Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham begin their recent interview with Judith Butler by asking her to respond to attacks that have been made on her writing. Butler, of course, points to the political affinities of such attacks:

> What concerns me is that the critical relation to ordinary grammar has been lost in this call for radical accessibility. . . . There is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking . . . 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. (732-33)

Butler defends the possibility that one may have a “critical relation to ordinary grammar” just as she defends the possibility, everywhere in her work, that one may have a critical relation to politics and to gender and to sex and to truth as well.

Butler’s analysis of the politics of clarity led me to reread Martha Nussbaum’s notorious attack on her work entitled “The Professor of Parody.” This essay, originally published in the *New Republic*, generated a lively conversation on the Internet. The tone of Nussbaum’s rant against Butler’s work—and it is a rant—reminds me of nothing so much as the puffed-with-rage attacks on the Clintons that show no signs of abating even though they have left the White House (in a most unseemly manner, we are told by talk-show pundits in sufficiently miffed tones to suggest that Bill and Hillary pilfered the silver or left unmentionable stains on the carpets). The more vicious right-wing attacks on the Clintons have
everything to do with class: the conservative upper-middle class simply cannot abide that a hick from Hope, Arkansas ran the country to great applause for eight years; it irritates them even more that he left the White House with the highest approval rating in history. It is no accident that they have chosen an aristocrat to replace him. Now they don’t have that constant worry about somebody raisin’ chickens in the Rose Garden, a space that by rights should be reserved for those entitled to it by virtue of wealth and family background.

Likewise, Nussbaum worries that Butler's presence in the garden of philosophy is a contaminant. She imagines philosophizing as a kind of quiet greensward where elegant men and women come and go, respectfully exchanging arguments with one another in the service of increasing clarity:

Butler gains prestige in the literary world by being a philosopher; many admirers associate her manner of writing with philosophical profundity. But one should ask whether it belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric. Ever since Socrates distinguished philosophy from what the sophists and the rhetoricians were doing, it has been a discourse of equals who trade arguments and counter-arguments without any obscurantist sleight-of-hand. (39-40)

Here, Butler stands accused of pandering to some very wrong crowds—literary types, for one, whom Nussbaum imagines as philosophy wannabes with no disciplinary practices of their own. She then accuses Butler of hanging out with an even less reputable bunch: Butler is not a philosopher at all but—horrors!—a sophist and a rhetorician. That ilk deal in the tawdriest of argumentative goods and simply are not to be trusted.

Nussbaum has this correct at least: Butler is a sophist and a rhetorician. Her insistence that intellectuals must retain a critical relation to doxa places her squarely within sophistry, as does her insistence on examining the local and temporal constraints within which every political action functions. This intellectual habit is nicely illustrated in *Excitable Speech*, where Butler brilliantly demonstrates how the U.S. Supreme Court deployed the discourses of liberalism and racism to turn a specific hateful act—a cross-burning in Minnesota—into a normalizing defense of free speech. Hers is a powerfully ethical rhetorical theory as well, because she is most wary of normalizing narratives that hide their necessary exclusions:
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. (Olson and Worsham 764)

Needless to say, a critic's refusal to interrogate her definitions can only be a contradiction if the assumption of social responsibility is a sine qua non of critical work. For Butler, this assumption goes without saying.

I am grateful to Judith Butler for what she has done, and is doing, for those of us who are grubbers in the arts of deception and fraud. Despite philosophers' attempts to get us off academic welfare and into honest work, us sophists and rhetoricians have managed to stick around the university for a good while. But we are now pretty much threatened by our invisibility. Until Butler, no American theorist since Kenneth Burke has thought systematically about important rhetorical practices in a fashion startling enough and interesting enough to get rants written about them in The New Republic. Add to this dearth the fact that in late monopoly capitalism nobody wants to see verbal craft at work. Not that there isn't rhetoric at work, and very crafty it is, too, in advertising and on MTV and in the music of Eminem and all over the place. It's just that the showing off of craft is considered tacky and hence very much discouraged. How else do we explain the fact that George W. Bush was thought by most Americans to have won those debates? When Al Gore cornered him on affirmative action, I thought for sure that Dubya was a goner. I was astonished to learn that people just didn't like the fact that Gore knew debate strategy, and worse, that he used it, openly and craftily, to put that poor naive Bush on the spot (my analysis gives the audience a benefit of the doubt, assuming that the American people don't actually agree with Bush's nonposition on affirmative action). The political upshot of this distaste for craft is easy to spot—those who exercise rhetorical power can pretend that it comes naturally to them because they are, well, just better. Nussbaum rants on and on about Butler's allusive style, complaining that she casually uses authors' names as citations to whole bodies of thought rather than telling us "what Althusser and Freud and Kripke really said," as if the point of intellectual work were to determine what Althusser really meant by "interpellation." No critical relations to texts here!

