

SUBJECTIVE DISPOSSESSION AND *OBJET A*:  
A CRITIQUE OF JUDITH BUTLER'S RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY  
FROM A LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to stake out the possible terrain of a post-identity politics. It begins with the work of Judith Butler who in *Gender Trouble* claims for the *performative* subject no “ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.” I trace her notion of the ek-static subject through to a consideration of *Antigone* as a prototype of what I call a deconstituted subject. However Butler does not follow to the end her insistence on a radical subjective ‘unravelling’ and thus her relational ontology stalls on the rocks of what Lacanians call the Symbolic. I then turn primarily to Jacques Lacan’s *Four Discourses* and the work of Slavoj Žižek to investigate further the nature of subjective deconstitution as a post-ego political form of subjectivity and explore a possible way of its incitement or emergence through an understanding of *objet a* in the discourse of the Analyst.

Dedicated to the memory of Ichitaro (Archie) Tanemura

(April 21, 1892 – January 16, 1975)

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Without the support of Robert Albritton this dissertation would never have seen the light of day. He has been a beacon of graciousness, kindness, patience and understanding. His political theory graduate seminar at York University was a singular truth event and, for me, maintaining a fidelity to this event has been my life's journey ever since.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

The subject is not stable. The focus of this dissertation is with substantive subjective change. It seeks to explicate the processes behind a 'radical' change of subjectivity. Whether a brand of soap or a series of lovers, over the course of a lifetime the subject will change its course and displace and replace the objects of his or her attachments. She or he may change their mind on a variety of issues over a period of time, supporting various political candidates, switching sides, changing jobs, getting divorced, the burgeoning list of metamorphoses is endless. This raises the familiar issue with regards to the structure/agency question. Moving locations may be less a subjective act than a imposition forced upon one by a free-falling economy. The crux of the issue becomes the difference between the person who sees no choice but to open their sails and perilously drift with the economic winds and tides of capitalism, and the emergence of a subject that says "Enough!"

The thinking behind this dissertation began while involved with the research program of Robert Albritton whose work located an irreducible tension between a structural logic of capital and political agency. This tension became somewhat of an obsession with me and it was while I was working on an earlier draft version of this document that I encountered a theoretical 'deadlock' of sorts that I tried but was unsuccessful in resolving. It went something like the following: if as Foucault suggests, the subject is immanent to the structure, then what of agency? On the other hand if Derrida is correct to point out that in the very structurality of the structure there are



blindspots, lapses, that the centre does not hold, then what of the subject? How can the radical subject emerge at this moment?

It was at that time that I began doing work at an inner city community centre, specifically working with groups of people the capitalist system has no material interest dealing with, who are in a sense 'waste products' of a system that only places value in a specific and very narrow definition of human productivity. It was here that I experienced first-hand the material effects of discourse on subjective agency. For example I encountered the way in which the installment of a neoliberal programming model changed the very mode of interaction between community workers and the people that came in off the streets seeking their support and advice.

During this eight year period between 2001 and 2009 I spent working in Toronto's social service sector, I was able to participate in a number of projects that allowed me to re-engage with theory. It was while working as a front line program coordinator in an inner city community centre on Toronto's west side that I experienced a paradigmatic shift in workplace discourse towards a more business oriented neo-liberal terminology. This discourse began to dominate not only the technical report writing to government grant agencies, but the change of descriptors slowly changed the way we as staff began to view the different groups of people that we had been dealing with on a daily basis. I was accustomed to calling everyone that dropped by or enrolled in my programs variously, members, volunteers, learners or students. But one day there was more or less an abrupt change to a neo-liberal programming model that required that I use the term 'clients' or 'client intakes.' But this subtle change in discourse had material

effects as well as it was mandated that large tables in the programming area where people could sit in groups be replaced with individual desks, and that strict enrolment figures be kept and each 'client' be tracked through the program, that is, personal files on each attendee were required and assiduously kept up to date with attendance figures, the nature of their activity while engaged in the program and material 'outcomes'. Throughout this period the language that I used in my report writing to the United Way and various provincial and federal government ministries became increasingly 'results based' requiring 'hard' data on 'client' intakes, length of stay, and follow-up. The very change of vocabulary included with it an entire epistemology and field of knowledge that 'individualised' our entire operating logic, it went from 'community programming' or 'community drop-in' to one that could be described as a individualised competition for 'open seats.' In one instance, I was running a day program that helped immigrants/new Canadians, upgrade their skills. With the turn to flexible part-time service sector labour this group occupied at best a precarious existence. They were continually on-call, employed for a single day, sometimes only a single shift, benefits were non-existent as were all health and safety concerns. The jobs that became available to them included foot/bicycle couriers, construction site night time security, dollar store shelvers, janitors, hair dressers, painters, crossing guards etc. The program I ran offered a way for these people to improve their employable job and computer skills, but it quickly became an unofficial social support group, and an informal job information network, but as the economy slowed the physical space gradually became a means to combat the day to day isolation of occupying the social margins, a location where they could seek respite from

the disciplinary gaze of social welfare officers, work supervisors, the police etc. One day I was handed a list of metrics in which I had to assess each person's (now resignified as a 'client') prior employable state at the time of 'intake' and compare that with a 'post' state after she or he had completed the program.<sup>1</sup> This required an intensive pre and post interview which I then was supposed to determine any fundamental change to his or her overall state or condition. It very soon became clear that the paradigmatic shift to 'results oriented' programming geared toward capturing social processes in 'quantifiables' was not only misguided, but because senior managers, always in competition for funding dollars, adopted this so readily, it became a workplace issue for many organizations. Interestingly I found that it was also an issue that had a generational component in that the younger recruits from various social work programs schooled in the latest empirical data collecting methods were much more compliant and willing to adopt the new numerical accounting, while more senior workers who had been in the social service sector for a period of time by and large resisted the change to a quantifiable universe.

Another issue that struck a chord of concern with me at the time concerned the way in which the category 'Canadian experience' was used as a yardstick of a person's employability. Working with the most marginalized populations in Toronto: displaced adult men tangentially employed, homeless youth, and immigrant men and women in particular, it was specifically this latter group who were deemed lacking in "Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> This meant I was to assess their 'pre-intake' and 'post-program' employable skill sets which included computational skills, language skills, social skills, resumé writing, attitude ... the list goes on.

experience” which became a typical catch-22.<sup>2</sup> I found that many of the immigrants with whom I was helping were over-qualified for the simple service jobs they were applying for, but they would inevitably run up against what Lacanians call the *petit objet a* or simply *object a*, this wholly undefinable positivization of a ‘lack.’<sup>3</sup> It is this *objet a* that situates ‘Canadian experience’ as something missing, but missing what? It is the *je ne sais quoi* that easily morphs into a subtle discrimination based on what — skin colour, accent, dress, handshake, body language, hair style, teeth? Canadian experience is simultaneously all of these and none of these at the same time. This notion of Canadian experience is what prompts the employer to reply when asked why the applicant was found unsuitable for the position, “I don’t know, but ... no.” It is also not the case that the elimination of this *objet a*, that is if the ‘Canadian experience’ issue were to be magically resolved, that this would in any way lessen employer resistance to hiring somebody deemed too ‘foreign’. The *objet a* is constitutive of our relation to the Other. Instead of its elimination, which is impossible, this dissertation will argue that what is required instead is a reconfiguration of our relationship to the *objet a*.

The final issue about my time spent in social services that I would like to broach concerns the period of time, approximately 3 years between 2007 and 2009, that I worked for a service agency that focused on youth and adults with autism. Autism is not a single thing but a syndrome, meaning that it is a complex confluence of symptoms that range

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<sup>2</sup> When newcomers go out onto the job market to seek this elusive ‘Canadian experience’ they are not given the opportunity to gain it due to a lack of it, that is, what they lack can only be gained by first showing that they have it.

<sup>3</sup> The *objet a* will be dealt with extensively in this dissertation. It is a very slippery concept but hopefully as this dissertation progresses its contours will become clearer.

along a wide continuum of behaviours. There are no two people labelled with autism who express it in an identical manner. There are those who are very low-functioning, with very little or no language acquisition and could be labelled psychotic to use a standard psychiatric designation. I personally worked with higher functioning adults with autism. It was in my work with young adults with autism that I was able to personally observe the importance of language acquisition and subjectivity. In fact there were similarities between my work with autistic adults and language acquisition and the neo-liberal wave of reporting and writing that affected me in my earlier work. Specifically, if I had stayed at that earlier job it would have required that I undergo a symbolic 'subjective dispossession' of sorts, that is, there would have been required a shift in my subjective symbolic coordinates in order to accommodate the neoliberal empirical quantification of my workplace universe. So too here in my work with autism, working with these young adults, I was able to gain a better understanding of the importance of language to ego development and subjectivity. For example the higher functioning autistic young men and women I taught became extremely anxious whenever I used a metaphor, or in any way revealed a 'slippage' between signifier and signified. I had to be extremely careful in my lessons to attach a stable 'referent' to every signifier. My lessons were extremely visual, and dedicated to the task of attaching signifiers onto stable referents. The lesson planning focused on the goal of establishing a stable referential sign system, however limited, so that at the very least the person with autism had a number of 'anchors' that allowed him or her to pin down meanings. I noted that when signification became too overwhelming, when there were too many different words to attach onto

things, then anxiety would arise, and sometimes going as far as an angry outburst and a total 'shutting down.' Again, it was only when yet another 'epistemological obstacle' was placed in my path that problems arose. This agency in particular where I was employed, was dependent on millions of dollars worth of provincial health funding, and that funding increasingly became tied to a particular therapy based on the work of B.F. Skinner the behaviourist psychologist. As a result of the edict which came out, and after attending a number of mandatory 'sessions' in which I and a number of other social workers, teachers and administrative staff were introduced, counseled and schooled in the new behavioural therapy, the format of the therapeutic work with the youth and adults changed, as all subsequent lesson planning had to adapt a purely positivistic individualist treatment plan. To put it simply: cognitive behaviour therapy depends on strict observation of behaviours and on rewards based on changing those behaviours through repetition and rote learning — to say that the therapy of some autistic youth resembled the paradigmatic Pavlov's dog scenario would not be stretching the truth.

These three issues — the shift to a neoliberal discursive paradigm the dynamics of which resemble what Lacanians call 'University Discourse'; the emergence of *object a* and its relation to the Other, and finally the general relationship of language and subjectivity — rekindled my desire to re-visit my earlier association with political theory in that I began to search for a way of understanding the process of subject formation outside of a strictly empiricist/positivistic problematic.

As mentioned above it was Albritton who pointed out to me the two different tensions in Marx's thought between a logic of capital and that of political struggle which

introduced me to a non-empiricist orientation of thinking the subject. It was while I was totally consumed in trying to think this space or gap between the logic of the structure and political struggle that I began to focus on how subjectivity emerges when the structure breaks or shows an inconsistency. Bruno Bosteels has recently picked up on this strand of thought in a recent interview.

I am interested in seeing what happens when this encounter occurs (or again, in a sense, when this encounter fails to occur) between the logic of capital and the logic of political struggle. They clash precisely at the point where the logic of capital is inconsistent, in the sense that it cannot, strictly speaking, claim to have posited all its own presuppositions. Nor is the logic of the subject here one of spontaneous freedom or autonomy. ... So all these ex-Althusserians—Rancière, Žižek, and also Laclau—are, in fact, trying to hold these two logics together. (Bosteels 2013)

It comes down to thinking the logic of the structure and the emergence of political struggle. So in one sense the question becomes: in what sense can one speak of a subjective intervention into our structural frames of reference? When the inconsistency of the structure is revealed, that is, when the big Other is found to be lacking, can we locate the emergence of a different subjectivity that was not in existence prior to the breakdown of the structure? My work in the social services alerted me to the material effects of language, of discourse, on the emergence of subjectivity. But it goes without saying that the subject is not just discourse, there is a sense in which the subject is 'more than language.' This dissertation will seek to expose the relationship between discourse

and this ‘something more’ or what Jacques Lacan labelled *objet a*. It will locate the importance of the *objet a* in the formation of the subject.

If one is to speak of a theorist or a body of work that inaugurated a re-thinking of the subject with respect to the political it would be hard to question the immense influence of Judith Butler’s ground breaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990). It was one of a number of studies that rode a wave of critical inquiries, many of which were questioning some of the most cherished tenets regarding the nature of political subjectivity. *Gender Trouble* broke away from a sociological based language of gender and identity and garnered a certain populist appeal that crossed not only disciplinary lines but was, and still is, invoked in popular news articles and on a number of online blogs.<sup>4</sup> Terms like ‘performativity’ combined with a genealogy of gender were suggestively ambiguous and yet ambitious enough to allow for a burst of creative theoretical labours that sought new ways to move identity beyond static givens and to arrest the moribund lethargy of a tired sociologism that trapped gender and identity within the wide nets of positivist political analyses. Thus Butler’s theory of subjectivity remains highly suggestive for radical politics in a number of ways. For one thing, Butler focused on deconstructing the ontology of ‘natural sex.’ That is, sex, for Butler, is shot through with

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<sup>4</sup> The *Globe and Mail* columnist Leah McLaren advises first year university students to avoid the work of Judith Butler (*Globe and Mail* Sept 18, 2009). McLaren does not mean the Butler of *Precarious Life* (2004) or *Frames of War* (2009), two books whose leftist political analyses are patently obvious, but rather McLaren unleashes her wrath on Butler’s theory of gender. With the university orienting itself more and more towards the production of administrative expert knowledge, McLaren seeks to ensure that the interpellation of student subjects is kept safely away from the impact of texts that question political and sexual norms and instead remain pointed towards the narrow causeways of capitalist identity formation.



culturally prescribed norms. Sex is revealed to be gender all along and, thus, to exist as a ‘gendered’ subject, is to reiterate a set of culturally prescribed norms. Importantly for purposes of our discussion, the political moment for Butler is the very possibility of a failure or short circuit in the reiteration of the norm.<sup>5</sup> The early part of this dissertation will sketch the outlines of a post-Oedipal subject that emerges in the work of Judith Butler. Both Butler’s development of Hegel’s *ek-static* subject and her reading of Antigone open up theoretical avenues that seek to articulate a vision of political and social life that is discernibly beyond liberal heterosexual normative political prescriptions. However my over-riding intention is to show that there exists a split in Butler’s work between, to use Žižek’s term, a politics of “imaginary resignifications,” and a more radical insistence on a *dispossession* of the subject. This latter of which surfaced in her work in the late 1990s but was then largely displaced with the publication of her work on the ethical subject that appeared after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York city.<sup>6</sup> For example the tenor of her work in 1997, particularly *The Psychic Life of Power*, had her saying this:

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<sup>5</sup> Commentators have pointed out that this recourse to reiterative transgression is used selectively by Butler. At times she explores the way the signifier can expand the discursive space of politics, at other times this space is wrapped tightly around the signified that leaves no room for reiterative gestures, i.e., her criticism of ex-Harvard President Lawrence Summers, see Butler 2004b, 100.

<sup>6</sup> I use this date as a significant watershed in her work because it subsequently took an ethical turn away from a subject formed in subjection to an emphasis on precarity and on re-articulating the question of Jewish statehood.

Where social categories guarantee a recognizable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all. (20)

What if the embrace of social categories that guarantee for the individual a stable social existence are outright rejected? Can this be a choice? Too often her thought has been taken to coincide with a social movement politics that seeks recognition of same-sex rights, indigenous claims etc, that in and of itself has made tremendous headway in terms of gaining wider recognition of particular identities, but this interpretation of her politics however effective in moving forward a certain number of claims against the state, nevertheless flatten out the more radical implications of her thought. My intention is to refocus Butler's work away from these 'imaginary resignifications' and re-open the door to a more radical post-Oedipal version. In so doing it will engage with Slavoj Žižek, a left-wing Lacanian who, although he may be one of her most outspoken critics, shares with her early work an emphasis on a certain 'subjective dispossession' which will become important to our argument.<sup>7</sup>

The term *post-Oedipal* in this dissertation is used to refer to the sense in which Butler, in her reading of Antigone, attempts to forge a sustaining relation to the other that bypasses the triad: infant, primary caregiver, name of the father (nom du père). Specifically Butler rejects the Lacanian theory of subjectivity that emerges out of the dynamic of the Oedipal triad because of, in her words, a tendency towards 'ahistorical'

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<sup>7</sup> Although Lacanian psychoanalysts tend to be a rather conservative bunch (cf. Jacques Alain Miller, Bruce Fink), there remains many interesting left variations on the Lacanian corpus, the most well known being the work of Slavoj Žižek.

reifying gestures, specifically here she points to the Lacanian notion of the Real. Antigone in Butler's estimation, escapes the imposition of the Lacanian triad, that is, Antigone remains outside the symbolic and thus escapes being reigned in by the castrating alienation/separation of the Lacanian Oedipal dynamic. I will argue that Butler's post-Oedipal performativity politics simply runs the risk of becoming a politics of symbolic resignification. This dissertation will use the term post-Oedipal to refer roughly to the refusal of any attempt that seeks to embed identity in the Symbolic and thus allow it to be resignified and hegemonized. Essentially a post-Oedipal politics is a politics that affirms there is no big Other, not only in the sense that God is dead, but in terms of a post-identity, in that all subjectivization should be forsworn, the subject should resolve to its own destitution and meet the other at the level of objectivity.

The *sine qua non* of Butler's politics is the 'traversing' of the ideological hegemony of the hetero-symbolic under which we currently live. In sum she seeks to overthrow the heterosexual regime of desire. To appreciate the truly radical dimension of her thought, one must inquire as to the nature of the collapse of the heteronormative symbolic and insist that the true liberation of alternative sexualities requires a post-Oedipal 'symbolic cut' that overturns the declining influence of the paternal law. This viewpoint eliminates a number of political strategies from the outset as post-Oedipal subjects do not sit well within liberal democratic capitalism, that is, post-Oedipal subjects remain critical of the same-sex marriage debates, nor does the equal inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) subjects in the domains of culture and business,

especially in positions of management etc., signal a clear-cut sign of political change.<sup>8</sup> Of course the argument for greater LGBT inclusiveness links up with the struggles of anti-racism and anti-poverty groups and other progressive causes that strike a deeply progressive chord. However the overturning of an onto-heterosexual regime of desire requires more than a redescription of symbolic coordinates. Butler herself became aware of this shortcoming when *Gender Trouble* was taken up and used as a personal identity manifesto. Running in somewhat of a parallel universe was an incredibly populist following that interpreted her work in highly idiosyncratic ways. Many of these latter interpretations were liberal, pluralist and multiculturalist and all guilty to one degree or another of misinterpreting Butler's radical message.

One should note here that Butler adheres to the position that subjectivity is relational, a matter of becoming 'other to oneself'. Our first claim to be made is that one way to escape the reduction of Butler's work to a liberal multiculturalist ethics, is to return to her original notion of the *ek-static* subject that she developed in her early Hegelian period. The *ek-static* subject is a 'relational' subject, defined as always outside, never fully present, to itself. This notion of ek-stasis is later used by Butler, notably in *Giving Account of Oneself*, to help forge a social ontology in which the self wholly morphs into what she terms a 'structure of address,' a fluid subjectivity that arises *immanent* to the communicative process.<sup>9</sup> However notwithstanding this highly original

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<sup>8</sup> *Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships* (2006).

<sup>9</sup> The sense in which Butler's ontology is relational points to her repeated insistence that the *being qua being* of the subject is prior to its subjectivization. Counter to much liberal social contract theory in which isolated individuals emerge out of their natural condition

and impactful intervention in the debates in ethical theory, it nevertheless runs the risk of reducing her politics to a series of micro-interventions at the level of the personal. Butler's recent re-figuration of subject (2009f), from her earlier emphasis on 'performativity' to 'precarity' may be taken as a further sign of an ethical turn in her thought that substitutes an ethics for a more rigorous political analytic? In other words, how are we to 'use' Butler in productive and illicit ways not unlike the initial creative furor that erupted in social and political theory sparked by the publication of *Gender Trouble* twenty years ago? We should first begin then to trace Butler's affiliation with Hegel from her earliest to her latest works. In tracing the notion of her views on the dislocated subject in Hegel, we may be able to discern a way to incorporate her ethical thought into a wider political analytical dynamic at the same time working towards a more refined understanding of the relationship between subjective dispossession and a radical withdrawal from the normative symbolic or the Lacanian big Other.

Does Hegel remain merely a negative point of departure for Butler, or is her entire oeuvre still, to a certain extent, caught within a particular Hegelian frame? The relational, *ek-static* subject, one of the pillars of her theory, resonates deeply with Hegel's own work in the *Phenomenology*. In this work self-consciousness discovers another self-consciousness and Butler's early move here is to refuse to reconcile this Otherness into the same or initiate in any way a resolution that develops the Other into a self-standing

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via a contract, Butler's relational ontology is in fact quite straight forward in its insistence that the being of the subject is its relation to the other. This means that identity/subjectivization is an occurrence that is subsequent to and something which the subject takes on only after its ontological grounding in this relation to an other.

positivity. Starting with *Subjects of Desire* right up to her later book, *Frames of War*, one notes the variations and differences of emphasis each time she turns to the famous scene between the Lord and Bondsman in order to kick off her discussion of the subject. Instead of seeing the approach of two separate self-consciousness as paradigmatic of relations of a self to an Other, Butler highlights what she calls the 'structure of address' which foregrounds the discursive and material setting in which the communicative process unfolds. Thus in the study of Hegel one notes the genesis of Butler's adaption of the decentred ek-static subject that forms the core of her theory of the subject today. However, as mentioned above, Butler soon found herself during the decade of the 1990s seeking to re-articulate her theory of performativity away from an interpretation that many criticized as too voluntarist. Thus the ek-static subject loses its more performative dimension and relies more on a deconstitution of sorts, as will be illustrated in her reading of the Sophocles play *Antigone*

Butler's theory of subjectivity is critically relevant on a number of political fronts. Her political attachment to progressive causes is well known and these attachments are also underscored by a deep commitment to theoretical analyses. Her incisive criticism of United States foreign policy on Iraq and Afghanistan, the prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay, the Palestinian question, her unrelenting critique of Zionism, and most recently, her misgivings about the California proposition on same sex marriage, are all underpinned by her theoretical labours. Butler's recent refusal of an honour at the 2010 Berlin Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival on account of what she claimed were underlying xenophobic and racist currents on the part of organizers, is illustrative of her attempt to link up struggles

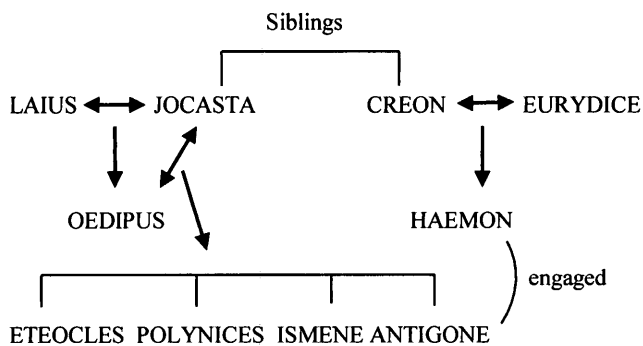
around gay, lesbian, transsexual, transgender politics with larger political struggles. However this leads us to investigate to what extent a politics of social movements ultimately is enough to accomplish the radical political change that it seeks. Butler for example insists on the constant re-negotiation of the political universal:

It seems to me that if we don't want a universal right to be an imposition of a Western culture on everyone, then we have to understand that what is "universal" is constantly being made, it is constantly being articulated and re-articulated, under conditions of cultural translation, where different governments and non-governmental organizations are involved in complex questions regarding, say, what would the right to personal liberty look like? (2003)

The Universal is a signifier that is constantly re-negotiated in order to ensure that it becomes neither an imposition that buries difference but at the same time in competition with other competing universalities (2000c). The question that will be pursued in this dissertation is the extent to which Butler's political program remains solely at the level of a Symbolic rearticulation and thus runs the risk of getting caught up in a type of proceduralist politics. On this point it is important to note that the release of *Gender Trouble* coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism in the West, and it soon became obvious to many on the left, of the apparent coalescence of Butler's theoretical interventions with a capitalist dynamic that was looking for more ways to exploit consumer markets. It was as if the marketing departments of Abercrombie and Fitch, Guess and the numerous other denizens of the fashion and cosmetic industry that have made billions of dollars off of

‘gender bending’ identities, held a deep and abiding interest in the early work of Butler. Butler’s theory was under threat of being sucked into the vortex of the logic of capitalism and with the added irony of appealing to a fluid market niche of ‘hipness.’<sup>10</sup> It was in the context of seeking to distance herself from simplistic notions of performativity that Butler wrote *Bodies that Matter* (1993), but it was only later that Butler struck upon a notion of ‘subjective dissolution’ in her study of Sophocles’ play *Antigone* that, one could say, opened up the space of the political in her thought.

### **Antigone: Background and brief Synopsis**



Oedipus kills his father Laius, the King of Thebes, and marries his mother Jocasta and takes over rulership. He begets four children with Jocasta: Eteocles, Polynices, Ismene and Antigone. After Oedipus dies a fight breaks out over succession. The brothers Polynices and Eteocles are supposed to share power but Eteocles refuses, and Polynices is banished from Thebes. Polynices returns and leads an attack on Thebes against Eteocles. The attack on Thebes results in the death of both brothers. Their uncle, Creon,

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Frank (1997, 224-239) has an interesting discussion regarding the way in which capitalism, and advertising in particular, domesticates countercultural initiatives.



assumes power and decrees the burial of Eteocles with full military honours and at the same time issues a prohibition against burying the body of Polynices, whom Creon deems a 'traitor' and so the body is left out in the open to decompose. Sophocles' play opens with Antigone's demand to bury her brother Polynices against the explicit edict of Creon. Antigone disobeys the edict and buries Polynices. This leads to a confrontation with Creon, ruler of Thebes, who banishes her to a cave where she dies. Antigone has been taken as a model of defiance. But how are we to understand her resistance? What can we learn from Antigone as regards the formation of a radical subjectivity?

In *Antigone's Claim* (2000) Butler looks to Antigone in order to explore the very limits of identity, of the point in which identity breaks down. She speaks of risking identity at the border of comprehensibility, of risking non-sense to oneself and others, Butler's work accords with the work of a number of left Lacanians who seek a universal that 'cuts' diagonally across all difference. Butler speaks in *Antigone's Claim*, of a form of 'subjective destitution' that cuts through ontic identificatory traits, and places the possibility of resistance in a radical 'act'.<sup>11</sup> Butler begins by asking a question first posed by George Steiner, "What would happen if psychoanalysis were to have taken Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?" Taking one's cue from Steiner's provocative question, the first part of this dissertation follows Butler as she situates Antigone in the place of the Oedipal law and seeks to explore the transformative consequences this move could have for politics. One immediate consequence is that

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<sup>11</sup> Subjective destitution is the definition of a radical subjectivity that stands outside of the symbolic coordinates of the prevailing regime.

Butler reads in *Antigone* a “new field of the human.” This new field of the human, in keeping with our determination to keep Butler free of the snares of liberal multiculturalism, would require the total collapse of the heterosexual regime of desiring and in this sense Butler's reading of *Antigone* points towards a more fundamental rethinking of the formation of the radical subject. *Antigone* signifies a break with the law of the Father and, simultaneously, the heralding of a distinct post-Oedipal politics. What has not been emphasized enough in commentators on Butler is that *Antigone's Claim* represents her boldest move towards constituting a theory of subjectivity that radically departs from her early work on performativity and the reiteration of the norm and instead we see her engaging with a radical ‘subjective deconstitution’ as a means for radical subjective change.

Lacanianians have suggested that Butler's theory is overly voluntaristic and mere ‘political correctness’ masquerading as critical theory. Butler is certainly no stranger to this criticism of her work, and in this dissertation the confrontation with a Lacanian critique will be staged. Will taking up the theoretical charges of her Lacanian critics ultimately benefit and strengthen Butler's post-Oedipal politico-ethico theory? The Lacanianians, hold dear to a theory of sexuation and a radical fissure of the Real, and are sceptical of Butler's ‘resignificatory’ politics.<sup>12</sup> For Žižek, Butler's critical theory plays on the field of the symbolic without touching the *Real* and without effecting lasting

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<sup>12</sup> The Real is that which is unsymbolizable but nevertheless structures the very way in which we adopt positions with respect to our everyday reality. This concept will be dealt with further in the chapter on Lacanian politics.

political change.<sup>13</sup> He argues that Butler's post-Oedipal politics of radical gender/sexual resignification has, like all counter-cultural political currents, been shown to function quite smoothly within the grid of global capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Thus a central issue in the debate between Butler and the left Lacanians is the extent to which Butler's theory of agency fails to acknowledge the Lacanian claim that a fundamental change in the symbolic universe requires a mutation in subjectivity at the level of the Real. It requires the further *radicalization* of Butler's initial constitution of the post-Oedipal subject by incorporating into her theory an understanding of the Real. Žižek insists on the theoretical importance of a radical politics of an 'act' touching the *Real* that breaks through endless resignifications and, he argues, is a necessary if one wants to install a radical restructuring the symbolic coordinates of global capitalism. Thus in what theoretically interesting and productive ways does a Lacanian politics intersect with Butler's work and how does one critically assess the political consequences of their differences for a radical left politics? The primary way in which we will engage this intersection between Žižek

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<sup>13</sup> The *Real* is a Lacanian term meaning precisely a deadlock in the process of signification. Its definition and usage will be dealt with later in chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Florida's work on the 'creative' class, helped provide a language for the neoliberal project of urban renewal (2002, 35-47). His work contributes to the gradual reconfiguration of much of the language of city politics previously based on Keynesian concepts of unionized industries, public housing etc, with the claim that 'creative cities' are the engines of a healthy economy. He then quickly highlights a vibrant gay district as a vital component to any diverse city. In Florida's view diversity is key to a healthy economy and gay and alternative households help create a collective creative *weltanschauung* that stimulates capitalist accumulation in metropolitan cities. No doubt Butler is only too aware of facile political appropriations of a pro LGBT stance. Nevertheless her original intervention in social and political theory runs the risk of being tamed by a liberal urbane crowd. Witness again the controversy surrounding Toronto's 2010 Pride Parade regarding making it a 'feel good' day for everybody thus prohibiting so-called 'political' floats.

and Butler is through an illustration of Lacan's *Four Discourses*. It is through a discussion of the latter that we can illustrate the insufficiencies of Butler's relational ontology.

The very contours of Butler's post-Oedipal politics are premised on a going 'beyond' of the standard Oedipal narrative and its attendant discursive regime that, Butler contends, remains caught within a heteronormative hegemonic frame. This dissertation will argue that to emerge on a post-Oedipal discursive terrain requires engaging with a particular Lacanian politics that is mindful of the effort that, in the attempt to overthrow a particular configuration of the symbolic, it does not end up simply reinstating the very structurality of a master that it seeks to displace. A post-Oedipal political theory must be aware at all times of the positioning of the Master, the big Other, and in doing so reject a social-democratic politics that seeks a reconfigured relation to the symbolic big Other. Instead a post-Oedipal politics is an *event of non-recognition* in that it foregoes any attempt to seek recognition in the Symbolic frame of the big Other.

## Chapter II: Ek-static Relational Subjectivity

Judith Butler is perhaps best known for ‘troubling’ the relation to the other. Insofar as gender is revealed to be largely an insistent repetition of a heterosexual norm, one’s relation to the other is never innocent of power. Take the case of seeking recognition for a gender that exceeds the binarism that structures heterosexuality. The consequence of seeking recognition of this sort is that one risks courting violence and marginalization if not outright social exclusion. Butler’s case for pluralizing a rigid gender dichotomy needs to be seen as her attempt to read Hegel’s theory of mutual recognition against the grain. As will be shown, Butler does not resolve recognition into a Cartesian identity. Notwithstanding those who argue that the sublation or *aufhebung* of the other renders the self able to appreciate the difference residing in the other, Butler insists on the constitutive moment of *self-loss* in the other, that is, a self-loss that cannot be dialectically resolved.<sup>15</sup> This intention of this chapter is to trace Butler’s theory of subject formation in Hegel. We will develop an extended investigation of Butler’s ‘troubling’ relationship with Hegel which will be framed using the theme of recognition and alterity. In her 1987 book on Hegel, *Subjects of Desire*, Butler outlines her initial defense of a relational *ek-static* subject against those interpreters of Hegel who want to

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, in a recent interview, makes clear her rejection of an ontology of the subject:

We cannot base a politics on any ontology of the subject. We have to think about modes of social relationality that precede the formation of the subject, and we have to ask why it is that some creatures are produced as subjects, and others are not. So I am not in favour of a subject ontology. (2010c)

posit a more secure Cartesian subject. It is precisely Hegel's more mainstream interpreters, in this case Stephen Houlgate and Robert R. Williams, who bring into relief the contours of Butler's ek-static subjectivity. This chapter will argue that Butler's various formulations of the Hegel's Lord and Bondsman dialectic is *the* site from which Butler launches her notion of political subjectivity.

