenet of his dialectic" (183-4).

I characterize *Subjects of Desire* as a rhetorical conceit not only because of its ambition and its ambivalence, but also because, with clear deliberation, it engages the ethos of these thinkers who rejected Hegel, specifically by deconstructing the binary between an anti-Hegelian and Hegelian position. Butler's aim is not to displace and undermine the anti-Hegelians, but instead to find a way to be aligned with them. Further, in this conceit, Butler manipulates Hegel and his legacy in France in order to figure "the negation of desire [as] always only another one of its modalities" (2). Indeed, the naivety she projects onto the rebellion against Hegel is perhaps an "imagined satisfaction" as well, since, significantly, both Derrida and Foucault reflect on the repudiation of Hegel as an anxious project. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida writes that those who try to "undo the constraint of Hegel can find themselves without seeing or knowing it, *within* the very self-evidence of Hegel one often thinks oneself unburdened of" (251; emphasis in original); and, in 1971, as part of his inaugural speech at the Collège de France, Foucault expresses that French philosophy is riveted by Hegel: "whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or Nietzsche, our entire epoch struggles to disengage itself from Hegel" ("Orders of

Discourse" 28). Butler constructs a situation in which Hegel appears to dominate and encompass all attempts to struggle out of his system: "it is striking to find how regularly even the most tenacious of post-Hegelians appear to remain faithful to the founding struggles of Hegel's desiring subject" (230). Within that bind, she compels us to think of agency in the face of Hegel beyond the rhetoric of negation and transcendence, and to "find a way of being different from Hegel that he himself cannot account for" (184). To that end, she strives to articulate poststructuralism in ways that *cannot* be "simply reassimilated back into Hegel's framework," looking to the developing poststructuralist and feminist accounts of embodied subjectivity in France, an account she says is absent from the *Phenomenology* (231). In the 1987 "Preface," she describes Hegel's narrator as "nameless and genderless in its abstract universality," and adds, "we would not be able to recognize this subject in the train station" (xix). Towards the end of *Subjects of Desire,* she poses the question of what gender Hegel's subject would be, opening up the differences between the sexes as an historic logic unexamined by Hegel's narrator (232).

In terms of the arc of *Subjects of Desire*, and of Butler's overall corpus, the question of the final pages of *Subjects of Desire* is a puzzling and rich one. As Tuhkanen and Lloyd observe, here Butler turns to the question of gender, generating the themes that create the platform for *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (Tuhkanen 5; Lloyd 14). In these final sections, she engages the critiques of Hegel in Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, although very briefly, based in the unexamined difference between the sexes (232-4). Paraphrasing from *The Second*

Sex, Butler writes that "it is mainly men who constitute the domain of subjects, and that women, in this regard, are the Other" (233). Focusing de Beauvoir's insight through Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Butler articulates the feminist critique of philosophy as phallogocentric: "the symbolic constitutes the rule of the Phallus, and that the entire system of symbolic language… implies the repudiation of femininity" (233). In a more sustained analysis, Butler looks to Foucault's "history of bodies" as the history of desire's production and circulation through "regulatory discourses on sexuality such as those that create the category of sex" (234-5). She fixes on Foucault's genealogy of desire as an effective revision of Hegel, and suggests a possible alliance between Foucault and "some feminist inquiries that understand the historical situation of the body to be centrally concerned with gender" (234). This engagement begins to lay out the precise methodological groundwork for *Gender Trouble*'s first chapter, entitled "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," which maps a "feminist genealogy of the category of women" (*GT* 9). Further, as I argue in the next chapter, Foucault becomes a "passionate attachment" for Butler, a thinker whose influence she must struggle to criticize as a reflection on the trajectories and forces of her own work. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she subjects his theory of power to a psychoanalytic redescription, gaining leverage over Foucault's firm refusal of the psychoanalytic paradigm. However, *The Psychic Life of Power*, which enacts agency as "reinstating differently," is an echo of the movement she figures in relation to Hegel in *Subjects of Desire*.

Butler posits the question of gender as one that Hegel's *Phenomenology* does

not foresee and cannot explain, and, by virtue of that incapacity, there emerges the desire and the possibility of breaking with Hegel: "To break with Hegel and yet to escape being cast into his all-encompassing net of inter-relations requires finding a way to be different from Hegel that he himself cannot account for" (184). The question remains as to whether or not we can fairly characterize this as a "break from Hegel." I argue that, in light of Butler's travels so far, to characterize the narrative resolution as "an attempted movement away from Hegel" somewhat distills and simplifies the text's arc, even if at times Butler herself characterizes the movement of her argument this way. *Subjects of Desire*, in form and structure, emulates the "rhetorical agency" that Butler reads in Hegel. Intervening in that struggle to progress beyond Hegel as it played out in twentieth-century France, Butler's conceit *exemplifies* and *stages* what will count as efficacious critical agency in the face of Hegel, arguing towards a strategic position of leverage internal to Hegel's system, but not wholly determined by it. It is therefore inaccurate to locate "the emergence of performativity in early Butler" in the last two sections of the book, as Tukhanen does: "the synthesis of a Foucauldian notion of discourse and power ... allows her to articulate performativity in *Gender Trouble*" (12, 13). If we conflate Butler's theory of performativity with her theory of gender, Tukhanen's analysis seems correct, and *Gender Trouble*'s trajectory seems to be born of an achieved difference from Hegel. However, Butler's use of theatre metaphors to describe Hegel's position as "dramatized, enacted" suggests that performativity *initiates* rather than finishes the text (18).

Recall that, in Butler, the performance of identity cannot be distinguished from the reality or authenticity of identity; rather, the patterned and stylized enactment of identity gives the effect of the real and the authentic. In her close reading of Hegel, she begins to think through how that discursive process can be flaunted so as to reveal the effect of ontology as a rhetorical feat. Performativity therefore appears at the beginning (rather than the end) of *Subjects of Desire*. More precisely and more importantly, performativity cannot be localized in a particular set of paragraphs; rather, the body of the text as a whole dramatizes, suffers, enacts, and performs the version of agency she will continually return to: as the rhetorical *effect* of autonomy conditioned within a situation of subjection.

Figuring a set of gradually expansive returns to Hegel, Butler struggles *with* poststructuralism towards the possibility of differing from him, but in ways that his work cannot explain through the trope of transcendence. Reading Hegel against those who, "in order to reconstitute contemporary identity again and again," reject him, Butler works through her conflict of alliance by imbricating that contemporary identity with the Hegel it negates (175). *Subjects of Desire* embodies the possibility of a "poststructuralist Hegelianism," a trajectory that Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, in her reading, could not foresee. At the same time, Butler takes Hegel's system to its unexamined limits by raising interrelated concerns for the feminine, for sexual desires, and for historically-situated bodies that emerge in de Beauvoir, Kristeva, and Foucault. Butler therefore trumps the "rebellion" against Hegel precisely by presuming her subjection to him, and also trumps Hegel with the question of gender.

Full of instructive paradoxes, the close of *Subjects of Desire* constitutes at once a movement away from Hegel, and yet also, in its organization and performance, has all the conceptual appeal and integrity of a Hegelian synthesis. Taken in retrospect, Butler's close reading at the beginning of her book puts into motion the position Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault deemed impossible: a Hegelianism that takes the process of signification as primary, and therefore undermines any epiphanies about truth and self-identity for consciousness. The narrator's "bungled attempts" become Lacan's *méconnaissance*; the deferral of his thought through writing becomes Derrida's *différance*; the historical conditioning of desire becomes Foucault's "discursive power." As Butler argues of the *Phenomenology*, the movement of *Subjects of Desire* compels us to loop back to the beginning, where the question of "how philosophical themes are articulated and 'argued'" is raised in the first sentence of her formalist reading of Hegel (17).

Subjects of Desire's paradoxes and tensions themselves testify to the conditions of a subjective historical life. Butler's revisions to her doctoral dissertation represent the compromise of her attachment to Hegel with a set of compelling inquiries grounded in his rejection. Over the course of the text, that attachment comes under threat by new alliances, is partially denied through a proposed distance, and then partially restored in the form of a distinctly Hegelian dénouement. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she will offer a psychoanalytic reading of the subject's inability to recover the conditions of its emergence: "no subject can emerge without [an] attachment ... but no subject, in the course of its formation, can afford to fully

see it" (*PLP* 8). This attachment is "blind" and "stubborn" (60), and continually

threatens the subject's integrity:

> that accounts in part for the adult sense of humiliation when
> confronted with the earliest objects of love—parents, guardians,
> siblings, and so on—the sense of belated indignation in which one
> claims, 'I couldn't possibly love such a person.' The utterance
> concedes the possibility it denies, establishing the 'I' as predicated
> upon that foreclosure, grounded in and by that firmly imagined
> possibility. The I is thus fundamentally threatened by the specter of
> this (impossible) love's reappearance and remains condemned to
> reenact that love unconsciously, repeatedly reliving and displacing that
> scandal. (8)

Butler's move away and towards Hegel figures this displacement and reenactment,

"the ambivalent scene of agency" perpetuated on the surface of her texts (15).[24]

It is interesting, then, is that Butler is openly conflicted about the success of

her first work, insisting she "published the book too early," and asking that it be

"approached with abundant forgiveness and reserve" ("Preface to the Paperback

Edition" viii). In these 1999 reflections, she carefully lists the research areas she

should have included for the publication (particularly surrounding the work of

Georges Bataille, Luce Irigaray, and Franz Fanon), and examines some of the works

published since 1987 on Hegel in France that would be useful to any reader of

Subjects of Desire (Pierre Macherey's *Hegel ou Spinoza* [1990], Louis Althusser's

The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings [1994], and Jean-Luc Nancy's *Hegel: The*

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[24] These issues are worth linking to Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence, which
casts the writer's attempt to approximate, and also overcome, illustrous precursors as
an expression of psychic anxiety: "every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent
poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety" (*The Anxiety of
Influence* 94).

Restlessness of the Negative [1997]). This new preface continues the work of

recovering greater dimensions of this legacy, and shows that the difficult question of

closure and synthesis in Hegel continues to define the key debates. Re-advancing

Subjects of Desire's thesis, she writes in 1999, "although it was within the context of

French theory ... that Hegel became synonymous with totality, teleology, conceptual

domination, and the imperialist subject ... often the marks of a distinctively 'post-

Hegelian' position are not easy to distinguish from an appropriative reading of Hegel

himself"(xii). That is, despite her plea for a "forgiv[ing] and reserve[d]" reading of

Subjects of Desire in 1999, Butler yet stands behind the book's main argument.

It has been well noted that in the "Preface to the Paperback Edition" Butler

reflects on *Subjects of Desire* as her "juvenilia" (Salih 19; Kirby 1; Lloyd 13). But

this statement is rarely quoted in full. She writes, "it reads to me now—*to the extent*

that I can read it—as my juvenilia" (viii; emphasis added). Butler's words seem to

reinstate the quandary of how identity is grounded in negation and exclusion,

crucially, in the very moment she disavows the book where this quandary featured

centrally. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she conceptualizes the specter of

identification as it appears through disavowal: "the radical refusal to identify suggests

that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification has been

made and disavowed" (149). The Butler of 1999 can read *Subjects of Desire* only to

an "extent," which suggests two different meanings: that its juvenile arguments meet

her with dismay and humiliation, and also that the Butler of 1999, too, is a myopic

reader whose appropriations of a text's meaning will service a set of unrecoverable

desires. This double resonance suggests a simultaneous disavowal and an

identification, whose *pathos* echoes and magnifies the ambivalences of *Subjects of*

Desire.

To me, any "imagined satisfaction" of finding the disintegration of Butler "the

philosopher" is partially thwarted by the text's overall lessons, which encourage us to

be interested in the engine of desire, especially where it appears as the formation of

identity through negation and exclusion, as the assertion of one's own coherence

through positing the incoherence of another, where "another" can be a former self as

well. Tom Boland discusses Butler's performances of self-disavowal in his essay on

the "Prefaces" to *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (2007), offering insights

that corroborate my reading of the 1999 Preface to *Subjects of Desire*. He considers

generative, exemplary dimensions of these moments in Butler, where, through a

disavowal of a former position, she "suggest[s] that the current 'self' has achieved a

significantly better theoretical position" and "generat[es] the fiction of a subject who

moves beyond the epistemological limit" (112, 112, 116). Boland's understanding of

this mythic subject, in my mind, can be redescribed as the Hegelian fiction of the

subject with absolute knowledge, risked in the gesture that Butler makes in calling

Subjects of Desire her "juvenilia." In the style of reading Butler that I am promoting

here, Boland asks us to read these moments in Butler with the "renewed critical

suspension of ... judgments," and to instead look to Butler's *figuration* of identity-

through-disavowal itself as a critique of subjective historical life (117). To strengthen

this invitation, I want to add that although Butler rejects her former self, conditioned

within a desirous historical moment, she accepts that her 1999 self is also conditioned

by a momentariness and by epistemological limits: "it reads to me now—*to the extent*

that I can read it."

To diagnose the contradictions in Butler's text—and moralize a better grasp of

desire—seems less fruitful than to engage her inconsistencies with interest and self-

reflection. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, when Butler returns to the *Phenomenology*

to reflect on the attitude of the skeptic, she writes that "the childish and stubborn

pleasure that the skeptic takes in watching another fall turns into a profound

unhappiness when he is, as it were, forced to *watch himself* fall into endless

contradictions" (45; emphasis in original). Figured as a turn back on the self in the

movement to criticize another, this reflexive momentum becomes the basis for an

ethics in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, where she reformulates a critique of "psychic

integration," and of the complete analysis of one's place in language and history as an

impossible moral injunction, one that hinders ethical relations: "suspending the

demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to

counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-

identity at all times and require others to do the same" (*GA* 42). The evolving

narratives of ambivalence and incoherence in Butler's corpus, initiated in *Subjects of*

Desire, represent a perpetual writing through of these difficulties.

The Contingencies of Reading Hegel

My analysis of Butler's conceit seeks to think through Butler's relation to

Hegel as a curious act of preservation and revision, initiating her work as an ongoing

project of giving new life to the *Phenomenology*, and of granting special power to the

critical act of "reinstating differently." Butler remains within the philosophical

process that Hegel stages, in ways that are partially authorized, and also in ways that

she cannot bring to full examination. With patience, this next section will work

towards exposing a paradox in Butler's *Subjects of Desire*, one that reflects a dualism

in her thinking and in the reception of her writing. On the one hand, she values the

historical contingency of the *Phenomenology*'s various readings, arguing that its

interpretations in twentieth-century French readings effectively expand on the text,

whatever Hegel's intentions may have been. In this reading, the fissures in his

reception reflect broader issues of textuality, futurity, and uncontrollability that she

will take up in *Excitable Speech*: "the writer is blind to the future of the language in

which she writes" (8). In this formulation, language comes into view as an agency

that is not productively thought of as the agency of the speaker, and, moreover,

deprives that speech's author of control or *authority*: "agency is not the same as

'control'" (16). On the other hand, there are moments in Butler's text where she

attempts to fix the authority of Hegel as an "ironic artist," rather than a sincere

idealist, sometimes by reference to the philosopher's intentions ("Preface to the

Paperback Edition" xx). This tension, between the contingency of reading and

interpretation and the reference to subversive intentions, recurs in the defenses,

launched by Butler and others, of her own writing. To explore and critically assess

this tension, I want to look at Butler's evaluation of Hegel's shifting reception in

France, tracing *Subjects of Desire* to its beginnings in the work of Kojève and

Hyppolite, and to consider the struggles to define Hegel's work as the clash of

competing political efforts.

The meaning of Hegel has been notoriously difficult to pin down. It also

seems that there has always been much at stake in the meaning of Hegel. In a review

essay of Michael S. Roth's *Knowing and History*, Butler supportively cites Maurice

Merleau-Ponty's sense that "to give an interpretation of Hegel is to take a position on

all the philosophic, political and religious problems of our century" (249). Kimberly

Hutchings describes the two broadly construed readings of Hegel's *Phenomenology*,

in terms of its systematicity, as "closed" or "open." In Hegel's early reception in mid-

nineteenth-century Germany, these divergent readings fell across "right" and "left,"

and reflected two vastly contrasting political visions of modern Europe. On the

Hegelian right, ideas of "Absolute Knowledge" and "The End of History" were

emblematized as the triumph of Protestant Christianity and the Prussian state; among

the Hegelian left, including Feuerbach and Marx, Hegel's work became a resource for

criticizing the contradictions of the political and religious order (Hutchings 32). This

early debate reveals not only that Hegel's *Phenomenology* has always had

interpretative instability, but also that it is a text that has effectively cut at least two

ways ideologically. Kimberly Hutchings notes that the instability of Hegel's meaning

has to do with the "obscurity and difficulty of his arguments" (32), indicating an

opacity built into the text that bemires its meaning in ambiguity. Given this very

history, I tend to agree with the early Hegelian left, and with Butler, that the

Phenomenology is "open," but in the sense that it is a *Gestalt* that can be read, viably, by interpretations that seem to contradict one another in absolutely crucial ways.[25]

Butler pursues this flickering quality of the *Phenomenology*, using its various incarnations in twentieth-century France to conceptualize meaning-making as the process of mediation. Arguing that the text's interpretations in France are primary rather than supplementary to its meaning, she sees the *Phenomenology* as fractured, revised, and re-embodied by the historical contingencies of its reading: "Hegel's text is itself transformed by the particular historical interpretations it endures; indeed, the commentaries are extension of the text, they *are* the text in its modern life" (*SD* 63; emphasis in original). In this analysis, Butler suggests that the question of Hegel's intentions is moot, or at the very least, less interesting than the question of how he has been variously encountered and read: "Hegel's text ... opens up the question of the relation between time and readability" ("Preface to the Paperback Edition" ix). Kirby focuses on this thread in *Subjects of Desire*, where "[Butler] imbues the act of reading with an interpretative efficacy that can continue to change it ... complicat[ing] our ability to discriminate between the specific contributions of individual authors... and between what is ancillary or derived and what is central or primary" (1-2). This attitude also becomes clear in Butler's 1990 review of Michael Roth's *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France*. She writes, "Rothman makes clear that he is not interested in assessing whether or not the French

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[25] Francis Fukuyama's bestselling *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) offers a more recent example of the Hegelian right, setting the end of the Cold War as the triumph of liberal democracy and globalizing capitalism, and in that sense "the end of history."

'got Hegel right,' and, in fact, I concur that that question is fundamentally

unimportant for the consideration of the meaning of French Hegelianism" (249). In

another review, of Edith Wyschogrod's *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-

Made Mass Death*, Butler openly censors Hegel's rationalization of war and

slaughter, confirming that Hegel's thinking has been historically dangerous: he

"assume[s] that if particular individuals are sacrificed in the historical process which

ultimately constructs this community of free agents, loss of individual lives is

retrospectively justified" (63). Unfettered by the confines of *Subjects of Desire* as a

performative conceit that celebrates—and embodies—the radical openness of Hegel's

text, Butler seems here to consent to Glucksmann's assessment, quoted earlier in this

chapter, of Hegel as a proprietor of "repressive or totalitarian ideas or practices" (qtd.

in Kelly 266).

To draw out this problem of the contingencies of reading, and to understand

Butler's inconsistent remarks about this problem, will I want to look at some of the

controversies over the Hegelianism of Kojève and Hyppolite, the two scholars largely

responsible for the modern life of the *Phenomenology* after 1930 in France. The

Phenomenology was not translated carefully into French until Kojève's 1930

version,[26] and, until then, questions of the subject and subjectivity were scarce in

French Hegelian studies, which focused on the materialist history and Christian

theology of the *Logic*, the *Encyclopedia*, and *The Philosophy of History* (J.H. Smith

236). Kojève gave the *Phenomenology* existential, semiological, and psychoanalytic

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[26] A "poor" French translation of the *Phenemonology* did appear in 1886 (J.H. Smith
236).

frames in his lectures on Hegel at the École des Haute Études in 1933-1939,[27] which

focused on Hegel's narrator as one experiencing subjectivity through articulation,

reflexivity, alienation, and enthrallment with the other. These translations,

republished by Allan Bloom in 1969, are interspersed with Kojève's extended glosses

that at once clarify and advance the original text. In these embedded commentaries,

Kojève's main topics—not exactly Hegel's—are the linguistic/psychic "I" and its

source in desire (3, 4-5). By focusing on the intertwinings of textuality and

subjectivity in the *Phenomenology*, Kojève paves the way for Butler to rethink

Hegel's subjectivity as the work of rhetorical agency, undermining the appearance of

a grounded metaphysical being. But it is *not exactly* Hegel's idea that desire and the

linguistic "I" should be our centermost topics when discussing his book. Hegel does

spend three sections (of a colossal eight hundred and eight) on the concept of the "I"

as it mediates all experience (sections 102-105), but without explicitly placing the "I"

in a field of desire. Indeed, as Butler points out, Hegel only mentions "desire" once

when he says, albeit definitively, that "self-consciousness is desire in general"

(section 167). Having implications perhaps well beyond Hegel's grasp, the text

becomes for Kojève the grand process of articulation that attempts to establish the

"I," a process that shows the I to be an effect of some persistent, sustaining, and

constitutive force that Kojève, post-Freud and post-Nietzsche, calls "desire."

Kojève initiated a Hegelian focus on the subject of desire, and Jean

Hyppolite's ensuing writings furthered the shift towards reading Hegel's struggle as a

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[27] Kojève's lectures were compiled and published by Raymond Queneau in 1947
under the title *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

rhetorical one. For Hyppolite, who devoted most of his career to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's text was a *Bildung* of consciousness, that develops as "an unstable synthesis ... which incorporated alienation as an essential moment," making the subject essentially not itself because it can only become itself, repeatedly and differentially, through an other (*Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* 38). That is, following Kojève, Hyppolite saw Hegel's text as what we might call performatively open, and laboured to clarify the *Phenomenology*'s invitation for the transformation, reconfiguration, and extension of the text, particularly in the form of dialectical opposition. They therefore began the project of diagnosing references to a break with Hegel as an effective expansion of the *Phenomenology*.

