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# Embodied Political Performativity in *Excitable Speech* Butler's Psychoanalytic Revision of Historicism

*Molly Anne Rothenberg*

THE CRITICAL commentary on Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* focuses primarily on her use of speech-act theory for political purposes. In this literature, Butler is congratulated for her 'brilliantly nuanced analysis of language as action' and criticized for offering both a faulty version of speech-act theory and an oversimplified version of political agency.<sup>1</sup> Even supporters reject the way she 'valorizes the linguistic act of resignification per se as inherently subversive' (McNay, 1999: 181). Yet Butler draws on other theoretical resources to support her claims for political agency. Admitting the limitations of Austin's (1962) work for her purposes, she introduces an extended supplement to her linguistically based performative theory in *Excitable Speech*: a discussion of embodied subjectivity presented in ways never before instanced in her work. That is, in this text, she continues to use speech-act theory articulated with Derridean iterability (her usual practice) to ground performativity, while presenting a version of embodiment newly derived from psychoanalysis to establish the political efficacy of the subject. She treats this psychoanalytic dimension as animating her entire argument in the volume. Nonetheless, her turn to psychoanalysis has gone unexamined in the scholarship on *Excitable Speech*, so that to date we have no evaluation of its contribution to performativity or political agency.<sup>2</sup>

The complicated argumentative structure of *Excitable Speech* merits close attention. In this article, I closely follow the rhetorical and logical pathways Butler traces in her efforts to connect historicism, deconstruction

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and psychoanalysis. Because she developed the theoretical apparatus displayed in the introduction and the final chapter only after publishing two of the essays elsewhere, my own argument primarily engages these chapters, in which she lays out her most sophisticated discussions of political agency and proposes her new theory of a non-linguistic, embodied political performative. Despite her stated reservations about, and revisions of, psychoanalytic theory in earlier work, Butler explicitly relies on psychoanalysis to remedy the deficiencies of speech-act theory and historicism in *Excitable Speech*.<sup>3</sup> My purpose here is to provide an evaluation of her revision that moves beyond the criticisms of psychoanalysis currently on offer in historicism and feminist theory to assess the contributions psychoanalysis makes to theorizing a politically effective subject of history.

### **The Limits of Linguistic Performativity**

In the final chapter of *Excitable Speech*, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’, Butler lays out her argument against censorship as a prelude to theorizing the embodied performative. She interrogates the meaning of the term ‘censorship’ to uncover not only its effects – censorship is constitutive as well as prohibitive – but also its status as performativity: how does censorship achieve its effects in the social field and how does political agency emerge in relation to it? Focusing on hate speech, she opposes censorship on the grounds that it is based on the incorrect view that injurious speech does not also include the possibility of its own subversion. In what is by now her characteristic deployment of Derridean iterability, she reasons that the effects of speech can exceed the context of its utterance – speech is ‘excitable’ – and so any given speech act has the performative power to institute as well as to close off meanings. Concerned that censorship will limit the means by which the injured can redress their wrongs through the *re-appropriation* of the very speech that harmed them, Butler forges an argument for the performative as politically relevant agency. In pursuit of that goal, she attempts to transcend the limitations of linguistic performativity while retaining its advantages.

As her readers well know, the performative theorized by J.L. Austin (1962) sits at the heart of Butler’s work, and *Excitable Speech* continues her long-standing love affair with speech-act theory. Yet, in relying on Austin’s formulations, she remains vulnerable to her critics’ charges both that her theory speaks only to individual rather than social transformation and that she is ignoring the social embeddedness of speech acts, the power relations that constitute and enable them.<sup>4</sup> Under pressure to revise Austin, she sees in ‘[t]he disjuncture between utterance and meaning . . . the condition of possibility for revising the performative’ (1997: 87). Defining this disjuncture in both Austinian (‘infelicity’) and Derridean (‘iterability’) terms, she remarks that the fact ‘that performative utterances can go wrong, be misapplied or misinvoked, is essential to their proper functioning’ (1997: 151). When contemporary arguments for the censorship of hate speech, pornography and obscenity ignore this requirement, conceiving instead that speech

can act as conduct – which is to say that its intention is realized univocally in the effect on the addressee – they rely on a ‘phantasy of sovereign action . . . one that immediately does what it says’ (1997: 12). However, as we will see, despite having made this criticism, Butler goes on to garner support for this very ‘phantasy’ as she articulates the political valence of her theory.<sup>5</sup>

Although she admits that in the world of reality ‘the teleology of action . . . is disruptible by various kinds of infelicities’, she wants to sustain the distinction between ‘sovereign’ *illocutionary* acts and other *perlocutionary* acts that, in her view, are more susceptible to infelicity (1997: 12). In this respect, Butler foregoes the Derridean critique of Austin, which shows that such a distinction between illocution and perlocution is untenable. At first it looks as though Butler wants to retain the category of perlocutionary acts because such speech acts, she argues, are inherently ‘ungovernable’ and therefore acquire political pertinence, challenging and even destroying the sovereignty of an utterance, thanks to the iterability inherent in perlocution: ‘[t]he interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes’ (1997: 15). The iterable quality of speech acts thus can undermine the power of the ‘illocutionary’ performative to realize its intentions, enacting a non-voluntarist yet subversive form of agency:

I hope to make clear that by affirmative, I mean ‘opening up the possibility of agency,’ where agency is *not* the restoration of a sovereign autonomy in speech, a replication of conventional notions of mastery. (1997: 15, my emphasis)

But the appropriately cautious tone she strikes here with regard to the subversive potential of resignification frequently gets lost, as in her example of ‘the revaluation of terms such as “queer”’, which, she says, ‘suggest (sic) that speech can be “returned” to its speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its originary purposes, and perform a reversal of effects’ (1997: 14). In this case, and throughout the volume, Butler treats this ‘resignification’ as though it can have *predictable* effects, re-describing the contingent contextual appropriation of the speech act as if it had all the intentionalist force of an illocutionary act, a move that is strictly precluded by the theory of iterability. For example, she argues that ‘the word that wounds becomes an *instrument* of resistance in the redeployment that *destroys* the prior territory of its operation’ (1997: 163, my emphases). Or, to take another example, at times she urges ‘misappropriating the force of injurious language to counter its injurious operations’ (1997: 41). Yet to speak of ‘misappropriation’ is to imply that there are two kinds of appropriation, those that simply repeat (‘re-enact’) an original intention and those (‘misappropriations’, ‘expropriations’) that intentionally break with that origin: ‘the resignification of speech requires opening new contexts,

speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms' (1997: 41).

