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Feminist Perspectives on Eros

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6. As Benjamin (1988, 28) would put it, Thrasy-machus's submissiveness is the counterpart to the overly aggressive and domineering character of Socrates's comportment towards him throughout Book One.
7. At *Rep.* 458d5–7, Glaucon tells Socrates that the necessities they are speaking of (concerning the upbringing of men and women guardians) are not geometrical ones but erotic ones.
8. All translations of the *Republic* are from *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allen Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968). All references are to the Stephanus pages.
9. Socrates describes the soul of the tyrant as a gourmand at *Rep.* 579b5.
10. It is a description that will later be described, in Book Nine, as the lawless dream of a tyrant (*Rep.* 571d1–4), which the tyrant then carries out in his waking life (*Rep.* 574e3).
11. As Danielle Allen points out (2000, 401n30), "the *Republic* is full of 'road' metaphors and starts and ends with them (*Rep.* 328e, 614c)." Jessica Benjamin (1988, 126–9) suggests that spatial metaphors involving transitional or in-between spaces as well as dwelling places serve as much better symbols for the intersubjective character of human desire than the phallus of Freud. The *Republic* is full not just of the transitional spaces of roads (between Athens and the Piraeus or in and out of caves), but also new and extraordinary places and dwellings, the likes of which Glaucon and Adeimantus have never seen before (*Rep.* 515a).
12. See Benjamin 1988, 51–84, for a full discussion of how the master/slave dialectic, which involves a breakdown of the essential tension between being with and being independent from an other, is inevitable for both Freud and Hegel.
13. For the argument that it was Socrates's inability to distinguish his philosophy from the eristic style of argumentation taught by the sophists and rhetors that actually lead to his trial and death, and not the suspected quarrel between philosophy and the polis, see Plato, *Gorg.* 486a4–b4 and Dustin Gish, "Rivals in Persuasion: Gorgianic Sophistic Versus Socratic Rhetoric," 48.

Melancholy, Anxious, and Ek-static Selves: Feminism between Eros and Thanatos

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If one accepts Spinoza's notion that desire is always the desire to persist in one's own being, and recasts the *metaphysical* substance that forms the Ideal for desire as a more pliable notion of social being, one might then be prepared to redescribe the desire to persist in one's own being as something that can be brokered only within the risky terms of social life. The risk of death is thus coextensive with the insurmountability of the social.

– Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*

To me, of the things outside my power, I esteem none more than being allowed the honor of entering into a pact of friendship with people who sincerely love the truth; for I believe that of things outside our power we can love none tranquilly, except such people. Because the love they bear to one another is based on the love that each has for knowledge of truth, is as impossible to destroy it as not to embrace the truth once it has been perceived. Moreover, it is the greatest and most pleasant that can be found among things outside our power, since nothing but truth can completely unite different sentiments and dispositions.

– Benedict de Spinoza, *Letter to Blyenbergh, 5 January 1665*

INnumerable papers are written by students and scholars every year on Judith Butler's philosophy. So much ink is spilled on her thinking, certainly, because it is rich, complex, provocative, and difficult. Many of the ideas contained therein need to be worked through, rather than merely reflected upon, observed, accepted and/or rejected. Moreover, such ideas require working through not only by virtue of their notorious theoretical complexity, but, I suspect, by virtue of the affective responses they induce in their readers. As Butler herself writes about our affective lives avowedly from within "the ranks of ambivalence" (2004, 135), it is difficult not to find oneself ambivalent in response to her work. Indeed, many of her diagnoses of contemporary gendered subjectivity are deeply unsettling, and her suggestions for responses to our predicaments are no less discomfiting. She might be our modern day feminist gadfly, alerting us to our collective melancholy, the losses we can never hope to recuperate, and our profound and irreducible ignorance about ourselves. In

response, we are encouraged to dwell in such sad passions, even to cultivate anxiety and to assume projects of mourning, as among our dearest resources for ethics and politics. Like a number of feminist theorists, Butler places desire, eros, life, relationality, connection, and responsiveness at the center of her reflections on personhood. Yet even as love, attachment, and ineluctable relations to others constitute selfhood, she never loses sight of the threat of aggression, violence, and loss at the heart of subjectivity. Butler is a radically anti-utopian thinker.