Butler's *Subjects of Desire* belongs to this Kojèvian trajectory born of the existentialist trends in France between World Wars. She owes to Kojève and Hyppolite both her reading of Hegel's agency and the impetus of her book as a whole. *Subjects of Desire* looks at Hegelian reflections in twentieth-century France to maintain that, whether they are oppositional or agreeable, "the commentaries are extensions of the text, they are the text in its modern life" (Butler 63).[28] Kojève's and Hyppolite's interpretative alliance with Hegel works to deconstruct the seeming opposition between loyalty or disloyalty to his intentions; in their view, built into the *Phenomenology* is an implicit invitation for unforeseen critical encounters. And indeed, the *Phenomenology*'s "modern life," initiated by Kojève and Hyppolite, consists of an explosion of neo-Hegelian inquiries that eventually culminate in the

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[28] Butler writes this to explicate Kojève's, rather than her own, argument.

confidence to name Hegel as *the* father of all trends of criticism current in France. In

1964, Merleau-Ponty declared that "all the great philosophical ideas of the past

century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, German existentialism, and

psychoanalysis—had their beginnings in Hegel," and in 1968 Francois Chatelet

names Hegel as the "Plato" of the age (*Sense and Nonsense* 109-11; "Hegel" 13). In

French socialist politics, recovering the Hegel whom Stalin rejected, particularly

through re-appraising Hegel as Marx's mentor, became a major theoretical

component of the anti-Stalinist movement, and the philosopher became a chief source

for Roger Garaudy, the leading philosophical spokesman for the French communist

party in the 1950s and 1960s (Kelly 256).

Can we call this a "restoration" of Hegel? Within Kojève and Hyppolite's

trajectory, such questions are less important than the imperative to understand that

texts, especially difficult and ambiguous ones like the *Phenomenology*, will always be

encountered in historically-contingent, desirous acts of reading. Still, there persists

the impulse to determine whether or not the Kojèvian trajectory is faithful to the

Phenomenology's initial purpose, and, in examining these arguments, we can see

some of the impasses that Kojève and Hyppolite perhaps hoped to circumvent. At the

same time, these impasses also resonate in Butler's recurring, ambivalent attempt to

establish Hegel as not only open, but as subversive. In his introduction to the 1969

publication of Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Allan Bloom insists

that Kojève's work "constitutes the most authoritative interpretation of Hegel," and

that "Kojève accomplished this revival of interest in Hegel *not by adapting him to*

make him relevant, but by showing that contemporary concerns are best understood in

the *permanent light* of Hegel's teaching" (ix, vii-xi; emphasis added). Seeking to

secure Hegel's place as an important philosopher, Bloom refuses the possibility that

Hegel's meaning and relevance change according to different historical and

geographical encounters, that is to say, according to the force of contingent desires.

But can we see Hegel as an important philosopher without proposing a "permanence"

that transcends historical contingency, transcends desire? John H. Smith, in an article

published the same year as Butler's *Subjects of Desire*, argues that the linguistic,

existential, psychoanalytic Hegelianism generated by Kojève is actually a

displacement rather than a restoration of Hegel, a conflation of Hegelian with

structuralist and poststructuralist issues carried out by the very critics of the twentieth

century whom Butler sources and critiques throughout *Subjects of Desire*. Insisting

that Hegel has been retrospectively mistaken as a semiologist, and his book misread

as an attempt to locate human experience in the external medium of language, Smith

says Hegel's work was quite literally lost in translation by Kojève's 1930 lectures,

and that Hegelian dialectic finds "its other in poststructuralism" (237). Smith wants to

expose the biases of existentialism, psychoanalysis, and semiology as they coursed

through Kojève's interpretation, to say that there ensued a loud mistaken legacy of re-

reading Hegel according to those desires.

    If the *Phenomenology* finds "its other" in twentieth-century France, then these

encounters effectively expanded the meaning of the text, giving it a life that Bloom,

Smith, and Hegel cannot control by reference to something proper in the text. In

"Contingencies of Value" (1983), Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that a text's

desirability to some set of readers "is not independent of authorial design, labour, and

skill," but its status as a "classic" is "variably constituted" through "emergent

conditions and mechanisms of cultural selection by transmission" (148, 147-148). In

important ways, this theory helps illuminate the transmission of Hegel by Kojève in

1930, and also the example set by Butler as she responds to the variable constitution

of Hegel's text as the endeavour of desirous subjects. The French reception of Hegel

was heavily mediated by existentialist, linguistic, and psychoanalytic commitments,

but this hardly discredits the bulk of writings produced in Kojève's wake, including

Butler's. No argument will erase the specific contours of Hegel's influence on the

powerful schools in twentieth-century French theory. At the same time, we can agree

with Bloom that Kojève is an authority on Hegel without insisting that his version is

"true," that is, without insisting that there will be a true version of the work at all:

"the properties of the work… are not fixed, given, or inherent in the work 'itself' but

are at every point the variable products of some subject's interaction with it" (B.H.

Smith 148).

In Butler's reading, the *Phenomenology* finds its meaning in the texts that

supplement it. In this sense, Butler accommodates all the readings, right and left,

closed and open, that his work has been subject to. She evokes the decentred, multi-

dimensional Hegel again an essay on Wallace Stevenson, now conceding to the

totalizing threads, but with an emphasis on looking for the ironic Hegel: "The

totalizing Hegel is only one dimension of his philosophical contribution; the other is

decidedly less easy to caricature. His philosophy of language, of history, and of the logical operation of negation ... will reveal a Hegel who knows the limits of what can be said or thought" ("The Nothing That Is" 287). Butler wants to advance the ironic Hegel as a particularly valuable caricature since this Hegel continues to shed light on the tropologies of negation, exclusion, transcendence, and synthesis as the inexorable destiny of philosophical thought. If Hegel has been stated and reinstated in different ways, and if those readings have achieved the effect of stability within particular historical contexts, then she can intend a provisional stability for her own reading of the *Phenomenology*, anticipating the ongoing processes of imagination, construction, and reformation that form *Gender Trouble*'s effort to reinstate feminism differently.

It is perhaps for this reason that at key moments of her argument, particularly in the posture of defending Hegel against the anti-Hegelians, Butler attaches her interpretation to Hegel's intentions, and exerts momentary efforts to "set right" the meaning of Hegel. She writes, "a close reading of the relevant chapters of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* reveal[s] that Hegel himself was an ironic artist in the construction of this conceit, and that his vision is less totalizing than presumed" ("Preface to the Paperback Edition" xx). This stance of certainty about Hegel's intentions appears in her sharp rebuttals to Derrida and Lacan as well. She writes, "in disregarding the comedy of errors that marks the Hegelian subject's travels, Lacan unjustifiably attributes Cartesian self-transparency to the Hegelian subject," and that "Derrida's analysis implicates [Hegel] in the metaphysics of presence, the very

opposite of the theory of ... dynamism Hegel explicitly defends" (196, 177).[29] In these diagnoses we see a tension in Butler's gestures, between setting the *Phenomenology* as functioning with historical efficacy beyond any useful reference to Hegel's intentions, and attempting to restore Hegel's intentions, here suddenly described as "explicit," to come to his defense against the anti-Hegelians. Only if Hegel *intended* his book to be ironic can Lacan and Derrida be faulted for projecting self-transparency and the metaphysics of presence onto Hegel. Yet, as Butler herself at times insists, no defense of Hegel's intentions can collapse the effectively ambiguous and divergent traditions of reading him.

Butler idealizes the subversive Hegel, re-illustrating, perhaps beyond her intentions, the "idealizing function of desire" (*SOD* 74). If, as Butler argues, Hegel means to figure idealism *as the sincere destiny of subjectivity*, and stages it only through the process of positing the absolute, then there will be, as there perhaps effectively has been, no way of securing and stabilizing the ironic force of that parody. As it emerges in her attempt to vindicate Hegel, Butler's idea of performative subversion rests on this hopeful, impossible aim that she can finally secure the best outcome of the *Phenomenology*. In other words, Butler's faith in the power of irony and parody rests on the impossible ideal that appears now and then in her texts: that performance will stand as self-sufficiently and inherently subversive.

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[29] For a full discussion of Derrida's (mis)reading of Hegel, particularly of the *Encyclopedia*, see Tanja Stähler's "Does Hegel Privilege Speech Over Writing? A Critique of Jacques Derrida" (2003).

Hegel and Drag

To shed light on Butler's idealization of parodic performance, I introduce

belatedly another context for thinking through the ambivalences of *Subjects of Desire*.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), she writes, "the only way to describe me in my younger

years was as a bar dyke who spent her days reading Hegel and her evenings, well, at

the gay bar" (213).[30] It was within this context, "in the midst of a social and political

struggle" for queer legitimacy, that Butler became interested in the performance of

drag as an illustration of how all gendered identities are achieved through acts of

imitation and approximation (213). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "drag reveals

the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency," "dramatiz[ing]

the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established" (175; "Preface

[1990]" xxviii). The language she uses to describe that parody in *Gender Trouble*

calls up her reading of Hegel, as *revealing* and *dramatizing* the operations that

fabricate a stable ontology as an aesthetic effect. Reflecting on her impressions of

drag during the time that she was studying Hegel, Butler writes, "when one

performance of gender is considered real and another fake, or when one presentation

of gender is considered authentic and another fake, then we can conclude that a

certain ontology … is conditioning these judgments, an ontology (an account of what

gender *is*) that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that

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[30] Butler's discussion of Hegel in *Undoing Gender* uses language quite different from that of *Subjects of Desire*; indeed, her understanding of Hegel appears to be re-framed through her engagements with Levinasian ethics and Laplanchian psychoanalysis, a shift in diction I explore further in Chapter 3. She writes, "the self in Hegel is marked by a primary enthrallment with the Other, one in which that self is put at risk" (149).

these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make" (*UG* 214).While it is

safe to say that drag does not always come across in the way that it comes across to

Butler, she argues that the interpretation of drag as a kind of "fake" imposes a system

of social regulations and logics invested in the naturalized effects of gender (*UG*

214). That is, to take a position on drag is to take a position on all issues of identity,

nature, culture, and the social life of the subject, just as Merleau-Ponty said of taking

a position on Hegel. As in her reading of Hegel, Butler wants to privilege and

advance *her* reading of drag as subversive of identity, and along the way, idealizes the

ironies of that performance.

The different meanings generated by the performance of drag have been

discussed in queer theory as a critique of Butler's conceptualization of drag in *Gender*

Trouble. Evoking the difficulty that I have been calling "the contingency of reading,"

queer theorists such as Tim Dean and Leo Bersani have written with careful suspicion

about its emancipatory power. Dean describes "the queer theorist's tendency to

romanticize the subversive power that they see in non-normative sexual practices,"

naming Butler, and Bersani writes that "it has been frequently suggested in recent

years that such things as the gay-macho style, the butch-fem lesbian couple, and gay

and lesbian sadomasochism … are in fact subversive parodies of the very formations

and behaviours they appear to ape" (135-6; *Homos* 206). Putting into question that

erstwhile revolutionary potential, he goes on to observe that these practices can be

very easily read as "*per*version rather than … *sub*version" (208; emphasis in

original). To be fair, we should note that Butler carefully disclaims the idea of drag as

a model for agency in the 1999 "Preface" to *Gender Trouble*: "it would be a mistake to take drag as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency" (xxii). Instead, she figures drag as "the *occasion* in which we come to understand that what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else. Although this insight does not itself constitute a political revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real" (xxiii; emphasis added). Butler points to drag and asks us to interpret it in this way. And if, as drag suggests, gender can be reinstated differently and beyond the rhetoric of authenticity, then the effort to set right the meaning of drag, in its subversive potential, represents Butler's effort to promote and stabilize a different future.

As a way back into the discussion of the contradictory responses to Butler, outlined in my introduction in terms of broader disjunctions within the humanities, I suggest that these criticisms point to a relation among issues of legibility in Hegel, in drag, and in Butler as well. Reflecting on Butler's reception, Salih writes that "parodic repetition is not in and of itself subversive" and that "texts, especially 'difficult' ones like Butler's, may be read, 'grafted,' and 'recited' in unforeseen ways" ("Judith Butler and the Ethics of Difficulty" 43). In the same spirit, Campbell and Harbord are wary of Butler's model of agency in its reliance on citationality, itself a necessarily unstable function. They say simply, "it could equally be argued that the effects of citation are highly ambivalent and could produce the reverse

effects" (234). The highly ambivalent effects of drag aptly illustrate this instability. Where Butler sets drag as the *example* that flaunts the mundane and repetitive stylization that characterizes any gender identification, drag can also function quite effectively in homophobic discourses as an example of the perversity of queerness and gender trouble generally, as Bersani and Dean suggest.

From here, I would like to draw some provisional conclusions about Butler's own varied reception that I return to in the next chapter. If a certain set of assumptions are already made, then Butler's signifying practice will register as perversion; indeed, she *will have to be denigrated.* And, in her scathing attack on Butler's writing, Nussbuam assigns descriptors of perversion to Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, describing the writing as "exasperating," "obscurantist," "moral(ly) passiv(e)," "more insidious than provincialism," and "extremely French," fraught with "lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness," "quietism and retreat," "mystification," and "sophistry and rhetoric" (39, 40, 42, 38, 38, 38, 38, 38, 40). More thoughtful rejections of her work include that of Lois McNay, who calls Butler's ideas "abstract and lacking in social specificity" (176), that of Seyla Benhabib, who describes it as the "complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" ("Feminism and Postmodernism" 21), and that of Kathy Dow Magnus, whose 2006 essay on Butler in *Hypatia* is entitled "The Unaccountable Subject."

In a 1993 essay, Black British cultural critic Kobena Mercer provides some insight into how we might take an interest in the ways that Butler is "variably

constituted," specifically through suspending the judgment of misinterpretation (B.H. Smith 148). In an analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, Mercer describes his response to Mapplethorpe as "aesthetic ambivalence," meant to denote the uncontrollability of political meanings the photographs generate. Looked at one way, Mercer argues, Mapplethorpe's photographs rewrite traditional western aesthetics by centering the black male body as the beautiful object. They also interpellate a homoerotic gaze, upsetting the expectations of the heteroerotic one. But, Mercer writes, if we look again, we can say these images fulfill the colonial fantasy of the black male as a hypersexual, exotic being, and also the homophobic fantasy that encodes queerness as gratuitous sexuality and perversion. Instead of attempting to secure one meaning for the photographs, Mercer concludes that in some contexts the photograph will function as an agent of racism, and in other contexts it will interrupt colonial and homophobic ideology (198). Mercer's article stages that context-by-context fluctuation, narrating his own dialectic of interpretations. He pushes beyond this conundrum by setting the ambivalence itself as a useful starting point: "Once ambivalence and undecidability are situated in the contextual relations between author, text, and readers, a cultural struggle ensues in which antagonistic efforts seek to articulate the meaning and value of Mapplethorpe's work" (198). For Mercer, this struggle "*lays bare* the ambivalence of the psychic and social relations" surrounding race and sexuality (225).

Mercer's reading of Mapplethorpe offers a framework for thinking through some of the problems I have highlighted surrounding the contradictory interpretations

of Hegel, of drag, and of Butler. Rather than insisting that Butler's work is, finally, subversive, we can confront the struggle to define her work as the clash of competing political efforts where much more than Butler's value is at stake. For example, how do we define agency? What counts as politically engaged criticism? What are the terms that circumscribe our expectations for "feminist" scholarship? That is, the ambivalence Mercer advocates serves as a productive starting point for thinking through the contested terrain of the real and the possible.

CHAPTER TWO

The Psychic Life of Butler: Foucault and Psychoanalysis

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.

—Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, *Vol. 1 (95)*

Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended *by power.*

— Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power *(15; emphasis in original)*

Michel Foucault has become the sort of intellectual figure with whom it is no longer possible to have a rational or non-pathological relationship.

— David Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography *(5)*

In the last chapter, I analyzed Butler's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as forming the kernel of her stylistic investment in the powers of parody and irony. At the same time, I showed that Butler inherits Hegel in ways that she cannot fully analyze, but that her inability to analyze those conditions yet has instructive purposes. Further, I noted that in the final sections of *Subjects of Desire* emerges a specifically Foucauldian interest in discourses that produce and regulate the subject's body, an

engagement which forms the key interventions of *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. Building on my analysis of Butler's Hegelian commitments and rhetorical strategies, this chapter focuses on *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), where Butler deploys a Foucauldian analysis of power to account for the formation of the psyche. The question of a Foucauldian psychoanalysis emerges in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), where Butler uses Foucault's regulatory and productive model of power to conflate the establishment of the psyche and that of the sexed body (22, 197-206). At the same time, *Bodies that Matter* combines Foucauldian and Freudian analyzes without reflecting on the implications of that compromise; she remarks only that "there may be a way to subject psychoanalysis to a Foucualdian redescription even as Foucault himself refused that possibility" (22). Since Foucault's corpus is marked by a strong refusal of psychoanalysis, *The Psychic Life of Power* has been hailed for pushing his paradigm beyond that refusal, and for doing so without reproducing the category of ahistorical psychic desire that offended Foucault (McNay 175). In the same vein, Heather Love situates *The Psychic Life of Power* within a recent surge of new efforts to articulate psychic life and social life together (*Feeling Backward* 10-11). As a forerunner for texts such as Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* (2001), Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007), and Love's own book, *Feeling Backward* (2007), *The Psychic Life of Power* examines psychic states of melancholy, depression, and rage as symptomatic of ambivalent social identifications structured by inequalities, exclusions, and shame. Love calls this thread of inquiries innovative because the psychic and the social

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perhaps *seem* to be "different kinds of objects" (11). She writes, "social life happens out there, psychic life, somewhere inside," hence the methodological severance between these "traditionally polarized terms," or what McNay calls "attendant antitheses" (*Feeling Backward* 11, 10; "Subject, Psyche, Agency" 175). Through a careful look at the structure, diction, and arguments of *The Psychic Life of Power*, this chapter pays attention to Butler's conjoinment of the Foucauldian paradigm with psychoanalysis as one way of exploring, and accounting for, this methodological problem of inside and outside.

Foucault rejected psychoanalysis for its deployment of "the repressive hypothesis," which posits private interior psychic space as a dynamic of true desires set against, and constrained by, an outside world of power, culture, and social law (*HS* 94-95). Against the psychoanalytic model of subjectivity, based on a distinction between subjectivity "in here" and power "out there," Foucault theorized the subject as *invested with power*, and formulated the paradox that "to be" a subject is "to be subordinated."[31] Butler argues that Foucault's theory of subject-formation requires a theory of the psyche since, within the dialectic of being at once constituted and subordinated, the autonomous subject emerges as foundationally ambivalent and threatened (*PLP* 3, 6). Recasting Foucault's paradox as a *psychic* conflict, Butler locates ambivalence, trauma, and grief at the heart of agency's possibility:

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[31] See chapter 1, "The Body of the Tortured," in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and also "The Subject and Power" (1982). He explains that the technique of subjectivation "applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" ("The Subject and Power," 212).

"subjection consists precisely in the fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (2). Butler returns to Freud's theory of melancholia,[32] the mental disease of endless grief whose key symptom is an intense brutality of the superego, the internal agency of conscience and self-regulation that bespeaks a psychic investment in social law. Imbricating Foucault's paradox with Freud's theory of melancholia, Butler uses contradictory pairings to describe the patterns of the acting subject, destined to "retain and resist" through "reliving and displacing," "denial and reenactment," and "resistance ... [and] "recuperation" (13, 8, 9, 13). This circuitous tension, as part of the operation of regulatory power, continually initiates "an internal world structured in ambivalence as the consequence," or the psychic life of power (167).

In an attempt to think through Butler's new focus on ambivalence and incoherence, which renews the question of "how [we] might think resistance within the terms of reiteration" (12), this chapter examines *The Psychic Life of Power*'s resistance to, and retention of, Foucault, a double-process initiated by a turn to his thought in the book's first pages. Butler's theory emerges from within the Foucauldian paradigm, and yet also positions itself against Foucault in its markedly psychoanalytic orientation. As Lynne Huffer writes in *Mad for Foucault*, Butler's book "dramatiz[es] the Freud-Foucault struggle" (169), in "a theoretical tableau that

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[32] Butler uses Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* to theorize identifications as "the consequence of loss" (*GT* 80). In Freud, melancholia is the pathology resulting from losses that are never allowed to be openly grieved; Butler considers how social prohibitions against homosexuality instates heterosexual identifications through melancholic loss (*GT* 73-84; *BTM* 65, 113, 233-6).

looks more like a wrestling match than a harmonious coupling" (169, 165). In her

reading of Butler's impact on queer studies, Huffer observes that Butler alters the

Foucauldian notion of subjectivation in this psychoanalytic inquiry through

"ventriloquisms" (171). However, in Huffer's view, *The Psychic Life of Power*

ultimately "enlist[s] Foucault for a political agenda he doesn't share," specifically by

recentering the subject as the focal point for the question of agency (171, 174). In her

introduction, Huffer calls the conjoinment of Foucault with Freud "odd," "distorted,"

and a "strangely American twinning," implying a promiscuity or perversity that must

be, perhaps, policed and eradicated (36). Although Huffer points out that Foucault

"himself longed for his own disappearance into the multiple uses to be made of his

books," Butler's irreverence troubles Huffer, particularly since *The Psychic Life of

Power* has inspired a thread of inquiries, such as those I mentioned above, that tend to

misuse Foucualt's anti-identitarian project in the service of inquiries about identity

(171). Taking interest in the specific ways that Butler manipulates Foucault, and

allowing that Butler's Foucault, like Butler's Hegel, may indeed be a caricature, I

want to respond to Huffer by weighing in Butler's motivating concerns, ones that

indeed accrue around questions of social identity: to understand the binds of subjects

judged to be failed or incomplete, to theorize how social worlds are marked by stark

divisions between the "intelligible" and the "unintelligible," and to explore the

tenacity of those divisions by framing them as psychic rather than "merely cultural."

