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“Judith Butler’s Relocation of the Ethical and/as Cultural Studies”

Judith Butler’s critical project has further approached becoming a fully-blown “ethical” one in her last three published books: *Undoing Gender*, *Precarious Life*, and the work in which I am particularly interested today, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Primacy is here continually ascribed to impressionability, impingement, injurability, vulnerability, failure/fallibility, and the limits of autonomy. These are the basic stuffs of the “ethical interpellation” of which she writes, though they are not necessarily experiential. But although they are not *necessarily* “experiences,” Butler’s recent work does indeed sometimes deal in descriptive detail with these as experiences—and with related sorts of experience too.

For this Butler these are, more generally, sites at which, and procedures through which, the subject continually leaks out of itself. In other words, they expressly precede the occupation of an “I,” especially by the time she gets to 2005’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*. The I is now primarily an always already pre-emergent one. “I” marks the possessibility of a mineness that is elaborated in relation to the individual, in relation to forms and forces of sociality from the dyad all the way up to the world, and in relation to the norms with which putative

possessabilities of belonging are entangled. Over the course of these books—we can also include the earlier *Antigone's Claim* (2000) among her more overtly ethnocultural works—the association of ethical interpellation with the limits of intelligibility, reasonability and recognizability take on increasing importance. Recognizability, for instance, asymptotically approaches coterminousness with life, livable life and survivability.

In *Giving an Account*, Butler addresses the notion that it might well be a truth of modernity, as such, that the hope of survivability is bound up with the possibility of *vacating* the social rather than of entering it or maintaining such “entrance;” i.e., rather than that of forestalling “foreclosure.” For those who are familiar mostly with Butler’s earlier work, this may seem confusing. This is not only because of the difficulties of formulations such as “livable life.” Butler seems now to be reversing, or approaching in a differently transversal manner, moves from earlier in her career. This is due in part to the ways in which she here articulates this vacating of the social with quasispecifically historical (“modern”) demands that we must take as partly enabling ones, even if and when we fulfill—as well as fail to fulfill—the mandates of sociality.

Giving an Account attempts to take “an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others” as “an ethical resource.” It does this through a reconstructed version of Levinassian ethics as first philosophy, or ethics as the closet we might get either to ontology or to deconstructive “shadowings” of ontology. The book’s positation of ethics as yet another domain wherein “the subject cannot hold” wants to “make the subject a problem for ethics rather than

the ground of it.” Despite at instances working with the twin enemies (Kant and Levinas) of, say, Alain Badiou’s *Ethics* (though without the same hostilities toward either one)—all the while simultaneously trafficking in just the sorts of “anti-philosophical” traditions that Badiou wryly asserts, in a footnote to *Ethics*, philosophy must asymptotically approach “in order to debunk them”—Butler’s book, in ways, nevertheless shares in certain aims of a project such as Badiou’s: to reanimate the very subject to which Derrida asserts that “nothing ever happens.”

In fact, *GAA*’s approach to ethical deliberation seems closely to follow the post-*Spectres of Marx* Derridean development of decisional aporetics and their impossible temporalities. Here the decision is not, in the strict sense, a decision unless it is strictly undecideable—and there is no time for it. Yet, again, a lot does happen to Butler’s subject in *GAA*. For example, she holds on at points to the importance of certain at least proto-psychoanalytic, if not phenomenological, dimensions of coming to have a body. She directly addresses ontogenic histories and temporalities that do not necessarily fracture into actions, deliberations, and acts (including speech acts) with the temporalities of Derridean hauntings even if they do have the character, as iterations, of “truths with the structures of fictions.” [This is to put it Lacanian terms, which still seem to me as apt here as Nietzschean ones.]

The book’s two-faced relation to structure, in this regard, is exemplary of Butler’s signature “heterodoxy.” By this I mean the complicated sets of multidirectional allegiances coming into play at any given juncture in her work.

As much in a Freudo-Lacanian tradition as in the wake of Derridean deconstruction per se, and partly in already related Heideggerian veins—though the last have here been hybridized with Foucaultian genealogy, as well as with what arguably came after genealogy in Foucault’s later work—the aforementioned “truths” impossibly call to us from origins that themselves have always, by definition, had head starts. So, these are impossible origins of the former ilk as much as the latter.

