

Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification

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Judith Butler is arguably one of the world's most influential and innovative scholars dealing with questions of difference, identity, and the role of rhetoric in subject formation. In fact, much of Butler's *oeuvre* in one way or another concerns the workings of rhetoric, the workings of language. For example, she has struggled all her life against the notion that intellectuals should strive in their scholarship to be "transparent" or "clear" because she believes such an ideal serves to shut down thought. She reminds us in the interview below that rigorous intellectual work is necessarily extremely hard labor. Becoming a critical intellectual involves "working hard on difficult texts," and it entails "undergoing something painful and difficult: an estrangement from what is most familiar." It is precisely because intellectual work is so demanding, so painful, that "not everybody wants to undergo it." Perhaps the very pain of intellectual work is one cause of the upsurge of anti-intellectualism that the academy is currently experiencing. Butler wonders whether there is "guilt" about being an intellectual because we simply don't know "what effects, if any, the intellectual (especially the intellectual in the humanities) can have on the larger social world."

Butler goes on to say that the present anti-intellectualism is in part structural, in that people in the humanities are no longer certain that they are central to the academy; they are "derided" by people outside of the humanities, and they are unable to articulate how their scholarship can have "concrete effects" both in the lives of their students and in the world in general. This anxiety often has disturbing consequences: "Those intellectuals who speak in a rarified way are being scapegoated, are being purged, are being denounced precisely because they represent a certain anxiety about everyone's effect—that is, what effect are *any* of us having, and what effect *can* we have?" While she agrees that those intellectuals who have a sense of social responsibility should be able to "shift

registers,” to work at various levels, and to communicate in various ways to various audiences, this does not mean that we should succumb to the drive toward transparency.

In fact, Butler is fascinated by the connection between difficult language and the opening up of new ways of understanding the world. She explains that having been formally trained in continental philosophy meant that she spent a considerable amount of time reading Hegel and Heidegger, and in both philosophers the difficulty of the language was in some ways “essential to the philosophical views that were being expressed.” As a young college student, Butler was especially influenced by Heidegger’s language, “his neologisms and his coinages.” In Heidegger she found a “profound effort” to call into question “ordinary language and the ways in which we structure the world on its basis, an analysis of the kinds of occlusions or concealments that take place when we take ordinary language to be a true indicator of reality as it is and as it must be.” Thus, in her formative years as an intellectual, she was “very much seduced” by the notion that “some newness of the world was going to be opened up through messing with grammar as it has been received.” Such linguistic experimentation is, in Butler’s view, important to critical thinking and to discovering new ways of conceiving the world. For Butler, being a critical intellectual means constantly interrogating our assumptions, continually calling things into question, not necessarily to do away with what is being questioned but, rather, to discover, for example, how terms might assume new meanings in new contexts. Such a stance means learning to “live in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly.” That is, true critical thinking is always accompanied by a certain unease: “anxiety accompanies something like the witnessing of new possibilities.”

Given her faith in the generative capacity of linguistic experimentation, Butler is dismayed by the increased calls for scholarly work to be “accessible,” to appeal to “common sense” through a “common language,” and to be written within the terms of an “already accepted grammar”: “What concerns me is that the critical relation to ordinary grammar has been lost in this call for radical accessibility. It’s not that I’m in favor of difficulty for difficulty’s sake; it’s that I think there is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking.” Butler points out that accessible meaning, common sense, and the public sphere are all “fictions” that deceive us into believing that we all inhabit “the same linguistic world.” She finds it curious indeed that anyone would make such appeals at the beginning of the twenty-first century, given our

“postmodern condition,” given what we now know about language thanks to poststructuralist thinkers, and given the fact that we live at a time when there’s “enormous conflict at the level of language.” In fact, she comments that it is our social responsibility to accept the fact that “there is *no* common language anymore.” This fact, says Butler, is “one of the most profound pedagogical problems of our time, if not one of the most profound political problems of our time.”

Another issue of great importance to Butler is the question of universality, especially as it pertains to gender—to naming someone “man” or “woman.” She believes that there is no critical practice that can circumvent the categorical violence of naming “women” or “men.” There is, instead, a “necessary violence” that must accompany the act of naming. Even though such names, such categories, are “false,” we have no choice but to use them. Butler retreats from her staunch opposition to all forms of universality, as outlined in *Gender Trouble*, and now believes that there are ways of “seeking recourse to universality that are quite important and necessary.” She admits that in *Gender Trouble* she could only see the “violent and exclusionary” character of universality, and so she was “extremely skeptical” of claims to universality: “The claim to universality seemed to me to be by definition totalizing. But I have become more convinced in recent years that there is an open-ended sense to universality that can be affirmed.” Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Butler now embraces a notion of contingent universality. She sees universality as a discourse that is perpetually driven into crisis by the foreclosures that it makes. She explains that “a universality that is brought into crisis again and again by what is outside of itself is an open-ended one. Universality, in that sense, would not be violent or totalizing; it would be an open-ended process, and the task of politics would be to keep it open, to keep it as a contested site of persistent crisis and not to let it be settled.”

Butler expresses surprise that so many readers of *Gender Trouble* understood her notion of “performativity” to be nothing more than “performance.” Some readers thought that Butler was simply advocating a version of radical free agency in relation to gender: “Oh, let’s get up and put on a new gender today.” They failed to see that she was theorizing something much deeper about the workings of gender. Butler contends that the performance of a gender is compelled by norms that none of us choose. We work within the norms that constitute us as individuals. These norms are the condition of our agency, but they also limit our agency. So, while there is an aspect of performance at play, this does not mean “that

the meaning of the performance is established by the intention of the actor—hardly. What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation.”

As an outspoken leader and activist in the gay and lesbian community, Butler worries that many mainstream gay organizations have been co-opted by an “intensely bourgeois politics” and as a result are becoming too identity based. The emphasis on “coming out” has constituted this one moment as the “rendering visible” of one’s identity. Thus, real political action is reduced to appeals to include gay identities within the smorgasbord of American pluralism. She sees these developments as “terribly, terribly sad”: “It seems to me that in the zeal to achieve legal redress within existing legal terms, we as a movement have actually failed to take stock of who we are as a community and who we want to represent and how.” Butler rejects identity politics, and that is why she is drawn to Gayle Rubin’s concept of “sexual minorities.” She believes that the struggle is not specifically for gays, lesbians, or the transgendered; it’s for all those who are “not immediately captured or legitimated by the available norms and who live with the threat of violence or the threat of unemployment or the threat of dispossession of some kind by virtue of their aberrant relation to the norm.”

Butler goes on to draw connections between the social taboo against homosexuality and the taboo against miscegenation—two areas that typically are theorized separately. She points out, for example, that the incest taboo not only works to solidify the institution of gender as masculine and feminine, but it also functions to establish heterosexuality as a “necessary social form.” Similarly, the social prohibition against miscegenation works to ensure that “families remain racially discrete and that gender mixing does not take place as a result of reproduction.” These prohibitions are based on deep-seated fears: “It’s not just that gay people are going to adopt and that you’ll get something like the dislocation of heterosexuality from its primary place, but that the family itself may end up not transmitting culture as we know it. It may end up transmitting a *new* culture or cultural hybridity.” She argues that it is very important that we analyze how society’s mandating of heterosexual marriage is linked with notions of cultural transmission and racial purity.

Whether the topic is the role of passion and affective states in the formation of political agency, why liberation isn’t the way to think radical social change, why a theory of “conscience” is necessary to explain subject formation, or the role of “iterability” and “radical resignification” in hate speech, Judith Butler brings to the analysis her usual incisiveness

and perspicacity. Even in the limited context of a scholarly interview, she demonstrates her belief that intellectual work is painful but that, in the end, the pain pays dividends. About her own scholarship, Butler comments, “I think that I probably produce a certain amount of anxiety, or what Foucault calls the politics of discomfort, and I don’t do that just to be annoying. For me, there’s more hope in the world when we can question what is taken for granted.”

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Q. Recently, *Philosophy and Literature* awarded you a prize for “bad writing.” Many of your readers, however, find your prose to be richly textured and carefully crafted. Do you think consciously about the problems of writing as you are composing? Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. I think that in general one thinks consciously about what one is composing but that what one is composing also happens in a way that exceeds one’s own consciousness of what one does. So, for example, after I finish writing something I can look back and see that I have made implicit citations to other styles of writing without knowing that that’s what I have done, or that I’ve tried to achieve something by pushing grammar in certain ways because what I was trying to think about couldn’t quite be contained within the grammar that was available to me at the time. There’s a *certain* level of consciousness to my writing process. I write and edit as I go along, and I’m not even sure one can, strictly speaking, distinguish between writing and editing. I know that people say that writing comes first and then editing comes later, but I think that’s actually not true. It may actually be the reverse that’s true: one edits in order to write.