### **Butler's Hegel**

*Subjects of Desire* (hereafter *SD*) is split into four parts. The first part, which will be of most interest here, details Butler's close reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* chapter 4. The second part is titled: "Historical Desires: The French Reception of Hegel" and details her reading and criticism the immensely influential work of Kojév and Hyppolite and the period in France that extends roughly from the 1930s to the 1960s, that is, up until the emergence of Althusser and Foucault. The third section is entirely given over to the work of Sartre, and perhaps today, would be extensively supported with the work of de Beauvoir as well. The last section was 'tacked on' at the last minute in the interests of the publication, and deals with readings of Foucault, Deleuze and Lacan, and represent early, sketchy thoughts that she has elaborated in more detail in her later works. For our purposes here, we will concentrate on the first part of *SD* that encompasses her reading of one of the most famous sections of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Lordship and Bondage, and to this day, remains a jumping off point for many of her theoretical excursions into the nature of precariousness and identity.

Let us begin by first noting the importance Hegel places in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the *relational* nature of subjectivity. He does this by first proposing that to

attain true self-consciousness human subjectivity must go outside itself and recognize another self-consciousness, and thus be recognized by that self-consciousness in return. This is captured nicely by Robert R. Williams who reminds us that Hegel's subject is emphatically not a "stable, quiescent self-identity." No such self-satisfied subject could possibly kick start a phenomenology of consciousness. As many commentators have alluded to, Hegel's break from Spinoza's monism is fuelled by the emphasis he placed on the *negativity of consciousness*; a "complex, restless, self-repulsive, negative identity." What drives consciousness beyond itself is a self-repulsing negativity. It is important to note that consciousness is "not initially present to itself, much less transparent to itself." Consciousness that does not yet know what it is: "What it is, is still implicit and must become explicit to it" (Williams 1997, 52). The story of the *Phenomenology* is thus the story of this loss of an original naive certitude.<sup>16</sup> This loss of naive certitude takes place in a scene of recognition in which an original self-consciousness looks over and sees an other.

That Butler's reading of Hegel beguiles many readers is due in part to her treatment of the nature of the other.<sup>17</sup> For Butler even the very act of 'thinking' is

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<sup>16</sup> Some have described Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a *Bildungsroman*, that is, an optimistic narrative of adventure and edification. In more contemporary parlance the *Bildungsroman* could be replaced with the conservative Hollywood genre known as the 'teenage angst' movie, replete with the central character as self-repulsive negativity who eventually learns how to navigate social norms, attend to otherness etc, progressively developing a self-identity which includes a knowledge of her social and gender role within family, country etc.

<sup>17</sup> Butler makes use of capitalized 'Other' and so will be used when quoting her work, otherwise the small 'other' will be used throughout.

indelibly marked by a necessary reference to an other, of going *outside oneself* into alterity. To think at all is to engage that which is other to oneself, to participate “in a set of structures or conventions” that exceed one, that are part of the “broad structures of communicability.” The very personal process of forming thoughts, “does not just belong to me, it belongs to others ...” (2009c). Butler’s describes this sense of *self-loss* as a form of *dispossession*. One could in fact risk the charge and claim the ‘essence’ of Butler’s theory of the subject is its *dispossession* by the other. It is a subject whose very *being* means being beyond itself. The subject is this upending, perpetual and perpetually changing *relation* to the other. Reacting against political analyses that situate subjects as consolidated, stable identities, she remains critical of liberal contract theory and state of nature descriptions that come prepared to install a methodological individualism as the core feature of political subjectivity.

In *Subjects of Desire* Butler reads Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a journey of the Hegelian subject and its motor, the dialectic: “In reading for multiple meanings, for plurivocity, ambiguity, and metaphor in the general sense, we experience concretely the inherent movement of dialectical thinking, the essential alteration of reality” (1987, 19). This is very different from a reading of Hegel that locates in his work an inner logic and immanent unfolding of the categories of pure thought. For example, Butler explains a key transition from consciousness to self-consciousness as follows: “Consciousness gives rise to self-consciousness in the bungled attempt to *explain* what it knows” (1987, 28). This sentence would mystify a more traditional reader of Hegel whose understanding of the dialectical unfolding of categories leaves no room for ‘bungling.’ For example the



British Hegelian Stephen Houlgate outlines the strict logical transitions that detail the *necessary* emergence of self-consciousness in his study of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>18</sup>

For Butler all dialectical movement is a configuration of desire. She puts less emphasis on testing the logical transition of categories and prefers to note instead the endless shifting of meanings. Meaning is constructed in Hegel's text rhetorically. For example, she focuses her attention on the copula "is" in order to illustrate the cyclical process of meaning creation in Hegel's text:

When Hegel states "Substance is Subject," the "is" carries the burden of "becomes," where becoming is not a unilinear but a cyclical process.

Hence, we read the sentence wrong if we rely on the ontological assumptions of linear reading, for the "is" is a nodal point of the interpenetration of both "Substance" and "Subject"; ... To read the sentence right would mean to read it cyclically, or to bring to bear the variety of partial meanings it permits on any given reading. Hence, it is not just that substance is being clarified, or that the subject is being defined, but the very meaning of the copula is itself being expressed as a locus of

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<sup>18</sup> The British Hegelian Stephen Houlgate's contention is that Kojève gets Hegel's *Phenomenology* wrong,

for Kojève, what drives self-consciousness to become social is its desire to assimilate (as well as be desired by) another's desire; for Hegel, by contrast, what renders self-consciousness social is its acceptance of the *other* as an *independent* source of recognition for itself. (2003a, 16-17)

We will contrast Houlgate's Hegel with Butler's reading in this chapter.

movement and plurivocity ... This multiplicity of meanings is not static ...  
but is the essence of becoming, of movement itself. (Butler 1987, 18-19)

To state the obvious, Butler cautions against a linear reading of Hegel.<sup>19</sup> She prefers reading the dialectic as a rhetoric of persuasion than a logical exegesis of the categories of thought. For Butler consciousness only comes to a greater understanding of itself and its place in the world by setting up obstacles in its path. The forming of a subject in the *Phenomenology* is a reiterative process, with the important distinction that the subject never ever returns to itself the same as it was before. Each time it is changed by its encounter with alterity, and though it may return in order to start anew, each starting point begins with the subject a touch wiser for its failing. Butler's emphasis on the *rhetorical* nature in which meaning is produced in the *Phenomenology* sets her apart from other contemporary readers of Hegel who are more concerned with the nature of the logical transitions and categorical distinctions. Hegelian dialectical method read rhetorically means that self-consciousness is, in its journey, *ek-static* or constantly

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<sup>19</sup> When Butler refers to the 'plurivocity' of a text she is referring to the impossibility of pinning down a final meaning. Andrew Cutrofello explains that any final meaning of a text:

cannot be resolved because the context that would render it decidable cannot be completely determined - "new experiences" can always bring about "unforeseeable configurations." Thus, the context of an undecidably equivocal text can never be completely determined. ... For Derrida, all texts are undecidably equivocal because of the impossibility of completely determining, or "saturating," textual contexts ... (1990, 157)

So right off the mark Butler is certain to provoke disagreement from those who read in Hegel a strict metaphysical delineation of the categories of pure thought, and general agreement from those who regard the legacy of Hegel as providing for just the slippage of meaning that Butler provokes here as a veritable example of the dialectic in action.

beyond itself in an alterity that it neither created nor controls.<sup>20</sup> Insisting on self-loss in the Other incites bouts of Cartesian inflected anxiety for some readers, nevertheless Butler's ek-static subject may just be the quintessential Hegelian reading of Hegel. Butler reads Hegel as constantly beyond himself, in that his thought never settles down into a static permanence:

The gradual yet insistent effort of Hegel's journeying subject ... never relinquishes this project to relate itself to externality in order to rediscover itself as more inclusive being. The insurpassability of externality implies the permanence of desire. [I]nsofar as Hegel's subject never achieves a static union with externality, it is hopelessly beyond its own grasp, although it retains as its highest aim the thorough comprehension of itself.  
(1987, 44)

### Judith Butler and the Anglo-Hegelians

The work of the British Hegelian Stephen Houlgate can be used as an instructive foil to Butler's work for the reason that he reads in Hegel a number of liberal political themes, and also he affirms in the latter an undying commitment to a 'presuppositionless' philosophy. Hegel did one better than Kant by showing that the essential categories of thought are generated out of the logical process of thought thinking itself without the intervention of any outside subjectivity. Houlgate's claims that in the *Phenomenology*

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<sup>20</sup> In *Subjects of Desire* Butler spells it 'ecstatic' but as she develops the concept in her later works, the spelling changes to *ek-static*. The latter spelling will be used throughout.

Hegel sets out to prove to sceptical metaphysicians of his time that, immanent to thought itself, is an underlying unity of *being* and *thinking*:

The aim of the *Phenomenology* is to teach ordinary consciousness —and philosophers wedded to the convictions of ordinary consciousness— that being is not simply something *objective* to which we stand in relation but exhibits one and the same logical form as thought itself and thus can be understood *a priori* from *within* thought. (Houlgate 2006, 146-7)

The Hegelian philosophy is a rigorous, logical and presuppositionless unfolding of the categories of thought and being and, for our purposes here, Houlgate argues that inherent to thought itself is the necessity of human intersubjectivity. Self-consciousness can only come to fruition through an exposure to another self-consciousness. Houlgate argues, that “we can achieve certainty of ourselves only when we are recognized by another whom we recognize as free in turn” (2003a, 20). His emphasis on achieving certainty of selfhood and recognition leads him to attempt to undergird Hegel with a Cartesian concern for self-certainty and bodily integrity and which promptly sets up a crucial distinction between himself and Butler that we shall now investigate.

Houlgate’s reading of Hegel also, like Butler’s, emphasizes the social component of mutual recognition, yet in addition Houlgate draws out what he sees as the Cartesian undercurrent in Hegelian self-conscious subjectivity. Houlgate argues that Hegel’s purpose in the *Phenomenology* is to show to the many non-believers who remained sceptical of Hegel’s metaphysical system at the time, how ordinary consciousness if left to itself reflects the very structure of *being*. Houlgate argues that Hegel wanted to

illustrate that consciousness immanently evolves to eventually reflect reality as its very essence; although it may look *as if* mind is separate from external reality, as if there exists a *thing-in-itself* unreachable and unknowable to human consciousness, the *Phenomenology* seeks to put to rest, once and for all, the Cartesian subject/object dualism. The question becomes whether Hegel's solution retains the Cartesian cogito or if Hegel's emphasis on self-loss and alterity refuses all reference to a volitional self-sustaining subject?

### **Subjects of Desire**

In *Subjects of Desire* Butler begins her treatment of the *Phenomenology* with ordinary consciousness and its attempt to think those objects external to itself. A consciousness that does not think the other, that does not think of something outside of itself, would not be properly thinking at all. But as soon as it goes out into alterity, consciousness seeks to move beyond the many "nows" and "heres" of immediate sense certainty. It is upon introduction of the category of *Force*, that consciousness is able to think beyond simple appearances and simple *Understanding* and grasp reality at a whole new level of complexity. Thus, for example, consciousness must move beyond immediate *Understanding* if it is to understand the concept of gravity. A higher order of concepts is needed in order to grasp what Butler describes as a hidden dimension of reality beyond immediate appearance yet which exerts a causal force:

[T]here is always something that is beyond the determinate, some operative negativity, that accounts for the genesis of determinate form as well as for its eventual dissolution. The notion of Force confirms that ...

reality is not coextensive with appearance, but always sustains and is sustained by a hidden dimension. In order to think the object of experience ... we must relinquish faith in the kind of thinking that can take only determinate beings as its objects; conceptual thinking must replace Understanding, for only the former can think the movement between opposites. (1987, 27)

The category of Force exposes the Understanding in its utter incapacity to understand the hidden complexity of reality. Ordinary consciousness, still mired in Understanding, lacks the cognitive tools to understand the new Newtonian universe: “The Understanding consistently mistakes stasis for truth” (*SD* 29). This is as far as consciousness can go, it has reached its most “sophisticated development” in the Understanding. Lacking the “cognitive tools” to properly understand the phenomenon in its complexity, consciousness is unable to think the process of change, and as such Understanding is found to be wanting. It fumbles in its attempt to explain Force, it finds itself searching for the right words but comes up short, and in so doing consciousness discovers its own reflexivity: “Consciousness gives rise to self-consciousness in the bungled attempt to *explain* what it knows” (1987, 28).

This new apprehension now implicitly grasps the back and forth of change, of the hidden dimensions that structure reality, nevertheless it suffers from being too abstract, too theoretical, it is not a real apprehension or ‘sensuous’ connection with the external world. Rather it still feels as if there is a mind, a consciousness here, and a world ‘out there’ without any real correspondence or connection between the two. Self-

consciousness must seek out an accommodation with the world in a way that not only does not detract from either subject or object, but on the contrary, strengthens each entity by incorporating their respective differences into a unity. Butler explains it as follows:

The problem under consideration is how to make the sensuous and perceptual world a difference that is no difference, that is, how to recapitulate this world as a feature of self-consciousness itself. We have seen that “explaining” the world went part of the way in doing the trick, but the solution there seemed too abstract. (1987, 32)

For Butler the subjective apprehension of the object, of the merging of subject and object into a “difference that is no difference” is nothing else but the advent of *desire*. Desire is that which makes the sensuous and perceptual world and consciousness into *a difference that is no difference*. For Butler desire is the sensuous articulation of self-consciousness in general, the sensuous enactment of the unity of consciousness with the world (33). No longer is this unity merely thought in abstract and theoretical terms but self-consciousness now properly apprehends alterity as a feature of itself: “Desire, as the expression of self-consciousness, is a constant effort to overcome the appearance of ontological disparity between consciousness and its world” (34). *Desire makes explicit self-consciousness to itself*.

Butler understands Hegel’s metaphysical project as tightly wrapped around the concept of desire. Desire, Butler insists, is the logical motor of the entire *Phenomenology* (43). For Butler on the other hand, reading Hegel rhetorically through the lens of desire offers her a way of thinking the dialectic without succumbing to common pitfalls mined

by various readers of Hegel, i.e., the progress of consciousness as teleological, a dialectic that renders difference into the same etc. By incorporating desire into the dialectic, Butler wishes to open up different instances in which Hegel could possibly be read for meanings that are in excess of the strict logistics of Houlgate's interpretation. Butler thus disagrees with those who want to claim a more modest role for desire, those who argue for its eventual supersession once self-consciousness recognizes itself in another self-consciousness.<sup>21</sup> Butler insists that desire's gradual sophistication is what drives the dialectic forward in the *Phenomenology*.

To claim that desire is simply an unsophisticated form of knowing and being in Hegel's system is to misread the standard of truth that governs the *Phenomenology* generally; the gradual sophistication of desire —the expanding inclusiveness of its intentional aims is the principle of progress in the *Phenomenology*. (1987, 45)

Having woven desire into the threads of the dialectic, the only problem for it becomes the fact that it is indifferent to the objects that it seeks to negate. Hegel notes that this incessant requirement to garner and negate object after object does not lead to a more expansive and complex version of self-consciousness. It only leads to an empty repetition. Self-consciousness goes out into alterity and negates object after object in an

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<sup>21</sup> The American Robert Stern is one of many commentators who believe that desire must give way to a new stage of the dialectic once consciousness turns away from the negation of objects and turns to the *recognition* of another self-consciousness (2002, 76). For Stern, the scene of mutual recognition highlights a higher stage that sees desire fall away and the dynamic of recognition take its place. For many Hegel scholars equating desire with the dialectic *tout court* would seem to deny desire its own specificity.



endless repetition of desire that denies it any stable sense of itself. How can this be resolved? It is here, in the brief interim before the storm of Master and Slave as it were, that the originality of Butler's reading of Hegel's scene of mutual recognition comes to the fore.

The original self-consciousness which sees another self-consciousness 'over there' (roughly paragraphs 175-185 in the *Phenomenology*) has been subject to many interpretations. Butler herself returns to this section in a number of her later works, stressing a different variation each time. It may be no exaggeration to claim that Butler's Hegel begins and ends with this scene of mutual recognition.

For self-consciousness to thrive and not atrophy, it is necessary that it relate to another self-consciousness. Hegel says this in a number of slightly different ways all contained within a couple of densely argued paragraphs: "A self-consciousness exists *for a self-consciousness*. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it" (para 177). On the next page Hegel states that self-consciousness "exists only in being acknowledged." Up to now consciousness has been negating objects only to have desire and the object return in a repetitive loop. Consciousness is not able to maintain a sense of stability or objectivity because "instead of gradually eliminating the domain of alterity, self-consciousness confronts the infinity of determinate objects and, accordingly, the infinite insatiability of desire" (Butler 1987, 39). To put it simply, there is too much happening, desire is in danger of over-heating in its continuous pursuit of an indefinite number of objects to

negate. Something is needed in order to quell this scene and put subjectivity on a more stable footing.

### **Mutual Recognition**

Prior to the scene of mutual recognition, the original self-consciousness is caught in a loop of continually having to negate the object, and yet, with each object negated, consciousness must go out and seek another thus seriously qualifying any stable sense of consciousness. Thus with this process repeating *ad nauseum*, self-consciousness quickly becomes “weary of its own vanishing act” and thereby seeks a more “permanent sense of self” (Butler 1987, 40). It then discovers another self-consciousness ‘over there’. The key passage in this regard is the following from Hegel’s *Phenomenology*:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has *come out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first *it has lost itself*, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (second emphasis mine, para 179)

Critically, for Houlgate, self-consciousness suffers a debilitating deficiency if it gives itself over to the other and sees “nothing but its own self” there. Houlgate makes clear that the cogito may negate, but it must never relinquish itself to the other. To the extent that self-consciousness finds itself in the other, it suffers, according to Houlgate, a *self-loss*, for its identity is now reflected in the *not-I* or the other.

Equally, however, self-consciousness lacks any real sense that the other is genuinely *other* than it, since it sees in the other nothing but its own self.

Insofar as self-consciousness does no more than find itself recognized by another, therefore, its consciousness of both itself and the other actually remains deficient. (Houlgate 2003a, 18)

Self-consciousness cannot bear this state of self-loss in the other and similarly the other, according to Houlgate, it is not a true other, since it is merely the reflection of itself. To remedy this unbearable state of subjective ambiguity, Houlgate argues that self-consciousness proceeds to supersede or *aufheben* the other independent being “in order to be certain of itself as the essential being” (2003a, 18). Self-consciousness thus withdraws itself from the other and retreats into itself. It attains self-certainty by removing any vestige of itself in the other, recovering the certainty that “it is what it is in itself” and simultaneously sets the other free.

To begin with, self-consciousness did not “see the other as an essential being,” because in the other it saw only itself. Yet it did not enjoy an unalloyed sense of self either, since it found itself “over there” in another (that it did not properly recognize). Now, by contrast, self-consciousness has a clear sense of its own identity and recognizes that the other is something wholly other than and independent of itself. Consequently, it can at last fulfill the condition required for concrete self-consciousness: for it can find *itself* recognized by and reflected in another that is known to be truly *other*. (2003a, 19)

Seeking to consolidate the identity of each self-consciousness, Houlgate’s first step is to strictly delimit their respective boundaries. Therefore Houlgate is quick to render as a

temporary state of affairs the first sign of self-loss in the other. Houlgate understands mutual recognition to result in two circumscribed, contained, equal and identifiably separate self-consciousnesses. The other is *aufheben*, superseded, in order for the original self-consciousness to recover from its *self-loss* in the other. This withdrawal from and *aufheben* of the other is seen as a necessary consolidation of the identities of self and other. The subject goes beyond itself, only to return to itself, more mature and self-sustaining no doubt. But for Houlgate, in order to recognize another self-consciousness, it must return to itself and leave *the other as other*. This final consolidation into separate identities is a prerequisite for the construction of Houlgate's liberal political order that stands for the mutual recognition of equals.

In *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, Robert R. Williams argues that what initially happens to the original self consciousness in this scene of mutual recognition is that it is rudely awakened from its naive certitude and solipsistic solitude when it sees the other self-consciousness.

The self achieves its identity by excluding the other. The other constitutes a shock to this naive parochial identity, which works an immediate change. The self now finds itself as other, or as "othered." The presence of the other signifies a loss of the original naive certitude, and this may be experienced as a loss of self. (Williams 1997, 53)

The dilemma strictly relates to being in an 'othered' state which is a shock to consciousness. Upon seeing an other 'over there' means that for the first time it must recognize a consciousness like itself who views another consciousness as other, it has

been 'othered' by the other, and this sense of self-loss turns into an absolutely unbearable state of anxiety. It must return to itself out of its 'othered' state either through killing the Other, or accommodating the Other. It is the latter which Williams opts for as it is only by accommodating the other, by renouncing coercion, can the other be affirmed "not simply in its identity but also its difference" (56). Williams states:

The self's return to itself out of self-othering is not simply a restoration of the original parochial and abstract self-identity. It is ... decentered and relativized by its relation to the other, while being enlarged and legitimated by the other's recognition. (56)

Williams uses the language, "decentered and relativized" but stops short of musing on a permanent state of self-loss or, as Butler insists, on an *ek-static* relation to alterity.

As we will subsequently see, the biggest difference between Butler and Williams is that the latter is still with Houlgate in insisting on the necessary return of the self in its otherness, of a return from the sense of being 'othered'. It is enough for both Houlgate and Williams to affirm that authentic mutual recognition recognizes that "coercion and mastery be given up" but the renunciation of violence leaves still too many questions unanswered for Butler, for whom mutual recognition means more than a renunciation of coercion. For Butler mutual recognition is the sign of a relational ontological bearing that takes place within a framework of recognizability, against a backdrop in which subjects emerge as recognizable and intelligible forms.

### Butler's ek-static subject

For Butler the question becomes, "How are we to understand self-consciousness as essentially realized in otherness, and yet as absolutely for itself?" (1987, 40) How is one to understand the relation between the constitution of subjectivity in alterity and at the same time as a singularity, as an independent self-sustaining subject? If Houlgate and Williams answer this question with recourse to the Cartesian cogito, Butler suggests that one think along the lines of the *relationality* of the subject. For Butler recognition once achieved only confirms the ambiguity of a subjectivity rent between self-determination and ek-static self-loss in the other. For Butler self-consciousness relinquishes itself to the Other, in fact entirely loses itself in and through this relation to the Other. Butler suggests that the initial self-consciousness is no longer seeking to "consume the Other, as it sought to consume objects, but is *instead consumed by the Other*. ... Self-consciousness finds itself besieged by the Other" (1987, 48), and the "ecstatic involvement of the first self-consciousness is "self-annihilating" (1987, 49). Writing in 2004 Butler summarizes the subjective dynamics that take place in the scene of mutual recognition as follows:

[T]he self never returns to itself free of the Other, *that its "relationality" becomes constitutive of who the self is*. ... Hegel has given us an ek-static notion of the self, one which is, of necessity, outside itself, not self-identical, differentiated from the start. It is the self over here who considers its reflection over there, but it is equally over there, reflected, and reflecting... it is transformed through its encounter with alterity, not in order to return to itself, but to become a self it never was. Difference casts

it forth into an irreversible future. To be a self is, on these terms, to be at a distance from who one is ... cast, always, outside oneself, Other to oneself.  
(2004c, 148)

The moment the initial self-consciousness discovers another self-consciousness 'over there' it loses itself in this other self-consciousness. This self-loss is an ambivalence of being both 'here' and 'over there' as both reflecting and reflected. The subject is precisely here and over there, engaging a dynamic in which each self-consciousness sees itself as both here as a singular self-sustaining being and yet also recognizing itself over there in a reflexive structure identical to itself, "It is aware that it at once is, and is not, another consciousness" (1987, 50). The subject "finds itself transported outside of itself in an irreversible relation of alterity. In a sense, the self 'is' this relation to alterity" (1987, 149). Butler here marks the copula '*is*' much like the attention she drew to the rhetorical nature of the '*is*' in Hegel's phrase: Substance *is* Subject. The '*is*' in "the self *is* this relation to alterity" does not attribute a predicate achievement to the subject, as in, "she is tall" but rather marks a relationship that is lacking in a dialectical resolution, since any such 'resolution' would resurrect the Cartesian moment of the sovereign volitional subject.

Houlgate recognized self-loss as the momentary sublation of the self that goes outside into alterity and then returns back again to itself as a fully contained self-integral being. In contrast, Butler intones that the Hegelian subject is forever outside itself, that this '*self-loss*' is *constitutive of the subject*. In the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Subjects of Desire*, she provides the following update:

The emergent subject of Hegel's phenomenology is an *ek-static* one, a subject who constantly finds itself outside itself, and whose periodic expropriations do not lead to a return to a former self. Indeed, the self who comes outside of itself, for whom ek-stasis is a condition of existence, is one for whom no return to self is possible, for whom there is no final recovery from self-loss. (1999, xv)

The concept of ek-static self-loss serves Butler's goal of maintaining Hegelian ties to a subjectivity borne out of a recognition of otherness, of a subject that exists in a dynamic relationality to the other and not in any sense as a static *positivity*. In *SD*, ek-static self-loss underscored Butler's early emphasis on the relational nature of the subject. This goes hand in hand with her emphasis on a 'nondialectical version of difference' which she picks up from Foucault and other French readers of Hegel. Foucault's influential work posits an inversion of Hegel's priority of identity over difference. Butler follows in her subsequent work, seeking out a proliferation of oppositions other than those that Hegel tames within his binary forms.

### **Butler's Critique of Hegel in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997)**

Ten years later in *The Psychic Life of Power* (hereafter *PLP*) Butler embarks on an altogether different reading of Hegel. Appearing in the *Phenomenology* immediately after the section on Lordship and Bondage, the Unhappy Consciousness serves as an important transition point between the labouring body and its dialectical resolution into religious concepts. Butler argues here that Hegel short-circuits his own dialectic by a renunciation of the body and the resolution of bodily being, of the materiality of the body



into religion strikes Butler as an arbitrary move to foreclose on the instability that comes about whenever one tries to discipline the bodily affect. Sweating, leaking, defecating and sexual bodies that are arbitrarily made quiescent in order to prioritize a realm of pure thought is, for Butler, not a resolution of a proper dialectic but its arbitrary foreclosure.

In a chapter in *PLP* specifically recalling Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness entitled: "Conscience doth make subjects of us all" Butler engages with Nietzsche and in particular, his contention that the subject is formed in a punitive scene of address in which it is interrogated about a wrongdoing and must give an account of itself. From this scene of interrogation emerges an ethical imperative that berates the ego of the subject. This Nietzschean formulation of an *ethical imperative* that subjects and *subjectivates* i.e., forms the subject, is prefigured in the *Phenomenology* in the section on the Unhappy Consciousness, and is a precursor to Butler's later 'ethical turn' and the centrality that norms and normative schemes will play in her thought. Recall that in her *Subjects of Desire* Butler maintains a reading of Hegel's project that underscores its unfinished nature — a dialectic of desire that never finds satisfaction in any end point, a self-journeying subject forever finding more encompassing versions of itself in its otherness. In *PLP* Butler changes gears and critically seeks out parts of Hegel's narrative that seem forced. Much less optimistic in this reading of Hegel, Butler's argument in *PLP* is that desire is no longer the motor of a dialectical journey of consciousness, but instead is steeped in a form of subordination constitutive of the subject.

### **The Constitution of Subjectivity: Following Nietzsche's lead**

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche conceived of the genesis of subjectivity in a scenario in which the proto-subject finds itself forced to give an account of itself and prove itself innocent of the accusations made against it. As Butler explains, "Thus I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me" (2005, 15). It is the constitution of reflexivity, of an interior psychic that draws Butler to a re-reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, particularly in light of a renewed Nietzschean slant that seeks to admonish Hegel for his Mr. Magoo optimism.<sup>22</sup> Butler follows Nietzsche's cue in arguing that the subject's initial aggressivity towards others is re-directed by imperatives of morality and turned inward on the 'self,' thus developing into conscience, and a model of reflexivity is borne out of subjection.

Conscience is the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive. ... For

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<sup>22</sup> In *Subjects of Desire* Butler compares the resilient optimism of Hegel to a comic book character who experiences hardship, even death only to re-emerge intact:

There is little time for grief in the *Phenomenology* because renewal is always so close at hand. What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more like the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbor's chicken coop always seems to land on all four wheels. Like such miraculously resilient characters of the Saturday morning cartoon, Hegel's protagonists always reassemble themselves, prepare a new scene, enter the stage armed with a new set of ontological insights — and fail again. (21)

Nietzsche reflexivity is a consequence of conscience; self-knowing follows from self-punishment. (1997b, 22)

I am confronted, accused, and asked to give an account of myself. In the giving of this account there is simultaneously an emergence of the reflexive subject, of self-consciousness, of, in Nietzsche's words, bad conscience. Bad conscience is the voice of self-beratement signalling a subjectivity that, in the throes of its own constitution, turns against itself and by doing so disciplines and keeps itself in line. Butler insists, after Nietzsche, that subjection is written into the very interstices of subjectivity.

Returning then, to the Unhappy Consciousness, for Butler, in a parallel fashion the admonishments of the lord are turned inward by the bondsman, that is, the original punitive and retributive actions of the lord against the bondsman are 'brought inside' into the bondsman, as a punishing super-ego or conscience:

The master, who at first appears to be "external" to the slave, re-emerges as the slave's own conscience. The unhappiness of the consciousness that emerges is its own self-beratement, the effect of the transmutation of the master into a psychic reality. (1997b, 3)

Conscience is viewed as a form of subjugation, an internal self-beratement that is constitutive of the subject. One need recall here Butler's early reading of Hegel in *SD*, where self-consciousness naturally sought ever more expansive forms of itself, and in which she gave no indication of a reflexive subject borne out of a punitive self-narrative. However in *PLP* Butler promotes the view of a self-making that is borne out of a, 'giving account of oneself', of a self-narrative given in response to an accusation that initiates a

reflexive subject. For the bondsman this punitive self-narrative now seeks to rid itself of all bodily affects by finding solace in a higher spiritual realm. More specifically it is the bondsman's fear of dying that installs an ethical imperative that is punishing in its inducements of self-mortification, of purging the body and of its elevation of consciousness itself into a realm of spiritual abstraction. The sphere of the ethical emerges in the disavowal of one's imminent death. The fear of death leads to an escape beyond the corporeal, beyond the body, into abstract thought. This is similar to her argument in *SD* where Butler points out that the lord, risking his own life and fearing death, embraces the 'comforts' of abstract thought.

[T]he fear and trembling accompanying the risking of his own life teaches him the relief of abstraction. Terror gives rise to dissociation. ... the reflexive project of disembodiment becomes linked to the domination of the Other. The lord cannot get rid of the body once and for all ... And yet he retains the project of becoming a pure, disembodied "I," a freedom unfettered by particularity and determinate existence, a universal and abstract identity. (1987, 53)

Butler is here linking freedom with abstraction and the fact that the bondman's fear of death is transformed into his domination. Because the bondsman chooses life over death, he now must labour under the lord. In this respect, "domination was a way of forcing the other to die *within* the context of life" (1997b, 41). To suffer a living death is still to remain within the context of the living and so, for Butler, to remain within the struggle

that is life, that is, a tangible dialectical struggle with an other that does not witness a relinquishing of bodily being to an abstraction or abstract realm of concepts.

Recall the bondsman has achieved a certain degree of independence and sense of identity through his labour on objects and service to the lord. Through the bondsman's labour on objects he is able to 'objectify' himself in a way that the lord cannot experience because the latter seeks only to consume. Now with respect to the bondsman, the very transient nature of the objects of his labour, the fact that he produces them only to have them disappear again, awakens him to the nature of his own bodily mortality and the transience of life. In labouring under the lord the bondsman experiences the transience of his labours as they are transformed into objects that are consumed by the lord.