As a reader of her work, I find myself returning frequently to a number of meta-theoretical questions. Namely, does feminist theory require something like a death drive? Is the self essentially constituted by loss? That is, is there an irreducible absence and negativity at the heart of subjectivity with which we must come to terms? Do we require such principles in order to be able to explain the persistence of oppression, and of self-destructive behavior among women and the otherwise gendered? If full and reflective awareness of the pernicious nature of a number of gender norms is far from sufficient to exorcise our daily reiterations of them, is it the case that many typically feminine attachments, for example, are death-bent? Is "feminist" a name for an especially self-aware, and thus an especially effective, masochist? These are questions about what kinds of selves we are. Yet since, as Butler affirms, explorations of selfhood inevitably enter the realm of speculative philosophy and fiction writing (2005, 78), they are also questions about which theories and fictions are enabling, if not emancipatory. If, after metaphysics, we can only construct more or less plausible, more or less salutary, more or less enabling models of selfhood, we need some ways of assessing how our "collective imaginings" (Lloyd and Gatens, 1999) amplify and diminish our power.

I propose to ask these questions, if not to answer them, by tracing Butler's invocations and treatment of Spinoza throughout her *oeuvre*. She regularly invokes Spinoza's principle of *conatus*, the desire to persevere in being, as a core commitment of her own philosophy. Moreover, Spinoza's notion of the desire to live (*cupiditas*, the Latin translation of eros) has come to assume an increasingly central place in her recent ethico-political meditations upon life, survival, and corporeal vulnerability (especially 2004 and 2006b). In a recent essay, rather than the usual allusion to Spinoza, Butler offers a reading of Spinoza's desire to live, a reading which she regularly acknowledges is somewhat unfaithful to him, that admits of a desire to die or, at least, "a certain refiguration of the death drive" (2006a, 116). Reframing Spinoza's erotic, life-affirming notion of the human essence allows Butler to place his philosophy in the service of "an ethics under pressure, one that would be constituted as a struggle and one that has 'anxiety' rather than conviction as its

condition" (2006a, 127). This interpretation interests me less as an analysis of Spinoza than as evidence of Butler's commitment to some kind of thanatic principle.

A number of continental philosophers celebrate Spinoza as a thinker of radical affirmation, as a great alternative to a philosophy of negativity, and as a joyful militant who denounces the uselessness of the sad passions (notably Braidotti, Negri, Deleuze and Guattari). As Butler is fully aware, it will strike many as highly idiosyncratic to enlist him in a politics and ethics of anxiety, and to dedicate an essay on his philosophy to those who "honor the death drive" (2006a, 127). Butler's essay is not just an interpretation of Spinoza; hers are fighting words. She is insisting upon the necessity of an ethics that treats both desire *and* the death drive, eros and thanatos, and defending the possibility that even the most celebrated thinker of vitality and positivity concedes that desire is not simple, that desire turns on itself, that precisely the desire to live is such that it risks assuming the form of the desire to die.

In examining Butler's treatment of Spinoza insofar as it reflects the tenacity of a commitment to the need to "honor the death drive," a need often justified by the ethical and political resources it provides, this essay asks about the basis of this need for feminist theory. From whence does it come? What ethical and political work does a primary vigilance toward our destructive and death-bent urges do? Thus, I begin with a review of Butler's treatment of Spinoza, and proceed to make some suggestions about what motivates her creative appropriation of his principle of *conatus*. Finally, without demanding that Butler represent Spinoza's philosophy accurately, I propose that Spinoza's philosophy allows a very strong acknowledgment of destruction, including self-destruction, without conceding the necessity of an ethics or politics of anxiety. Like Butler, and perhaps even more radically, Spinoza insists upon our opacity to ourselves, our irreducible and original multiplicity and constitutive relationality, as well as the inability finally to demarcate the boundaries of the self. Yet his ethics culminates in what he calls a "remedy for the affects," in an endeavor to displace and minimize sad passions, like anxiety. In concluding, the question for feminist theory remains: Which are the best fictions, models of selfhood, and modes of speculation for the displacement of anxiety, aggression, and the passions that trigger violence against ourselves and others in a misogynist, homophobic, and racist culture? If I am not able to answer these questions in the course of this brief essay, I hope to underline the importance of asking them.