To make the transition from the 'possibility of agency' to political agency seem credible, she divides iterability's 'repetition with a difference' into discrete temporal moments, as though iterability means oscillating between sameness (repetition without slippage) at one moment and difference (resignification without normative re-inscription) at another.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to certain performances, she forgets about the slippage, the opening for re-interpretation that iterability confers on *every* repetition. As she describes it, iterability ceases to operate in the special case of performers who *intend* to appropriate the speech act for subversive purposes. Significantly, Butler reserves the power of such insurrectionary speech for those who have been the objects of injurious speech, the marginalized or abjected: 'agency is derived from injury, and injury countered through that very derivation' (1997: 41). For such specially empowered yet abjected subjects, the performative engagement with the convention is described as producing calculable effects (commensurate with the intention of the performer) upon a given social context.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, in the political parts of her exposition, iterability functions only *initially* to make it possible for the addressee to appropriate the original utterance. It then *ceases* to operate when the addressee brings about her subversive intentions through resignification. In fact, her final sentence – 'Insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to injurious language . . . a repetition in language that forces change' – indicates this excision of iterability's non-voluntarist function in two ways: 'insurrectionary speech' is speech that realizes its subversive intentions, and a repetition in language that 'forces change' is one that has somehow exercised sovereign autonomy (1997: 163). What she fails to respect in these formulations is that *all* signification is citational, working by *simultaneously and unpredictably* repeating and breaking with prior contexts (1997: 41). Iterability (as she sometimes acknowledges in her more tempered moments) does not confer on the speaker the sovereign power of opening or closing contexts, legitimating or de-legitimating meanings.

This unacknowledged gliding between a more cautious formulation and a full-blown claim for agency as control makes it possible for Butler to complain that her critics misread her when they charge her with voluntarism. Yet, to uphold the promise of her subtitle, she must and does argue for a theory of special performativity that re-inscribes sovereign action. Although she has disclaimed this voluntarist form of agency since charged with it by critics of *Gender Trouble* (1990), she nonetheless continues to resurrect it, along with its positional claims, as the political warrant of her theorizing about agency. To take just one example from *Excitable Speech*, but one that Butler emphasizes as the most telling, she attributes to Rosa Parks a freely chosen, unilateral and creative act of (previously unavailable) counter-performativity, the subversive political results of which devolve from Parks' purposes and her marginal status: 'she had no prior

authorization, [yet] she endowed a certain authority on the act, and began the insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy’ (1997: 147).<sup>8</sup> For all of her temperate reasoning about the impossibility of governing speech, then, Butler repeatedly returns to the more politically useful, if less theoretically valid, formulation of special performative agency.

Indeed, in order for her theory to have any political traction, she must advance this stronger version of agency. If agency is not the same as control, as she sometimes notes, then the possibility of a politically subversive or progressive action arises in every act but in an *ungovernable* way: relying on iterability offers no way to guarantee a politically positive outcome (1997: 8). Unless iterability can be applied selectively to acquire sovereign force when the intentions of the addressee of hate speech are politically subversive – that is, unless there is special performative agency – Butler’s argument loses its political force, as the 1980s debate over the political valence of iterability rehearsed *ad nauseam*. The theoretical import of iterability precludes precisely the type of politics for which Butler has become famous.<sup>9</sup>

Butler utilizes a number of strategies to maintain the distance between the parts of her theory that depend upon the weak form of ‘possible’ agency enabled by iterability and those that claim the strong form of political agency for special subjects. Chief among these strategies is her theory of the embodied performative, which retains the advantages of linguistic performativity but tries to render her invulnerable to criticisms of linguisticism, voluntarism and neglect of social determinants:

If agency is not derived from the sovereignty of the speaker, then the force of the speech act is not sovereign force. The ‘force’ of the speech act is, however incongruously, related to the body whose force is deflected and conveyed through speech. (1997: 39)

Butler here begins her investigation into the source of a speech that has a ‘sovereign force’ derived from the body rather than from language. What authorizes this move to the embodied speech act, what advantages does it have, and what challenges does it present for a theory of political agency?

### **The Performative Force of the Embodied Speech Act**

Responding to the problems the linguistic performative causes, Butler wonders how performative force could work to give her the political valence she needs. In a section of her final chapter entitled, appropriately enough, ‘Speech Acts Politically’, she asks ‘[i]n what does the “force” of the performative consist, and how can it be understood as part of politics?’ (1997: 141). She suggests that ‘[t]he performative needs to be rethought not only as an act that an official language-user wields in order to implement already authorized effects, but precisely as a social ritual’ (1997: 159). With this comment, she signals her project of bringing together historicist

constructivism with deconstruction and, ultimately, psychoanalysis into a theory of the embodied political performative, surveying three different explanations of performative force.

She draws first on a psychoanalytically inflected objection to Austin's linguistic formalism. Taking refuge from those who charge her with linguisticism, Butler makes use of Bourdieu's *habitus* – the embodied product of inculcated durable dispositions that operate unconsciously to make the subject's practices conform to institutional authority – to suggest that interpellation constitutes 'the social life of the body . . . discursively and socially at once' (1997: 155).<sup>10</sup> Thus, she gets her revision under way by retaining the linguistic performative as part of the subject's interpellation, while deploying Bourdieu's formulation that embodied practices channel and reproduce social authority.

Still, Butler remains dissatisfied with Bourdieu's emphasis on the determining function of social institutions because it avoids linguisticism 'at the expense of . . . transformability'. The *habitus* conforms to social power: only those who have the prior authorization given by their relation to social power will be able to work the performative 'social magic' that derives from and reproduces official authority (1997: 151, 156). From a political perspective, then, the Bourdieusian performative works to sustain rather than subvert the status quo.<sup>11</sup> She contrasts Bourdieu's notion that performative force comes from *outside* language with Derrida's position that performative force resides *inside* the very structurality of language itself: there is, he says:

. . . a certain conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act (locution) itself, all that might be summarized rapidly under the problematical rubric of 'the arbitrary nature of the sign'. . . . 'Ritual' is not a possible occurrence (*éventualité*), but rather *as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark. (Derrida cited in Butler, 1997: 149)<sup>12</sup>

Although Butler does not highlight the universal application of iterability to every utterance, she still references the Derridean critique in order to establish that performatives can liberate subjects from the conditions that have formed them: 'Derrida's formulation offers a way to think performativity in relation to transformation, to the break with prior contexts, with the possibility of inaugurating contexts yet to come' (1997: 151–2).<sup>13</sup>