I was trained in continental philosophy, and that meant that I spent a considerable amount of time reading Hegel and took numerous seminars on Heidegger; the difficulty of the language was in some ways essential to the philosophical views that were being expressed. For instance, when Hegel talks about the “speculative sentence,” he is trying to work against the propositional form as it’s been received. When he says, “The subject is spirit,” the first inclination, the one that received grammar in some sense prepares us for, is to establish “the subject” as the subject of the sentence, and then “spirit” becomes one way of determining or qualifying that subject. But, of course, what he

wants us to be able to do is to reverse that sentence, to recognize something about how the “is” functions: it doesn’t just point linearly in one direction; rather, it points in both directions at once. He wants us to be able to experience the simultaneity of that sentence as it functions in its double directionality. Now that’s a very hard thing to do given how profoundly inclined we are by what Nietzsche called the “seductions of grammar” to read in a linear way. Reading Heidegger as a young person and trying to figure out what it is he was trying to do with his neologisms and his coinages also influenced me. Some people, such as Bourdieu, have dismissed it completely, but I think there was and remains a rather profound effort there to call into question ordinary language and the ways in which we structure the world on its basis, an analysis of the kinds of occlusions or concealments that take place when we take ordinary language to be a true indicator of reality as it is and as it must be.

So, submitting myself to what were profound grammatical challenges—challenges to grammar, challenges to ordinary language—was part of my own formation, and it was very exhilarating. I would even say that such texts were in a way the high modernism of the continental philosophical tradition, in that you have a similar experience as if you were to pick up the works of Mallarmé, or Celan, or even Proust: there are times when you think, “My God, what’s happened to the sentence? Where’s the sentence?” There’s something in the life of the sentence that’s become new or odd or estranging in some fundamental way—and I went for that. I was very much seduced by what I think was a high modernist notion that some newness of the world was going to be opened up through messing with grammar as it has been received. What concerns me is that this impulse—which I consider to be important to critical thinking and to an openness to what is new—has been disparaged by those who believe that we have a certain responsibility to write not only in an accessible way, but within the terms of already accepted grammar. What concerns me is that the critical relation to ordinary grammar has been lost in this call for radical accessibility. It’s not that I’m in favor of difficulty for difficulty’s sake; it’s that I think there is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking—indeed, about what a person is, what a subject is, what gender is, what sexuality is, what politics can be—and that I’m not sure we’re going to be able to struggle effectively against those constraints or work within them in a productive way unless we see the ways in which grammar is both producing and

constraining our sense of what the world is.

- Q. That reminds us of your recent piece in the *New York Times*, in which you explain the role of the contemporary tradition of critical theory, pointing out that “difficult language can change a tough world.” You argue that language that challenges common sense can “help point the way to a more socially just world.” Yet, many commentators, both within the academy and in the public sector, have taken aim at academic discourse in general, particularly that discourse (as you point out) that focuses on topics such as sexuality, race, nationalism, and the workings of capitalism. What do you believe is really at stake in these criticisms? Is this debate really about “good writing”?
- A. No, I don’t believe it’s a debate about good writing. Sure, there is a problem when writing in the academy becomes so rarefied or so specialized that it speaks only to an in-crowd or to a group of people who are initiated into the protocols of the discourse. I’ve certainly seen that. There were times when deconstructive literary criticism became so internal to itself that unless you were trained in the exact same way and had read all the same texts and knew all the same allusions and understood all the same rhetorical gestures it was going to be a very odd and strange and alienating enterprise. I understand that. I believe it is important that intellectuals with a sense of social responsibility be able to shift registers and to work at various levels, to communicate what they’re communicating in various ways. I think I probably do that, both in my writing and in my teaching, but it’s always possible to seize upon the more specialized moments of my writing and to say that it is somehow exemplary—and that is unfair.

I’m interested in why there is an upsurge of anti-intellectualism in the academy right now. Is there guilt about being an intellectual? Is there guilt about being an intellectual because we don’t know what effects, if any, the intellectual (especially the intellectual in the humanities) can have on the larger social world? There are some people on the left in the academy who believe that all you have to do is make certain verbal gestures and be publicly identified with certain kinds of verbal gestures in order to qualify as a politically minded intellectual. That is, you don’t actually work in labor politics or give time to gay and lesbian activism or any of the rest; you simply identify publicly with certain stands. But even this is a haunted and guilty moment because the intellectual who believes that political satisfaction is to be gained through the public performance of certain kinds of verbal gestures is still not sure what effect that has. One gets to know in effect that one

is being identified with certain positions, and so one gets *positioned*, you might say, within the academic landscape as a “leftist,” as a “progressive,” or as something else. Part of it is a structural problem in that people in the humanities no longer know whether they’re central to the academy; they know that they’re derided by the outside, and they don’t know how to articulate how their work can have concrete effects on the lives of the students and the world in which they live. And there’s a certain scapegoating occurring. Those intellectuals who speak in a rarefied way are being scapegoated, are being purged, are being denounced precisely because they represent a certain anxiety about everyone’s effect—that is, what effect are *any* of us having, and what effect *can* we have? So, there might be an identification and a projection occurring: the persons who are being scapegoated probably remind the scapegoaters too much of their own dilemma.

It’s unfortunate because I believe it has to be the case (certainly since Marx it *has* been the case) that becoming a critical intellectual involves working hard on difficult texts. Capitalism is itself a difficult text. From Marx through Adorno, we learned that capitalism is an extremely difficult text: it does not show itself as transparent; it gives itself in enigmatic ways; it calls for interpretive hermeneutic effort. There is no question about it. We think things are the way they must be because they’ve become naturalized. The life of the commodity structures our world in ways that we take for granted. And what was Marx’s point? Precisely to make the taken-for-granted world seem spectral, strange. And how does that work? It only works by taking received opinion and received *doxa* and really working through it. It means undergoing something painful and difficult: an estrangement from what is most familiar. Adorno understood this. In *Minima Moralia* he talks about the painfulness of passing through difficult language but how it is absolutely essential to developing a critical attitude toward the constituted social world if we’re not to take the constituted social world—that is to say the social world—as it is given, as it is rendered not only *familiar* but *natural* for us. That’s a painful process, and not everybody wants to undergo it.

It may well be that we want to construct a fiction called “the public sphere,” or a fiction called “common sense,” or a fiction called “accessible meaning” that would allow us to think and feel for a moment as if we all inhabit the same linguistic world. What does it mean to dream of a common sense? What does it mean to want that today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when there’s

enormous conflict at the level of language? When Serbian and Croatian are now claiming they are separate languages? When speaking even in a Berkeley classroom means speaking across inflection, across dialect, across genres of academic writing to students for whom English is very often a second language? Every classroom I’ve ever been in is a hermeneutic problem. It’s not as if there’s a “common” language. I suppose if I were to speak in the language of the television commercial, I might get a kind of uniform recognition—at least for a brief moment—but I’m not going to be able to presuppose a common language in my classroom. I was teaching Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* to a lecture course in modern rhetorical theory—it’s a beautiful essay, very paradoxical, very complicated—and at one point Rousseau takes issue with the common conception of what onomatopoesis means. He says that you think that it is an instance in which the word we use in language approximates the sound that we hear in the world. So, for instance, the word *meow* actually sounds very much like the noise that the cat makes. We assume that language in some sense represents a pre-linguistic sound and that it is fully mimetic at that moment, that it’s fully representative, that it’s as close to a certain kind of mimetic proximity as one can get between language and thing. But, he says, it’s not true. Cats say various things (or speak various ways or make various sounds) in various languages, and it’s more the case that the word we have for the sound prepares us to hear the sound in a certain way. This is a very Wittgensteinian point, really—a pre- or proto-Wittgensteinian point.

So, I looked up at my classroom of eighty students and asked, “How many of you speak another language besides English?” Probably fifty-five of them raised their hands. And I asked, “Okay, what languages do you speak?” We went around the room, and there were probably sixteen languages represented in the class: Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Urdu, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and more. Then I asked, “What do cats say in your languages?” And we got sixteen *different* sounds, all of which claimed to be onomatopoeic. And the assumption in every single language was that *this* is what cats truly sound like. So the point was made, and it was fabulous. Cats say, “mah.” Cats say, “mew.” They say, “eee.” Cats say lots of things. You have no idea what they say. Now, this was not just a lesson about how Rousseau was right; it was a lesson about multilingualism in the classroom. What does it mean to say that there is *a* language that is common, that everyone understands, and that it is somehow our social responsibility to speak? It seems to me

that our social responsibility is to become attuned to the fact that there is *no* common language anymore. Or if there is a common language, it is the language of a commercialism that seeks to extend the hegemony of commercial American English, and to do it in a way that violently effaces the problem of multilingualism. This is one of the most profound pedagogical problems of our time, if not one of the most profound political problems of our time.

Q. In *Bodies that Matter* you write, “To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims.” This statement seems to characterize your critical practice in general. Do you agree?

A. Yes, I do agree. That was an important thing to say. People are very much afraid of criticism; they think criticism is destructive. I wonder, though, whether it’s not time to rethink what we mean by critique and the tradition of critique that was established really with Kant and that goes through critical theory and that emerges quite interestingly in Foucault (I think his short piece, “What is Critique?” is generally under-read) and in Walter Benjamin when he writes about the critique of violence, for instance. That sense of critique has to be dissociated from a sense of destruction or pure negation. What it’s really about is opening up the possibility of questioning what our assumptions are and somehow encouraging us to live in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly. Of course, it’s not for the sake of anxiety that one should do it (I don’t think one should do anything for the sake of anxiety), but it’s because anxiety accompanies something like the witnessing of new possibilities. It is important to call things into question. That does not mean one does away with them; it just means that one asks important questions: “What purposes have they served? What purposes can they serve? How can this term be mobilized beyond its established context to assume new meanings in new contexts?” The qualification I would add now, seven years later, is that although one can very often take a term like “masculine” and dislodge it from its metaphysical moorings—one can say, for example, that “masculine” does not necessarily apply exclusively to ostensibly anatomically male bodies and that it can function in another way, like, let’s say, in the way that Judith Halberstam talks about “female masculinities”—it is important to question what of the prior context is brought forward as a kind

of residue or trace. It is also important to question what new ontological effects the term can achieve, because to liberate it from its prior moorings in an established ontology is not to say that it will not acquire a new one.