The Desire to Die? The Death Drive Prefigured by Spinoza

In "The Desire to Live, Spinoza's *Ethics* Under Pressure," Butler performs a reading of Spinoza's *conatus* that endeavors to foreground (a) its sociality and (b) its opacity with respect to individual self-consciousness (2006a). Although there is certainly a tradition that interprets Spinoza's desire for perseverance in being as egoistic, and as a ground for radical individuality if not ethical egoism,¹ each of these claims is assumed by most contemporary interpreters of Spinoza, especially those who work within the continental tradition. Yet she mobilizes these widely shared assumptions toward two ends that set her reading far apart from the Spinoza familiar to readers of Deleuze (1990), Braidotti (2002), or Negri (1991). First, just as she has done in her work since *The Psychic Life of Power*, she inscribes Spinoza within a Hegelian framework of recognition, where the desire to live is inextricable from a struggle to find oneself reflected positively in the world, to represent and to be represented by others in an enabling and life-sustaining way. She further identifies Spinoza with a Hegelian and Heideggerian conception of the self as an "*ek-static*" being, one for whom desire engenders "a dependence on an externalization, something that is palpably not-me, without which no perseverance is possible" (2006a, 113). Third, and probably most contentiously, she argues that since Spinoza affirms that the desire to persevere in being might be occupied by external and destructive forces, one can find in his philosophy "a certain prefiguration of the death drive" (116). Moreover, the possibility that Spinoza allows for the possibility of self-deconstitution and dispossession, far from being an incoherence within an otherwise affirmative philosophy, represents a virtue of his ethics and politics:

Placing Spinoza within a Hegelian and quasi-existentialist paradigm contradicts the many thinkers, especially Deleuze and his readers, who have claimed that Spinoza represents an alternative to a philosophy of lack, an antipathy toward preoccupations with mortality, and a challenge to a phenomenology of consciousness, representation, and an epistemology of re-cognition, as it is prefigured in Descartes.² Moreover, Butler's claims involve reading Spinoza against himself, reinterpreting his own arguments against negativity in both its affective and metaphysical forms.³ As is well known, Spinoza claims that nothing good comes from melancholy (which is his name for the diminution of all parts of the body at once, IIIp10s), that "a free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death" (IVp67), and that there is no such thing as a vacuum, or void in being (Ip15s). As if locating Spinoza within the very tradition to which many take him to be the most robust alternative were not enough, Butler proceeds to claim that

Spinoza himself both prefigures and honors the death drive, a psychoanalytic principle from which his admirers also distance him. Thus, according to Butler, Spinoza not only has a place within the tradition whose counter-tradition he is said to animate (see Negri 1995), but his own philosophy thematizes the centrality of the negativity and de-constitution of the self captured by the principle of the death drive. This, as Butler observes in her reading, involves disposing Spinoza's claims in contradiction to his several assertions to the contrary: "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (IIIp4); things that can destroy one another cannot be in the same subject (IIIp5); and "no one ... avoids food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature" (IVp20s); among others.

Since she knows that she is on unstable ground, Butler makes her argument carefully. Since space does not allow me to examine all of the heresies involved in her interpretation, I must save the question of whether and how Spinoza fits into a framework of recognition for another day. For now, I will merely outline that premise without assessing its plausibility or justification. What interests me in this essay is that, for Butler, the radical sociality of the self, the notion of an *ek-static* self that desires life and thus recognition, must also admit of a desire for death as its condition of perseverance. The reading she offers of Spinoza here, as her readers will easily recognize, represents a variant of her own position. Let me proceed through the steps of her argument.⁴

First, Butler shows that the desire to persevere in being (Spinoza, IIIp7), the striving to enhance one's power and life, cannot be a "personal desire," but since one's power is always dependent upon and involved with the powers of others, one's essential desire to live must be coextensive with a desire that others live. That the successful striving to persist in being involves the facilitation and enhancement of other lives is a basic principle in Spinoza. In the most important proposition describing the life of "modes," or finite, singular things, Spinoza writes:

Every singular thing, or anything which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause can also neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity (Ip28).

This proposition refers to tables, birds, and states, as much as to singular human actors.⁵ All singular things are essentially constituted by the

striving to persevere in being (*conatus*), and by the inability to effect such striving without the determinate collaboration of infinitely many other beings, relationships of constant exchange and interaction, most of which remain entirely inaccessible to human consciousness. A piece of wood strives to persist in being, endeavors to preserve its integrity against the background of things that erode it, and endures with the assistance of those myriad beings that enable it. The *conatus* becomes "desire" in the case of human beings because we are usually constituted by "appetite together with consciousness of this appetite" (IIIp9s).