Looking at this "wrestling match" between psychoanalysis and Foucault, I

argue that Butler's conflicted attitude toward the latter, which initiates and sustains

the arguments of this book, illustrates what Butler means by the psychic life of power

as the internal conflict generated by subjection. Attending to her intervention, I will

trace the symptoms of her Foucauldian conscience set against, and working with, her

commitment to psychoanalysis as she rewrites the terms of each. To that end, this

chapter has four interlinked agendas: to look at some of the ambivalent legacies of

Freud that Butler echoes in *The Psychic Life of Power*; to examine Butler's

Foucauldian theory of power in its psychic form; to excavate and reread Foucault's

precise objections to psychoanalysis, especially in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1;

and, finally, to analyze the consequences of conceptualizing interiority as an effect of

power.

Ambivalent Legacies of Freud

Freud's psychoanalysis emerged in the reading of scriptive practices. Through

the study of puns, slips, and strange dreams, Freud pointed to some hidden force at

work within the subject beyond the subject's knowledge. This principle, that

symbolic material is the expression of a compromised agency, translates into a theory

of author and text, one that has had tremendous impact on the study of literature and

on literary theory for at least sixty years. In their essay "The Practice of Writing and

Psychoanalysis: Freud's Writing on Writing" (1977), Jean-Michel Rey, G.W. Most,

and James Hulbert describe Freud's principle as the "disjunction of writing and

knowledge" (306). They insist that, in the wake of Freud, "no text ... could possibly

be homogeneous and linear, and, consequently, immediately transparent to its author;

that belatedness … is necessarily an integral part of any scriptured practice," which "causes the postponement of the moment of comprehension, of interpretation, indeed the moment of the conclusion itself" (302). Exemplifying textual belatedness, the meaning of Freud's work itself continues to be postponed. Like the writings of Hegel, Freud's papers on the clinical practice of psychoanalysis have proven to have power, influence, and significance well beyond Freud's initial intentions. Freud's theories of the unconscious, displacement and transference, melancholia, dreamwork, sublimation, narcissism, hysteria, and countless other terms continue to be deployed across disciplines and in a striking variety of scholarly and non-scholarly, psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic, contexts. Moreover, while Freud himself seems generally unconcerned with social change,[33] his theories continue to be used in thinking through the possibility of social justice in a range of inquiries, including Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, and Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*.[34]

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[33] A case can easily be made for *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) as Freud's tract on social justice, wherein he theorizes "[civilization's] disinclination to relinquish an old position in favour of a new one" as "the inertia of the [sexual] libido" (98).

[34] Jameson engages Freud's notion of "wish fulfillment" to unlock the notion of the unconscious from its trappings in individual psychic history, and instead understand "wish fulfillment" in terms of unresolvable social contradictions, a collective unconscious, as they are expressed in individual cultural objects and narrative forms (79, 175). In her chapter "History," Spivak charts Freud's understanding of "over-determination" and "dream-work" to discuss imperialism's fabrication of "Empire" (218-219). Gilroy criticizes the nostalgia of the contemporary British imaginary for its glorious, unified, and white past, which hinges on, and reproduces, a collective amnesia. Gilroy dislodges these psychoanalytic terms from their beginnings in Freud, but draws directly on *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which Freud reflects on the

Particularly ambivalent is *one* style of Freudianism emerging in French

deconstruction: the politicized practice of reading Freud against himself by probing

the contradictions, impasses, slips, and anxieties in his own bulk of writings. This

widely influential, deconstructive mode of engaging psychoanalysis rests on the irony

that Freudian discourse, too, is opaque to its own desires, even as it is Freud who

offers the critical tools for reading that opacity. Luce Irigaray calls this the

"interpretive lever" (72) in Freud, naming the use of psychoanalytic principles in the

effort to unhinge Freud's paradigm. Two threads in this Freudian legacy inform *The*

Psychic Life of Power. The first comes from second-wave feminisms, where Freudian

theory is a centerpiece in the critique of patriarchal discourses on "woman." In *The*

Second Sex, de Beauvoir rearticulates Freud's tenet that the father has special

sovereignty, which necessitates ambivalent identifications and an alienated psychic

destiny for the little girl. However, re-reading that ambivalence according to the

historical subjugation of women, de Beauvoir writes that "the sovereignty of the

father is a fact of social origin, which Freud fails to account for" (37-38). This

critique consents to the diagnoses of psychoanalysis, but gives them historical

explanations. Following de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer

historical accounts of the "womanly" conditions of agoraphobia, hysteria, and

anorexia, again insisting that Freud's diagnoses were correct, but that these

pathologies are symptoms of the social place assigned to Victorian women, rather

than a natural outcome of feminine psychic instabilities (*The Madwoman in the Attic*

citizen's duty, through the sanction of patriotism, to stand by its country's will to
dominate (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 64-68).

54). In de Beauvoir and Gilbert and Gubar, the historical contingency of patriarchy constitutes the unconscious in Freud's psychoanalysis, the repository of motivating principles that delimit the possibility of knowledge. In finding social rather than natural reasons for these psychic symptoms, they criticize the psychoanalytic paradigm not by doing away with it, but by repeating its statements so as to unearth the historicity of the psyche, re-channeling psychoanalysis to read the social subtext of the subjugation of women.[35]

The second important re-reading of Freud that informs *The Psychic Life of Power* is that of Jacque Lacan. Of all of Lacan's contributions to the canonization of Freud, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* stands out as his most ambivalent: in the introduction, he lauds Freud as the author of a "Copernican revolution" (3) and also insists that Freud's technique of fortifying the ego was essentially *counterproductive* in the basic effort of helping analysands cope

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[35] These concerns also motivate Hélène Cixous in her "Portrait of Dora" (1983), a critique of Freud's diagnosis and treatment of a "hysteric" young girl in "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905). Looking to the gaps and contradictions in Freud's analysis of Dora's hysteria, which he attributes to sexual jealousy of her father's affair, Cixous offers an alternative account by reconstructing the story from Dora's perspective, attributing her symptoms to an oppressive, patriarchal bourgeois life, and to the psychoanalytic treatment imposed on her by her father and Freud himself. Elaine Showalter also revisits Dora's wrenching story in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (1985), adding that "Freud failed Dora because he was too quick to impose his own language on her mute communications. His insistence on the sexual origins of hysteria blinded him to the social factors contributing to it" (160). More generally, Showalter's book is an excellent overview of the historical subjugation of women in discourses on the female psyche during this 150-year period in England.

with internal battles: "the ego … intervenes in psychic life only as a symbol" (38).[36]

Lacan took very seriously the symbolic basis of Freud's work, which was initiated by

the interpretation of speech and of dreams, and named the symbolizing processes of

condensation and displacement as "primary."[37] Giving the symbolic the special

theoretical status that is implied in Freud, Lacan argues that the basic psychic activity

is in the *process of making symbols* (43), that being enmeshed in the symbolic

"causes the subject to always realize himself elsewhere" (210). He writes,

definitively, "inasmuch as he is committed to a play of symbols … man is a decentred

being" (47). For Lacan, Freud created a new paradigm in positing the subject as

inherently decentred. However, Lacan reads Freud's theoretical and clinical faith in

the ego as itself a symptom of the anxiety born of that decentredness. In this seminar,

Lacan argues that the ideal subject is the subject without an ego (175); that is, to help

alleviate the subject's basic anxiety, psychoanalysis should strive to sever the

subject's naïve, uncritical investment in the ego as the seat of agency and experience.

These legacies help clarify Butler's 1997 book, which mimics these

poststructuralist styles of relating to Freud (particularly in her deconstruction of

Freud's theory of melancholia), and also borrows its content (for example, she is also

reinscribing an explicitly Lacanian psychoanalysis with her focus on psychic life as

the process of making symbols). These deconstructions of Freud, which no doubt

continue to have influence and currency, illustrate what Butler means by agency as

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[36] See Freud's "The Ego and the Id" for his intention of restoring the ego's power
(55).
[37] See Freud's "The Unconscious" (186).

"the assumption of a purpose unintended by power," "the ambivalent scene" where "agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled" (*PLP* 15). On the one hand, these interrogations are mobilized in a way that is at least partially uncritical. While they lay claim to knowing Freud in ways Freud himself could not achieve, they also reproduce an unmistakably Freudian impulse, reciting his laws, and inevitably leaving something of his paradigm beyond critique. On the other hand, the act of mobilizing that impulse in a new way has the effect of an intervention: "submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection" (15). Through these inherently ambivalent critical positionalities, these texts at once extend Freud's writings, and also extend them into an unforeseen future. If we were to describe this process in Foucauldian terms, we can say such readings destabilize Freud's regime even as they prolong it. The regulatory and productive effects of Freudian discourse are proven to be open to new intentions.

The Tropology of Subjection

Butler borrows the term "tropology" from literary theory to transform Freud's basic model of inner life, the topology, into a model of symbolic/scripted life (*PLP* 3-4). Drawing on the polyvalence of "trope," at once a rhetorical figure and an *unwitting* turn, Butler uses "tropology" to bring together the Freudian economy of conscious and unconscious with Foucault's concern for the regulatory effects of power as they accrue centrally through the body. In its ancient, neo-classical, and

Victorian modalities, tropology names both the procession of figurative language in a given text, and also the branch of rhetoric that has the semi-scientific aim of cataloguing tropes (metaphor, synecdoche, irony, etc.) into taxonomies. In the late twentieth-century, "tropology" was by Hayden White and Paul De Man to defend literary theory's place in the study of literature, philosophy, and historical writing as verbal artifacts.[38] In the context of a psychoanalytic inquiry, Butler plays on the graphic similitude between tropology and *topology*, Freud's spatial model for the internal processes of the mind. Where Freud uses the geometrical term "topology" to theorize an inner psychic space set against an outside of social life, Butler's "tropology" names the patterned "turning" towards the law or "the embodying of rules in the course of action" (*PLP* 17).

In a discussion of sexual, racial, and spiritual "orientations," Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) builds on Butler's analysis of the "turn" to conceptualize the body through "the political requirement that we turn some way and not others" (15). Insisting on the double valences of being "straight" and "in line," she writes that "if such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the shape of such direction" (15). In this vein, I read Butler's "tropology" as an elaboration her

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[38] See Paul De Man's "The Rhetoric of Tropes" in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979); and the first chapter, "Literary Theory and Historical Writing," of Hayden White's *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999). White describes his object as "the content of form," using neo-classical taxonomies of rhetoric and figuration to read novels, political treatises, and works of philosophy as expressive of their historicity. White also connects tropology to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which outlines the study of the symbolic processes of condensation and displacement (White 101-125).

theory of performativity. In performativity, social identities congeal through stylized signifying acts whose repetition has the effect of a coherent, natural disposition. Mapping tropology onto performativity, we can speak of the performance of gender tropes or sexuality tropes which, when appropriated in scripted ways, produce the effect of inherent identity: "gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation) the illusion of inner depth" ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 728; emphasis in original). If performativity is the repeated signing that establishes the illusion of inner depth, tropology is the contoured, tangible, even "panicked" (729) turning that bespeaks the tension between the illusion and the compulsion to establish it as real. In this 1991 essay, Butler adds that "the psyche is not 'in' the body" (728), but is the life of that body as signifying surface, or what she theorizes in full as *tropology* in *The Psychic Life of Power*. As in her theory of performativity, if the effect of the real is conditioned by the repetition of these patterns, then alternative tropologies can strategically contest these lines of continuity and coherence. For example, in Butler's coinage, "tropology" maintains the specter of "topology," and is therefore a return to psychoanalytic discourse that at once preserves and reconfigures Freud's term. With an emphasis on "surfaces" and "skins," Ahmed suggests there is a durability and tangibility to these lines, and, following Butler, that they contain the possibility of revision: "the lines of rebellion and resistance that gather over time … create new impressions on the skin surface and on the skin of the social" (18).

Ahmed's insights about "skins" and "surfaces" reflect the conflation of the psyche with the body that Butler suggests with her theory of tropology.

As a signifying surface, or "skin," *The Psychic Life of Power* enters this "tropological quandary" in the opening pages where Butler turns to Foucault, a thinker who has heavily directed the tenor of her work (*PLP* 4). Particularly, I read Butler's submission to Foucault in the epigraphs and her first paragraph as "a kind of yielding prior to any question of psychological motivation," where Butler falls "in line" with a Foucauldian inquiry (112). The first epigraph is from Foucault's "Two Lectures," which she uses to direct us towards the paradox of subjectivity as it is posed in Foucault's theory of power: "We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects" (qtd. in *PLP* 1). Tellingly, she offers another epigraph from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which implies the same paradox in its three-part definition of "subjection," now including the term's grammatical inflection: "the act or fact of being subjected," "the condition of being a subject," and "the act of supplying a subject to a predicate." Aligning Foucault's call "to grasp subjection" with the authority vested in the *OED*, Butler sets this paradox of subjection as the law that predicates her inquiry; at the same time, she entangles the question of the subject with the question of grammar and predication. In the first paragraph, in a voice that appears oblique and ahistorical, Butler reproduces this law uncritically:

> As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what 'one' is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite

another. We are used to thinking of power as that what presses on the subject from the outside, as that what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are. (1-2; emphasis in original)

Repeating Foucault's observation that "power is often cast as unequivocally external to the subject" (20), these statements are structured in address toward common sense: "*we are used to* thinking of power" as an external force. In this paragraph, Butler generalizes the condition of subjection as paradoxical, setting up her Foucauldian interrogation of the regulatory and productive effects of power, and reinstating Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis. That is, Butler is becoming an agent of the Foucauldian paradigm; the introduction at once describes subjectivity as a "prior complicity with the law" and also *displays* that "prior complicity." "If, following Foucault …" she writes, announcing a hypothetical initiative, and also the condition that she will "harbour and preserve" in the contours of her own writing.

Her introductory remarks manifest as the partially uncritical 'turning' to the law that initiates any speech. If the subject is "compelled to turn … prior to any possibility of asking a set of critical questions," then the reach of that inquiry, however qualified, reflexive, and provisional, will be limited from the outset, and will re-inscribe a paradigm as beyond question (7). This initiating turn marks *The Psychic Life of Power* as an allegory for Butler's theory of psychic subjection: psychological motivations are never in opposition to power, but follow historically-established

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trajectories through gestures that are always partially uncritical. This book, carefully subtitled *Theories in Subjection*, performs the process through which psychic life emerges terminally through a turning or troping towards the law. Furthermore, the chapters of *The Psychic Life of Power* are structured in a movement at once circular and progressive; the focus on theories of reflexive beratement in Freud's "melancholia," in Hegel's "unhappy conscience," in Nietzsche's "bad conscience," and in Althusser's "interpellation," itself reflects a circuitry as the inquiry spirals further into the problematic of self-regulation. The performance has the pedagogical function of *showing* this operation, and also the ethical function of implicating the text in that difficult problematic. Caught up in the problem she describes, Butler writes, "for the 'I' to launch its critique, it must first understand that the 'I' itself is dependent upon the complicitous desire for the law for the possibility of its own existence. A critical review of the law will not, therefore, undo the force of conscience unless the one who offers that critique is willing, as it were, to be undone by the critique that he or she performs" (108). I argue that, since Butler is getting ready to refuse Foucault's rejection of psychic life, the first chapter stages the ambivalence that she theorizes as the psychic life of power, where the subject turns to reflect on the conditions of its emergence in an attempt to become critical, independent, and autonomous. In this sense, *The Psychic Life of Power* reinstates the movement of agency she figures in *Subjects of Desire*.

Butler's "Introduction" articulates Foucault's paradox of subjection through the psychoanalytic tropes of "denial," "the unconscious," "passionate attachments,"

"conscience," and "ambivalence" to show that "the subject who is at once formed and

subordinated is already implicated in the scene of psychoanalysis" (6). Butler deploys

the Freudian method of looking to the founding scenarios of dependency and

attachment in infancy and childhood, theorizing the effect of (adult) autonomy as a

partial denial:

> This accounts in part for the adult sense of humiliation when
> confronted with the earliest objects of love—parents, guardians,
> siblings, and so on—the sense of belated indignation in which one
> claims, 'I couldn't possibly love such a person.' The utterance
> concedes the possibility it denies, establishing the 'I' as predicated
> upon that foreclosure, grounded in and by that firmly imagined
> impossibility. The 'I' is thus fundamentally threatened by the specter
> of this (impossible) love's reappearance and remains condemned to
> reenact that love unconsciously, repeatedly reliving and displacing that
> scandal. (8)[39]

As I argued in Chapter 1, these reflections on "earliest objects of love" illuminate

Butler's work as an ongoing expression of her attachment to Hegel. In *The Psychic*

Life of Power, Butler relives—and displaces—that process by taking Foucault as this

primary attachment. Imbricating a Foucauldian law with a psychoanalytic tropology,

Butler's theory represents a critical agency enabled in subjection. She asks, "what

does it mean for the agency of a subject to *presuppose* its own subordination? Is the

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[39] In her book *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (1998), Deborah Britzman provides a nuanced and useful study of the interface between teachers and students in terms of love and passionate attachments: "Over and over, the ego must solve the problem of love. What belongs to the ego, and what belongs to the object? Is it me or is it them? ... How do I recognize myself when myself is at the same time conflictive, ambivalent ... ? ... In a place called education, what belongs to the teacher, and what belongs to the student?" (12). Creating a Foucauldian-Butlerian queer pedagogy, Britzman uses this line of questioning seeks to "move [pedagogy] beyond the production of rigid subject positions and ponder the fashioning of the self that occurs when attention is given to the performativity of the subject" (81).

act of *presupposing* the same as the act of *reinstating,* or is there a discontinuity

between the power presupposed and the power reinstated?" (12). Providing a

discourse to think Foucault and psychoanalysis together, Butler deploys this paradox

in ways he did not intend, performing the effect of autonomy through subjection.

However, Butler also wants to re-advance Foucault's critique of the psychoanalytic

project. To re-write Freud's topology as tropology, Butler engages and re-mobilizes

Foucault's attack on the distinction between an interior psychic world and an exterior

world of power.

Foucault's Disavowal of Freud and the Psyche

Over the course of his career, Foucault opposed Freud and his psychoanalytic

models from several directions,[40] and his works played a leading role in the anti-

psychiatry movements in France, Europe, and North America between 1960 and

1980. In his history of madness, he exposes Freud's exploitation of the expert-patient

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[40] The psychoanalysis Foucault opposes does not appear to include the work of Jacques Lacan, who rigorously revised Freud's theory based on the primacy of symbolic law, undermining both the talking cure and the repressive hypothesis. See especially "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious: or Reason Since Freud"(1957), and *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Practice of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*). Foucault seems to reference his common grounds with Lacanian psychoanalysis briefly in *The History of Sexuality*, describing a theory of desire and lack that avoids the repressive hypothesis of power: "the assertion that sex is not 'repressed' is not altogether new. Psychoanalysts have been saying the same thing for some time. ... the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated. Where there is desire, the power relation is already present"(81). Butler uses Lacan throughout *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* to conflate symbolic, bodily, and psychic indentification.

power dynamic, and the pathologization of un-reason (*Madness and Civilization* [1965], *Psychiatric Power* [1973-74][41]); in his politics of sexuality, he names Freud as draftsman of the repressive hypothesis in its modern form (*The History of Sexuality*, Volume I [1976]); and in his theory of self-care, he sets "the psyche" as a normalizing model that erases the historical technologies that produce the body through conceptions of the self (*The Care of the Self* [1984]). As Joel Whitebook and Patrick Hutton have suggested, Foucault's opposition to Freudian theory can be said to mobilize the key turns in Foucault's work as a whole.[42]

The question of analyzing Foucault's relation to Freud as a "disavowal" is a difficult one since, in proposing such an analysis, we enter a "tropological quandary" by citing the psychoanalytic paradigm that Foucault rejected. Hutton provides a way into this difficulty by engaging the language of classical rhetoric, calling Freud "an apostrophe" to Foucault's work, the unnamed but centermost addressee (121). Engaging this reading heuristic, I will consider *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (referred to hereafter as simply *The History of Sexuality*) and Volume 3 (*The Care of the Self*), where Foucault analyzes the repressive hypothesis of power and the problematic of interior life, Butler's two foremost concerns in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's central objection to Freudian theory is its powerful deployment of the repressive hypothesis (17). Freud's influential

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[41] This text represents Foucault's course at the Collège de France (1973-74), published in French in 2003, and translated into English in 2006 by Graham Burchell.
[42] See Hutton's "Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self" (1988) and Whitebrook's "Against Interiority: Foucault's Struggle with Psychoanalysis" (2005).

contribution to the repressive hypothesis, Foucault argues, lies in normalizing the

existence of natural or original sexual desires that are *restricted by* social norms

(119). By and large, the repressive hypothesis offends Foucault in three ways: 1) it

implicitly equates sexuality with nature, screening the history of sexuality as a

regulatory, normative grid of social constructions; 2) it apprehends culture as a force

that constrains the expression of true subjective desire; and 3) it conceives of agency

as resistance to these repressive powers, which he characterizes as "Victorian," in the

form of ostensibly transgressive speech acts about sexuality (3). In Foucault's

analysis, these "incitements to discourse" "always unfold within the deployment of

sexuality, and not outside or against it" (13, 131). Foucault argues that these

apparently frank and open discussions of sexuality retain the regulation of sexual

desires as they claim to overcome it, and at the same time erase the history of

sexuality as a grid of normative, institutionalized constructions that regulate and

produce, rather than describe, sexualities.