Suddenly, at this point in her argument, Butler decides to reject both Bourdieu's theory of performative force derived from social authority, on the grounds of its political quietism, and Derrida's theory of performative force derived from the structure of language, on the grounds of its 'excessively formal interpretation of the performative' (1997: 151). Each lacks some component of the 'social iterability' she desires (1997: 150). She initially tries to resolve this problem by marrying Bourdieu with Derrida, arguing that interpellation functions by way of iteration – calling subjects into being, but never perfectly reproducing them, so that interpellation has to be

continually, iteratively, performed.<sup>14</sup> Bringing iterability together with the *habitus*, she reasons that if the subject is formed in and through continual social interpellation, then the very speech acts which interpellate the subject themselves must be limited (otherwise they would not need to be repeated), which opens a space for resistance and subversive agency. In order to make her case, Butler specifies the body as the site of resistance:

The body, however, is not simply the sedimentation of speech acts by which it has been constituted. If that constitution fails, a resistance meets interpellation at the moment it exerts its demand; then something exceeds the interpellation and this excess is lived as the outside of intelligibility. This becomes clear in the way the body rhetorically exceeds the speech act it also performs. This excess is what Bourdieu's account appears to miss or, perhaps, to suppress: the abiding incongruity of the speaking body, the way in which it exceeds its interpellation, and remains uncontained by any of its acts of speech. (1997: 155)

Leaving aside, for now, the question of how a body 'rhetorically exceeds the speech act it also performs' (and ignoring the unnecessary and unexceptionable claim that a body is more than its acts of speaking), we can see that here Butler is taking on the task of theorizing the embodied performative to demonstrate its resistant capacities.

In a characteristic logical chiasmus, Butler defines speech as having a bodily component – speech is produced by people with bodies – in order to make the more problematic argument that interpellating speech has corporeal effects – speech acts have such profound determinative effects that they can literally, corporeally, wound people: 'words enter the limbs . . . bend the spine . . . live and thrive in and as the flesh of the addressee' (1997: 159) This logic not only allows her to claim a certain agential force for speech acts but also an exceptional status for the body as that which is both vulnerable to the wounding force of hate speech and capable of escaping the intentions of those who seek to regulate the subject. In fact, for Butler, the speaking body, by virtue of its 'excessive' quality, can subvert and resist its interpellation in ways that the Bourdieusian bodily *habitus* cannot. We must follow Butler further in her thinking to understand the basis for this unexpected conclusion.

### **The Excessive, Expressive Body**

To set up this step in her new theory of embodied performativity, Butler turns to a psychoanalytic account of the bodily speech act, one which she had discussed in her introduction: 'the "force" of the speech act, as it was articulated by . . . Shoshana Felman, has everything to do with the status of speech as a bodily act' (1997: 152). She finds in Felman the psychoanalyst an argument against the exclusive focus on linguistics in Austinian (and, by her lights, Derridean) speech-act theory, an argument which helps her claim that speech acts have bodily consequences. Butler reads Felman as saying that 'the speech act is a bodily act, and . . . the "force" of the

performative is never fully separable from bodily force . . . the speech act [is] at once bodily and linguistic' (Butler, 1997: 141).

At this juncture in her final chapter, it would be reasonable to expect Butler to elaborate Felman's theory as providing the 'social iterability' missing in Bourdieu's and Derrida's accounts of performative force (1997: 150). She does not do so. But, in order to understand why Butler's argument for the embodied performative takes this turn, we have to follow it from its first appropriation of Felman in the introduction, 'On Linguistic Vulnerability'. There Butler references the psychoanalytic reading of Austinian speech-act theory in which Felman proposes that the speech act always exceeds its intended meaning thanks to unconscious motivations. In Felman's own words (words, by the way, that are not quoted in context in Butler's text):

. . . if the theory of the performance of the speaking body – of speech acts proper – lies in the realm of the performative, the theory of the scandal of this performance falls in the domain of psychoanalysis. The scandal consists in the fact that the act *cannot know what it is doing*, that the act (of language) subverts both consciousness and knowledge (of language). (Felman, 1983: 96)

To Butler this means that 'the body becomes a sign of unknowingness precisely because its actions are never fully consciously directed or volitional . . . that unknowing body marks the limit of intentionality in the speech act' (Butler, 1997: 10). Felman herself does not regard the body as a 'sign of unknowingness', but, to the extent that Butler is trying to capture the sense that intentionality is always disrupted, she is on the same track as Felman. Still, Felman seems an odd choice, for her point that all speech exceeds its intentions by virtue of unconscious determinants would seem antagonistic to Butler's goal of finding a performative force in the speaking body. So, in this introductory chapter, Butler adds a twist to the idea of the speaking body: people not only use their bodies to articulate speech but also to express intentions with gestures, even intentions that are unconsciously motivated. Using a threat as her example of a performative effect, Butler argues that

. . . a statement may be made that, on the basis of a grammatical analysis alone, appears to be no threat. But the threat emerges precisely through the act that the body performs in the speaking act. Or the threat emerges as the apparent effect of a performative act only to be rendered harmless through the bodily demeanor of the act . . . (1997: 10, 11)

In this analysis of the threat, she argues that the true significance of the speech act is guaranteed by what the speaker's body expresses non-verbally. Consonant as this account may be with a psychoanalytic (and Bourdieusian) conception of the unconscious, in the sense that 'body language' may reveal unconscious motivations unacknowledged in the speaker's words, Butler's

view here departs from psychoanalytic theory, and Felman's insight, in assuming that the body's language gives access directly to intentions while the spoken language does not. For Butler, speakers may not have access to their own unconscious motivations, but it seems that if the auditor is in doubt about what a speech act means, he can disambiguate the message by referencing the speaker's body. That is, in Butler's account, the body does not *exceed* the speaker's intentions; instead, it transparently *expresses* them, even if the speaker is 'unknowing' about what her true intentions are. The truth of the speaker's intentions is not to be found in her articulations but in her bodily significations. In this move, Butler completely (and without acknowledging doing so) contradicts Felman's criticism of Austinian intentionality by offering a theory of the embodied speech act that *re-instates* intentionality at the level of the body. The speaking body as sign of unintended expression becomes the body speaking its expressed intentions.<sup>15</sup>

Butler abruptly drops Felman's work at this point in the introduction and does not return to it until her final chapter, in which she stresses its foundational importance to her theory of the embodied performative. She briefly mentions Felman's notion that 'speech is not fully governed by intentions', but devotes her attention to the picture of the body as expressing its own intentions in a readily available way (1997: 155). She claims to find in Felman her warrant for the notion that the body provides the true gauge of the meaning of the speech act:

. . . the bearing of the body as rhetorical instrument of expression . . . makes plain the incongruous interrelatedness of body and speech to which Felman refers, the excess in speech that *must be read along with, and often against*, the propositional content of what is said. (1997: 152, my emphasis)

Here, again, the body ceases to stand for the exceeding or disrupting of intentionalized meaning, as Felman theorizes, to serve instead as the vehicle and guarantor of intentionality. The impossibility of securely recovering intentions turns into a demand – 'must be read along with, and often against' – that assumes their ready transparency.