Although it is important that, for Spinoza, humans, including their power of thinking, are different in degree rather than in kind from other beings (IIp13s), it is precisely the existence of this striving "together with consciousness" that makes human desire more fraught and complicated than the *conatus* of a rock or piece of wood. On the one hand, the proposition cited above confirms that it is simply a fact that no singular, finite thing exists or acts except by virtue of others. Butler underlines, however, that the desire to live (presumably for humans) entails the desire "to live in a world that reflects and furthers the possibilities of that perseverance" (2006a, 112). This remark recalls her remarks in *The Psychic Life of Power and Undoing Gender* that the *conatus* reappears in Hegel, such that the desire to live is the desire for recognition (1997, 27–8; 2004, 31). Since others (people?) "wield the power of reflection," what Butler refers to as Spinoza's "self" imagines its possibilities of perseverance in a "complex interplay of reflection," which expresses its affective orientation with respect to its ambient others (2006a, 113). Thus, the essential desire for self-preservation, what some have seen as a narcissistic foundation for ethics and politics, actually "produces an *ek-stasis* in the midst of desire, a dependence on an externalization" (113), the force of which "renders this 'I' equivocal" (114).

Butler's reading of selfhood in Spinoza aligns him with her interpretation of Hegel (the model of selfhood that she more or less advocates). As the familiar narrative goes, while the desire to live may appear to an individual consciousness as a desire for mastery and invulnerability, its struggle with another implicitly acknowledges its desire to be reflected in the other's desire. Butler advocates an emphatically non-Aristophanic interpretation of the movement of Hegelian desire (2004, 150). The self is not an original whole that, once dispossessed, will undergo a process of mediation by which it is returned to itself in order to enjoy an elevated form of self-possession. On the contrary, she contends that the self is always already *ek-static*, given over to others, irretrievably outside of itself, and inhabited by an alterity that it can never master. If the notion of a unified, simple, undifferentiated self remains a persistent fiction, perhaps even a foundational fantasy that animates the struggle for

recognition in the first place, it does not reflect the reality of what kind of beings we truly are; that is, the fantasy obscures that a self is socially constituted, a vulnerable body dependent on myriad other bodies, a human psyche riven by enabling and disabling attachments and desires.

Because, on Butler's reading, Spinoza shares the view that one is always already and necessarily outside oneself, standing apart from oneself, this opens the possibility for being inhabited by contradictory currents, which might move the desire to live in opposing directions. Butler thus juxtaposes Spinoza and Freud on the question of whether it is morality, or demands of social propriety, that might produce a struggle within the erotic urge to live. She thus performs a kind of symptomatic reading of Spinoza's assertion that "No one can desire to be blessed, to act and live well, unless at the same time he desires to be, to act, to live, that is, to actually exist" (IVp21). She suggests that, while this would seem to suggest that Spinoza does not see a conflict between "the virtuous life" and the desire to live, this also suggests that "living in the wrong way," perhaps under the constraints of oppression, abuse, or other hostile pressures, "can induce the desire not to live" (114). While Butler completely ignores the fact that Spinoza equates virtue and power (IVdef8), her point remains that no one lives, let alone lives well, without a preponderance of enabling relationships with others. Moreover, absent such relationships, one's ability to persevere in being is annihilated, and, in an especially hostile environment, one's desire might likewise become moribund. This much is clear in Spinoza (see IVappVII), even if an analysis of the play between desire, reason, and morality (better understood as *pietas* than *virtus*) would have to take a much more complicated route than the one Butler suggests.

She proceeds to treat Spinoza's well-known remarks on suicide, in which he contends that one cannot, properly speaking, be the agent of one's own destruction. Rather, one kills oneself only by virtue of external causes, like illness, physical or mental coercion, or "hidden external causes" (*causae latentes externae*) that force one to take on "another nature" of which there cannot be an idea in the mind (IVp20s). In Cristofolini's gloss, *sui-cide* is explained by Spinoza always as *alteri-cide* (1991, 87). Yet since Butler incorporates Spinoza into a line of thought according to which "the self 'is' this relation to alterity" (2004, 150), even as she acknowledges that there is no absolute alterity of the Other in Spinoza (2006a, 125), a strict line demarcating self-destruction and destruction by others becomes unsustainable. Because one is always and irreducibly constituted by others, as Spinoza surely thinks, might these hidden, latent causes be "external" in only a peculiar sense?