Although Foucault never directly confronts the rhetoric of Freud's papers, and

uses his name in often loose, oblique ways, *The History of Sexuality* can be read as a

scathing critique of Freud's theory of the conscience, or the superego.[43] In "The

Dissection of the Psychical Personality" (1932), Freud writes: "Even if conscience is

something 'within us,' … it is not so from the first. In this it is a real contrast to

sexual life, which is in fact there from the beginning of life and not only a later

addition" (77). In Freud's chronology of moral development, sexuality is a natural

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[43] In his late essay, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," Freud uses
"conscience" and "superego" interchangeably.

drive that originates deep within the pre-social human psyche. These "true" desires are restrained and repressed, filtered and transformed, by the demands of socialization initiated in the Oedipal phase. According to Freud's account of the superego, the repression of sexual life is initiated by the *introjection* of the Father's word, which functions as a hieroglyph for moral law, establishing the subject's destiny as a self-restricting, moral being: "the external restraint is internalized and the super-ego takes the place of the parental agency and observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child" (77). Freud uses this model to understand the analysand's family relations, and locates the defining moment in this more or less literal confrontation with the father. At the same time, Freud's psychic superego, as the organ for the propagation of tradition, is also a theory of ideology: "a child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of ... judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation" (84). Developing this concept towards a social theory, Freud accounts for the subject's spontaneous striving to meet social ideals, attempting to break from the Kantian model of the self who is naturally moral.[44] However, Foucault's genealogy of the repressive hypothesis implies that Freud said little that was new. In his theory of repression, Freud posits the self as naturally

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[44] Freud writes that "following a well-known pronouncement of Kant's which couples the conscience within us with the starry Heavens, a pious man might well be tempted to honour these two things as masterpieces of creation. The stars are indeed magnificent, but as regards conscience God has done an uneven and careless piece of work, for a large majority of men have brought along with them only a modest amount of it or scarcely enough to be worth mentioning" (77).

sexual, and it is Foucault's project to show that, although this may have seemed

liberating and revolutionary, Freud's clinical psychoanalysis is only a modernized

version of the Roman Catholic confessional, now imbued with the insistence of

medical science in the production and regulation of sexuality.[45] In Foucault's view,

psychoanalysis is a human science that produces and regulates the human—"*homo*

sexualis" and "*homo psychologicus*"—where it claims to only describe it (*HS* 52-73;

Mental Illness and Psychology 74). Indeed, *The History of Sexuality* presents the

clinical scene of psychoanalysis as analogical to the confessional scene, where the

confessing analysand is hailed and produced as an interiority *only* through the

framing logic of repression.

The first volume of *The History of Sexuality* looks to the methods and

institutions through which the sexualized psyche is constructed and produced. In the

third volume, *The Care of the Self* (1984), Foucault rejects interiority as a model of

subjective life altogether on ethical grounds. In this book, Foucault traces the

genealogy of self-knowledge as an ancient technique, implicitly setting the modern

subject as the locus of alterity, upon which historically-produced discourses are

recited and regrafted as the fashioning of the self as an object. He calls these "the

technologies of the self," "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization,

suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it,

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[45] Hutton also makes this point, observing that "Freud believed that his
psychoanalytic technique was a new invention, made possible by his discovery of the
dynamics of the unconscious mind. Foucault, however, wishes to expose its hidden
ancestry. He reveals a Freud who, however inventive, ... appropriated the techniques
of auricular confession of the Catholic Church and thereby clothed the examination of
conscience, a religious practice, in medical garb" (132-3).

or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of ... self-knowledge" ("Technologies of the Self" 87). As Hutton points out, "whereas Freud provided a method for investigating the internal workings of the psyche, Foucault seeks to show how that method itself is an ancient technique of self-fashioning that has over the centuries shaped the mind externally" (121). Foucault rejects the self as the site of unique psychological depth, and advocates the ethical practice of constant, active creation of a *historically*, rather than psychically, contingent self based on the sustained apprehension of one's formation within power.[46] Within this frame, historically-oriented, engaged political activity becomes possible only by rejecting the sanctum of inner life in recognition of the external technologies that shape subjective life.

In sum, Foucault's firm refusal of the psychoanalytic paradigm goes hand-in-hand with his dictum that subjects are produced and regulated within and by power and discourse. To model of subjective life as an interior set against an exterior of power erases the specific histories of interiority as a set of religious and scientific technologies and, more generally, exempts the subject from its complicity with the workings of power. Discourses of inner depth, Foucault argues, bespeak, exploit, and re-enforce a grid of liberal constructions of power, knowledge, and the subject. It is important to note, though, that Foucault does identify some critical potential in Freudian theory. In the last pages of *The Order of Things* (407-410), Foucault

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[46] Foucault favours and revamps *ascesis*, the ancient theory of an art or style of life that has aesthetic, rather than moralizing, imperatives. See *Care of the Self* (68). For a discussion of *ascesis* as a queer politics, see Halperin's *Saint Foucault* (76-79, 109-110).

chooses psychoanalysis as the human science that best undermines the possibility of complete knowledge because it critically examines the epiphanies that attach themselves to the truth of the subject. In psychoanalysis, consciousness—the subjective acquaintance with the world—conditions the subject's knowledge as compromised: "psychoanalysis stands as close as possible, in fact, to that critical function which ... exists within all the human sciences," "man's finitude" (408). In this short passage, Foucault aligns his own effort with the psychoanalytic project: to designate, analyze, and criticize the conditions under which knowledge is possible (409). Given that Foucault finds, at least momentarily, an ally in psychoanalysis, we might ask, how could Foucault's alliance with psychoanalysis be elaborated? What might it achieve, particularly in terms of understanding "man's finitude"?

Since Foucault trained in psychoanalysis at l'École normale supérieure between 1950 and 1952, it may be tempting to frame his work, in psychoanalytic terms, as "a radical *disavowal*," as psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook does in his essay "Against Interiority: Foucault's Struggle with Psychoanalysis" (313; emphasis in original). Researching Foucault's early training in psychology and psychoanalysis, Whitebook reads his career-long attack on its paradigms as a tense but spirited rebellion that bespeaks a psychic block.[47] Whitebook, in an expert tone, takes the young Foucault as his patient, speculating on his "state of mind" during his years at l'École normale supérieure, concluding he was "extremely tortured," "severely

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[47] Whitebook documents Foucault's training in psychology and psychoanalysis in France, and attributes Foucault's departure from the field to a traumatizing encounter with a patient, "Roger" (316-7).

depressed," and that we can be "almost certain" that Foucault's homosexuality had "a profound effect" on his psychological difficulties (315). Whitebook writes, with unruffled paternal benevolence, that "most analysts wouldn't see challenges from their patients ... negatively" (315), suggesting that Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis should be met with a steady, knowing gaze of an analyst proud to see the patient exerting insubordination: "such questioning [is] necessary for advancing the psychoanalytic process and promoting their patient's autonomy" (315). This seems to me a rather smug way to preserve the continued importance of psychoanalytic models in the wake of Foucault's work, particularly since it implies that sexuality is a source of conflict without offering an historical account of how Foucault's homosexuality might have caused him "profound" depression. I read Whitebook's essay as a powerplay on Foucault, figured through an expert-patient dynamic. Although he is tremendously interested in Foucault's work "against interiority," Whitebook continues to posit an "early" and "originating" interior conflict as the secret truth of Foucault from which all exterior symptoms—the concerted rebellion against psychoanalysis—emanate.

Butler's *The Psychic of Life of Power* preserves the potential of psychoanalysis in the face of Foucault; however, in contrast with Whitebook's diagnostic rebuttal, the version of the psyche she theorizes is one heavily altered, re-configured, and ruffled by Foucault. Giving psychoanalytic valence to Foucault's paradox of subjection, Butler eschews his resistance to psychoanalysis, engaging the problematic of psychic life to elaborate his account of the subject's formation within

power. However, crucially, Butler reinscribes Foucault's politicized attack on the distinction between interiority and power.

The Effect of Interiority (and Exteriority)

Important to Butler is that Foucault rejected interior life not only because it implies that some part of the subject is beyond the reach of power, but because the binary between a subjectivity "in here" and power "out there" breaks down if power's regulatory and productive function is secured *only* through subjects: "for power to act, there *must* be a subject" (*PLP* 203; emphasis in original). Butler maintains pressure on that binary, theorizing interior conflict as a real effect of the tactical, juridical forms of power that Foucault describes.

Butler looks to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" as an important entry-point to Freud's general view of interior psychic space. Freud defines melancholia as a mental disease of endless grief marked by a ruthless superego or conscience, the seat of the subject's psychic investment in the social order that causes it to regulate itself and function, as it were, *conscientiously*. Linking the seemingly spontaneous work of conscience with Foucault's concern with the regulatory tactics that produce normalcy, Butler argues that "melancholy offers potential insight into how the boundaries of the social are instituted and maintained ... through binding psychic life into forms of melancholic ambivalence" (167-68). To theorize interior conflict as a secondary effect of socialization, Butler revisits the "scene of partition and confrontation" that Freud theorizes as the topology (*PLP* 179). Also called a

topography, the topology maps interiority as a finite locus or space marked by a

relatively autonomous dynamic of conflicting agencies (figure 1).
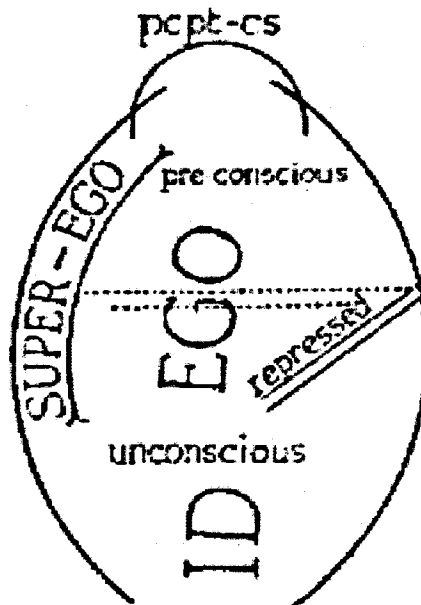
Figure 1. "The structural relations of the mental personality" (1933). Produced by Freud in "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality" (98).

Introducing his spatial figure in 1915, Freud insists that his hypothesis "set[s] out to

be no more than graphic illustrations," saying he prefers to imagine the psyche as a

formless economy of dynamics ("The Unconscious" 175).[48] But Freud's disclaimer

seems to contradict the language he uses to describe the psyche's development into

"dimensions of depth in the mind" (173) or "territories" ("The Dissection" 71). Not

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[48] In this essay on the topology, he also refers to these dynamics as "processes and forces," and "instincts and aims" (173, 175). He names these "processes and forces" the pleasure principle and the reality principle in his early model of the psyche, known as the first topology, and the death and life drives in his later model, known as the second topology.

only is the psyche drawn up spatially for instructive purposes, but the development of

the psyche seems to be an essentially spatializing process. In Freud, the subject will

function *normally* provided that the instincts, or pleasure principle, are rigorously

compromised by socialization, and that the boundaries between the ego, superego,

and id achieve durability and, in tandem, form the psyche's depth. In this account of

psychic development, the libido does not become unconscious until contact with the

law necessitates the division between the conscious and the unconscious through

repression. In his 1932 lectures, Freud comes to compare the external world of reality

and the internal world of the repressed, each equally alien to the perceiving ego: "the

repressed is foreign territory to the ego—internal foreign territory—just as reality ...

is external foreign territory" ("The Dissection" 71). If the Freudian psyche is defined

as this dynamic of conflicting agencies, then is the psyche not a secondary effect of

socialization? Synthesizing Freud's topology with a Foucauldian understanding of

disciplinary regulation, Butler asks, "[i]s there an implicit social text in this

topographical rendition of psychic life, one that installs antagonism (the threat of

judgment) as the structural necessity of the topographical model ...?" (*PLP* 179).

Exploring these "structural necessities" in Freud's model, Butler draws out the social

fabrication of interior and exterior life.

Butler reads the boundary between the internally conflicted agency known as

the psyche and the amorphous, threatening outside as the outcome of the threat of

judgment: "I argue that this process of internalization *fabricates the distinction

between interior and exterior life*" (19; emphasis in original). To disengage the

rhetoric of pre-psychic insides and outsides in Freudian theory, and to emphasize the "social text" implied in Freud's topology, Butler returns to, and revises, the logic of *internalization*, the process by which social law is installed in the internal psychic world, initiating inner conflict and, by that same token, self-regulation. Also called "introjection," Freud's understanding of internalization presumes a pre-existing inside and outside that are simply *bridged* as the outcome of the Oedipal phase. As in Freud's theory of the superego, Butler reads the symptomology of "conscience" as the subject's enthrallment with the law. But Butler asks, "is the norm first 'outside,' and does it then enter into a pre-given psychic space …? Or does the internalization of the norm contribute to the production of internality?" (19). Butler accounts for the formation of interiority through Althusser's theory of *interpellation*, a process "productive of," rather than "happening to" the psyche (5, 106).

Although aware that the superego lies at the limit between inside and outside, Freud reads the breakdown of that boundary as an indication of pathology in "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality." He describes psychotic patients "molested by the observation of unknown powers—presumably persons," who have "mistakenly displaced" the superego into "external reality," and "[suffer] from delusions of being observed" (74). Although he deems such displacement unhealthy, he delineates this particular pathology to advance his theory of the superego: "How would it be if these insane people were right, if in each of us there is present in his ego an agency like this which observes and threatens to punish …?" (74). *The Psychic Life of Power* seeks to de-pathologize the breakdown of the distinction between "internal" and "external"

reality toward a psychic theory of the social. Through "interpellation," Butler thinks

through how the social processes of shame, judgment, and antagonism continually

initatiate the reflexivity of conscience qua internal conflict.

At times, as in Freud, Butler evokes a generalized "subject," suggesting the

conflict of ambivalence will appear everywhere through the social process of

acculturation. However, Butler is trying to understand the specific vexations of

subjectivities that are judged to be lacking, incoherent, or failed. If, as in both Freud

and Foucault, normalized sexuality is the most clinching subtext of self-regulation,

"endowed with the greatest instrumentality,"[49] Butler asks, what are the internal

consequences for sexualities thought to be corrupt and socially illegible (*HS* 103)?

She writes, "rigid forms of gender and sexual identification ... seem to spawn forms

of melancholy" (144). Especially in *The Psychic Life of Power*'s final chapter,

"Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," Butler analyzes the

"transposed aggressivity" of sexual shaming that operates through violence and

installs the necessity of acute self-beratement: "the violence of social regulation is not

to be found in its unilateral action, but in the circuitous route by which the psyche

accuses itself of its own worthlessness" (188, 184). It is worth noting that, in its

emphasis on grief as constitutive of abject identities, Butler's *The Psychic Life of*

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[49] Foucault writes of sexuality that "between each of us and our sex, the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth: ... it is up to sex to tell us our truth ...[Sex] shines forth; it is incandescent ... In the space of a few centuries a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of who we are, to sex ... We have placed ourselves under the sign of sex ... the West has managed ... to bring us almost entirely—our bodies, our minds, our individuality, our history—under the sway of [this] logic ... Sex, the explanation for everything" (*HS* 77-8).

Power has been frequently regrafted in theories of racial identity. In *The Melancholy of Race,* Anlin Cheng uses Butler's theory of self-beratement to think through grief as itself constitutive of racial identity, rather than a result of localized instances of racism, exclusion, and discrimination. Similarly, Deborah Youdell engages Butler's concept of subjectivation to analyze the discursive terrain through which Arab identities are tokenized and produced as "exotic" in school-based celebrations of multiculturalism, entailing identifications stricken by their difference from normalized whiteness ("Subjectivation and Performative Politics").

To further explore the wider social resonances of Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, it is fruitful to compare Butler's critique of Freud's topology with Julia Kristeva's, not only because the latter too describes the production of interiority as a secondary effect, but also because they each engage Freud's spatial topology to understand how social worlds are defined by partitions, antagonisms, and exclusions. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva posits the endless maintenance of insides and outsides as the chief psychic drive (7, 65, 155). The ego and its objects are secondary effects of that drive for which there is no effable agent, and life is the continued maintenance of the border between what is proper to the self and what is not through the exclusion of "semi-objects," hence the repulsion for shit, loose hair, mucous, and also, crucially, the organization of social worlds into intelligible and abject bodies (2-3, 16). For Kristeva, "repressed content" is not reserved or hidden inside the psyche, but materializes as "the excluded," and, by virtue of its visibility, continually threatens the border into appearance (6). Butler suggests a similar conflation of the psychic

"outside" and the social "outside," both fabricated in the process of maintaining the fiction of a bounded internal world.

According to her Foucauldian psychoanalysis, it is not that moral standards are internalized; rather, internality is the very conflict power generates in the production and regulation of subjects: "Although one is tempted to claim that social regulation is simply internalized, taken from the outside and brought into the psyche, the problem is more complicated, and, indeed, *more insidious*. For the boundary that divides the outside from the inside is in the process of being installed, precisely through the regulation of the subject" (67; emphasis added). Here, Butler describes the problem of the interpellated psyche as "more insidious" than Freud's "introjection" because the installation of inside and outside hides the subject's attachment to the law: "no subject can emerge without this attachment, formed in dependency, but no subject, in the course of its formation, can ever afford fully to 'see' it" (8). That is to say, the subject is founded on the condition of that boundary.

Within and also against her Foucauldian affinities, Butler re-inscribes the hypothesis of repression as the key to illuminating psychic conflict. But, in her formulation, it is precisely the subject's formation within power that must be repressed—through the relegation to an outside—in order for the subject "to be." She writes, "Foucault's reformulation of subordination as that which is not only pressed on a subject but forms a subject, that is, is pressed on a subject by its formation, suggests an ambivalence at the site where the subject emerges. If the effect of autonomy is conditioned by subordination and that founding dependency is rigorously

repressed, the subject emerges in tandem with the unconscious" (6-7). Butler's account of repression therefore explains the impulse to *see* power as a force (out there) and subjectivity as a sanctum (in here). In the first pages of *The Psychic Life of Power*, she writes, "we are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside," following Foucault's observation that "power is often cast as unequivocally external to the subject" (2; *HS* 20). Over the course of Butler's reading of power and the psyche, she suggests that this sense, which "we are used to," itself marks the subject's regulation. If the subject's ontology hinges on the distinction between inside and outside, then the humanist, liberal constructions of power and agency Foucault attempted to dismantle are, in Butler's psychoanalysis, "more insidious" than he imagined.

Foucault renounced the psychoanalytic project because of its insidious instantiation of the difference between an internal psychic world and an external social world. We can say that, according to Foucault, this distinction tactically *muffles* the regulatory and productive function of power, and *hides* the historical conditions of the agendas, hypotheses, and technologies marshaled in the production of subjects. Indeed, Foucault engages the metaphor of repression just as he denounces the hypothesis: "the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come[s] to act as a *roadblock* to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged" (*HS* 10; emphasis added). Foucault suggested that notions of agency attached to liberation and the defeat of constraint are historically legitimized by the tactical insistence of institutions, jurisdictions, and knowledges, such as those of Freud and the clinical

practice of psychoanalysis. Aligned with Foucault's analysis of knowledge, history, and power, Butler's theory suggests that those tactical insistences bind the subject to a *necessary compromise* that she figures as "psychic life" within the cultural life of juridical power.

A careful reading of the tensions that characterize *The Psychic Life of Power* therefore sheds light on Heather Love's remarks that the psychic and the social *seem* to be "different kinds of objects": "social life happens out there, psychic life, somewhere inside" (11). In imbricating these narratives, of history and the psyche, of Foucault and Freud, Butler's text offers a politicized account of the methodological severance between these "traditionally polarized terms" or "attendant antitheses" apprehending that severance as "the presence of the law ... in "its concealment" (Love, *Feeling Backward* 10; McNay 175; Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside" 157). *The Psychic Life of Power*, a reembodiment of the scene of struggle in *Subjects of Desire*, represents Butler's effort to work through the Foucauldian paradigm on which she depends. Her initiating remarks, the epigraphs, the turn to Foucault—these retrospectively become the critical occasions of the subject's formation within power. The book's tropology therefore works slightly at odds with the installation of an inside and outside, and also becomes partially critical of that initiating, Foucauldian turn, temporalizing an act of "presupposing ... subordination" in order to achieve the effect of autonomy (*PLP* 12).

Psychic Tenacity and the Subject Beyond Power

On the way to understanding Butler's critique of the juridical discourses that
regulate identity, and building on my conclusions from the last chapter about Butler's
reception, I want to draw out one of the consequences of Butler's theory of the
psychic life of power: that debates about agency, opposition, and resistance will
continue to emanate from an understanding of social structures that prioritizes
repression. If, as Butler argues, the interior of subjectivity and the exterior of power
are the necessary effects of the subject's regulation, it is no wonder that Foucault, and
following him, Butler, have been attacked in the service of defending a subject
beyond the specific historical institutions and discourses that instigate it: "The 'I'
emerges upon the condition that it deny its formation in dependency, the condition of
its own possibility. The 'I,' however, is threatened with disruption precisely by this
denial," and embarks on "neurotic repetitions that restage the primary scenarios it not
only refuses to see but cannot see, if it wishes to remain itself" (10). In depriving the
subject of its agency beyond power, *The Psychic Life of Power* poses the very threat
that "no subject ... can ever afford fully to 'see.'" Michael Levenson writes, warily:

> Everywhere [Butler's] theory looks it sees that our hope comes from
> our very degradation. There is nothing outside the apparatus, nothing
> independent of the regime of power: the stirrings of opposition are
> only the product of that selfsame machine. As she puts it in a clinching
> paraphrase of Foucault: 'resistance is an effect of the very power that it
> is said to oppose.' The very apparatus that breaks us also makes us.
> This is the terrible claustrophobia of her vision. ("The Performances of
> Judith Butler" 63)

Levenson's stuttering comment does get to the heart of Butler's vision. However,
Levenson's use of mechanical and paralytic imagery reflects a pre-Foucauldian view
of power as a "degrad[ing], "clinching", "break[ing]," and "terrible" dynamic that

only constrains the mobility of subjects, and that Butler herself imparts only "terrible claustrophobia." Such a vision emerges in Nussbaum's remarks on Butler's Foucauldianism as well: "[Butler] derive[s] from the writing of Foucault … the fatalistic idea that we are prisoners of an all-enveloping structure of power, and that real-life reform movements usually end up serving power in new and insidious ways" (38).