Significantly his objects of labour are constantly vanishing: "Hence, if the object defines him, reflects back what he is, ... and if those objects are relentlessly sacrificed, then he is a relentlessly self-sacrificing being ... a persistent site of vanishing" (1997b, 40). With the change in consciousness of the bondsman, comes a transformation of the original fear of death. It is not fear of one's death at the hands of the other or the fear of being killed by somebody else as it was in the section on Lordship and Bondage. In other words, instead of a fear of death in the struggle with another body, another human being, it becomes now an abstract fear of death. Instead it is a fear of the "inevitable fate of any being whose consciousness is determined and embodied" (1997b, 41). Death is no longer seen as an external threat from another, it now becomes fear of one's own mortality, a fear of bodily vulnerability and temporality. The bondsman now seeks to take flight from his body, to flee the bodily deterioration, to take respite in the realm of thinking, of

contemplation. This flight from the body instils in the bondsman an ethical imperative that is self-punishing in its sheer will to deny the body. Rituals of purging, of self-mortification, of penance, of bodily denial, are the genesis of a psychic interiority, of conscience. This fear carves out an interior psychic space and sets off a sequence of events that, Butler argues, lead to the formation of a self-berating ethical imperative that anticipates Nietzsche's thesis on the constitution of subjectivity via the development of conscience. The ethical imperative is a structure of norms that both constitute and imperil the subject in the very constitution of an ethical consciousness, "the subject is subordinated to norms, and the norms are subjectivating, that is, they give an ethical shape to the reflexivity of this emerging subject" (1997b, 43). The echoes of the later Foucault resonate throughout this quote. Butler is reaffirming here the importance of normative values, of a structure of normative expectations that constitute the subject or punish it when it refuses to accommodate itself to the norm.

### **Stoicism, Scepticism and the Paradoxical Assertion of the Ineluctable Body**

This flight from fear of bodily degeneration and death translates into a stubborn clinging to thought that takes the form of stoicism and scepticism. The bondsman, in seeking its freedom in pure thought via stoicism and scepticism, internalizes the very master it sought to rid itself of, and, as such this insidious form of self-regulation takes hold of the subject out of which is borne the Unhappy Consciousness and an ethical reflexivity that prefigures Nietzsche's self-punishing conscience. Key here to Butler's argument is that the bondsman in clinging to life, in disavowing the body, attempts to

purge himself of affect by disappearing into pure thought. But paradoxically by trying to realize itself in thought, ends up affirming the body even more, the very corporeal existence it seeks to suppress. Before Hegel resolves the Unhappy Consciousness into religion via the total effacement of the body, Butler notes the paradoxical assertion of the ineluctability of the body in Hegel's text. Every religious or spiritual attempt to efface the body ends up securing the body, its very negation is paradoxically *a productive assertion*. For example Stoicism, in its purported selflessness turns out to be the height of egotism, for it must presuppose the very self that it seeks to deny. In the section on the Unhappy Consciousness, before the priest arrives on the scene, the body is simultaneously posited and negated, and it is the very ineluctability of the body, its persistence amidst the attempts by the self to deny it, that speaks to a tension that, Butler believes, inheres in all critical thinking worthy of its name. But upon Hegel's introduction of the priest and mediator, all is lost. It is here, Butler argues, that Hegel breaks with his own pattern of explanation that exposes paradox and the persistence of desire and the body, in favour of a religious solution. The stronger the negation of the body, the more consciousness attaches on to bodily functions, proving that in seeking to rid ourselves of the body we cannot but promote a fascination for the body. Butler explains that Hegel's work reveals this intriguing paradox, but he just as quickly snatches it away.

In effect, self-sacrifice is not refuted through the claim that self-sacrifice is itself a wilful activity; rather, Hegel asserts that in self-sacrifice one enacts another's will. One might expect that the penitent would be shown to be

reveling in himself, self-aggrandizing, narcissistic, that his self-punishments would culminate in a pleasurable assertion of self. But Hegel eschews this explanation and thus breaks with the pattern of explanation in the chapter in favour of a religious solution in Spirit. (1997b, 52)

Although to call Hegel's resolution a *deus ex machina* may be putting it too strongly, Butler remains critical of Hegel's "eschatological transformation of the pain of this world into the pleasure of the next" (1997b, 53). For Butler this is a forced resolution to the body or to pleasure. In contesting the fast-track solution of Hegel, Butler wants instead to insist that the 'logic' of Hegel's narrative points instead to a 'pleasure' of the body. Perhaps even a 'jouissance' that is indescribable, unimaginable and inarticulate. A pleasure in pain, a persistence so pleasurable that it causes pain. Butler takes the logic of Hegel's own analysis and applies it critically against his own reading of the Unhappy Consciousness. On her reading, the dialectic of desire would refuse any immediate resolution that seeks to conjure away the resiliency of the desiring body. According to Butler, before the introduction of the "mediator" and the "priest" the chapter on the Unhappy Consciousness appears to proceed as if it contained a trenchant critique of ethical imperatives and religious ideals. In this way Butler reads Hegel against the grain in a manner of speaking. In *PLP* Butler reads an instance in Hegel's text where Hegel himself seemingly ignores the current of his own argumentation and forcibly directs the dialectic into a closure that Butler deems as arbitrary. There however is one more thing to note before we take leave of *PLP* and this concerns the later mitigation of her argument regarding the formation of the subject in subjection. Butler argues in *PLP* that



the subject is wrought in the midst of matrices of power that is both enabling and subjugating. Although she is to later reject the Nietzschean tenet of the subject formed in a punitive scene of address, she nonetheless retains the role social norms play in the formation of the subject. In *PLP* she posits that norms play the dual role of enabling a subject and also foreclosing on other possible ways in which identity could be imagined.

Butler's (re)reading of this section of the *Phenomenology* perhaps speaks to a growing concern that a strictly Foucaultian understanding of subjectivity left one with the impression that the disciplinarity of power on bodies worked too insistently in one direction. There is no space in which to think the resistance to power if it *immanently* works to produce the subject. Secondly, Butler looked to Nietzsche to supplement what she saw as Foucault's lack of attention to the way in which a subject 'interiorizes' the operation of power. How does Foucault explain the ways in which the subject takes up the operation of power? And for Butler, it is important that this answer articulate the ways in which power fails, of a possibility of resistance on the part of the subject. To this end, Butler briefly flirted with the Nietzschean idea of a genesis of the subject via the operation of standing before an accusation and giving an account of oneself, of the development of a conscience in the face of a threat to one's existence. As we will see next, Butler returns to Hegel in order to re-think this position.

In 2004 Butler publishes *Precarious Life* and closely on its heels in 2005 *Giving Account of Oneself (GAO)*. Both these books mark a turning away from the Nietzschean influence of her arguments on subordination and self-beratement towards an opening up of her work to larger frames that seek to understand how broader human populations are

sustained and defined as against others who may not be rendered visible in the prevailing 'hegemonic frames.'

Butler contests the notion that we are able to grieve only those "lives that share a common language or cultural sameness with ourselves." For Butler "the point is not so much to extend our capacity for compassion, but to understand that ethical relations have to cross both cultural and geographical distance." Note here that Butler is not re-framing a humanism, she is not simply appealing to one's more compassionate senses but is seeking a way to shift the moral framework of recognition that "takes us beyond communitarianism and nationalism alike" (2010a).

### **Butler's Move Away From Nietzsche's Punitive Structure of Address**

Butler now very much abandons the idea of the role of self-subjection in the constitution of the subject and seeks instead to address other less punitive and more sustaining forms of subject formation. Re-thinking her position on subject formation, specifically the punitive scene of inauguration that calls upon the subject to account for itself, Butler seeks out more 'sustaining forms of address'. A reading of Foucault's later works on the self and in particular *The Use of Pleasure*, prompts Butler to state:

For Foucault *reflexivity emerges in the act of taking up a relation to moral codes*, but it does not rely on an account of internalization or of psychic life more generally, certainly not a reduction of morality to bad conscience ... I perhaps too quickly accepted this punitive scene of inauguration for the subject ... The turning against oneself that typifies the emergence of

Nietzschean bad conscience does not account for the emergence of reflexivity in Foucault. (emphasis added, Butler 2005, 15)

What needs first to be noted here is the invocation of and importance attached to ‘moral codes’ in the constitution of the subject. The self-beratement thesis that made up the main focus of Butler’s theoretical labours in *PLP* is amended if not rejected outright in order to frame ‘less punitive’ measures by which the subject is sustained in social life. Butler now focuses more attention on the ways in which a “social dimension of normativity governs the scene of recognition” (2005, 23). With regards now to her previous readings of the dyadic exchange between self and other in the scene of mutual recognition, Butler now reads the scene discursively.<sup>23</sup> Structuring the dyadic exchange between self and other is a frame that defines the very parameters within which the other is deemed recognizable: “[Hegel] did not explain why some are recognizable, and others not” (2010c). This is not liberal hand-wringing over the need to include more people inside prevailing norms of recognition, since this would be to mistakenly read her emphasis on norms of recognition in a humanist light instead of striking to the heart of her contention — that to recognize something as recognizable it first has to be rendered intelligible within a normative frame that constitutes its recognizability.

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<sup>23</sup> The discursive moment Butler adds to the Hegelian scene of recognition focuses on the place of language, norms and social conventions that structure the ‘visibility’ of others:

I think it is important to realize that if and when recognition happens, it happens through established languages and norms, and that the claim to be recognized sometimes requires innovating new modes of language and new social conventions. This is why some persons and creatures are "recognizable" when others are not. (2010c).

In asking the ethical question “How ought I to treat another?” I am immediately caught up in a realm of social normativity, since the other only appears to me, only functions as an other for me, if there is a frame within which I can see and apprehend the other in her separateness and exteriority. (2005, 25)

There are other ways in which subjects are constituted and sustained that don't rely on scenes of punitive accusation. To base an ethics on accusations and the demand to give an account in one's defence on threat of punishment is a particular scene of address that *no longer appeals to Butler as the paradigmatic example of subject formation*. The very concept of self-narration that secured the Nietzschean punitive account of self-formation, is critically rejected in favour of her renewed emphasis on the subject's self-loss in alterity. The general nature of alterity now includes a structure of normativity that acts as a disciplinary matrix stipulating what objects will be deemed recognizable and that bears on a definition of ontology:

These normative conditions for the production of the subject produce a historically contingent ontology, such that our very capacity to discern and name the 'being' of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition. (2005, 4)

What Butler wants to make sure to avoid is the liberal humanism of 'inclusiveness.' The notion of numerically including more people — more women council members, more minority representation on the board of directors, etc — all too easily falls into a politics of toleration; one recognizes the other in the guise of tolerating them. But as Slavoj

Žižek points out, Martin Luther King did not ask white people to ‘tolerate’ African Americans. Feminists are not asking men to ‘tolerate’ women. To reduce the issue of equality to ‘toleration’ is to de-politicize an issue that concerns economic and social rights. Butler states, “It isn’t simply a question of getting more people included under prevailing norms, but to articulate new egalitarian norms of recognizability.” Clearly her project is not ‘additive’. One gets the impression that the author of *Gender Trouble* would not pay any special heed to a politics of equality strictly based on a numbers game. Instead she seeks to draw attention to the underlying exclusions and normative judgements when it comes to recognizing something as a human life.

I am caught up not only in the sphere of normativity but in the problematic of power when I pose the ethical question in its directness and simplicity: “How ought I to treat you?” If the “I” and the “you” must first come into being, and if a normative frame is necessary for this emergence and encounter, then norms work not only to direct my conduct but to condition the possible emergence of an encounter between myself and the other.

(2005, 25)

Important to note here is that norms not only frame in the sense of ‘directing’ ones conduct, but act as the very conditions of emergence of the encounter itself. The structure of the encounter is framed according to prevailing normative schemes. There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ encounter with the other outside of any and all norms. Whether the other will even appear within the terms of recognisability depends on the normative framing, that is, the very fact that one encounters, ‘sees’ an other is due to a particular

structure of normativity that enables this sighting to occur. That one sees a 'person' there rather than a 'slave,' 'untouchable,' 'terrorist,' or 'nothing' is conditional upon the normative frame.

### **Revising Recognition: Singularity and Substitutability**

In Adriana Cavarero's book *Relating Narratives* (2000) Butler finds a fellow traveller influenced by Hegel, Levinas and Arendt. Cavarero strikes a distinctly post-Hegelian tone with the statement that "there is an other not fully known or knowable to me." Here Cavarero is voicing a resistance to a version of the Hegelian scheme in which the other is brought under the umbrella of the One. Striking out in contrary fashion Cavarero insists on the opacity, uniqueness and 'nonsubstitutability' of the other. Butler notes positively how this view acts as a limit on the model of "reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian scheme and to the possibility of knowing another more generally" (2005, 31). In other words, Cavarero puts the breaks on any quick formulation of self-other that does not heed caution when approaching the complexity of the self-other dynamic. Cavarero maintains that the self is only knowable by telling its story to an other. Each person has a unique story to narrate, but we cannot do this by ourselves, we can only narrate our stories to an other. Cavarero underscores the ontological condition of radical exposure and vulnerability of one human to another. Eschewing those schools of political theory that subsume the human under broad sweeping universals, and postmodern theory for dismantling the "I", Cavarero insists that identity is premised on an essential dyadic relationship emphasizing the singularity of the unique individual. In contrast with the individualist ethics of liberal contract theory, Cavarero's ethics places a

distinctly Hegelian emphasis on the importance of procuring identity in a community of others *and in a radical exposure and vulnerability to the other*. She also makes a point of insisting that the other is nonsubstitutable, it is an absolute other. Cavarero's claim is similar to Houlgate's Cartesian insistence that the *other is really other*, that in order for the identity of self-consciousness to coalesce it must maintain consistent boundaries between itself and the other. Cavarero places an emphasis on '*singularity*', on the uniqueness of one's story, seeking to rethink an ethics and politics that has steamrolled individuality in favour of individualism.

Butler is largely supportive of Cavarero's project because she limits "the claims of Hegelian sociality upon us." This means the dyadic relation between the "I" and "you" does not resolve itself into a higher synthesis, it does not *aufheben* into a wider sociality. Butler says something similar with regard to its ethical implications, "To revise recognition as an ethical project, we will need to see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable (2005, 43). Unsatisfiable in the important sense that it is not finally resolvable, or cannot be sublated into a higher logical synthesis. Another variation of this theme that Butler puts forth is when we ask the other, "who are you?" we are not to expect an answer. Or at least an answer that satisfies.

Butler is also to a certain degree influenced by Cavarero's insistence on the exposure and vulnerability to the other, and the latter's influence can be noted in Butler's ethical re-signification of Hegel's scene of recognition, as Butler notes: "Whereas the *Phenomenology of Spirit* moves from the scenario of the dyad toward a social theory of recognition, for Cavarero it is necessary to ground the social in the dyadic encounter"

(2005, 32). Hegel moves from the dyadic encounter to Religion, Reason and finally Spirit whereas Cavarero starts from the opposite end and grounds her theory of the wider social totality in the dyadic encounter of self and other. The I is radically exposed to the other and the other to the I, each in their respective vulnerability and singularity. But while Butler may like Cavarero's initial focus on the dyadic scene of recognition, she is less enamoured with the latter's extreme emphasis on singularity of the "I" as opposed to the "we". In opposition to Cavarero's strict emphasis on the uniqueness and singularity of the "I", Butler responds by stating:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life. But this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the "I" must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story. (2005, 37)

Butler insists on "a structure of substitutability at the core of singularity" (35), offsetting Cavarero's emphasis on singularity. The concept of substitutability is the means by which Butler signals the importance of sustaining a "we" and making sure to maintain that the singularity of the "I" does not take precedence over our substitutability with one another, and that uniqueness and singularity do not trump the efforts at sustaining a collective "we". Butler, in order to make her argument, relies on the structuring role of discourse, quoting Foucault: "discourse is not life its time is not yours" (2005, 36).



Discourse is indifferent to the individual singular subject, there is a sociability that exceeds the life of the subject, any emphasis on singularity effaces the extent to which this overlooks the ways in which the subject is constituted by a discourse that is beyond it and that will exceed the life of the individual subject. Butler's point is that while Cavarero rightly heeds the importance of emphasizing the singular irreducibility of the other, of the dyadic encounter, she is mistaken in her conclusion that a wider sociality is imagined only at a cost to the singular subject. Butler affirms Cavarero's emphasis on mutual exposure and vulnerability, of the importance placed on subjective constitution based on an other who is similarly vulnerable and exposed and Butler is drawn to Cavarero's description of perpetual openness and exposure to the other and how this factors into and is constitutive of subjectivity. However Butler locates a residual humanism in Cavarero's contention that, in this exposure to the other, the "I" can give an account of itself to the other, its own unique, singular story.

### **Revisiting Lord and Bondsman**

At a talk given in London in 2009, Butler re-visits the section on Lordship and Bondage and begins with the initial self-consciousness noticing that this other self-consciousness 'over there' is not unlike the initial self-consciousness, it to an extent both *is* and *is not* the other self-consciousness. Butler draws attention to the appearance of the other, but it is not an absolute other, it is not another self-consciousness standing separate and in opposition to the initial self-consciousness. The other is both me and not-me. This is the definition of the *ek-static* self that Butler first introduced in *Subjects of Desire*,

only it is used here to spearhead a renewed sense of the ethical. The question for Butler then becomes: how to live with the other? It is this question of cohabitation with the other that has become the most resonant of 21st century Hegelian themes.

The dialectic of *singularity* and *substitutability* is defined as: this other that I did not choose, yet with whom I must share and cohabit the planet; this other that is over there that is both me and not-me. Singularity of the one and its substitutability with the other, the former signifying individual self-consciousness, the latter signifying its going outside itself, a self-loss of sorts in that it appears in the other, is the other. For Butler the paradox of singularity and substitutability, of finding oneself over there in the other that is me and not-me, cannot be dialectically resolved. That there is no possibility of a dialectical resolution is the defining feature of the ethical relationship to the other.

In late 2009, during a talk on *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler was asked if she was arguing for a move away from an identity claim based in singularity towards a notion of ‘multiple identity’ so that instead of the declaration, "I am this," the question was asking if Butler's alternative was instead, "No, I am not just this, I am that and that, my identity is multiple." In response Butler pointed out that even when one tries to break the singular determination of identity, "I'm not just that, I'm this and this, I'm that and much more." Nevertheless one still finds oneself within what she calls, after Foucault, the “*regime of ontology*.” One is still trying to determine who one *is*, one is just doing it “multipley.” But this ‘multiplicity’ that combats the ‘singularity’ of identity is not what Butler is advocating, she is not a pluralist in any simple sense. Instead she emphasizes a ‘scene of address’:

But maybe the thing is to *not* determine who I am whether singly or multiply, but to be engaged in a kind of scene of address to oneself, to another, to a set of others, where those terms get re-worked in ways that make a difference, then we are less interested in determining who we are singularly or multiply than in some act of communication, or some act of avowing and articulating a relationship which is more ethically significant than establishing who I am.<sup>24</sup>

Seeking to accentuate a different relation to the other that emphasizes not the consolidation of identity but rather Butler wishes to place an emphasis on the ways in which the structure of the address, its materiality and discursive setting, hinders or opens a relation to the other: a relationship or set of relationships in which the very epistemological assumptions sustaining the 'I' are disarticulated, putting the 'I' at risk of incoherence ? (2005, 23)

Recognition can only take place within a particular structuring of normativity or 'scene of address.' If a particularly oppressive scene of address can be exposed or 'parochialized', that is, revealed as a particular semblance of power and interest, this could possibly open the space for alternative ways of avowing relationships which prove more important than accounting for the sovereign "I". Clearly not entertaining any possibility of a transparent self-knowing subject Butler wants to counter an 'ethical

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<sup>24</sup> This is a personal transcription of an informal discussion by Judith Butler who attended a graduate seminar on her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* at Claremont Graduate University (2010e).

violence' that demands a subject maintain a 'self-identity' at all times (2005, 42).

Against Nietzsche and following up on the work of the later Foucault, Butler argues that

any effort we make 'to give an account of oneself' will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, ... If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (2005, 43)

When we ask of the other, "Who are you?" we should seek to establish a communication that more effectively engages the other, rather than seeking out an answer and assessing it for its historical/scientific accuracy and fidelity which reflects a rather paternalistic/diagnostic attitude. Butler contends that forcing one to recite a self-narrative, whether over a glass of wine or across a table at an immigration hearing, only misses the point — that in forcing somebody to speak the 'truth' of themselves only speaks to the wish that they conform to a codification of norms, to articulate their story in accord with the prevailing scheme of intelligibility.<sup>25</sup> The very space of determining who

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<sup>25</sup> Butler strikes a sensitive note when, in seeking to shift the very coordinates of intelligibility when it comes to approaching the other, she introduces the 'immigrant' the 'immigration hearing' etc. Nothing stokes mass popular hysteria more than this particular signifier of exoticism, otherness and of course fear and terror(ist). Butler's work on displacing the 'truth of' the immigrant, advocating for a different structure of address based not on a discourse of 'truth' but a narrative of 'trauma' 'longing' 'reconciliation'

will be recognized and who will not is pre-structured by normative schemes that place the other within a specific epistemic terrain of knowability, hence any possibly new identifications and articulations are foreclosed and these very limits to intelligibility are challenged by political critique.

[A]ny discourse, any regime of intelligibility, constitutes us *at a cost*. Our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability. (2005, 121)

For example Butler points out in the context of war, the loss of Iraqi lives are considered less grievable than the loss of American lives. Her strident wish is to mobilize more 'egalitarian forms of recognition' so that for example, Palestinian lives lost are not rationalized away as the cost of harbouring 'terrorists'. A different sort of acknowledgement needs to be fostered that considers the precariousness of human lives when war is waged. "In order to become open to offering that sort of acknowledgement, however, we have to come up against the limit of the cultural frames in which we live. In a way, we have to let those frames get interrupted by other frames" (interview with Nina Power). Yet do not lines of interdependency run deeper between oneself, family, friends and local community than between, for example, oneself and the average Iraqi in Iraq? "Can't I be excused for at least grieving the Iraqi less, proportionate to my dependence?"

To which Butler responds:

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'love' for instance, reflects her attempt to think a post-nationalist version of global citizenry.

It is not a question of how much you or I feel —it is rather a question of whether a life is worth grieving, and no life is worth grieving unless it is regarded as grievable. In other words, when we subscribe to ideas such as “no innocent life should be slaughtered,” we have to be able to include all kinds of populations within the notion of “innocent life” —and that means subscribing to an egalitarianism that would contest prevailing schemes of racism. (2010a)

It is not a question of feelings. Butler is making the point that currently wars are waged and lives lost based on premises that delimit the cost of human suffering to a very stringent and strident definition of whose lives count as human lives. Whose lives are grievable? Whose lives remain ungrievable? Which lives count as human lives and which lives do not? And to be sure, it is not simply a question of adding more people under the flag of recognition, but “how existing norms allocate recognition differentially? What new norms are possible and how are they wrought?” (2009d, 6). Butler insists on a fundamental shifting of the normative schemes that constitute the terms of recognizability. And in order for that radical shift to occur, a politics of critique must confront the very epistemic limits of what constitutes the human, and of human life. The schema of recognition based upon the volitional self-determining ego of liberal political theory must be cast aside for a new ethic of recognition based not on a seamless accounting of oneself, but on the very failures of that operation, not on our mutual rationality (or nationality), but our mutual exposure and vulnerability to one another.

## The Danish Cartoon Scandal

In 2005, twelve editorial cartoons satirizing the prophet Muhammad were published in a Danish newspaper and then republished in a number of European dailies in 2008. For Butler the issue quickly became one encapsulated in liberal legalistic discourse that turned into a confrontation between free speech on the one hand, and blasphemy on the other. The Danish cartoon debate had been delimited from the beginning by a particular normative and evaluative framework. Butler's strategy is to 'parochialize' the reigning evaluative framework. In this she seeks not to bask in a sea of relativism, but to unseat the reigning hegemonic normative schemas of evaluation by exposing their 'secular' assumptions and liberal ontology.

In this case, to change the framework ... makes it possible to see that what is at stake is not so much a question of whether speech should be free or prohibited, *as a way of conceiving a mode of living outside of self-identity and self-ownership.* (Asad et al. 2009, 119)

The Muslim 'self' at issue is not a discrete and bounded individual" but is a "self [that] has to be understood as a set of embodied and affective practices that are fundamentally bound up with certain images, icons, and imaginaries" (Asad et al. 2009, 122). Butler seeks to render parochial the liberal ontology of the self-originating volitional subject by adducing its abject failure at addressing the wrongs of others, of its tendency to violence at that point of contact with the other. Butler insists that "to understand blasphemy as an *injury to a sustaining relation* is to understand that we are dealing with a different conception of subjectivity and belonging than the one implied by self-ownership"

(emphasis added, Asad et al. 2009, 118). Butler focuses instead on the scene of address, of the relation that endures with the Other and an appreciation of the epistemic limits of such an encounter. The very fact that the attempt to mediate the Danish cartoon debate took place within a scene of address marked by liberal juridical law means that important issues of *isā'ah*, insult, injury could not be articulated.

[T]o situate blasphemy—or in this case, *isā'ah*, insult, injury—in relation to a way of life that is not based in self-ownership, but in an abiding and vital dispossession, changes the terms of the debate. It ... shifts us into a mode of understanding that is not constrained by that juridical model.

(Asad et al. 2009, 118)

In trying to articulate an injury not in the sense of harm done to a 'person' but, instead, to a 'sustaining relation', an injury felt as an 'abiding dispossession' Butler points to where law courts prove incapable of apprehension simply because the nature of the 'injury' lies outside its own frame of intelligibility. Again we see how Butler looks to alternative scenes of address in which there emerges between self and Other "some act of communication, or some act of avowing and articulating a relationship which is more ethically significant than establishing who I am." For Butler the Danish cartoon incident should be viewed not through a structure of address between litigants, but through a structure of address in which it is less important to establish an empirical identity in order to establish harm, than on establishing a sustaining relationship, and on a 'cultural translation' that turns intense focal points of heated debate and feelings into a different



modality that unbinds the strict limitations, both legal and epistemic that stand in the way of a different form of understanding.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps another way of approaching this difficult concept is to note that navigating the tense terrain that seeks a mode of cohabitation with the other issues from a political stand that refuses to legislate an *apriori* certifiable identity before entering the political arena. Butler's politics are resolutely post-identity. For Butler 'queer' is not an identity (2010f). Queer instead signifies a relation, an "intervention into power." Queer is not something a person "is," but only how a person acts, more specifically, how a person acts in concert with others."<sup>27</sup> Queer is a relation. Perhaps this is how one could conceivably think of the signifiers: 'Muslim' or 'working class.' That is, not to conceive of these signifiers as designating empirical subjects but rather, as a given relationality with others. A relationality that is forged in various political deeds and events and where translation, not definition, proves the most ethical response: "it is not because we are reasoning beings that we are connected to one another, but, rather, because we are *exposed* to one another, requiring a recognition that does not substitute the recognizer for the recognized" (Butler cited in Watkins 2009, 200).

Butler replaces the rigidity of 'identity' with a social ontology of relationality, in which the formation of the self takes place in relation to others, in which one's own self-narrative is never transparent or complete. In a recent interview Butler articulates this concept of relationality by calling it a non-anthropocentric conception of the human: "we

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<sup>26</sup> Cultural translation is the hard work of finding out how meaning is produced in different cultural contexts.

<sup>27</sup> Note here once again Butler's relation to the copula 'is'.

can neither lodge the human in the self, nor ground the self in the human, but find instead the relations of exposure and responsibility that constitute the “being” of the human in a sociality outside itself, even out-side its human-ness” (2009a). Butler’s ethico-political project means to interrupt the dominant norms of recognisability with alternative frames based not on the guarantee of epistemic knowledge, but on its very limits. It is not about consolidating an identity, rather one’s relationship to the other is predicated on a mode of relationality and structure of address. Butler’s *ek-static* post-identity politics of the other seeks constantly to investigate the possibilities for recognition at the limits of each and every scheme of intelligibility. Recognition is conferred less on an identification of who one is, than on a recognition of a mutual vulnerability and exposure, and of finding ways to lessen the precarity of those human lives that may now suddenly appear.

### Chapter III: Antigone and the Real

In the previous chapter we traced the emergence of the self-other relationship and particularly the way in which Butler, in refusing an ontology of the subject, instead retains a notion of the ek-static subject as self-loss. Responding to the well known claim that the Hegelian dialectic resolves the other into the same, Butler refuses the move to consolidate identities into hard shelled Cartesian subjectivities, and instead opts to proceed 180° in the opposite direction, embracing self-loss as that which defines the relationality of the subject. We will see in this chapter that Butler furthers her case by arguing that the subject emerges through a radical undoing, through a wavering of its very ontological consistency. And it is precisely this subjective deconstitution that heralds the inauguration of a post-Oedipal political imaginary.

Judith Butler's remapping of the sexual landscape shorn heterosexuality of its encrusted naturalism and exposed it as a set of sedimented norms. Further to this, and extending her social ontology of precarity and the undoing of the subject, Butler remarks, "I just think that heterosexuality doesn't belong exclusively to heterosexuals" (2004c, 199). That this statement is able to resonate within a community of not only critical academics and activists but also with the general public to a certain degree is an index of the massive shift in the 'symbolic coordinates' in the last 20 years.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler points out that the structuralist law against incest has played a primary role in the sedimentation of compulsory heterosexuality. Arguing further that the heteronormative Oedipal drama is a forced drama of sorts, established as it is on the foreclosure of alternative ways of doing kinship that exist outside of the

narrow structuralist binary frame laid out by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and later taken up by Jacques Lacan. This prompts her to ask:

Can the prohibition against incest that proscribes and sanctions hierarchical and binary gendered positions be reconceived as a productive power that inadvertently generates several cultural configurations of gender? Is the incest taboo subject to the critique of the repressive hypothesis that Foucault provides? (1990, 72)

A reading of the incest taboo that concentrates solely on repressively directing heterosexual desire into strict exogamous external channels, outside of immediate kin, forecloses other variable constructions of imaginable sexual alternatives. What Butler asks is that instead of legislating a conservative family pattern, can another reading of the incest taboo produce alternatives that break this mould, and spill over onto a post-Oedipal terrain? The crucial thing to note here is Butler's explicit theoretical goal: "What interests me most however, is disarticulating oedipalization from the thesis of a primary or universalized heterosexuality" (2004c, 200). It is in her reading of the Sophocles play *Antigone* that this project hits its stride.

### ***Antigone's Claim: Rubin, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan***

Butler's work, particularly her reading of *Antigone* provides an outline for thinking a radical subjectivity not in its positivity, but in its radical dehiscence, that is, in its undoing or deconstitution. However her anti-Lacanian position, particularly an ambiguity around the Lacanian ultimate ethical gesture, the 'act,' prevents her from

adapting the full radical implication of her reading of Antigone. Thus her theory of the subject occupies an unstable ground between, on the one hand, a radical deconstitution, in which Antigone figures the very epistemological limits of subjectivity, situated outside of any support in the big Other (Symbolic order), and, on the other, a subject of citationality that resides within the Symbolic and the universe of signification and seeks to extend and universalize its particular claims across broad sectors of the 'abject' populations. Butler not so much reverses the taboo on incest, (sanctioning incest between consanguine members is not what she has in mind), as open it up and allow it to show its naked effect; and it is the former reading of *Antigone*, the Antigone of the 'act', that shows the breakdown in signification that occurs when she occupies the very limits of kinship. By placing the very term 'kinship' in crisis, Antigone thus makes herself 'monstrous' and unrecognizable, and signals the conditions under which a radical subjective deconstitution is the unavoidable outcome.

Early in *Antigone's Claim* Butler asks (quoting George Steiner), "What would happen if psychoanalysis were to have taken Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?" What if Freud had noted in the speech of his patients not the Oedipal story of patricide and incest but rather an alternative guiding thread based on Antigone? What would be the consequences for kinship given that for Antigone: her 'father' is her brother who slept with her mother. That her family history is somewhat 'disnormative,' is precisely Butler's point: Antigone rejects marriage and has no children, she holds an 'incestuous' love for her 'brother' who could be any one of Polyneices, Eteocles or Oedipus, she is called a 'man' by Creon and a 'son' by Oedipus. How the unquestioned

universality of the heterosexual conjugal family that Antigone puts into crisis attained such vaunted status is the focus of Butler's attention. Via a route through Gayle Rubin, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, Butler exposes how the incest taboo functions as a structuring principle of the social yet the social is denied any reciprocal role in affecting the structure of the incest taboo.

