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and Aids: Hailing Judith Butler

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# SEX WITHOUT SEX, QUEERING THE MARKET, THE COLLAPSE OF THE POLITICAL, THE DEATH OF DIFFERENCE, AND AIDS HAILING JUDITH BUTLER

BRETT LEVINSON

It is interesting to note that in Judith Butler's study of the social construction of sex, *Gender Trouble* (as well as in the sequel, *Bodies That Matter*), one finds barely a trace of sex. Or to put matters more bluntly: in Butler's study of gender critiques that avoid or dismiss the matters of hetero- and homosexuality, in her examination of the relationship of gayness and lesbianism to feminism, and in her exposition of a politics of queer-ness—as to fucking, not a word. This omission is not tangential to *Gender Trouble*. It determines Butler's entire undertaking.

## 1. *The (In)difference of Performance*

By illustrating that sex, like gender, is a social construction, Butler strives to tear not sex but *both* sex and gender from biological essentialism. For as Butler insists, as soon as we imagine sex (woman/man) as naturally given, and gender (feminine/masculine) as a product of social forces, we fall into the very gender essentialism that we seemingly called into question. This is because the sex/gender binary makes sex the ground of gender: a woman may be masculine or feminine, and she may subvert the social norms that demand that women act in a certain manner. But throughout all of these gender reversals, she remains a woman. Her behavior, therefore, is either far from her sex (if she is subversive) or close to it (if she conforms). But in either case, it is measured in terms of that sex, which stands as the essence or foundation of the conduct. Hence, within such a discourse, gender stereotypes do not actually emerge as social (thereby deconstructible) constructs since the substructure (sex) of their edifice is given prior to production.

This thesis, which ultimately reveals that the sex/gender split reproduces the woman/man binary—the foundation of sexism—opens the way for one of Butler's most renowned interventions: her theory of performativity. Butlerian performance traces the intersection of Derrida's concept of mimesis and Foucault's understanding of power. Derrida argues that if a mark (in writing) or a sound (in speech) is to form part of a language, it must be iterable. Language hinges on social conventions, and social conventions on repetition, ritual. Repetition, therefore, does not follow (from) a pregiven



sign but is a condition of its possibility: a sign must be repeatable before it is a sign.<sup>1</sup>

Derrida often translates these ideas into an analysis of “the citation,” a fact Butler fully exploits. An articulation, Derrida argues, must be a priori citable (again, iterable) if it is to function as an articulation, as a “speech act.” This means that deviance, miscitation, recontextualization, and the possible transformation or loss of an enunciation—any or all of which could occur via a citation—belong essentially to that enunciation. The repetitions that yield rituals, habits, and then norms are the same iterations that undermine those norms. But this is true not only for speech. It holds as well for the law: the citing, execution, reading, writing, and acknowledgment of the law, hence the possibility of the law’s shift and even disappearance, pertain to the law’s groundwork.

*Gender Trouble* posits patriarchy and compulsive heterosexuality as two such citable laws. And as laws, they are powerful but not inevitable. Indeed, because the law of normalcy harbors its own deviance as a condition of its public emergence or deployment, this normalcy opens the way for its own transgression. One is indeed subject to the law of the norm. But this subjection cannot *not* grant the very alternative agency/subjectivity it strives to suppress.

Hence for Butler, queer types such as the “femme” or the “butch,” as they perhaps flaunt (through dress, bodily image, or public demonstration) the constructed character of their own sexual identities, recite and dis-cover the constructed, artificial character of sexual identities (e.g. the “real man or woman”) and “laws” as a whole. Queers stand as uncanny citations, parodic doublings of the straights that they *are almost exactly like*. The queer exhibition, then, does not imitate the essential norms or models. It performs their absence.

A rigorous understanding of these theses is not possible without a consideration of Derrida’s rereading of the ontological division that grounds Western metaphysics. On one side of that divide is located mimesis, reflections, representations, mere appearances: the contingent, sensual, multiple, finite, mortal world. On the other side of the binary, one finds *eidōs*, nature, being, presence, actuality: the original, necessary, transcendental, unchanging, unlimited, unique realm. Mimesis, as the only sphere available to the mortal eye, permits human beings to intuit this *eidōs*. By distinguishing material, transient images from their eternal, supersensible reality, thought learns (of) the truth it can never directly access.

The subject/object dichotomy is the modern translation (and transformation) of this mimesis/*eidōs* binary. Just as there is no *eidōs* without mimesis, there is no subject without an object. This object—production, perception, voice, writing, the animal, the other, and so on—is therefore the mirror which brings the transcendental subject into appearance. The object is hence also a domain of finitude. Just as all mirrors possess frames, and therefore can offer an image only of part of the beings they reflect, so too all objects. If there is no subject prior to or beyond the object, then the subject depends upon, is determined by its finitude: its boundaries, temporality, and contingency.

Thus a key Derridean *aporia*: the subject must appear (in an act, a text, a product, an idea: an object), take the form of a finite being, if it is to be at all. Yet the moment it *must*, the instant it is obliged to the domain of finitude, to the end, to death, it ceases to be that subject; bound, it is not self-determined, free, or transcendental. Thus, the transcendental subject cannot emerge simply by producing an object. It can only do so by disavowing its *relation* or bond to that object. For if the subject is related/linked to or in any way *like* finitude, then it is “not unlike” the object, hence is not absolutely but only relatively a subject. The subject qua subject must produce; but clearly, what it must

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1. See “Plato’s Pharmacy” [61–171], where Derrida clearly lays out his ideas on mimesis.

produce is not just the object but the distinction between the subject and object, their nonrelation. The subject, indeed, *is* this opposition.

This does not mean that subjects, as subjects, cannot “have” relations: to products, money, works, acts, properties, or others. But just as a certain nineteenth-century man would claim to *be* an aristocrat by birth and right, beyond whatever riches or titles he *had* (as opposed, he would say, to the bourgeois), the subject must *be* absolutely independent of the relations to mimesis/finitude/objects that it *has*: beyond all possessions or “havings,” thus beyond (their) possible loss. Indeed, if the subject can demonstrate that it only *has* limits, this proof attests to the fact that its being *is* not relative, not *essentially* bound or committed to any exterior or relation.

Let us relocate this analytic onto Butler’s field. Performativity, as a mimetic (domain of finitude) operation, necessarily unconceals not only the intrinsic deviancy, but also the limit of compulsive heterosexuality. The reason there is room for queerness within the law of normalcy is that the law is finite: it cannot account for the All. And as such, as bordered, this law necessarily swings onto, is in contact with, related to, and possibly contaminated by other territories/practices.

This means that sex is by definition heterogeneous, plural. Itself *plus* its finitude, any given sexual practice includes its openness to, thus corruption by, other practices. One equals itself *plus*. A sexual act must be plural (one plus), with others, if it is to be one. Particulars have limits. Limits hinge on others. And hinges are common territories: realms no single practice can take for its own, sites where the contamination of one by the other—the becoming more than one of the one—cannot *not* be risked. Once we show that the production/object pertains to the subject, performance to norms, and finitude to the seemingly essential/universal, we also demonstrate not only that there exist many legitimized sexual practices (none without limits), but that each of these practices is itself many: porous, exposed, with others, more.