The metaphors of paralysis, imprisonment, and mechanism implicitly confirm the idea of power as an external force that constrains the subject. Indeed, framing Butler and Foucault according to the imagined separation of agent and structure, the rhetoric of these readings recuperates the very cluster of assumptions about power, discourse, and subjects that Foucault attempted to rewrite in *The History of Sexuality*. David Halperin's book *Saint Foucault* attributes such dismissals of Foucault to a misreading of how power works (16-20): "some of Foucault's critics on the Left … have misunderstood his claim, 'power is everywhere,' to imply that contemporary forms of social domination are so total in their operations and so overwhelming in their effects as to leave no possibility for individual or collective resistance" (18). Halperin objects to these charges of political immobility by referring to Foucault's founding role in AIDS activism and the formation of GLBT alliances. He asks, how can we argue that Foucault's theories do not work if he is "the intellectual architect of what is arguably the most significant recent development in progressive politics in the United States," and "the single most important intellectual source of political inspiration for contemporary AIDS activists" (26, 15)? I would add that Foucault's work has been

enormously enabling in academic critiques of the human sciences, of identity-based

oppression, and of global technologies of power and knowledge devoping over the

last fifty years. This would indicate that Foucault's power is to be reckoned with

rather than refused.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler too describes "the misreading by which Foucault

is criticized," whereby the operations of power are "reduced to determinism and

impl[y] the evacuation or displacement of human agency" (9). Edward Said deploys

the same metaphors against Foucault, coupled with the insistence that Foucault's

theory is beset by immobility. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic,* Said writes, "the

trouble is that Foucault's theory has drawn a circle around itself, constituting a unique

territory in which Foucault has imprisoned himself and others with him ... Resistance

cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it,

except in some metaphysical, ultimately trivial sense. ... The disturbing circularity of

Foucault's theory of power as a form of theoretical over-totalization" (Said 245-246,

qtd. in Halperin 21). Finding Foucault's vision at once troubling (threatening) and

trivial (dismissable), Said claims that Foucault's influence is constraining rather than

enabling.[50] The images of captivity effectively emphasize only *one* inflection of the

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[50] This seems a tense and surprising reading on Said's part, since, in *Orientalism*
(1978), he engages Foucault's concept of discursive power to explain the West's
construction of the East through representation as a tactical and binding form of
domination (3-4). This implicitly presumes the capaciousness of Foucault's theory,
that power breeds its own opposites. In terms of effective resistance within a
Foucauldian understanding of dissemination and counter-dissemination, Said's
autobiography, *Out of Place* (1999), seems to corroborate Said's sense that his
education in the English language and his graduate career at Harvard provided him
with the ability to attack and criticize, from the inside, Western discourses of the

Foucauldian axiom inscribed here, downplaying *the effect of autonomy* bequeathed by

subordination, even as Levenson's and Said's remarks implicitly include that

possibility: "the very apparatus that breaks us *also makes us*," and "[*resistance is an*

adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it]" [emphases added].

Read another way, these statements affirm agency's possibility, and, as I have argued,

also describe Butler's intervention in the Foucauldian paradigm, enabled through

rhetorical subjection to Foucault's paradox. Her work, like the subject she describes,

is mobilized on the basis of that "disturbing" and "terrible claustrophobia." Less

scathingly than Said and Levenson, but with the same implications, Lois McNay

argues that Butler "replicate[s]" Foucault's failure to aid individuals struggling to

change the socio-cultural order (178). McNay writes: "[Butler's] idea of the

performative appears to replicate a weakness in Foucault's model, namely that it

provides an etiolated and rather formal account of agency which lacks a hermeneutic

dimension ... an analysis of the political dimensions of agency—the capacity of

individuals to engender change within the socio-cultural order—is not fully

explained" (178). McNay's denial of Butler's critical mobility purchases a pre-

Foucauldian assumption, inscribed beyond question between parenthetical dashes,

that agency is "the capacity of individuals to engender change." Her use of the verb

"to engender" is perhaps incidental, but in *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses

"engendering" to describe the process through which values are constructed as

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Other. The truth of Said's claim—that resistance cannot be a dependent function of
power, and that Foucault himself is a constraining thinker—relies heavily on there
being neither an *example* of how resistance works as a dependent function of power,
nor a critical future for the Foucauldian paradigm.

unquestionable through discourse, for example, the value of the subject beyond power (11). In Butler's view, this process is exerted not *exactly* by the individual, but by "discursive/cultural means" of which the individual is an effect as well.

Rewriting subjectivity at the limit of critical reflection, Butler insists, as much as she attempts to show, that our discourses reproduce the intentions of power in partially blind ways. As we can see in the unwitting turn to a subject beyond power in the rhetoric of Butler's adversaries, the regulatory effects of power accrue at the limits of intentionality and critical reflexivity; the subject reproduces discursive formations whose power takes effect well beyond the subject's control. And yet, this does not "make the question of responsibility superfluous" in Butler (Magnus 85). Rather, her work demands a mode of self-reflection as an ongoing analysis of social regulations, a mode that consents to one's own work as the wielding of power in the Foucauldian sense, and to the impossibility of accounting for the full resonance of one's speech.

I summarize the tropology—the surface and the skin—of *The Psychic Life of Power* as an active contour of resistance that functions tactically rather than oppositionally. Butler writes of the "double aspect" of subjection, "consider that in the very act by which the subject reproduces the conditions of its own subordination, the subject exemplifies a temporally based vulnerability that belongs to those conditions, specifically, to the exigencies of their renewal" (12). That is to say, *The Psychic Life of Power* reproduces the Foucauldian paradigm, and yet also achieves the effect of autonomy in expanding his account of subjectivity to explain the

formation of the psyche within power. Although Foucault initiates and sustains her inquiry, Butler advances the Foucauldian trajectory against its own prohibitions, and thereby enacts resistance as an effect of the power it is said to oppose. She contends that "there is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence *and instability*" (*BTM* 9; emphasis added). Butler's "replication" of Foucault's theory of power in the context of psychoanalysis embodies this "reiterated acting" *and* the "instability" of that theory's discursive future.

Keeping it Moving: Toward Incoherence

As in *Subjects of Desire*, Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* continues to be deeply invested in the "instability" of formations that seem to cohere, and in the possibility of reinstating them differently by dwelling in the gaps and enunciating their incoherences. The criticisms I have analyzed above, however, at once corroborate Butler's argument that defenses of the subject's independence will be tenacious, and also frustrate her Foucauldian effort to undo those tenacities. In other words, *The Psychic Life of Power* advocates for the subject an act that Butler says is "impossible:" to maintain an ongoing critical review of the conditions of its emergence (9, 25, 146). Crucially, in one instance she describes such a review as *almost* impossible: "it is almost impossible to ask after the genealogy of [the subject's] construction without presupposing that construction in asking the question" (117). Inhabiting that opening of the *almost*, Butler suggests—and instates—a mobility within the circularity of these questions.

My argument is that Butler advocates, perhaps obliquely, "incoherence" as a value and, furthermore, as a basis for becoming critical of seemingly stable and inevitable social destinies. Butler's Foucauldian psychoanalysis, as I have charted it, suggests that melancholia is permanent so long as the juridical regulations on identity and difference persist. Motivated by these concerns, Butler raises "the political question of the cost of articulating a coherent identity position by producing, excluding, and repudiating a domain of abject specters that threaten the arbitrarily closed domain of subject positions" (149). The cost is that incoherent identities— sexual, but also racial, national, and spiritual —will continually undergo social death, and in many cases, bodily death. The solution, she writes, lies in "risking the *incoherence* of identity" (149). Michael Snediker's "Queer Optimism"[51] considers the effects of reading Butler during his years of depression after coming out, fixing on the bleakness of "incoherence" as Butler's solution for the difficulties of queer identity. Characterizing her book on melancholia as "queer pessimism," Snediker reflects that "my experience of feeling shattered lacked all the thrill of reading about being shattered. Stronger than the excitement of radical new possibilities of self-losing, of the vigorous embrace of factitiousness, was the grief of self-loss" (11). Snekider observes that melancholia itself seems "unimpeachable" (epithet 12) in Butler: "whereas the identity born of melancholy required constant, quotidian maintenance, melancholy itself was described as a 'permanent internalization'" (epithet 12).

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[51] This 2006 article was published in the online journal *Postmodern Culture*, without pagination. Snediker has since then elaborated this essay into a book, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitious Persuasions* (2009).

Snediker's affective despair in the face of Butler, to me, echoes Butler's own

melancholy tones as she works within, rather than at a distance from, the tropological

quandaries of subjection. The psychoanalyst in Butler traces melancholia as formative

of identity itself; the Foucauldian in Butler, however, wants to historicize those

melancholic binds, giving them a contingency and a context, in order to suggest the

possibility of a future without them. This duality in *The Psychic Life of Power* reflects

a pessimism and an optimism for the effort to revise the frames of social and cultural

intelligibility. In "Sexual Traffic" (1994), an interview with Judith Butler, Gayle

Rubin reflects on how enormous, difficult, but necessary that effort suddenly appears

to be when we begin to theorize social and psychic structures as intractably linked.

She observes that "people often assume that if something is social it is also somehow

fragile and can be changed quickly" (75). At the same time, she points out the

overwhelming "frustration" that a psychoanalytic framework can entail for the hope

to generate new social formations: "the enduring quality of certain things sometimes

leads people to think that they can't be socially generated. But the kind of social

change we are talking about takes a long time, and the time frame in which we have

been undertaking such change is incredibly tiny" (75-76).

In terms of psychic/social change, Butler's book is motivated by the

imperative for large-scale transformation, and yet can gesture towards only a small-

scale intervention; she attempts to mobilize her account of juridical power's violence

in the situation of one-on-one clinical therapy. The penultimate chapter of *The*

Psychic Life of Power, "Keeping It Moving," written by practicing psychologist

Adam Phillips, attempts to channel Butler's theories into practical revisions of

clinical practice. Addressing his colleagues, he writes that "starting with two sexes, as

we must ... locks us into a logic, a binary system that often seems remote from lived

and spoken experience ... We should be speaking of paradoxes and spectrums, not

contradictions and mutual exclusion" (158). Here, Phillips articulates the use of the

norm of incoherence for the specific purpose of managing and apprehending the

influence the expert can have on the patient's psychic pain. In *Undoing Gender*,

Butler elaborates this trajectory in her analysis of Gender Identity Disorder, the

pathologization of non-normative gender and sexual identifications (75-76, 81). The

clinical effort to restore coherent identifications to subjects said to be confused, often

children, instates and necessitates melancholia through an implicit shaming. In this

view, such diagnoses force the subject to take itself as "misoriented," instigating the

very guilt and confusion the clinician is claiming to fix. Butler labours to show that

the health of systemic coherence, rather than the health of the patient, takes primacy

within the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, a label meant to account for strange

identities that threaten the guise of "nature" in coherent genders and sexualities.

The movement of Butler's book, from a highly theoretical and deconstructive

engagement with Freud and Foucault, Hegel, Nietzsche, Althusser, towards a critique

of the verdicts that mark certain forms of therapy and psychology, may seem like an

anxious attempt to "keep it moving," an attempt to prosthetically instate the mobility

of her theories. However, Butler has advanced this precise critique before in the

context of feminist collectives in *Gender Trouble*; in the first pages she poses

Foucault's notion of juridical power against "woman" as the subject of feminism: "juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent" (5); and, in the circulation of "woman" as the proper basis for feminist identity, "the specters of discontinuity and incoherence… are constantly prohibited and produced" (23). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she cites Leo Bersani's *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*, which also suggests that incoherence can be a productive counter-norm, since "only the decentered subject is available to desire" (149; Butler's paraphrase). However, she might have also cited herself in *Subjects of Desire*, where she illuminates the violent moralism of the "paradigm of psychic integration," and hopes, through counter-tropology, to reveal the limits of that paradigm. In *Gender Trouble*, she writes that "it is the exception, the strange, that gives us the clue to how the mundane and taken-for-granted world of sexual meanings is constituted … hence, the strange, the incoherent … gives us a way of understanding the … world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently" (*GT* 140). As in *Subjects of Desire*, Butler seems to be able, at best, to set an example of the tensions and paradoxes she is attempting to think through, "repeatedly symptomatizing what resists narration" (124), and to make hopeful gestures towards imagining a future where subjects are not required to be "in line" and normatively "oriented" (Ahmed 15-16).

CHAPTER THREE

An Account of Herself: Butler's Turn to Ethics

As a pursuit, ethics may well appear to be far more high-minded than epistemology or ideology or politics. But by the same token, one may easily also feel—especially in those moments when the sense of exhilaration at engaging in the noble pursuit of ethics recoils to haunt one with the demand for a keener, more scrupulous self-criticism about the rigor and consistency of one's critical practice—the result may be a considerable amount of queasiness over how freely that signifier ("ethics") can slide around and metamorphose into something other or less than it seems to denote at first.

—Lawrence Buell, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics" (3)

In the last two chapters, I have argued that *the way* Butler writes theory is as instructive and meaningful as *what* she writes, exposing the pedagogical resonances of her work as performance, and working towards an overview of Butler's practice of criticality, writing, and theory. Along the way, I have foregrounded the importance of reading Butler's reflexive style as an ongoing critique of the philosophical regimes she re-articulates in her writing, and, in turn, I have analyzed these moves as instructive and exemplary interventions in scenes of critical legacy, inheritance, and alliance. Butler's rhetorical performance of what we might call the "undone subject" strategizes and temporalizes non-violent, exemplary ways of relating to those we

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want to disengage, even hate (Hegel, Freud). In this chapter, I will draw out the ethical valence of the "exemplary" in Butler more directly by analyzing *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), which wrestles with the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas.

The focus of *Giving an Account of Oneself* is a critique of narrative coherence as a block to ethical relations. She writes:

> I am concerned with a suspect coherence that sometimes attaches to narrative, specifically, with the way in which narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource—namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others. To hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form may even be to require a falsification of that life in order to satisfy the criterion of a certain kind of ethics, one that tends to break with relationality. (*GA* 63)

Butler's work has consistently focused on one difficulty: that subjects become intelligible by citing and reinscribing norms that have power and resonance beyond that subject's control. In *Giving Account of Oneself*, she grafts this difficulty onto the question of responsibility, indicating by her title both the act of speaking or writing in self-reflection, and also the attempt to account for one's actions in relation to a moral problem or crisis. She writes, "When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration" (7-8). This chapter reads *Giving an Account of Oneself* as the narrativization of self-opacity as an instructive artifact—a meditation on the "acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (63). I argue that this recent work takes up the ambivalences and conflicts about self-knowledge, psychic integration, and norms of coherence in *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, now with an explicitly ethical valence:

"suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require others to do the same" (42). Butler theorizes the problem of self-opacity as the crisis of responsibility in which I fail to narrate the cosmology of conditions that make my speech possible and meaningful, and in which I fail to predict its material outcomes and resonances. As her title suggests, to say "I" in this kind of ethical reflection can be a starting point to understanding the self in relation to norms and in relation to others. Butler's texts, as I have argued, perform a kind of ambivalence and incoherence that instate—by example—a set of counter-norms that work at odds with the normative strictures she criticizes. Even where she does not say "I," or when she guides her reader through the merely routine argumentative markers, "I combine," "I contend," "I interpret," etc., the implied "I" of Butler's texts constitutes an agency enabled and compromised. In each of *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter*, *Excitable Speech*, and *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler makes her central claims about the problem of social subjection through the linguistic signifier of the "I," which is at once a citation of grammatical rules, and also the basis for grounding the speaking subject. At times, she orients the "I" in first person narration as caught up in the analogies she seeks to theorize: "Langauge is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self"; "I can only say 'I' to the extent that I have first been addressed"; "Because I have been called something, I have been entered into linguistic life, refer to myself through the language given by the Other, but

perhaps never quite in the same terms that my language mimes" (*GT* 183 [emphasis in original]; *BTM* 226; *ES* 38). In her early essay "Contingent Foundations" (1995), Butler reflects on the lack of sovereignty over the positions that constitute her work, and that, despite that lack, the turns of her rhetoric will at times imply a sovereignty: "My position is mine to the extent that 'I' … replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me, working the possibilities that they systematically exclude. But it is clearly not the case that 'I' preside over the positions that have constituted me, shuffling through them instrumentally, casting one aside, incorporating others, *although some of my activity may take that form.* The 'I' who would select between them is always already constituted by them" (42; emphasis added). The concession here, that her work will yet imply a presiding "I" despite her effort to undo the sanctioned, autonomous subject, foreshadows the central ambivalence of *Giving an Account of Oneself,* marked by a salience of first-person narration to the effect of the speaker fascinated and "overwhelmed" within the symptomology of self-opacity (*GA* 54).

   To explore the implications of *Giving an Account of Oneself*'s semi-autobiographical narrative form, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first will consider the specific set of critical interpellations that condition *Giving an Account of Oneself* as an explicit articulation of an ethics that has been said to be missing from her work. I take Martha Nussbaum's "Professor of Parody" as an extreme example of the charge of irresponsibility, and also consider the theoretical trend widely known as "the turn to ethics," which centres largely on the work of

Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas has a significant impact on Butler's later works, which incorporate his motifs of *singularity* and *exposure*. These motifs eclipse the language of "performance" and "staging" that proliferated her work before 2000, a shift in diction and focus that bespeaks her turn to ethics, which she conducts with pronounced hesitation.[52] Drawing out the reasons for that hesitation, I look to her essay "Ethical Ambivalence" (2000) as an important precursor to *Giving an Account of Oneself*; in this essay she addresses the surge of work on Levinas as a metonymy for "the turn to ethics," and articulates her resistance to each through the Nietzschean notion of "bad conscience," in which "the subject afflict[s] pain on itself in the service of, in the name of, morality" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 75). Putting her bad conscience to critical use, Butler offers a reflection on how the demand to become ethical acts on the subject who can never give a full account of itself. The second section will pursue Butler's shifts between third person and first person ("if the subject is ... then I am ...") as a set of mirrorings and identifications that interweave self-accounting with an analysis of that process. To read these shifts, I will turn to poststructuralist criticism of memoir and autobiography, which will help me to draw out the political consequences of self-narration's limits. Indeed, Butler seems to put *Giving an Account of Oneself* in that trajectory of scholarship as well by referencing Leigh Gilmore, Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, and Adriana Cavarero, although very briefly. Elaborating Butler's references to these critics, who offer studies in autobiographical writings that test the boundaries between self and other, will offer

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[52] There is no mention of Levinas in *Subjects of Desire, Gender Trouble, Bodies that Matter, Excitable Speech,* or *The Psychic Life of Power.*

insight into Butler's focus on self-opacity as "an ethical resource" or "capacity," specifically as a way of handling our constant and necessary exposure to others, and theirs to us (63, 42).

The Structure of Address for *Giving an Account of Oneself*

Some of Butler's remarks seem to court charges of irresponsibility. For example, in "Contingent Foundations," she writes, "What speaks when 'I' speak to you? What are the institutional histories of subjection and subjectivation that 'position' me here now? If there is something called 'Butler's position,' is this one that I devise, publish, and defend, that belongs to me as a kind of academic property? Or is there a grammar of the subject that merely encourages us to position me as the proprietor of those theories?" (42). Butler's critique of the academic 'I,' meant as a commentary on the authority and mastery often vested in the social theorist, seems to exacerbate, rather than resolve, the problem of accountability. In presuming the subject's inability to name, assimilate, and narrativize in full its own conditions and impulses, *Giving an Account of Oneself* pushes her theories of subject and structure towards an ethical crisis, asking, "does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility ... ?" (19). Placed in the introductory sections, and repeated strategically at transitions between chapters (40, 42, 83, 85),[53]

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[53] "There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does that mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do? If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully

this question paraphrases the many charges of irresponsibility against her work, and against the complex, diverse projects that critics yoke together under the sign of "postmodernism" or "poststructuralism."

I understand *Giving an Account of Oneself* as a patient response to one broadly construed demand on Judith Butler: to formulate a viable, worldly ethics, or what Adorno calls a morality applicable "in a living way" (*Problems of Moral Philosophy* 15). This ethical demand, delineated in the first six pages through Adorno, forms the text's "structure of address." In the decade after the publication of *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Butler's ethics was variously contested. As already discussed, it has been argued that her analyzes are unethically attendant to the structure of language and its operations: "there is no victim. There is [only] an insufficiency of signs" (Nussbaum 40). In the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler addresses some of these concerns, and outlines what she sought to accomplish with the book in ethical and material terms: to interrogate the symbolic processes through which some lives come to matter and others do not.[54] While she consents that "it is always possible to misread," Butler expresses that she "hopes" the text will be considered in its initial aims, to "promise a more democratic and inclusive life for ...

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accountable to you, is this ethical failure?" (40); "Can a new sense of ethics emerge from such inevitable ethical failure?" (42); "Haven't we, by insisting on something non-narrativizable, limited the degree to which we might hold ourselves or others accountable for their actions?" (83); "But is there an ethical valence to my unknowingness?" (84).

[54] Butler writes that she intended "to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions" and "to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimate minority gendered and sexual practices" ("Preface [1999]" viii).

criticism" (vii). However, Butler's attempt to restore her good intentions comes up

against two related problems that she both highlights and imbricates more fully in

Giving an Account of Oneself. The first is that words will be "deform[ed]" over the

course of their decoding, "sometimes against their author's most precious intentions"

(*BTM* 241), and that this uncontrollability continually introduces an element of risk.