In her influential article "The Traffic in Women" (1975) Gayle Rubin argues that the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss conceives of the incest taboo as a universal myth that imposes an invariable law of kinship on human society. The invariable law mandates the exchange of women as one of its key features.

The incest taboo divides the universe of sexual choice into categories of permitted and prohibited sexual partners. Specifically, by forbidding unions within a group it enjoins marital exchange between groups. ...

[T]he taboo on incest results in a wide network of relations, a set of people whose connections with one another are a kinship structure. (Rubin 1975, 74)

Rubin then asks, if women, along with yams, pigs, mats and shells etc., are being exchanged, and these exchanges create an organization, then exactly who is being organized? Rubin's answer is that it is the men who are being linked with each other, "the women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (174). The key here is that the imposition of a law against incest regulates the exchange of women by forcing them to move outwards from the clan to other clans not related by blood. This

move signals the key difference between animal and human society.<sup>28</sup>

For Lévi-Strauss the incest taboo functions as a universal cultural law that inaugurates regulated exchange and contact between clan groups. The move from indiscriminate gratification to the taboo on incest signals a move from nature to the cultural sphere. Key here for Butler is the way these invariant cultural rules become the basis of the Lacanian Symbolic (2004c, 45).<sup>29</sup> Women represent an object of exchange which enables an exogamous ritual of exchange to function according to universal rules. Thus the incest taboo inaugurates a number of crucial changes, principally it generates a *non-incestuous heterosexuality*.

Butler notes that Lévi-Strauss assumes that the general prohibition against incest only works in one particular direction, that of heterosexual exogamy. But does the prohibition on incest *necessarily* lead to heterosexual exogamous coupling? What makes it so? In her answer Butler underscores a point that Rubin mentions only in passing:

[Psychoanalysis] has rarely addressed the question of how new forms of kinship can and do arise on the basis of the incest taboo. From the

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<sup>28</sup> In another context, Jodi Dean relates how in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* the killing of the father by the band of brothers accomplishes the move from arbitrary authority to the rule of law, from nature to culture, "Law frees us from the absolute, arbitrary demands of the Other." Killing the father ended their submission to arbitrary force, and instituting the rule of law regulates access to among other things women and the use of violence (*Žižek's Politics* 145).

<sup>29</sup> The Lacanian symbolic is the big Other. It is the system of rules, norms and regulations that the subject follows. It is also the system of language which 'speaks' the subject. Butler's seeks to show how the Lacanian symbolic order is a sedimentation of norms and thus subject to change.

presumption that one cannot — or ought not to — choose one’s closest family members as one’s lovers and marital partners, it does not follow that the bonds of kinship that *are* possible assume any particular form. (2000a, 66)

There is nothing inherent in the incest taboo that dictates heterosexual kinship. In Butler’s reading of Lévi-Strauss the incest taboo is cited as a universal law that structures the social formation. Key to Butler’s argument is the explicit connection she makes between the way in which the incest taboo functions and the role the Symbolic plays in Lacan’s theory.

Lacan, according to Butler, takes the universal prohibition against incest and the ensuing laws of kinship and combines them with a Saussurean structural linguistics.<sup>30</sup> What emerges from this mix of incest taboo and linguistics is specific Symbolic positions coded in language: Mother, Father, Child, Aunt, Uncle etc. These positions are accorded a linguistic status by Lacan, functioning as symbolic positions or placeholders. Butler argues that the symbolic for Lacanians is insulated from any ‘social’ influences.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), placed the signified over the signifier:  $\frac{\text{Signified}}{\text{Signifier}}$  and did not really see the bar separating the terms as an actual ‘bar’

whereas Lacan reversed Saussure:  $\frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$  giving more prominence to the Signifier, plus Lacan treated the bar as a bar, meaning that not only was the relation between the terms arbitrary, there was a constant slippage of the signifieds underneath the signifiers. The primary relation was the signifier — signifier relation. Lacan’s definition of a signifier: “a signifier represents the subject to another signifier” does not make reference to a signified.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the question of sexual difference Butler asks, “If it is symbolic is it changeable? I ask Lacanians this question, and they usually tell me that changes in the symbolic take a long, long time. I wonder how long I will have to wait” (2004c, 212).



Lacan's symbolic is ultimately a static structuralist law that functions to secure its own seamless reproduction unaffected by social forces. Butler claims that both Lévi-Strauss and Lacan have effectively transformed something that is social and historically variable and made it into a structural universal. This prompts her to ask "whether the incest taboo has also been mobilized to *establish* certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones (2000a, 70). Butler is harshly critical of heterosexist assumptions of the incest taboo and how a prohibition against sexual intercourse with next of kin turns into a necessary heterosexual exogamous exchange of women that is dictated as cultural law.

When the study of kinship was combined with the study of structural linguistics, kinship positions were elevated to the status of a certain order of linguistic positions without which no signification could proceed, no intelligibility could be possible. What were the consequences of making certain conceptions of kinship timeless and then elevating them to the status of the elementary structures of intelligibility? Is this any better or worse than postulating kinship as a natural form? (2000a, 20)

Butler's point of contention is that Lacan's reading of Lévi-Strauss through Saussurean linguistics results in a structuralist linguistics based on Mother, Father, Child as three signifiers that structure in a precise way *one's very access to the symbolic*.<sup>32</sup> This access to the symbolic requires a precise triangulation: a representative of the phallic law intervenes between mother and child. The child then needs to assume castration as a

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<sup>32</sup> For Lacanians access to the symbolic means access to language itself. If access to the symbolic is foreclosed for any reason, psychosis is the result.

condition for entry into the symbolic as a user of language. For Lacanians this access to language or the symbolic order is the *sine qua non* of intelligibility, of being able to communicate with others and make sense.<sup>33</sup>

### **Subject as Constitutive Outside**

Butler argues that in the very move of articulating the incest taboo with structural linguistics Lacan has taken a variable cultural process, the exchange of women, and made it into a structural law, making heterosexual exchange the precondition of signification and sexuality. In other words, the Lacanian symbolic enforces an ahistorical binary of sexual difference that grounds an implicit heterosexual set of norms and is based on a foreclosure of the variable ways in which the Oedipal complex is insulated from the force of history and the social.

[T]he oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been accomplished, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this

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<sup>33</sup> In “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” Lacan states the following:

Man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man.  
 ... The primordial Law is therefore the Law which, in regulating marriage ties, superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature, the latter being subject to the law of mating. The prohibition of incest is merely the subjective pivot of that Law.  
 ... This law, then, reveals itself clearly enough as identical to a language order. For without names for kinship relations, no power can institute the order of preferences and taboos that know and braid the thread of lineage through the generations. (2006, 229-230)

sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire. (1997b, 135)

Butler here is making the argument that the over-riding assumption that a boy's attraction to his mother must be channelled towards an alternate mother-substitute-object via a prohibition on incest, forecloses on the initial Freudian definition of the human as *polymorphous perverse*.<sup>34</sup> Here Butler is making the point that heterosexual object choice is a *learned* attribute in the sense that heterosexuality is not a natural feat of nature, it is something that the Oedipal law 'forces' on the child. The Symbolic then for Butler becomes a realm of structuralist signification dictating the terms of a restrictive kinship meanwhile relegating those forms of kinship and sexual codes that do not fit this norm as 'aberrant', 'deviant' 'abject'. The abject thus form a *constitutive outside* that functions as all that the inside is not and cannot be.<sup>35</sup> The construction of a stable inside

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<sup>34</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. 57.

<sup>35</sup> In *Precarious Life*, Butler attributes the constitutive outside to a sphere of dehumanization.

It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a "Western" civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human. (91)

Ewa Płonowska Ziarek sums up nicely Butler's critical take on the constitutive outside:

Butler, like Žižek, concedes that the normativity of the law works by producing a certain outside to the symbolic universe. Yet, to avoid the

requires the construction of an outside that functions as a relational negative “that which the inside can’t be, can never be” (2004b, 91). Butler argues that the Lacanian version of the Symbolic, because of its separation from the social, negates any opportunity for this ‘constitutive outside’ to be engaged politically thereby negating any possibility that the abjected identity could change as a result of political struggles. Butler recognizes in Derridean fashion that the relational nature of identity makes it impossible not to have to deal with a constitutive outside. This realm of the socially abject is a politically crucial feature of any theory of social change. It exists with a history and a genealogy and the political task hence is to “reconfigure this necessary ‘outside’ as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome” (1993, 53). In the construction of any social identity the constitutive outside or foreclosure of what one is not needs to be a crucial part of a process of democratic inclusion. This outside is an important space from which to make claims because it is a place of ‘excess’, a remainder that is sedimented neither in tradition nor in stock political languages. The human rights of gays and lesbians, the human rights of the physically challenged or the sans-papiers, it is these populations that Butler mentions as being, in some countries, outside the definition of the human. Butler’s political analysis would seek to trace “how the production of cultural unintelligibility is mobilized variably to regulate the political field, i.e., who will count as a “subject,” who will be required not to count” (1993, 207).

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ahistorical production of the real, Butler proposes to rethink the “constitutive outside” as a social abject, the exclusion of which secures the domain of social intelligibility. (129)

The production of cultural intelligibility is the result of a 'sedimentation' of a constellation of discourses whose political origins have been buried and now reveal themselves as the 'common sense' pattern of social behaviour.

To sum up the argument to this point: Butler develops Rubin's critical insight regarding the connection between the incest taboo, the structuralist exchange of women, and exogamous heterosexual kinship. In doing so she develops a critique of Lacan arguing that he structuralizes the Symbolic order thus making static what otherwise should be a fully historical category of analysis. As a result patriarchal monogamous heterosexual coupling is regarded as a structural law, rendered universal and outside history. What is rendered abject in Lacan's analysis is a remainder that forms the 'constitutive outside,' which for Butler consist of formations of sexuality that are deemed outside the proper functioning of the Symbolic. It is this margin that resides outside that must be politicized and for Butler politics becomes a process that is constantly reconfiguring the frontiers of this abject space. Approaching Butler's work on Antigone we can then ask in what way does the character of Antigone figure into this scenario? One scenario, which could be called the 'social-democratic Antigone' would see her as a representative of the 'constitutive outside,' the part of no part, relegated to a marginal status in society because lacking the qualification as properly 'human.' This list would include the transgendered, the slum dwellers, the homeless, migrant labourers that sans-papiers etc. However one can also argue that another more radical reading highlights a more politically suggestive dimension to Antigone's plight.

### **Butler's more radical claim on Antigone**

Antigone represents an abject figure. But can her abject status be reducible to one identity claim in an equivalential chain? Or does Butler's construction of the particular nature of Antigone's abject status prefigure something of greater radical significance? It is the fact that Butler's reading of *Antigone* bears certain key resemblances in places to a Lacanian notion of the 'act' that lends a critical ambiguity to her text. Notwithstanding her criticism of Lacanians, Butler shares certain affinities with the latter with regards to the nature of the allegorization of Antigone's defiant action. Antigone prefigures a 'new field of the human', the epistemological limit to the human which can be nothing other than a subjective deconstitution. It is to this ambitious ambiguity in Butler's reading of Antigone that we now turn.

Butler's reading of Antigone specifically tracks the discontinuities and breaking points in what she calls the *field of the human*. Antigone approaches the inchoate contours of a post-Oedipal politics and simply confounds those who insist that she speak intelligibly. Dismissing Creon's edict, turning down Haemon's marriage proposal and choosing death instead, Antigone "imperial[s] the very possibility of being recognized by others" and it is this very imperilment of recognition that signals a crisis of signification (2009a).

Identifying Antigone as figuring a crisis of signification represents one of Butler's key strategies of critique. Criticizing a version of postmodern Foucaultian 'genealogical' analysis, Butler insists that it is not enough simply to identify the nexus of power and knowledge that jointly authorize what objects appear in a field, one must "also track the

way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands” (2000e, 58). Every epistemic field has a ‘break’ point which puts into crisis its very own limits of intelligibility. The critical point to note is Butler’s insistence on going beyond the simple positivity of the field and to actively search for the point in which it breaks down. It is here that Antigone represents for Butler the breakdown of the field of the human. Antigone’s plight is not merely that she said ‘no!’ Antigone defies the normative constraints placed on her sexuality, her gender, and her proper kinship role. Furthermore she ends up embracing the fatality that was her family legacy. Antigone simply no longer occupies a proper signifier, she turns away from any and all interpellative calls by a big Other and undermines any possibility of possessing an identifying mark by which others could recognize her. Antigone troubles the categories of kinship, she places herself outside the symbolic, thereby making herself unrecognizable and she does this less by means of a misrepresentation of these terms than by voicing a disarticulation of kinship via a *catachresis* of these very terms (2000a, 39). Catachresis is the use of signifiers that point out a gap in the symbolic. Signifiers are ripped out of their place in the chain of signification and ‘misused’. Catachresis emerges at that “epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all” and thus exposes those very limits of intelligibility. At the same time committing catachresis increases the risk of one’s “unrecognizability as a subject” (2005, 21). It is these ‘troubling’ articulations of a new

post-Oedipal field that Antigone endeavours to draw out that clears the way for a new modality of the human.<sup>36</sup>

A heterosexual kinship structured by the incest taboo is rendered unworkable by Antigone's very incoherence and intransigence. How would one understand and theorize a subject that resides outside the boundaries of the structuralist incest taboo? Antigone figures as the epistemological limit of kinship. Such an 'epistemological' limit points to an illegibility in the subject once all boundaries and allegiances to a kinship based on bloodlines, exogamy and patriarchy, are effaced.

Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founds on its own founding laws. (2000a, 297)

For Butler there is absolutely no symbolic position of the Mother and Father which is not an "ossification of contingently constructed norms" (2004c, 158). The violation of the incest taboo is an aberration against normative kinship as such and this fact draws Butler's attention to those 'socially survivable' aberrations that are the performative 'misfits' of the Oedipal narrative. "What will be", asks Butler "the inheritance of Oedipus when the very kinship rules that he defies, no longer carry the stability, status or

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<sup>36</sup> Butler calls her work towards a new modality of the human a non-anthropocentric philosophical anthropology. "So we can neither lodge the human in the self, nor ground the self in the human, but find instead the relations of exposure and responsibility that constitute the "being" of the human in a sociality outside itself, even outside its human-ness." (2009a.)



hegemony accorded to them by Lévi-Strauss and structural psychoanalysis?" (2000a, 22) Butler clearly has in mind, if one is to take seriously her call for an aberrant iteration of norms, a *post-Oedipal politics* in which the incest taboo does not automatically structure the norms for a heterosexual exogamous unit, but that these very terms are re-worked. This reworking would structure the positions Father-Mother-Child in a manner which no longer foreclose other ways of doing kinship differently.

How then would such a post-Oedipal political frame question some of the long held truths about kinship structures? Butler intervenes in the same-sex marriage debate to show how the lesbian/gay alliance in support of same sex marriage make identifications with straight couples who are married or seek to marry, thus fortifying the Oedipal law while at the same time forsaking alliances with those who fall outside this law and who, like Antigone, exist in a post-Oedipal holding pattern in which a kind of poststructuralism of kinship can be discerned:

single mothers or single fathers ... people who are in relationships that are not marital in kind or in status, other lesbian, gay, and transgender people whose sexual relations are multiple (which does not mean unsafe), whose lives are not monogamous, whose sexuality and desire do not have the conjugal home as their (primary) venue, whose lives are considered less real or less legitimate, who inhabit the more shadowy regions of social reality. (2000c, 176)

The activist document “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision For All Our Families and Relationships” extends this list of post-Oedipal kinship forms.<sup>37</sup> All of these groups, to one degree or another, fall afoul of a proper iteration of the heterosexual nuclear family complex. Within a post-Oedipal interpretive framework one could argue that advocates for same-sex marriage who do not acknowledge a wider realm of significant relationships beyond marriage and, moreover, let the state define these terms, are working within a conservative political agenda. A post-Oedipal subjectivity simply does not mean that marginal sexual subjects be given their ‘rights’ and that a general public affirm this claim, but the more radical insistence that sexual multiplicity, as opposed to a heterosexual binarism, forms the precise interpellation by which *all* subjects come to be as subjects. One could ask, based on Butler’s work on heterosexual melancholy: What becomes possible once a legacy of lost same-sex desire is reaffirmed and in which the repudiations necessary under a heterosexual normativity, repudiations of

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<sup>37</sup> This list could also include:

- Grandparents and other family members raising their children’s (and/or a relative’s) children
- Committed, loving households in which there is more than one conjugal partner
- Blended families
- Extended families (especially in particular immigrant populations) living under one roof, whose members care for one another
- Queer couples who decide to jointly create and raise a child with another queer person or couple, in two households
- Close friends and siblings who live together in long-term, committed, non-conjugal relationships, serving as each other’s primary support and caregivers
- Care-giving and partnership relationships that have been developed to provide support systems to those living with HIV/AIDS

“Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision For All Our Families and Relationships”

certain associations with homosexuality or even persons of different racial backgrounds, are no longer necessary? Butler's conclusion is thus: "when homosexuality returns as a possibility, it returns precisely as the possibility of the unravelling of the subject itself" (2000b, 739). And it is precisely this fear of becoming 'undone' that leads to all sorts of prejudices and fears, and this is how the Cartesian subject is fortified by the drawing of explicit impermeable boundaries.<sup>38</sup> In an interview in 2000 Butler explains the critical connection between foreclosure, sexuality and race and the undoing of the subject as a defence mechanism against invasion in doing so Butler takes to task the Cartesian subject dressed in bullet-proof armour, where vulnerability is taken as a threat to its impermeability and rejected less the subject 'lapse' into a crisis of identity. Such a subject always begins by claiming:

"I would not be I if I were a homosexual. I don't know who I would be. I would be undone by that possibility. Therefore, I cannot come in close proximity to that which threatens to undo me fundamentally."

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<sup>38</sup> Žižek tells the story of a man who was very close to his wife when she unexpectedly dies of cancer. His friends are expecting him to take it hard but are surprised when he adjusts to her death quickly and maintains his social life and ties. The only thing being that whenever he talked about his late wife he would always makes sure that he held a hamster they both cared for when she was alive, stroking it in his lap etc. Once the hamster died however, the man's Symbolic universe collapsed and he was unable to go on and suffered a breakdown. Žižek suggests with this story that we all have our own personal psychic hamsters that anchor our subjectivity. Perhaps we could extend Žižek's logic and apply it to Butler as well, which means, in order to transform the hetero-symbolic, some psychic hamsters need die, that is, the hamster that helps us maintains our distance from gay people etc. will have to suffer a death in order for subjectivity to be reborn. [Žižek's hamster reference is from a taped lecture on youtube <http://youtu.be/AAbLgKFw-2E?t=4m55s>] See also Pfaller (2005).

Miscegenation is another moment — it's when you suddenly realize that a white subject assumes that its whiteness is absolutely essential to its capacity to be a subject at all: "If I must be in this kind of proximity to a person of color, I will become undone in some radical way." (2000b, 739)

For is it not the case that all sorts of conservative traditions and institutional barriers are the result of these biased and phobic ways of organizing social reality in order not to threaten the subject's internal coherence, to keep oneself 'intact' as it were? What needs to be emphasized here is Butler's insistence, "... I think it's possible sometimes to undergo an undoing, to submit to an undoing by virtue of what spectrally threatens the subject, in order to reinstate the subject on a new and different ground" (2000b, 739). This 'undoing' of the subject is the basis of her 'social ontology' that structures her political and ethical theory. This undoing would indeed be necessary for the sort of political change that is required in order to shift entirely away from an Oedipal kinship form.

What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, *where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds*. (my emphasis, 2000a, 23)

Here Butler mentions an undoing of the very symbolic that keeps the structural positions in place and in play. Mother and Father would no longer occupy *the* symbolic positions or structural place holders. They would no longer play the role of structuring kinship along strict heterosexual pathways. Instead these positions would open up to a

fundamental ‘undoing’. Bidding farewell to the legacy of Oedipus, a post-Oedipal subjectivity is based on a certain precarity. Again it is to “[put] oneself at risk, making oneself in a way that exposes the limits of one’s own self-making” (2005, 23). In her book on Judith Butler, Sara Salih follows up on this notion of precarity, of subjective precarity which is about “the subversive potential of giving up the claim to a coherent identity ... [and] agency lies in giving up any claim to coherence or self-identity by submitting to interpellation and subversively misrecognizing the terms by which we are hailed” (Salih 2002, 133). It is this risking that Butler finds compelling in Antigone, her going beyond the epistemological limits of her being.

Butler seeks to re-think subjectivity not as a static naturalization of an inner essence. Her concept of performativity insists on the idea that subject formation is always on the verge of ‘outdoing itself.’ In the very insistence that gender is performative Butler provides a range of metaphors that enable a way to think identity as not ever ‘one with itself.’ Modulating Althusser’s theory of interpellation, the subject fails to heed the call, or heeds it ‘wrong’.

Such a turn demands a *willingness not to be* — a *critical* desubjectivation — in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. *What forms might linguistic survival take in this desubjectivized domain.* How would one know one’s existence? Through what terms would it be recognized and recognizable?<sup>39</sup> (my emphasis, 1997b, 129)

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<sup>39</sup> Butler troubles Althusser’s seamless interpellation thus: “Rather than obediently responding to the terms by which one is interpellated, a more ethical and subversive

How does one exactly not recognize oneself in the call? Butler underscores the point that this non-recognition in the call of the law is a critical desubjectivation. Marked by a concern to think through to the very limits of a given episteme or schema of cultural intelligibility, Butler's subject seeks out the very boundaries and outer limits where one no longer encounters standard, safe markers of epistemological certainty.

How far can one take this reading of Butler before ultimately hitting one's own epistemological limit? To figure the limits of a given episteme, to occupy that non-space which places in crisis the very frame of epistemological certainty and representationality is a difficult undertaking to properly theorize.

### **A Retreat from Subjective Destitution?**

The fact of the matter is that one could retreat from the abyss, and opt for the social democratic alternative. In a 2009 interview when asked to speak to the current day Antigone, Butler replied:

In a way, she [Antigone] stands in advance for precarious lives, including new immigrants, the sans-papiers, those who are without health insurance, those who are differentially affected by the global economy, questions of poverty, of illiteracy, religious minorities, and the physically challenged.  
(2009a)

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mode of being is, paradoxically, failing to be by not recognizing oneself in the call of the law" (1997b, 131).

Here Butler draws an equivalential chain between different articulations of the 'abject' under global capitalism. Her recent work, *Frames of War* (2009), develops a 'social ontology' that draws attention to the shared precarity and interdependence of the human being with all sentient life. As noted in the previous chapter, Butler's discursive strategy is to lay open the particular normative frames which authorizes which lives count as human and those that don't count. For example, there are currently 520 recorded cases of missing or murdered aboriginal women in Canada; "If compared to the general female population in Canada, the disappearance and murder rate of aboriginal women would equal more than 18,000."<sup>40</sup> This story is passed over in silence by governments at all levels and the lack of alarm and dismay in general is disquieting to say the least. Within the hegemonic normative frame, aboriginal women may be living, but do not constitute a life. Perhaps in this way Antigone could be seen as an 'empty signifier', one that could be filled by various marginal groups in an attempt to universalize their particular claims and to draw what Laclau calls a 'chain of equivalence' between different struggles. No doubt using Antigone to represent: san-papiers, the slum dwellers etc is a innovative and progressive reading of the tragic play. Yet if it becomes a question of advancing claims for recognition entirely within the symbolic order then this would be the social democratic reading of Antigone. Political struggle would consist in working in broad coalition with other progressive groups to articulate their demands in a general chain of equivalence. The political project would consist in the creation of democratic subjects

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<sup>40</sup> "Missing women: 520 aboriginal women missing or murdered" *Ottawa Citizen*, 4 Sept. 2009.

who fight to be included under the universal signifiers: democracy and equality. Butler seems to confirm this position in *Frames of War* when commenting on the political iteration of the norm:

What one is pressing for, calling for, is not a sudden break with the entirety of a past in the name of a radically new future. The “break” is nothing other than a series of significant shifts that follow from the iterable structure of the norm. (2009d, 169)

Yet one somehow senses that this seems to countervail the force of Butler’s earlier claim that saw in Antigone a void, an impossibility of all sense-making, a figure at its own epistemological limits who rejects any compromise with a Symbolic that mandated a quiescent feminine oedipalized subject. Does not Butler’s call for an ‘undoing of the subject’ as the inaugurating moment for this new field of the human require more than simply an addition of new subject positions within the Symbolic? Instead would it not require an alteration of that very Symbolic? *Is this not what is really required for any inauguration of a new mode of subjectivity?* As recent as *Precarious Life* Butler speaks of the necessary changes that need take place at the level of the ontological. This requires a subjective modality that exceeds the current liberal democratic subjectivity, as it questions the very ontological substance of being, and calls for its remaking.

It is not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? (2004b, 33)



It is here that we can locate perhaps the reason why Butler is vulnerable to criticism that her political theory of multiple identities and sexualities merely panders to the needs of global capitalism. On the one hand she seems to be no more than a left social democrat seeking more ways and space to liberate marginal subjectivities. On the other hand, she directly calls for a revolution at the level of the subject, something one could discern as early as her book *Gender Trouble*. The shift of normative frames required to make grievable those whose lives cannot be grieved, even recognized, requires a fundamental deconstructing of the dominant frame, otherwise political struggles stop short of real change and get (in)stalled in the legal machinery of the state. As we noted in the previous chapter with regards to the Danish cartoon scandal, various demands get co-opted into a stultifying liberalist legalism.

In order for this new field to emerge it requires a radical desubjectivation, a draining of the subjective coordinates holding the current liberal subject in place and the installation of a totally new symbolic. In an interview Butler remarks, “it is possible to undergo an alteration of the subject that permits new possibilities that would have been thought psychotic or “too dangerous” in an earlier phase of life” (2000b, 739). That Butler’s commits to risking the very intelligibility of the liberal subject, to pushing its epistemological limits, to sensing that it may become unrecognizable, indeed ‘monstrous’ would seem to make a case for a post-Oedipal politics requiring a fundamental mutation in subjectivity. Butler figures the monster here as a limit, as the *undead* to use a Žižekian term: one is not biologically dead, yet one is also not recognized within the socio-symbolic. Not biologically dead, yet not recognized in any socially significant way, so

not alive. Butler expresses it thus: “In this way, whenever we question our gender we run the risk of losing our intelligibility, of being labelled ‘monsters’” (Butler, 2008). The fear of the homosexual induces a panic, a loss of identity, this is labelled *monstrous*:

Hence the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity, that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman, that if she is not quite a man, she is like one, and hence monstrous in some way. Or in a man, the terror of homosexual desire may lead to a terror of being construed as feminine, feminized, of no longer being properly a man, of being a “failed” man, or being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection.<sup>41</sup> (Butler 1997b, 136)

As we have already noted, Antigone figured as the monstrous in her challenge to the Thebean status quo. When one becomes ‘monstrous’ they become unrecognizable, no longer ‘seen’ or defined as human in the prevailing Symbolic order. But is it that this very deconstitution of the subject, its very monstrosity, can provide us with a way forward, that its very irremediable disappearance from the symbolic coordinates of the political status quo should give one a pause for thought. What one should refrain from is a rush to remediate the subject’s condition, to seek to reconstitute its place in the Symbolic. To this end, Butler herself seeks reference to the Lacanian ‘act’ in order to express the very nature of subjective deconstitution:

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<sup>41</sup> As will be argued below, this figure of monstrosity is the place of a true *universality*, a *singular universality* shorn of all particularity, where we meet one another on the ground of objectivity. As Kelsey Wood claims, “true subjectivity arises only through encountering the Real, and through the subsequent disintegration of the self that had been constituted within a communal universe of meaning” (2012, 241).

I make use of the Lacanian notion that every act is to be construed as a repetition, the repetition of what cannot be recollected, of the irrecoverable, and is thus the haunting spectre of the subject's deconstitution. (1993, 244)

Butler's mentioning of the Lacanian 'act' here is significant. What Butler here recognizes is that reiteration of the performative code, of a repetition that 'is a bit off' is not simply a performative undoing of the Symbolic but also touches on the 'haunting spectre of the subject's deconstitution.' In other words, Butler here may be hinting at something beyond a performative reiteration of the norm, something more that is needed in order for a rupture and emergence of a space of a new 'subjectivation.' In this way, the Lacanian act according to Žižek is precisely a way of thinking the nature and extent of the deconstitution of the subject that is required to bring about a radical change over and above the simple coordinates of liberal democratic capitalism. It is to think the very possibility of a new field of the human within a more radical political analytic framework, an insistence on 'going through' the symbolic co-ordinates of liberal democracy and global capitalism.

The emergence of the subject is an 'erupture', an event that explodes the coordinates of the status quo and inserts a new 'political grammar', after which, through the iteration and repetition of the new normative complex, new subject positions become stabilized.<sup>42</sup> These new subject positions exist within a totally new political grammar that

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<sup>42</sup> Butler is critical of the concept "subject positions" and would not use it. It is being used in this context purely descriptively. The Lacanians out of the University of Essex are also critical of the notion of 'subject positions' choosing instead an emphasis on the

allows, for example, that one has not one mother but mothers or even no mother, not a father but fathers or no father and in which sexuality is no longer dictated by a relationship to a phallic signifier, but is incorporated in a plurality of signifiers as Butler makes clear in her work on the 'lesbian phallus' in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). The lesbian phallus is for Butler a signifier that articulates plurality rather than the ancient singularity of the Oedipal phallic signifier. Under the lesbian phallus one can conceive of a new modality of human being. But the struggle to articulate the new is nothing short of monstrous.

The human, it seems, must become strange to itself, even monstrous, to achieve the human on another plane. This human will not be "one," indeed, will have no ultimate form but it will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organization of sexuality. (2004c, 191-192)

One thus reads Butler's treatment of Antigone as less a constitution than a deconstitution of subjectivity. A post-Oedipal political configuration requires changes in the very psychic mapping of the subject: "radical alterations in kinship demand a rearticulation of the structuralist suppositions of psychoanalysis, moving us, as it were, toward a queer poststructuralism of the psyche" (2004c, 44). Undoing the structuralist Oedipal sanction against incest and reaffirming a disavowed homosexual and/or homosocial desire that de-

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concept of dislocation of the structure. In the next chapter we will take up the Essex Lacanians and the way in which they read Butler in a social democratic vein which is consistent with their own Lacanian version of radical democracy.

institutionalizes patriarchal heteronormativity would require nothing short of a mutation in the very modality of subjectivity.

Antigone goes beyond conventional politics of negotiation, protest, alliance building and voting. An inauguration of a new subject is never planned. The eruptural nature of its event has to do with the fact that it happens and shifts the entire scheme of intelligibility, the coordinates that now come into play then situate the 'act' as fully justified and as the only real solution. The new situation retroactively justifies its very conditions of emergence. The originality of Butler's claim for a post-Oedipal grammar of the political would be nothing less than an inauguration of an 'Antigone complex', a poststructuralism of kinship and of the psyche. It would be based on a new normative schema of intelligibility, one that is ecstatically post-Oedipal and this requires shifting the very frame of the symbolic itself. Butler asks, "... there remains a question of whether or not she [Antigone] might signify in a way that exceeds the reach of the symbolic" (2000a, 44). The answer to this questions now seems clear. When someone no longer makes sense, when their speech is deemed 'psychotic' what could Butler be describing other than an glitch in the symbolic requiring a total reconfiguration of master signifiers? And with this shift heretofore 'psychotic' languages now become the coordinates of normativity.

In order to properly appreciate and discern the contours of a post-Oedipal subjectivity one should insist that Butler properly stare down the radicality of her thesis and not waver. Inaugurating a post-Oedipal politics is about monstrosity, a "dispossession of the self" that explodes the equivalential and other discursive logics of

liberal democratic politics. Antigone vanquishes the coordinates of the symbolic order altogether in a Lacanian version of the act, of which Butler is not entirely averse.

