Contingency and Magnifying Glasses: A Response to Judith Butler

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I spent last year in southwest China, just east of Tibet and south of the Silk Road. As a Fulbright lecturer, I taught year-long courses in American Literature and Research and Writing to the graduate students at Sichuan University in addition to speaking throughout the country. I was quite excited by the experience because, while I had been in China before, I had never traveled outside tourist routes. I came to know a part of China that few Westerners do, including Sichuan which historically has been isolated—surrounded by mountains and accessible only through the port of Chongqing on the Yangtze River—until a north-south rail line was completed in the late 1970s. Because of its isolation, Sichuan has a reputation for both extremism and provincialism.

I arrived there just three months after the embassy bombing in Yugoslavia. Our bombing of China’s embassy had initiated a round of student protest in China, including the burning of the U.S. consulate in Chengdu. Students from Sichuan University had marched the mile or so to the U.S. consulate, stormed the walls, and set fire to the consulate general’s house. Anti-American sentiment was high. Needless to say, this was not the easiest of times or places to be teaching.

It is with this experience in mind that I want to respond to Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham’s recent interview with Judith Butler. Given the richness of the interview, I am tempted by other directions in which to take this response. I wonder what I could make Confucius say about Antigone, but mostly I am tempted by issues of performance. I have taught Butler’s views on gender performance for years in my feminist theory courses. For years, male and female students have come to class dressed as men one day and as women on another day. For over a decade, women have increasingly resisted coming dressed as men, and men have been more willing to come as women, even riding the subway and working campus jobs in dresses and makeup. Women students have been frustratingly inarticulate about the reasons for their resistances, but the men—apparently increasingly liberated—report that they are not really, truly performing womanhood, but rather performing drag or “Dennis Rodman” or “Howard Stern.” These male performers free male students to act. If I had
more space to respond, I would like to pursue what it means to perform drag (or “Rodman”). Is drag (or “Rodman”) gender performance, gender performativity, or gender parody? What are the connotations of “queen” and “drag,” and what do the connotations say about the perceptions of and by men who perform as women? What do the connotations say about male perceptions of women? This all tempts me, but Butler’s work and my own are increasingly concerned with a broader sense of rhetoric and political subjectivity. So I will set aside the performance of drag—an idiosyncratic male performance—in order to discuss our mutual concerns with rhetoric, universal human rights, and gender within the context of my Chinese year.

Butler’s identification with disciplinary rhetoric is important inasmuch as she brings a continental orientation that is often missing or superficial within mainstream rhetoric; she also brings a level of abstraction that is more often associated with philosophy and perhaps hinders the incorporation of her work within rhetoric. Despite a spoken concern with context and political specifics, she often moves quickly to philosophical assertion in ways that diminish the situated nature of rhetoric. For example, in the interview Butler observes the tension between the responsibility to write in an accessible way, even in terms of accepted grammar, and the ways in which grammar produces and constrains our structuring of the world (732-33). She advocates a creative grammar that by its difficulty opens the prison-house of ordinary language and lifts the veil of common sense. At least in principle, I agree although I struggle with what her use of grammar here might mean. Derrida’s science of writing? Wittgenstein’s language games or form of life? Burke’s generative stratagems for human thinking (selecting, defining, understanding)? Whatever definition we feel secure with here, her claim for alternative grammars makes sense in the frame of China and writing. Certainly, it would not be a surprise to composition theorists that teaching a course such as Research and Writing—a western system of claim, evidence, consequence, reason, counter-argument, and critique—was more radical in China than teaching contemporary American literature. After all, stories are easily consumed and interpreted in the existing paradigm—in this case, provided in the department’s required weekly Communist-party sessions. The contents of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* provide ample evidence of our racism, greed, and corrupt class structure. Writing across cultures, in contrast, interrogates common sense, forces the confrontation—if not critique—of ideology, and demands speaking in a public sphere of sorts: an engagement in a classroom of interlocutors. The production of texts
and the manipulation of grammar required more engagement with one’s assumptions than the reception of texts.

Still, while Butler privileges grammar as a source of innovation and inquiry, within the context of my Sichuan classroom, it was the demands of writing and speaking in accessible ways between two cultures that forced the contemplation of assumptions. That is, the demands of a new-to-us context forced me to examine what my teaching presupposed and implied, and it forced my students to invent novel strategies and novel topics for an alien audience (understand the alien audience here as both me as Other and their classmates as helpful critics). However, this confrontation with what might be grammar in a Wittgensteinian sense was motivated by a desire to be understood and to share a form of life. Neither accessibility nor the rupture of grammar alone shaped the evolving culture of the classroom; rather, they interacted.