Butler's reading of Hegel's legacy in *Subjects of Desire*, as I argued in Chapter 1,

seems to privilege reading as a process of historical mediation and extension; at the

same time, she also wants to secure *her* reading of Hegel as an "ironic artist," just as

she had "hope[d]" *Gender Trouble* would be taken in the way she intended it. The

second problem follows from the first: that texts will be read and regrafted in

unpredictable ways, and that may they therefore "act" against the intentions of the

speaker. This unpredictability forms her understanding of the agency of language as

elaborated in *Excitable Speech*: "the speech act, as the act of a speaking body, is

always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, that it always says

something that it does not intend" (10). In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler

draws these two problems together to devise a theory of accountability beyond the

narrative of our intentions: "we are used to thinking that we can be responsible only

for that which we have done, that which can be traced to our intentions, our deeds"

(8). A general reflection on the process of self-accounting, and, in my view, a specific

reflection on some of the less felicitious readings of her work, I understand *Giving an*

Account of Oneself as a response to threads of backlash and charges of

irresponsibility in her reception. However, unlike the 1999 "Preface" to *Gender*

Trouble, the insistence on what Butler had "sought" or "hoped" to do is completely absent from this book; instead, she offers a sustained meditation on the impossibility of offering a full account of one's agency.

I link this absence of defense to a shift in her thinking that Butler works through in *Giving an Account of Oneself*—namely, from the "tethering of a subject to the deed" towards a notion of "primary and irreversible susceptibility" (15, 88). This shift emerges in her discussion of the difference between a Nietzschean account of culpability and a Levinasian one. On the one hand, in Nietzsche, accusations of guilt for a specific deed committed inaugurate the subject in self-beratement and the reflexivity of conscience. On the other hand, in Levinas, the subject is inaugurated in its primary susceptibility to, and responsibility for, the Other prior to any deed or action (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 15, 88). The turn to Levinas helps her collate the two problems of textuality and accountability outlined above, as she moves from implicit, sometimes explicit, references to intentions towards a notion of unquestionable responsibility, especially for the "unwilled" (57). Levinas writes: "Here I am in this responsibility, thrown back toward something that was never my fault or my own doing, something that was never within my power or my freedom, something that never was my presence and never came to me through memory" (*Entre Nous* 170). Butler ventriloquizes Levinas's narrative of responsibility in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: I am already acting on the other, just as they are acting on me, and, frightfully, in ways that I cannot control, add up, or narrate in a review of my "own" history.

Giving an Account of Oneself foregrounds self-opacity—a key theme and organizing principle of Subjects of Desire and The Psychic Life of Power—as an explicitly ethical problem, and in such a way as to declare accountability for the readings of her work that she perhaps did not intend, making moot the claim, "that is not what I meant to do." At the same time, she uses this reflection on the subject's self-opacity and its ethical consequences to challenge the violence entailed by the demand for transparency, and to draw out the blocks to self-knowledge instated by the claim of transparency. In this sense, Butler strikes the posture of the "turn to ethics," but with an ambivalence towards how that ethical demand might act on and interpellate the subject who can never, finally, give a full account of itself. Drawing out the conditions of "primary susceptibility" that she reads in Levinas, Giving an Account of Oneself offers an extended rumination on the rhetorical processes that single out the individual by making her answerable to an impossible ethical demand, which, in Levinas, forms the subject in the primary commandment from the other, "do not kill me," and in Nietzsche, bullies the subject into the circuitry of bad conscience. Giving an Account of Oneself looks at the tension between these conceptualizations of responsibility, and, along the way, formulates an ambivalence towards the ethical demand that persecutes, shames, and banishes the subject whose account is failed, incoherent, and, in particular, bemired by a set of compromising historical and political desires. Her 2000 essay "Ethical Ambivalence" is an important precursor to Giving an Account of Oneself, in which she recounts the tensions between Levinas and Nietzsche as they played out in her post-Holocaust Jewish

education. Taking these semi-autobiographical contexts as important for

understanding Butler's ambivalence towards ethics, I want to make some of the

explicit links between this general "ethical demand" she theorizes and the particular

ethical demand on Judith Butler that informs *Giving an Account of Oneself*: to

formulate a living morality.

The Enigmatic in Butler's Ethics

In her book *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and

Critical Responsibility* (2008), Annika Thiem forges an explicit connection between

Butler's academic work and those "mundane" and "daily experiences" which "often

make us—sometimes painfully—aware of the limits of our knowledge of and control

over ourselves, others and the situations in which we have to act" (51). Although

Thiem clearly engages the Butler of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Thiem also insists

that Butler's work has *always* had ethical import, particularly as she conducts the

encounter between poststructuralim and moral philosophy. Thiem outlines the

foundational questions of morality and ethics that form the introductory problematic

in *Subjects of Desire,* where Butler argues that "the unified subject with a unified

philosophical life has served as the necessary psychological premise and normative

ideal in moral philosophies since Plato and Aristotle" (*SOD* 4). For Thiem, Butler

helps answer gritty, intimate questions of "how to best respond to the overwhelmed

friend, the talkative person on the bus, the nagging child, or the heartbroken

neighbour," and also sheds light on large-scale contexts of global interconnectivity:

"when we read the newspaper or follow the daily news and wonder how things can be as they are and what we can and should do about [it]. … Our powers and knowledge, as well as those of others, seem extremely, if not overwhelmingly, limited" (51). Summarizing Butler's insights, Thiem writes "the individual who can know herself and has the capacity to know the good and just from the bad and unjust … can no longer function as a backdrop to ethics and politics, if she ever really could" (51). Thiem's chief argument is that Butler's challenges to moral philosophy since *Subjects of Desire*—particularly her relentless defiguration of the self-grounding, integrated subject—are constitutive of her ethics (Thiem 7-9). This reading of Butler's work, as fundamentally engaged in an ethical project, helps explain some of the frustrations Butler must write through in the demand to formulate a clear and viable ethics. However, Thiem brackets the needling sense that Butler's ethics are, at times, ambiguous, and that her counter-intuitive treatment of the tenets of moral philosophy makes those ethics effectively hard to read. In eschewing from the outset a reading of Butler's varied reception, Thiem, to me, renounces the problem of legibility in Butler in defense of her project as unequivocally ethical, and perhaps reinscribes the primacy of intentions by foregrounding what Butler means to achieve.

In "Dwelling in Ambivalence," Love also notes that Butler's supporters are hailed into a defensive position against Butler's adversaries that risks "reducing… the complexity" of Butler's ambivalence: "Because of attacks such as Nussbaum's, Butler's fans may feel a certain pressure to defend her as a politically engaged and

ethical scholar" (Love 19).[55] Love briefly mentions Butler's essay "Ethical Ambivalence" as Butler's concentrated reflection on the potential violence of ethical injunctions. Developing Love's account of Butler as "dwelling in ambivalence" towards the ethical, in this section I will pursue what is persistently enigmatic in Butler's ethics as she journeys from what may *seem* to be a firm refusal of ethics through the 1990s (*Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter)* into a perhaps even more reluctant, even if more ethically oriented, set of motifs and themes drawn together in *Giving an Account of Oneself,* especially by drawing out her ambivalence towards Levinas.

Following Love, I argue that Butler's ethics are partially opaque, at times, illegible, because they are bemired by reservations about explicitly ethical formulae, and concerned about the violence they can inflict. Although I agree with Thiem that Butler's work has worldly applications, and that her theories have always had an ethical program in mind, it is also important to preserve Butler's reluctance to articulate an explicit morality. J. Aaron Simmons observes that it is difficult to discern the practical applications Butler's ethics seek to authorize in his review essay of *Giving an Account of Oneself.* Although mindful that "prescriptivity is what Butler challenges," Simmons writes that Butler risks coming off as abstract: "although *[Giving an Account of Oneself]* is not intended to be a practical guide for ethical and political life ... some suggestion for how to translate the acknowledgement of

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[55] As an example of such a defense, Love cites Sara Salih's introduction to *The Judith Butler Reader* (2004): "If anything may be said to characterize Butler's work as a whole, it is its ethical impetus to extend the norms by which 'humans' are permitted to conduct livable lives in socially recognized public spheres" (4).

subjective opacity into a different way of inhabiting the political sphere would be helpful for addressing the possible charge of speculate abstraction (of which I do not believe she is guilty)" (89). Simmons appreciates that there important reasons for Butler's obliqueness. Yet he appears to bracket a full elaboration of those reasons in the service of principles we might call "transparency" or "coherence, the very content of "prescriptivity" that Butler challenges.

This ambivalent attitude towards ethics and the injunction to formulate ethical programs in its association with moralism is figured in Butler's most famous books, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. In particular, in her foundational contributions to queer theory, Butler is somewhat allergic to morality in its historical affiliation with heteronormativity, [56] following Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, which follows Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Foucault exposes the moral codes of modernity as co-emergent with the specialized study of sexuality, psyche, and populations, which produced stark divisions between the upstanding and the perverse that attached themselves, respectively, to right and wrong. Butler focuses on "normative injunctions" and "prescriptive requirements" and "compulsory order"; "protocols" and "prohibitions" "annihilating norms" "shaming interpellation[s]" (*GT* 189, 9; *BTM* 49, 51, 124, 226). Joining Leo Bersani (*Homos* [1995]), and also Michael Warner (*The Trouble with Normal* [1999]), Butler continues the Foucauldian effort to expose the institutional, legal, and casual regimes of intelligibility that order some identities as corrupt, and to connect heterosexuality with the invention of

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[56]"Heteronormativity" was coined by Michael Warner, not Butler, in his article "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet" *Social Text*, 1991; 9 (4 [29]): 3-17.

morality itself. As Edwina Barvosa-Carter observes, evoking a Nietzschean legacy, "Butler's strident anti-normativity is born out of her attempt to unmask the pretense, falsehood, and will to power behind attempts to declare socially constructed norms universal" (184). The linkages between the moralized and the naturalized became particularly urgent for Butler, Bersani, and Warner as they address the medical and public responses to HIV/AIDS, which had in the early 1980s been clinically termed "GRID" (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), nicknamed "the gay plague," and represented as the embodiment of a moral lesson against homosexuality. The moralizing force of normative sexuality effectively restricted funds for research into the spread and treatment of the disease.[57] Butler, and following her, Bersani and Warner, write against the violent, exclusionary, and deathly effects of moralization, and, as part of the affirmation of difference and the shifting demands of disparate contexts of urgency, they refuse to tell their readers *how to live*.[58] Instead their interest lies in finding counter-values in non-normative, queer practices that upset and

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[57] See *Gender Trouble* (168-169) and *Bodies that Matter* (233), and also Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: AIDS, Pornography, and the Media* (1997), and Paula Treichler's *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (1999), especially Chapter 1, "Aids, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification."

[58] Of programmatic statements, Butler writes, "I believe that politics has a character of contingency and context to it that cannot be predicted at the level of theory. And that when theory starts becoming programmatic, such as 'here are my five prescriptions', and I set up my typology, and my final chapter is called 'What is to be Done?', it pre-empts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions are made in that lived moment and they can't be predicted from the level of theory.... I'm with Foucault on this. I'm willing to withstand the same criticisms he withstood. It seems like a noble tradition" ("On Speech, Race, and Melancholia" 167).

de-stabilize the presumed continuities of sex/gender/desire, or the "chains of binding

conventions" (*BTM* 225), thereby revealing there to be nothing natural or inevitable

about heterosexuality. As I argued in Chapter 2, Butler looks to the psychic pain and

social death of non-conforming subjectivities and, motivated to understand and aid

those historically disenfranchised by norms of coherence, formulates the nebulous

norm of "incoherence."

In her alliance with queer theory and the genealogy of morals, Butler's allergy

to moralism in *Gender Trouble, Bodies that Matter*, and *The Psychic Life of Power* is

an important backdrop for understanding the ambivalence she feels in taking "the turn

to ethics." Butler begins the essay "Ethical Ambivalence," published in the volume

The Turn to Ethics (2000), by interrupting this "turn" with two major reservations:

"I've worried that the turn to ethics has constituted an escape from politics, and I've

also worried that it has meant a certain heightening of moralism and this has made me

cry out, as Nietzsche cried out about Hegel, 'Bad air! Bad air!'" (15). The reference

to Nietzsche here evokes the genealogical critique of morals taken up in Foucault's

The History of Sexuality; the subsequent reference to Hegel, however, alerts us that

Butler is prepared to revise and become critical of her feeling of suffocation, given

her open immersion in Hegel's legacy. Butler analyzes these feelings of anxiety as the

symptomology of "bad conscience," the Nietzschean theory of paralysis in the face of

"impossible and relentless ethical demands" (17). Seeking to find room "to breathe"

(27), she traces the origins of her resistance to the work of Levinas, a centerpiece in

the turn to ethics in philosophy and critical theory, which strikes her as a moralizing

demand. That is to say, Levinasian ethics are redolent of the kind of normativity that her work has consistently distanced itself from. Calling "the turn to ethics" a "return," she writes, "I have for the most part resisted this return, and … what I have to offer is something like a map of this resistance and its partial overcoming"(15). The *partial-ness* of this overcoming, for me, is crucial to the essay's key point: that the "turn to ethics" must incorporate a reflexive ambivalence or wariness. As Buell describes in the same volume, "as a pursuit, ethics may well appear far more high-minded than epistemology or ideology or politics," but "the noble pursuit of ethics recoils to haunt one with the demand for a keener, more scrupulous self-criticism about the rigor and consistency of one's critical practice" (3). Butler's "Ethical Ambivalence," in its demand for reflection on the claim to an ethical position, leads into the necessity of giving an account of oneself, and also the impossibility of giving a complete or satisfactory account.

Before looking further into the essay "Ethical Ambivalence," I would like to trace some of the contours of this "turn," and to consider that it hails Butler into a difficult situation she theorizes through the formulation of "ethical ambivalence." The queer critique of morality comes at the tail end of a larger pattern across the humanities in the academic left in the 1970s and 1980s where, it has been said, ethics fell out of fashion. The descriptor "the turn to ethics," meant to account for a surge of ethical inquiries in the 1990s whose momentum continues today, suggests that there was, in preceding decades, a "turn away," indicating threads of deconstruction and poststructuralism that regarded with suspicion the traditional tendencies of ethics

towards universally binding statements and the refusal of culturally and historically

specific horizons of value.[59] But as "the turn to ethics" gained the energy and berth to

constitute it as a "turn," some cautioned against underestimating the ethical impetus

of that so-called "turn away." Wayne Booth contends that deconstruction's exposition

of the cultural/textual logics of subordination, domination, and exclusion "ha[s] an

ethical program in mind" (Booth 5).[60] In "The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s," the

introduction to the volume *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and*

Theory (1997), Adamson, Freadman, and Parker concede that "even the most

linguistically focused recovery of the marginalized Other of a logocentric

philosophical or literary text at least implicitly links itself with the defence of those

who have been Other to Western imperialism, to patriarchy or to bourgeois interests"

(3). A full critique of the turn, and its characterizations of the critique of morals,

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[59] By way of introduction to their volume *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory,* Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker claim that "most avant-garde Anglo-American literary theory in recent years has been either more or less silent about ethics or deeply suspicious of it" (2). In the introductory paragraphs of *The Turn to Ethics,* Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz declare that "ethics is back in literary studies," referring to a time, "not so many years ago … when ethics was regarded … as a 'master discourse' that presumed a universal human and an ideal, autonomous and sovereign subject. To critics working within the domains of feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism, this discourse became a target of critique: the critique of humanism was the exposé of ethics" (viii).

[60] In *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics,* Benhabib discusses the ethical valences of Derrida in the context of the *différance* between "West" and "East": "the logic of binary oppositions" that he deconstructs "is also the logic of subordination and domination" (15). This may seem at odds with Benhabib's rejection of postmodernism and Butler in "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance"(*Feminist Contentions* 1995), but in *Situating the Self* she clarifies that, despite its ability to analyze the violence of binary oppositions, postmodernism's anti-normativity is "debilitating" to feminism, and can be feminism's ally only in "partial and strategic solidarity" (15).

remains out of the scope of this chapter. However, to me, the enthusiasm toward

ethics on the academic left since 1990 seems to depend wholly on the possibility of

its separation from the coarse dangers of moralism, and Butler importantly suggests

that there may be instabilities and false satisfactions in that proposed separation.[61]

Emmanuel Levinas, in particular, has been extolled for offering the explicitly

ethical valences that deconstruction and poststructuralism so badly need (Buell 2).[62]

Defining the ethical as the obligation to the well-being of the "other," Levinas

theorizes the violent reduction of "the other" to "the same," and, in terms of large-

scale patterns in twentieth-century theory, corroborates in explicitly ethical terms

what Simone de Beauvoir argues of "woman" in *The Second Sex*, what Derrida

describes as "binary logic" in *Writing and Difference*, what Foucault calls "the order

of things," and what Edward Said formulates as "orientalism." In Levinas, the

deconstruction of Western knowledges and traditions dovetails with the ethical

imperative to open up to the singularity and exposure of the other, and the promise of

identification and knowledge blocks, rather than access, that founding obligation

(*Entre Nous* 99; *Time and the Other* 64). At its basis, Levinas's concept of the other

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[61] Important to the turn to ethics is a sharp distinction between "morality," based in generalized principles of right and wrong and an autonomous, sovereign subject who acts, and "ethics" based in practices of intersubjective relationality that attempt to accommodate otherness and difference (see *The Turn to Ethics* viii; Fraser 97).

[62] In *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992), Simon Critchley approaches Levinas as a necessary supplement to Derrida, and to the program of deconstruction generally, in terms of securing the crucial relationship between ethics and politics (xiv). The reverse, however, is argued in David Campbell's *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (1998), which insists that Levinas must be read through Derrida to clarify the former's insights for the formation of a politics (177-181).

seeks to be open enough to accommodate an infinity of "others," analogized not as the human but as the vulnerable, "the infinite," or "the unforeseeable" (*Ethics and Infinity* 66–67). However, important in Levinas is that even the vaguest analogies risk the violence of reducing the other to the same. For this reason, Levinas uses "the face" to conceptualize both the uniqueness of the other and its vulnerability to violence.

Labouring against that violence, Levinas insists on an ecstatic, sustained apprehensiveness toward the other —which he emulates through a highly meditative style of writing—who is conceived of as already implicated in his text. Levinas describes ethics as "first," in the sense that our obligation to others precedes and forms the self recurrently and synchronically, and also that, accordingly, the ethical work of preventing violence on the Other should take primacy in the work of philosophy, especially over epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge) and ontology (the philosophy of being): "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (*Totality and Infinity* 304; see also *Ethics and Infinity* 75).

In Levinas, what we say and do is a matter of life and death for the other, whose "first commandment from which all others follow" is "do not kill me" (*Totality and Infinity* 197). Thinking through this commandment in terms of the work of theory, its identifications and its "necessary error[s]" (*BTM* 230), Butler draws out the strong thesis in Levinas: if you are not colonizing, persecuting, even killing the other, then you are perhaps not theorizing at all, and the impossible ethical injunction

in Levinas is to labour against this "murderous impulse": "killing the other is the

temptation against which ethics must work" (*GA* 98).

To map her resistance to his injunctions, Butler implies that her post-

Holocaust education in Judaism had a Levinasian timbre, and that these difficult

encounters also formed the ground for her career as a philosopher. Her story is worth

quoting at length:

> I began my philosophical career within the context of a Jewish
> education, one that took the ethical dilemmas posed by the mass
> extermination of the Jews during World War II, including members of
> my own family, to set the scene for the thinking of ethicality as such.
> The question endlessly posed, implicitly and explicitly, is what you
> would have done in those circumstances, whether you would have kept
> the alliance, whether you would have broken the alliance, whether you
> would have stayed brave and fierce and agreed to die, whether you
> would have become cowardly, sold out, tried to live, and betrayed
> others in the process. The questions posed were rather stark, and it
> seemed as if they were posed not merely about a hypothetical past
> action, but of present and future actions as well: Will you live in the
> mode of alliance? Will you live in the mode of betrayal, and will you
> be desecrating the dead by your actions, will you be killing them
> again? No, worse, you are, by your present action, effectively killing
> them again. (16)

Projected by the young Butler as part of a lesson in history and in Judaism, these

demands resonate with Levinas's "stark" hypothesis of responsibility that comes from

another: "you are, by your present action, effectively killing them again." In Levinas,

taking full responsibility for actions that do not seem to be our own is the requisite of

morality. As noted earlier in this chapter, he writes that "here I am in this

responsibility, thrown back toward something that was never my fault or my own

doing, something that was never within my power or my freedom, something that

never was my presence and never came to me through memory" (*Entre Nous* 170). As

a pendant to her reflection, Butler articulates the guilt she felt in turning to Nietzsche

to explain the effects of this ethical demand as a "psychic violence," and "the

crushing force of unappeasable law" (17). She adds that "the effect on action was

generally paralysis or guilt" (16). The bond with Nietzsche she desired "threatened to

implicate [her] in an alliance with an anti-Semitic text," and "this was unacceptable"

(17). Butler references the debacle surrounding the posthumous unearthing of Paul De

Man's pre-war anti-Semitic letters, and the ensuing censure of his work on

deconstruction in parts of the academic world (19-20).[63] Butler explains that, in

Levinas, engaging Nietzsche re-inscribes the violence of the holocaust, "enacting that

desecration again," a crime punishable by exile (16).