Butler is surely right to note that Spinoza's philosophy renders a strict demarcation between self and other very difficult to draw. Although the

conatus is meant to be precisely the principle of singularization, it also, as Macherey points out, entails the need for others. We do not strive *simpliciter*, we strive to be, to become, to affect others and to be affected by them (1995, 80). Moreover, Spinoza himself affirms that the rational, free man ceases to draw a line of demarcation between himself and those with whom he "agrees in nature," that is, those whose powers support and enhance one another (IVp35). Moreover, the universal and irreducible dependence upon others, the fact that to be a body is to be constantly exchanging parts with other bodies (IIp13postIV), means that "one," especially something as complex as a human individual, is never simply one. We contain multitudes, as Walt Whitman exclaims, and multitudes are what we are. Moreover, Spinoza affirms many times that we only know our own bodies by virtue of our encounters with others (IIp19), and we will never have adequate knowledge of either our bodies (IIp24; IIp2s) or our minds (IIp23). In order to know the totality of oneself, one would have to know all that contributes to and composes one's being, which is ultimately the entirety of Nature. Moreover, the precise composition of our minds and bodies constantly changes, and all that remains of "personal identity" is a relatively stable proportion of motion and rest among our varying parts, along with the idea of that proportion.

It is not at all clear that the mere presence of "hidden external causes" is sufficient to explain the occurrence of suicide, or, more precisely, the presence of a hostile force *that is constitutive of a being's essence*. For Spinoza, all finite beings are determined by "hidden external causes," if one understands by "external" a cause that cannot be explained solely based upon the "nature" or "essence" of a thing. In fact, the preponderance of any finite being's existence and action cannot be explained by its "nature," "essence," or "*conatus*" (interchangeable terms for Spinoza), but must be explained by the dynamic activity of Nature, as an unbounded totality. With respect to finite individuals, their existence and action are mostly determined, at the level of affect, by passions, or events pertaining to the body and mind of which one is only the "partial cause" (IIIdef2-3), and, at the level of ideas, by inadequate, partial, and confused ideas, ideas that do not include knowledge of their causes.

Spinoza affirms unequivocally that we are comprised of "external" forces, powers uninterested in our particular well being that we nevertheless depend upon for our perseverance, and which can never be known to us. For desire to take the form of conscious appetite does not entail anything like knowledge of our desire, what determines it, or the shapes of its "objects." When Spinoza defines desire, it is in the note to the proposition that reads as follows: "Both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it strives, for

an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being, and it is conscious of the striving it has" (IIIp9). Likewise, in the appendix to part I, Spinoza complains that "men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing." In loose psychoanalytic parlance, it is fair to say that Spinoza's consciousness is replete with the unconscious, and even dreams do not disclose the forces working upon desire.

Butler's reading helpfully emphasizes the opaque forces that clearly operate in Spinoza's account of human desire. Moreover, one does not have to look far to see an acknowledgment in Spinoza of powerful forces of destruction. The first and only axiom to part IV affirms that there "is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed." Likewise, all humans are subject to passions and thus both "disagree" with each other and with themselves. That is, social and individual bodies and minds are internally divided by passions, and, to that extent, are unable to coordinate their energies into a *convenientia*, an agreement of power (IVp31-5). Such disagreement is necessary and insuperable, since it "is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause" (IVp4). It is certainly important to point out that a complex individual like a human being is far from simple, is necessarily inhabited by forces that militate against its flourishing, yet I still do not see that the presence of hostile, indifferent, or conflicting forces, along with the contours of an unconscious life in Spinoza's philosophy, lead to a notion, however inchoate, of a death drive. As I mentioned, Butler acknowledges that she is "not quite" representing Spinoza's ideas in her reading, which is also not meant to be a "definitive" one. Thus, I would like to turn away from Spinoza and toward some reflections upon the conceptual framework that Butler is unfolding throughout her work.

From *Ek-stasy* to Death

I am largely persuaded by the contours of the self that Butler outlines throughout her work, and in her somewhat unorthodox reading of Hegel. She describes it often, and with increasing elegance: "Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty that to which I lay claim as my own" (2004, 21). Yet I am left with some questions: Why does being given over to others entail, first, that desire is best understood as a dynamic struggle between self-affirming and self-

annihilating forces; and, second, that we must mourn a unified conception of oneself that we never had in the first place, lest we suffer melancholy and risk acting out our aggression on ourselves and/or others? Of course, we do not need to deduce aggression, violence, and destruction from our concept of the self in order to observe its overwhelming presence in our lives. That social life is replete with violence, pain, and suffering would be ludicrous to deny, just as it would be absurd, in my view, to dismiss Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern subjectivity characterized by self-punishment. I find Butler's concern with sadism and masochism in its various forms well placed. Likewise, I share her reluctance to erect models of selfhood and sociality that simply support our aspirations, or function as normative ideals, without sufficiently attending to the dangers that human interactions involve.⁶ Still, I am not sure why an ethics that does not dismiss the persistence of destructive social dynamics entails that we import such destructive agency into the core of the self.