That hundreds of aboriginal women, prostitutes, intravenous drug users, sexual abuse victims and victims of domestic battery can disappear without any popular concern or consternation reflects a particular regulatory frame that sets out to value a particular variant of human being whose lives will count and be grieved when lost, and those whose lives cannot be said to be recognized as worth living, who do not count as properly human and thus cannot be grieved. To recognize the magnitude of those missing aboriginal women et al. and to honestly, sincerely grieve their loss would require a mutation in the modality of the liberal subject. This mutation would be simultaneous with a new field of the human, rupturing the symbolic, appearing as a 'terrorism' which can't be relegated to any standard framework of intelligibility. This is the legacy of Antigone. If one is to cull a virtue from this very disposition to forego all certainty, all anchors in a symbolic, then this virtue must articulate itself in the very desubjugation of the subject.

But if that self-forming is done in disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be a subject here, and what will count as a life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment

in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from  
constraint. (Butler 2000e, 321)

The very breaking of the habitual form of judgement means escaping the logics that are determining and restrictive. It becomes then a question of securing an understanding of these determining logics and what it entails to break out of them, of yielding artistry from the constraints that hold the current coordinates of the symbolic in place.

## Chapter IV: On not seeking Recognition in the big Other

### Part 1

In *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) and *Antigone's Claim* (2000) Butler made the first indications of developing a theory of subjectivation that was itself subtracted from being, that is, it contended with a de-subjectivation of the subject. At this stage of her work, as we have already touched upon, Butler seeks a different sort of interpellation. Instead of a turn towards the Law, perhaps one does not turn at all, one ignores the Law, develops a cold indifference to it. Yet her efforts to put forth a relational ontology in her later post-2001 works, particularly *Giving an Account of Oneself* in some ways seriously compromises this earlier more radical theory of the ethical relation. In this extended quote from her *Precarious Life* (2004) we can discern this tension:

This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self. It is not as a discrete individual that we honor this ethical relation. I am already bound to you, and this is what it means to be the self I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. This is also, clearly, the condition of my injurability as well, and in this way my answerability and my injurability are bound up with one another. In other words, you may frighten me and threaten me, but my obligation to you must remain firm.

This relation *precedes* individuation, and when I act ethically, I am undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I *am* my relation to the “you” whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this “I” makes no



sense, and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego. Another way to put this point is that the “I” becomes undone in its ethical relation to the “you” which means that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical relationality possible. If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation. The ethical relation means ceding a certain egological perspective for one which is structured fundamentally by a mode of address: you call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level, and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness. (2004b, 10)

Butler cites a particular ‘mode of dispossession’ as that which makes the ethical relation possible and it is this, rather than ‘precarity’ proper, which leads to more fruitful avenues of investigation. This is because a study of the mode of dispossession from which emerges the ethical relation requires an understanding of an ethical relation outside of an intersubjective humanist starting point. Subjective dispossession is that which is prior to “subjectivation” or to use Althusser's term, ‘interpellation,’ in other words, we need to consider a subject prior to its individuation. A universal ethical position, a ‘singular universality’ that cuts through ontic particularity, can only arise when we consider the

subject formation in its deconstitution, not in its intersubjective mode as being-with-others or any such notion of relationalism. Thus the intention of this chapter is to chiefly expose the limitations of a politics of precarity that relies solely on a theory of ethical intersubjectivity. From the catacombs located deep below what is now her built foundation of precarity and performativity we will seek to disinter the remnants of her brief dalliance with a notion of ‘critical desubjectivation’ and expose it once again to the light in hopes of showing how it can be used to think a critical theory of subject formation that will bring a politics to her ethics.

### **Precarity**

Starting out from the concept of precarity, Butler builds a political approach that seeks to investigate the institutional and political preconditions of providing for sustainable lives. Her politics starts from bodily life itself, what is needed to sustain a body, what does it mean to “commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other.” Bodily vulnerability is a condition of life itself and Butler seeks to build upon this notion in a number of different ways. Bodily vulnerability in one way means an investigation into its social and political construction, its performative nature. Precarity also points to the political conditions of its sustenance, and its social preconditions: housing, healthy food, clean water, transportation etc. She asks: what are the conditions that provide a differential precarity; why are some populations more precarious than others?

The major drawback of a politics of precarity, for example, is simply that it has vacated the terrain of critical subject formation, it no longer asks the question, “what are

the conditions for the emergence of a radical subjectivity?” Practically however, a politics of precarity has a role to play, afterall if one wanted to draw attention to the differential precarity of populations, it would require attending to the need for infrastructural supports such as access to clean drinking water, free education and housing and security of income. To obtain these resources for precarious populations requires struggle at the level of the democratic demand. But our radical take in this question is to insist that an ethics that resolves itself at the level of democracy is an ethics of ‘servicing the goods’ which can only result in piecemeal reform. To redeem a *politics* of the ethical relation, change must occur at a level that disturbs this very democratic default. Change must go beyond the default ethical setting of *more democracy*, and instead accentuate the possibility of real change, that is, change that touches the *Real*.<sup>43</sup>

### **For the Creative Disintegration of the Ego**

Subjective change occurs as a form of self-annihilation, self-dispossession. The signature example of such an evacuation of the ego, a cleaning of the slate in preparation for the new, would be the cautionary tale of the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystics, The New Spirit

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<sup>43</sup> The Lacanian category of the ‘Real’ does not designate reality. It is not a positivity, nor is it negativity, it is deadlock in the Symbolic. Sometimes it is viewed as an unsymbolisable ‘excess’ that besmirches even the best laid plans, or it is a symptom of the totality, the crack or fissure that prevents any neat closure. It is the reason why one can’t designate true love by listing the loving qualities of a person, that any list doesn’t encapsulate one’s love, but it is also why one may feel bothered by the proximity of the other (who wears a headscarf for example), or the proximity as felt via the threat of second-hand smoke. In order to rid ourselves of this nagging feeling of the proximity of the other we attempt to ‘de-cafeinate’ our environment through various by-laws, products and codes of behaviour.

Movement, whose claim was that only through such a self-overcoming could one become One with God. Marguerite Porete was executed, burned at the stake as a heretic in 1310, most notably for authoring a work *The Mirror* that was, as Simon Critchley calls it, “an instruction manual of sorts” which describes the process of self-deification, “becoming God” (Critchley 2012, 125). Leaving aside whatever ‘becoming God’ could possibly mean, what interests us here, is the subjective transformation that took place, and the way in which this came about. Critchley points out that the process could be interpreted as an undermining of the rational ego, “undermining its authority [which then] allows a new form of subjectivity to stand in the place inhabited by the old self” (139). Figuratively one kills of the old self “in order that a transformed relation to others becomes possible, some new way of conceiving the common and being with others” (143). No doubt this sounds rather cultish, religiously harrowing in a sense that sounds foreign to a secular ear, nonetheless, the point touches on the theme we will be pursuing here, that is, subjective change through self-dispossession.

Why was *The Mirror* condemned as heresy? For the simple reason that once the Soul is annihilated, there is nothing to prevent its identity with God. ... In becoming nothing, God enters the place where my Soul was. At that point, *I*—whatever sense the first-person pronoun might still have here— become *God*. When I become nothing, I become God. Such is the logic of auto-theism. (130)

Critchley's thrust here is to trace a genealogy of radical subjective formation and its relation to faith, however what concerns us more is specifically this *decreation*.<sup>44</sup> That the early mystics gave us a glimpse of a total subjective transformation entailing a destitution of the self requires a contemporary treatment that nevertheless retains faint echoes of Porete's exemplary work of self-dispossession. It is in turning to the work of Jacques Lacan that we begin this task.

## **Part 2**

### **Lacan's Subject of the Enunciation, Subject of the Statement**

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst who sought a return to Freud, in much the same way his contemporary Louis Althusser sought a return to Marx. As Althusser sought to purge Marxist theory of forms of residual humanism, so Lacan sought to develop his version of psychoanalytic theory in opposition to the then dominant school of ego psychology. Lacan's early influences were the surrealist art movement, Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel, and the structuralism of Claude Levi Strauss. This means that the formation of the argument below will bear the marks of these three different movements: the surrealistic evocation of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, the Hegelian relation to otherness/the Other and finally the influence of structuralism in Lacan's four discourses — Master, University, Hysteric and Analyst.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Critchley cites the term "decreation" as coming from the poet Anne Carson and her work on female mystics (2012, 129).

<sup>45</sup> From 1933 to 1939 Lacan attended the lectures on Hegel given by Alexandre Kojève. André Breton, the founder of the surrealist movement and Georges Bataille both friends of Lacan, also attended these lectures (Lee 1990, 3).

In his *Seminar V*, Lacan draws a distinction between the *subject of the enunciated* and the subject that is speaking, or the *subject of the enunciation*. The *subject of the enunciated or statement* is where one is located in the utterance or the sentence. It is the subject of the signifier, “I am warm-hearted and generous.” However, the *subject of the enunciation* is elsewhere, it is not in the statement. The *subject of the enunciation* is from where the subject speaks. Molly Anne Rothenberg in her book *The Excessive Subject* underscores the emergence of the subject precisely in the gap between two levels in the subject: the level of the enunciation (unconscious), and the level of enunciated (statement).

The fact that one has become meaningful to others — i.e. been registered in the Symbolic — does not mean that one actually knows what one means to others. On the contrary, to enter the Symbolic register is to fall under the regime of signification as a signifier, that is, as capable of transmitting meaning, but not capable of coinciding precisely with one’s meaning. A gap remains between the subject who is referred to in the utterance at the level of enunciated (“I am a woman”) and the subject who is making the utterance at the level of enunciation. This gap marks the locus of the minimal difference that keeps the subject from coinciding with itself. ... So, the inability to control the meaning of oneself for others, this consequence of the difference between the level of the enunciated and the level of enunciation, is the way in which the subject becomes aware of its own non-self-coincidence. (Rothenberg 2010, 42)

The subject exists as this breach in discourse, as split \$ between the *level of the enunciated* or statement, the ego, the speaking I as in “I am a generous and outgoing” and the *level of the enunciation*. It is not only due to the excessive nature of the signifier as Derrida argues, but also because at the *level of the enunciation* the unconscious, the other scene erupts in gaps in speech, in dreams and slip-ups.

Taking a simple example from the clinic, when the analysand says to his analyst, “I dreamt about a woman, I don’t know who she is, but I’m sure that she is not my mother.” Does not this denial, this attempt to steer clear away from any reference to his mother alert one’s attention to the figure of his mother? “Signifiers ... are indifferent to the conscious subject’s (the ego’s) intentions. Where the analysand wishes to deceive the analyst is where there is truth” (Pluth 2007, 42). This “excess” which the subject is not in control of, an excess of which is irremediable, cannot be tamed through seeking a means of purifying the means or methods of communication etc.

This excess that emerges in the gap, signalling the non-coincidence of the two levels, is what in effect Butler came upon in her study of Antigone. It is this ‘minimal difference,’ holding onto this non-coincidence and not blaming or seeking recognition in a big Other that needs to be elaborated as key to a theory of the formation of a (anti-neoliberal) radical subject.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Seeking recognition in the big Other, as will be argued below, is to seek a form a recognition that looks for a place to settle in the prevailing social codes or common sense. An alternative strategy is for a group to deny or frustrate attempts to place their demands in the big Other.

For example one could say in large part that the Tea Party movement reflects real antipathy and exhaustion with issues affecting the middle class. That is, at the *level of statement*, it seems to be a standard middle class revolt against taxes and government spending, however at the *level of enunciation* it is based on homophobic racist fantasies. One could, for all intents and purposes, agree that at the *level of statement*, the Tea Party is speaking truth, yes government has spent wastefully, yes a significant portion of youth crime in many large U.S. cities is committed by young black males, and even agree, why not, that large portions of the Hispanic neighbourhoods are composed of ‘illegals’. Nevertheless this is an example of what Žižek calls “lying in the guise of truth.” The point being, that at the *level of the statement*, these things of which they speak could be quite factually true and accurate, nevertheless the Tea Party movement is lying. Lying in what sense? Because although at the *level of the statement*, they speak the truth, at the *level of enunciation* they are speaking from the standpoint of homophobic racists and xenophobes. At the *level of enunciation* there lies an integrated fabric of unconscious racist and sexist fantasies. Of course if this is pointed out to Tea Party followers they would deny allegations outright. One needs to heed the previous statement: “I don’t know who this woman is but she’s not my mother” in order to understand this split nature of the subject. This split or barred subject is what Lacan represents as:  $\$$ .

Thus the utterance could be factually true and still a lie. This is where ‘political correctness’ goes awry. As a discourse *political correctness deals only with the subject of the statement and leaves the level of enunciation untouched. That is, it leaves the subjective position of the racist homophobe untouched.* One could take as an example



sensitivity training, the promotion of positive imagery, of 'Reach Out' programs that explain the situation of 'persecuted minorities' all are of little social value. Unless the 'minimal difference' is addressed and the racist fantasies traversed, what will inevitably be the case is that the subject walks away from these social programs speaking one way, but in an almost inchoate way, feel or sense another, as in, "Yes I understand that X (Turks, Chinese, Arabs, Jews) are human beings like myself, nevertheless there is something about them, a *je ne sais quoi* that really bothers me. This *je ne sais quoi*, is the minimal gap, the self-difference *constitutive of subjectivity*. One cannot get rid of this gap. The question then becomes what does one do with this feeling, this gap, this excess? Scapegoating the Other, blaming a segment of society for this so-called tear in the social fabric is one political possibility. It is our contention here that the truly ethical stance requires taking responsibility for one's own excessive dimension and *jouissance*<sup>47</sup> (Rothenberg, 194). How is this done? In a manner of speaking, it is here that Butler zigs, while Žižek zags.

### **Butler's ethical problematic**

Judith Butler's entire ethical problematic does not begin with the question of how to recover a commonality, a common discourse, or a substantive means to a free and

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<sup>47</sup> More than simply enjoyment, *jouissance* is the combination of pleasure and pain, of pleasure in pain, not simply in the masochistic sense, though it is that as well, but also the gratification taken in obsessive repetitive loop rituals, fanatical cleaning, or unconsciously seeking to be yelled at or admonished by a loved one or authority figure. Stereotypically there is the woman who constantly complains about her husband, while unconsciously, unbeknownst to her, 'gets her kicks' out of this constant complaining and so does nothing to change her situation.

undistorted communication with the other. She argues that the address coming from the other is constitutive of the self, the self is only this relation with the other. For Butler ethicality begins not with commonality, but with difference. In a recent debate with Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornel West, she opposed the notion that an ethics starts with clearing a space for a commonality to emerge.

Myself I'm not much interested in the common ... I think maybe it's the uncommon, or what is not part of the common or what can never truly become common, which establishes really specific differences, and which also becomes the basis of an ethical relation that establishes alterity rather than the common as the basis of ethicality. I think we can't have an empathy, we can't have the relation to the suffering of others without that constitutive difference. (2011b, 113)

For Butler the ethical relation to the other begins at precisely that point where there is no common language, no common landing or worldview with which to begin a dialogue. Butler insists that this is where the political begins today: the question of cohabiting the earth is this very ethical formation, of not being able to choose one's neighbours, not being able to choose with whom to cohabit the earth. The ethico-political relation is anything but a social bond or type of contractual relationship one enters through individual volition and deliberation. Butler does not join Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor who seek to legislate the ethical relationship via rational autonomous individuals seeking to meet one another on a neutral terrain of law. She is not dismissing the importance of a legal framework but wishes only to make the larger claim that rejects

claims to subjective autonomy that support instances of 'heroic' individuality thus disavowing the ways in which humans are mutually dependent on one another. Thus it goes without saying for Butler that a Cartesian ontology cannot grasp this fundamental condition of precarity.

This way of being bound to one another is precisely *not* a social bond that is entered into through volition and deliberation; it precedes contract, is mired in dependency, and is often effaced by those forms of social contract that depend on an ontology of volitional individuality. Thus it is, even from the start, to the stranger that we are bound, the one, or the ones, we never knew and never chose. If we accept this sort of ontological condition, then to destroy the other is to destroy my life, that sense of my life that is invariably social life. This may be less our common condition than our convergent condition – one of proximity, adjacency, up againstness, one of being interrupted by the memory of someone else's longing and suffering, in spite of oneself. (1997b, 88)

This seems to expose Butler to the objection that her project is merely rehabilitating a humanism, a cherished notion of a bounded human community founded in common suffering, or vulnerability. But hers is not a humanism that starts from an ego-centre, her community is not a social contract of individuals willing to give up some of their rights for the security of a community, nor is it a communitarianism grounded in a commonality of ethnicity, religion or vulnerability. Even in the latter case, describing her ethics as one of 'mutual vulnerability' does not adequately capture her social, relational ontology.

Butler's social ontology defines the human as a relation, or a relationality. Far from a humanism, Butler seeks to re-articulate moral theory away from a Cartesian subjectivity.

Another issue that surfaces in her discussion with Habermas and Taylor is the concept of 'translation,' of moving a discursive object from a religious discourse to a public discourse so that all parties involved have a common language and thus are able to converse with one another. Butler reacts to suggestions of a notion of translation suggested by Habermas, by which a religious discourse is mined for elements that could be brought out or exposed to a wider articulation and conversation with other groups. But this very mechanism of 'translation' as taken up by Habermas and Taylor is much too narrow, as Butler explains:

It seemed to me that the way it (translation) was being used is that, when a religious claim is translated into secular reason, the religious part is somehow left behind and the translation is an extraction of the truly rational element from the religious formulation, and we do leave the religious behind as so much dross. ... I think there are accounts of ... universality of equality, and say, of cohabitation that emerge from within religious discourse. I'm not sure that they can be fully extracted from it.  
(2011b, 113)

Butler cites translation as both a necessary though impossible task. The key to translation for her is not coming up with a common object of agreement, a positivity of sort, but in Hegelian fashion, Butler is more keenly aware of the negative, what she calls the exilic or exhile nature of what escapes the popular political vernacular.

### **National Anthem in Spanish**

In 2006 a group of illegal immigrants gathered in downtown Los Angeles seeking the 'right to have rights' as Butler states it. During their demonstration they broke out in a version of the American national anthem, singing it Spanish. Butler points out the quandary they were in. They live and work in the country, some for a very long time, their families are settled and have laid down roots. So all they wanted was official recognition, they wanted their rights. But in order to stake their claim to basic rights, they had to 'appear' which in itself is illegal. That is, they had to speak in public which is prohibited to them as a group as they could not be "enacting freedom of assembly" precisely where it is prohibited to them by law. They sang the anthem in Spanish where US federal law prohibits the singing of the national anthem in any language other than English. Their quandary, or what Butler labels a 'performative contradiction' is that "they have no right of free speech under the law although they're speaking freely precisely in order to demand the right to speak freely." By speaking out, enacting their rights, they seek to bring them into being. But the very act of seeking their legal rights is itself illegal. This points to the gap between the 'illegitimate' exercise of rights and the performative enactment of those very rights. What the demonstration succeeded in doing was in putting both of these "in public discourse so that the gap can be seen, so that the gap can mobilize" (2007, 69).

### **Foreign Workers at Talbot France**

Ed Pluth in his study of the Lacanian subject, cites a similar situation of North African migrant workers in Talbot, France. During a strike in early 1984, at an auto plant, an occupation of the factory floor led to a confrontation between the unionized French workers and “non-strikers” a group of mostly North African workers which drew national press attention. It was becoming clear that although the African workers had lived in France for many years, some had lived in France for 20 years, living in the city and raising a family but nevertheless lacking the certification of French citizenship etc. The strike at Talbot exposed a schism not only in the French labour movement but society wide. There were incidents in which the unionized workers clashed with the African workers as it became clear that the African workers would be shut out of any bargain struck between the union and the employer. Quite simply the migrant workers clashed with the authorities and drew nation-wide attention to themselves. These migrant workers were demanding their “rights.”

The confrontation was condemned by France’s largest trade union which soon decided to accept management’s offer. Immediately after this strike, the ruling socialist party plummeted in the polls, due to the failure of their industrial policies. And the Right was able to rally French public opinion against the migrant workers at Talbot. What now appeared on the political agenda was the ‘immigrant problem’ and the Right, but not only Le Pen<sup>48</sup>, were able to capitalize on a public perception that the left-wing parties were

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Marie Le Pen came to the forefront of French politics in 2002 on an right-wing anti-immigrant platform that succeeded in changing the language of the debate in which

incapable of dealing with the 'immigrant' situation. It was quite simply that the claims being made by the North African workers could not be properly absorbed within any of the properly political Symbolic.

At this point Pluth draws on the theory of Alain Badiou, pointing to this occurrence as in-itself significant for an understanding of the nature of politics: "[The migrant workers'] statement, which does however bear on rights, is intrinsically unrepresentable, and it is in this unrepresentability that the politics of this statement consists" (Pluth 152). It is simply that this request simply made no 'sense' in the accepted universe of political discourse. These workers were illegal and had no rights to speak of, yet they were gainfully employed by the car maker. They wanted the right to treatment as equals. But like the illegal immigrants in Los Angeles, they became stuck in a performative contradiction or what a Lacanian would call an 'impasse in signification.' What needs to be fully endorsed is Butler's claim that "there can be no radical politics of change without performative contradiction" (2007, 66). Rephrasing this slightly, there can be no politics without an act. An act brings to the fore the distinction between politics and 'the political.' We refer to 'the political' as the sedimentized, hegemonic 'encyclopedia' of any situation, the prevailing common-sense. When one speaks about 'the political' it is about representation and its proper function in state institutions, its epistemology is pragmatic and empiricist. The category of 'politics' on the other hand is what seeks to lay bare and expose the contingency of 'the political' revealing it as

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all parties sought to explain to the general electorate what they intended to do to solve this "problem."

nothing other than sedimentation of past decisions now taken up as ‘tradition’ or the norm. Politics, as opposed to the political, de-commissions reality, seeks to throw a monkey wrench into it in a manner of speaking, but to seek to accomplish such a thing thus depends on an ‘act.’ Such was the singing of the anthem in Spanish, such was the demands of the North African migrants, “We demand our rights.” Both acts brought into relief the fact that their demands could not be accommodated within ‘the political’. In both cases what their political acts represent is an *impasse in signification* in the symbolic.

Politics does not consist of repeating the circumstances of an event, of, for example, trying to bring about again what happened at Talbot. Instead, politics as a signifying act preserves the *impasse in signification* caused by the event. Politics does not let this event stop being an event for the social. In other words, it does not let an event get fully absorbed or placed in the Other. Politics, then, is a signifying practice that remains faithful to the subjective rupture an event brings about. (Pluth 2007, 155)

Butler uses ‘performative contradiction’ as a way to expose this gap between the performance of people on the street, of the physical display of the very rights that they are being denied. Their bodily presence was considered illegal since they did not possess the proper papers to be in the United States. Hence their very “performativity” was in and of itself an illegal act: their appearance on the street, their chants and demonstration, culminating in the singing of the national anthem in Spanish, all expose a ‘gap’ in political discourse, an *impasse in signification*. The gap can be mobilized in this case by



remaining true to the cause of immigrant rights, of seeking to render the gap in political discourse open. Mainstream discourse will attempt to close it off by recognizing it as an ‘immigrant problem.’

After having said all this, one has to note that the criticism of Butler by Lacanians<sup>49</sup> is that Butler’s politics is an attempt to close this gap by seeking to resolve it in a specific articulation, an articulation that relies on getting recognized in the Symbolic order, seeking recognition in the big Other. The claim being made here is that for ‘illegal’ immigrants, who have worked and lived in their current places of landing yet are denied citizenship, there is no place in the Symbolic from which to articulate their claims. They are registered only as a problem, what Žižek would, after Ranciere, label the *part of no-Part*, an abject population who are denied any claims to recognisability and therefore treated as less human. For Žižek this opens up a space for a type of universality that is not based on the conventional notions of commonality, communalism etc. So that when Butler seeks to address a pressing political question: “What makes for a non-nationalist or counter-nationalist mode of belonging?” Lacanians would insist that the answer to this question cannot rely on an ethics of intersubjectivity but rather, as Slavoj Žižek argues, it must be an ethics based on a *singular universality* that cuts across difference. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the Lacanian critique of Butler insists that

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<sup>49</sup> Two things need to be made obvious here. Slavoj Žižek has given the work of Jacques Lacan a coherence and political traction that has made my passage through Lacan’s Seminars and his *Écrits* much more rewarding. My interpretation of Lacan is indebted to Žižek as will become apparent. And Žižek has been the most vociferous Lacanian critic of Butler, although there have been others, particularly Tim Dean, Adrian Johnston and Molly-Anne Rothenberg.

intersubjectivity cannot be the starting point of the ethical. If Butler truly wants to endorse the struggles of illegal immigrants, of seeking to theorize a non-nationalist mode of belonging then to think a universal non-national mode of belonging requires a notion of universality *bereft* of intersubjectivity.

### **Relational Psychoanalysis**

Butler cites as an interesting example of the dynamic of her ethical relation the therapy environment between analyst (therapist) and analysand (patient). It is the work of the practicing psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas with whom Butler finds a kindred theoretical spirit. Bollas practices a type of relational psychoanalysis that accords well with Butler's 'onto-relational' subject.<sup>50</sup> Referring to a work by Bollas where he outlines his relational form of psychoanalytic therapy, what is immediately useful for Butler is the way Bollas (the analyst), places himself vis à vis the analysand (patient). Butler states "The model of psychoanalytic intervention that Bollas affirms constitutes a significant departure from the classical notion of the cold and distant analyst who keeps every counter-transferential issue to himself" (Butler 2005, 56). Butler wants to draw attention to an 'empathetic' understanding or conversation that the analyst has with the analysand. Bollas, refers to a clinical situation in which a female analysand, during the session, falls silent for long periods of time. Bollas observes her silence and begins to reflect on what it must mean for her to be sitting there in silence, about how lonely and disorientating it

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<sup>50</sup> I use this term to express what I think is Butler's reworking of the ontology of the subject. Hers is not a de-ontology *per se*, that is, Butler does not seek to do away with the category of being, for example reducing it to a completely historicist category. For Butler being is relational hence my term onto-relational.

must be. Bollas does not sit back and remain silent, waiting for her to resume speaking, instead he speaks up and suggests to her that, “for and with him (she) has effectively recreated the environment in which she had felt suddenly isolated and lost as a young child. He asks whether she has asked him to inhabit this experience through her long pauses so that he can know what it was she then felt (2005, 56). The upshot of this for Butler is the following: Bollas is ‘undone’ by the suffering he witnesses, he attends to his own feelings of alienation and isolation so that he can better understand her inarticulateness. Butler here quotes Bollas:

the analyst will need to become lost in the patient’s world, lost in the sense of not knowing what his feeling and states of mind are in any one moment ... Only by making the good object (the analyst) go somewhat mad can such a patient believe in his analysis and *know that the analyst has been where he has been and has survived and emerged intact.*” (2005, 57)

We note here two key nodal points of Butler’s theory. Firstly, the analyst is required to abandon totally and utterly her or his complete sense of self and “become lost in the patient’s world,” to approach the point of madness in which the analyst and analysand’s world coincide. The echoes here of the mystical union of Porete with God should be sensed here, but for that reason not entirely dismissed. The analyst allows her or himself to be used as an “object” by the analysand. Secondly, what attracts Butler to the relational psychoanalytic techniques of Bollas is a mutual precarity that emerges between analyst and analysand, recognized by the analyst and articulated to the analysand in hopes that this admission will lessen her defences. This relation to the Other is a paradigmatic

example of the ethical relation for Butler. We will briefly return to Bollas and his version of relational psychotherapy later in this chapter. For now we need to recognize that, for Butler, the relationship to the Other is constitutive of the formation of the 'self.' Butler's ethico-political theory is dependent on extending her relational ontology into a mutual precarity, of dignifying a precariousness of all human life and noting that with inequality of resources there comes inequality of precarity, where some lives are placed in more precarious position than other lives. This differential precarity is what marks much of her later work.

We have now reached a crucial point in our investigation that necessitates a rebuttal to Butler's work on precarity that she attended to largely in the last 10 years. The following section will detail the drawbacks of basing a politics on an intersubjective dialogue, or more specifically, of basing an ethico-politics on a concept of relationality. In other words, as has been previously noted, Butler's earlier work on *Antigone* should be earmarked as the political text that issues a directive on subject formation that is more formidably political in its make-up: that is the concept of subjective dispossession. The following section aims to bring further clarification to this point. And so it will be at this point that we refer to the substantial theoretical interventions of Slavoj Žižek in order to bring out and sustain the investigations Butler seriously began in *Antigone's Claim* — that of seeking to push the understanding of a radical ethics to the point of a subjective destitution, to a zero level subjectivity such that in its place a new subjectivity can be born. It is in the interests of reviving this earlier theoretical tangent that we turn to a Lacanian political orientation that can continue on the path of a constitution of a 'radical'

counter-hegemonic subjectivity, a path from which Butler has since, if not quite strayed from, remains under-theorized in her later work post-2001.

### **Part 3**

#### **Intersubjectivity is not the starting point**

To encounter the other in Hegelian philosophy is an ultimate scandal for Žižek. There exists no mutual space of recognition where the subject encounters another self-consciousness. Žižek's contentious and political reading of this part of Hegel's *Phenomenology* sits in direct contrast to a liberal appropriation of Hegel. The 'liberal' Hegel, reads into the *Phenomenology* a theory of *mutual recognition*; a theory of self-consciousness emerging through the recognition of an Other. Butler as we have seen, this crucial Hegelian piece remains part of her basic ontological disposition. The self-Other for Butler is the signature moment of her political theory. On the other hand Žižek argues that an encounter of self-consciousness with another self-consciousness is caught within a *mirror relation* or a relationship that remains stuck predominantly in the register of the *Imaginary*.<sup>51</sup> So whereas Butler resolves the self into a seamless relationality, Žižek would prefer to understand this relationship as one of misrecognition. On the other hand, his reading of Antigone shares Butler's emphasis on subjective dispossession. For Žižek, Antigone is an instance of the emergence of the subject proper. But in order to get

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<sup>51</sup> The Lacanian registers of imaginary, symbolic and real will be dealt with at length below.

to this point, we need to take account of the reason why starting out at a notion of recognition of the Other, or a paradigmatic self-Other relation is misguided.

### **Princess and can of beer**

To illustrate this point Žižek recounts a television commercial that ran in the British media. It recounts the fairy tale of a princess, walking through the forest and coming upon a frog. She kisses the frog and it miraculously turns into a handsome young prince. But it does not stop there, the young prince then embraces the princess and kisses her and *poof* she turns into a bottle of beer which the prince, smiling, holds up triumphantly. What this illustrates is that there is never a harmonious picture of woman and man together, we either get a princess and a frog, or a man and a bottle of beer (*Indivisible* 163). Žižek uses this commercial to make the point that the self-Other relationship is never straight-forward, that the subject  $\$$  is barred from any transparent self-knowledge and that primarily one's approach to the Other is caught up in fantasmatic vehicles that stymie any notion that there is simply a kernel of authenticity that can be apprehended in the other marking the 'successful' initiation of a 'true' relationship. Stated differently: the gap between the subject of *enunciation* and the subject of the *enunciated*, locates a gap in the subject, that the subject speaking is never perfectly aligned with the subject of the unconscious, that this lack, or gap can be covered over in fantasy, in an object that the person finds in the other person which causes them to fall in love with that person. The only thing is the beloved can never see her/him self from the position of the lover, so not only does s/he not see what the lover sees, but it really does

not matter because the beloved does not have that object that causes the desire of the lover.<sup>52</sup> To place this in a larger political context, what Žižek is warning against is any too simplistic reduction of the Other to the stories they tell about themselves, to a too quick reduction of the Other to an ethical of open communication and understanding.

Žižek insists that the ethical duty of today's artist is "to confront us with the frog embracing the bottle of beer when we are daydreaming of embracing our beloved." The artist should expose the "underlying fantasy that the two subjects are never able to assume, something similar to a Magrittesque painting of a frog embracing a bottle of beer, with the title, 'A man and a woman' or 'The ideal couple'" (*Indivisible* 163). The intersubjective relationship is caught up in a fantasmagoria of projections and fantasy. The Princess set in her desire that her frog will one day grow up to be a handsome prince, and the man whose desire is always on a trajectory outside of that binary relation.

### **Decaffeinated other**

There is no neutral space where self and other can meet removed from a structuring fantasy scenario. Intersubjectivity is not a proper category of analysis for political theory. This sounds strange, for how can one begin to think social relations without a category of intersubjectivity, or at least a category that implies a relation to the other. For Žižek the entire problematic of self-other, seeking to address conceptions of

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<sup>52</sup> In Seminar VII, Lacan uses Plato's *Symposium* to speak about the transference that takes place between Alcibiades and Socrates and the way in which the former is convinced that Socrates possesses the 'algama' or *objet a*, the cause of his desire for Socrates.

differentiation from the other, respecting the otherness of the other, is paradigmatic of a liberal politics of piece-meal reform and 'political correctness.'