And as if it isn't enough that rhetoric is supposed to stay out of public view, increasingly rhetoricians are threatened inside the university by our
very own colleagues, those folks who have built an empire in first-year composition. The rage for clarity in composition is legendary, so I won’t dwell on it. What is not often remarked is that the rage for clarity marks a class war in composition and rhetoric just as surely as it marks philosophers’ fear that some uber-rhetor like Judith Butler will come along and question whether they have an exclusive handle on truth. I am aware that the lore of our field suggests that rhetoricians are the aristocrats and compositionists the working class therein, which belief is substantiated by the deplorable working situations of most composition teachers (don’t worry—I’m not going there today). This bit of lore overlooks the laughable irony inherent in claiming the title of rhetorician as a means of social betterment—in today’s cultural climate that’s a bit like announcing that one is pleased to have accepted a position as a prostitute. In any case, the really big time movers and shakers in our profession are WPAs and other administrators of the first-year course—the folks that James Sledd likes to call “boss compositionists.” (I’d like this clever term better if Sledd would stop attaching it to me). These folks have followed the money. They give deans and taxpayers what they want: clarity, brevity, sincerity. They have no truck with invention, allusive styles, and most certainly do not contemplate any such nonsense as a critical relation to grammar. Butler is onto the pedagogical politics of this scam: “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…” (736). The rage for accessibility is yet one more manifestation of the old colonizing desire to identify and control.

Butler is probably too generous to her detractors. She opines that, having been made vaguely uneasy by postmodern uncertainty, they seek to dispel the uncertainty by expelling those who call attention to it: “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?” she asks, rhetorically, giving us yet another instance of a stylistic habit that really irritates Nussbaum (Butler 733; Nussbaum 38-40). If you’ve read your René Girard, you know that scapegoating is a mimetic mechanism: the community scapegoats any of its members who too obviously or repeatedly remind them of who they are. Compositionists don’t seem to have doubts—or any that they articulate, anyhow—about their having effects on their students, and
good effects they are supposed to be, too. So do they scapegoat those of us who question the probity of their claims to do-goodism? Indeed, they do. If you doubt this, read Maxine Hairston’s or Wendy Bishop’s chair’s address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, both of which paint some workers in the profession as traitors to the belief in good, healthy classroom effectiveness. Hairston’s address was greeted with a series of standing ovations when it was delivered. I know, I was there, slunk low in my chair—sneaking sophist that I am—while my colleagues thunderously applauded Hairston’s repeated claims that our classrooms are happy, egalitarian places where everyone is treated nice and fair, regardless of who they are or from whence they hail. Butler is not about to let anybody get away with irresponsibly sweeping claims like these, and I can only respond with a hearty, “You go, girl!”

I have been a fan of Butler’s work ever since Gender Trouble (well, maybe since Subjects of Desire), and I recommend it to anyone who professes the field of rhetoric. Butler is both rhetor and rhetorician insofar as her practice reveals insights about what rhetorical theory might become (if it isn’t undone entirely by the corporate university) and insofar as she is a skilled interrogator of the linguistic and cultural constraints that operate on political utterance and action. And so I read this interview with delight, and I hope that if you missed it, you’ll go back and look at it. Olson and Worsham asked the right questions (except “What is rhetoric?”), and Butler was generous and forthcoming in her responses. The interview can (and no doubt will) serve as a handy introduction to the issues that concern Judith Butler and her interesting ways of negotiating them. Give us more like this, JAC!

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Works Cited