Recall that Butler embarks on her discussion of the embodied performative in order to explain how speech powerful enough to interpellate (and harm) subjects can be resisted by those same subjects. If speech-act theory will not suffice, then a theory of a speaking body expressing intentions different from those inculcated during subject formation might. Butler attempts to create this theory by doubling the site of articulation for the same reason that she divides iterability into discrete temporal moments: it allows her to appear faithful to the theory's constraints while creating (unfounded) special exemptions. In this case, Butler applies the principles of disrupted intentionality and linguistic interpellation to the speaker while resuscitating readable intentionality and an interpellation-free zone for the special case of bodily gesture. Her argument runs like this: (1) subjects are interpellated through language, which even affects their bodily existence,

but (2) language is by nature excessive, so something escapes the interpellative intentions, and (3) bodies are the signs of that excess; (4) at the same time, bodies do not simply *stand for* the excess that disrupts intentionalized meaning but also *enact* that excess by escaping the determinations of interpellation (bodies are excessive to the intentions of other speakers), so (5) bodies themselves, not determined by interpellation, can articulate their own intentions (bodies are expressive of the intentions of their own speakers) in order to disrupt interpellative intentions (bodies are subversive). There are several weak links here, especially the slide from the body's 'exceeding' its own speaker's intentions to the body 'exceeding' society's 'intentions' to interpellate the subject. What is more, Butler never answers the question, if interpellation follows iterability, and therefore is always incomplete, how does the body escape interpellation while the mind does not? Why distinguish two sites of articulation, if interpellations act on both mind and body iteratively?

Recapping this logic allows us to see that Butler is playing word games with the concept of 'excess'. In some cases, the body's 'excessive' dimension simply refers to the fact that the body is not the same as language: the body is the instrument by which language is articulated. In some cases, the excess refers to a body language that reveals motivations other than those acknowledged by the person who is using that body to speak. In still other cases, the body somehow 'exceeds' the intentions of other speakers (who have their own bodies). Just as importantly, Butler's 'excess' is not Felman's. For Felman (and psychoanalysts), every signification (whether in articulated speech, written text or bodily gesture) produces and leans on an excess inherent to signification itself, an excess that makes it impossible for the subject's intentions to govern the reader's interpretation. For Butler, ultimately, the failure of intentionalized meaning only applies to spoken articulations, while the body escapes that stricture. The body is outside or 'excessive' to speech, yet its intentionalized meanings have no excessive dimension, for they are readable and recoverable. In the first case, excess is irreducible; in the second, it is not.

### **The Social Dimension of Performative Agency**

Butler's inversion of Felman's critique of Austinian intentionality answers directly to the crucial elision in her theory of performativity as agency, an elision apparent from the inception of her work. Having lamented others' failure to 'give an account of the power that such [offensive] words are said to exercise', she herself fails to expound with any rigor the *reason why* speech acts exceed their speaker's intentions (1997: 13). This reason has nothing to do with the body's ability to express unconscious motivation or to resist interpellation. Rather, speech acts exceed the intentions of the speaker because other people interpret them according to their own lights, in ways that are not predictable or governable in advance. By consistently sidestepping the role of the auditor in the 'exceeding of intentionality', Butler seeks to preserve for her theory of political agency the very

sovereign force that she has disallowed to the speakers of hate speech and would-be censors.<sup>16</sup> Because in all cases of signification, not only those that injure or marginalize, the auditor or reader has a role in the production of signification, Butler's pleading on behalf of special embodied performativity takes on an ironic cast. In essence, by failing to recognize the true status of the 'excess' in signification, Butler elides the very dimension of meaning that any theory with political ambitions must engage – the social dimension.

Butler employs iterability to acknowledge the limits to intentionality, but she mislocates these limits, finding them not in the audience's reception but rather in the *body*, which she misdescribes as being capable of its own sovereign speech, 'confounding the performative power of the threat' (1997: 12). In this way, she can use iterability to argue for the re-appropriation of a speech act, as we have seen, in a 'repetition that *forces* change', as though the person appropriating the speech – thanks to iterability – has the capacity to close off *her* auditor's ability to make that speech meaningful according to its own lights – as though the audience somehow can be prevented from making use of iterability (1997: 163, my emphasis).<sup>17</sup> In this scenario, in order for the repetition to force change, that is, in order for iterability to cease to operate, speaker and auditor must have either the same mind already, or the one must be capable of dominating the other's mental processes in some mysterious way. Whether Butler is arguing for such special cases of iterability or locating sovereign force in the body, she covertly relies on this invariance between the speaker's intentions and the audience's construals for the performative force she needs in her account of political agency. The perfect match between intender and auditor disposes of any excess and with it the social dimension of language.<sup>18</sup>

This theorizing of an excess that sticks to and flows from all signification (whether in speech or in bodily gesture) is the hallmark of a psychoanalytic approach. The excess is inescapable, irremediable and unsymbolizable: in Lacanian parlance, it subsists in the register of the Real. So, when Butler transforms Felman's insistence on the *inaccessibility* of the speaker's intentions into a guarantee for the *recovery* of the force of those intentions by 'reading' meanings, even those that are covert or unconscious, she uses the trappings and terminology of psychoanalysis but spectacularly fails to appreciate precisely what distinguishes psychoanalysis from historicism – the theorization of the dimension of excess inherent in every speech act.

### **Excess, Contingency and Subject Formation**

It is time to look more closely at this excess that is the condition of signification and the genesis of the subject in its social relation in order to show how Butler forfeits the value of psychoanalysis when she fails to comprehend excess. One way to think about this excess is to note that every statement includes an unspoken reference to its enunciative conditions: 'I am sad' includes 'I am saying that I am sad.' Of course, this second statement

also includes a reference to its own enunciation – ‘I am saying that I am saying that I am sad’ – and so on without end. Every statement always exceeds itself simply in virtue of being stated. Some surplus attends every utterance, but the characteristics of this surplus remain indefinite. ‘I am sad’ exceeds itself, and adding ‘I am saying that’ does not destroy but rather revitalizes the excess. When one person says ‘I am sad’ to another, this indeterminate excess emerges for the auditor as a question about intentions and meanings: ‘I know that you are saying that you are sad, but that doesn’t help me know why you are telling me that you are sad – what do you want from me?’ The question that is raised by all utterance is the (social) question of the relation between speaker and auditor: in effect, the auditor always wants to know – but can never know for sure – what the speaker wants from her by speaking. No amount of further speech will resolve the inherently indeterminate nature of this surplus, for every attempt to clarify, reassure, explain or exfoliate is haunted by the specter of the speaker’s desire, a desire that cannot be pinned down in language. The excess is both a function of and the constitutive factor in the social relation, a relation that is ineluctably marked by indeterminacy.