All of this explains Butler’s provocative thoughts, never fully developed, on abjection. At one point in *Gender Trouble* [57–77] Butler calls into question Freud’s thesis that the infant possesses a biological disposition toward bisexuality. If in fact we are all determined by some form of bisexual inclination, Butler argues, this is not due to an original disposition but to the very structure of the Oedipal complex. Our “original bisexuality” is a cultural construct, and thus not original at all. Indeed, through an intricate analytic that I will not completely summarize, Butler convincingly contends that the same structures of identification, prohibition, and fear—identification with the same-sex parent, prohibition of incest, fear of castration—that lead to compulsive heterosexuality during the Oedipal phase also necessarily generate homosexual desires. The child is Oedipalized, thus entering normative society, not only by repressing a desire for incest (for the opposite-sex parent), as Freud would have it, but by repressing a homosexual drive as well. This explains the abjection of “actual” homosexual collectives, subjects, and practices, the visible embodiment or rem(a)inder of such repressed or “wrong” urges.

Butler thereby intimates that the gay/lesbian is abjected not because his/her sexual desires are different from the “norm,” but precisely because they are somehow alike. The dissimilar sexual practices indeed share a communal space: the border that divides them. The heterosexual’s desire has something in common with that of the gay person, even if this “other” component has been repressed. And insofar as the gay other, via this shared yearning, is like the heterosexual “I,” related to him/her, then this heterosexual’s heterosexuality, and by extension, the truth of who he or she is, his/her identity, is relative, not certain or absolute. The straight is a bit queer.

If the male (for example) heterosexual is to be “totally” heterosexual, then, it is not enough that he erase his homosexual leanings via the objectification of the most overt

public manifestation of those desires, namely, the queer other. He must also abject his junction or *relation* to these homosexual practices/desires. He must reduce to (next to) nothing gay people in order to destroy any likeness between hetero- and homosexual desire: to shift the hetero/homo, subject/object *relation* or bond into a being/nothing nonrelation. For if my identity/being is relative, contingent, temporal, and if as relational that being necessarily dwells next to the other who is at my threshold, pushing at my space, then my identity is always vulnerable, exposed, unsure. Only through a process of abjection, in other words, can the straight individual emerge not as relatively straight, as a straight who borders on queer, but as absolutely straight: as a subject without frontiers, open to nothing, threatened by nothing, omnipotent. In this scenario, the destroyed homosexual(ity) or “object” no longer marks a limit. As nullified and epiphenomenal, “this deviant loser” bears witness to the fact that the straight subject, having conquered the relationality of his sexuality, is the master of every confine or weakness.

In abjecting the queer, in brief, the straight subject rids itself not of the other, but of its own limit, which it displaces onto that other. The abjection removes finitude from the straight body, producing this subject as the being-without-an-other or the being-without-ends: the All which, because it is All, touches or relates to no exterior object. The exposure/openness of the self is closed down as it is relocated and restaged onto the “exposed, weak” queer. Contamination from the exterior is cleaned up as it is swept into the site of the “queer scum.” And the straight subject is separated not from its competitors but from its death, now expelled into the other’s realm: the queer as the figure of the death that the straight now has ousted.

Acts of objectification—the nullification of the other—only open the door for more others, who will all need to be objectified. This is because objectification does not erase the condition of possibility of the bothersome alterity/relationality: the limit between same and other. Abjection, on the other hand, strives to destroy not a specific exterior power, but the very possibility of that exteriority: once and for all. A violence that works to exchange the limit of the subject’s power for its absolute power, death for immortality, relationality for an essence, abjection is not outside of objectification; it is its end.

This can only mean that the straight’s abjection of the queer is not simply about the dismissal of any link to homosexual desires. It is also about the abjection of desire itself. In fact, no master is the master of desire. I can certainly use my powers to repress my longings. But I am powerless to rid myself of those yearnings, since repression (as even casual readers of Freud know) does not stop but produces them. And as long as I desire, I could desire any object, including a same-sexed person, including my manifest and/or closet gayness, and no will-power, self-command, or violence can curb this urge. The urge, in fact, is founded on that curbing. If agency is about empowerment, then desire is the agent’s weak spot: its exposure.

I will return to this subtle distinction between objectification and abjection. For now, though, I want to raise an obvious question. Butler holds that queer performances cannot *not* show that “straight” ideologies and practices are also performative, not natural or essential. But if queer recitations do not in fact play off an original scene but off of other (straight) recitations, then how can we tell one recitation from the other: the parodic (queer) deviance/repetitions, which a priori displace norms and the law, from the straight mimesis/repetitions which a priori reproduce norms? The response to this inquiry, unfortunately, cannot be grounded in a reference to heterogeneity. As just noted, queer performance reveals the multiplicity, the *plus*, of all sexual practices, delegitimizing in advance critiques that set up a “queer, open, and heterogeneous” versus a “straight, closed, and homogeneous” distinction.

However, even if one can, as Butler at times labors to show [see, for example, *Bodies That Matter* 121–40], differentiate between a queer performance and a straight reproduction, there is no guarantee that this difference does not itself work for the same. Indeed, I have been trying to emphasize that norms such as “compulsive heterosexuality” are the demand for this difference. It is by producing a marked or readable queer/straight division that the straight’s relationality is overcome, its naturalness affirmed. And if the queer or queer theory, via the serious/parodic, performance/imitation binaries, does this separation work for the straight—all the more convenient, for this allows compulsive heterosexuality to spend less time battling with the other, and more time reproducing the myth of a true sexual nature.

In his essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” to which I will be returning, Leo Bersani raises this same sort of question. He argues that there is nothing about the parodic performance of the leather queen, the butch, the femme, and so forth, that is intrinsically counterhegemonic. When, for example, the straight macho views his odd mirror image, the gay macho, he does not necessarily perceive the performativity or artificiality of his own sexual identity. He might just as well perceive the exceptional *nature* of his own, genuine, straight machismo. Gay machos, the straight macho might assume, really want to be like us, we are their models. But they are merely inferior, forced imitators: straight “wannabes.” As the epiphenomenal mimesis of “us straights” (the “authentic” macho says), queerness bears witness to the fact that “we” are the *eidos*: the truth of sex.

## 2. Foucault and Althusser: Sex, Communication, Interpellation

Before responding to the above query, let us turn to Foucault. If Derrida’s notion of mimesis is the paradigm by means of which Butler effects an epistemological critique and displacement of essentialism and/or of the natural, Foucault’s concept of power is the vehicle by means of which she turns this epistemological discussion into a politics of agency, into a “queer” empowerment. Centralized power, Foucault shows, is “absolute” or centered in relation to marginal forces. In order to emerge as the only power, it needs to negate those other wills/drives: the heterogeneity of force. Thus, in his studies of various institutions (the family, the school, the prison, the church, the clinic, the asylum), Foucault reveals how repressive powers necessarily count upon, hence license, the very subversive drives/practices that they repress. The project of centralized power is therefore never finished, since power must endlessly invent new strategies (hence Foucault’s “genealogies of power”) so as to control the novel transgressions and transgressors that the “old” strategies/institutions generate and legitimize.

Let us phrase these ideas in other terms. Foucault shows that there is no abstract power, no Power as such. Power must be executed or represented, embodied by a particular figure/practice, in order to materialize. But as soon as it is represented Power loses its transcendental, necessary status, emerging—like every instance of mimesis/representation—as relative, exposed to other forces: not as absolute or fixed but as temporary, stained, vulnerable to an invading alterity that new manipulation techniques must bring back into the fold.

Queer performances, Butler contends, “plug into” or tap Foucault’s marginal power sources. Unlike numerous “poststructuralist” others, Butler’s queer is not “out there” in some form of negativity, death, or lack which can never intervene publicly. It is empowered and politicized. Rather than running from domination in the name of freedom—a powerless freedom—queer performance grabs the power the center unwillingly grants. Indeed, according to Butler queer agency is not social, political, and historical because it falls within social constructs, as many have assumed. The queer is politicized because

he/she possesses, and gains access to, a space within the domain of power: the realm that, for Butler, is also the field of history/culture as a whole.