Žižek's attitude towards the other is very pragmatic. That this Other is my neighbour whom I should love as myself is what the biblical saying insinuates. The approach to the Other is always through a screen or filter in which there is an implicit judgement. The imaginary register plays a role here. Just as the baby (mis)recognizes its image of wholeness and physical coordination, a person judges the other as in a mirror image, seeking to recognize traits of the similar that are filtered through implicit standards, "The imaginary neighbor is the one who looks like me. I respect him because of his similarity, which thus stands in for a notion of Good that I impose on him" (Dean 173). What the other ends up being for us, is a filtered, censored, acceptable other, a 'decaffeinated other'. This logic of respect for the other can only come across as patronizing, a bit too polite, and incapable of something upon which one can base an ethical engagement.

Starbucks initiated a campaign that guaranteed with every purchase of a coffee a portion of the proceeds would go to help a poor child in Guatemala (Žižek *Violence* 5). This logic resembles a Levinasian plea to respond unconditionally to the plight of the fragile other. In this way, it combines what were once two separate social practices, charitable giving and consumerism. The former, charitable giving, was once done outside the sphere of capitalist consumption, it was a separate endeavour, one that called for personal and political reflection. Now however the appeal to help a starving other is made directly within the sphere of consumption so that one can purchase a cappuccino



and at the same time know that five percent of the cost goes towards helping a child in Guatemala. Political appeals that seek out a recognition and responsiveness to an Other no longer hint at a possible opening for a critique of free market rationality. On the contrary, it is only by exercising this rationality that individuals are interpellated to come to the aid of the other.

Similarly a McDonald's restaurant in India was accused of importing French fries from Europe that were prepared using beef fat (Žižek 2004a, 122). Complaints were raised regarding the fact that the cow is a sacred animal in Hindu religion. McDonald's recognized the complaint and said it would no longer use the fat from beef to prepare its French fries. Yet instead of calling this a victory for local forces against the power of globalization, Žižek argues instead that, "we should not accept this kind of respect for the Other's ideological-religious fantasy as the ultimate horizon of ethics." He asks, is there not something fake and patronizing about this kind of respect: "it is one thing to ask McDonald's to respect local customs, but quite another to engage with Indians against the economic model for which McDonald's stands. ... If we want to fight corporations like McDonald's, the correct strategy of attack is not this one of respect for the Other's fantasies" (2004a, 122). Here it seems Žižek, though critical of McDonald's Corporation, reduces a religious belief, to a fantasy formation. Does it not seem that Žižek's anti-political correctness sounds like typical Eurocentric dismissal of the cultural values of an Eastern country. Žižek asks of all North Americans and European supporters of the Indian boycott of McDonald's under the auspices of respect for cultural belief, if they would also claim the same for the Indian dowry system which has led to

burning deaths of 8391 women in 2010.<sup>53</sup> The question is rhetorical and the answer obvious, but Žižek's growing impatience with multiculturalism as a political ethos means that he strongly disagrees those ethico-political theories that begin with 'respect for the Other.'<sup>54</sup> Žižek is not denying that tactical alliances must be made with anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist struggles, but he is quick to point out that the overall strategy should be one that seeks to reject the binarism between Liberalism (good), and racism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-semitism, fundamentalism (bad). Going beyond this binary means not retreating back to a fundamental fantasy of a balance, or a prelapsarian state of a balanced whole. With regards to any binary opposition, Žižek contends, there are roughly two philosophical approaches that deal with it. The first approach one opts for one pole against the other, so for example one simply chooses Good against Evil, freedom against oppression. The second approach makes a case for a 'complicity of opposites' and shows how the second pole is implicit in the first, thus advocating something like a 'proper measure' or a 'dialectical unity.' It is Hegel who usually gets placed into this second group. But Žižek rejects this and insists on a third option:

[T]he way to resolve the deadlock is to engage oneself neither in fighting for the 'good' side against the 'bad' one, nor in trying to bring them

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<sup>53</sup> Bedi (2012) mentions that with the turn to the neoliberalism in India starting in the 1990s "this pernicious custom became more acute with greedy grooms backed by their families seeking to get rich through their hapless brides."

<sup>54</sup> This also is why Žižek claims that Butler's best work was her 1997, *Psychic Life of Power*. In this book her reflections were based on psychoanalytic notions of unconscious disavowal, and projection, which all combined for a sophisticated theory of subjectivity that bore no resonances of Levinas. It was only after the New York attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, in which one notes a distinct 'ethical turn' in Butler.

together in a balanced ‘synthesis’, but in opting for the bad side of the initial either/or. Of course, this ‘choice of the worst’ fails, but in this failure it undermines the entire field of alternatives and thus enables us to overcome its terms. (Žižek cited in Bryant 2008, 12)

To radically resolve the deadlock means that one needs to opt for the ‘wrong’ choice. In a situation of impending radical change there always are the conservatives who seek to maintain the status quo and who place a stress on civic order, the family and the rule of law. If one opts for the status quo, the power-holders consolidate their reign. For this reason it is always the ‘worst choice’ that truly undermines the field.<sup>55</sup> And this leads us to the question: what is the form of subjectivity required to ‘choose the worst’? Butler’s notion of a radical dispossession of the subject leads us in this direction with the following caveat that, though laudatory, her ethico-politics loses its analytic traction when she tries to press forward with the concept of precarity. This concept is not robust enough to carry the ethical load that she wants to handle. Precarity, the sense of precarious vulnerability, does open the door onto abjection and of an insidious normative discursive matrix which are politically illuminating analyses without a doubt. And it goes without saying that her emphasis on precarity also needs to be understood along with her claims to relational Otherness. But we have argued to this point that her project

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<sup>55</sup> Regarding the choice of Syriza in Greece, Žižek’s recent complaints that they didn’t have a coherent party platform, a sound alternative to communicate to the Greece electorate flies in the face of his advocacy of ‘the worst.’ The election of a truly socialist alternative in Greece would most probably have led to widespread chaos, capital flight, and a mutiny in the armed forces and police, plus demonstrations in the streets, etc. But this is precisely the ‘worst option’ that Žižek advocates.

wavers to the extent that intersubjectivity is strictly grounded in an onto-relationality between self-Other. This is not to say Butler has not treaded more radical ground. The consistent claim up to this point has been that there can be located a strain in her work that veers away from an onto-relationalism towards a politics of subjective dispossession. But it is only hinted at and now we have come to the point where the deconstitution of the subject needs to be looked at more closely which requires an brief investigation into the nature of Lacan's three registers, the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real.

#### **Part 4**

#### **Imaginary, Symbolic and Real**

In sum the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real are 3 registers that combine to formulate a distinct Lacanian psychoanalytic knowledge of subjectivity. These 3 registers are not entirely separate, they do not stand on their own. Lacan uses the metaphor of overlapping rings, or a configuration such as a Borromean knot to illustrate an overdetermination of all three with each other.

#### **Imaginary**

It is the imaginary that best captures the emotional and mental affects, torments and traumatic conflicts of personal relationships such as sibling rivalry, professional jealousies, the teaching relationship, child and the parent, the dynamics of married life. The imaginary register captures best the 'mirroring' relationship of understanding, of the 'chemistry' between two people, that can easily slip from closeness and intimacy to jealousy and hatred. It is an affective register where emotions and feelings are registered

primarily as affect rather than filtered through the medium of language. In the Imaginary Eagleton states, “we relate to things directly by our sensations – as though our very flesh and feeling become a subtle medium of communication, without the blundering interposition of language or reflection” (Eagleton 2009, 49).

In an early paper on the “Mirror Stage” Lacan outlined the theoretical contours of the imaginary register, using the example of a baby who sees itself for the first time in a reflective surface. The baby between six and eighteen months is uncoordinated, not in control of urinary and bowel tracts, drooling, crying, unable to walk or talk. Yet it rolls over and is captured by its own image in a mirror to the enthusing echoes of its primary caregivers, “Who’s that?” “Look its Riley, Riley that’s you!” The baby identifies with an image that gives the impression of imperial control, of wholeness.

But the important point is that this form situates the agency know as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan 2006, 76)

It is important to note here that Lacan’s point is that the development of the nascent ego takes places ‘outside’ the infant, in the image of the other. The infant as Chiesa points out, is both *captured*, by the image, that is attracted to the image and *captivated*, fascinated by it as well (Chiesa 2007, 15). The child recognizes him/herself in the otherness of the specular image in the mirror. But it is a false sense of self for one thing

the bodily is given an integrity that it does not have in reality. Alienated in the image of the other, that is, taking the image for itself implies that the very definition of the ego is one of a mistaken impression of unity. When Descartes defines madness as taking oneself for another person whom one is not, as in when a beggar takes himself to be a king, Lacan retorts that to believe oneself to be king when one is not is merely as crazy as one who “believes oneself to be oneself” (Chiesa 2007, 16). This is at basis the fundamental fantasy of the mode of egologicality, of the sovereign ‘I’. Furthermore, this mirror image capture extends to our relations with Others, caught within this Imaginary register, I seek to understand the Other as an extension of myself. As Fink describes it,

our usual way of listening is centered to a great degree on ourselves — our own similar life experiences, our own similar feelings, our own perspectives.” I believe I can truly relate to another person when I can locate a kernel of experience that resounds with theirs, a bonding only happens when a feeling of experiential harmony is felt between me and this other person. “We say things like “I know what you mean,” “Yeah,” “I hear you,” “I feel for you,” or “I feel your pain” (2007, 1).

Fink is arguing that one feels most connected to another human being only when both sides can mirror to an extent their own life experiences in each other. Being “caught in the Imaginary” describes much of office politics, the jealousies and petty rivalries between work colleagues and speaks to the affective resonance with which many of one’s “cordial” relations are based. Imaginary relations, Fink points out, “are not illusory relationships – relationships that don’t really exist – but rather relations between egos,

wherein everything is played out in terms of but one opposition: same or different” (1995, 84-85). Žižek mentions the rise of the new ‘liberal communists,’ George Soros and Bill Gates as the two predominant poster boys of a type of a politics caught in the Imaginary. They seek to tackle the world’s problems by ‘taking the bull by the horns’ as if to say, “Enough of this ideology and politics, there are children starving in Africa” thus bypassing the symbolic and attempting to engage directly the level of affect. The Imaginary also plays a role to the extent that people vote for a candidate largely on “gut feeling.” Advertisers use the seductions of the Imaginary when equating national identity and family with consumption, as in the equation of a cold Canadian ice rink in the early morning — children playing hockey — a warm cup of Tim Horton’s coffee. However the imaginary does not stand on its own, advertising messages are conveyed in language, and even one’s inner most felt affect is articulated using language or the Symbolic.

### **Symbolic**

Where the imaginary is the order of ‘affect’, of rivalry, jealousy, love and hatred, the Symbolic is marked by the use of language. Lacan’s earliest formulations of the psychoanalytic cure was in terms of getting the patient to ‘speak’ their trauma, that is, to effect a move from the order of the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The Symbolic is the world of the big Other, that agency of interpellation that structures the symbolic universe. Once the child leaves the embrace and secure world of the primary caregiver it is thrust into the world of the symbolic, of language and codes and norms. The late Steve Jobs (then C.E.O. of Apple) once spoke of his ‘friend’ and rival Bill Gates, (founder of

Microsoft), saying, “I wish him the best, I really do. I just think he and Microsoft are a bit narrow. He’d be a broader guy if he had dropped acid once or gone off to an ashram when he was younger” (Lohr 1997). Jobs positioned himself as the Boy Wonder artiste connected to affect, to passion, to the bodily *Imaginary* while Gates was simply the computer programming nerd caught in the symbolic of programming code and data.

The Symbolic order or big Other structures our everyday experience in ways we sometimes are not even aware. The “big Other is not confined to the explicit symbolic rules regulating social interaction; it also includes the intricate network of unwritten ‘implicit’ rules.” Adrian Johnston cites an example of a dinner party in which none of the invitees has any desire to attend and yet the party takes place and lasts for the requisite amount of time contrary to the desires of everyone present.

The very glue that holds the entire event together is the fact that each person in attendance attributes to or projects onto his or her respective others the desire to be there (a desire ostensibly absent in each and every person making this attribution or doing this projecting). ... This desire doesn’t exist within any of the particular nodes of the network, and yet nonetheless circulates throughout the network as its unifying force. (2006, 88)

The example combines a normal (neurotic) subject, (if I do not attend what will people think?), along with a big Other (that does not exist). The big Other is a collective projection, it exists only via the collective ‘positing’ by individuals. Nevertheless it is not simply a hallucination or anything of the sort. The big Other has material effects. Žižek



uses a number of clichés found in Hollywood movies to make this point, for example there is the “Grocery Bag” rule stating that whenever a scared, cynical woman who does not want to fall in love again is pursued by a suitor who wants to tear down her wall of loneliness, she will go grocery shopping, and her grocery bags will then break and the fruits and vegetables spill out which will symbolize the mess her life is in. Enter the suitor who then can help, “pick up the pieces of her life,” not only her oranges and apples. A cliché certainly but nonetheless one that appeared often enough in Hollywood to signify a precise moment in the film when a woman’s world was placed on the brink of a seduction. It signified a ‘romantic’ interlude in a way that the audience implicitly understood. One could add the “Kodak moment” of Canadian troops leaving for overseas missions. Most times the media covers the event there is at least one picture of a departing male soldier walking towards the plane or boat and a young waving mother, tears her in eyes, baby in her arms. One cannot second-guess the sincerity of this scene, but it needs to be pointed out that to be seen as ‘sincere’ this scene has to be staged more or less ‘properly’ in order seek its rightful place in the big Other. What about a woman soldier departing, kissing her black, nose pierced, dyke partner, holding their baby of mixed race? Is this moment captured in the big Other? Likely not, but then should the attempt to achieve full signification in the big Other be the political goal of movements seeking radical change? This question runs to the heart of the Lacanian critique of Butler. Many political movements seek to get recognized by a big Other. They want recognition in the Symbolic order.

### On Not Seeking Recognition in the Other

Radical politics gets so easily caught up in a fantasmatic relationship that purports to be radical but is merely the Imaginary rebuke of one's ego-Ideal. In his lecture from 1957 Lacan gives the example of a young man and his female friend driving around in daddy's sports car, the man has just taken out a membership in the Communist party to 'piss daddy off.' But what this ultimately reveals for Lacan is not an instance of rebellion, or at least not a type of resistance that is productive. At the level of his *ideal ego* the young man may emulate one of his favourite sports or musical figures on television. On an entirely different level, at the level of his *ego-Ideal*, he seeks to perform for one person, his father's gaze.<sup>56</sup> The young man appears before the symbolic gaze of his father, or perhaps another authoritative figure such as a professor, a priest, a boss, somebody to whom he admires and takes narcissistic gratification at appearing before their gaze, either approvingly or disapprovingly it does not matter since what matters is that the subject identifies with this point, with his or her *ego-Ideal*. In other words the young man is 'pissing off' daddy, but is doing it in such a way that seeks recognition from his father, he is misbehaving for the benefit of his father. Thus ultimately his so-called transgressive behaviour is about seeking recognition in the Other. An ethico-political theory must bear this in mind when seeking to articulate on an alternate mode of subject formation that does not readily collapse into an identification.

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<sup>56</sup> The *ego-Ideal* is the agency I try to impress, the place from which I judge myself. The *ego-Ideal* is located in the symbolic register. On the other hand the ideal ego is one's self-image, how we would ideally like to be seen by others: generous, caring, helpful etc. The ideal ego is located in the imaginary register (Žižek 2006a, 80).

A recent example is the Occupy Wall St. movement (OWS). A continual demand that was placed on them was “What do you want?” The media, politicians and other cultural commentators demanded that OWS register themselves in the Symbolic order, that is, to make themselves recognizable to the big Other. For some ‘seeking recognition’ is the road to accommodation to the liberal status quo. For the first time a grass roots movement was not pigeon-holed as a single movement issue i.e, equality for this or that constituency, or save the whales etc, but was generally putting itself forward as a protest against a neo-liberal capitalist order. The way this protest was articulated was ‘sliced and diced’ in a myriad number of ways both within the movement and without, but it was in the very performative contradictions, as in the Talbot strike or the march in downtown L.A., and ideally this means that what was called the lack of message, irresoluteness, confusion etc of the movement was its very strength. The political nature of the OWS was in turn its ability to remain faithful to this ruptural event, this making a hole in the signifier, thus not look to plug this hole by seeking recognition in the big Other.

Butler’s focus on the normative influence of the Symbolic order is reflected in her critique of the heterosexual matrix. Her theory is a relentless attempt to disengage this matrix of attitudes, physical movements/gestures and norms that has become firmly sedimented into a ‘naturalist’ common-sense understanding of human identity. Here Žižek’s reference to Woody Allen’s divorce from Mia Farrow is an example of the counter-intuitive counter-hegemonic understanding needed to get ‘beyond’ the Symbolic order. Woody Allen in a series of public appearances during his publicized divorce from Mia Farrow acted in ‘real life’ exactly like the neurotic and insecure male characters in

his films. So Žižek asks, “should we conclude that ‘he put himself’ in his films?” Are Woody Allen’s films just an extension of his ‘real life’ character? Are his main male characters merely ‘half-concealed portraits’ of himself? No, argues Žižek, “the conclusion to be drawn is exactly the opposite.” In his ‘real life’ Woody Allen, modeled himself, unconsciously copied (mirrored), characteristic traits and personality structures that he later elaborates in his films, “that is to say, it is ‘real life’ that imitates symbolic patterns expressed at their purest in art” (*Contingency* 250). Just as the woman whose groceries spill to the ground is (re)playing a role already mapped out for her in the big Other, so Woody Allen in his real life is merely playing a role already mapped out for him in his films, in the big Other.

One could extend Althusser’s claim and suggest that we are interpellated by the Symbolic big Other. And it is Butler’s assertion that the Symbolic Order can be chipped away and reconfigured, asserting that the repetition of the norm can go awry, that an interpellation by the big Other in order to maintain its hold, has to rely on its being repeated by the subject, and each repetition inevitably runs slightly askew. For Butler, to be a ‘bad subject’ is to draw attention to the performativity of these ideological operations and force these operations off the rail, put them out of their comfort zone in a manner of speaking. Žižek nonetheless claims that “such a practice of resignification can be very effective in the ideological struggle for hegemony ... there is, however, a limit to this process of resignification, and the Lacanian name for this limit, of course, is precisely the *Real*” (Žižek 2000a, 222).

## The Real

The stark contrast between the standard foot-dragging caution shown by governments in response to calls to ameliorate global poverty, attend to the ecological crisis and address pervasive inequality as compared to the haste and immediate response of billions of dollars suddenly ‘found’ by governments to throw at the 2008 financial crisis, was revealing. When it comes to the pressing global social issues such as inequality, starvation and the environment things can wait, but when the banks are hit then the message goes out that this is serious business. Government and bankers were responding with a sense of panic to the Real of Capital, the absent cause and immutable antagonism that structures priorities as when oil drilling development is given priority over the integrity of marshlands. Žižek insists against Butler that “today’s Real which sets a limit to resignification is Capital.” Žižek is responding to the Butler in *Gender Trouble* and her subsequent charge that the Lacanian Real is ahistorical, that the Real falls outside of signification as such and therefore concepts such as sexual difference defined as Real means that it is shielded against the force of history. Butler’s possible misunderstanding here is that she sees it as something outside history, when Žižek contends that the Real is exactly that without which there would be no history, “each historical epoch if you will, has its own Real. Each horizon of historicity presupposes some foreclosure of some Real. ... for [Butler] historicity is the ultimate horizon” whereas for Žižek historicity is sustained on a fundamental exclusion or deadlock.<sup>57</sup> The Real (deadlock) of Capital, is

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<sup>57</sup> Christopher Hanlon, “Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek.”

the unspoken 'motor' of history, but of course not in any crude reductionist sense. Only in the sense that the various historical sociopolitical formations: neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, Keynesian welfare state Soviet communism etc, are just various attempts to resolve this deadlock.<sup>58</sup>

Butler's proposal to reconfigure the standard interpellation: "Hey you there!" in the form of a response that is a 'turning away' from, entails a touching of the Real, as "such a turn demands a willingness not to be — a critical desubjectivation ..." (*PLP* 129). Is this not Antigone's insistence to pursue to the end the burial of her brother? Is not her act an act of seeking out and going beyond the limit, a death-driven frenzy that touches the Real? The Real is where symbolization reaches an impasse, breaks down. The Real is not to be confused with reality as it is the latter that acts as a shield of sorts to protect against any direct confrontation with the abyss of the Real. Antigone's act exposed the limits of thinking the possible. The efforts of the Symbolic to delimit and place into language or 'codify' that which escapes it is a political process of hegemonization. The Imaginary plays a significant role along with the other two registers, underscoring all symbolization with an affective component but also, in a surrealist vein, the Imaginary combines with the Real to signal dimensions of reality that escape the Symbolic. The next step is to combine these three registers with a 'structure' that shows that human

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<sup>58</sup> In this way the "class struggle" is not the last signifier giving the meaning to all social phenomena ("all social processes are in the last instance expressions of the class struggle"), but as Žižek describe it class struggle is Real, in that it denotes, "a certain limit, a pure negativity, a traumatic limit which prevents the final totalization of the socio-ideological field. The "class struggle" is present only in its effects, in the fact that every attempt to totalize the social field ... is always doomed to failure" (*Television* 11).

communication is never an egalitarian mutually symmetrical form of intersubjectivity. It always relies on the imposition of a Master signifier within a structured field that can be broken down into four different social links.

## Chapter V: Lacan's 4 discourses

The ideal perfect communicative setting that “eliminates any kind of noise” is the goal of communication theories. Whereas even Foucault concentrated on the content of the discourse, parsing it for threads and supple criss-crossing tributaries of power, “Lacan, on the contrary, works beyond the content and accentuates the formal relationship that each discourse establishes in the very act of speaking” (Verhaeghe *Does* 100). It is not so much the words spoken as it is the *position* in which they are spoken from. Here Jodi Dean outlines just what this would mean in terms of the different social bonds or social links this entails:

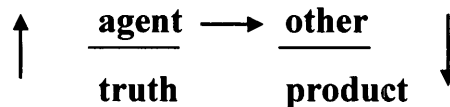
If I ask my young daughter, “What are you doing?” I am likely speaking from a position of parental authority. If I ask an associate in my laboratory, “What are you doing?” I may be speaking as a fellow scientist. If I ask a political leader, “What are you doing?” I may be challenging her authority, calling upon her to justify her policies and decisions. Lacan formulates the difference among these questions as different discourses, different ways that communication establishes a social link. (Dean 2006, 63)

The formal structure of the discourse determines the nature of the social bond. So for instance Lacan laid out four different discourses and thus four different social bonds. Lacan introduced the 4 discourses in a series of lectures gathered in Seminar XVII and continue to refine them up to his Seminar XX *Encore*.



### The Four Structural Locations (That Don't Move)

There are four positions or containers that don't move:



Typical of most theories of communication, Lacan starts out with the minimum two subjects needed in order to communicate. They are agent  $\longrightarrow$  other. An *agent* communicates to an *other* as speaker to addressee.

The *product* is the result of the exchange, it is located under the bar and so is hidden and therefore not a conscious product of the exchange. But up to this point we are still well within standard communication theory. It is only when we arrive at the fourth position: the position of *truth*, which is the driver and generator of each discourse. The position of *truth* is what remains unconscious and hidden from the position of the agent. "Freud demonstrated that, while man is speaking he is driven by a truth, even if it remains unknown to himself. It is this position of truth which functions as the motor and as the starting point of each discourse" (Verhaeghe *Does* 101).

### The Four Pieces of Content (That Move)

**S<sub>1</sub>** Represents the master. The master is the one that brings order to a chaotic situation, by an official pronouncement, a final decision or judgement. The Master S<sub>1</sub> unifies what was prior to that mere nonsense or chaos. The S<sub>1</sub> is the ultimate point that

‘quilts’ a disparate field of signifiers  $S_2$  under its rule. For example Democracy, Communism, Woman are significant examples of an  $S_1$  that curtail or bring to an end the endless sliding of signification by defining and quilting the field. Thus for example a hegemonic struggle to define the  $S_1$  Democracy will in turn structure the field of discourse ( $S_2$ ) around ‘workers rights’ and ‘same-sex marriage’ etc.

**$S_2$**  Designates the field or chain of signifiers that make up knowledge. There is a distinct Lacanian emphasis on signifiers and the combination of signifiers to make meaning. Wherever there is a field of  $S_2$  there is an  $S_1$  lurking nearby in order to complete or consolidate the slippage or constant play of the  $S_2$  field.

**$\$$**  Represents the barred subject. It represents the subject split between the conscious and the unconscious; it also represents the subject as subject of the signifier.

**$a$**  This letter ‘ $a$ ’ or *objet petit a* (here  $a$  stands for the french word *autre*) represents the unassimilable excess. Seemingly one of Lacan’s most straight-forward concepts to grasp, yet it defies all simple categorizations. *Objet a* stands for the ‘object-cause of desire’ and for that which escapes desire. It is that which causes the relentless and unending movement from object to object, always pronouncing after each successive capture, “That’s not it.” It is both the lure, the ‘object-cause’ of desire, and the void behind this lure. Once the subject falls into the defiles of the signifier, something

retroactively is felt as lost, a lost primordial bond, a wholeness or oneness, that nevertheless never existed but retroactively comes into play once signification takes hold of the subject.

Alternatively, the gap that opens up between the *subject of the statement* and the *subject of the enunciation*, this void is *objet a*. *Objet a* represents the void, at the same time as it is the object-cause of the desire that seeks to fill that void. The *objet a* as the gap between the *subject of enunciation* and *subject of statement*, is the object-cause behind the relentless pursuit to find that final meaning that will reveal the big answer. It is behind the subjective pursuit of his or her authentic cause, her authentic desire. The *objet a* is what throws the subject off kilter, throwing the subject continually out of joint.

### Discourse of the Master

$$\frac{S_1}{\mathcal{S}} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

The discourse of the Master is the discourse of the all-seeing One, the One that pronounces the Law. In classical age the Discourse of the Master served as the Divine Right of Kings; it is Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The master's word is  $S_1$ , the master signifier occupying the position of *agent*.  $S_2$  occupies the position of the *other*. This can be read as a master signifier in the operation of *quilting* a string of signifiers into a coherent knowledge  $S_2$ . However, as with all signification, this operation produces a remainder

'a' which is the *product*. Beneath the bar, in the position of *truth* is the barred subject written  $\$$ . Recall that the position of truth is the unconscious driver of the discourse. So in this case the Master  $S_1$  disavows his split subjectivity, and instead covers this over giving the impression that his directives are seamless, whole and complete and without contradiction.  $\$$  is under the bar means the Master signifier  $S_1$  denies that it is castrated by the signifier. She or he believes rather that she is impermeable, in control of her intentions, purposeful and whole.

*It veils over its lack with the illusion that it is whole and complete; the méconnaissance of a self that imagines that it is identical to itself and to its master signifier. It imagines that it has mastery of a 'univocal' discourse that masks its unconscious division. (Lacan 1992, 103)*

The split subject is split between the *subject of enunciation* and the *subject of the enunciated*, or the statement. The fact that the subject of the statement: "I am kind, generous and I care about the plight of starving children in sub-Saharan Africa" is not in the same place as the subject that made the enunciation may strike some as an odd, if not downright nonsensical. As soon as the subject speaks, it speaks from an (other) place. Unless it is reading from a prepared speech the subject never knows what it is saying. Its apprehension of itself is composed of a fantasy framework of which the discourse of the Master remains ignorant.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Caring about the plight of starving children is commendable. As *subject of the statement* the person who spoke this no doubt will feel a sense of satisfaction. However it is at the level of the *subject of the enunciation* where subjective change must occur. How this occurs will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

In a radical democratic vein, Laclau and Mouffe's work argues that the  $S_1$  in the position of agency works as the 'quilting signifier' or anchor point and its efficacy depends on 'recruiting' a chain of  $S_2$ s to its position. For example, the  $S_1$  of democracy becomes a raging battle in the Wisconsin state legislature, as competing forces try to recruit the  $S_1$  'democracy' to a string of  $S_2 + S_3 + S_4 + S_n$ : collective bargaining + public services + living wage. The string of  $S_2$ s that slide under the  $S_1$  of democracy as  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  produces an 'excess' product, *objet a* which acts as a constant driver of the political process. *Objet a* represents the forever ineffable, political deadlock and also the lure that covers over that deadlock. *Objet a* is the reason why the meaning of  $S_1$  is constantly battled over, revised, re-invigorated or outright replaced by competing political forces in the contestation for hegemony.

Mark Bracher points out, the discourse of the Master as produced in the arena of pedagogy, produces a teacher who seeks to replicate in his or her students an appreciation for any classical canon, for the masterpieces in an area of study. As a form of authoritarian pedagogy Bracher points out that the discourse of the Master, "engages students' desire for recognition by promising that if they can successfully embody the authority's ideals, values, desires, or enjoyments, they will merit recognition and validation by that authority or its avatars, (e.g. the teacher)" (Bracher 2006, 87).

### Discourse of the University

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{\mathcal{S}}$$

Dialing the Master Discourse a quarter turn to the left, one arrives at the discourse of the University. In the University discourse,  $S_2$ , knowledge is in position of *agent* as expert, addressing *objet a*. University discourse as  $S_2$  represents the contemporary rule of the expert, the economist, the bio-genetic researcher, the committee on medical ethics, an officer from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the pronouncement from the central Bank regarding the functioning of the economy. In all these instances  $S_2$  addresses an other as *objet a*, as object, as remainder. In other words a subject as object, as something to be talked at, lectured to etc., thus producing as *product* of this discourse, the split subject  $\mathcal{S}$ .

It is the master signifier  $S_1$  that drives the university discourse but remains hidden beneath  $S_2$ . That is,  $S_1$  functions here in the position of *truth* – what is disavowed by the speaker in the position of  $S_2$ , is that she or he operates under the guise of providing cover for  $S_1$  the master signifier. As such whereas the discourse of the Master is one which states without any equivocation the Law, the University discourse sets up to provide a rationalization for the Law.

Suffice it to recall the market expert who advocates strong budgetary measures (cutting welfare expenses, etc.) as a necessity imposed by his neutral expertise devoid of any ideological biases: what he conceals is the series of power-relations (from the active role of state apparatuses to ideological beliefs) that sustain the “neutral” functioning of the market mechanism. (Žižek 1998b, 79)

University discourse presents knowledge in the position of an agent of knowledge who attempts to pacify the object-cause of desire with his/her expertise and explanations. The product of this exchange is the barred subject  $\mathfrak{S}$ , and the hidden truth is  $S_1$  as Master signifier, lurking just below the surface of the discourse of the expert.<sup>60</sup>

One could attribute as Žižek does, the ascendancy of the discourse of the University to the decline of what he calls ‘symbolic efficiency’ and the rise of a post-Oedipal configuration which in general terms is roughly described as the breakdown of master signifiers that could hold together such grand political narratives as liberal democracy, capitalism and socialism. These were once the hotly contested political frames people used to orient their politics. But increasingly the breakdown of the ability

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<sup>60</sup> Mike Wilson, who founded the Cincinnati Tea Party, said that a recent proposal, brought before the Wisconsin state legislature, is not an effort to break unions, but to restore balance, “This bill is not an attack on public employees; it is not an attack on the middle class,” he said at the rally, “This bill is about math.” This is an example of how the *University discourse* effectively depoliticizes issues that are about power and class, and instead redefines them in a technocratic language of objectivity. An attack on public sector unions turns into an *objective counting*. This logic has further manifested itself in both Greece and Italy where in an equally stunning turn of events, and in an ironic Marxist twist, politics has been over-ridden by the technical administration of things, as the imposition of an ‘expert’ administrative technocrat sits at the head of each government.

of these  $S_1$  signifiers to quilt their respective field of signification whether that had been the definition of science or marriage, sexual relations, gender roles or the role of the church to just name a few issues that were once the 'taken for granted' foundation of the social. Now the ensuing breakdown has left the field open and as such people now tend to pick and choose which scientists they agree with as with their choice of news. There has been a decline in public trust in politicians and public figures. And with this a plurality of groups and entrepreneurial types of sprung up to fill this vacuum. One need only glance at the effectiveness of conservative coalitions to address the decline of the patriarchal authority in the family, the decline of Christian faith, decline of a language that speaks to 'one nation' and so forth. Hence the rise in ethical committees and the role of the experts, administrative technocrats, business management experts, fitness experts, health experts, financial experts, all offering their services to help navigate the confusing array of options available.