When Butler imagines circumstances in which the speaker’s desire can be disambiguated by reading the truth of bodily gestures, she phantasmizes that some special utterances do not generate this excess. Powerful purposes drive her: in this text as elsewhere, she proposes that society produces abjected subjects who, while apparently rendered powerless, nonetheless can at times bring about a change in their own status. Her commitment to this vision makes her touchy about any theoretical proposition that regards such subjects as victims (‘Those who argue that hate speech produces a “victim class” deny critical agency’ [1997: 41]). Having accepted the reasonable proposition that subjects are formed through language, she makes her theoretical mis-steps when she tries to figure out how to confer power on marginalized subjects by imagining that they can control the surplus attending all utterances. Time and again she gets tripped up by an inadequate conception of the source and role of signification in subject formation.

For a generation of theorists, Foucault’s description of the subject as a discursive effect has served as the exemplary model for the project of theorizing the relationship between the subject and language. In his formulation, discursive power is always everywhere creating subjects by a process of contestation and reformulation, working independently of the intentions of the ‘singular subject’. His elaboration of a non-prohibitive power leads Foucault to specify that every performance of power includes its own resistance. While the non-intentionalist and resistive dimensions of this theory suit Butler’s purposes, she worries that the Foucauldian model reduces the subject to a set of positive determinants supplied by discourse. Following the lead of psychoanalytic critics Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek, she argues ‘that the subject is not a unilateral effect of prior discourses, and that the process of subjectivation outlined by Foucault is in need of a

psychoanalytic rethinking’ (1993: 189). She seeks to establish a political opening in the historicist field of overdetermined positivities by noting that ‘any effort of discursive interpellation or constitution is subject to failure, haunted by contingency, to the extent that discourse invariably fails to totalize the social field’ (1993: 191–2). In her view, only psychoanalytic theory explains the failure of totalization in a way that accounts for the cause of a subject who is both determined by and to some extent free from external determination, a subject who embodies some contingency. By bringing contingency into the historicist conception of subject formation, Butler puts herself on the trail of a more adequate conception of the cause of the subject in its relation to signification, one that she derives explicitly from psychoanalysis.

This strong endorsement of psychoanalysis may come as a surprise to her followers, who tend to remember only Butler’s charges against psychoanalysis. Butler herself has not forgotten her past criticism that psychoanalysis is ahistorical, a charge she bases on her belief that psychoanalysis presents castration as a universal form of lack. So, in order to benefit from the psychoanalytic model of subjectification, she proposes in *Excitable Speech* a version of lack that can be historicized (1993: 202). She conceives of this lack in her final chapter in terms of *exclusion*, an exclusion that produces a realm of ‘unspeakability’ as the condition of the emergence and sustenance of the subject proper, but the ‘contents’ of which are determined historically. This account of subject formation supports her argument that censorship is the founding gesture for subjectivity:

Although the subject enters the normativity of language, the subject exists only as a grammatical fiction prior to that very entrance. Moreover, as Lacan and Lacanians have argued, that entrance into language comes at a price: the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable, that is, produce an unspeakability as the condition of subject formation. (1997: 135)

She finds that the Lacanian term ‘foreclosure’ best covers the operation of subjectification as she conceives it:

The psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis have distinguished the censorious act of repression from a preemptive operation of a norm, and offered the term ‘foreclosure’ as a way of designating preemptive action, one that is not performed by a subject but, rather, whose operation makes possible the formation of the subject. (1997: 138)

Citing the *OED* to define foreclosure as ‘to bar, exclude, shut out completely’, Butler goes on to explain how the subject born of foreclosure encounters the limits of speakability as the condition of its continued existence:

The condition for the subject’s survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally; thus, the ‘bar’ produces the threat

and defends against it at the same time. Such a primary foreclosure is approximated by those traumatic political occasions in which the subject who would speak is constrained precisely by the power that seeks to protect the subject from its own dissolution. . . . Acting one's place in language continues the subject's viability, where that viability is held in place by a threat both produced and defended against, the threat of a certain dissolution of the subject. If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question . . . (1997: 135–6)

Because this constitutive 'foreclosure does not take place once and for all', it must be 'repeated to reconsolidate its power and efficacy' (1997: 139). In this way, she imagines that the subject could appropriate speech, 'redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable' (1997: 139).

By this route, she also creates an analogy between her notion of an exclusion constitutive of subjectivity and the exclusion of people from the polity, arguing that the political act of appropriating the 'unspeakable' can lead to the political inclusion of dispossessed or marginalized people.<sup>19</sup> Here she explicitly proposes that the subject can access the realm excluded by foreclosure by 'speaking impossibly', or by 'redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable' (1997: 139). From her perspective, the politically motivated subject has to take the 'risk' of accessing this realm, even at the cost of being seen as something other than a subject. Butler's argument is nothing less than the claim that the subject can transform the very conditions of (its own and others') subject formation through special speech acts that control their own reception. What has been excluded can be included, the marginal can take center stage, and formerly unspeakable acts will have normative force: 'The appropriation of such norms to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the *insurrectionary* moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a *break* with that past' (1997: 159, my emphases).

### **Exclusion or Foreclosure?**

Wagering her own theory's political value on this exclusionary model of subject formation, Butler marshals resources from psychoanalysis to bolster her view that foreclosure founds the subject. She believes that the excluded element would dissolve the Symbolic (and the subject with it) if foreclosure were to fail and the 'unspeakable' be given a hearing. By casting foreclosure as the guarantor of symbolic and subjective integrity, she imagines that this excluded material remains a permanent, if historically specific, threat to the status quo – and hence a reservoir of politically subversive materials:

In the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis refer to foreclosure as a primordial rejection of that which remains outside of the symbolic universe of the subject . . . what is set outside or repudiated from the symbolic universe in question is precisely what binds that universe

together *through its exclusion*. . . . [They] argue that what is foreclosed is to be distinguished from what is repressed. . . . What is foreclosed . . . does not belong to the realm of neurosis, but to that of psychosis; indeed, its entry into the symbolic universe threatens psychosis, which is to say that its exclusion guarantees symbolic coherence. (1997: 180, n.17)

It is important to note that in her references to psychoanalysis in the final chapter of *Excitable Speech*, Butler is neither criticizing nor rewriting psychoanalytic theory: she is claiming to represent the theory adequately and to use it on its own terms. Yet if we look again at Butler's deployment of psychoanalytic theory here, unfortunately, we will find that her construal could not be further from the position she purports to be summarizing. Contrary to her interpretation, psychoanalytic theory does not propose that subjects are formed by foreclosure nor that foreclosure prevents psychosis.