Now, while I do not claim to know fully the effects of my pedagogy (what I composed exceeds my consciousness of what I did), I do feel secure that I had as Butler says, “effects on the lives of my students and the world in which” I live (734). I feel more secure of my effect in China than I do in a Buffalo classroom on any Tuesday morning because of the visible and audible struggle for understanding: man man shou (speak slowly), zai shou (say it again). For a shift in grammar to achieve an effect in Sichuan, the participants in meaning-making needed to share a commitment to accessibility. Any unmooring of cultural presuppositions depended on a commitment to being understood across a significant divide, to iterating and reiterating until there was a bridge. With that commitment to understanding came a willingness to struggle against foreclosure and segregation.

For this reason, I find Butler incomplete in her critique of the scapegoating of intellectuals for their complex discourses and idiosyncratic grammars. There is more at stake here than our insecurities about the effects of our work and more motivation than a fear of complexity. I would place the current critique of complex discourses in the incomplete effects of grammatical play without the solicitation of a complete and complex rhetorical situation. Interlocutors and texts—which do not attempt to perform old-fashioned engagement and persuasion—frustrate not only the anti-intellectuals and those who engage in scapegoating; they also frustrate the potential for opening and extending conceptual worlds. For my students to respond to me, for me to respond to my students, we had to be accessible to each other. Neither side gave up its thinking (not in any simple way), but each had to work to be known and to know that
it was known, at least in part, by the other. Echoing Aristotle, each had to find the available means of persuasion in this particular case. Echoing Confucius, each felt that “a man of humanity is one who, wishing to establish himself, helps others to establish themselves and who, wishing to gain perception, helps others to gain perception” (6.30). Just as “universal” human rights is a concept in need of particularizing, there is a need of particularizing the relationship between grammar, aberrant or otherwise, and accessibility. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau, Butler points out that there must be something outside the universal for that concept to make sense (746). For a grammatical challenge to ordinary language to have effect, audiences must have access, must desire access, to a new concept, one outside their first perceptions. What spurs that desire is particular to the rhetor, audience, and their situation. Inasmuch as “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,” the practice of rhetoric, even more so, is open-ended, dialogic, and crisis-driven (747).

True deliberation and engagement requires the crisis of access as well as the difference of grammar. Radical resignification needs an audience and a situation, lest it slip into formal analysis and play or into empty metaphysical propositions.

Butler’s omission of the rhetorical situation in theorizing invention is not unlike her omissions of the material and historical in her work on gender. These omissions create difficulties for many feminists. We are intrigued by “a radical critique of the categories of identity” and freely acknowledge that there is some political use to expanding our narrow definitions of gender. I, however, feel that critiquing ideologies of gender is no longer a primary way to critique or change society. Consciousness-raising is useful (and we are getting good at it), but within the material world, there is vital work to be done on the behalf of the beings who answer to that old-fashioned name “woman.” Perhaps I can justify my simple-minded concern with women by framing my work in terms of strategic essentialism, but that strikes me as gaming rather than working. Despite the allures of post-feminism, I intend my writing and teaching of both rhetorical and feminist theory to transform the situation of women. While my writing and teaching are driven by political objectives, I also understand the domesticity of institutionalized feminism. The situation of most women is not improved by rhetorical, grammatical, or psychoanalytical critique in the academy; these critiques historically come after votes, property rights, equitable wages, access to contraception, and educational opportunity.
Butler would have us hear violence in naming women. The expression “woman” constrains and, by its history, injures. But in her discussion of the state’s role in protecting citizens from hate speech, she acknowledges a very telling, very material distinction between “free expression” and “conduct” or “action.” This distinction between pain caused by expression and pain caused by conduct becomes a means for understanding how many feminists characterize women’s struggles. Rather than a concern with grammatical play, many feminists focus on language in its relationship to conduct and in its use in public demands for changed conduct. The violence of naming is not irrelevant, but it is distinct from conduct toward women. Naming and conduct interact, but they are not the same.