With respect to the first question, I am not accusing Butler herself of subscribing to a theory of drives. Although she juxtaposes Spinoza to Freud, she implicitly distances herself from a theory of the drives in her reading of LaPlanche (2005) and elsewhere. Thus, perhaps the hypothesis of the death drive as an ineradicable factor in desire simply forces one to abandon a fantasy that one can exorcise aggression from the self or others, once and for all. It may function merely as a pragmatic, ethical premise to counter one that might neutralize the necessary vigilance and suspicion needed to hold aggression in check, directed against either oneself or others. Likewise, if each and every one of us houses a destructive urge to annihilate, one cannot identify aggression, violence, and threat only with others, the Other, or any particular axis of evil. Thus, in place of self-righteousness in ethics, or unshakeable, universal foundations of justice in politics, we should be anxiously interrogating ourselves and questioning our assumptions about others. At least, this is one way to understand the motivation for preserving the death drive as a necessary aspect of the self, rather than an acquired and contingent property belonging to some people and not to others.

Second, Butler seems to understand all subjectivities to be constituted by loss, even as the fact of such loss may be more or less violently foreclosed, refused, or disavowed by the psyche (1997, 163). Again, her illuminating treatment of LaPlanche suggests that it is imperative to grieve our constitutive losses and to allow them permanent residence, as it were, in order to mitigate sadism. She sketches a portrait of the dangers posed by refusing to mourn the death "of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had"

(2005, 65). If such loss is not mourned, one may strive to re-center oneself, to gather oneself up in the shape of a sovereign subject, which would entail a refusal of one's constitutive sociality. Since to be is to be given over to others, to be constituted by alterity, the endeavor to inoculate oneself against others or, in Spinozan terms, to posit oneself as one's exclusive and adequate cause, would be a sadistic urge to expel, suppress, or annihilate those "others" that are oneself. At its limit, the aspiration to sovereignty or godliness is suicide and/or murder.

Yet if selves are never unified, sovereign, or self-possessed, why is an erotic drive to mastery a universal plague? Why are (all? most? many?) selves animated and governed by this loss of a self that they never enjoyed in the first place? What is the nature of a melancholia that mourns what it never had? What kind of loss is one that never takes place? Why is subjectivity an inevitable "vacillation between loss and ecstasy" (2005, 28), if one is always already without a contained self? Why must one externalize a self that is necessarily standing outside itself? What does it mean to externalize oneself, if one is always already external? Again, if we take Butler's claims as working hypotheses, speculative fictions, animated by ethical imperatives, it is unnecessary to hold her to these descriptions as eternal, metaphysical principles. It is certainly plausible that an aspiration to mastery represents a widespread cultural fantasy in Western societies, and that it has done so for a long time.

Nevertheless, I detect a tension between an account of unconscious psychic life constituted by loss(es) it can never fully avow, or understand, and the insistence that we never had the kind of self that we nevertheless must learn to mourn. Even as I recognize each as a speculative fiction, I wonder whether one fiction attenuates the power of the other. In particular, I wonder how well a project of mourning, a process that can never be complete, supports a project that affirms and avows one's constitutive sociality, one's radical and irreducible being-with others. I understand that Butler means to couple these two gestures. Her portrait suggests that one can only incorporate others into one's psyche non-violently by mourning the death of the sovereign self (oneself imagined as *causa sui*).

Perhaps Butler is right. Acquiescence to the necessity of working through certain sad passions is a necessary project for many, perhaps most contemporary subjects. The innumerable people, especially women,⁷ who suffer from depression, anxiety, and various "new maladies of the soul" suggests that a response to such passions is urgently needed. Yet how one works through them should be a subject of debate among social theorists as well as psychologists. I want to conclude with a brief

discussion of Spinoza's suggestion that such sad passions are only worked through by way of an amplification of joyful passions.