The definition for foreclosure (*forclusion du Nom-du-Père*) offered by Laplanche and Pontalis is:

. . . [a] term introduced by Jacques Lacan denoting a specific mechanism felt to lie at the origin of the psychotic phenomenon and to consist in a primordial expulsion of a fundamental 'signifier' (e.g. the phallus as signifier of the castration complex) from the subject's symbolic universe. (1993: 166)

In Lacan, and Laplanche and Pontalis, foreclosure is the *cause* of psychosis, not the means by which the subject is protected from psychosis, as Butler would have it. Moreover, *what* is foreclosed does not 'belong to the realm of psychosis' (and Laplanche and Pontalis never say that it does); what is foreclosed (the phallus as signifier, or *Non/Nom-du-Père*) in psychosis has to be included in order for the non-psychotic subject to form. Similarly, it is not the *exclusion* from the symbolic of this foreclosed element that creates 'symbolic coherence', but rather the *inclusion* of the *Nom-du-Père* that makes it possible for the subject to enter the symbolic at all, that is, for the symbolic to develop as a coherent psychic register.

Nor is it the case that the price of the entry into language is that 'the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable'. No one properly versed in Lacanian theory would talk about 'the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject', because what governs the subject's inception as subject is nothing more than the addition of a negation to the realm of the Real: the Symbolic is formed by way of the *addition of a negation*, known as the *Non/Nom-du-Père*, a rather unusual kind of addition.<sup>20</sup> Butler's mistaken formulation conforms to her belief that subjects are formed in and through a primary exclusion. In fact, without this formulation of 'unspeakability', her argument that subject formation transpires by way of censorship disappears, and so does the glue binding the various strands of her argument in *Excitable Speech*.

In order to understand the psychoanalytic conception of foreclosure, it is necessary to realize that the *Non/Nom-du-Père* has no content, much

less normative content. The addition of the negation, the *Non/Nom-du-Père*, makes the subject a signifier, which means that the subject does not control what s/he means to others any more than s/he can know for certain what others mean. In effect, the ‘paternal metaphor’ places a ‘minus’ on the immediacy of the presence of the individual, raising the question as to the meaning of the individual, and in this way makes of the individual a signifier, bringing the individual into the realm of signification from the realm of the Real. That is, the *Non/Nom-du-Père* is a metaphor for the process by which anything, including the child, ceases to simply *be* and comes to *mean*, which is to say that it enters into the defiles of linguistic mediation and social appropriation.<sup>21</sup> No object simply means what it is; every object becomes a site of excessive meaning. To be a signifier – and a subject – is to be stuck to an irreducible excess of meaning. In other words, this form of internalization is very different from what Butler imagines to be the process of subject formation: at its core is the social dimension of language, an unsymbolizable *excess* (not an unsymbolizable *exclusion*) produced by the conditions in which meaning arises as perpetually ungovernable.

In this sense, the paternal metaphor *causes* the subject without adding any content to the subject’s determinants. This cause ‘comes from’ outside the subject – in fact, its purpose is to bring the subject into contact with the external social world – and it must be internalized to become operative, but it does not provide any substantive positivities in the process. The subject is not formed by the *exclusion* of signification but by the *excess* of signification that irremediably adheres to the subject.

### **Between Neurosis and Psychosis**

This psychoanalytic theory of subject formation directly contradicts Butler’s assertion that the paternal metaphor creates a realm of ‘unspeakability’ that could somehow be accessed through willed speech acts, no matter how risky. Instead, the addition of the paternal metaphor creates the illusion that something has been lost, a world of perfect understanding with no possibility of slippage. Pace Butler, this ‘loss’ never actually happened; it is simply an after-effect of the entrance into the symbolic. And because this world never existed, it can never be recovered. The subject has not been ‘barred’ from this world, and she is not ‘excluded’. Rather, the subject is structured around this imaginary loss produced by the addition of the *Non/Nom-du-Père*. Butler’s project of ‘redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable’ presupposes that somehow one does gain access to the ‘barred’ remainder (1997: 139). In principle, then, for Butler, the loss can be remedied – by an appropriation of speech acts that will lead to the opening of previously ‘closed’ contexts, resulting in the inclusion of the politically oppressed.

Psychoanalysis has a name for the position Butler adopts – the neurotic.

The neurotic does believe that the lost object can be recovered. . . . The neurotic can only accept the lack to the extent that she can also believe that

it can in principle be remedied. . . . [T]he neurotic understands her suffering in terms of frustration – she has been denied or deprived of something that she should have (and could have) had in order to lead a successful life. (Van Haute, 2002: 153–4)

When she accounts for the formation of the subject along exclusionary lines, then, Butler not only signals her demand for the loss to be remedied, but she also shifts from a psychoanalytic to a historicist register. If the loss is a fact, then it must be the loss of a determinate something: the loss should be remediable by the addition of a positivity.

Imagining that subjects are formed through foreclosure, Butler *herself* endows all subjects with the attributes of psychotics, relying on these very attributes to make her argument plausible.<sup>22</sup> Defined in psychoanalytic terms, the psychotic

. . . does not really inhabit her own body . . . this body is not her own. The sensations that appear in the body, and the ideas that arise there, do not belong to the subject – they are the thoughts of an anonymous Other that has taken possession of the body. . . . [she] does not recognize the lack in the Other, and thus has no grasp of the constant sliding of meaning under or along the chain of signifiers. The psychotic lives, on the contrary, in a world of fixed and clear meanings, which he encounters, or which even impose themselves upon him, both in words and in reality . . . (Van Haute, 2002: 232, 230)

Not recognizing the lack in the Other means not recognizing the Other's desire – or, we could say, not recognizing the capability of the hearer to have desires different from those of the subject, which is a convenient feature for an implicitly sovereign theory of the performative speech act. Living in 'a world of fixed and clear meanings' fosters the phantasy that the speaker's intentions will always conform to the listener's grasp of meaning. The capability of the speech act to wound 'bodily' in this 'literalization of metaphor', as Butler has it, conforms to the properties of language as experienced by the psychotic. And her version of interpellation is tantamount to the infestation of the subject by the discourse of the social, the taking over of the subject's body and mind by an anonymous and omnipotent external power. Given these qualities, as we have seen, it is indeed difficult to imagine how the (imputedly psychotic) subject could deploy her paltry resources against such a powerful force. In Butler's theory of the political performative, the neurotic speaker seeking to reclaim the lost and forbidden realm of 'unspeakability' can only acquire (imagined) efficacy by way of a phantasied psychotic interlocutor – one whose body is literally vulnerable to the words of the performative politician, whose mind is taken over by the desires of the performative politician, whose very inclusion is the sign of its subjection to the force of the performative politician.