Butler’s Foucauldianism in this book does rely heavily on a few of the 1980s writings, including Volumes II and III of *History of Sexuality* and the 1983 Berkeley lectures. But this is a Foucault read largely—though not, of course, exclusively—via Adorno. Here Butler partly follows Foucault’s statement to the effect that if only he had known more about the Frankfurt School earlier, he might have saved himself years of headaches. The associated departure from, as well as close debt to, a not-existential Nietzsche—due only partly to this heavily Adornian Foucault and to the relationship of all of this together to deconstruction, to mention only some of the vistas that here result from the more surprisingly scenic re-routings of *GAA*—ultimately involves the big, urgent question of “how it might work to make an ethics from the region of the unwilled,” an ethics through which “freedom can be untethered from responsibility.”

What motivates this untethering of freedom from responsibility is not only the opacities of responsibility that arise partly with and from complications in the “relationship between origin and validity,” to borrow Alexander Garcia Duttman’s useful definition of genealogy. At stake here is also the important “unfreedom”

from which responsibility itself, as well as the development of the “I” and the “mine,” might in their more traditional forms be derived in the first place—and from which responsibility can, according to Butler, possibly be re-derived while accounting for economies of risk and economies of error that adhere to regimes of intelligibility, and through whose operations we are always constituted as reflexive beings “at a cost.”

Those costs do not in this analysis bear any simple relation to the “limit points” of reflexivity, recognition, self-mastery or truth that might, even as limit points conceived with a particular kind of reference to “absence,” serve to “ground” procedures of self-making alongside which, and through which, the social itself is made. Neither are those costs univectorally anchored to norms that institute, and are instituted by, those same limit points in processes of enactment, action and deliberation.

Butler writes:

There is no difference between the touch and the sign that receives me and the self that I am, because the boundary is yet to be installed, the boundary between the other and this “I”—and hence, the condition of their very possibility—is yet to take place. The self that I am yet to be (at the point where grammar does not yet permit an “I”) is at the outset enthralled, even if to a scene of violence, an abandonment, a destitution, a mechanism of life support, since it is, for better or for worse, the support without which I cannot be, upon which my very being depends, which my very being, fundamentally and with an irreducible ambiguity, *is*. This is a scene, if we can call it that, to which we return, within which our action takes place, and which gently or perhaps violently mocks the posture of narrative control. One can attempt to cover it over; indeed, the enunciated “I” may well function as that covering. To ward off the emergence of this opacity, it may be that no action is taken: To act is immediately to break the narrative structure and so to risk losing a self over whom I maintain narrative control.

At this “point” of pre-emergence that Butler describes above, “I am my relation to you.” Putting it this way commissions Butler’s extended meditation on Levinas’s discussion of a preontological realm, and of the conceptual relations of such a realm to the “originary” or “enigmatic signifiers” of Jean Laplanche. These are two sources for the “touch” and the “sign” in the first sentence of the above citation. Through the combination of the two, Butler fixes on narrative’s *interruption* by the scene of address that is the scene of ethical interpellation, even if and when there is no actual address. This last is one of the reasons she appends the “if we can call it that [a scene]” in the above quote, and then injects into the rest of that sentence the attendant complications of temporality. Where, when and how does that scene contaminate other scenes? For what duration, and with what durations? Rather than simply structuring address and relation, narrative interrupts these. But narrative does not interrupt these unitarily. So do narrative’s notoriously polyvalent “times.”

Given the contents of that long citation, and since I am the first speaker on this panel, I want to note that the title of this panel session (“The Politics of Anti-Essentialism”) is somewhat misleading about what at least some of us are trying to do, and have been attempting for a number of years now. Way back when, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler somewhat famously wrote:

Paradoxically, the inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism. For there is an “outside” to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute “outside,” an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive “outside,” it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. The debate

between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether.

Among others who have asserted similar things, Tim Dean has somewhat persuasively critiqued what he calls the “rhetoricity” of some of Butler’s earlier writings, which is related in a panoply of ways both to the constructivism that Butler names above and to the jump from that to “anti-essentialism.” But it is the elements of just such a rhetoricity that we now see being developed into a creative mode for dealing with the empirical, the cultural, the contextual and the conjunctural in Butler’s more recent writings. Given the collaboration of the three on the 2000 *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* book, I also think it is important to put this issue next to Ernesto Laclau’s distinct but closely related recent arguments for the fundamental rhetoricity of discourse in order to further complicate its relation to what we used to call (anti-)essentialism—and also next to Laclau’s contentious exchange with Slavoj Žižek about these matters in *Critical Inquiry* a couple of years ago.