Foucault, of course, draws his theory of power from social practices. I will be concentrating on two such practices: sex and communication. Nonetheless, we should not forget that Foucault does not address praxis empirically; he does so through the prism of philosophy, one such prism being the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. Hegel's sovereign, we know, is master only if he receives recognition from the slave: production, sweat, an escape attempt, a transgression, a cry, a scream, a laugh, submission, love. The master is not a master unless he makes the slave *do* or *say* something that serves as recognition of the master's law. Yet this recognition, this sign, cannot *not* serve as the mark of the slave's force, of the fact that he has not yet been mastered. If the master is to be the total master, the slave must be a total slave, absolutely subservient. But if this servant is totally subservient (dead, reduced to an object), he cannot offer the acknowledgment that would speak for this complete acquiescence, hence is not a slave at all.

In short, no matter how events turn, the slave is never yet a slave/object, the master never yet a master/subject. This is why Hegel's dialectic is indeed a *dialectic*, not a mere play of oppositions. If the master could completely objectify the slave (and still remain master), then slavery—the master, the slave, and their relation—including any memory or trace of that phenomenon, would come to a close. But this completion could only take place at the conclusion of history, when Absolute Spirit realizes itself (for better or worse). History itself, on the other hand, is the battle toward this termination, a dispute to the death between two related (thus relative, vulnerable) drives. The command of the master is one force. The (dis)obedience of the slave is the other. In the ceaseless struggle between the two, each faction plays out one or any combination of three scenes: (1) it loses, dies, giving up its territory, expiring into the other; (2) it wins, taking the other's territory, though only by risking death and indeed by dying. In fact by winning, this faction also loses: it perishes into the other as it radically (from the ground up) shifts, expands, becomes something more and something less than its deceased "was"; (3) it draws or refuses to fight, remaining under the threat of death (the enemy at the border could invade again, or the faction could rot: age without growing). A party either fights (lives), faces death, and dies; or else it does not fight (lives), faces death, and dies.

It is not difficult to divine Foucault's debt to Hegel. Hegel's master/slave, command/acknowledgment struggles are akin to Foucault's relation of forces, for they are never quite conflicts between Power and the powerless, subject and object. Sex in the Foucauldian project, in fact, involves a similar confrontation. Just as the Hegelian overlord is never yet overlord, the Foucauldian subject is never yet the master of sex. Sex instead is that opening to a relation that no subject can master. In sex I am exposed to the limit of my power, exposed to the other, exposed pure and simple. If I seek mastery by giving my partner (see what a sex master I am!) "total" pleasure, no will, technique, or strategy will guarantee that my acts produce the desired end.<sup>2</sup> Such pleasure in fact hinges on facets of my partner (for example, on his/her history), which I—not to mention the partner him- or herself—cannot fully determine. Indeed, even if the other screams in absolute joy, my mastery is not acknowledged. After all, he or she could be faking, and my mind is not sufficiently masterful to know whether this impression is accurate or not. In truth, I cannot even will through power my own pleasure, not to mention my own orgasm. Sex, in brief, is not the coming-together of two subjects, but an ecstatic relation of forces which happens at the limit of each subject, as well as of the "couple" (or more).

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2. This is true even of masturbation, the condition for which is an imaginary figure which the masturbating subject controls, yields to, defeats, and so on. One never masturbates alone.

Even the sadist who kills the other while simultaneously experiencing orgasm (that old yarn), does not, for various reasons, affirm his or her mastery. Indeed, since this figure cannot make the corpse acknowledge his/her power, force the remains to communicate, the cadaver indexes not power but its end: the other's death exposes the "master" to the limit, to the death—his/her own—s/he cannot master.

What is sex, for Foucault? On the one hand, it is the subject's exposure to relations qua the limit of Power. On the other, it is the effort to overcome this limit, to bring the "sharing" to an end, and thus to attain absolute power (not necessarily over the other, but over the self). In the sex act, one cannot objectify the limit and become the master or subject of the encounter for the simple reason that, without that limit, that openness-to-the-other, that exposure to death, there is no sex, no erotics, no desire. Sex puts death in play: this is why it is both exciting and terrifying. But at the same time, sex is the subject's struggle to disavow, overpower this limit and thus materialize as the All: to erase the bind to the other who, given that the subject of sex is "only" relational, threatens to strip this subject of its very being.

What holds for sex holds for language. Language marks the finitude of the subject's mastery for numerous reasons, one being that it pivots on the other's understanding, which no speech act can determine.<sup>3</sup> I give orders; I yell, shout, dictate, command, promise, teach lessons. But I cannot be assured that the orders will be understood, that they will actually *order* (promise or teach). Similarly, I can articulate a feeling. But I cannot for certain communicate that feeling, impel it to "reach" the other. Nor can I dominate aspects of my speech that determine this reception: the grain of my voice, my accent, tone, pitch, the surrounding noise, the slips of tongue.

I do not mean to suggest that messages and meanings never reach their receivers. The point is that no "power" will guarantee this arrival. Communication is not human but the limit of human will, of subjectivity. The exposure of the subject to the other, it is the space-between which puts the two in contact: lip to ear, writing hand to reading eye socket.

This is why "total" dialogue is inconceivable. In dialogue, two humans strive to work out their differences. But the condition of this "intersubjective" exchange is its limit, a third party which is irreducible to the dialogue, and to the control of the "subjects" or the negotiations: language, the "between" or relation-of-the-two. When dialogue succeeds, it does so because this border is cast aside, disavowed. The inhuman is mastered by the human, humanized. In dialogue, that is, three—the two parties and the exchange—try to become one by getting rid of language. The condition of "fair dialogue" is its end: nondialogue.

We noted above that Butler understands politics and history exclusively in terms of empowerment and disempowerment. It is therefore clear why the sex act and desire—*Gender Trouble*, a perusal of sex, includes barely a mention of desire—as well as language (as we will be seeing) are largely disavowed in her work. These *topoi* in fact disclose the limits of the very foundations from which Butler's endeavor departs. They reveal that Power, however heterogeneous, cannot ground history/culture since certain historical, bodily, highly volatile, and politicized events—sex, communication—contain elements for which power cannot account.

Butler's frequent interpretations of Althusser's concept of "interpellation" or "hailing" are, in this context, telling. Althusser deploys the term *interpellation* in his renowned essay on the state and ideology: "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In her reading, Butler takes as her starting point a rather comical "example from life" which Althusser offers so as to illustrate his con-

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3. This holds even for speaking-to-oneself, as Derrida demonstrated long ago.

cept: when the policeman calls out in the street “hey, you!,” nine times out of ten the subject who is actually hailed turns around (and not only because he or she feels guilty). According to Butler this means that the law and power, both embodied by the police, hail the subject into existence. Yet, because the injunction must be cited (Hey, you!), publicized, exposed, the law cannot *not* license, even legalize, its own potential displacement, deviance, or transgression.

The Althusserian policeman’s “hey you!,” however, is just an example; and like all examples, it does not quite coincide with the idea it is geared to illustrate. Althusser, who appropriates the notion of interpellation from Lacan, is a good enough Lacanian to know that no command ever fully hailed the subject into being.<sup>4</sup> Subjectivity does not emerge via a response to ordinances but via the condition of both response and ordinance, namely, language.