Spivak understood this when she reneged on her notion of “strategic essentialism.” She at first thought she’d be able to use a term like “Third-World woman” and just have it be strategic rather than metaphysically grounded. It didn’t have to describe her (or anyone else) fully or exhaustively; it could be relieved of its descriptive function. But, of course, it *does* begin to describe, because the author who strategically intends it as “X, Y, or Z” has also to recognize that the semantic life of the term will exceed the intention of the strategist and that as it travels through discourse, it can take on new ontological meanings and become established in ways that one never intended. So, I guess I would be a little less optimistic about the possibility of a radical unmooring than I was in 1993.

Q. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, you try to open a space for agency that avoids the liberal humanist concept of self and that finds in subordination and subjection the very conditions for agency. Would you explain this apparent paradox for readers not yet familiar with your work?

A. Much of the poststructuralist writing that came into this country in the 1970s and 1980s had a very strong antihumanist or posthumanist bent, and it was particularly interesting to see how the notions of the self that for the most part have been popular in the American philosophical tradition are ones that assume an agency to the self and that resonate strongly with forms of American individualism and notions of self-making. When Lacan came along, for instance, and said that the subject is produced on the condition of a foreclosure, he meant, quite clearly, that there would always be a lack of self-understanding for any subject; that there would be no way to recover one’s origins or to understand oneself fully; that one would be, to the extent that one is a subject, always at a distance from oneself, from one’s origin, from one’s history; that some part of that origin, some part of that history, some part of that sexuality would always be at a radical distance. And it would have to be, because the foreclosure of the past, and the foreclosure of whatever we’re talking about when we talk about what is prior to foreclosure, is the condition of the formation of the subject itself. So, I come into being on the condition that I am radically unknowing about my origins, and that unknowingness is the condition of my coming into being—and it afflicts me. And if I seek to undo that, I also lose myself

as a subject; I become undone, and I become psychotic as a result.

A formulation like that surely limits our sense of self-knowing, and it also means that when we do things or when we act intentionally, we are always in some sense motivated by an unconscious that is not fully available to us. I can say, “I will this; I do this; I want this,” but it may be that the effects of my doing are quite different from what I intend, and it’s at that moment that I realize that I am also driven by something that is prior to and separate from this conscious and intentional “I.” In some ways, that was great for a lot of people because they thought, “Oh, look, we no longer have the mastery of the ego; we no longer believe that the self is supreme or sovereign. The self is in its origin split. The self is always to some extent unknowing. Its action is always governed by aims that exceed its intentions.” So there seemed to be an important limiting of the notion of the ego, the notion of individualism, the notion of a subject who was master of his—usually his—destiny. And instead we started to see that the subject might be subject to things other than itself: to drives, to an unconscious, to effects of a language. The latter was very important to Lacan: the subject is born into a network of language and uses language but is also used *by* it; it speaks language, but language speaks it. Lacanian thought involved a kind of humility and de-centering of the subject that many people prized because it seemed also to release the subject from the hold of its own mastery and to give it over to a world of desire and language that was bigger than itself. It gets connected to others in a very profound way through that de-centering.

Of course, the critique of this notion emerged on political grounds, and it questioned whether we haven’t undone agency altogether. Can I ever say that I will do *X* and *Y* and truly do them and keep my word and be effective in the world and have my signature attached to my deed? I think that I have always been a little bit caught between an American political context and a French intellectual one, and I’ve sought to negotiate the relation between them. I would oppose the notion that my agency is nothing but a mockery of agency. I don’t go that far. And I also don’t think that the foreclosures that produce the subject are fixed in time in the way that most Lacanians do. They really understand foreclosure as a kind of founding moment. My sense is that it is always the case that the subject is produced through certain kinds of foreclosure—certain things become impossible for it; certain things become irrecoverable—and that this makes for the possibility of a temporarily coherent subject who can act. But I also want to say that its

action can very often take up the foreclosure itself; it can renew the meaning and the effect of foreclosure. For instance, many people are inaugurated as subjects through the foreclosure of homosexuality; when homosexuality returns as a possibility, it returns precisely as the possibility of the unraveling of the subject itself: “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.” 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.” We see forms of segregation and phobic forms of organizing social reality that keep the fiction of those subjects intact.

Now, 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. What have I done? Well, I’ve taken the psychoanalytic notion of foreclosure, and I’ve made it specifically social. Also, instead of seeing that notion as a founding act, I see it as a temporally renewable structure—and as temporally renewable, subject to a logic of iteration, which produces the possibility of its alteration. So, I both render social and temporalize the Lacanian doctrine of foreclosure in a way that most Lacanians don’t like—not all, but most. I am also trying to say that while we are constituted socially in limited ways and through certain kinds of limitations, exclusions and foreclosures, we are not constituted for all time in that way; 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.

So, in answer to the question “How is it that subordination and subjection are the very conditions for agency?” the short answer is that I am clearly born into a world in which certain limitations become the possibility of my subjecthood, but those limitations are not there as structurally static features of my self. They are subject to a renewal, and I perform (mainly unconsciously or implicitly) that renewal in the repeated acts of my person. Even though my agency is conditioned by those limitations, my agency can also thematize and alter those limitations to some degree. This doesn’t mean that I will get over limitation—there is always a limitation; there is always going to be a foreclosure of some kind or another—but I think that the whole scene has to be

understood as more dynamic than it generally is.

Q. You note that discussions of subject formation resonate with “a larger cultural and political predicament, namely, how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes. Often this postliberatory insight has led to the conclusion that all agency here meets its impasse.” Your notion of the postliberatory will be of special interest to scholars in rhetoric and composition, in that the literature is saturated with a discourse of “resistance,” “liberatory learning,” and “critical consciousness.” Is your theory of the necessary relation between subjection and subject formation implied in what you mean by the postliberatory?

A. First, let’s make a distinction between a certain conception of liberation and other conceptions of radical change or critical alteration. I suppose that I follow Foucault to a certain degree here in wondering whether *liberation* as a term promises us a radical freedom from constraint that in the end is impossible and that will just redeliver us to new constraints and plunge us into forms of political cynicism. So, if liberation isn’t the way to think radical social change, what is? Radical social change has to be understood in light of the fact that we are radically constituted culturally, and as we approach the problem of what to change and how to change, we are already within the confines of a language, a discourse, and an institutional apparatus that will orchestrate for us what will or will not be deemed possible. Now, there are some hard-core structuralists, even structuralist Marxists, who would say that anything we seek to change within the contemporary order will simply augment the power of the order and that we’re co-opted and contained in advance. Jameson sometimes falls into that mode. It’s as if one says, “You think *that’s* subversion, and you think *that’s* criticism? Actually, it’s nothing other than an extension of an existing power regime—end of story.” Now, what I want to be able to say is, “Sure, we *are* extending the contemporary power regime by our ostensible subversion, but there’s extending the power regime and there’s extending the power regime.” Extending it does not mean extending it always in the same form; it could mean reiterating it in new forms. Extending is not a mechanical process. We need to understand power as something that produces unanticipated effects, that we can certainly extend power but that we can extend it into an unknown future.

I’ve been working on *Antigone* in the last couple of years, and I’ve been particularly interested in the fact that Antigone is so often

understood as a completely oppositional figure. Most of the critical literature reads the play in one way: there’s Creon who represents the State and Antigone who represents resistance, individualism, and kinship. But if you read the play carefully, you see that time and again her language is actually mirroring *his* and that she is more like *him* than she is like any other character in the play. She tries to mirror his speech acts, and she in some sense is involved in what I would understand to be a mimetic practice, a critical mimesis in relation to his discourse. Now, you could answer despairingly and just say, “Oh, I see, so Antigone is nothing more than Creon or an example of Creon’s power.” But I think that characterization would be false. She’s exploiting the language of sovereignty in order to produce a new public sphere for a woman’s voice—a sphere that doesn’t actually exist at that time. The citation of power that she performs is a citation that, yes, is mired in established power—it’s mired in the conventions of established power—but it also uses that citation in order to produce the possibility of a political speech act for a woman in the name of her desire that is radically delegitimated by the State itself. She produces, one might say, a new basis for legitimating speech precisely through deterritorializing or citing the norms of power in a radically new context. She’s not free of power, and she’s not even free of traditional forms of power, but in the mode of citation she does produce a radical crisis for established power. This seems to me to be an example of political insurrection that is based on a citation of existing norms and that also produces something new. I don’t call it “liberation.” It’s a “critical subversion,” a “radical resignification.” It does not engage the fantasy of transcending power altogether, although it does work within the hope and the practice of replaying power, of restaging it again and again in new and productive ways.