I point this out—that Butler is a thinker who is highly engaged with the empirical in a way that actually troubles what we used to call anti-essentialism, but is nevertheless engaged with questions of empiricity in a manner that is a strong point of continuity between her work and the work of *many* in contemporary cultural studies—precisely because this is evidently fairly easy to disavow or overlook. It is partly the very heterodoxy of Butler’s work, even in what we might call a relatively “abstract” book such as *GAA* (compared with, say, *Precarious Life*), that I think makes much of her writing absolutely indispensable for cultural studies “now.” *GAA* reads Freud and Foucault together, Levinas and

Laplanche together, and Hegel with Foucault. That still makes Butler's work potentially seem downright dubious to the analyticists, strategicists and coherentists in us and among us. But, in this case, she is doing this in a book that is all about opacity, and all about the limits of knowability and communicability whenever there is an "I" in play. As I see it, Butler thereby goes to great lengths, in general, to risk Stuart Hall's still-very-apt explanation of interdisciplinarity, which is not cross-disciplinary or transdisciplinarity and does not amount to combining a bunch of methods from different disciplines, or to building bridges across fields. Rather, it is the (inevitably doomed to fail) attempt to work in the cracks and fissures between disciplines: inevitably failed because, first of all, there is no there there and, secondly, what are the ends by which success or failure in getting to and working with those non-sites are to be adjudicated? Plus, at what "point" in the "process" of such work can this adjudication occur, given these ends that are not ends?

In her infamously scathing 1999 *New Republic* attack on both the content and the form of Butler's work, which was published around the time that Butler was awarded the *Journal of Philosophy and Literature's* asinine annual "bad writing prize"—a piece that Rosi Braidotti, in her recent book *Transpositions*, calls in her opinion "below the belt"—Martha Nussbaum indicts Butler's work (up to *Excitable Speech*) as "extremely French influenced." She refers to it as the "new, symbolic type feminism." In this argument, Butler's work aims to do feminist politics in a subversive manner that is shot through with "lofty obscurity" and "disdainful abstractness." To be fair to Nussbaum, who does make a few useful

points in the course of her condemnations, note that the last charge targets Butler by lumping her work together with the work of a group of mostly unnamed others. Still, read alongside, for instance, Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, a number of these charges—and the principles underlying them—in effect add up to an *ethical* condemnation of Butler as an individual, rather than to a mere dismantling of this “brand” of scholarly work.

Nussbaum faults Butler for: “naively empty politics;” implicit “quietism” (and for promoting it, apparently through magic-bullet type transmission of it to her readers); a defeatism that offers no possibility whatsoever for large scale change; “thin ideas;” and even sadomasochism. Nussbaum there claims that Butler's arguments support a radical libertarianism among groups such as the law students she teaches at the University of Chicago(!) Nussbaum charges Butler with: provincialism; not respecting her readers' intelligence through her “anxiety inducing obscurity” and through her refusal to take the stance of “an arguer among equals” in the Western philosophical tradition; and for not acknowledging that “the figures she is discussing are complicated.” Then there is Butler's: “appeal to contradictory concepts and doctrines without any account of how the apparent contradictions will be reconciled;” her “preposterous middle class acceptance;” and her “narcissistic focus on personal self-presentation.” Nussbaum insists on all of the following instead, which she claims Butler utterly disregards: “philosophical clarity;” “historical precision;” appeal to “material reality” and “empirical validity;” universal norms; addressing the jargonistically uninitiated at the same time as experts; clearly stated “final views” on

deliberations (rather than eternal litanies of questions and unresolved equivocations); clear definitions of terms; less allusion; “less ambivalence of the implied author” (Nussbaum wants more “explanation” instead); “definite claims;” and, in general, stylistic transparency.

Nussbaum concludes:

Butler’s hip quietism is a comprehensible response to the difficulty of realizing justice in America. But it is a bad response. It collaborates with evil. Feminism demands more and women deserve better.

Butler convincingly responded to some of these charges in a brief but illuminating piece in *The New York Times* about her bad writing award. That piece lucidly defends difficult scholarly language as a practice of the political in contexts influenced by what she elsewhere calls “critical and post-critical theory,” where the aim might be stated as what she yet elsewhere describes as “living the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation.” While I cannot here go into the details of Butler’s *Times* response [“A Bad Writer Bites Back,” which is as readily available online as is the Nussbaum piece from *The New Republic* (“The Professor of Parody”)], I want to end by pointing out that—in what could, vis-à-vis Nussbaum, be taken to expressly (*re*)*model* philosophical “friendship” and “argument among equals” rather than to ignore or avoid either of them—*GAA* can be read as a thematization, as well as a stylization, of having been targeted with Nussbaum’s specific charges, and of the question of how one can and should respond to such condemnation (and one’s openness to it) in the first place.