### Discourse of the Hysteric

$$\frac{\mathcal{S}}{a} \longrightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

Dialing the Master discourse a quarter turn to the right, one arrives at the discourse of the Hysteric. Whereas the discourse of the University is the discourse of the institution and status quo, the discourse of the Hysteric has been taken up by many to be the discourse of



the dissident radical.<sup>61</sup> The hysteric position is marked by the barred subject  $\mathcal{S}$ , in the position of agency addressing a master represented by  $S_1$ . The product of this exchange is  $S_2$  knowledge, and the position of truth is occupied by *objet a*. *Objet a* drives the hysteric to seek answers to the question *Che Vuoi?* or “What does the other want of me?” “What do I mean for the Other?” In the position of the hidden truth and driver of the discourse sits *objet a* as cause of the hysteric’s desire, the pulsating repetitive drive to know.

For Lacan, the subject is *as such* hysterical: hysteria is, at its most elementary, the failure of interpellation, the gnawing worm questioning the identity imposed on the subject by interpellation — “Why am I that name?”, why am I what the big Other claims I am? (Žižek 2008a, 344)

The position of master  $S_1$  could be that of professor, scientist, economist or priest and it is the hysterical subject  $\mathcal{S}$ , as split, castrated subject, whose desire is to ask of the  $S_1$ , “Tell me more”, if only to critically reject the knowledge  $S_1$  has to offer. The discourse of the hysteric is marked by both a constant appeal to the master to be the master, to provide answers, but also to ‘show up’ the master, to reveal the gaps in her or his knowledge. The hysteric thus reveals the lack in the Other. It seeks in its address to the  $S_1$  a remedy for its own barred subjective condition, its irreducible split but at the same time refuses all the suggestions offered by  $S_1$ . No answer can ever satisfy.

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<sup>61</sup> The hysteric in the psychoanalytic literature has usually been typecast as female. This is not the case here as the Lacanian discourse of the Hysteric is gender neutral, it is social link that persons occupy it does not designate a gendered subjectivity.

In his reply to the student uprisings in May 1968 , “What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one” Lacan interpreted their outbursts as a hysterical cry that sought change but only insofar as they could chain themselves to a new master (Seminar XVII 207). Jodi Dean extends this critique to claim that demonstrations that call for more ‘democracy’ remain caught within the discourse of the Hysteric, seeking to show the lack in the Master, but do so only within the terms of power’s own discourse. And so, when all is said and done, the protesters pack up their signs and go home, feeling content at the attendance figures and that their message was registered in the big Other, whether that big Other is represented by the State, God, Law, Media, History or Nation.

The University and the Hysteric discourses are fundamentally opposed, so that literally when these two meet, the result is a non-result, they merely end up speaking past each other. Jeanne Schroeder illustrates this with an example of a legal economist speaking the discourse of the University, being confronted by a student critic or worker who speaks in the discourse of the Hysteric:

The critic, speaking the hysteric’s discourse, does not address the legal economist in his public persona as expert ( $S_2$ ). Rather she addresses the truth hidden below this pretense – power ( $S_1$ ). The legal economist, speaking the university discourse, does not address the subject subjected to law, but rather what he sees as the collective goals of society and the law. The hysteric cries, “Look what your law is doing to me!” The university replies, “The law has a purpose.” (Schroeder 2008, 154)

The discourse of the University is a crucial apparatus for the hegemonization of knowledge, providing the means to sediment its purpose and reason as 'common sense.' Such is the case that when the hysteric cries out that the law does not operate for him, the discourse of the University replies that the working of the law is there for a sound reason: "the university's reply is not an answer to the hysteric's question arising out of the truth of her pain ... It does not help her integrate within the symbolic order of law but further alienates her." The university's response to the hysteric, Schroeder points out, "is equivalent to Ring Lardner's immortal conversation ender, 'Shut up,' he explained" (178).

### **Decline of the Paternal Order and the Rise of the Hysteric Consumer**

Many North American Lacanian commentators will describe an implosion of the traditional Symbolic order that was based on repression, guilt and the paternal Law. Primarily up until cracks started to appear in the 1950s, the Symbolic was based on guilt and repression, it enforced a modicum of law and order, as everyone gave up a part of enjoyment in full knowledge that it would be a collective endeavour (McGowan 21). This is a collective repression that results in a modicum of solidarity, tradition and order, settling around the primary S1 master signifiers: Church, Family, State, Law and Order. Beginning in the 1960s the Symbolic order based on shared guilt and repression has gradually been replaced by a super-ego commandment to "Enjoy!" The messages that speak to subjects today are not ones based on linking of repression to future rewards, such as chastity, forbearance, and tradition, but instead the message is to "Realize

yourself,” “Live life to your full potential,” “Enjoy!” (McGowan). As Renata Salecl points out, if one is not having great sex, a great career, great vacations, a great body, then one is simply not living properly. Between the period of 1991 and 2000 the self-help publishing industry took off. In this period of time between 33% and 50% of Americans purchased a self-help book (Salecl 2011, 29).

The question then becomes: “What happens when enjoyment becomes the mandate of an entire Symbolic order?” The waning of the symbolic order of paternal law to one of enjoyment precipitates the question “what does the big Other want of me?” What am I for the Other? This question moves from narcissistic self-indulgence to an enduring capitalist theme (Boyle 2008, 10). The transition in the Symbolic order between guilt, repression to enjoyment brings about a persistent self-questioning fuelled itself by *objet a*, the object-cause of desire. During the reign of the Oedipal Symbolic, the object-cause of desire was sublimated into activities: community service, family outings, church activities, recreational bowling leagues etc. The breakdown of the reign of the Oedipal law, and the rise of the super-ego command to Enjoy! effectively unleashed the *objet a* from its Oedipal anchoring and let it run free in a *metonymy of desire*. And it is precisely this metonymic movement from desire to desire that capitalism post-World War II exploits and creates the *hysteric-consumer*, in his or her permanent quest to fill the lack in the endless aisles of mega-marts, department stores, antique shops, thrift stores, etc (11).

### Discourse of the Analyst

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \longrightarrow \frac{\mathcal{S}}{S_1}$$

In the discourse of Analyst, the agency is located in *objet a* that addresses the  $\mathcal{S}$  barred subject. In a typical analytic setting this means the Lacanian analyst seeks to occupy a position vis à vis the analysand or patient that enables a particular transferential relationship between them that does not place the analyst in the position of the all-knowing doctor who pronounces a proper diagnosis and cure. In other words the analyst does not rush to interpret, even though prompted by the analysand with suggestions, “What do you think? Please tell me, ” or “I’m paying for these sessions, you’re silence is most unhelpful.” Nor must the analyst in a counter-transference with the analysand feel obliged in order to prove his or her credentials as a professional, seek to rush to an interpretation. There are a number of reasons for the analyst to assume a much different position than this “subject-supposed-to-know.” One such reason is that as Freud discovered in his analysis of Dora that not only was his rush to interpretation unhelpful, he realized later that telling a person the ‘truth’ of their symptoms does not in any way ‘budge’ them off their symptom or get them to stop doing what they are doing. Speaking the truth of the patient’s symptom to the patient is, initially, not a helpful course of action to take. Žižek extends this logic to the dynamics of the way that capitalist subjects believe, or how belief works today in general. To illustrate his point Žižek cites the anecdote of the Nobel Prize winning physicist Niels Bohr, who, while giving a tour of his

summer home to a group of fellow scientists, they came upon a horseshoe over his door. Nailing a horseshoe over one's door is thought by many to bring good luck. But to the shock of the assembled guests they asked why a world-renowned scientist would pander to such silly superstitions as a horseshoe over his front door. Bohr replied, "Of course I don't believe in such a silly superstition, I'm not an idiot, but I was told that it works even if you don't believe in it" (*First as Tragedy* 51). This is a case of disavowal, *je sais bien, mais quand même*, I know very well what I am doing but nevertheless I am still doing it. So if the analyst is to resist occupying the position of the Master  $S_1$ , then what precisely does it mean to occupy the position of *objet a*? The analyst stands in for that which the analysand doesn't know that he or she knows, "the analyst stands precisely for the ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other, that is, for the Symbolic order's inability to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity" (Žižek *Iraq* 116). The analyst stands for precisely that gap or excess, the lack in the big Other. The analysand will refuse at first to confront this lack directly, that is, to either confront the lack in themselves or the lack in the big Other.

Returning to Butler's comments on Christopher Bollas, we can glimpse a similarity as well as huge differential between Bollas and Lacan:

Bollas clearly suggests that the analyst must allow him-or herself to be impinged upon by the client, even undergo a kind of dispossession of self, as well as to maintain a reflective psychoanalytic distance and attitude.

(Butler 2005, 57)

A Lacanian would equate the analyst's dispossession of self as exactly that 'cold' distance, a de-personalization of sorts, in order to provoke in the analysand a change in their subjective position vis à vis the analyst. The analysand may initially try to place the analyst in the position of 'friend' 'somebody like my mother' 'bourgeois intellectual' 'doctor' and other fantasmatic identifications, but the Lacanian analyst through his or her silence must *refuse* all of these. The analyst's de-personalization allows the analysand to gradually see the specific qualities in the analyst to which she has attributed phallic power *and* helps the analysand discover the contingency of her identifications (Rothenberg 2010, 209). It is a very different dynamic than the version of relational empathy that Bollas strictly promotes.

Recall in the discourse of the Hysteric, the hystericized subject  $\$$  addresses the field of generalized knowledge, of the cultural order, and asks of the big Other: *Che vuoi?* "I know you are telling me this, but why are you telling me this?" and seeks as a product of this exchange a new  $S_1$ . In the Analyst discourse it is no longer the hysteric's question *Che vuoi?* In the place of *Che vuoi* the Analyst discourse seeks to place the subject herself, so that she is the answer to her own question. She becomes the object-cause of her own desire. Freud's famous, "*Wo es war, soll ich werden*" can be loosely translated here as, "where the foreign cause of my being was, there I shall be" (Van Haute 2002, 52) or "Where the Other pulls my strings, acting as my cause, I must come into being as my own cause (Fink cited in Rickert 2007, 91). Not 'it happened to me' but 'I saw, I heard, I acted.' Instead of using analysis in order to smooth out desire, to make it amenable to an identity as consumer/worker, Lacanians insist on moving the subject off his or her

present template of desire that is malfunctioning, and to desire differently, that is, not from the place of the Other, but *where the desire of the Other was, should go the subject* (Fink 1995, 46).

Lacanianians argue that the analysand must position herself in a much different position in relationship to the analyst if change is to occur. The Lacanian analyst places herself in the position of the object-cause of this desire in order to prompt the self-questioning that Bollas may inadvertently cover over with his personal assurances and heartfelt questioning which may drive the therapy into the register of the Imaginary instead of in the opposite direction: the *traversal* of the fantasy. To occupy the position of *objet a* in the position of agency in the Analyst discourse means that the analyst occupies the position of pure void, of not returning the love, which then forces the analysand to confront the contingency of his or her existence. For Žižek the analyst stands in for the inconsistency, for the failure of the big Other to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity (Žižek 2006e, 304). The analysand gradually comes to realize that the knowledge they placed in the analyst as *subject supposed to know* the truth of their desire, is false, a charade. Confronting the analyst is merely to confront the void, the emptiness that once embodied his or her hopes for a cure, for an explanation and kind of relief.

The following chart illustrates the different positions the barred subject  $\$$  places the Other and the corresponding social bond or link this entails; the point being that every relationship to an Other, (friend, boss, mother, spouse, colleague, etc) is irremediably 'fantasmatic.'



The position in which the analyst (Other) is placed by the subject $\mathcal{S}$ (analysand)	Relationship of subject $\mathcal{S}$ to Other	Social Link
Equality	Jealous rivalry	Hysterical
Oppressor	Victim	Master/Hysterical
Subject-supposed-to-know	Subordinate/Student	University
Alter ego	Love/Hate, Emulation, Rivalry	Hysterical
Authority (priest, police etc)	Confessional	Hysterical
<i>Objet a</i>	-	Analyst

In the therapeutic relationship the analyst is placed by the subject (analysand) in various positions of authority, equality. For example placing the analysand in a relation of equality drives the relationship into the Imaginary register brimming with rivalry, emulation and love/hate. The Master discourse seeks to be the signifier in and of the Symbolic order, meaning that it harbours the wish of being the Other of the Other, the metalanguage that guarantees that the signifiers  $S_2$  all fall within the purview of an articulating centre or  $S_1$ . The University discourse seeks to sediment knowledge in the Symbolic so that it is installed as the common sense or prevailing hegemonic codification of political discourse. The Hysterical discourses seek recourse to an Other in its fruitless search to install it as  $S_1$ . All three of these discourse, Master, University and Hysterical seek recognition in one way or another in the Other or Symbolic order. Hence the overriding question for a radical ethico-political theory is: *how does one live without seeking recognition in the big Other?* Is it possible for one to act in such a way that one does not implicitly rely on a notion of an Other-who-knows, or implicitly expect the reestablishment of such an Other? (Pluth 2007, 7). As the object-cause of desire, *objet a*,

the analyst does not occupy position of “subject-supposed-to-know” that is, as a fount of knowledge who will listen and prescribe a solution. So when the analyst occupies the position of *objet a* this means that her sole intention is to expose the contingency of imaginary identifications and patterns of seeking recognition in the big Other. As such, for Žižek, the best opportunity for subjective change occurs at that precise moment when the suffering of the analysand is exposed as meaningless because no longer can the analysand blame a big Other. At this moment the analysand can be said to have *traversed the fantasy* that has maintained its hold on the analysand’s life up to that point. Contrary to Bollas, this is another reason for the psychoanalyst to remain silent, by demanding nothing from the analysand, his silence suspends the illusion of interpellation and thus forces the analysand to confront his own act of positing the Other” (Žižek 1992, 67). When the analysand confronts her own complicity in positing the Other, this is called *traversing the fantasy*.

### **Butler’s Undoneness**

Traversing the fantasy is the consummate destruction of the egological mode of existence for the subject. In Rothenberg’s word, “Once the transference fantasy has been traversed, through interpretation at this Symbolic level, the analysand encounters the formal constitutive conditions of subjectivity” (181). It opens up a terrain of *ethical subjectivity* where for the first time in analysis the analysand does not feel horrified or upset when his narrative turns up as inconsistent, garbled, contradictory, when the subject experiences for the first time that of being undone. Being ‘undone’ consists in traversing the fantasy, the fantasy that one need seek one’s identity in the big Other. And in this

way it is a first step to recognizing not only the contingency of norms, of the contingency of all identity-making structures, traversing the fantasy also means the nature of the big Other is finally exposed to the subject. It is here, when the big Other is lacking, that its *barred nature* is revealed, when the supposed seamless nature of the Symbolic order comes into contradiction, it is here during this ruptural moment that an event of subjectivity takes place. The big Other is revealed as barred, fractured and fissures appear such that the  $S_1$  master signifiers have been scrambled, it is at this moment that the individual 'kick-out' of her tranquil 'animal existence' temporarily becomes an 'autonomous' subject,

to be jarred out of the comfortable non-conscious habits of the automaton of quotidian individuality and plunged into an abyss of freedom devoid of the solid ground of unproblematic, taken-for-granted socio-normative directives and guarantees. ... the barred big Other's inherent incompleteness, activated by crises or unforeseen occurrences, offers the sudden opening/opportunity for a transient transcendence qua momentary, transitory break with this Other's deterministic nexus. (Johnston 2006, 49)

It is precisely this notion of an emergence of a subject *separate from identity* that needs to be explored. This is what is required in order to effect a transition away from the symbolic matrix of which are deeply etched Capitalism-Heterosexualism-Family. A subject that has traversed the fantasy thus *dis-identifies*, does not try to please, appease, seek out recognition or approval from a big Other. There are no laws of history, no God

above, no Hell below, no axiomatic moral precepts with which to ground the ethical decision. To confront a void where he or she conventionally positioned an Other means that now the subject is faced with a decision: 1) to engage in an Act, of subjective change, or 2) to try to seek recourse in a big Other. The former is the radicality of a position that seeks change, the latter is conventionally the steps an individual takes when the threat of the void proves too overwhelming. The task of the analyst in the position of *object a* is to prevent the analysand from slipping back into such familiar territory.

When Butler (2009e) speaks of seeking recognition, she asks: “What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability? What might be done, in other words, to shift the very terms of recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results?” The shift in terms of recognizability require more than a shift in the symbolic coordinates of the social order. *The question becomes how, politically, does one ‘disfigure’ or interrupt this logic of the Symbolic order or the big Other?* In her earlier works *Antigone’s Claim* and *Psychic Life of Power* Butler advocates turning away from the law, resisting its lure of identity.

Such a turn demands a willingness *not* to be — a critical desubjectivation — in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. What forms might linguistic survival take in this desubjectivized domain? How would one know one’s existence? Through what terms would it be recognized and recognizable? (1997b, 129)

The Lacanian subject emerges in the gap of the failed interpellation. Butler wants to reiterate the interpellation and change its symbolic course, for her the subject is this

ecstatic, self-overcoming relational entity that answers the infinitely demanding call of the Other. Butler's self-dispossession can, it seems, be understood in terms of her social ontology of relationality, since the location of the human for her is always 'outside of itself in the non-human, or it is always distributed among beings, among human and non-human beings, chiasmically related through the idea of precarious life" (2009d, 169). The significant philosophical point of contention between Butler and Žižek is situated here. Žižek asks of Butler: "is the status of the subject always limited, dispossessed, exposed, *or is the subject itself a name for/of this dispossession?*" (2006e, 45) For Žižek the subject precedes subjectivization. The subject in a way *is* just this failure of subjectivization, "the failure of assuming the symbolic mandate." This minimal difference, this failed interpellation is a positive force in itself.

From the Lacanian standpoint, Butler is thus simultaneously too optimistic and too pessimistic. On the one hand she overestimates the subversive potential of disturbing the functioning of the big Other through the practices of performative reconfiguration/displacement ... On the other hand, Butler does not allow for the radical gesture of the thorough restructuring of the hegemonic symbolic order in its totality. (1999, 264)

Žižek's radical gesture is to go to the end and speak of *death drive*. That which enables Žižek to think radical deformation and reformation of subjectivity beyond symbolic performative resignifications, is his idea that ontological basis of the subject is not some form of relationality, but a constitutive madness that enables Being to break out of its inert cyclical complacency. In order to be able to think a subject that is capable of a

radical withdrawal such that every precept and ontological anchor is swept clean, such that its base singularity is all that is left, requires that not only is there no rational, unique kernel of subjectivity, a nameless  $X$  unique to every person, but that instead there is just an empty void, and the ethic-political relation is to garner this *objet a* and render it such that it resounds as the very motor of a universality, a singular universality. This singularity universality comes about through the emergence of a subjectivity that becomes an obstacle to the Symbolic.

## Chapter VI: Bartleby's "I prefer not to"

Herman Melville's 1853 short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" is about a lawyer who runs a business copying legal documents. He hires Bartleby as a law-copyist or scrivener to help with the workload. Soon after Bartleby arrives he gradually begins to turn down work from the lawyer with the words, "I prefer not to," until eventually he attends his worksite everyday, only to sit, and do nothing. It is not so much his gesture of refusal, but the way he goes about doing it.

Bartleby is no revolutionary, his aim is not social change, his aim is unclear, what is apparent though is that he seeks no recognition in a big Other for his deeds. It is an act of self-destitution, or depersonalization in the sense that he goes about his gesture of refusal of his preference not out of a defiance that can be named, but as a refusal that cannot be articulated within the Symbolic order.

Bartleby's co-workers and employer are baffled. His refusal via the mode of desubjectivization means it is not done on behalf of a particular identity (environmentalist, feminist, working class etc.) Bartleby's subjectivity does not appear on the plane of hysterical desire, he does not exist as a subject of desire. Bartleby is on the contrary a subject of the drive, he identifies directly with *objet a* and thus "institutes a gap between itself and its symbolic subjective dimension" (Rothenberg 2010, 176-177).

This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference. There is no violent quality in it; violence pertains to its very immobile, inert, insistent,

impassive being. Bartleby couldn't even hurt a fly – that's what makes his presence so unbearable. (Žižek 2005b, 58)

And the question then is “So we must all then become so unbearable?” Unbearable in this precise sense: the subject now is placed in the position of *objet (a)* as void of the other's desire. In other words we find ourselves in the discourse of the Analyst, and Bartleby occupies the position of *objet a*, silent, unobtrusive, prompting perhaps a slight hystericization of those around him in that they react defensively to his silence and refusals to participate in the ‘game.’<sup>62</sup> Bartleby causes anxiety and slight turmoil at his office because he is not saying “I do not want to”, but affirming, saying that he “prefers not to.” Bartleby's act then is successful in setting off, against his own background of passive resistance, the contingency of the Symbolic, that things could be otherwise. By occupying the very void of desire in the position of agency (analyst discourse), he forces those closest around him into a frenzy of anxiety, self-doubt, persecution/scapegoating and fear. But he remains passive in his preference, not being able to hurt a fly thus opening up a transformative space. Žižek believes that in Bartleby one sees “how we pass from the politics of “resistance” or “protestation” which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which “opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation” (*Parallax* 382).

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<sup>62</sup> Bartleby here refuses the typical camaraderie of office workers who regularly go out for coffee, complain about the work and the boss behind her back but not acting on their complaints precisely because they, being caught in the imaginary, get a certain *jouissance* in complaining and gossiping about their employer.



To add another twist on our take on Bartleby, Žižek continues, “Bartleby’s gesture is what remains of the supplement to the Law when its place is emptied of all its obscene superego content” (382). What is key to understand about Bartleby is that, getting back to Butler’s query above: in an act of critical desubjectivation how would one know one’s existence, how would it be recognizable? A critical desubjectivation empties the law of its obscene superego content of imaginary resentment, hate, jealousy and fantasies of revenge and scapegoating etc, thus any identities that emerge could be labelled post-Oedipal, yet we must be careful to note here, post-Oedipal identities are *not* whole, refined, without excess, as that would simply be another form of Imaginary identification, one of purification, which entails its own debilitating and politically vile logic. There is no basis with which to concretely articulate a post-Oedipal identity or what that could be, we can only insist along with Žižek that Bartleby remains an underlying principle, the articulating spirit that sustains the work of construction of a new Symbolic.

### **Whatever beings**

Written over a century ago Bartleby’s act underscores a formation of subjectivity that has very contemporary resonances. Contrasting Bartleby’s “I prefer not to,” with its contemporary variant, “whatever,” Jodi Dean highlights this refusal of identity and its possible political effects. When somebody responds, “whatever,” it unseats both the sender and receiver.

By acknowledging communication without attending to the content of the message, “whatever” denies the sender the sense that her message has

been received because its content remains unaddressed. The sender is challenged, her position as sender undermined. “Whatever” forestalls a communicative exchange even as it adopts communicative form. It refrains from establishing the subject position of the one who responds with “whatever,” and it unsettles the position of the one who initiates the exchange. It’s a glitch in orality. (Dean 2010, 69)

Citing the idea of “whatever beings” from Giorgio Agamben, Dean states that just as “I prefer not to,” the term “whatever,” “asserts no preferences. It neither affirms nor rejects. And it doesn’t expose the subject as a desiring subject to whom something matters.” It also comes with its affective dimension, “whatever,” conveys an insolence, an attitude or provocation, “that arises out of its function as a non-responsive response.” Yet to the inevitable comparison of *whatever beings* to images of skateboarders in hoodies, one should instead insist that perhaps the emphasis should be placed not on the insolent attitude or non-committal, non-reply, but rather on the possibility of this action foregrounding the contingent nature of the ontic traits of identity. “Unburdened by the obligations of being this or that, of being bound by choices or words or expectation of meaning, whatever beings could flow into and through community without presuppositions” what Dean, citing Agamben, calls a “singularity without identity” (2010, 83). The point hence of desubjectivization is that the coordinates of all identity are put in relief. The idea of *singularity without identity* is not a case of *self*-denial, or that of a ‘self’ denying itself. For in that case there are all kinds of anti-consumerist movements ranging from recycling programs to moratoriums on buying consumer goods

for one whole year that fall into that subjective form of self-denial and which paradoxically are consumer initiatives of a self-aggrandizing and self-congratulatory nature. Again speaking to Žižek's claim about saving starving children in Africa, the radical response would be "I prefer not to," or "whatever." When asked to purchase a coffee because every purchase of a cappuccino helps send a Guatemalan child to ... the response should be "whatever." In other words, instead of locating their desire in the locus of the big Other, the subject occupies the position of *objet a*, as the cause of its own desire. It is the preference not to turn around when hailed by the big Other, but to ignore the interpellative call:

What would happen if we just stopped? Agamben's evocation of singularity and belonging detached from a compulsion to cultivate an individual identity or to identify with a specific group opens up the potential for another form of belonging, one unlimited by the division and restrictions of being this or that. (Dean 2010, 82)

And this form of identity is the ethical agenda of Butler *and* Žižek. As for example both of them seek out a form of *non-national* belonging, beyond boundaries of state and ethnicity. An ethical relation and its political exposition can only take place on the order of objectivity, the identification with *objet a* creates a distance towards one's own symbolic identity thus putting one in the position to act, as Žižek says, in an "objectivity-ethical" way (2006d 182).

## **Bartleby and Blood Transfusion**

Žižek cites the story of a recent legal case in California in which a woman appearing before a judge rejected unconditionally, for religious reasons, the blood transfusion that would save her life (2000b 137). The judge after a moments thought asks her that if she were given the transfusion *against her will* would this commit her to hell and damnation in the afterlife? After a brief consultation the woman replies, “I guess the answer is no.” Upon hearing this, in order to save the woman’s life without putting her in an unbearable moral predicament, the judge ordered the blood transfusion to be done against her will. Although many people would have done what the judge did if placed in his position, nevertheless Žižek states that this solution is a *lie*. How so? The woman knew perfectly well that if she answered ‘no’, meaning that taking the transfusion would *not* condemn her to a life in hell, the judge would then order the blood transfusion. At the level of the *statement*, this woman was simply telling the truth, but at the level of the *enunciation* she effectively lied, she wanted the transfusion, in effect her ‘no’ at the level of the *statement*, was a ‘Yes, please give me the transfusion!’ at the level of the *enunciation*. One could also cite the American singer Bruce Springstein who exhibits a similar split between a truth at the level of the statement but a lie at the level of enunciation. His song “Born in the USA” for example is popularly taken up as an American imperial anthem, and again happening most recently with his song, “We Take Care of Our Own.” Now both songs do contain lyrics critical of US politics but this only applies at the level of the statement. The catchy pop songs are instant hits with the refrain to each song respectively being “Born in the USA” and “We take care of our

own.” These choruses repeat a belligerent nationalism, yet of course when questioned about this Springsteen can always point to the ‘critical’ song lyrics that could be interpreted as a rebuke of US political aggression. But at the level of the *enunciation* he enjoys selling millions of recordings by tapping into an undercurrent of American righteous patriotic xenophobia. Similarly Žižek cites middle class radicals who, at the level of the subject of the statement, seek fundamental social change, down with worker exploitation, down with capital! Yet at the level of the *enunciation* hope that nothing will change as this would mean they would probably lose their secure job status, or require sacrifices in other areas of their comfortable lifestyle. Žižek makes this point quoting a passage from George Orwell:

So long as it is merely a question of ameliorating the worker’s lot, every decent person is agreed ... But unfortunately you get no further by merely wishing class-distinctions away. More exactly, it *is* necessary to wish them away, but your wish has no efficacy unless you grasp what it involves. The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class distinction but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class distinctions ... I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person. (Orwell in Žižek 2008a, 476)

George Orwell exposes this gap between the level of *enunciation* and the level of the *statement* and the ‘lying’ that can take place to cover over this gap. So what is the solution? Here again we must turn to the example of the blood transfusion and claim that a de-personalization and subjective destitution as the only ethical response. In answer to the judge’s query regarding whether receiving a blood transfusion against her will condemns her to an afterlife in hell and damnation, the woman responds ‘No’ but this time not because at the level of enunciation she knows that she will be saved by the intervention of a court-ordered transfusion. Instead

what if the poor woman, in answering ‘No,’ was *not* hypocritically counting on the fact that her desire to live would be fulfilled, that she would get her transfusion, without being responsible for it, and thus having to pay the price for it? What if her stance was rather that of radical *indifference* towards the entire domain of the possible pathological (in the Kantian sense of the term) effects of telling the truth? (2000b 139)

What she desires becomes simply irrelevant. Her ‘No’ this time comes from a pure non-pathological singular sense of doing one’s duty, a singular non-identity seeking only to state the truth without regard for consequences. Consider Bradley Manning’s case, the young soldier being held in solitary confinement in a U.S. military jail for releasing to an internet site over 2000 classified diplomatic cables, and a video of a U.S. military offensive on unarmed civilians in Iraq. Something he ‘just had to do,’ like *Bartleby*’s “I prefer not to,” or a “whatever.” Indeed such acts are rare but that they do occur and are examples of an ethics of the Real.

## **Ethics of the Real**

When it was noted earlier that Žižek refused any correlation of ethics being about intersubjectivity, he was seeking to put in its place a meeting of the Other in the Real. Meeting the Other in the Real is to meet on the grounds of objectivity abstracted from all particularity. As such we attain the singular universal in which “solidarity thus emerges not from intersubjective relations but rather from the relations of subjects purified of their symbolic identities, subjects who meet on the grounds of objectivity” (Rothenberg 2010, 177). When universality cuts through particularity, individuals emerge as universal subjects purged of symbolic identity and meet on grounds of objectivity as for example when veiled Palestinian women and Jewish lesbians with body piercings demonstrate together in the city of Bilan on the West Bank (Žižek 2011a).

The meeting in the Real is precipitated by an act. An act is something undertaken that seeks no recognition in a big Other. This means any act could be condemned for its nonsensicality, its non-meaning. If an act is to seek not accommodation with the Symbolic but rather the wholesale change of the Symbolic, then it would at that moment seem totally without sense, totally deranged, “[as] there is no big Other; you never get the guarantee; you must act. You must take the risk and act. I think this is the Lenin who is truly a Lacanian Lenin” (Žižek 2004a, 164). Ethics does not take cover in the big Other, or on behalf of a big Other. The ethical relation begins with the part-of-no-part, Butler’s excluded, abject; those who fall outside of the normative law, those who, for example, are without social definition because the heterosexual-normative matrix deems them as non-definable. This part-of-no-part, suffers a subjective destitution in which symbolic order

comes to a standstill for them. In other words, there is an impasse in signification because the Symbolic order does not yield, and cannot recognize their demands.

[W]e must think of a susceptibility to others that is unwilled, unchosen, that is a condition of our responsiveness to others, even a condition of our responsibility *for* them. It means, among other things, that this susceptibility designates a nonfreedom and, paradoxically, it is on the basis of this susceptibility over which we have no choice that we become responsible for others. (Butler 2005, 87-88)

Butler speaks of a susceptibility to others as unwilled, unchosen, an '*up-againstness*' of the other. How can this susceptibility to others turn into an ethico-political relation? It can only happen when solidarity is gained with the Other at a level bereft of ontic traits of identity. This political relation is composed of seeking the universality of the Other in the Real.

Susceptibility to the other's call, from the part-of-no-part, is the basis for which universality can be built. Bartleby's desubjectification provoked vile resentment from the other two law clerks. However, the lawyer, though initially perturbed by Bartleby, chooses not to displace the anxiety Bartleby causes by attempting to rid the office of his presence. Instead he seeks to meet him half-way. Rothenberg argues that "Bartleby's de-personalization forces the lawyer to recognize Bartleby as something *in addition* to a symbolic identity, to treat him as well at the level of the foundation of subjectivity, not as something subhuman" (Rothenberg 2010, 213). The ethical stand of the lawyer is



premised on one question he must ask himself: Will I act in conformity to what threw me 'out of joint'?

