DISPOSSESSION:
THE PERFORMATIVE IN THE POLITICAL

Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou
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Conversations with Athena Athanasiou

Judith Butler

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Contents

Preface vii

1 Aporetic dispossession, or the trouble with dispossession 1
2 The logic of dispossession and the matter of the human (after the critique of metaphysics of substance) 10
3 A caveat about the “primacy of economy” 38
4 Sexual disposessions 44
5 (Trans)possessions, or bodies beyond themselves 55
6 The sociality of self-poietics: Talking back to the violence of recognition 64
7 Recognition and survival, or surviving recognition 75
8 Relationality as self-dispossession 92
9 Uncounted bodies, incalculable performativity 97
10 Responsiveness as responsibility 104
11 Ex-propriating the performative 126
Contents

12  Dispossessed languages, or singularities named and renamed 131
13  The political promise of the performative 140
14  The governmentality of “crisis” and its resistances 149
15  Enacting another vulnerability: On owing and owning 158
16  Trans-border affective foreclosures and state racism 164
17  Public grievability and the politics of memorialization 173
18  The political affects of plural performativity 176
19  Conundrums of solidarity 184
20  The university, the humanities, and the book bloc 188
21  Spaces of appearance, politics of exposure 193

Notes 198

Index 205
Preface

The two of us met in Athens, Greece, in December 2009, when Judith gave the Nicos Poulantzas Memorial Lecture for the Poulantzas Institute, affiliated with SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), and spoke for the Department of Social Anthropology at the Panteion University, where Athena is a professor. We began a conversation on politics, theory, embodiment, and new formations of left politics, focused at first on the question of how older left politics might respond to newer feminist and queer concerns with resisting precarity. Our first conversation (which was published in Greek), “Questioning the Normative, Reconfiguring the Possible: Feminism, Queer Politics and the Radical Left,” appeared in the volume *Performativity and Precarity: Judith Butler in Athens* (Athens: nissos, 2011).¹

Athena’s own work focuses on feminist theory and radical social thought, bringing perspectives on the work of Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault to critically consider critically relations between masculinism, technology, and the human. Athena’s volume, co-edited with
Elena Tzelepis, *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and the “Greeks”* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), moves from tropes derived from classical Greek myth to contemporary transnational and postcolonial contexts of corporeal and critical practices. She has published a book in Greek called *Life at the Limit: Essays on the Body, Gender, and Biopolitics* (Athens: Ekkremes, 2007), in which she offers a post-human and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic account of technology, difference, embodiment, and bodies of knowledge, focusing on how they inform the contemporary social organization of livability, desire, and gendered and sexual subjectivity. She has also written a book (*Crisis as a “State of Exception”: Critiques and Resistances*, Athens: Savvalas, 2012) on the bodily dimensions of the Greek debt crisis; in it she addresses the indefinite state of exception as an instance of neoliberal governmental rationality conducted in the name of the economic emergency and involving forces of racialization and feminization that fundamentally structure the condition of “becoming precarious.” Her overall work focuses on forms of queer deconstruction and feminist modes of performative politics, including non-violent public demonstrations of grieving and resistance to contemporary regimes of biopolitics, such as the work of the transnational, antimilitaristic, feminist movement Women in Black. In considering concrete manifestations of subversive gender performativity, Athena has been inspired by Judith’s philosophical work on ethics and politics, gender and queer performativity, corporeality, language, normative violence and violence of derealization, the vulnerability of human life and the question of what makes for a livable life. And Judith has been challenged
by Athena’s anthropological and philosophical perspectives wrought from Irigaray and Heidegger as well as the geopolitical challenges of neoliberalism that have been so acutely registered in Greece. Like Judith, Athena has been engaging with a non-sovereign account of agency, the relationality of the self, freedom with others, questions of recognition and desire, as well as the gendered, sexual, and racial implications of one’s bodily exposure to one another. So our conversation insistently explored these questions, as we sought to convey and map out the political and affective labor of critical agency.

Our conversation began with the consideration of a poststructuralist position we both share, namely that the idea of the unitary subject serves a form of power that must be challenged and undone, signifying a style of masculinism that effaces sexual difference and enacts mastery over the domain of life. We recognized that both of us thought that ethical and political responsibility emerges only when a sovereign and unitary subject can be effectively challenged, and that the fissuring of the subject, or its constituting “difference,” proves central for a politics that challenges both property and sovereignty in specific ways. Yet as much as we prize the forms of responsibility and resistance that emerge from a “dispossessed” subject – one that avows the differentiated social bonds by which it is constituted and to which it is obligated – we also were keenly aware that dispossession constitutes a form of suffering for those displaced and colonized and so could not remain an unambiguous political ideal. We started to think together about how to formulate a theory of political performativity that could take into account the version
Preface

of dispossession that we valued as well as the version we oppose.

The following represents a wide-ranging dialogue that happened over several months in meetings, conversations, and writing, but mainly on email, though we met in London in February 2011 to plot the trajectory of this exchange. During that meeting in London, the Egyptian revolution was in full swing, and in the last weeks of writing this text together the Greek Left posed a serious challenge to the neoliberal politics of austerity, opening up the possibility of a new European Left opposed to the differential distribution of precarity and the technocratic suppression of democracy. Our reflections register these events obliquely, and in the course of this exchange we refer to several political movements, demonstrations, and acts that helped us to formulate what we mean by a politics of the performative. Our approaches converge and differ. Athena’s geopolitical position informs her reflections on modes of resistance and public mourning, and she draws from the work of Irigaray, Heidegger’s critique of technology, Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis.4 Judith’s work emerges from Foucault and speech act theory, gender theory, queer activism, and heterodox psychoanalysis. Both of us return to Greek myths to understand the present, which means that those myths are animated in new ways, as in an extraordinary film that we discuss, Strella (dir. Panos Koutras, 2009), in which a transgendered sex worker lives out a contemporary Oedipal myth in twenty-first-century Athens. Along the way, we seek in convergent ways to prepare Hannah Arendt for a Left she would not have joined, and we enter into questions of affect and ethics within

x
the frame of politics by thinking through recent forms of political mobilization.

Both of us found ourselves returning to the question, “What makes political responsiveness possible?” The predicament of being moved by what one sees, feels, and comes to know is always one in which one finds oneself transported elsewhere, into another scene, or into a social world in which one is not the center. And this form of dispossession is constituted as a form of responsiveness that gives rise to action and resistance, to appearing together with others, in an effort to demand the end of injustice. One form that injustice takes is the systematic dispossession of peoples through, for example, forced migration, unemployment, homelessness, occupation, and conquest. And so we take up the question of how to become dispossessed of the sovereign self and enter into forms of collectivity that oppose forms of dispossession that systematically jettison populations from modes of collective belonging and justice.

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I

Aporetic dispossession, or the trouble with dispossession

AA: Dispossession is a troubling concept. It is so troubling that as we seek to write about it, it is highly possible that it gets us into trouble. In order to put this troubling concept to work – that is, in order to engage with the ways in which it gets us in trouble – we must confront an aporia. On the one side, dispossession signifies an inaugural submission of the subject-to-be to norms of intelligibility, a submission which, in its paradoxical simultaneity with mastery, constitutes the ambivalent and tenuous processes of subjection. It thus resonates with the psychic foreclosures that determine which “passionate attachments” are possible and plausible for “one” to become a subject. In this sense, dispossession encompasses the constituted, preemptive losses that condition one’s being dispossessed (or letting oneself become dispossessed) by another: one is moved to the other and by the other – exposed to and affected by the other’s vulnerability. The subject comes to “exist” by installing within itself lost objects along with the