Q. In *Gender Trouble*, you write that “it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead, we ought to ask what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity?” This critique is one that you yourself initiated with the publication of *Gender Trouble*. Do you believe that feminist theorists have moved in that direction? Do we now have a more nuanced understanding of identity?

A. Yes, we do, and I’m not sure everybody’s happy about that. (First, it’s important to note that Denise Riley’s *Am I That Name?* predated *Gender Trouble*, and it made the argument in a way that I definitely

profited from.) Yes, at some point feminist theory probably agreed that it was no longer useful to come up with an essentialist description of what women are, if “essentialism” means a category that adequately describes the range of women’s experience and that attempts to unify that experience in some way. There have been some innovative efforts to try to rethink what essentialism is if it is no longer making the claim to be descriptive. Strategic essentialism was one way to do that. And many scholars who drew on the work of Luce Irigaray sought to rethink what essentialism is (often within the pages of the journal *differences*) in order to hold out some possibility for talking about feminine specificity without basing it on a descriptive claim, or a denial of women’s complexity, or anything of the sort. But I’m not sure these attempts got very far. They certainly produced some interesting work, and I learned from it. But my argument was made in a theoretical mode in relationship to feminism and the emerging field of queer theory. At the same time, there were other people who were making the argument against the unified subject of feminism on very different grounds. Certainly, bell hooks made the argument in *Ain’t I a Woman*. Patricia Hill Collins made it in a different way. Kimberlé Crenshaw made it with her notion of “intersectionality”—the feminine subject must always be complicated. Spivak made it quite radically. So, the argument was made from different quarters at different times. I don’t think *Gender Trouble* is solely responsible, but it is one moment in that movement.

As to the question of whether we now have a more nuanced understanding of identity, there’s a lot of interesting psychoanalytic work that has complicated our understanding of identification and desire. For example, Jessica Benjamin has only become more interesting with the years. Her most recent work opens up very interesting questions about how multiple identifications coexist within a child, how the pre-Oedipal domain is an extremely important one, and how the task of the adult is to somehow recapture or become attuned anew to pre-Oedipality. That’s very interesting, and she’s done great clinical work on it—and scholarly work as well. Feminist film theory, too, has become more complicated in recent years. Film critics don’t always assume that the woman’s gaze is heterosexual, or that it’s looking at the man, or that it’s identifying with the feminine person (it could be identifying with Cary Grant). There’s been a lot of theoretical complication that has produced a field of gender studies that is sometimes distinct from feminism precisely because of this complication. It’s not necessarily woman centered because it doesn’t know what a “woman”

is or must be. I know that this produces tensions within the academy, but I believe that in part it’s a good sign—it’s a sign of a certain kind of opening up.

Q. Well, let us follow up on this point. You comment that to understand the concept “women” as “a permanent site of contest, or as a feminist site of agonistic struggle, is to presume that there can be no closure on the category and that, for politically significant reasons, there ought never to be. That the category can never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy.” Yet, as you point out, many kinds of feminism have been thoroughly committed to the category “women.” What critical practices can be used to circumvent the categorical violence of naming “women” or “men”?

A. There is no circumventing the categorical violence of naming “women” or “men.” Wittig, in her early years, wanted us not to use these terms anymore. She even wanted to change hospital practices, questioning why it is necessary to name a child a “boy” or a “girl” when it comes into the world. (I actually heard her say this in public at one point.) She also thought that we should not accept the given terms for anatomy, so that if asked if you have a vagina, for instance, you just say, “No.” She felt that this would be a form of radical resistance to how vernacular language structures the body in ways that prepare it for heterosexual reproduction. There is a necessary violence that must be committed in the act of naming. I was probably more Wittigian in that way at the time that I wrote *Gender Trouble*. I now think, “Sure, you say it; you must say it; you use that language; you become dirtied by the language; you know you’re lying; you know it’s false, but you do use it.” And you live with the consequences of this catachresis, this use of a term to describe something in a radically improper way. When asked, “Are you a woman or a man?” as I was asked two weeks ago, I said that I *am* a woman—although I accompanied my affirmation with a certain bewildered laughter. My interlocutor had to live with that as part of the speech act itself. So, yes, that’s the answer. I commit this violence against myself in the name of a certain kind of politics that would be ill-served if I were not to use that language.

There are, however, obligations. The assertion of identity can never become the end of politics itself. This is a terrible American conceit—the idea that if you accomplish your identity, you are there; that you’ve achieved recognition, status, legitimation; and that that’s the end of your struggle, as if becoming visible, becoming sayable is the end of politics. That’s not the case because what that perspective fails to do is

to ask, “What are the conditions of sayability, of speakability, of visibility? Does one want a place within them? Does one want to be assimilated to them? Or does one want to ask some more profound questions about how political structures work to delimit what visibility will be and what sayability will be?” Those critical questions cannot be asked if the only thing you want is to achieve visibility and sayability within the existing order. So, I have a real problem with identity becoming the aim of politics itself. To have a conference in Beijing on “women’s human rights” is great. You must have such events, and there must be lots of people who go, but we must constantly question what it means that we gather there under that rubric and what that rubric can mean—and not just in an abstract way. For example, when we’re talking about sexual autonomy, and reproductive freedom, and anti-rape laws, and discrimination, and rights to divorce, etc., we need to ask, “How is gender being positioned? How is it being defined in relationship to those various practices? And how is it being defined internationally?” I don’t think that when you say that there’s going to be an international conference on women’s rights that everybody comes to that conference agreeing on what a “woman” is. Nor do you ask in advance that they achieve consensus. And, of course, there was a crisis at the Beijing conference. In what’s called the “pre-con-proposal,” the pre-conference writings, the organizers wanted to use the language of gender to talk about what a woman is, but the Vatican denounced the word *gender*. Many Catholic countries also voiced their opposition to any platform that used the word *gender* because that would suggest that women are not defined by their biological roles as mothers, and it would also suggest that those biological roles are not mandated by theology. And if you made a distinction between theology, biology, and cultural meaning, that was considered to be a very dangerous form of Western relativism. So the very word *gender* became extremely controversial: “Are they saying that there are more than two genders?” Then the Vatican came out against Anne Fausto-Sterling, and there was a big argument about that. But my sense is that, yes, you use the words. If *gender* is the word that produces that argument, then use that word. If *woman* is the word that produces that argument, great. Those are the conflicts that have to be put on the table, and such words are very useful. And the more public the conflicts, the more divisive they are, the better it is.

Q. Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and you yourself have warned that feminists should not posit a universal patriarchy that is the same across

all cultures, nor should they posit a universal oppression of women. You write, “Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculine signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms.” Is there any sense of universality that feminists can strategically employ, or is an appeal to universality always a totalizing gesture regardless of one’s strategic intentions?

A. I’m going to suggest that there are ways of seeking recourse to universality that are quite important and necessary, but I’m also going to say that they are not “strategic.” In fact, in the book that I just finished writing with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, we discuss universality at length. In *Gender Trouble*, I could only see the violent and exclusionary character of universality, so I was extremely skeptical of any claims to universality. The claim to universality seemed to me to be by definition totalizing. But I have become more convinced in recent years that there is an open-ended sense to universality that can be affirmed. I did some work in gay and lesbian human rights (in fact, I was the chair of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) that was really rough for me because so much of the human rights discourse had intense international and universalist dimensions to it, which I had to deal with. And I learned many things about the discourse of universality. The first thing I learned was from Charlotte Bunch, oddly enough. She talks about women’s human rights, and she says that we can say as a universal that women and men ought to be treated equally, but we do not know what that means in any given context. For her, it’s an abstraction that remains to be specified: what equality will prove to be will differ radically from context to context. So, the pragmatic dimension of the politics ends up particularizing the problem of universality in a very interesting way. And we could take that even further. What does it mean to claim “universal” human rights in an American context, in an upper-class American context, in a working-class American context? What does it mean to claim it in another country? What does it mean to claim it in an international convention where the problem of translation is at work? What does it mean to claim it in a movement where there are various different cultural and linguistic practices at work that will take up the notion of universality very differently? It doesn’t mean it cannot be said, but what becomes clear is that it’s

“empty” when it’s said; it only comes to life when it is applied and redeployed in ways that cannot be fully anticipated by anyone who strategically mobilizes it.

My sense is that universality takes on its life precisely when it exceeds the strategic intentions of its speaker and that it is extremely mobile. What does and does not count as a universal, as the universal reach of human obligation and right? That is a question that is constantly on the table. For instance, when the Vatican says that it is very interested in human rights but that homosexuality is an assault on “the human,” what it is in effect saying is that homosexual humans are destroying the human by virtue of their homosexuality, and the rights that pertain to humans do not pertain to them because they have in some sense disqualified themselves from the human by virtue of their homosexuality. If the homosexual then, nevertheless, gets up out of her or his abject state and says, “I am human, and I deserve some rights,” then in that moment there’s a certain paradox: universality is actually being asserted precisely by the one who represents what must be foreclosed for universality to take place. This is one who’s outside of the legitimating structure of universality but who nevertheless speaks in its terms and makes the claim without prior legitimation in order to assume legitimation as a performative consequence of the claim itself.