The very fundament of the subject is its relation to the Other, in this precise sense. What Butler calls a certain unfreedom, is this susceptibility to this up-againstness of the Other which the global migrations of populations makes evident. As ever greater populations of stateless abject begin to roam the earth, as slums begin to take over greater areas inside the urban metropolises, the presence of the part-of-no-part will increase and Antigone's catachrestic call that made no sense in the prevailing Symbolic order, that rendered her abject, is the zero point, the fundament of the subject on which a new ethical relation must be built.

### **Our Marriage was Hell**

Žižek recounts a story of one of the planes that took off from New York on September 11<sup>th</sup> that would eventually plunge into an empty farmer's field. The passengers knowing full well they were all going to die, phoned their loved ones with heartfelt messages proclaiming love etc. The British writer Martin Amis saw this as proof of the eternal veracity of love, that when all is lost, the one thing that remains is the love of those closest. Why should one think differently?

Consistent with love is a knowledge in the Real. That is, if the person on the plane was true to their ethical cause, and truly loved their partner and knew they were going to die, they would have forced a confrontation with the Real. Žižek suggests a true ethical act would have been, as the plane is about to crash, to phone one's lifelong partner

and say, "Our marriage was hell, I don't love you, good-bye."<sup>63</sup> The person on the plane adopts the position of *objet a* in the position of agent. As the pure void, provoking the other (in this case the husband or wife), by saying something to the effect: "Aha, now what are you going to do without me? My death was meaningless, as no doubt will be yours too. There is no big Other to grant you sanctuary. Now you must truly start to live your life. Don't waste your time mourning my death, the question is, will you maintain a fidelity to the event of my death and finally start to live?" Another way of looking at it, is that the phone call to the spouse was intended to 'free up' the desire of the other, to make it no longer dependent on the interdiction, the Law (in this case marriage vows in the big Other). It's the equivalent of what is intended to happen at the end of a Lacanian analysis, when the analyst (the person on the plane in our example), is reduced to a piece of excrement in the sense of, "What are you looking at? I'm nothing, now get on with it."

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<sup>63</sup> Žižek mentions this ethical act in passing in a talk given at Boston University (2007) <http://youtu.be/K5WNcRoCXCM?t=24m38s> and in *Violence* (2008c), 51-52. The subsequent interpretation is my own.

## Chapter VII: Conclusion

### Placing the *objet a* in Judith Butler's Relational Ontology

This dissertation began with Judith Butler's Hegelian displacement of the self-sufficient "I" of subjectivity. By tracing her development of a relational ontology the focus increasingly became her insistence that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical relationality possible: "If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation."<sup>64</sup> That relationality occurs prior to any formation of an "I" is shown throughout her work in 1990s. In particular, Butler holds to a version of subjectivation, or subject formation that emphasizes the need for a radical re-constitution of subjectivity via a subjective displacement, a re-writing through a radical act such as Antigone's refusal to heed the public Law.

Thus the subject emerges through a fidelity to a logic that falls outside and beyond the law, and is accomplished without rehearsing, restaging or otherwise repeating the coordinates of the socio-symbolic space of the big Other. To this Butler adds, "My point is not to rehabilitate humanism, but rather to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity." (2011c) The challenge here it seems is that

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<sup>64</sup> Butler's ethico-political claim relies on this function of dispossession as preceding the subject.

This relation *precedes* individuation, and when I act ethically, I *am* undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I am my relation to the "you" whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this "I" makes no sense, and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego. (2011c)

although the category of “precarity” points in the direction of inequality as such, its anti-humanist credentials do not stand out. Butler seeks to insert a relation to Otherness that clearly stands outside a meeting of two fully fledged autonomous egos, but her account of a relational ontology, and specifically the genesis of the subject from such an ontology is under-theorized. For Butler it is not a process of addition, she is against simply reworking the current norms to make room for the forgotten others, or adding the abject to a re-normalized Symbolic space. We have seen that Butler hints at a more radical de-subjectification of the normative subject. And this is what she moves towards in her work on Antigone.

The over-arching claim of this dissertation has been to draw together her work on Antigone with a theory of the subject aided and abetted by Lacanian theory. What is the relation of precarity to Antigone’s suicidal pure desire? Butler politics consists of a re-writing of the Symbolic so as re-define, re-signify what it is to be human. She begins the political task of re-signification through her concept of precariousness. For Butler precariousness marks every bodily being both human and non-human, and with regard to humans her notion of differential precarity separates populations out between an industrialized, globalized capitalist ‘we’ and those struggling outside this ‘club’. On a more local level, there are strident material separations between the urban poor and the “white flight” into the suburbs. The new divisive landscape groups together high-finance and industrial parks along with a technological matrix of immaterial labour on one side and, on the other, those who do not count in this situation, the part of no-part. It is a differential precarity between bodies that are valued, adorned, and given to regimes of

pleasure and consumption, and those who fall outside of this competitive landscape: the urban aboriginal population of young men and women who have moved off the desperate situation of the reserves, the homeless and mentally ill, the trans-sexed, working poor, refugees, the poor immigrants and those without proper papers of landing, all of whose lives are rendered of less value, rendered easily expendable and when lost or dead, go unrieved. If this part of no-part were to truly figure in a politics of emancipation, what would this formation look like and how would it come about? Butler asks much the same question about Antigone, in that

she is prohibited from speaking, and yet she is compelled by the sovereign law to speak. So, when she does speak, she defies that law, and her speech exceeds the law that governs acceptable speech. To what extent, then, can Antigone figure for us in the position of the speaker who is outside of the accepted discourse, who nevertheless speaks, sometimes intelligently, sometimes critically, within and against that discourse? (Butler 2009a)

Butler points to the contradiction between a law that bans female speech and yet forces Antigone to speak, and when Antigone does speak she speaks beyond the bounds of the current rationality. She is “between two deaths” that is, between biological death and symbolic death (Lacan *Sem. VII*). In other words, Antigone is still physically alive, but she, like the part of no-part, no longer signifies in the prevailing rationality of the situation. How would something like a new signification emerge out of a placid complacency of the old? What does Antigone represent that could offer possible clues as to how to think a radical subjectivity that breaks into something that is radically

heterogeneous to the present situation? If one were to think of a theoretical intervention that grasps how a new subjectivity emerges from the redundancy and repetitiveness of the same, what would this look like? An answer to this question requires first that the general “lay of the land” be established. In this concluding chapter we will summarize our findings with regards to a specific mode of subjective dispossession that makes an ethical relationality possible. Our starting point will be a rather peculiar film released in the early 1990s that illustrates a logic of the subjective change required to break out of a repetitive cycle of the same.

### **Groundhog Day**

In 1993 the movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays a television reporter named Phil who gets caught in a temporal loop or a 24 hour time warp. The movie begins just as he arrives in the town of Punxsutawney PA with his television crew, including his producer Rita, played by Andie MacDowell, to cover a national event, Groundhog Day. They cover the event as a straight forward cultural info piece for the morning news, and are prepared to return back to the head office in Pittsburgh. However a winter storm prevents Phil and the crew from leaving that day, and so they remain stranded in the community and must spend the night. Phil gets up the next day only to slowly realize that it is Groundhog Day all over again. He awakens to the same Sonny and Cher song on the radio and the identical radio script from the morning announcer that he heard the day before. He meets the same man outside his hotel room who repeats the exact same greeting, and another man who tries to sell him insurance.

Phil is caught in this repetition of the same day. At first Phil seeks out medical attention from the town doctor and then a psychiatrist. Eventually, in total despair, he tries to end his own life up to and including driving off the edge of a steep cliff, jumping out of a tall building, leaping into a bathtub with a clock radio, yet all of these instances end where they begin, the next morning he wakes up at 6:00 am to the same Sonny and Cher song on the radio, and the exact same radio morning script.

Phil then starts to exploit the repetition for his own purposes. He engages in a game of seduction with his co-worker Rita by gradually building up knowledge of her likes/dislikes through conversations with her during each repetition of Groundhog Day, until he has built up an archive of knowledge about her: favourite vacations, favourite drink, poets etc. For example, in one early conversation he mistakenly comments that Rita's college degree in French poetry is a "waste of time," which upsets her. Phil corrects his mistake the next day when, under the same circumstances, instead of uttering the miscue, he chooses to recite a romantic poem *en français*. Of course, Rita is duly impressed and the romance blossoms; however, the constraint is that Phil must seduce Rita within the 24 hour time frame before everything 'resets' and Groundhog Day begins anew. Rita resists Phil's desperate attempts to 'speed things up' which she interprets as just a cheap ploy and walks out on him.

There are two interesting things to note about this film. The first is the way Phil's seduction scenario exploits the temporal loop. He slowly builds up an archive of knowledge through the continual reiteration of the intersubjective scene, and finishes by authoring what he deems to be the perfect "Rita dating algorithm" that he imagines will

finally bring a harmonious conclusion to his night, or so he thought. What essentially is wrong about this scenario? Alain Badiou's, *In Praise of Love* makes it clear, the mistake is that people want love without the risk, the uncertainty and unknowingness that comes with any attempt at establishing a relation to the Other. It is the wish for intersubjectivity without, in Butler's words, being *undone* by the other, that combination of terror/repulsion/attraction/uncertainty/desire. Thus Phil wants to "fall in love" minus the "falling" part.<sup>65</sup> His mistake is precisely the fallacy of believing that intersubjectivity culminates in a transparency of knowing the Other in all of his or her richness and complexity, without the risk, the exposed vulnerability, chance and uncertainty. However this inexorable intractable part of relationality, *precedes individuation*. Butler insists that

when I act ethically, I am undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I *am* my relation to the "you" whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this "I" makes no sense, and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego ... the "I" becomes undone in its ethical relation to the "you"... (2011c)

The crux of the issue is what this subjective deconstitution means? One should avoid going down the path here of interpreting Butler as if she is emphasizing the finitude of the human animal, of its limitation and weakness and vulnerability along with the

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65 Internet dating sites and behavioural psychology have combined forces to provide a service that seeks to remove the "uncertainty" of love. No longer do couples need fear the anxiety of 'falling' in love (Badiou 2012, 6). Through the extensive use of algorithms and database technology, online dating sites advertise the ability to set up singles with their 'ideal mate' and promise to remove the 'plunge into the abyss.'



suggestion that one can only heed a politics of limitation and incremental change. On the contrary, what if the void of the subject, its undoneness, is not a sign of the subject's particularity, but the opposite, its universality?

But in order to gesture towards a universality of the subject, stripped of its contingent particularistic traits, we need first to trace the trials and tribulations of Phil, who embodies the hegemony of the egological "I" in his attempts to not only seduce Rita, but to break the spell of Groundhog Day. Phil believes that through a persistent iteration he will a) become a subject that Rita will become attracted to, and b) that he, using his expert knowledge of Rita's intimate personal being, will be able to position himself in Rita's fantasy framework as a mate who "truly" knows her. Phil believes that in the accumulation of knowledge and experience Rita will become a fully transparent Other to him. Phil believes he can reduce his intersubjective relationship with Rita to an algorithm that he refines during each repetition of Groundhog Day. Doing this he adopts the position of the *pervert*, in that he believes he truly knows Rita's intimate desire and he *knows* what pleases her even better than Rita herself. The conventions of Hollywood dictate that love between them will happen, and the spell of Groundhog Day will eventually be broken, but it doesn't happen with Phil in the position of the pervert, but rather in the position of the analyst.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The position of the pervert  $a \rightarrow \$$  is identical to the analyst, but with a crucial difference that the pervert 'knows' what the Other desires, whereas the  $a$  in the *discourse of the Analyst* functions much differently. This important point will be discussed later on in this chapter.

How does Phil finally break out of Groundhog Day, the eternal repetition of the same?<sup>67</sup> In order to break out of Groundhog Day Phil undertakes an act that changes the symbolic coordinates of his situation, and initiates a subjective transformation. In other words Phil, a simple middle-class utilitarian, pragmatic liberal individual enduring a typical social existence, a repetition of the same day in and day out, breaks out of this reiteration and becomes a subject. But how does this occur? In the past Žižek would have accused Butler of not being able to think an escape from “Groundhog Day.” That her reiteration of the self-same only allows for margins of difference, and does not do enough to break with the prevailing symbolic coordinates of the situation.

### **Bad subjects: there is no big Other**

However Žižek clearly overlooks parts of Butler’s work where she insists that to “unbind the law from the process of subjectivation” one needs to be a bad subject (*On Anarchism* 99). She further asks, “what are the possibilities of politicizing *disidentification*, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (1993, 219) In his important *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* Althusser focuses on the interpellation of a subject by the big Other. Althusser’s theory of subject formation places the emphasis on a subject that conforms to the normative dictates of capital — she is hailed by the police officer and

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<sup>67</sup> The debate on various internet sites has Phil stuck in Groundhog Day anywhere between 30 and 300 years.

turns around.<sup>68</sup> What Butler does is stand Althusser on his head and read how interpellation could make for *bad* subjects.<sup>69</sup> In this respect, Butler cites Antigone's ability to break with the symbolic, to insist uncategorically without compromising her desire. Antigone employs a catachrestic operation of making a tear in the symbolic, exposing the Real, that is, the deadlock immanent to the big Other. In her battle with Creon Antigone exposes the *lack in the Other*, the fact that the big Other is barred: the edicts of the State are in the last resort arbitrary and grounded in violence. Antigone seeks no support in the symbolic order, the big Other, she makes no effort to gain recognition in this space because what she seeks is heterogeneous to the prevailing rationality. But what does this mean if one is to bring this example closer to an understanding of a political event today? Firstly, it reveals that to be a subject is not something in which one is born; to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born a subject, one emerges as a subject through an impossible act, and remaining firm, pursuing the consequences of this act to the end. A subject emerges as a result of an act. Prior to an act the human being is merely an individual, a strict utilitarian maximizer pursuing his/her pleasures. In other words, it is possible to live one's entire life as a subject of desire, pursuing and maximizing one's interests according to a personal calculus of benefit/harm etc. But an ethical relation to the Other makes no concessions to this type

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<sup>68</sup> "I shall then suggest that ideology ... recruits subjects among the individuals ... or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects ... by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (Althusser 1971, 174)

<sup>69</sup> This idea is further explored in Henry Krips (2006) and Adrian Johnston (2006).

of existence. In *Groundhog Day*, once Phil ceases to cater to a hysterical *Che Vuoi* plaguing him in the form of a constant question — Why are you saying this to me? Why is this happening to me? — and instead invokes an entirely different subjective position that is indifferent to the desire of the big Other, his subject position begins to shift.

It is thus only after assuming a fundamental indifference towards the Other's desire, getting rid of the hysterical game of subjectivization, after suspending the intersubjective game of mutual (mis)recognition, that the pure subject emerges. (Žižek, 2011)

The important point to be noted here is to reject the false notion that first there is an individual, who then gets “subjectivized,” that is, interpellated as a subject. The idea that there is first an individual who gets hailed into a “subject position” and then that there are subsequently various subject positions that individuals occupy is false. The popular upshot of this is that an individual may then experience a conflict between his or her various subject positions, her subject position of “mother” and that of “career woman” for example. But we should keep in mind that when Butler quotes Nietzsche's emphatic statement that there is “no doer behind the deed,” we should interpret this as saying that the subject *is* this very failure of interpellation. The subject is its own failure to signify. The emergence of the subject is its very failure. As opposed to the game of “subjectivation” and subject positions, Žižek wants to bring attention to the self-relating negativity that is the subject, the fact that failing to heed the interpellative call is this very minimal self-difference inherent to subjectivity, this *out-of-jointness* of the subject with itself.

The key is whether the subject holds true to this failure, remains in this space “between two deaths” between biological death and total symbolic death. The subject is thus a void, between two signifiers, it can never be completely exhausted by the signifier, it can never be One.<sup>70</sup> Thus the crux of the ethical relation for Žižek is not to construct an Other in its capacity for goodness, (a slippery signifier if there ever was one).

To recognize the Other is thus not primarily or ultimately to recognize the Other in a certain well-defined capacity (“I recognize you as . . . rational, good, lovable”), but to recognize you in the abyss of your very impenetrability and opacity. This mutual recognition of limitation thus opens up a space of sociality that is the solidarity of the vulnerable.

(2005c, 138-139)

Intersubjectivity is not a relation of mutual recognition of each other’s positive ontic qualities. This would reduce intersubjectivity to a mirroring relationship that ends in bitter rivalry, jealousy, resentment and hate.<sup>71</sup> Instead, intersubjective recognition should be grounded in the void of subjectivity. It is only here where the necessary agency is located to propel the subject into an act that “clears the deck,” or “wipes the slate clean” in a manner of speaking. But what does this mean?

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink (2008, 7) summarizes Žižek’s Hegelian reading of subjectivity: “The subject is ... a *self-relating negativity*: that which wins its truth (its self-identity in otherness) only through the experience of radical negativity or the freedom to negate itself, to say ‘no!’ to everything, even itself; or as Hegel puts it, through the experience of finding itself in and through “utter dismemberment.”

<sup>71</sup> What Lacanians call the *imaginary*. Being caught in the *imaginary* is to be overwhelmed in *affect* rather than the mediation of the symbolic. A relationship that remains caught in the *imaginary* is suffused with affective states of extremes such as rivalrous jealousy, love, hate and resentment.

### Striking out against oneself

In *Groundhog Day*, Phil breaks out of the cyclical repetition of the same, he breaches the Symbolic order by striking out against himself, which seems oddly counter-intuitive. But this can be seen as part of a materialist dialectic that is engaged in changing the coordinates of the situation. One needs to recognize that the standard reading of the Hegelian triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, i.e., starting out with a good, then opposing a bad, and then finding some synthesis in a magical *aufgehoben* that brings together good and bad, must be discarded as a simplistic reduction of the dialectic. Nor should one simply see in Hegel an absolute idealized version of 'God' who resolves all contradictions at a different higher level. Instead Hegel's 'synthesis' of opposites, should be discarded for

an unheard-of third version: the way to resolve the deadlock is to engage oneself neither in fighting for the 'good' side against the 'bad' one, nor in trying to bring them together in a balanced 'synthesis', but in opting for the bad side of the initial either/or. Of course, this 'choice of the worst' fails, but in this failure it undermines the entire field of alternatives and thus enables us to overcome its terms. (Žižek cited in Bryant 2008, 2)

One thus opts for the worst solution in order to finally attain the significantly different solution. The worst option is required in order to 'clear the deck' which prepares the way for the initiation of the new. So for example in the 1994 movie *Speed* Keanu Reeves plays a police officer who partners with another officer, (Jeff Daniels) to apprehend a dangerous criminal. In one crucial scene Reeves finds himself face to face with a

criminal who is armed and holding Reeves' partner hostage (*Fragile* 150). Instead of dropping his gun as demanded by the criminal Reeves shoots his partner in the leg. This momentarily both shocks and confuses the criminal just long enough for Reeves to shoot the criminal and free his partner. In the Toni Morrison novel *Beloved*, Sethe, a slave, escapes to Cincinnati with her three children, but upon her impending recapture, she kills her oldest daughter by slicing her throat and tries to kill her other three children rather than return them to a life of slavery.<sup>72</sup> Striking out against oneself thus changes the very coordinates of how the situation is to be understood, it creates its own criteria regarding how the situation will be judged retrospectively. One needs, in order to reconfigure or reorder the standard criteria by which a situation is judged, to choose or go through the bad choice first.

## Summary

To quickly summarize our argument up to this point: Butler insists that there is a particular mode of dispossession or subjective deconstitution that forms the basis of the ethical relation. Instead of thinking of subjectivity as an egological substance, she moves towards a relational ontology based on a notion of precarity. Precarity is then used to understand how the management of populations is reduced to issues of humanness and grievability: who gets defined as recognizably human, who can be grieved, and who cannot. But it is only until the addition of Antigone's act of self-dispossession that an

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<sup>72</sup> *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850 declared all runaway slaves, upon capture to be returned to their 'owners.'

ethical relationality emerges. And just as importantly, it is only through self-dispossession that allows us insight into ways in which a new subject emerges from the repetition of the old. How does something like the new emerge? How does the subject emerge and engage the new? It is not through an interpellation, or misrecognition, or reiteration of signifier. Instead it requires an understanding that the subject emerges only ever between signifiers — whenever a signifier thinks it has captured the ‘essence’ of the subject it inevitably falls like water off the back of a duck (Bryant 34). So a first step in this direction is taking it one step further than Butler herself. It is not simply about getting the interpellation wrong. The subject is not a series of failed or re-enacted interpellations. The subject *is* this failed interpellation. To get to something new, to an emergence of a new type of subjectivity it is necessary to become a 'bad subject' and initiate an act, part of which is striking out at oneself, of taking the ‘bad way’ out in order to reconfigure the coordinates of the entire situation. But another important piece that needs to be included in thinking this emergence of a qualitatively new subject, is that in order for this to happen a wholly different relation to *objet a* must be established. This will compose the final part of this concluding chapter.



## Objet a

The *objet a* is both the cause of desire, a lure, and the screen that covers it over. It is that which is finally, an unsettling hinderance, a ‘not knowing why’ — that for some reason what I thought would coincide, just does not. “I really have no problems with the recent influx of Pakistani immigrants into my neighbourhood, but nevertheless there is something about them, I don’t know, that makes me uncomfortable.” Alternatively, that little “something” can also be understood as that reason for which one spends endless hours on the internet searching for *the* deal on Coach bags, or for that vital piece of information that will tip the balance between an iPhone or a Samsung. The *objet a* in this instance is the object-cause of desire. It’s not the object of desire, but that which impels desire, causes desire and its restless metonymic journey from object to object.

Perhaps the best example for our purposes is the emergence of *objet a* in anti-Semitic discourse which Žižek in the *Sublime Object of Ideology* outlines in a three step process. In the first step there appears a series of adjectives called Jewish. So starting out with, for example, the terms: “(avaricious, profiteering, plotting, dirty...) *is called Jewish.*” This initial move sets out a series of descriptors. In the next step we have: “X is called Jewish because they are (avaricious, profiteering, plotting, dirty...)” Here the order is reversed, terms become predicates. Instead of ‘avaricious can be applied to Jews’, we have, ‘Jews are avaricious.’ It is in the third step that an anti-Semitic discourse emerges: “X is (avaricious, profiteering, plotting, dirty . . .) *because they are Jewish.*” As Rex Butler points out, “Jews are not simply Jews because they display that set of qualities (profiteering, plotting, dirty...) previously attributed to them. Rather, they have this set of

qualities because they are Jewish” (49-50). What emerges is that strange excessive *objet a*.

In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, when Scottie finds out there really was no real Madeleine, that who he thought was Madeleine was Judy pretending to be Madeleine, what he thus discovers:

is not simply that Judy is a fake (he knew that she was not the true Madeleine, since he had recreated a copy of Madeleine out of her), but that, *because she is not a fake — she is Madeleine; Madeleine herself was already a fake — the objet a disintegrates, the very loss is lost, we get a negation of negation.* (Žižek 2012b, 479)

Madeleine here exists as Scottie's *objet a*. What was so disabling for him in the end, was the realization that not Judy, but Madeleine is a fake. His *objet a*, not the object, but the very cause of his desire is proven illusory. Perhaps Scottie could nevertheless carry on his obsessive search for a replacement (homologous to 'retail therapy'), of seeking to cover over loss through a fantasmatic relationship to a metonymic-like cascade of different objects that will ultimately come up short as 'this is not it!' Or, and this option is what interests us, Scottie could opt to 'traverse his fantasy' and reconfigure his relation to *objet a*. Although the film ends at this point, his reaching a point of subjective destitution could allow him to rebuild his relationship not to any women, but to Woman, not treating her as symptom, as the object that would finally make him whole but rather, after Butler, troubling his relationship, realizing that his relationships to himself as well

as to sexual others will be 'non-all', that there is no constitutive exception in reality, Woman or otherwise that, once found, could make him whole.

### **Doing *objet a* differently**

So instead, of getting stuck on the Other's otherness: the strange cooking odour, the intensity with which they search for bargains and count their money, thereby producing *objet a* as scapegoat, one needs instead to approach *objet a* via an act of *creative self-destitution*. To return to the *Groundhog Day* example, Phil breaks out of *Groundhog Day* precisely by performing such an act: he attempts to save a homeless man, (who was repeatedly ignored by Phil in earlier iterations of *Groundhog Day*) and in the watershed moment in the movie, Phil embraces the dying man and plants a subtle kiss on his lips.<sup>73</sup> Here at this precise moment, Phil touches the real, in an act. The question becomes does Phil become a subject, that is, does he remain true to this act, this kiss and move to establish a determinate sequence that builds on it, or does he quickly fall into a

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<sup>73</sup> The precise moment of this 'kiss' is obscured by Harold Ramis the director. The camera angle renders it ambiguous, perhaps suggesting it was Phil's attempt to resuscitate the homeless man. But on repeated viewing his actions do not suggest this, Phil's emphatic cries and then his embrace and kiss are meaningful in the context of his fractured state of mind. It is well known that Bill Murray who played Phil, wanted to cast a more 'philosophical' light on the film and frequently clashed with Ramis. The two friends, once close, would end up not speaking to each other for 15 years after the making of this movie.

humanistic attitude of charity and an emboldened sense of selfless giving, of giving his life over to the poor, organizing food drives etc.<sup>74</sup>

$\frac{\text{agent}}{\text{truth}} \longrightarrow \frac{\text{other}}{\text{product}}$	<p>The role of <i>objet a</i> should no longer hold the place of the mysterious enjoyment of the other, the smell of their food, their loud music, rather the <i>objet a</i> must shift from that mysterious Thing that disturbs, to that which provokes an emergence of a subject. In the <i>Master's discourse</i> the <i>Objet a</i> is pure excess; the product that escapes the master signifier.<sup>75</sup> In the <i>discourse of the University</i>, the professor, the judge, the scientist is in position of the agent that directly addresses <i>objet a</i> producing the split subject <math>\\$</math>. In the University discourse <i>objet a</i> as excess, as object-cause of desire is exploited to produce a captured subject: a student, a consumer, or in Phil's case, he exploits the object-cause of desire to produce Rita as a desiring subject. In the discourse of the Hysteric the <i>objet a</i> is the truth of the hysteric's position. He or she addresses the Master with non-stop questions as to 'why?' Why are you saying this to me? Why are you saying what you are saying?</p>
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However, and this is our central point — for a radical subjective change to occur it must take place within the *discourse of the Analyst*. Of Lacan's four discourses, the

<sup>74</sup> The Hollywood resolution to the film flees from the possibilities opened up by this act, opting instead for the safe narrative of redemption. But this should not deter us from exploring all the possibilities provided by this freeze-frame moment of the kiss.

<sup>75</sup> Recall the 4 discourses

University	Master	Hysteric	Analyst
$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$	$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$	$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$	$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$

*discourse of the Analyst* is the only social bond where the *objet a* occupies the crucial position of agency.

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

The *a* here represents *objet a*, in the position of agent, and it is “the Kiss.” — Phil’s kiss to the dying homeless man, this brief lightning clap that touches the real. The *objet a* is wholly other in the sense that it cannot be known through understanding or reason, but can only be sensed and experienced. For Lacan, the psychoanalytic process is ethical insofar as it brings the analysand to discover the appropriate disposition toward the *objet a*, thereby clarifying how he or she must be with reference to this alterity. Phil as *S* traverses the fantasy, realizes there is no big Other that he can rely on to ‘get him out’ of Groundhog Day. Phil creates a new master signifier *S*<sub>1</sub> that re-orient his desire and what emerges are a new string of *S*<sub>2</sub> signifiers. The process by which Phil breaks out of the deterministic nexus can illustrate what is required to break free of the symbolic coordinates that hold in place the Oedipal-capitalist symbolic.

It is only in the analyst’s discourse where *objet a* takes on the position of agency. Rather than *objet a* taking on the function of scapegoat (Jew), or of the mysterious *je ne sais quoi* that holds the Other as irremediably Other, (their body odour, their food, the way they enjoy), instead one “traverses the fantasy” and confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object. In other words, *objet a* is that which stares back, dumbly, but importantly seeks not to incite a call to an Other for rescue, or for meaning, or invoke a resentful sneer, a racist slur etc. The conclusion to be drawn is that there is no big

Other and this then involves a different subjective position, a traversing of and realignment to a new fantasy framework.

This involves a more radical ethical freedom in which one can assume a certain position of ‘being impossible’: i.e. a position of refusing the terms of socio-political engagement and identitarian inscription; of refusing the terms of existing possibility. (Daly 2009, 293)

We are back to Bartleby’s “I prefer not to.” But to be more precise it is Bartleby who in the position of *objet a*, invites the lawyer to establish a different relationship to his fantasy framework. Recall the lawyer, upon trying to enter his office on a Sunday morning, is met by Bartleby who has taken up residence in the office, and who kindly asks the lawyer to come back in a while so that he can change. The lawyer, instead of “standing his ground” and enforcing his right to enter his own office, of not “being shown up” by a subordinate, instead complies, and goes for a walk around the block in order to give Bartleby time to wash, gather his stuff and leave. In fact the lawyer, from the beginning, refrains from scapegoating Bartleby. Bartleby’s co-workers do not waste any time rebuking his insolence. So is the lawyer being played here for a dupe, a fool? Or, is the lawyer, like Sethe and Keanu Reeves mentioned above, in a subtle way, striking out against himself, risking looking like a fool, breaking with convention and with his professional status? Reconfiguring this relation to *objet a* is what is at stake in our claim that a certain mode of dispossession of the subject figures a new ethical relation.

This is where I stand — how I would love to be: an ethical monster without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind

spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity. With more people like this, the world would be a pleasant place in which sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion. (Žižek 2009a, 303)

This accords with Butler's insistence that precarity is not a new humanism. It is a way of relating to the Other without the hidden resentment. It is a politics of for example, feeding the poor, giving life-saving medicine to AIDs patients, regardless of pointless hand-wringing debates over the effect on the economy, whether 'handouts' hurt in the long run rather than help etc. People are hungry, they need to be fed. It needs to be done period. People are dying, they need to be cured. However, one needs to be clear here, this is not the crying out of the new liberal communists Bill Gates, George Soros, Bono and their "court-philosopher Thomas Friedman," who proclaim, "Let's quit the talking, there are starving children in Africa that need our help!" (Žižek 2006c). In an ethical relation based on a transformed relation to *objet a* the subject enacts a fidelity to a cold and cruel passion in place of sentimentality, and possibly at the risk of one's job, marriage, friends, reputation. The subject emerges in a singular universality that overrides all particular ontic traits, and creates the possibility for a new space of a collective. An act of subjective deconstitution, the point in which 'madness' erupts, all symbolic coordinates are lost and a new fantasmatic mapping is put in place in which *objet a* emerges *not* as mysterious resentment, envy, nor the obscene underside of law.

A *singular universality* is opened by traversing fantasy and reconfiguring the relationship to *objet a*. It is the part of no-part in which the subject as object, meets the

other on this ground of objectivity, that is, subjects meet on the singular ground of objectivity minus their respective ontic particularistic traits.

Struggles in which “there are neither men nor women, neither Jews nor Greeks” are many, from ecology to the economy. Some months ago, a small miracle happened in the occupied West Bank: Palestinian women demonstrating against the Wall were joined by a group of Jewish lesbian women from Israel. The initial mutual mistrust was dispelled in the first confrontation with the Israeli soldiers guarding the Wall, and a sublime solidarity developed, with a traditionally dressed Palestinian woman embracing a Jewish lesbian with spiky purple hair — a living symbol of what our struggle should be. (Žižek 2012c, 46)

This is the mode of dispossession and ethical relationality of which Butler speaks — purged of ontic characteristics, one meets the Other on the ground of objectivity (Rothenberg 177). A singular universality emerges from subjective dissolution, of a subject that has touched the real of the dissolution of its own symbolic coordinates. In other words, the subject has effected a distance or a gap between itself and its own symbolic-subjective dimension. This opens up the dimension of objectivity, which cuts diagonally across all ontic particularities (race, gender, class, culture etc) and unites subjects as subjects not of desire, but as subjects of drive. The difference between the subject of desire and subject of drive being the latter’s fidelity to the Universal. Only a thorough reconfiguration of *objet a* through solidarity with the part of no-part, establishes



a vantage point from which to act from a truly universal standpoint. Getting to this point no doubt is a trying and difficult task and expressed with poignancy by Samuel Beckett:

*in the silence you don't know,*

*you must go on, I can't go on,*

*I'll go on.*

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