According to Lacan, the subject (which Althusser dubs the “ideological subject”) is hailed into existence the moment the prelinguistic *enfans* (the baby-mass who has not yet distinguished itself from the world, is not yet an individual body, much less a self) makes a demand—a cry, a breath, a moan, a belch, a smile—on the primary caretaker. The caretaker, by a logical necessity that we will trace, can respond only by offering an object of need (a hug, a breast, words, a bottle, and so forth) rather than the desired entity. The subject, that is, requires language (demand) to get what it wants; but because the meeting of the demand hinges on a reception by the other (who must guess/impose the signified or meaning behind the fart, cry, belch, laugh, breath), which no demand can dictate or regulate, language introduces “his majesty, the baby” to the limit of its powers: to itself as the not-All, as relative to others and, above all, as cut off from the objects it desires.<sup>5</sup>

Why does the baby never receive the object of desire it demands? Because what this baby desires is to eliminate the separation between itself and the supplier-of-the-All (the caretaker, who surfaces as “the mother” not due to a biological tie but only if and when s/he is posited as this supplier, this All) so that it can get whatever it wants: without needing to ask. If the baby is All, if there is no distance between self and supplies, if acquisition does not hinge on the “undictatable” capacity and agency (the understanding) of an other, if the infant need not recur to this “tool” which never seems to get the job done (language)—only then is the subject self-sufficient: a master without limits, and without others/relations who could displace it. Hence the paradox: the immobile and “immature” *enfans* must make demands, communicate to “get the goods.” But the communication *must* fail, since it itself produces the very difference or gap—and the unfulfilled desire to fill it—between the receiver and giver, the closure of which is precisely what the demand demands (the demand, it should now be clear, not of the baby but of language).

I cannot in this space outline the way in which the subject disavows this initiating threshold or limit by displacing it onto the mother (the supposed All) in the form of an imaginary lack (the supposed failure of the All/mother, the not-All which yields the fill-in: the Phallus). Suffice it to say the Lacanian social subject is so—is a subject—via its mis-taking of finitude/relationality for a temporary loss of complete selfhood and “natu-

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4. For Lacan’s discussion of interpellation or of “the appeal,” see *The Psychoses* 247–309.

5. One could begin an analysis of this process from any number of places: from the demand of the infant to the demand of the mother, from the need that induces desire to the desire that produces the need. Since I cannot commence my reading in all of these sites at once, I choose one: the demand of the *enfans*. Another point to emphasize is that this immersion into the social never ceases: the subject, from birth to death, makes demands for objects of desire, receiving only needs in return. One does not become a subject once and for all; one never stops becoming a subject or going through the mirror-stage that I am describing.

ral” independence (which the subject will forever try to “recover”) when, in fact, the gap/border/finitude introduced by language is neither a lack nor a loss. It is the condition of being.

I will say, however, that while language discloses a limit, it does not represent a prohibition. Language does not direct the subject to “do” or “not do” this or that. It simply exposes the subject to the fact that *there must be direction*: a “to do.” The subject must traverse the threshold, *emerge* into the social, engage or refuse the other and its menace, if it is to exist at all. Language does not say “stop!” It says “go,” which is the root of the subject’s fears: the fact that there is no stop to relations, desire, the exposure-to-the-other, terror. The limit, that is, is the condition of the subject’s freedom, of the sallying-out, going-beyond, and becoming-more, meaning that freedom pivots on the subject’s bind and response to the outside. One is not a self, self-determined and free, and then socially responsible; one is a self through that enchainment (qua signifying chain, at least in Lacan’s scheme) to the social.

The subject’s desire to transcend this sociality and responsibility, thereby to be itself—the subject qua master—is played out the moment that language, demand, or finitude is misrecognized as a prohibitive statute, rather than as the opening-to or contact-with the other. Legal injunctions indeed function as Butler indicates: they license their own subversion. By first misreading the limit as a despotic law, and by then unconcealing and/or taking advantage of this law’s structural weakness in order to displace it, the subject stages its mastery of the “despot,” albeit an imaginary one. In other words, by constructing the limit as a restrictive law qua “vulnerable overlord” the subject is able to perform its transcendence, free itself from a commander, hence disclaim this limit: the inexorable demand of language.

Althusser’s point, however, is that, in outdoing the “master” in this manner, the subject does not subvert the dominant ideology but precisely falls into its trap. The trap is opened by language: the “hey, you!” which Althusser cites. “Hey” is an impersonal signifier (in French, Althusser also uses an impersonal expression). Directed to “you,” it itself emits (from the standpoint of this “you,” which is the matter at hand) from “out there”: from no subject and no place (after all, Althusser’s subject does not know it is the policeman, or any other man, who has hailed him). This “hey!,” moreover, does not command the “you” to do or not do anything—“hey!” is not a decree—indeed, it is a signifier that barely possesses any meaning or message at all (thus the expression: “Hey!” is for horses). “Hey!,” in fact, is Althusser’s “example” of the Lacanian signifier without either a signified or a subject (even though no such pure signifier, which would be the actual Phallus, exists, as Lacan knows; it is desired). The “hey!,” in short, is the force of language itself. The “you” who turns around, therefore, does so by converting the “hey!” into the words of a “you” (another subject with whom he can dialogue, negotiate), the “you” into a “me,” and the “me” into an I, into the subject itself: it is I who am being called! “You” first humanizes the impersonal “hey!” so as to compete on “equal grounds” with the limit (of the human) qua language. It then conquers this adversary by appropriating it (Look, I am in the mirror of the law!), thus emerging as a being who has taken over its relations and binds: an absolute subject, free and without “lack.” In other words, the subject, in this encounter with the “hey!,” turns language—the loser in the struggle—into a human sign, a sign of (self-)representation: into the “weak,” epiphenomenal object/law/mirror which the subject deploys to erect the subject/object binary, the subject itself. This is why Althusser holds that the ideological subject always identifies itself in and via (its displacement of) the Master: in the Subject which transcends history, the social, politics.

The transcendental subject, then, does not turn around nine times out of ten—the policeman example is just an example—but ten times out of ten, since, prior to that turn,

there is no such subject. But why precisely does the “hey, you!” hail or recruit the *ideological* subject? It does so because, according to Althusser, this “hey, you!” actually says (or is imagined as saying): “Hey you! There is a place in the social which we are holding specifically for you, for your subjectivity and freedom. This is a location in which you will be free from others and thereby from all repression, threats, and prohibitions. The place, however, is contingent on your disavowal of language qua relationality. In other words, in accepting this freedom berth, this site of self-empowerment, lawlessness, and subversion, you agree to renounce, posit as contingent, your relation to others. You *must* be a free individual, turn in any essential political inclinations. Hey!, if you turn this signifier around, displace it, take it for yourself, is your password, your way in, your master signifier, your ticket to freedom. And since you now have a secret sign that is all yours, a proper name, language as a whole is no longer your limit: it is your property to do with as you please.” In short, the ideological subject mistakes its “private” inscription into ideology for its emancipation and self-determination, and then happily chooses and produces—as an “empowered” agent—the apolitical state, one that does not need to recur to violence (it can spend all its time on reproduction), since its recruited citizens/subjects control themselves.

To be sure, this recruitment by the ideological state would seem less vicious than the methods used by the repressive state. But ideology deploys this reduction in brutality as a selling tactic: “you will not be violated by us, that was part of the old regime; we are not despots, we will not prohibit you. Hey, you! Be free, be with us!” The difference between repression and ideology, exclusion/cessation and recruitment/participation/empowerment, serve as the publicity that aids in the construction of a depoliticized consensus: the ideological state itself which, it should now be clear, is the state of the market.