Here is the closing of Butler's book:

...If certain versions of self-preoccupied moral inquiry return us to a narcissism that is supported through socially enforced modes of individualism, and if that narcissism also leads to an ethical violence that knows no grace of self acceptance or forgiveness, then it would seem obligatory, if not urgent, to return the question of responsibility to the question "How are we formed within social life, and at what cost?"

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. [Note: Butler is here referring to an Adorno quote she discusses at length, which forges a negative dialectical passage between inhumanness and modes of becoming human.] To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven.

In other words, *GAA* provides exactly the semi-under-the-table "account" of herself that Nussbaum's piece ferociously demands of Butler, along with an elaboration of the involved assumptions about ethics, morality, opacity, scholarly writing, form, interdisciplinarity, the question of who is addressed in scholarly writing, what can and should be "communicated" by it, and the distributive politics—still associated with identity, and still disrupting and disrupted by identity's operations (this includes proximate as well as seemingly unrelated operations)—that make the critical theory from which cultural studies must not divest itself a formation that remains opposed to the "instrumentals" of that rational philosophy of which Nussbaum acts almost as if she has never hit the volatile, phantasmatic borders.

Suggesting the impossibility of “answering” such charges in any complete or satisfactory way (i.e., inevitable failure) and holding fast to the Foucaultian essay as “assay” in whose process one becomes otherwise (and “goes astray of oneself”), *GAA* could thus be said to attempt a “good faith” demonstration, in the public domain, of the very mode of “responsibility” that Butler theorizes in the book. I have been recontextualizing Butler’s book by invoking the unpleasant Nussbaum-event because it makes her book speak even more eloquently than it does already to our continuing reluctance to take the calls of self-reflexivity and its impossible limits in cultural studies “now” (this reluctance is generated partly because those calls can clearly conflict with the signature “accessibility”-mandates of cultural studies), and to inscribe—wherever and however they may be useful—traces of authorial uncertainty, confusion, inconsistency, non-mastery, equivocation, messiness, heterodoxy, subjective devastation and all the related sufferings into the hearts of our work.

In saying that there are still differential sites as well as times at which these inscriptions might be most desirable or even most direly needed, I may need to appeal both to the idea of “subculture” and to my own reluctance to take up such a mode of semi-identitarian identification in the process. For it seems to me that it is both of these appeals, together, that can end up re-floating the issue of “narcissism” as a critical one in a context like this one. This is one thing the Butler-Nussbaum case illustrates. Narcissism was first elaborated, at least by psychoanalysis, in relation to female sexuality and homosexuality. Butler knows this well. The pickles in which it still ensconces us “after identity politics”

themselves prove the worthiness of the endeavors *GAA* implicitly and explicitly advocates. Following a-not-very-Deleuzian late Foucault, the book will not let itself get detached from Foucault's "aestheticism" or from his ethics and politics (i.e., sociocultural "production" *tout court*)—let alone from all of their mutual interrelations after the transformation of his critique of confession. Yet, *GAA* operates partially in a zone where demands for something like "discretion" and its "rights" should still perhaps be unashamedly mobilized as (counter)forces.

Butler's book can be read as a politics, ethics and aesthetics of error and the "limit-point" on numerous registers, then: here error and the limit-point are, in essence, technologies of the human because of their entanglements with the delimitations of the domains of intelligibility, appearance, publicity and recognizability. Imbricated as much from the start with the conjuncture that is (however erroneously) marked by the term "modernity" as it is with the deconstruction of the very notions of "conjuncture" and "context" that are so dear to cultural studies—that is, tracing the implications of the non-identity with themselves of both "conjuncture" and "context" in a manner that potentially extends cultural studies "now" more or less (un)comfortably beyond its own conventionalized limits—tendencies and attempts to separate work such as this Butler's from the "project" of cultural studies, such that it exists today, should be no less shot through with scrutiny than should, to give just two examples, either Nussbaum's originary and non-originary call or, finally, Butler's masterful and not-masterful "response."