Erotic Strategies

In her essay on Spinoza, Butler invokes "the political potential of anxiety" that she advocates in *Undoing Gender*. In a Heideggerian vein, anxiety belongs to an authentic relationship toward one's own death-bound condition, a future-oriented stance in which Dasein affirms its homelessness in the world, the ultimate inability to ground its existence. Butler translates this notion into political terms. "If there can be a modernity without foundationalism, then it will be one in which the key terms of its operation are not fully secured in advance, one that assumes a futural form for politics that cannot be fully anticipated, a politics of hope and anxiety" (2004, 180). She affirms anxiety as an antidote to both ontological and epistemological security, opposing it to struggle undergirded by "conviction" (2006a, 127). Rather than being armed with unassailable principles, a politics of hope and anxiety preserves an openness to correction, solicits rather than forecloses interruptions of its tentative foundations and modes of justification, and cultivates an awareness of its provisionality. Ultimately, a politics of anxiety is aware that no ground can be justified with finality, and thus remains necessarily and fruitfully unstable. It affirms that its positions must give way in response to new challenges, new demands for inclusion, new shapes of "the human," "the good," and "the just." Butler's outline of political antifoundationalism is well known, ever since her prescient piece "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Post-Modernism" (1992).

The extent to which Heideggerian anxiety resembles the ontic, everyday affect of anxiety suffered by late modern subjects is a question I leave to Heidegger scholars. Although Butler does not mark her debt to Heidegger, her invocation of *ek-stasy* and her particular formulations leave little doubt that she appropriates his terminology, albeit in her own way. In the case of her essay on Spinoza, she does leave anxiety in quotation marks, however, which she does not do elsewhere. The quotation marks likely indicate an awareness of the peculiarity of invoking such an affective stance in the context of an essay on Spinoza's *Ethics*. But any Spinozist, such as myself, cannot help but ask whether anxiety is the best affect to mobilize against excessive conviction, hostile exclusion, and politically dangerous self-satisfaction.

Anxiety might be most naturally categorized as a species of fear, which Spinoza defines as "an inconstant sadness born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt"

(IIIp18s2). Spinoza singles out fear in the political writings as among the most pernicious affects; fear is the life-source of superstition that can lead to despotism (Spinoza 1998, preface).⁸ Spinoza does not deny the inevitable play of fear and hope governing our uncertain relationship to the future. Indeed, he offers something close to an antifoundationalist principle in his discussion of the difference between human and divine law. "[W]e plainly have no knowledge of the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things ... so that for practical purposes, it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent" (1998, 48–9). Whereas divine law comprises those things that cannot be contradicted, such as gravity, human law includes any rule, command, or guideline that can be obeyed or disobeyed. Any human code or law cannot be grounded in anything like absolute knowledge of Nature, or reality. Moreover, the preface to part IV of the *Ethics* affirms, like Butler, that our model (exemplar) of human nature serves as a useful fiction to guide our future-oriented actions, and to give shape to our idea of a desirable life, but it cannot express anything like a *telic* unfolding of the human essence, since there are no final causes in Nature. What we call "human" refers to an imaginary universal, which reflects our peculiar corporeal histories. "For example, those who have more often regarded man's stature with wonder will understand by man an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—for example, man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal" (IIp40s). Spinoza claims that such notions of humanity depend upon habits of association, the "disposition of [the] body," and the desire to affirm or exclude oneself from the image. It is not a far step to claim that one's universals must be provisional, revisable, and contestable, since clearly they are best treated as modes of imagination springing from context, experience, and desire.

Yet Spinoza's insistence that our laws, rules, and models of humanity are contingent expressions of our peculiar bodies and desires does not lead him to affirm an anxious comportment toward what we think we know. Rather, we must habituate ourselves to patterns of thinking and association that mitigate fear as much as possible. The affective therapy in which the *Ethics* culminates entails a careful and deliberate response to our sad passions and their displacement through an amplification of the joyful ones. One practice he recommends is the meditation upon possible future harms.

To put aside fear, we must think in the same way of tenacity, that is, we must recount and frequently imagine the common dangers of life and how they can be best avoided by presence of mind and

strength of character. But it should be noted that in ordering our thoughts and images, we must always ... attend to those things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy (Vp10s).