Butler falls for the machinations of the ideological state. The slip begins the instant she posits “compulsive heterosexuality” as a restraining but “displaceable” law. Even if normalcy is a law (as it is in sites where queerness or homosexuality is illegal), no law can dictate the precise line, limit, or boundary between what it permits and what it prohibits. Therefore, the “law of normalcy” cannot serve as an “against which” that subversion/displacement “eeks” past. This is not a matter of opinion. It is a matter of fact: the limit of the law is the limit of the law, the finitude of its determination or domain, *as well as of its counterdetermination*. In truth, *anything*, including many so-called homosexual (and onistic) practices, could be (and often *are*) considered “heterosexual”; many more can be created. “Compulsive heterosexuality,” as a social demand, swings—like a border—onto a plethora of options. “Compulsive heterosexuality,” that is, does not tell a subject where to draw the line, only that, between “hetero-” and “homosexuality,” a line must be drawn. “Heterosexuality only!” exposes the subject to decisions that are not necessarily piloted by prohibitions or their subversion—the “mandate” does not tell the subject where sexuality itself starts and ends, much less where *heterosexual* practices start and end—but that must be made by the subject’s imaginary, who determines while in the “sexual act” a moral and/or ethical ground from the many “codes” (even if transformed or reinvented) which are out there: a foundation either for obedience or subversion. To be sure, the location of the line-between is not completely the free or conscious decision of a subject, for nothing imaginary ever is. It is directed by the demand of the “in the act” situation, as well as by the relation, by the subject’s history, by the gaze of the social, and so on. But nor is it dictated (does my attraction to my same-sexed friends emerge as a sign of my “homosexual” desires here or here? Is this hug or kiss a mark “merely” of straight friendship, while this one signals a “queer” desire? The law of normalcy will not tell me where to etch the limit) by any cultural code, much less any law.



Butler's confusion of the demand of sex/desire for the prohibitive law is complemented by her misrecognition of language, the "hey!," for this same law. Her objective misinterpretations of the policeman's hail (she takes an example for a rule, posits a signifier which commands nothing for a law, ascribes a person to an impersonal expression), like all misreadings, best reflect Butler's desire: for a hard law of sex and desire which would ground her discourse of subversive power. Indeed, by personalizing the "hey!" (it is a cop!), she humanizes language so as to make sure that the hailing produce an intersubjective battle of "strong" agencies: of (self-)representations in which the subversive agent beats the wobbly law or the brawny law beats the torpid, law-abiding agent—but in which the finitude that "reduces" all power (agency) to a relation of forces, drives, or wills is eliminated in advance from the match. Butler, a perfect Lacanian subject, abjects language in order to find in that "language" a law/vehicle, a "stop!" to be trespassed—a master law by means of which the self makes itself master—a signifier for the now empowered queer.<sup>6</sup>

If Butler's queer agency indeed carves out a free place in the social it does so only by desexualizing and delinguistifying—therefore depoliticizing—that emancipation. In fact, by demonstrating that "normalcy" possesses a "repressed place" for the queer, queer theory ultimately suggests that compulsive normalcy qua the dominant ideology, while seemingly restrictive, is actually a *topos* full of nooks and crannies of license and "secret" possibilities: a space of opportunity. Butler "radically reverses" or displaces the hail of ideology; but the ideological state had already figured this turnaround into its recruitment plans.

*Gender Trouble*, in brief, displaces language, sex, and indeed, "matter" and the "body" itself, off the body and onto easily deconstructible, hence "overpowerable" binaries, which Butler posits as "laws." Butler's communication is not exposure—it leaves language out—but the subversion of the construction/essence opposition. Her "sex" is not the mergings, the separations, the shatterings, and the depressing loss of drives but the "subversive" undoing of the sex/gender split. Finally, her body is not a sex-machine, an eating machine (who can control their food habits?), or a sleeping (oversleeping, insomniac) machine but the deconstruction of the body/mind separation. *Gender Trouble* is pure philosophy. It passes off the dismantling of concepts for the liberation of social being: the breakdown of philosophical structures for the breaking down that is the body, communication, sex, any relation, any political organization.

### 3. *Strange Bedfellows: Bersani and AIDS*

The previous section, in many ways, represents a reading and expansion of Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?," which addresses in the main a seemingly simple question: Why are AIDS victims more often seen as victimizers rather than as victims? Bersani, however, rejects the simple answer; for him, AIDS phobia is not reducible to homophobia. AIDS phobia, he instead holds, points to a general repulsion not of homosexuality but of sexuality itself.

Bersani's understanding of sex is Foucauldian in nature. Sex, Bersani holds, is the subject's exposure to a relation, hence to death, and the effort to abject that death/relationality via the objectification of the other; it is the will/drive to turn via abjection

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6. *Butler's analyses of hate speech, in her recent Excitable Speech, exemplify my point: the victim of hate speech, in Butler's paradigm, turns hate speech into his or her own master signifier. Of course, there is nothing wrong with master signifiers; on the contrary, they are the condition of the subject's entrance into the social. The point is that all master signifiers are exposed to their limit, where they must fall as masters.*

the sexual relation into the absolute individual, into pure self-empowerment: Power over the limit of Power, over death. This is how Bersani can allege, both in this essay and in *Homos*, that queer theory is never talking about sex when it talks about sex, since it takes the finitude of power out of the sexual equation: “queerness” quite literally removes the sex from homosexuality. Bersani, in making this accusation, is alluding both to Butler-like endeavors, which cut “sex” down to a “deconstruction” of concepts; and more crucially, to those of the David Halperin type (in *Saint Foucault*), which argue that gay sex frees itself from the oppressive mandates of compulsive heterosexuality. The queer is empowered by sex; yet that power is never violent or “bad” but precisely a means to emancipate the queer from the tyranny of norms.

Bersani argues that if we find sex repulsive, it is because we hate the death (of the subject) which sexuality puts into play: the death and terror that turn sex away from romance and toward an uncharitable battle for power and individuality. And this is why AIDS disgusts the general public. Given the “advent” of this illness, the death that was always present in every sexual encounter *actually* presents itself: not conceptually but as a tangible component of our everyday existence. AIDS destroys (the myths of) sex for all of us. This does not mean that we will all contract AIDS and die every time we have sex; it means we could contract AIDS and die anytime we have sex. No one, and no sexual practice, is immune from the threat of AIDS (not even the practice of saying no: you cannot say “no” to an accident). We will no longer ever be alone in sex; sex is never again to be a personal matter, for since the appearance of AIDS, death always already comes between us, keeping vigil. AIDS, to put this another way, is the gaze from “out there,” the publicness, the being-in-relations and in-circulation, which marks up all that is called the “private” or “individual.” The illness is the palpable manifestation of the human’s inexorable contact with the other, its openness and vulnerability, its terror and death, its ravaging “exteriority”: the “publicity” and politicality of our being, outside of which (in the private realm) we would like to hide sex, the daily, corporeal rem(a)inder of this disclosure. AIDS, of course, is not the agent of the defilement and death; it is scapegoated as such, for it exposes or “outs” them. The hate of AIDS, in short, is not only the hate of sex but the love of humanism and of humanism’s ground: the transcendental subject, the being-without-death.