Consequently, while the naming of women can be a kind of violence, it also can be a positive identity leading to solidarity. Just as Butler’s claim that “lesbian” had transformative effects, can we not claim “woman”? The difficulty is that this simple claiming strategy may only return us to a womin-, wimmin-, womyn-stage of feminism and ignore work on institutional and governmental structures. The word, however, turns up in the institutional structures and has power there. Would it have helped or hindered women if the Fourth World Conference on Women was called instead the Fourth World Conference on Gender? Butler values the tension over gender at the conference, but why should “gender” as a site of contestation become privileged over “women”? When I teach classes in feminist theory, certainly one of the more controversial points occurs when I require the final project to be done on women, not men, and not gender. Always some sincere students who elected to take the course have difficulty thinking about women. “Yes, you can write on AIDS, but it has to be on women and AIDS,” I say. “Yes, you can question the military, but you must include women, and you must use feminist theory.” Even in the frame of women’s studies and feminist theory, women are subject to erasure. I increasingly restrict my use of “gender”; it hides too many things that should be shown.

Finally, even if hailing women as women is sometimes a kind of violence, I find that kind of violence and struggle removed from my observations and experiences in China and, for that matter, North America. While women in communist China “hold up half the sky,” there are indications that their lot is not so equal—party leadership being one measure, but there are others. In comparison to male-female population ratios in sub-Saharan Africa, China—like many, many Asian nations—is missing women: in China’s case, forty-four million women, 8.6 percent
of its women (Drèze and Sen 52). Whether the population discrepancy is
due to abortions, hidden population, or unequal distribution of health and
food resources, clearly the conduct toward women and girls is different
than it is toward men and boys. Nussbaum’s concern with the condition
of women in India maybe paternalistic, even imperialistic, and she may
wish to “assault” local cultures (Olson and Worsham 764). Still, I accept
Nussbaum’s claim that her work is intended not as “recommendation by
elite specialists to people who have no ideas on the topic,” but rather as
“the systematization and theorization of thoughts that women are pursu­
ing all over the world, when they ask how their lives might be improved,
and what governments should be doing about that” (301). Nussbaum
attempts to gather particular demands and an issue-oriented, feminist
politic under a wide umbrella. In her articulation of women’s capabilities,
Nussbaum offers a symbolic, grammatical, and theoretical agenda that
might help organize political actions and new international conduct.

Certainly, political theory, colonialist accusations, and claims of
universal norms of human capability need arguments that extend beyond
either an interview or a response, but the issues that disturb Nussbaum
exceed what Butler would characterize as “displaced animosity” (764).
Putting intellectual nuance and philosophical inanities aside for the
moment, I share Nussbaum’s outrage over the missing women in the
world, and I do what I can to stop their deaths.

In my Sichuan classrooms, we studied in coats and gloves during the
winter. There, male and female students intellectually engaged with
feminist texts. They seriously considered all that I brought before them;
we all know that the lives of women are difficult. We read Dale Spender
and compared Chinese and American slang for sexually active women
and men. My concession to the culture was that I had male students write
the slang on the board; to quote a female student, “any one of the words
associated with women will destroy a lady’s image both in her family life
and her social life.” We read from Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth, and
I found out about Chinese jobs, career options, and employment ads. Did
you know that many professional jobs for Chinese women not only
require beauty, but also require a height of over one hundred and sixty
eight centimeters, a height that disqualifies a large percentage of the
population? These interpretive activities in the classroom have their uses
and their limits. My impulse to colonize is always present, the fantasy of
the speaking, bourgeois subject is always lurking, but interpretation is part of what I am trained to teach, and while textual production may have
more potential for creating social change, interpretation is its collabora-
To achieve resignification, one needs both. And so we wrote with our
gloves on, and maybe we performed a little differently. Maybe we learned
a little about collaboration, translation, and collective commitment. I
don’t know if the material world changed, but my students learned about
the thinking of one western academic who stood as a synecdoche for U.S.
feminists.

I admire Judith Butler’s work. It stretches my mind, and I truly do not
wish to be included among anti-intellectuals, clear stylists, or critics with
displaced animosity. My own scholarly work on intention and deliberation—work that I see as useful and politically driven—also is limited by
its textual orientation and distance from political action. My work suffers
from what Teresa Ebert would characterize as “poststructuralist assump­
tions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse” (3).
I accept her critique even as I pass it on to Butler’s work. Alas, a lack of
engagement in the material world is typical of current theory in the
humanities; what we produce for academic audiences is highly special­
ized. Much of what we compose in the university employs an electron
microscope, and much of what ails humanity needs a magnifying glass
and a pair of tweezers.

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