Butler uses this bit of *Bildungsroman* to offer a *"livable*, ethical reflection"

(16; emphasis added) on the Levinasian demand to be ethically responsible, in this

case to perform loyalty to Jewishness above all. She makes critical use of the guilt it

accrues, to acknowledge that these accusations "carry wounds and outrages" that

wound and outrage her as well, but also to develop and pursue an ambivalence

towards an ethics that, in the cases of Nietzsche and Paul De Man, tends to judge,

condemn, and banish (*GA* 95). In "Ethical Ambivalence," she describes this as the

paradox of an ethics that persecutes: "becoming ethical ... through a certain

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[63] In 2002, I was preparing a presentation on deconstruction in a fourth-year seminar
at the University of King's College, Halifax, and I asked the instructor if I could use
Paul De Man to supplement, and explain the American interpretations of, Derrida's
Of Grammatology. She stared at me gravely: "no." Years later, at a Northrop Frye
Conference in 2007, the ideas of De Man briefly entered, and were promptly banished
from, a discussion of Frye's view of deconstruction, banished on the basis of De
Man's anti-Semitism. In these scenes of pedagogy and assembly, these refusals
effectively diminish De Man's impact on literary studies.

violence.... . Is it the only mode for ethics?"(27). In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, she

redescribes this paradox as "ethical violence," describing the deep-rooted blockages

to self-knowledge that such gestures amass, introducing her theory of self-opacity as

a "suspension of this mode of ethicality" ("Ethical Ambivalence" 27):

> Condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to
> posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, even to
> purge oneself of another. ... In this sense, condemnation can work
> against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by
> disavowing commonality with the judged. Although self-knowledge
> is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project.
> Condemnation tends to do precisely this, to purge and externalize
> one's own opacity. In this sense, judgment can be a way to fail to
> one's own limitation and thus provides no felicitous basis for a
> reciprocal recognition of human beings as opaque to themselves,
> partially blind, constitutively limited. (*GA* 46)

Butler's account of her ambivalence toward Levinas, part philosophical, part

autobiographical, analogizes and instates the necessity of giving an account of *oneself*

as an interruption of this process of condemnation and judgment. Through a very

particular spirit of exemplarity, Butler is labouring to create a greater ethical platform

for humility generosity, forgiveness, compassion, and honour in this scene of

identification and empathy where we are "precluded from revenge" (91). She writes,

"I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under

similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial

opacity to themselves" (42). Crucially, Butler extends the possibility of being

"precluded from revenge" when she confronts Levinas's confessional,

autobiographical book *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (1976) (*GA* 93-5). With

what she describes as "blatant racism" (94), he excludes from the realm of the ethical

religions that are not based in the history of the saints and of the Old Testament,

warning against the "rise of countless masses of Asiatic and underdeveloped peoples"

(*GA* 94; *Difficult Freedom* 165). In Butler's *Precarious Life*, she exposes how

exclusions and refusals of this kind, heightened to an uproar in the aftermath of

September 11th, 2001, continue to shape the attitudes and unilateral political

decisions of Judeo-Christian nations: "the same binarism … returns us to an

anachronistic division between 'East' and 'West' and which, in its sloshy metonymy,

returns us to the invidious distinction between civilization (our own) and barbarism

(now coded as 'Islam' itself)" (*Precarious Life* 2).[64] In *Giving an Account of Oneself*,

Butler mulls over this terribly difficult "ethical dilemma" (95) posed to her in reading

the Levinas who, in his own terms, persecutes and kills the other. Instead of using this

evidence as cause for exile, or, at the very least, as a reason to be fully suspicious of

the moral consistency of Levinas, Butler asks us to take his account of persecution

even more seriously, "to read his account against himself," and "to insist, as it were,

on a face-to-face encounter precisely here where Levinas claims it cannot be done"

(*GA* 95). In this specific dilemma, Butler judges Levinas in his "blatant racism"; at

the same time, she emphasizes a commonality with Levinas, the judged, in that his

words come from a place of outrage within a historical situation of blinding violence,

that is, self-opacity.

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[64]*Precarious Life* engages Levinas on "the face" in order to address the rigorous dehumanization of the Arab world in the post-9/11 American popular media. Butler uses "the face" to talk about the situation of mutual vulnerability to, and complicity in, acts of violence that come from positions of blinding injury, and rage, flaunted horrifically by the events of September 11th, 2001 (131-5, 144-5).

In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* which sustains a deeper and more developed

alliance with Levinasian ethics than does "Ethical Ambivalence," Butler argues that

giving an account of one's self-opacity, one's singularity and one's exposure, is a

starting point for opening up to the singularity and exposure of the other. I read her

resistance to ethics as a counter-demand to consider the debilitating conditions that

inform the sometimes frustrating crises we must respond to, especially if we

ourselves are in the process wounded and outraged, and therefore prone to counter-

violence. She thereby transforms her resistance to ethics, in its risk of condemnation,

into a dwelling place for an "ethical ambivalence" by a turn inward that doubles as a

turn to the other. Therefore, the enigmatic in this ethics dovetails with the refusal to

posture in the certainty of a moral, and to conduct an absolute separation between her

position and the one she wants to denounce.

Us, Them, You, "the I," and I

When Butler says "I," she means "the subject," she means we, she means you,

she means me, but provisionally, cautiously, worriedly, guiltily, enigmatically,

mindful of the unwieldy force of her own desires and commitments, and how they

might connect given these relations of primary susceptibility. To turn now to the

texture of Butler's book, in this section I examine the way the narrative point of view

leaps from first, to second, to third person, and back. Although Butler engages first-

person narration in the service of reflexivity in nearly all of her works, as noted

earlier in the chapter, the manipulation of narrative viewpoints comes to a head in

Giving an Account of Oneself, in which a stable viewpoint breaks down altogether. I read these shifts as a set of mirrorings, identifications, and recognitions that are never finalized or fully legible, emulating that "I," "you," and "we" are implicated in one another, but in ways that cannot be narrated. Sometimes narrative viewpoints are conflated within the same sentences, creating grammatical inconsistencies, or failures. She writes, awkwardly, that "Subjects who narrate *ourselves* in the first person encounter a common predicament. I cannot tell the story in a straight line, and I lose my thread, and I start again, and I forgot something crucial, and it is too hard to think about how to weave it in" (68; emphasis added). These turns of phrase call up Ahmed's queer analysis of the "straight lines" that bodies are encouraged to take, specifically through the relegation of incoherent orientations to the realm of the abject (15).

The grammatical mistakes in *Giving an Account of Oneself* metonymize the themes of inconsistency and incoherence, the themes she introduces in *Subjects of Desire* in resistance to the moral ideal of a unified life. Read this way, *Giving an Account of Oneself* reconstructs the Hegelian *Bildung* of consciousness, now including patterns of "breaking frame" that draw attention to the process of narrative construction. These are, I argue, construable as "lines of rebellion" (Ahmed 18). Fracturing the stable and unifying narrative effect secured by chains of consistent pronouns, Butler encourages us to read these shifts as both identifications and errors, spending several sections foregrounding the psychoanalytic model of *transference* to emphasize the 'work' and 'acting' of self-disclosing speech (50-65, 70-79). In its

emphasis on the processes of symbolization and elaboration, transference is in many ways a redescription of the performative function of language in psychoanalytic terms: symbolic material *acts* on the scene of exchange in some way, and that non-narrated (illocutionary) acting is given special weight as testimony, particularly the "elaboration … in an imaginary domain" of an "I" and a "you" (50). Engaging Jean Laplanche's *Essays on Otherness*, she considers this scene of self-disclosure where the other, and its address to me, are implanted in "my" speech in non-narrated ways, forming that speech in a relation that "animates" and "overwhelms" the speaker (54). And yet, when brought under analysis, this instigating relation to the other is erroneously considered to be "my unconscious" (53). An account of that relationality would then have to "def[y] the rhetoric of belonging" (54). The shifts in narrative viewpoint, as partly narrated and partly non-narrated, are Butler's struggle to honour the relation of responsibility by which the narrative is beset but cannot fully explain.

As self-psychoanalysis, Butler's narrative interweaves a first-person account with a critical analysis of that self-accounting, often figured as a reflexive dynamic between "the I" in third person and "I" in the first: "I am, in other words, doing something with that 'I'—elaborating and positioning it in relation to a real or imagined audience—which is something other than telling a story about it, even though 'telling' remains part of what I do" (66). The book, in terms of genre, shifts between philosophy and autobiography, confession and analysis, criticism and story-telling. To supplement Butler's emphasis on the psychoanalytic frame for self-disclosing speech acts, I want to engage poststructuralist criticism of autobiography

and memoir in Leigh Gilmore, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and Adriana

Cavarero. These theorists of memoir and autobiography interweave psychoanalysis,

speech act theory, and poststructuralist accounts of identity in order to critique the

rational and representative "I" as the presumed corollary of autobiographical writing.

On the one hand, they draw out the tension between poststructuralist critiques of

identity and of representativity, and, on the other, they consider the demand within

identity politics to speak out and tell one's story in order to garner a voice for, and

extend visibility to, silenced groups. As in Butler's analysis of the extension of

visibility to women in *Gender Trouble*, these critics of autobiography subject the

assumption of transparent representation to the constative fallacy, and focus instead

on the processes of construction and elaboration as themselves testimony to identity-

formation and memory-making. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature,*

Psychoanalysis, and History, Felman and Laub write that "the speaking subject

constantly bears witness to a truth that continually escapes him, a truth that is,

essentially, *not available* to its own speaker" (15; emphasis in original). Gilmore

writes against the expectations of "truth-telling" for the genre of autobiography,

exposing veracity as an impossible moral for testimonial speech: "because testimonial

projects require subjects to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a

private and intolerable pain, they enter into a legalistic frame in which their efforts

can move quickly beyond their interpretation and control, become exposed as

ambiguous, and therefore subject to judgments about their veracity and worth" (*The*

Limits of Autobiography 7). Allied with what Gilmore calls "limit-cases,"

autobiographical texts that trouble the boundary between memory and construction, fiction and non-fiction, self and not-self, these critics emphasize a set of counter-capacities in autobiography: to flaunt the live political dynamics of self-representation, and to aestheticize the social burden of giving an account of oneself. Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Story-telling and Selfhood* (1997) considers Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the story of Stein's life written in the third person from the perspective of her lover. She reads this narrative, neither a fiction nor a true story, neither an autobiography nor a biography, in terms of the ways that "selfhood" is constructed through the narratives of the other, and figures an ecstatic interface between an "I" and a "you." In Cavarero's analysis, Stein suggests and stages "the expositive and relational reality of the self" (82), offering a broader commentary on the "irremediable exposure" to others that characterizes modern subjectivity. In the style of Gilmore, Cavarero values "the capacity of [this] book" to explode "the individualist horizon": "fragile and exposed, the existent belongs to a world-scene where interaction with other existents is unforeseeable and potentially infinite" (83, 86, 87).

Giving an Account of Oneself, as part autobiography, can be read as such a "limit-case." The book offers a lively dramatization of the process of self-accounting, "bear[ing] witness to a truth that continually escapes it," and staging "the expositive and relational reality of [the] self." Legible throughout this book is the metonymic leap from "the 'I,'" an object for theory, to "I" in first-person. These leaps, conflations, or confusions are Butler's struggle to narrate the work of transference as

content: "I also enact the self I am trying to describe; the narrative 'I' is reconstituted at every moment it is invoked in the narrative itself … I am, in other words, doing something with that 'I'" (66). The semi-colon in the first sentence punctuates the shift between the first person *I* and third person *the I*, marking the non-narratable 'leap' that both furnishes and obfuscates the process of taking the "I" as an object. To narrate "the I" as a theoretical object implies a critical distance afforded by the scare quotes and the definite article; switching to the first person "I" in the form of direct identification (if "the I is," then "I am") collapses that critical distance. As in transference, these conflations reverse the intentions of identification just as they seek to install them. And, over the course of these animated enunciations, the agency of "I" emerges tensely in the compromise between *its* predications and *her* intentions. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler pauses to describe the critical analysis of the subject as a "double" process, a "story" "inevitably … circular": if "the subject can refer to its own genesis only by taking the third-person perspective," then "the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that the constitution has already taken place" (11). This work of narrating the subject's emergence at once delineates the formation of this trope, "the subject," and also leaves a trace of how that delineation works as an incomplete turning back on the self:

> As much as a perspective on the subject requires an evacuation of the first person, a suspension of the 'I' in the interests of an analysis of subject formation, so a reassumption of that first-person perspective is compelled by the question of agency. The analysis of subjection is always double, tracing the conditions of subject formation and tracing the turn against those conditions for the subject—and its perspective— to emerge. (*PLP* 29)

Butler, for the most part, suspends the "I" in her account of the subject in *The Psychic Life of Power. Giving an Account of Oneself*, however, continually enters this double process, repeatedly returning to the "I," and, over the course of those repetitions, gives the effect of the subject's inability to recover its conditions of emergence, despite its best theoretical efforts.

For example, in this paragraph, Butler re-articulates her defense of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, arguing that the performance of blundering subjectivity effectively undermines the posture at the narrative's close of full consciousness or absolute knowledge—which in the first chapter I understood as Butler's hopeful reading of the *Phenomenology*, the ambivalent scene where her investment in parodic power emerges. As in *Subjects of Desire*, Butler reads Hegel's relation to the other as "ecstatic" rather than cannibalizing:

> The Hegelian other is always found outside; at least, it is first found outside and only later recognized to be constitutive of the subject. This has led some critics to conclude that the Hegelian subject effects a wholesale assimilation of what is external into a set of features internal to itself, that its characteristic gesture is one of *appropriation* and its style that of imperialism [emphasis in original]. Other readings of Hegel, however, insist that the relation to the other is ecstatic, that the "I" repeatedly finds itself outside itself, and that nothing can put an end to the repeated upsurge of this exteriority that is, paradoxically, *my own. I am, as it were, always other to myself, and there is no final moment in which my return to myself takes place*" (*GA* 27; emphasis added)

She theorizes identification as the mark of alterity, and also begins to explain the muddling of narrative viewpoints. The predicated subjects of Butler's sentences progress from "the Hegelian other" and "the Hegelian subject," then to "the 'I'" as a theoretical place-holder, and then to just "I." Indeed, the third sentence here,

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beginning "Other readings of Hegel," contains an incorrect possessive pronoun, "*my* own" instead of "*its* own," at the sentence's end. Butler at once posits the Hegelian impossibility of the "return to myself," and also stages the process of discovering the other as a structural feature of the "I" when she returns to first person: "I am, as it were, always other to myself." This paragraph stages Butler's account of herself as constituted by an ecstatic relation to this theoretical model, "the I," which she also identifies with *directly*. And, to think more broadly in terms of Butler's corpus, this paragraph calls up another key subtext in its attempt to advance the meaning of Hegel as "ecstatic" rather than "cannibalizing," which I considered in Chapter 1 as a tense, contradictory movement. Further, the reader who knows *Subjects of Desire* will notice that she refuses a direct identification with that reading of Hegel at the beginning of the third sentence; she perhaps should say "my reading of Hegel," but instead says "other readings of Hegel" and lists in a note the works of Nathan Rotenstreich, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Catherine Malabou.

Despite the rigor of Butler's acts of reflexivity, the myriad of subtexts here fracture this account in self-opacity. However, the ethical momentum in Butler's text begins with self-opacity, written as a critical dynamic between "the I" and "I" as an opening up to "you." That is, Butler's voice in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, marked by frequent first-person narration, speaks from a place of internal contradiction in address to the same in the other. This work may come off as narrowly-conceived from the start if, in cultural criticism, philosophy, and political theory, "the *I* is unseemly" or decadent (Cavarero 90; qtd. in Butler 32). The demand to articulate

collective projects, especially for writers in positions of power and privilege, is

rightfully acute. However, questions of the self and subject do not necessarily emerge

at the *expense* of an imagined collectivity, however local or global. Butler begins to

address this problem through Cavarero's analysis of the politics of pronoun use in

social theory in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*: "Many revolutionary

movements (which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood)

seem to share linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The *we* is

always positive, the plural *you* is a possible ally, the *they* has the face of an

antagonist, the *I* is unseemly, and the *you* is, of course, superfluous" (Cavarero 90-91;

emphasis in original). Butler imports from Cavarero the importance of considering

dyadic encounters. As in Levinas's focus on the face-to-face-encounter, if moral

problems and questions emerge "mainly through proximate and living exchanges"

(*Giving an Account of Oneself* 30) between a singular "I" and a singular "you," then

"the problem of singularity might provide a starting point for understanding the

specific occasions of address ... in a living morality"(30). With Cavarero, Butler

wants to avoid the Hegelian progression from the dyadic encounter (between "I" and

this, between "I" and "you," between "master" and "slave") to a universalizing theory

of social recognition, and instead wants to theorize the social via Levinasian notions

of *singularity* and *exposure* that characterize the dyadic encounter, but without

reinstalling the illusion that ecstatic identification is exempt from the dynamic of

ethical violence.

The dynamic that Butler amplifies and encourages in *Giving an Account of Oneself* plays out in the book *Conversations with Judith Butler: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life* (2008). Produced as a transcript of a symposium at the University of Western Sydney (June 2005), "A lived history of the thought of Judith Butler," this is a compilation of essays given dialogically between Butler and a group of scholars from a range of disciplines (cultural geography, education, gender and feminist studies, narrative therapies and art psychotherapy, philosophy, psychology, rhetoric and cultural studies, sociology, and theater and dance).[65] The first section of this volume is Butler's essay "An Account of Oneself," a shortened version of her book's first chapter. Interestingly, the new summary she writes as this version's conclusion is composed entirely in first person and in the interrogative, where she repeats the questions: "If I find that, despite my best efforts a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable, is this ethical failure? ... Is there in this affirmation of partial transparency a possibility for acknowledging a relationality that binds me more deeply to language and to the other than I previously knew?" (37). Interwoven with "Conversations" with Butler on the essays as they unfold, the book

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[65] Conceived as an "interface" (Davies xiii), the book is structured in the insistence on the dynamic connectivities between Butler's work and other fields of study, particularly in terms of pedagogy and hospitality. For example, David McInnes grafts Butler's notions of gender melancholia, ethical violence, and the value of incoherence onto situations of multiple, unequal masculinities in the context of all-boys schools; Affrica Taylor discusses kindergarten and the child's imagination as a space to encourage "an ethics of open belonging" through scenarios and embodied enactments of play and fantasy (215); Linnell Secomb investigates the Australian government's constructions of "the refugee," encouraging the possibility of proliferating more humane constructions based in Butler's speech act theory; and Susanne Gannon and Sue Saltmarsh explore the writings of Australian refugees for a discourse of "mutual particularity and vulnerability" in the encounter between citizens and refugees (166).

gives the effect of an analytic space conditioned but not wholly determined by Butler's writings.

Although this Butler-based symposium may strike us as perhaps idyllic and heavy-handed in its organization, it effectively stages the momentum of Butler's essay "An Account of Oneself," placed at the beginning of the text, and initiating a constellation of reciprocal critical relations. However, I would like to draw out a tension between the editor's conception of this dialogic space and Butler's own framing words in "Conversation with Judith Butler I." In the "Introduction," Bronwyn Davies writes that "we undertook this project in order to trace the ways that Butler's thinking opens up a certain freedom, and a space in which the repetition of old thought is no longer necessary or inevitable" (Davies xiii). In the first of these "Conversations," Davies begins by asking Butler, referring to the latter's theory of "the structure of address" in *Precarious Life*, "We have you here, captive ... greeting you *as Judith Butler*... can you tell us how it is to be you sitting there, face to face with us ...?" (1). Meant to grant Butler her singularity and alterity within this scene of address, the question garners from Butler what I read as an unforeseen response, one that highlights the *unfreedom* of her speech as a caveat, apology, even a warning: "I'm [*sic*], of course, informed by philosophy; I was drawn to philosophy as a very young person ... So my immediate concern is how I both honour my own language— my own way of working—and at the same time, find out what the sites of intersection might be with each of you" (2). In the same conversation, she answers Fiona Jenkins's question about the regulation of grief post 9/11 by reference to Plato's

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Republic and Sophocles's *Antigone,* in which a strong polity seems to depend

partially on the induced restraint of grief (6, 7); later, she explains the political fantasy

of the invulnerable body by way of Freud's account of the bodily ego (12); her essay

"An Account of Oneself" focuses on revitalizing Adorno, Arendt, and Foucault; and

she introduces the fourth conversation through Benveniste, Hegel, Laplanche,

Blanchot, Levinas, and Derrida (187-190). Contrary to Davies's emphasis on the

potential for "a certain freedom" from "the repetition of old thought," Butler's speech

and responses abound with philosophical models and concepts that she at once

revitalizes and reinstates.

Relating this tension back to my project's larger purpose, I read in Davies's

introduction a desire for the emancipatory in Butler, and an idealization of Butler's

thinking as it "opens up a certain freedom." My sense instead, as I have argued, is

that Butler's emphasis on "the unfreedom at the heart of our relations" overshadows

the emancipatory and the subversive in her work, and offers a better account of

problems of legibility (*GA* 91). To illustrate, I want to turn to the first paragraph of

"Responsibility," the final chapter of *Giving an Account of Oneself.* After posing the

question of "the very meaning of responsibility" in terms of "the basis of [our]

limitations" (83), she poses a universal and Kantian social theory of responsibility,

and also confounds that universalizing gesture through a shift in narrative point of

view:

> to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-
> understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition
> for the subject but as the predicament of the human community. I am
> not altogether out of the loop of the Enlightenment if I say, as I do,

> that reason's limit is the sign of our humanity. It might even be a
> legacy of Kant to say so. *My account of myself breaks down*, and
> surely for a reason, but that does not mean I can supply all the
> reasons that would make my account whole. Reasons course through
> me that I cannot fully recuperate, that remain enigmatic, that abide
> with me as my own familiar alterity, my own private, or not so
> private, opacity. (83-4; emphasis added)

I add emphasis to highlight the point at which her account "breaks down," marked by

a shift to the first person, because she indeed feels humiliated to find herself

'speaking Kant.' I believe this concession is a response to Pheng Cheah, who, in his

review "Mattering" (1999) charges Butler's political morality with "Neo-Kantianism"

(121). Specifically, he takes her faith in democratic acts of contestation, recognition,

and revision as the inflection of the liberal, western self as the ground and measure of

judgment and critique (121). Instead of insisting that Cheah's charge is incorrect, she

evokes the operation here, using herself as an example, of unexamined legacies that

she perhaps would prefer to be critical of, but may finally not be able to struggle out

from. The posturing and mimicry implied in the conditional, "if I say ... reason's

limit is the sign of our humanity," is made sincere by the concession, "as I do." I read

this concession as a kind of critical maturity that invites me to reflect on my

complicity in "the loop[s]" that I am caught up in, bringing the focus back to a dyadic

encounter between me and Judith Butler, and yet also, in flaunting her self-opacity,

offers an unKantian notion of responsibility based in the subject *ungrounded* from the

start rather than one as originally, eventually, or ideally coherent.