This tells us why AIDS phobia, while irreducible to homophobia, is unthinkable without it. The association of AIDS and homosexuality, however, cannot merely be traced to the fact that gays are often seen as “the ones who get AIDS.” If AIDS and homosexuality are viewed as one and the same by a certain public imaginary, it is because they both stand for sex as such. The gay man, it is supposed, does nothing but seek and have sex, for he is sex itself. This, according to Bersani, explains the disdain for “bottoms” or the so-called “passive” male homosexual partner, who, it is sometimes assumed, never expends and therefore can “do it” forever. This pure openness, this sex without limits, daunts the social not only because it serves as a reminder of exposure and “weakness.” It terrifies also because it produces the conviction that sex itself—open sex, obscene and unproductive—is “taking over,” is without bounds and therefore is the new despot defining and defiling the limits of our (private) space and freedoms.

#### 4. *State to Queer Market: Is There a Cigarette in This Picture?*

Butler, we have been noting, carves out a theory of “queerness” as a means to deconstruct the exclusionary/violent tendencies of compulsive norms. Yet numerous thinkers (Althusser, Deleuze, Baudrillard) have shown that, as we move from a world in which the highest political institution is the state, to one in which the state must compete for its

sovereignty with global movements (including AIDS), above all the market, domination does not work only through restriction but also through license, participation, the multiplication of differences, and the construction of choices. Butler's queer theory, in other words, undermines one mode of production of dominance, when power today is working in a different mode.

The problem at hand is difference. If today difference is the buzzword of both radicals and talk show hosts, rebel professors and economy-minded deans, if it is everywhere, this is because it no longer necessarily works for difference. Just as the subject is the subject/object distinction, straightness the straight/queer division, and *eidos* the mimesis/*eidos* split, sameness is the difference between same and other. Thinkers such as Derrida and Lyotard, therefore, do not theorize or mark difference, as so many seem to believe. They think its end: the fact that difference can no longer be assured to name (hence Derrida's *différance* and Lyotard's *differend*), much less make, a difference. We are not "in the age of difference"; having missed difference, we are in the mourning after.

I am aware that not all differences are the same difference; radical multiculturalism is not the United Colors of Benetton. But that is exactly what the market *hails* (hey, you!) people into believing: *my* difference is *really different*. For only through this conviction does one adopt and enter the system as a free agent, thereby reducing the need for state violence.

It is with these ideas in mind that we should return to Foucault's notion of power, which, in actuality, is derived from his understanding of the relation of the citizen and the sovereign state. "State," according to Foucault, refers to all fields in which belonging, right, or "citizenship" is understood in terms of what he tends to call an "economism of power." Each member of the "state" (which could be any institution, all of which have been conceived as "little states," according to Foucault) belongs in direct proportion to the power he or she rightfully possesses—power is a guaranteed right, similar to an inheritance—but whose "partial or total cessation enables political power or sovereignty to be established" [Foucault 88].<sup>7</sup>

This means that the citizen's struggle to overcome cessation, to access his or her right or possession, can only serve to avow state supremacy. Citizen rights, this drive for access affirms, are given by the state beforehand, after which the state takes them away: the taking away and the effort to reclaim the lost space or power are the conditions of citizenship. The state is basically the "landowner of power" which de jure must rent out "real estate" to citizens, but de facto withholds territory (usually by "giving" too much to a certain sector). However, when citizens demand that right, that "empowerment," which is actually the right to "pay rent," they do so—even if they manage to empower themselves—by acknowledging, indeed producing, the state as the true owner of Power qua the Sovereign. In other words, the recent wave of scholarship, including Butler's, which treats Foucault's "outside force" as a resource for marginal empowerment, as untapped or repressed (state) capital, attribute to Foucault the very "economism" he spent virtually his entire career calling into question.

To understand more clearly the significance of these Foucauldian postulates, it is helpful to take a detour through Jean Baudrillard. Battles between Coke and Pepsi, runs Baudrillard's argumentation in texts such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, serve both companies. The disputes, first of all, create variety. Consumers do not believe, given these market wars, that the stronger product, Coke, possesses a monopoly. They choose

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7. It is in reference to this cessation that Foucault clearly states that his work is an effort to dislodge those theories of institutional power which are grounded on a state paradigm. Foucault's "relation of forces," in other words, theorizes the end of the state as the model for all institutional power, including that of the state itself.

Coke freely, often convinced that it tastes better (and the impression, the taste, is real, not imaginary). Indeed, without Pepsi, or a strong substitute, Coke would likely emerge as an “ugly monopoly,” and thus as an enemy of the free market which opened the way for Coke’s successes in the first place. That is, if Coke actually ousted its competition, it would lose, not win.

Everything works out for everybody. Coke prevails because it defeats its rival in a competition, and thus emerges as a powerful but fair and appealing product/company. Pepsi gains because, by being linked to Coke, it vanquishes all the “minor” soft drink “competitors,” reaping in large profits, even if somewhat less than Coke’s. And the consumer wins because the competition both controls prices and allows for selection. But in fact the biggest profit-taker is the market. The antagonism permits the structure of the liberal market not only to sustain itself, but to emerge as an object of choice for the consumer. A “duopoly” or “multipoly,” the multiplication of products, generates the simulation of options and freedoms, hence of consumer hankerings for this emporium. For as Baudrillard argues, what the consumer pursues is himself, his own subjectivity qua self-determination qua self-mastery, all of which are simulated as he makes his uncoerced choice from the duopoly’s basket.

The duopoly machine, however, does not run by itself; it does so in opposition to the monopoly. We noted above that Althusser’s ideological state sells itself by sustaining and then setting itself off from the restrictive state. Likewise the duopoly, which resurrects the monopoly or “dominant discourse”—which continue to exist, but not as sovereigns; they have yielded to the duopoly, to decentralization and competition—so as to oppose them in the name of “opening” and freedom. Thus, to survive well today, a strong product or signifier (for example, the IBM desktop or, in the Academy, “tradition”) must produce a repressed counterproduct (the IBM desktop clone or academic “multiculturalism”). The ensuing battle between the established brand “striving” to form a monopoly and the new mark working to offer a competitive value creates the choices, which produce the consumer-subjects, who reproduce the market. The value of the novel label, then, does not lie in whatever use-value it may possess (valuable or valueless, it can thrive either way). It rests in the choice, hence the consumer freedom, this product adds to the buying scene.

Crucial to Baudrillard is his seemingly eccentric conviction that part of the attraction of the new product or brand lies in the consumer’s (unconscious?) belief that these fresh goods did not come from nowhere: *they were previously excluded*. If merchandise (“multiculturalism”) was never before on the market, it is supposed, this is because *the monopoly (“tradition”) had blocked its emergence*. This product’s worth, in other words, lies in its movement from absence to a presence in the market. The wares do not overcome their exclusion because they serve a purpose, meet desires, hence possess real or, more importantly, imaginary value. Rather, they serve a purpose and meet desires *because* they were formerly “barred” by the despotic monopoly but now have “beat the master,” have powered forth so as to offer greater selection and opportunity. The capacity of the product to “free itself from exclusion,” in other words, simulates the freedom of the consumer, who, in procuring the goods, mistakes the product’s “push” or strength for his own self-determination. He “buys in” because he sees his ideal self—a citizen who is by definition dispossessed, marginated, and unfairly “jipped” but is also rugged enough to take back his rightful territory from the monopolistic despot—in the mirror of his purchase options.<sup>8</sup>

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8. This is not to suggest that the repression of the margins is itself the new dominant discourse or “the culprit.” The center/monopoly also posits itself as suppressed and deprived. Some identify with “those from below” who beat the master or the dominant One, while others identify with this dominant One, which fends off the unworthy competitors who threaten to unfairly take