It seems to me that this is the position that gay rights activists are in time and time again, often in relation to other human rights activist groups. It took a long time, for instance, for Human Rights Watch or the ACLU or Amnesty International or other organizations to bring gay questions into human rights issues because they were afraid that they would lose the ability to have connections with certain countries, so they made the case for human rights on other grounds. So what does this mean? It means that the notion of universality is in crisis. As Laclau points out, any notion of universality is based on a foreclosure: there must be something that is not included within the universal; there must be something that is outside of it for the universal to make sense; there must be something that is particular, that is not assimilable into the universal. What happens when that particular—that particular identity that cannot lay claim to the universal and who may not—nevertheless lays claim to the universal? It seems to me that the very notion of universality is brought into an extremely productive crisis and that we get what might be understood as spectral invocations of the universal among those who have no established, legitimate right to make the claim.

So, I like the idea that universality is a discourse that is driven into crisis again and again by the foreclosures that it makes and that it’s forced to rearticulate itself. Where I agree with the project of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe lay out is that for me the process of a universality that is brought into crisis again and again by what is outside of itself is an open-ended one. Universality, in that sense, would not be violent or totalizing; it would be an open-ended process, and the task of politics would be to keep it open, to keep it as a contested site of persistent crisis and not to let it be settled.

- Q. Extending Althusser’s notion of interpellation, you posit that *con-science* is central to subject formation, in that the hailed individual inevitably turns around to encounter the interpellating force. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, you write, “‘Submission’ to the rules of the dominant ideology might then be understood as a submission to the necessity to prove innocence in the face of accusation, a submission to the demand for proof, an execution of that proof, and acquisition of the status of subject in and through compliance with the terms of the interrogative law. To become a ‘subject’ is thus to have been presumed guilty, then tried and declared innocent. Because this declaration is not a single act, but a status incessantly *reproduced*, to become ‘subject’ is to be continuously in the process of acquitting oneself of the accusation of guilt.” Although you draw primarily on Freud and Nietzsche to construct this theory, it seems also to allude to Judeo-Christian notions of guilt, conscience, and “the law of the father.” Would you clarify why you think a theory of conscience is necessary to explain subject formation?
- A. The basic presupposition of the argument that you’re citing—there are other arguments that I have for this, too—is that part of what it means to be a subject is to be born into a world in which norms are already acting on you from the very beginning. What are those norms? There’s a certain regulation of the subject from the outset: you’re born in a hospital (or somewhere else), you’re given a name, you’re ordered in that particular way; you’re assigned a gender, and very often a race; you’re inculcated quite quickly into a name and therefore a lineage (if you stay with the biological mother or both biological mother and father); you’re immediately submitted to a calculative logic—weight and height—which becomes the cause of trauma for the rest of your life. And there are a set of fantasies that are immediately imposed: what this will be if it is a boy, what it will be if it is a girl, what it will be, how it will relate to the family, how it will or will not be the same as others.

Very often—at least in Judaism, which is my context—you are given a name that recalls someone who is dead, so already you are the site of a mourning; and you cannot anticipate what the effects of *that* will be. And as the subject is reared, certain civilizing norms are imposed: how to eat; how to defecate; how to speak; how to do all these things correctly and in the right time and place; how distinctions between public and private are established; how sexuality is managed, controlled, structured, sequestered. There is a set of legitimating norms, and they all come with their punishments or their costs, so that as the child emerges into subjecthood, it emerges in relationship to a set of norms that give it its place, its legitimacy, its lovability, its promise of security; and it risks all of these things when it abdicates those norms. What is punishment for the child but the perceived withdrawal of love? And that's great, that's terrific, that's how it works. The child learns how to do that which will somehow bring forth love (or perhaps learns how to instigate the withdrawal of love for another reason); there is some negotiation with love at the level of learning norms, and this is inevitable to the extent that a child will, of necessity, despite its best judgment, be passionately attached to whoever is bringing it up. That is, of course, the humiliation of all humans: that we love these beings who happen to be our parents or who happen to be our caregivers, and it's terrible to find that we have absolutely no choice but to love them and that the love is absolute. It's a deep humiliation, I think, for any thinking human. This is not just the relationship of the child to an external norm or to a norm that is imposed by someone or to a relationship to an Other who comes to stand for normativity in some way. To the extent that the child develops the capacity to take itself as an object, to regulate itself, to think about itself, to make a decision for itself, it develops a reflexivity that has already taken that norm in in some way. So, it's not always in consultation with the external exemplification of the norm.

So, how does the norm become internalized, and internalized as a feature of the self? I would suggest that to become a subject is precisely to be one who has internalized the regulatory principles and who regulates one's self. There is no subject who does not have this capacity for reflexivity, and this reflexivity does not exist without the internalization of that norm. But what do I mean by the "internalization of the norm"? A lot of behavioral psychology assumes that norms are more or less mechanically internalized, but I think that they can in fact take all kinds of forms, that they enter into the fantasy life of an individual

and, as part of fantasy, take on shapes and forms and meanings and intensities that are in no sense mimetically related to how they're existing in the outside world. It would be a mistake, for example, to say that if there is a severe parent there will be a severe superego. I'm not sure that this is at all true; in fact, sometimes the most severe superegos are those that are formed in relationship to radically *absent* parents as a way of producing a proximity in compensation for what was in fact not there. So, I think there is, as it were, a psychic life of power—which is not the same as a social life of power, but the two are radically implicated in one another.

When you ask why a theory of conscience is necessary to explain subject formation, let me say that conscience is the relation to oneself that is formed in a way as a substitute and as a transfiguration of primary relations to others, and it is the moment when reflexivity emerges as a structure of the subject that is relatively independent of its relation to concrete existing social others. Nietzsche says it more strongly. He says that I only begin to think about myself as an object when I am asked to be accountable for something I have done, that the question of accountability is actually what inaugurates reflexivity. It's a very, very strong claim, and there are many people who totally disagree with him and with me. Object relations theorists take me aside and say, "Judy, you've got to get out of this." And it *is* theological, and it probably comes from my own Judaism, but I do find it interesting that I become an object to myself at the moment in which I am accountable to an Other. The relation to myself that takes place is psychic and is complicated and does not necessarily replicate my relation to the Other; the I who takes myself to task is not the same as the Other who takes me to task. I may do it more severely; I may do it in ways the Other never would. And that incommensurability is crucial, but there is no subject yet without the specificity of that reflexivity. You might even say that the subject becomes inaugurated at the moment when the social power that acts on it, that interpellates it, that brings it into being through these norms is successfully implanted within the subject itself and when the subject becomes the site of the reiteration of those norms, even through its own psychic apparatus. I suppose that this would be why conscience is essential to the inception of the subject.

Q. Sounds like the voice of the Other within yourself.

A. Yes, which, of course, *is* and *is not* the Other.

Q. You've written quite a bit about melancholia, saying at one point that there are culturally instituted forms of it. In recent *JAC* interviews,

Chantal Mouffe and Homi Bhabha have also discussed the social dimensions of emotions, and they've argued that passion is central to progressive political action. What do you feel is the role of passion, emotion, affective states in the formation of political agency?

A. One way to answer this to interrogate the relationship of politics to loss, since loss is what occasions melancholia and since loss is what melancholia seeks to deny in a certain way. It's clear, for instance, that many political movements are fueled by the sense of a loss that has already taken place or that is expected to take place. It could be a loss of autonomy, it could be a loss of land, it could be the violent loss of relatives in a war; but many political passions emerge from an experience of loss that comes to understand itself as collective. What becomes difficult to read sometimes is how these passions then get transmuted into certain kinds of political claims that don't always reflect them in a clear way. For instance, take something that is notoriously difficult, like Israeli military aggression. It seems to me that it is based in a profound sense of mournfulness, in a rage that comes from a limitless sense of mournfulness and a sense of precariousness that is not always possible to read and that in certain ways is not acknowledged as the anxiety over loss that it is. The transmutation of mourning into aggression is something that Freud talked about as part of melancholia, and it was something that he thought could only be undone by returning melancholia to mourning, to the extent that that's possible. There would have to be a more overt way of acknowledging loss; aggression is, to a certain extent, an effort to deny loss.

There are enormous anxieties, for instance, about the loss of place that are being undergone by white South Africans or white landowners in Zimbabwe that probably take the form of certain kinds of legal and political agendas; it would be interesting to figure out how the loss of privilege or the loss of dominance translates into political action. Or look at affirmative action in the state of California, the decimation of that agenda that took place not so long ago. There's no way to grasp what happened there without first understanding that white people knew damn well that they were very soon not to be the majority in this state. What does it mean for them to lose that place? Affirmative action seemed nothing other than ceding that place or hastening the loss of that majority status. I'm not sure what kind of political culture we would have to live in where the psychological dimensions and the passionate dimensions of our political investments actually got analyzed. It seems to me that we act out our passions rather quickly and unselfconsciously—

in this culture, at least—and that the field of popular psychology tends to de-politicize rather than to function as a commentary on our political culture. I suppose I have some nostalgia for the Frankfurt School's efforts to try to bring politics and psychology together in a certain way.

Q. In *Bodies that Matter*, you take pains to clarify your notion of performativity: "There is a tendency to think that sexuality is either constructed or determined; to think that if it is constructed, it is in some sense free, and if it is determined, it is in some sense fixed. These oppositions do not describe the complexity of what is at stake in any effort to take account of the conditions under which sex and sexuality are assumed. The 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity." For our readers, all of whom are interested in the workings of rhetoric, would you elaborate on the rhetoric of performativity?

