

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Judith Butler and **Athena Athanasiou**, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 211 pp., \$21.95 paper (9780745653815).

To begin the final exchange of this twenty-one section book with Judith Butler (JB), Athena Athanasiou (AA), the first speaker throughout, writes:

My sense is that our conversation, Judith, perhaps in its entirety, has been insistently gesturing toward the question — and the affective labor — of critical agency, in its entwinement with multiple forms of doing, undoing, being undone, and becoming, as well as multiple forms of giving and giving up. (AA 193)

I think that I agree. This book does its work in the face of established critical scholarship that shows the self to be accomplished via discursive powers that produce psychic life in neoliberal times. This scholarship has shown the place of the self as ready-made prior to our arrival on the scene, and has also put into question the possibility of agency.

As Athanasiou suggests, she and Butler can be read as orienting their discussion to the gesture of continuing in the tradition of questioning the appearance of a *critical agency*. But their questioning does not so much aim to disrupt the taken-for-granted status of the agentive action of a sovereign self since such disruption is their assumed starting point throughout the book. Butler's and Athanasiou's exchanges do, however, question the idea of agency in the face of being done and undone by the dispossessions enacted by capitalism, liberalism, humanism, and even by social theory itself.

Thus, "insistently gesturing toward the question of critical agency" (AA 193) can be taken as *Dispossessions'* animating orientation. By "oriented" I do not mean to suggest the "arelational" disposition that Butler (JB 47) finds in current uses of "sexual orientation," discussed in section four, "Sexual Dispositions" (44–54). Rather, that this book is *oriented* to the question of critical agency means that the authors' exchanges are fully informed by a relation to the latest theorization of the impossibility of agency as this simultaneously spurs the agentive imagination onwards to the sensibility that producing something other than the same is possible.

Butler (JB 53) expresses this paradox in this way: “Acted upon, yet acting, the ‘we’ who we are is caught always precisely there, at the nexus of temporal demands from the past and the future.” Caught and captivated by a vibrant welter of scholarship regarding the question of agency, Athanasiou and Butler show the reader what it means to be haunted by the impossibility of a straightforward agency. They do so, however, as a way to confront agency *as* it appears as a critical space for critical inquiry regarding its own possibility. Such a project can be read as one way to respond to Stuart Hall’s (2000:26) use of Foucault’s (1987:5) “hermeneutics of desire” as a call for reflexive dialogue with the terms and practices that have conditioned the meaning of being human, in this case the terms of agency within scholarship that has radically disrupted any version of a sovereign self.

Throughout *Dispossession*, readers will find various expressions of this paradox of being oriented to the question of critical agency while caught within the confines of its current configuration as impossible. For example:

And so we take up the question of how to become disposed 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. (JB and AA xi)

Or,

In general, dispossession speaks to how human bodies become materialized and de-materialized through histories of slavery, colonization, apartheid, capitalist alienation, immigration and asylum politics, postcolonial liberal multiculturalism, gender and sexual normativity, securitism governmentality, and humanitarian reason... (AA 10) Even though the metaphysics of presence is not something that can be evaded or thwarted at will, this does not mean that we cannot be present to one another in ways not subsumed by this order. (AA 15)

Or again,

...the “I” who works on herself, who crafts, herself, is already formed by social relations and norms that are themselves in the making, that is, in process, open to crafting. The sovereign refusal of dependency, for example, is still a relation to the other... So much depends on how we understand the “I” who crafts herself, since it will not be a fully agentic subject who initiates that crafting. It will be an “I” who is already crafted but also who is compelled to craft again her crafted condition. (JB 70)

With guidance from the final section, “Spaces of Appearance, Politics of Exposure” (193–197), the reader (re)encounters *Dispossession*’s

orienting theme of an essential paradox of a desire for the impossible possibility of agency. Returning to the text from the vantage point of the final section, Butler and Athanasiou's relation to this paradox can be discerned throughout. For example:

So the question is not how to articulate recourse to the grand narrative of the self-contained, self-sufficient individual, but rather how to do it within and against this normative grand narrative, how to do it critically, differently.... (AA 99)

It is my understanding that to answer these questions requires insistence on the politics of performativity: norms, names, signs, practices, and regulatory fictions can be invoked, cited anew, and challenged at once. (AA 99)

And,

What I take from Arendt is the notion that there might be forms of political agency, what she would call "action," that require a self conceived as a plurality. This is not a self divided up internally into separate parts, but one who comes into being, and can only come into being, on the occasion of relations with others, and so is "located" precisely in and as the relation itself ... since whatever "agency" is possible and valuable is conditioned by an unchosen realm ... the interdiction against genocide is a consequence of the normative value that comes from the unchosen character of earthly cohabitation. (JB 122)

Alongside their radical uncertainty with agency, lies their affective labour not only of forging a relation to agency as a space of questions, but also of coming to know how we are living with our unchosen relations. Athanasiou suggests that a critical agency lies in attending to how our lives are already put into practice by the powers that be but, to do so, without reliance on a grand narrative of I am, I do, I feel, I will. Similarly, Butler gestures toward human action conceived in relation to what has already acted upon and enacted the self as this meets others also so situated and with whom we form scenes of an "unchosen character of earthly cohabitation" that can bring reflection to being.

This book offers important provocations for those who orient to and live with agency as a key question haunting modernity. This book would be of benefit for graduate level social theory courses in Women and Gender Studies, Cultural or Disability Studies, Queer or Postcolonial theory or any other sociologically oriented course that is addressing the self and its subjectitude. With the many long lists of potential examples sketched between the authors' exchanges, this book can be used to raise the question of critical agency within most disciplines in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. The reader's openness to Butler and Athana-

siou as they work with the paradox of agency as an impossible possibility seems pertinent to a productive reading. *Dispossession* also invites the reader to discern whether our theory-laden performances of critical agency serve to rewrite this paradox in the shape of ever more sophisticated conundrums, or whether such theorizing has provided new ways to encounter our unchosen uncertainties.

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