Baudrillard's analytic is ironic and even comical, but it contains a serious tenet: Baudrillard is trying to trace the finitude of finitude, the end of the end, the death of death. We noted how in Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Being either dies, transforms, or holds its ground; but never does it escape its exposure to mortality, since being is that exposure. Today, Baudrillard argues, such struggles do not necessarily bring death onto the field of the social, but precisely expel it. Not only do the values of goods, people, ethnicities, concepts, positions, theories, and beliefs rest in the fact that they were once "silenced," excluded, forgotten,<sup>9</sup> marginated, kept offstage; also invaluable are their fall and return, their expiration. Death has emerged as the assurance of another life in a new register. (Hence we live in the epoch of the comeback: John Travolta disappears but returns stronger than before, not because of the acting talents he may or may not possess but *because he has returned*; new indigenous documents found in a colonial archive are presented as emancipatory, not because of what they say—*sometimes they cannot even be read*—but because they had been buried, "suppressed," and now have been recovered.) Products, ideas, and people that lose ground fuel the market, for they help produce the illusion of real competitions in which "the best man is free to win"—not even death can stop him!—and thereby the illusion of freedom itself. In essence, death and loss secure the space, that of the market, which always holds the "good location" for the comeback, hence for the production of more selection. Like terror and exclusion, death no longer marks the limit of value but has resurfaced as a ground for eternal value.

Battles, wars, limits, debates, separations, gaps, to put all of this another way, have ceased to expose subjects to the risk of death; they are instead the promise of unremitting life. If suddenly more and more wars are appearing—burger wars, media wars, culture wars, the war on drugs, the war on racism, the war on illegal immigration, the war on human rights abuses—it is because those who produce these wars *cannot die*. War is welcome, for it removes (its own) threat and terror. In the culture wars, for example, the struggles between multiculturalism and liberal/conservative humanism do not threaten the life of either discourse but, on the contrary, sustain them both, maintain or lift their values. Academic consensus depends neither on the working through of disputes, nor on the victory of a given discourse, but on the endless production and reproduction of differences and viable options. One need not resolve the conflicts within the culture wars, for conflict is itself the resolution.

One begins to perceive that Foucault's critique of the economism of power, of the understanding of marginal force as a resource for new subjectivities, is quite close to Baudrillard's duopoly, whatever his other differences with Baudrillard may be. As we have just seen, it is the *difference* between the Foucauldian sovereign (which releases power to the margin) and marginal powers—the margin/center, power/power, duopoly—which performs and reproduces the single Power.

Now, for Foucault as for Baudrillard, this collapse of difference into the new mode of reproduction signals the waning and possibly the end of the political. In fact, the citizen's drive to empower himself, and the state's effort to subdue that empowerment, is not for Foucault one politics amongst others; it is the only politics we know, perhaps politics itself. Once marginal empowerment no longer necessarily interrupts (radical-

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*its territory. The One presents itself as the stifled victim of the despotic many, while the Many presents itself as the quelled victim of a despotic one.*

9. This is why, during the question and answer session which follows the delivery of an academic paper, someone is sure to exclaim, "it seems to me you have forgotten X" or "what about X?" The value of X, much more often than not, lies not in X but in the exclusion of X, which the questioner now emancipates from the despotic paper, thereby freeing him- or herself: after listening for an hour and a half, what else would an academic demand if not his or her own subjectivity?

ism) and therefore need not be contained, and once the management (conservatism) of that margin is not the responsibility of the state, but of the global processes the state cannot dictate, then modern politics comes to a close. It goes on, of course, but only in simulated forms: as a value within the “wars”—in the Academy, “being political” is a good or bad selling point, depending on the market—that reproduce the duopoly structure.

Perhaps contemporary political theory should take its cue from Prince, and address not politics but “the thing formerly known as the political.” The question is: why would we want to? Why keep alive this “thing formerly known as politics”?

The stakes here are largely linked to the fact that no sovereign or sacred name for a political project currently exists. After '68, there is no “in the name of” to take up politics. Revolution, democracy, freedom, liberation, communism, living labor, civil society, “the left,” inclusion, Marxism, unity, sameness, tolerance, openness, consensus, difference, change, hybridity, diversity, and politics itself (to name but a few)—these terms are still functional, they work or do not work, sell or do not sell, but no such signifier can be assured *not* to repeat the very ideas or ideals whose defeat it is geared to name. Radicals can protest capitalism’s totalizing tendencies in the name of “openness” and “change.” But such cries cannot undo the fact that nothing is more open, more obscene, more hybrid, more diverse, than capitalism and the market/state duopoly themselves; and no institution is more an advocate of change, of total exchangeability of products, machines, and people, than this same market. The demand for change can be completely conservative, as can the call for greater inclusion.

Now, it is certainly true that any of these old names might return to its sacred perch. Also possible is that a new “in the name of” will emerge to guide a novel political endeavor. But what do we do while we are waiting? The answer, for Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault, and many others, is clear: we keep the project open. We show that the state/market duopoly has not yet completed its production of a total consensus, one in which all desire is stripped as it is funnelled into the seductions (“hey you!”) of the market. In other words, the closure of the political is not the absolute conclusion of politics, but like a border/end, is also an opening-to: disclosure. As to exactly *what* this (dis)closure swings onto—whether it be or not be similar to this “thing formerly known as the political”—this “what” is precisely that for which we have no name. Indeed, the moment we fill in the “what” with a new name, we create a new duopoly.

Thus we return to Foucault’s “relation of forces.” It should be transparent by now that the function of Foucault’s marginal force is to seal the limit of the Sovereign Power. If a power is a relation of forces, it is not absolute, it has limits. However, the instant this force is taken as a source of empowerment, the empowerment is nothing but the performance of its own “killer”: *the sovereign’s totality*, the Being-without-margins. Either there is force without power—in which case the limit of totality is marked—but no marginal empowerment, place, or right surfaces; or else there is marginal might and right, in which case a single Power (re)gains its sovereignty, wiping out the excluded sector the moment this sector believes it has gained agency.

Important here is the fact that marginal force without empowerment (if such a force were possible) *does* perform a key function. After all, one cannot expect individuals or groups to resist if they know beforehand that the market has already completed itself, that all interventions have been accounted for in advance by the duopoly: if they are sure that “it’s all the same, if you can’t beat ’em, you might as well join ’em.” To index the limit of this sort of account is to publicize the fact that something could be done, since the “everything” itself is not yet done. It is to show that closure is also an opening toward something other, toward a *plus*. Such a public emblem, to be sure, does not supply a “what to do”; it does not offer a political direction. It is not “political” in these

senses. Rather, it is the condition—the desire for intervention—of politics' being at all: of the staying-open, the dis-closure of that project. Politics, in other words, is not reducible to "empowerment," as critics such as Butler, and so many others, suggest. Indeed, empowerment without its limit—desire, force—is precisely the end of the political: pure production and publicity, absolute marketability.

Herein lies, at least "ideally," the task of performance for Foucault. Performance performs finitude and death, exposes the limit of Power, and thus induces a collective desire: for more performances/forces which, opening to the border or relationality, would disclose this limit, keep the door from shutting. Such performances are not preparations for a politics to come. They are all that is left of politics, the only conceivable praxis remaining. Indeed, this desire we are discussing, this condition of the politics' remaining open, is not a given (the duopoly threatens to obliterate it). It is made, and the moment it stops being made, it vanishes: the gate slams as the end ceases to expose.