### Historicizing Desire

In effect, Butler's conception of an exclusionary mode of subjectification implicitly disavows the psychoanalytic account (the addition of an indeterminate negation) in favor of the Foucauldian one (the determination of subjects by positive elements; the 'norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject'). Yet by this action Butler leaves herself in a theoretical no-man's land, for if the psychoanalytic account abjures *positivities*, the Foucauldian model abjures *exclusion*, the very elements on which she must rely for her theory of the political performative. We can put it this way: in her disavowal of psychoanalysis, she has also given up the one useful aspect of Foucault's work for a historicizing theory – the refusal to think power in terms of exclusion and prohibition. Her version of psychoanalysis resupplies Foucauldianism with the very element Foucault most forcefully rejects. That she is wrong about psychoanalysis does not change the fact that she tries to forge an account based on exclusion as well as on positive determinants. Without a remediable exclusion (say, of non-normative discourse) and the reinstatement of excluded positivities (say, of marginalized subjects), Butler's whole project of transforming norms and including marginal peoples through the appropriation of speech acts falls apart, and with it, any possibility of historicizing the subject. Ultimately, Butler's inept use of psychoanalysis creates a mangled version of historicism that completely vitiates her political project: her misguided reliance on exclusion effectively reduces the subject to positive determinants – that is, to a mere expression of the social structure itself – and thereby eradicates the subject *as such*, destroying any possibility of resistance.

In order to see how psychoanalysis supplies an alternative account of historicization, we can return to the example of the paternal metaphor as cause of the subject. Unlike the Foucauldian cause, it is not simply one positive determinant among others. Even though, by virtue of its internalization, it belongs to the field in which it works its effects, it nonetheless remains distinct from the other elements of the field in that it has no content. Instead of becoming just another positive determinant, the *Non/Nom-du-Père* works a transformation on the entire field to add another dimension to it, that of signification. The value of this cause, this excess, for theory can be seen when we consider not only how it addresses the dilemma of social change by supplying to the psyche the minimal necessary contingency from which resistance can be staged, but also, by virtue of that contingency, how it meets Butler's charge that it is ahistorical. This cause enables the child to enter history as a *subject* in a particular relation to a particular historical field (a relation that has both conventional and arbitrary aspects). In failing to see that the Law itself consists only of a *content-less*, formal negation, Butler becomes blind to the fact that the symbolic, and the Law, are not the same for everyone in the social field, nor could they be: castration does not, no matter what she says, have a universal meaning or form. The conditions of subjectification – that is, the ability to substitute one signifier for another; the stricture that meaning is always elsewhere; the fact that the contents

supplied under symbolization emerge as functions of contingent experiences with all manner of people idiosyncratically regarded as meaningful – preclude the emergence of ‘one law’. That this is so is demonstrated by the varieties of desire, for if the Law were the hegemonic and unitary ‘one law’ of Butler’s imagination, then all subjects would be constrained to the same desire, and the charge of ahistoricity would be fair.<sup>23</sup> But desire, installed through the negation of the paternal metaphor, moves within the order of the signifier, not the signified. To imagine otherwise is to be trapped always within the Imaginary. Precisely because the Law is formally empty, its action nothing more than a function of the addition of a negation that makes signification possible, it *activates* desire in unforeseen and ungovernable ways, fleshed out on contingent circumstances and properties, driving a particular individual history while seizing social history. Strange as it may seem, the Law and contingency are two sides of the same moving coin. Far from being ahistorical or politically quietistic, a truly psychoanalytic theory of subject formation provides the only account of causality capable of putting historicism on a firm footing, that is, in its proper relation to the excess that mobilizes desire.

#### Notes

I want to thank my three anonymous readers for helping me strengthen this essay. Teresa Toulouse, Kellie Warren and Jonathan Riley have made comments on various versions from which I have benefited greatly. The work that I have co-authored with Joseph Valente on other Butler texts forms an intellectual backdrop to this article. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Janet E. Halley’s back-cover blurb praises Butler in this way. Veronica Vasterling sums up the approving side of the Butlerian literature when she explains that Butler’s ‘epistemological linguisticism is politically effective in that it opens up the ontological domain, that is, the domain of what is considered to be natural or real, to questions of power’ (2003: 209). Lois McNay, arguably one of Butler’s most sympathetic expositors, finds ‘the concept of agency that underlies Butler’s notion of a politics of the performative . . . abstract and lacking social specificity’ (1999: 176). Lisa Schwartzman (2002) argues that *Excitable Speech* misrepresents both Austin and the feminists who argue for speech regulation. Martha Nussbaum (1999) faults Butler’s account of agency and resistance. Kory Schaff notes that ‘Butler’s account of weak agency cannot provide a strategic location for promoting concrete effects of social change . . . [and] we are left in the rather unsavory position of changing the relations of power only insofar as we change ourselves’ (2002: 190).
2. McNay finds in *Excitable Speech* ‘a more precise formulation of her [Butler’s] conception of the political efficacy of the performative’ but she does not discuss Butler’s use of psychoanalysis to propose embodiment as a supplement to her account of linguistic performativity, referring only to criticisms of psychoanalysis as ahistorical (1999: 178). Vasterling (2003) treats neither *Excitable Speech* nor the psychoanalytic version of embodiment advanced by Butler. Butler’s later dialogue with Žižek and Laclau touches in part on her theory of the embodied performative and the psychoanalytic conception of subject formation (Butler et al., 2000). Margaret McLaren (2002) has recently discussed Foucault’s conception of embodiment in terms that are relevant to my discussion.

3. McNay sums up the current sense of Butler's deployment of psychoanalysis when she outlines two themes in Butler's work: 'the dialectic of subject formation, namely that the autonomous subject is instituted through constraint, and the question of the relations between the psyche and the social'. Categorizing Butler as a Foucauldian who 'bridges the overpolemicized gap between the psychoanalytic and constructivist perspectives', McNay praises Butler for 'reconfiguring the psyche as an effect of the interiorization of social norms . . . [and avoiding] the tendency towards ahistoricism that hampers psychoanalysis in order to maintain a sense of the social specificity of modalities of desire and gender' (1999: 175–6). As the ensuing discussion demonstrates, I have a different sense of Butler's use of both Foucault and psychoanalysis.

4. As noted above, critics have faulted Butler's appropriation of speech-act theory for political purposes. I have detailed criticisms of Butler's efforts to put Austin into such service elsewhere (Rothenberg, 2004).