Perhaps the imperative to see "those things which are good in each thing" is why Spinoza urges us to see, even in the apparent desire to die, the desire to live. He suggests that even suicide can and should be seen as evidence of precisely that life-affirming force that it appears to exclude. Since the project of Spinoza's *Ethics* is to enhance our power, our ability to persevere in being, and he affirms that finite beings cannot have anything like exhaustive knowledge of themselves or the world, the best we can hope for is to be acted upon by enabling forces, to be inhabited by and linked to bodies that amplify and enhance one's life. Thus, he offers something like a strategic affective orientation toward the world and, in particular, toward its threats and horrors.

Because one cannot simply decide to feel one way or another, even as one might engage in deliberate practices and meditations such as the ones he suggests, Spinoza places an especially high value upon friendship. When Blyenbergh wrote to Spinoza with some questions about the meaning of good and evil in his philosophy, he assured Spinoza that his aim was only to understand and not to judge. Spinoza, happy to get a sincere inquiry, perhaps got carried away in his praise of the love that two friends bonded by a desire for understanding might share. As the epigraph to this essay reads, Spinoza urgently declares his desire for friendship, one of the greatest joys of life which nevertheless remains outside his control. When he learns that Blyenbergh was actually interested in persuading Spinoza to accept more conventional theological views, the disappointment and sadness in Spinoza's ensuing letters is palpable. Spinoza was not able to moderate his sad passions very well after his hope for friendship was extinguished. Yet the exchange reveals how urgently Spinoza felt he needed the support of others, how much his own perseverance depended upon enjoining others in a common effort, and how tranquility requires engaging with those who value understanding over judgment.

Terrible things happen. The world is filled with violence and horror, including that violence we impose upon ourselves, which is precisely what Spinoza claims prompted him to philosophize (1995, Letter 30). Yet he promotes coming to know what might be good in all bad things, and cultivating friendship with others. He advocates coming to see what is good in things, I think, not in order to excuse them, but to understand how they reflect the desire to live, and thus to be in a better position to act upon them, to try to imagine how such affects, desires, and passions

might be directed toward their "correct use," toward the amplification of our collective power to think and act.

Spinoza's erotic strategy may not be better than Butler's thanatic one. In fact, it may be possible to practice them in tandem, to alert oneself to the destructive forces at work while also aiming to uncover the constructive impulses that nevertheless attend catastrophic human events and projects. I suspect that one does not have to choose once and for all between a politics of anxiety and a militancy of joy. Yet if Spinoza is right, sad passions reflect a diminishment of the mind's power to think and the body's power to act (IIIp11s). From a Spinozan perspective, one would be reluctant to allow too much room for anxiety, considerations of death, and mourning, for example, the loss of an impossible ideal of sovereignty. As feminists have already begun to do, we might find as many ways as possible in theory and practice to enjoy, affirm, and amplify our multiplicity, our existence as, with, and for others. If Butler and Freud are right, the melancholia suffered by the loss of our erotic drive for self-sufficiency and mastery needs to be worked through. Yet an affective therapy might attune itself to what is good in this desire, and thereby be moved to its displacement from an affect of joy.

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Notes

1. While Butler presents this reading as a response to Levinas, there are few, if any, Spinoza scholars who would deny the centrality of sociality for Spinoza. The current representatives of a kind of libertarian interpretation of Spinoza are Lee Rice and Steven Barbone. Yet even as they emphasize the centrality of individuality, they do not ignore the sociality entailed by the principle of *conatus*. Barbone, for example, argues that Spinoza's philosophy represents for a reconciliation of egoism and altruism, in "Virtue and Sociality in Spinoza" (1993).
2. For an interesting feminist discussion of Spinoza as a thinker against recognition in the Cartesian sense, see Tina Chanter (2006, 127–145).
3. I will proceed to cite Spinoza parenthetically in the body of the paper with the standard notation, using Edwin Curley's edition and translation of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (1985). Citations refer to the part (Roman numeral), proposition (p), demonstration (d), scholium (s), corollary (c), appendix (app), preface (pref), and definition (def).

4. In doing so, I will also be forced to leave aside her defense of Spinoza against Levinas's charge that he leaves no room for radically alterity.
5. Although Spinoza's principle of *conatus* refers to any and all singular things, Butler only ever invokes it with reference to humans. Chloë Taylor critiques Butler's self-conscious exclusion of non-human animals from her concerns in her forthcoming article (2008).
6. On this, see Butler's critique of Jessica Benjamin (2004, Ch. 6) and Amy Allen's very interesting discussion of it (2006).
7. Women are diagnosed twice as often as men with depression and anxiety disorders (National Institute of Health, 1994).
8. For a more detailed treatment of this, see Sharp (2005).

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