But here we confront the fix. In fact, by a logical, philosophical, and ontological necessity (I cannot outline that necessity here), there is no marginal force which is not already empowerment, just as there is no mimesis (as the index of finitude) which is not a reflection (of transcendence), no mark that is not a signifier or label, no artwork that is not also a publication or publicity, and no performance that is not also a reproduction, a spectacle, an imitation of norms. Every performance of the limit is, at least in part, a mirror of the sovereign subject without limits. Or to put this in very different terms: a performance can be sexy, but it cannot perform sex (qua exposure) for it cannot perform the limit of itself.

Discourses that, via terms such as "agent," advocate self-empowerment (individual or collective) while claiming to "deconstruct" the transcendental subject offer an attractive product (via a subject/agent duopoly) but miss the hard facts of the matter: empowerment is the empowerment of a subject.<sup>10</sup> The subject, indeed, is at once a power that transcends its limit and relations, and a relation that stamps the limit of that transcendence. It is impossible not to be both at once. But at the same time, it is impossible to "opt" simultaneously for the two. Either I empower myself, a certain name, or a group, in which case I fight off my relationality in the name of my individuality (single or collective), at the same reproducing the state of ideology; or I open to the other, to contamination, and to change, also possibly reproducing the dominant ideology. Neither of these options *is* (necessarily) political. Neither *is* (necessarily) epistemologically rigorous. At times I must fight off change, take a position, hold a ground, *refuse to include*, and speak in the name of a single, fallen signifier which I hoist up to the status of the sacred. At other times, I must open my position to the *plus*, to the other, so as to become other, to open to a not-yet-given name. Politics lies neither in the ground of subjectivity nor in the "groundlessness" or "contingency" of relationality or limits. It rests in the situational "in(a)decision" between groundedness and groundlessness, closure and openness, exclusion and inclusion, essence and contingency.

The waning of politics means, then, that there is no concept of the good or the right which would tell me in advance, whatever my convictions, the correct direction to turn: ever. Yet in all circumstances, I must turn, decide, and I must do so on good grounds, "in the name of" a slain signifier that I select and/or construct (if space permitted, I would show that an ungrounded decision, decision without an "in the name of," is logically impossible, even if that name is "groundlessness" itself), for I cannot *not* do so: to be a subject is to be exposed to this "in(a)decision."

The possibility that I *must* choose from these unsavory selections may seem paralyzing. In actuality, it is the last hope for this "thing formerly known as the political."

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10. My reading of interpellation hopefully showed that the supposed difference between the "transcendental subject" and the "socially constructed" agent is thoroughly imaginary.

First of all, the fact that I *must* choose, that I cannot *not* do so, for I am already thrust into a decisive circumstance, means that choice is not a choice. It is a demand. The market/state duopoly wants people to believe that variety, diversity, and participation are empowerment and self-determination. If a discourse or practice can show that choice is not liberty but a *must* and, therefore, that politics is not about “getting in” but about the responsibilities or obligations of *being in* (or out)—if it can disclose that, today, choice is no choice—then this discourse/act has at least begun to mark the limit of the market’s seduction, rendering the political desire discussed above possible.

This “in(a)decision” also addresses Baudrillard’s insistence that death and difference, the separation- or relation-between, have been thoroughly incorporated into the reproduction of the Same. One of the greatest testimonies to this thesis, I should add as an aside, is the way both the US and post-dictatorship states (in Latin America, for example) publicize foreign or past human rights violations in order to sell the “openness” of the free market or neoliberal state: terror is a source of value. But if praxis and thought can reveal that there is no finitude which does not already disavow finitude, hence affirm the sovereign individual—no mark of death which is not already a (self-)representation transcending death—it does manage to mark this end: the finitude of finitude. Finitude (like difference) cannot account for the fact that transcendence and sameness are its condition of possibility.

*Différance*, groundlessness, undecidability (so close to Descartes’s hyperbolic doubt), contingency, the death of the subject—none of these can stand as the Last Great Signifier, the Signifier of the End, since every Signifier is the disavowal of the End. We must keep naming if we are to continue acting; yet no name for “the times,” which is the time of closure, exists. With its Heideggerian tone, finitude is perhaps the final master discourse of the West. Once we index the fact that this term cannot designate the closure/dis-closure of metaphysics/the political, cannot denote “finitude” itself, we are left without any master words or foundations—not even groundlessness will do—but also without directions or laws. The only remaining praxis is the “in(a)decision” between the two: between the nihilism of the state or the One (the fixed signified), which imposes arbitrary decrees, sets up dictatorial and exclusionary grounds; and that of the market (the infinite play of the signifier), which invites ungrounded cuts and thoroughly capricious, unjustified inclusions and participation. The being-human has been shoved into the uninhabitable interstice between two nihilisms: ethics and politics are the decision for the one or the other, a decision that, at the border-between, neither nihilism can dictate, and that thereby marks the limit of both, of nihilism itself.

Butler’s strength lies in her deployment of the terms of queer theory as a means to articulate the relation, hence the limit, of a series of binaries that have made claims on the all—gender/sex, woman/man, woman/feminine, gay/straight, constructionism/essentialism, subject/object, law/lawlessness, subversion/imitation—thus opening certain discourses to their *plus*, to more. In the wake of *Gender Trouble*, we might reword these divisions as gay(queer)straight, subversion(performance)imitation, subject(agent)object, law(interpellation)lawlessness.

But the moment “queer” enters into circulation, it itself forms part of a binary structure: queer/straight, performance/reproduction, agent/subject, construction/essence, power/desire. Rescuing a series of signifiers whose “subversive” value is grounded in their previous exclusion or abjection, Butler generates a series of new duopolies that serve to reproduce themselves and to empower certain signifiers—in queer theory, power is hotter than desire, agency hotter than subjectivity, Foucault hotter than Lacan or Derrida, politics hotter than psychoanalysis, and so forth—and the people who adopt them. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this empowerment, marketing, or publicity; as I have been trying to stress, such publicity is the condition of any contemporary interven-

tion. However, in coming “out,” queerness is exposed. Thus, either it opens itself to its limits, dies/expires into something other, or fights off its *plus* in the name of a queer homogeneity which it deems worthy of preservation; or else it rots endlessly into the duopoly that keeps it fresh and successful.

If I have been trying to show that sex is the limit of Butler’s sex, language the limit of her (de)constructionism, desire the limit of her power, it is not because her work is unimportant but because Butler is not meeting her obligations as one of the leading advocates of queer theory: to work her master concepts to their end, toward their closure, and toward the closure of all closure, the only site left where there is any thinking and/or acting to do. Queer theory is not Butler’s invention or fault; it is her responsibility. If she has profited from the theory, all the more power to her; but she, she herself, is answerable for those proceeds, and no one can respond to this charge in her stead. In sum, Butler’s most pressing intellectual and political demand is the one her writings struggle to erase from the scene: to account for the sex to which she is indebted, in other words, to expose her theory to death, for it will not die by itself, without a marker.

Of course, Butler is absolutely right in suggesting, intentionally or otherwise, that there is no sex without the drive for total empowerment. This is why Bersani’s concluding demand for ascesis [“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 221], for a discipline of sexuality and homosexuality which would open itself to the death of the subject, the death-drive, and relationality is caught in a logical impossibility. In the first place, the subject’s effort to fight off the desire to annihilate the other is already the affirmation of the master subject, the subject who masters his desire. In willing his death or openness, the subject disavows both. And secondly, there is no death-drive (no sex) without the lust for immortality, just as there is no desire without the will-to-power. You cannot have the one without the other, but you cannot have both, either: that is why the “in(a)decision” of freedom (as well as sex and communication) is so difficult, and why for sexual politics the times are rock hard.

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