5. See Schwartzman's critique (2002) of Butler on this point.

6. In fact, in her distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, Butler has instanced temporal deferral as the source of perlocutionary iterability (1997: 17). This formulation is not Austin's, but it neatly describes her own practice in parsing the iterable nature of acts of signification into those that correspond to the consolidation of meaning through convention and those that correspond to the disruption of traditional meaning through resignification. For a fuller account of Butler's misguided description of Austinian speech acts as referencing two different temporal modalities, see Rothenberg (2004), Schwartzman (2002), and Rothenberg and Valente (1997).

7. Butler does talk at some length about how 'circumstances alone do not make the words wound . . . and that the deployment of words is not reducible to the circumstances of their utterance', but she applies this caveat only to the first speech act (injurious or hate speech), not to the resignifying speech that responds to it. When she discusses oppressive or injurious speech, she reserves for the victim of this speech the ability to carry out her intentions to subvert the original speech act.

8. See Melissa Clark's (2000) discussion of Butler's misrepresentation of the authorizing conventions of Rosa Parks' actions.

9. In her last footnote, Butler (1997: 182, n. 31) even references Žižek's discussion of the 'phantasmatic promise of the performative' in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, a discussion she clearly does not take to heart.

10. Bourdieu explains that:

. . . ignorance of the conditions of production and circulation of commentary allows and encourages people to search solely in the discourse in question for the 'conditions of felicity' which, though theoretically and practically inseparable from the institutional conditions of the functioning of the discourse, have been assigned to the domain of external linguistics . . . (1980: 32)

11. This virtually canonical criticism of Bourdieu finds succinct expression in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

12. The original quotation is in Derrida (1988: 15).

13. Butler takes back her initially rigorous account of the universality of iterability, saying that it is 'simply not the case' that 'the speech act, by virtue of its internal

powers, breaks with every context from which it emerges . . . contexts inhere in certain speech acts', precisely the position of the pro-censorship opponents against whom she argues in her introduction (1997: 161).

14. Here Butler is not innovating on psychoanalysis: this version of continual subjectification is a standard psychoanalytic principle. See, for example, Hans Loewald's 'The Waning of the Oedipus Complex' (1979), which argues that the psyche continues to negotiate Oedipal conflicts in a continual process of transformation throughout its life.

15. Furthermore, in this attempt to separate speech from performance, Butler undermines a key tenet of Austinian speech-act theory.

16. We can easily see how Butler elides the active role of the audience in a footnote to Felman's work:

Felman provides a marvelous reading of Austin's humor and irony, showing how the reiterated problem of performative 'misfire' reveals how the performative is always beset by a failure it cannot explain. The performative performs in ways that no convention fully governs, and which no conscious intention can fully determine. This unconscious dimension of every act surfaces in Austin's text as the tragic-comedy of performative misfire. (1999: 166, n. 8)

In this passage, Butler acknowledges the failure of intentionality but misattributes it to the activity of the speaker's unconscious, rather than to the addressee's (perhaps unconsciously motivated) interpretation. Tellingly, Butler uses the term 'misfire', which highlights the role of the speaker, rather than the Austinian usage of a failure of 'uptake', which highlights the role of the receiver.

17. As noted above, Butler has a syncopated version of iterability; we can see now that this is how she disavows the social dimension of language. For example, in a clever move, she proposes that the performative *opens up* the possibility of 'unknown contexts' (1997: 161). By focusing on these anti-closural possibilities, she appears to be following the principle of iterability, but, rather than bringing to light why these anti-closural effects are merely *possibilities* (because they are not at the disposal of the speaker, not a function of her intentions), she instead states that performatives can be deployed to *open up* contexts closed by other people. Because she has already discussed iterability, which describes the opening of new contexts even as old ones are referenced, she does not bother to explain how a context could come to be 'closed', but she speaks as though such closing results from the intentions of certain political forces: 'The desire not to have an open future can be strong. In political calculations, it is important not to underestimate the force of the desire to foreclose futurity' (1997: 162).

18. As it turns out, Derrida's iterability (rather than the 'unknowingness of the body') could ground the social dimension missing from Butler's theory, but only at considerable cost to her political claims. Because, as Derrida demonstrates, performatives are not a special class but the general class of speech acts, the alleged 'specific social meaning' of iterability turns out to be a *general* social meaning. Derrida shows that the limits to intentionality derive from two simultaneous operations of signification (repetition and difference) – each equally crucial to the emergence of meaning and *neither dependent on the intentions of the speaker* – that, taken together, guarantee the social dimension of signification. Iterability is a function both of the potential but uncoordinated application of the same conventions by

speaker and audience and the potential but uncoordinated application of different conventions used by speaker and audience. Every utterance is split – that is, is self-different – on account of these operations, fissured by constrained conventional usage and unconstrained individual construals. Derrida makes this point when he refers to the ‘problematic rubric of “the arbitrary nature of the sign”’ (1988: 15): the rubric is problematic because arbitrariness is not a property of the sign itself but a function of the social dimension of signification.

19. In trying to assess Butler on her own terms, I do not address the criticism that she has no theory of collective political action. Obviously, a full discussion of the potential of Butler’s work for progressive political work would have to take up that issue.

20. See Van Haute for a discussion of the particular meaning the paternal metaphor has in Lacanian thought (2002: 15–18). I rely on Van Haute’s (2002) and Fink’s (1997) elaboration of the paternal metaphor throughout this discussion.

21. While this may sound tragic, dooming us to uncertainty about where we stand and what we mean, in fact, for the child, it represents the only way to escape outside determination, the only way to retain a bit of contingency. Thanks to the addition of this negation, the child is enabled to abandon ‘the belief that there is an adequate object that corresponds to the desire of the mother . . . on the basis of the paternal metaphor the child surrenders itself to the movement of signifiers’ (Van Haute, 2002: 200). The *Non/Nom-du-Père* supplies the motivation, so to speak, for the child to seek the satisfaction of its desire elsewhere than the mother. The mobilization of desire within the child, derived from the sense that the Other is also desiring/lacking in ways that the child cannot remedy, is what subjectifies the child. The paternal metaphor produces the conditions of signification as irremediable excess: the irrecoverability of the intentions of the mother by the child is the motive force behind the child’s subjectification.

22. I discuss an earlier manifestation of Butler’s reliance on a psychotic form of the subject (differently manifested) that occurs in her essay ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ (Rothenberg and Valente, 2001).

23. It is worth noting that in psychoanalytic theory, the person one desires is never desired on the basis of positive characteristics. If that were the case, then all other people who shared those characteristics would be equally desirable. Rather, desire arises from outside the field of positivities.

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