A. Let's think about the difference between performativity and performance. I was somewhat surprised that people took performativity to be nothing other than performance when they read *Gender Trouble*. In that book, I used the example of the drag queen to try to make the case that the performance of gender that the drag queen offers is no less real and no less true than the performance of gender that any ordinary man or woman might perform, that it gives us a kind of allegory of the mundane performance of gender, and that we are all, all the time, as it were, performing gender. The drag show is a moment in which that performance is rendered explicit. It's not an aberration from the norm; it shows us how the norm actually functions, how the norm is instituted through our bodies, through our stylistics, through our bodily gestures. Then the tendency was to think, "Oh great, now we can perform gender differently," which led to the notion of radical free agency: "Oh, let's get up and put on a new gender today," or "Let's have a collective meeting and decide what gender we should perform and go perform it on the street and alter things radically." Now, I don't mind that. I think that's great. And I love my students who are performing their gender in various ways, and I have elaborate e-mail correspondences with various genders throughout the world, and I'm grateful for

them. It makes my life better, and it makes everybody live a little more easily. So, I'm not opposed to performance, and in fact performance is a crucial part of performativity, but there's something else that's going on: the performance of a gender is also compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency; they are that limit *and* that condition at the same time. What I can do is, to a certain extent, conditioned by what is available for me to do within the culture and by what other practices are and by what practices are legitimating.

Then there is the question of how performance is taken up or read or interpreted. That's always very interesting. When I'm in Hawaii, I'm sometimes treated as a grandmother, which I think is extremely funny. Why is it that I'm constituted as a grandmother? It's one of the things that happen. In other places, I am assumed to be a man. Gender performativity is not just drawing on the norms that constitute, limit, and condition me; it's also delivering a performance within a context of reception, and I cannot fully anticipate what will happen. Once I gave a talk in Germany and it was reported in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* that as I stood at the podium explaining the difference between masculine and feminine, I looked like a young Italian man. They said that I used my hands to gesture in certain ways and that I had a manly haircut. In Paris my haircut probably would not look manly but would look like any other woman's short haircut, and it would even function within a certain conception of femininity; but in Frankfurt, for whatever reason, it looked masculine. That I was *Italian* was interesting. Since there aren't very many Jews in Frankfurt, I suppose you could look at this nose and my skin tone and say that I'm Italian—some weird Mediterranean, non-Aryan something. This really interesting interpellation—which, of course, is not what I intended—might have to be understood as something like the effect of various cultural norms as they produce something like the readability of a person. And I think this happens again and again: performativity—gender performativity, in particular—produces hermeneutic rifts, questions of whether a common understanding is even possible. It can actually lead to massive cultural misunderstanding, to real dissonant meanings and interpretations.

So, yes, there is an aspect of performance, but that does not mean that the meaning of the performance is established by the intention of the actor—hardly. What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation; but also in play are the

cultural norms of reception, which may or may not accord with the ones that are constituting a situation so that we actually have a retrospective of constitution of the performance through the norms of reception—and this can produce really interesting problems of cultural translation and cultural misunderstanding. And those problems are very productive. That gender is a site of cultural translation (and I think it probably is) accords with my argument that woman is a site of contest and so why wouldn't gender performativity be a site of contested meanings as well?

- Q. You state in *Gender Trouble* that you do not believe that there is a “radical disjunction” between heterosexuality and homosexuality, that there are “structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships.” In other words, heterosexuality is not “the only compulsory display of power that informs sexuality.” Also, we noticed that you were cited recently in the *New York Times Magazine* in a story about Barry Winchell, a soldier who had dated a pre-operative transsexual and who was consequently bludgeoned to death by another soldier. In describing the transsexual, Calpernia Addams, the author of story writes, “Just as Addams is not yet female and no longer purely male, as a couple they were not wholly straight or acceptably gay. Rather they occupied a rare middle ground encompassing both, and neither: socially heterosexual, sexually homosexual, uncomfortably on the margins of all worlds” (26). Does this case serve as an example of the way in which the structures of psychic homosexuality and heterosexuality occur together in heterosexual or homosexual relations?
- A. Well, let me comment about the Barry Winchell story, and that will lead me to a more direct answer to your question. What's interesting about this case is that Barry Winchell was involved with a transgendered person who remains anatomically male (to the extent that we can say that) but whose rather seamless gender presentation is in fact as a woman—with a woman's name and everything. So, when gay legal activists sought to take the military to trial on this question, claiming that this was gay-bashing, the only coherent way they could make that argument was by claiming that this was a relationship between two men, since if it were a heterosexual relationship it could not be gay-bashing. So they decided that they would reconstitute the woman as a man, reduce her as it were to her anatomy and therefore violate her self-understanding and her self-naming practice for the sake of the political

and legal issue. Of course, the question comes up: “Why is it that gay rights activism has to assume that its primary goal is to defend homosexual relations, where ‘homosexual relations’ are understood as relations between people of the same gender?” The law itself is very complicated, since the legal precedents within which such an activist group is functioning would define homosexuality as a sexual relationship between two people of the same gender. But what I would like to see is a system of jurisprudence that understands something of the complexity of gender that is at work in homosexual and heterosexual relations and in bisexuality, since a bisexual would also prove a problem for the law in a discrimination case.

I have always been drawn to the concept of “sexual minorities,” a notion that Gayle Rubin introduced many years ago. This term is not identity-based: it isn’t that we’re struggling for people who are gay or lesbian or transgendered; we’re struggling for all kinds of people who for whatever reason are not immediately captured or legitimated by the available norms and who live with the threat of violence or the threat of unemployment or the threat of dispossession of some kind by virtue of their aberrant relation to the norm. What worries me is that many mainstream gay organizations have become very identity-based; coming out has become a very big thing because that’s the moment of rendering visible your identity. The problem is that among that kind of bourgeois politics—and it is an intensely bourgeois politics that has taken over the gay movement—the point is to get good-looking people on television who say, “I’m a lawyer, or I’m a doctor, and I just happen to be *X* or *Y*. And the fact that I’m *X* or *Y* should not get in the way of my being accepted in society.” Of course, that’s just to say, “I’m an identity that needs to be included within American pluralism.” But there are a lot of folks who aren’t going to be able to stand up and say they are *X* or *Y*, or who might even say they are *X* or *Y* and their assertion would be disputed. So, for instance, this woman who is anatomically male in part—or who may be mixed; she has breast implants, so perhaps she is in transition—could get up and say that she’s a woman, but that is going to be a really rough speech act for a lot of people to accept. There will be some who say, “No, you are not.” It would be profoundly infelicitous. She may try her best. She may try to go to the Women’s Music Festival in Michigan and may be returned to her home. She may go to the doctor’s office and hear that she’s “wrong.” She may try to make certain legal claims under the status of “woman”—or even under, say, Title IX—and she may be dismissed. She may try to compete in

athletics, and she may be dismissed. So, we’re talking about a speech act that again and again runs up against a refusal to accept its claim. What’s most painful in the Barry Winchell story is that the very activists whom one might expect to be trying to produce a world in which this woman’s speech act would be accepted are in fact denying her, undermining her, violating her by keeping her out of the media and by trying to suppress that aspect of the story in order to make the legal claim that they want to make.

So, one important question here is: “What happens when identity politics gets instituted in the law and becomes a very rigid structure so that the capacity for making a claim or seeking redress becomes effectively dictated by very narrow identity terms?” Who’s left out at that point? It seems to me that in the zeal to achieve legal redress within existing legal terms, we as a movement have actually failed to take stock of who we are as a community and who we want to represent and how. There’s something terribly, terribly sad there. In the relationship of heterosexual and homosexual, we have to make a distinction. Many transgendered people understand themselves to have issues with the gender that they’ve been assigned and often want to alter that to another gender, or even alter it to the point where they are “transsexual” or “transgendered” *rather than* “male” or “female.” It’s possible to have *transgender* as a term that is neither one nor the other but that denotes something like a transition that has no end. Kate Bornstein has been quite vocal in trying to open that up as a possibility. This is an interesting move because the conventional critique of transgender has been that it accepts the most orthodox notions of gender and wants to reconstitute them. In fact, there is a gender-subversive strain within transgender that needs to be understood a little bit more clearly. But many people who are transgendered do not therefore have a question about what their sexuality is, and that’s very complicated. In the same way, people who are perhaps very mobile in their sexualities—who are bi or who are alternately straight and gay, who are a bottom in a straight scene and a top in a gay scene—may feel that the available language for their sexuality is inadequate. They may find themselves profoundly estranged or annoyed by identity language as it circulates within public culture, but they may have absolutely no question about their gender; the question of gender assignment is not an issue. It may well be that the sexual issue doesn’t challenge their sense of gender at all. I think it’s rare but I think it’s true, in the same way that many transgendered people really think the issue is gender and not sexuality.