Butler's self-referential remarks on Enlightenment loops arrive at the

beginning of *Giving an Account of Oneself*'s final chapter, "Responsibility," where

she theorizes "the relation to the self [as] a social and public relation" (114). Drawing

on Foucault's discussions of the historicized subject, she writes that "if one is

speaking … then one is also exhibiting, in the very speech that one uses, the logos by

which one lives" (126). In these passages, she reads a 1983 interview with Foucault in

which he discusses the philosophical ideal of the "transhistorical subject."[66]

Interpreting the "the logos" Foucault exhibits in his answers, she focuses on his

response to the question of why he turned to Nietzsche in order to think through the

historicity of the subject. Foucault gives two answers, initially saying that "[he]read

Nietzsche by chance" and then later that he read Nietzsche because of Bataille and

Blanchot (Foucault, "Critical Theory and Intellectual History" 114, 115). To Butler,

Foucault is trying to express that he does not exactly know why he turned to

Nietzsche. That is to say, in these oblique answers, he is refusing to give a full

account of the conditions of this alliance. She writes that

> when Foucault tries to give an account of why he read Nietzsche and
> says that he does not know, he is showing us, by his very confession of
> ignorance, that the subject cannot fully furnish the grounds for its own
> emergence. The account he gives of himself reveals that he does not
> know all the reasons that operated on him, in him, during that time … .
> Thus he is giving an account of himself as someone who is … not a
> founding subject but rather a subject in history. (*GA* 116-117)

From here, Butler emphasizes that in Foucault, "a mode of reflexivity is stylized and

maintained as a social and ethical practice" that "mak[es] the self appear for another"

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[66] Butler cites the interview "How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?"
(1983), noting that the transcript for this interview was published in several
languages, in several places, and under several titles (*GA* 145n5). I cite this same
transcript (translated by John Huston) as it appears in the volume *Critique and
Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (1994) with the title "Critical and
Intellectual History."

in its radical historicity (114, 113). What's interesting is that, if we compare Butler's interpretation to the interview she cites, Foucault seems to be saying something else with his answer: "I said earlier that I wondered why I had read Nietzsche. *But I know very well.* I read him because of Bataille, and Bataille because of Blanchot" (115; emphasis added). Although Foucault's work generally hinges on the radically historicized subject, and therefore Butler is accurate to draw on his work to think through that posture, Foucault's remark in this particular interview appears to figure the "knowing" rather than the "self-opaque" subject that Butler wants to advance: "I know very well (why I had read Nietzsche)." Indeed, in this same interview Foucault makes the strategic statement of critical insubordination that I quote in my introduction: "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist, and I have never been a structuralist" (114). As I argued, this refusal of paradigmatic alliances runs directly at odds with the kinds of statements Butler seeks to make. Because of this crucial elision in her reading of Foucault's interview, my sense is that Butler's discussion is not really, or not only, about this fleeting moment in Foucault at all; rather, Butler is trying to theorize the impetus behind *her own* postures in *Giving an Account of Oneself.* This misinterpretation, which to some might seem like a result of selective, or even dishonest, reading, corroborates Butler's understanding of self in its ecstatic relation to others; through a caricature and idealization of Foucault, Butler advances the ethical practice of posturing in self-opacity, the central thesis of *Giving an Account of Oneself*'s final chapter, as though that notion came to her through another.

The posture of "Kantianism" that opens her chapter serves as a better example of what she means by Foucault's "subject in history." And if that posture in "Enlightenment loops" is a response to Cheah's critique in *Diacritics*, as I believe it is, then she is not saying, "a Kantian notion—that is not what I meant to inscribe." She is saying instead that it may very well be redolent of Kant, but the triumph of locating that trace bespeaks the norm of a coherent, self-same positionality, unfettered from unconscious debts, and possessing the capacity for un-desirous acts of reading and writing. Butler privileges self-opacity because critical positions *always* have subtexts and contexts that the narrative does not fully articulate or analyze, where their commitments comes from, what they serve or might serve, and how the narrative will come to mean something to *you*, something perhaps quite different from what was intended.

If we highlight Butler's un-transparent, enigmatic ethics as exemplary rather than programmatic, they are legible in terms of the energy they give to a relation of ethical reflexivity: "I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves" (42). To be sure, the acknowledgement encouraged here is not the terminus of the critique. As she writes, "to acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency" (42). Rather, the transformational power is the impetus or capacity for becoming responsible for that unpredictability: as we move to criticize the other for precisely that opacity, we should become aware that our own arguments affirm paradigms that

we cannot fully assimilate, that we are motivated in ways that remain unavailable to

us, and that our work forms precedents that will be taken up for purposes we never

intended.[67]

Reading Butler

Giving an Account of Oneself, as Butler's ostensibly belated turn to ethics,

gathers together the lessons of *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power*.

Butler ritually and systematically implicates herself in the problems she is attempting

to think through, here figured in the explicit title, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. At

the same time, Butler's incorporation of Levinas, coupled with, I believe, her

increasing fame and influence, have altered her work in tangible ways, and sharpened

a wary, reflexive focus on the processes of critical violence, specifically in terms of

the demands for coherence and for intention-based accounts of the meaning of one's

work. Although *Giving an Account of Oneself* conducts stylized acts of recitation,

repeating theorizations of the subject through the first person, "I am," the Butler of

Giving an Account of Oneself strikes me as much less enchanted with the powers of

irony and subversion, and more concerned with the contingencies of reading.

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[67] Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* appears to draw on Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999). Although an explicit reference to Spivak is absent in Butler's book, Spivak advocates precisely this kind of reflexivity to counter the operations of "epistemic violence" (267). Focusing specifically on imperialism and subaltern subjectivities, Spivak conceptualizes epistemic violence as the process through which knowledge regulates and produces identities and bodies, marking up those bodies physically by force or violence (266-277). Anticipating *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Spivak calls for "an awareness of the itinerary of … one's own critique, a vigilance precisely against too great a claim to transparency" (281).

In "The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading," John Guillory analyzes the gap presumed between the political domain on the one hand, and practices of reading and writing on the other, as itself a "political fantasy" that conceals the most important intervention of the academic humanities (44): "However much we may hope to produce specifically political effects, or to 'change the world' in a specified political sense, any and every effect we have in the world must be achieved through a practice of reading" (31). Such an analysis is fruitful for justifying Butler's ritualized and self-conscious acts of reading as expressly ethical operations without the need to connect them to, and posit, a separate realm outside of issues of textuality where intervention must be instituted. Butler's particular style of reflexivity in her readings Hegel, Freud, Foucault, and Levinas meets Guillory's stipulation that "the ethical must be understood in the context of a reflection upon this practice [of reading]" (30). Guillory goes on to map the material differences between two broadly distinguished practices, "professional" and "lay" reading, and argues that *these* are the gaps and differences that we must negotiate and bridge as teachers and researchers in the humanities. However, as his study of the material practice of book-reading suggests, Guillory might be over-determining, and underestimating, what "the ethical practice of reading" could mean. In light of Butler's engagement with Levinasian theory in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, I am suggesting a broader valence for the ethical practice of reading: as the reflexive apprehension of subjects of desire and the responsive navigation of that relation.

CONCLUSION

Towards the Specificity of the Response

Interpreting Butler's writings themselves as active processes of predication,

incorporation, and recitation, I have argued that Butler's style of writing is crucially

related to her ethics and politics. With a sustained focus on the architecture of her

texts, as well as research into the specific critical paradigms she engages, I explored

the tense dynamic between revision and reinstatement that characterizes Butler's

rhetoric, showing how that dynamic generates an effective and gradually expansive

exploration of the limits of intentionality. This extended examination of the

structure—and the textures—of Butler's writing was initially inspired by Salih's

"Judith Butler and the Ethics of Difficulty," and by essays in Culler and Lamb's

volume *Just Being Difficult*, both of which ask us to consider that Butler is *doing*

something with her prose. In order to think through the conflicted patterns in Butler's

rhetoric, I looked to Heather Love's short review "Dwelling in Ambivalence," which

invites us to be interested in, rather than uneasy about, some of the paradoxes and

conflicting desires internal to Butler's ideas. I have responded to these critical

invitations by demonstrating that Butler's engagements with Hegelian, Freudian, Foucauldian, and Levinasian modes of organizing the world, where they are revisionary and where they are reinstative, have pedagogical and ethical imports that are perhaps sidestepped in the effort to value her writing as subversive. As a contribution to the ongoing effort to interpret Butler, this project hopes to move discussions of Butler's style past the question of subversion, and to direct our diagnoses of Butler's "limitations" towards a more nuanced understanding of her pedagogy. At the same time, I have charted Butler's evolving grasp of the problem of subversive intentions. I began with Butler's idealization of irony and textual subversion in *Subjects of Desire*, then considered the inescapable ambivalence and conflicted intentions at the heart of *The Psychic Life of Power*, and finally unpacked Butler's decidedly cautious view of how texts "work" at the limits of the author's intentions, the author who is yet accountable for that "work."

My emphasis on the tense relation between her critical autonomy and her critical subjection—to Hegel, Foucault, Freud, and Levinas—has identified a problem at the very heart of Butler's corpus overall. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender identifications accrue through scripted practices of impersonation and approximation that seek the effect of, rather than emanate from, "internal coherence" (23). Having explored Butler's writing as patterned practices of approximation, I want to highlight the arguments in my chapters that, together, point towards the effect of incoherence that Butler's writing achieves, and also to reflect on the process of reading Butler, and on the process of reading criticism and cultural theory generally.

In Chapter 1, I developed a reading of how Hegel's legacy lives on in Butler's work as the investment in the critical powers of irony and reflexivity, and in the capacity of language to convey the limits of ethical self-reflection, paradoxically, by flaunting them in "the dramatization of desire" (4). Looking to the institutional contexts that inform her 1987 book, I framed *Subjects of Desire* as the anxious struggle of a Hegelian student desiring alliance with an anti-Hegelian school in Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, suggesting that "Butler's Hegel," an ironic artist rather than a sincere idealist, was born of this conflict of alliance. I also connected her investment in the ironic Hegel to an increasing interest in the subversive power of drag as a parody of gender. Tracing these commitments that underlie *Subjects of Desire*, I drew out an important contradiction in Butler's first book, between her emphasis on the contingencies of reading the *Phenomenology*, a text that has generated interpretations that contradict one another in crucial ways, and her momentary references to Hegel's intentions, used in the service of advancing and defending her reading against the anti-Hegelians. To me, any "imagined satisfaction" of finding the disintegration of Butler "the philosopher" should be forestalled by the text's overall lessons, which ask us to be interested in the engine of desire, especially where it appears as the formation of identity through negation and exclusion, as the implicit assertion of one's own transparency through pointing out the self-opacity of another. To diagnose the errors of Butler's text—and to advocate a better handle on desire—seems less fruitful than to engage her incoherence with patience, and, perhaps most importantly, a reflection on one's own critical practices.

Focusing on the attachment to Hegel figured in *Subjects of Desire*, one that is partially strategic and critical, and partially passionate and stubborn, I argued that the organization of *Subjects of Desire* prefigures all of Butler's critical acts—as the performance of autonomy through, rather than against, a situation of subjection. In Chapter 2, I looked at Butler's imbrication of Foucault and psychoanalysis as a return to this ambivalent scene of agency. Specifically, I foregrounded Butler's pursuit of Foucault's theory of power within a psychoanalytic trajectory. Elaborating Butler's theory of "tropology"—which confounds the distinction between an inside of psychic life and an outside of power, culture, and social law—I pursued Butler's "turn" to Foucault at the beginning of *The Psychic Life of Power* as her entry into the "tropological quandary" of agency, and the book as a whole as a display of how psychic conflict is a matter of surface and symbol rather than inner depth. To contextualize Butler's book, I looked to some of the deconstructive legacies of Freud that prefigure Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, and also provided an analysis of Foucault's rejection of Freud and the repressive hypothesis, particularly in terms of the normative regulation of sexuality, which Butler recasts as a critique of coherent psychic identifications. Highlighting Butler's concern for understanding the vexed identifications of subjects judged to be lacking, incoherent, or failed, I explored some of the reasons that lead Butler to advocate, perhaps enigmatically, "incoherence" as a counter-value.

I framed *Subjects of Desire* and *The Psychic Life of Power* as significantly reflexive reviews on the conditions of Butler's own emergence as a thinker. In

Chapter 3, I worked towards drawing conclusions about Butler's reflexivity in terms

of an explicitly ethical practice; however, I also laboured to preserve Butler's

reluctance to embrace ethical formulae by reviewing her place in the queer critique of

normativity, and by delving into her conflicted relation to Emmanuel Levinas and the

turn to ethics. Focusing on the violence of an ethics that demands transparency and

coherence, I gleaned from Butler the crisis of responsibility in which "I" fail to

narrate the contexts that make my writing possible and meaningful, and in which "I"

cannot control how that writing will be read and regrafted. Making clear that *Giving*

an Account of Oneself represents Butler's response to some of the less favourable

readings and outcomes of her own writings, I emphasized that the problem of

intentions is indeed an ethical problem, and that the objection, "that is not what I

meant to do," amounts to the renunciation of responsibility. Focusing on the pronoun

shifts in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, which at times create grammatical

inconsistencies, I argued that Butler speaks from a place of internal contradiction and

unavailable desires, in address to the same in the other. In a statement that, to me,

paraphrases the introduction to *Subjects of Desire*, Butler writes that "suspending the

demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to

counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-

identity at all times and require others to do the same" (*Giving an Account of Oneself*

42). To me, the movement in Butler's corpus from *Subjects of Desire,* to *The Psychic*

Life of Power to *Giving an Account of Oneself* is marked by an increasing concern for

how to read ourselves and read others without the implicit criterion of transparency.

That is to say, to promote the idea of a criticism *without blindspots*, either implicitly or explicitly, is to make a moralizing gesture that we perhaps intend to be critical of, especially if we have any loyalties to the large-scale critiques of systematicity, rationality, and totalization of the last century.

Turning now to my own style of reading Butler, I feel my effort to foreground "incoherence" has proven to be fruitful, not only because Butler herself maintains a critical distance from the philosophical, psychic, and ethical norms of "coherence," but also because it helped me resolve some of the anomalies that emerged over the course of this research. How, I asked, can I offer an appreciative but also critical study of Butler's rhetoric, which seems at times deeply conflicted, even contradictory, without taking a diagnostic stance? In the early drafts of these chapters, I found myself cutting out paragraphs that led towards the ambivalence that now features as my central argument. My project, then, represents a process of learning how to read responsively rather than diagnostically, and to weigh the contexts and alliances that motivate me and others to write what we do.

Towards the end of the final chapter, I gestured toward an ethical practice of reading, as the reflexive apprehension of subjects of desire and the responsive navigation of that relation. To clarify this trajectory, I want to look briefly at Butler's refusal of the Civil Courage Prize on June 19, 2010, and to read this gesture, as well as some of the reactions to it, by considering the situation and context. The *Zivilcouragepreis* was created by Christopher Street Day (CSD) Pride, an organization that has been associated with anti-immigration campaigns in Germany,

with ideals of homonationalism,[68] and with discrimination against queer youths of

colour. In her "acceptance" speech in Berlin, Butler stated that "some of the

organizers explicitly made racist statements or did not dissociate themselves from

them. The host organizations refuse to understand antiracist politics as an essential

part of their work. Having said this, I must distance myself from this complicity with

racism, including anti-Muslim racism" ("I Must Distance Myself"). Strategically,

Butler offered a list of who she considers to be the rightful recipients of the award:

anti-racist queer groups that "really demonstrate courage," Gays and Lesbians from

Turkey (GLADT), Lesbian Migrants and Black Lesbians (LesMigraS), SUSPECT,

and ReachOut, all queer groups expressly engaged in fighting against violence and

racism. It should be noted that, after she was announced as the recepient, in the days

leading up to the ceremony Butler was pressured transnational queer organizations,

activists, and academics to refuse the award as a protest against CSD's complicity in

right-wing, anti-immigration politics; Butler was therefore representing, and

responding to, a widespread alarm and cannot be considered the sole "author" of this

refusal. To me, her gesture at the podium in Berlin echoes the movement she makes

in *Gender Trouble*, in which she criticized, and distanced herself from, certain kinds

of American feminism for mobilizing a politics of exclusion under the guise of

democratic liberation; particularly, Butler reviews twentieth-century critiques of

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[68]In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Jasbir Puar defines homonationalism as "the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary" (2). Focused on discourses of American homosexual identity based in "white ascendancy," Puar analyses the sanctioning and propogation of a national homosexual subject, and the relation between homonationalism and the production of "terrorist" bodies (2).

feminine identity in the service of showing "feminism" to be *already* divided, multiple, and internally conflicted. That is, the 2010 refusal of the Civil Courage Prize was an act of dis-alliance that aimed to wrench open, and dissolve, an identity-based solidarity formed in violence and exclusion.

In the ensuing weeks, Butler's speech at Berlin Pride was discussed in numerous international web forums and blogs. Her refusal inspired triumph and celebration, but also effectively re-energized discussions about the persistence of racism and xenophobia in organizations that are considered to be progressive. African-American activist Angela Davis, referring to decades of micro- and large-scale struggles against sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism, observes that Butler's act should remind us that "each time we win a significant victory it requires us to revisit the whole terrain of struggle" ("Angela Davis on Judith Butler's Refusal"). In other words, this event should unsettle and mobilize rather than satisfy us. With the same ambivalence, it is important to point out that, while Butler's name found its way into news releases about the award all over the world that weekend, much of the coverage focused on documenting Butler's biography and research rather than the work of the five groups to which Butler had extended the award to in an attempt to empower their projects. Indeed, these elisions and the issue of Butler's fame and privilege—which undoubtedly made her refusal a powerful act to begin with—have been remarked upon in numerous responses to the event. Jasbir Puar, the author of *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, reflects on Butler's acts in the essay "Celebrating Refusal: The Complexities of Saying No."

Beginning, as the title suggests, by lauding Butler for her speech in Berlin, Puar goes

on to say that, "unfortunately, media portrayal in this instance only extends the

structural inequities of representation by omitting mention of the groups that Butler

hails," and also that, since Judith Butler is an unequivocally empowered queer

subject, "there is a danger that the structural positionings of privilege may rearticulate

themselves" ("Celebrating Refusal"). In the press statement by SUSPECT on June

20th, the collective writes: "we are *delighted* that a renowned theorist has used her

celebrity status to honour queer of colour critiques against racism, war, borders,

police violence and apartheid," and then add, "*sadly* this is happening once again, for

the people of colour organizations who according to Butler should have deserved the

award more than her are not mentioned once in the press reports to date" ("Judith

Butler Refuses Berlin Pride Civil Courage Prize 2010"; emphasis added). In my view,

Davis, Puar, and SUSPECT together offer an important response: to support, even

celebrate, Butler's refusal as a meaningful act of resistance and representation, and

yet also to share the worry, frustration, and inconsolability that led her to pass the

award in the first place.

Pauline Park, a transgender activist based in New York City, shows obvious

frustration, even rage, about the difficult issues of privilege surrounding Butler's

speech at Berlin. In "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Famous Queer Scholar Refuses

Prize; Keeps

Salary, Named Chair," Park rightfully observes that that "the speech act represented

by [Butler's] June 19 speech could have precisely the opposite effect that it was

ostensibly intended to have." This statement sounds to me like a paraphrase of some

of Butler's most important reflections on the problem of subversive speech acts. Yet,

despite this connection, the blog overall can be described as an expression of hate for

Judith Butler, calling her speech at Berlin an "outrageous [act] of ruthless self-

promotion," and using Butler as an example of "the Ugly American ... [who]

appropriates a position of global sovereignty wherever s/he goes, unaware of the

structures of power that enable him/her to do so." Obviously, Park harbours an acute

concern for the power of white, American public figures on the global stage, and also

a wariness of the "armchair activis[m]" of academics, that fall hard on Butler here. In

the process, however, Park offers only a partial account of Butler's subject position

and of her work. For instance, Park seems to say that Butler's current position as a

famous scholar entails that the thinker has never faced a situation of discrimination,

and that Butler refuses to reflect on the institutional conditions that enable her as an

agent:

> Butler is a privileged white American academic theorist who used her
> position of privilege and power to appropriate the position of the
> person of color, and that is a kind of racial politics that strikes me as
> false. ... [T]here is not an iota of recognition on Butler's part of how
> she got to where she is in part because of her white-skin privilege.
> Nor is there any recognition of the enormous institutional privilege and
> power she wields. ("Mirror, Mirror on the Wall")

I think it is fair to say, as a response to Park, that Butler has been and continues to be

almost principally engaged in reviewing the conditions of her agency, and also that

she is a liminal—Jewish and queer—figure of power whose fame has come from her

ongoing reflections on the difficulty of representation, and on the well-intentioned, but often risky, movement to extend visibility to the margins.

Let me conclude by saying that although Park's portrayal of Butler and her work is incomplete, and, to me, unfair, Park's motivating concerns—about white American privilege, the power dynamics of the global stage, and the appropriation of anti-racist politics to egregious ends—should motivate and concern us as well. That is, Park speaks from a position of warranted outrage, and her partial account of Butler should not lead me to discredit those worries, despite my own frustration that tempts to me reject Park altogether in Butler's defense. That is to say, as I move to judge Park's self-opacity, I should consider my own impassioned, perhaps stubborn, attachment to Butler, and work towards a critical horizon where I am "precluded from revenge" in order to develop a response to Park's writing in its specificity and its historicity (*GA* 91).

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams looks to the history of the meaning of "criticism" to caution against the general sense that criticism is equated with "fault-finding," or "the presumption of judgment as the predominant or even natural response" (84). He advocates instead "the specificity of the response, which is not an abstract 'judgment' but… a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context" (86). Butler's work suggests that this practice, which must work towards a view of the "whole situation and context," is without end since the whole will never, finally, be available to any critic, and that this practice must also

include a sustained turn inward to contour the historical traces, commitments, and frays that motivate us to criticize others.

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