So the case that you're offering to me is a complicated one. The interesting question at this level is, "What does it mean for a man to be in love with a drag performer, someone who's not just performing on stage but who is transgendered throughout life, who still has male genitals and who may well engage those genitals in sexual activity?" Anatomy is a *condition* of sexual fantasy, but it also gets radically transfigured by sexual fantasy, so I think we would be making a big mistake if we thought that the sex between Barry Winchell and his lover was straight or was gay. I'm not sure we can say. I'm not sure we *should* say. It may well be that it is romantically and even sexually very straight for both of them, extremely straight, even though there are two penises in play. That just means that the *meaning* of the penis is going to be transfigured within the sexual scene. Or that penis may well be put *out* of play; we don't know what kind of play it was in. But if it's put *into* play, the question is, "In the service of what sexual fantasy is it put into play?" For example, think about *Boys Don't Cry*. Are we going to say that Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena was having straight sex with her girlfriend/his girlfriend? Or is it lesbian sex? My sense is that their sex puts the distinction into crisis and that it is probably all the more interesting and exciting by virtue of the fact that it eludes the categories that are available for it. Where's anatomy in that? In some ways, Brandon's anatomy is put out of play (some parts of it are), and yet there is also obviously a body that's put into play. We get the breasts that are strapped, the vagina that is not accessible, the dildo that enters and that is, we might say, a kind of phantasmatic extension of the body—all of which would seem to be making this sex pretty male, pretty straight; but we also get lips and arms and thighs and lots of other body parts at play. I think that we would not be able to answer in any easy way the question, "Is this straight or is this gay?" There might be what Brandon says. There might be what Brandon's lover says. There might also be a certain cultural reading that is possible that would take into account what they say but would not be completely wedded to what they say. But I think the reason why we are kind of stopped at these moments is that we realize that there is a certain crossing going on such that these human beings cannot be easily reduced to either category, straight or gay. Of course, there's much more to be said about this question.

Q. You take issue with Luce Irigaray's contention that sexual difference is *the* question of our time, saying that she positions sexual difference as more fundamental than any other form of difference. You posit instead that it might be more productive to "consider the assumption of

sexual positions, the disjunctive ordering of the human as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' as taking place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation." Further, you remind us that "the reproduction of the species will be articulated as the reproduction *of* relations of reproduction, that is, as the cathected site of a racialized version of the species in pursuit of hegemony through perpetuity, that requires and produces a normative heterosexuality in its service." Would you say, then, that the ordering and regulating of sexuality is a racial or even racist project?

A. It's a very complicated issue. What is most interesting to me about this topic right now is the relationship between the incest taboo as it functions to make the case not only for the institution of gender as masculine and feminine but also for the institution of heterosexuality as a necessary social form, and the taboo against miscegenation, which works to make sure that families remain racially discrete and that gender mixing does not take place as a result of reproduction. For the most part, they have been theorized separately. We get the theorization of the incest taboo through Lévi-Strauss and what follows from that analysis. Then we have historical scholarship on miscegenation, which talks a lot about American slavery (especially what happens between slaves and slave owners) and about how miscegenation is both taboo and also a kind of taboo that is regularly broken—in the same way that we might say that the incest taboo is regularly broken. What *hasn't* been done and what I would like to see done is another kind of work. When Lévi-Strauss makes his argument in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the incest taboo is the basis of culture and that it mandates exogamy, that it mandates marriage outside the clan, I wonder whether his notion of the clan could also be understood in terms of the notion of race. I mean that in the following way: marriage must take place outside the clan, there must be exogamy, but there must be a limit to exogamy; that is, it must be outside the clan but not outside of a certain racial self-understanding or racial commonality. So, it seems to me that the incest taboo mandates exogamy, but the taboo against miscegenation limits the exogamy that the incest taboo mandates.

Of course, one can see that Lévi-Strauss is in some sense making marriage into one of the most elementary structures of culture itself, because it's not just that women are exchanged but that they're exchanged through marriage, and the marriage bond is what opens up symbolic modes of communication between two clans. This has been

very worrisome, by the way, in contemporary French debates on the family and marriage and whether single or gay people can have medically assisted reproductive technology and whether they can adopt children. For the most part, the French have said no because they believe that heterosexual marriage is essential to culture itself and that such options would destroy—Destroy!—culture. Indeed, an anthropologist, Françoise Héritier, who is the bona fide representative of the Lévi-Straussian position, is the one who has gone in front of the *Assemblée nationale* to say that heterosexual marriage must remain the basis of culture. So we've seen a massively conservative move there.

Let's take the French case. The effort to shore up marriage as the essential moment of culture takes place in a context in which there are many married people who live separately, who are in what they call a state of *démariage* (which is a term I love; it's almost like the deconstruction of marriage). The French are also dealing with a new Europe in which there are many people in France who are no longer "French" in the old, white sense of French. So, Frenchness itself is coming under crisis. The very culture—for which they think marriage is the linchpin—is in crisis because it's becoming profoundly multiracial and multilingual. Lots of young kids are having sexual relations with their friends who are from Turkey or from Arab countries or from North Africa, and who knows what's going on with miscegenation? So, this shoring up of the family as the essence of culture is also the shoring up of family as the essential moment of *French* culture, of its racial purity: "We must keep marriage in order to transmit *Frenchness* and its national and racial purity." We might even read this kind of new orthodoxy on marriage, which the structuralists are responsible for to some degree, as a panicked response to the possibility of miscegenation: it's not just that gay people are going to adopt and that you'll get something like the dislocation of heterosexuality from its primary place, but that the family itself may end up not transmitting culture as we know it. It may end up transmitting a *new* culture or cultural hybridity or cultural complexity, or we may find that what is North African has become essential to French culture and that colonialism has reversed itself through the intimacies of family life. So, it's important that we understand both how the mandating of heterosexuality and the mandating of heterosexual marriage are linked with notions of cultural transmission that are invariably linked with questions of what race that culture will be, questions of racial transmission and racial purity. One can see it most intensely in some of these European scenes, but I'm

quite sure we could do such an analysis domestically as well.

- Q. You point out that an injurious term "works its injury precisely through the accumulation and dissimulation of its force. The speaker who utters the racial slur is thus citing that slur, making linguistic community with a history of speakers. What this might mean, then, is that precisely the iterability by which a performative enacts its injury establishes a permanent difficulty in locating final accountability for that injury in a singular subject and its act." Would you expand on how iterability does its rhetorical work?
- A. As an example, consider the word *queer*, which thirty years ago (even twenty, even fifteen years ago) was considered profoundly derogatory and frightening as a speech act. I remember living in great fear of the word, knowing I was eligible for it, thinking that once it actually landed on me I would be branded forever and that the stigma would do me in completely. Ten or twelve years ago when *queer* started to happen as a term, people would ask, "What do you think, should we produce a journal called *Queer Theory*?" I thought, "My God, do we have to use that word?" I was still in its grip. I was still thinking, "Must we take on this word? Isn't it too injurious? Why do we need to repeat it at all?" I still think there are words that are in fact so injurious that it's very hard to imagine that they could be repeated in a productive way; however, I did note that using the word *queer* again and again as part of an affirmative practice in certain contexts helped take it out of an established context of being exclusively injurious, and it became about reclaiming language, about a certain kind of courage, about a certain kind of opening up of the term, about the possibility of transforming stigmatization into something more celebratory. So, I became convinced that it's fine. Now I hear administrators in the University of California system wondering whether it would be appropriate to include "queer studies" in this or that instructional unit, and they don't blanch. Of course, there are certain places even in this very city [Berkeley/San Francisco] where we couldn't use the term or people would be quite upset, or where it would in fact incite violence of some kind. It is interesting to me that we're in a linguistic landscape in which it functions variably: you don't know, when you say it, what it's going to do.

And, of course, to whom does the word belong? I remember once walking on a street in Berkeley and some kid leaned out of a window and asked, "Are you a lesbian?" Just like that. I replied, "Yes, I *am* a lesbian." I returned it in the affirmative. It was a completely impulsive

moment. It was an interpellation from nowhere. Of course, what such a questioner is really asking is, “Are you this thing that I fear and loathe? Do you dare to say yes to this thing that you apparently are, at least on the basis of what you look like? And I have power over you to the extent that I am now seeking to expose you through the question I pose to you.” To the extent that I was able very quickly to turn around and say, “Yes, I am a lesbian,” the power of my interrogator was lost. My questioner was then left in a kind of shock, having heard somebody gamely, proudly take on the term—somebody who spends most of her life deconstructing the term in other contexts. It was a very powerful thing to do. It wasn’t that I authored that term: I received the term and gave it back; I replayed it, reiterated it. Whose speech act was that? Is it my speech act? Is it the other person’s speech act? Did I recite the other person’s speech act in my own? Did I extend it? Were we in an odd moment of community at that moment—kind of remaking language together? It’s as if my interrogator were saying, “Hey, what do we do with the word *lesbian*? Shall we still use it?” And I said, “Yeah, let’s use it *this way*!” Or it’s as if the interrogator hanging out the window were saying, “Hey, do you think the word *lesbian* can only be used in a derogatory way on the street?” And I said, “No, it can be claimed on the street! Come join me!” We were having a negotiation. And what have I given back to that person? Well, I don’t know. Will this person make the same interrogation again? Maybe my questioner really wanted to know: “Hey, are you a lesbian?” “Will this person claim or not claim?” That was the question being posed to me: “Are you gonna claim or are you not gonna claim.” “I’m gonna claim.” “Oh, you’re gonna claim. It can be claimed?” “Yeah, it can be claimed!” “Oh, look, it can be claimed!” It could be that this person then notes that this is not going to work anymore. Or that it is possible to claim. Who knows, maybe that person is claiming. Maybe that person needed a little help to claim. We don’t know. But it’s an interesting moment because it brings into relief something about how the question will function. Will this word serve injury, or will it serve another purpose? There is a certain challenge that is delivered with something like hate speech. “Are you a lesbian?” Is that hate speech? I don’t know. I think in fact that my interrogator was actually asking *me* whether it was hate speech: “Is this hate speech that I am delivering to you right now?” “No, it doesn’t have to be hate speech.”

So, when we’re thinking about how iterability does its rhetorical work, we probably make a mistake when we think that it’s the word that

causes the injury, when actually there is always a question of what purpose that word will serve. We can re-link it to injury, we can de-link it, we can try to interrogate how it is linked and de-linked, but the whole purpose of reiterating injurious language is to show that the relationship of the word itself to the injury that it performs is finally arbitrary. I worry that many people focus on injurious language, on racist or homophobic speech, thinking that the language is the source of the injury when the source of the injury is actually in racism or homophobia—which is much more profound and much more complicated. To single out language seems to me to single out one mode of its conveyance (and an arbitrary one at that) and probably to miss the larger struggle at stake.

- Q. Well, that’s a point you make in *Excitable Speech* when you say there is an inverting. You say that rather than an act of regulation that occurs after an offensive speech act, censorship is “a way of *producing* speech, constraining in advance what will and will not become acceptable speech.” That is, in the conventional view censorship appears to follow the utterance of offensive speech, but in your view censorship *produces* offensive speech: the temporal relation is inverted. Nonetheless, you do acknowledge that speech *can* injure people. While we agree that the State should not be allowed any power to censor words and images, we wonder if you believe that there is *any* role that the State should play in protecting citizens from hateful speech and images?
- A. I do. There’s a difference between coming up with a typology of words and images that are of necessity injurious, and actually looking at the way in which they function as social practices in very specific contexts. For instance, in *Excitable Speech* I cite the example of the burning cross on the black family’s lawn in *R.A.V. v. St. Paul*; that is *massively* injurious, a threat to their lives. We understand that this is operating as a threat of violence according to conventions. I would not argue that it is an arbitrary sign in that case. Although we could say that the wood and the fire do not in themselves “mean” anything, we can say that wood placed in that way, formed as a cross, burning on a black family’s lawn, is a racist act—and it is a threat of violence. It seems to me appalling to understand that as “free expression.” And that there are people who have made that argument is just appalling to me. No, that’s not appropriate. That’s where the State needs to intervene. There’s no question about it. What worries me is that the State will call *that* “free expression” and will say that coming out in the military is not: that coming out is “an action,” “conduct.” So then the question becomes:

“What are we to do with the fact that we live under a State apparatus that will abuse its power in that way, that will use the speech/conduct distinction in such a way as to allow racists their free expression while throttling the expression of gay desire?” We have a big problem: what to give to the courts and what not to give to the courts, or how to formulate it in such a way that the hands of the courts are tied so that they can’t use their discretion in a way that produces such noxious results.

That’s a set of critical questions about what to do when there are fundamentally conservative aims that are coursing through the State apparatus and that are manipulating this distinction in certain ways. For instance, there are various elements of sexual and racial harassment policies that I accept, that I helped to draft for my university, and that I believe ought to be instituted. I think, however, that it’s not enough to know that a professor had a liaison with a student. So I wouldn’t support the MacKinnon view that those relations are structurally imbalanced and therefore exploitative by their very definition. I would need to know a lot more. I would be very context-bound about trying to understand what meaning that liaison had, what consequences it had, whether there was a threat of punishment, whether it was undermining the student’s ability to function and complete the course work, whether there are charges that are being vindictively and retroactively produced. Most sexual harassment officers—at least the ones I have talked to—understand that there’s nothing you can derive a priori from that scene.

The same is true with utterance. An utterance in a classroom that one student understands as racist may well have another meaning, implication, or intention; and precisely because we live in disjunct linguistic locations, the capacity for radically different interpretations, for interpreting words that are not intended in certain ways as having certain intentions, is very possible. It’s a sign of the fact that we do not speak a common language. Such attributions are possible all the time; sometimes you can establish why they are racist, or sexist, or impermissible, but I don’t think you can derive either from a typology of terms and images or from the a priori structure of a relationship what its actual injurious content is. It has to be investigated in context. The *early* MacKinnon, the MacKinnon of the *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, knew that. She really did. She said that it must in every instance be linked to consequences and that we must be able to show that link.

The way in which she changed was to say that we don’t ever have to show the link to consequences because this is structurally the case. That scares me. It scares me because it means that we have no interpretation to perform. In fact, she has become very, very bitter about the idea of “in-ter-pre-ta-tion,” as she puts it—she spits it out. She doesn’t want to have to live in a world in which it’s a question of “in-ter-pre-ta-tion,” and *I* think we have no other choice.

- Q. Many of your works are controversial, and so it is no surprise that some scholars would disagree with you. Nancy Fraser, for example, has voiced some criticisms of your work. Are there any misunderstandings or misrepresentations of your work that you would especially like to address at this time?
- A. I’m always glad to have Nancy’s arguments. I feel that we have a productive disagreement. I guess I’ll say one thing about one of the points she regularly makes. Nancy and some other social theorists who are profoundly influenced by the Habermasian school worry that I am always interested in producing new possibilities but that I don’t say which possibilities are good to pursue and which are bad to pursue, that I don’t have a set of strong norms that would tell us which possibilities to actualize and which not. Certainly, I don’t want *all* possibilities realized, so why don’t I distinguish among them? What I would answer to that is that when we ask the question, “How ought we to live and what possibilities should we collectively seek to realize?” we always ask it within a given horizon of possibilities that are already established—what is imaginable. What worries me is that we very often make decisions about what life to pursue and what possibilities to realize without ever asking how our very notions of “what is possible,” “what is livable,” “what is imaginable” are constrained in advance, and maybe in some very politically consequential ways. For instance, say you’re in a human rights organization that hasn’t thought about the problem of gay and lesbian human rights—violence against gays and lesbians, the radical pathologization or psychiatrization or imprisonment of gays and lesbians. And say you are considering which strategies to pursue in the field but that the field of possibilities is delimited in advance such that gay and lesbian lives are not thinkable within the field. What does it mean to make a normative judgment on that basis when you have not critically interrogated *how* the field of possibility is itself constituted, and constituted through some pretty violent exclusions? It’s not as if I wouldn’t make such decisions or don’t think there are hard decisions to make; what worries me is that the rush to *decision-ism* and to strong

normativity very often fails to consider what is meant by some of the very basic terms that it assumes. For example, what is a deciding person? How are decisions made? What is the field of possibilities that is delimited in advance to me? What is outside that field? I worry that there is a critical dimension to political normativity (and even a normative dimension) that is missing, because if there's a violent circumscription of the possible—that is to say, certain lives are not considered lives, certain human capacities are not considered human—what does it mean that we take that for granted as we proceed to decide what we ought and ought not to do? It means that in our effort to be normative we perform a violence and an exclusion for which we are not accountable, and in my view that produces a massive contradiction.

Of course, Martha Nussbaum has also made a very strong attack on me, but I think it actually has nothing to do with my work. It doesn't strike me as an engaged or careful reading, and I presume that it does probably epitomize a certain frustration that a certain kind of liberal American politics has with a critical approach to some of its most important issues. She wants to be able to make strong paternalistic claims about women's conditions; she wants to be able to use the language of universality without interrogating it; she wants to be able to tell us how Indian women suffer; and she wants to be able to, in her words, make "an assault" on local cultures when it is mandated by universal concerns. I see her as being very much opposed to the problem of cultural translation and cultural difference; she thinks they get in the way of strong normative arguments. We can see something like a resurgence of a certain kind of white feminism here that doesn't want to have to hear about difference, that wants to be able to make its strong claims and speak in the name of "reason," and speak in the name of *everyone* without having to hear them, without having to learn what it might mean to hear them. So, I'm sorry about that. It seems to me to be full of a kind of displaced animosity, but I think people can read it for what it is.

Let me make one final comment. You've asked me about difficult writing, and you've asked me whether I think the State has any role in the adjudication of hate speech. These are in effect questions about whether what I write is readable, whether what I am for is translatable into contemporary politics in an obvious or clear way. I think that I probably produce a certain amount of anxiety, or what Foucault calls the politics of discomfort, and I don't do that just to be annoying. For me, there's more hope in the world when we can question what is taken

for granted, especially about what it is to be a human, which is a really fundamental question. What qualifies as a human, as a human subject, as human speech, as human desire? How do we circumscribe human speech or desire? At what cost? And at what cost to whom? These are questions that I think are important and that function within everyday grammar, everyday language, as taken-for-granted notions. We feel that we know the answers. We know what family is, we know what desire is, we know what a human subject is, we know what speech is, we know what is comprehensible, we know its limits. And I think that this feeling of certainty leads to a terrible parochialism. Taking for granted one's own linguistic horizon as the ultimate linguistic horizon leads to an enormous parochialism and keeps us from being open to radical difference and from undergoing the discomfort and the anxiety of realizing that the scheme of intelligibility on which we rely fundamentally is not adequate, is not common, and closes us off from the possibility of understanding others and ourselves in a more fundamentally capacious way.