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Dasgupta, S.

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Words, Bodies, Times

Queer theory before and after itself

Sudeep Dasgupta

University of Amsterdam

Both queer theory and Jacques Rancière's work have articulated critiques of identity. These critiques however, have taken place in very different institutional and disciplinary contexts, and are also marked by very specific histories. In this essay, close readings of specific essays (Edelman, Bersani, Dean, Butler) in queer theory are related to arguments developed by Rancière in order to bring out clearly the very different modes through which critiques of identity have been developed. In particular, the themes of language and representation, and ethics, provide the two perspectives through which both the conjunctions and disjunctions between queer theory and Rancière's work are explored. Representation and ethics in both bodies of work, the essay argues, provide for a comparative and mutually illuminating perspective on the articulation of words, bodies and images.

A lesbian and gay population...is defined by multiple boundaries that make the question who is and who is not 'one of them' not merely ambiguous but rather a perpetually and necessarily contested issue. (Warner, 1993: xxv)

The demos is forever drawing away from itself, dispersing itself in the multiplicity of ecstatic and sporadic pleasures. (Rancière, 1995: 15)

Conjoining Rancière's understanding of politics with Warner's definition of sexual borders might open one to the charge of constructing superficial connections and tenuous homologies. For the *demos* and the 'queer' cannot be simplistically linked through the discourse of ecstasies, pleasures and multiplicities. To do so would be to ignore the crucial differences between Rancière's discussion of, and queer theory's relation to, politics. On the other hand, framing the one through the other might productively enable thinking a

relationality between Rancière's understanding of politics and queer theory's critique of identity. Both share, minimally, a critique of the stabilization of identity through hegemonic discourses: in Rancière's case, through a powerful archival reading of workers' intellectual and political practices (Rancière, 1989), for queer theory, through a critique of the assumed essentialist notions of identity of the gay and lesbian liberation movement (Seidman, 1997). Michael Warner's commentary in *Fear of a Queer Planet* sees belonging, based on sexual orientation, as *necessarily* contested and always subject to dislocation, while Rancière, in *On the Shores of Politics* argues that the *demos* is 'forever drawing away from *itself*' (emphasis added). Warner's 'multiple boundaries' and Rancière's 'shores,' call attention to the crucial instability of identity and the motility of borders. However, the fields of knowledge within which both critiques take place, their specific modes of argumentation, and the conceptual resources furnished to substantiate their respective arguments are not the same.

By marking the differences between them, and at the same time, producing points of contact, the essay connects specific arguments in Rancière's oeuvre to crucial developments in queer theory. In particular, by weaving the two into and out of each other's specific arguments around *representation and language*, and *ethics*, I will argue for Rancière's relevance for a politically productive revisioning of queer theory, whose substance is being questioned in some quarters (Halperin, 2003). At the same time, if Eve Sedgwick is right that 'queer is the unstable solvent that dissolves all stable identities' (1990: 85), then the disruptive instability that much queer theory articulates might bear a specific relation to Rancière's resolutely anti-consensual understanding of politics.

To think queer theory 'before itself,' is to argue that Rancière's writings, both prior to and after, queer theory's emergence, position us in the double sense of evaluating queer theory's presence, and ours before it, *and* constellating a nexus of temporalities of a before and after, which might provide new insights around representation, language and ethics. Rancière's relevance then, lies not just in an asynchronous relation to, and before queer theory (*Nights of Labour* was translated into English in 1989). His in-disciplinary interventions were also formulating a politics *before* the subject, including the queer subject (Rifkin, 2005), whose deconstruction by queer theory in the academy came *after* the subject had been consolidated politically and intellectually. Constellating the time of the subject, and the times of its theorizations reveals productive disjunctions and conjunctions in thinking the relation between bodies, words and times.

Language and representation

Foucault's *History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978, original French publication in 1976) was experienced by many, particularly in the U.S. (see Rubin and Butler, 1997) as making

possible a theoretical critique of the 'naturalness' of homosexual identity. His theorization of the discursive production of subjectivity moved the terms of the gathering internal debate in gay and lesbian studies in the early 1980s away from the expression of an innate identity to a recognition that the very language and expression of sexed subjectivity was solicited by a power-knowledge nexus deployed through discourse. The argument that an 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1990: 17) produced an identity caught within the power relations it sought to resist, suggested a shift from theorizing or positing homosexual identity to analyzing its mode of production. The shift from the language of homosexual identity and experience, to a focus on how 'same-sex sex acts have different cultural *meanings* in different historical contexts' (Jagose, 1996: 9, emphasis added) however, shifted the focus from the discursive construction of homosexuality toward a theoretization of meaning, language and representation. The post-Saussurean critique of the sign came to figure prominently in the shift from identity to identification. Thus the Foucauldian influence in U.S. queer theory coincided with the rising influence of Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which on the surface at least, could not be easily reconciled with Foucault's work (Davidson, 2001). I am not arguing that reconciliation of different theoretical interventions (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan) is necessary or desirable. It is important to note this nexus however, since it relates to the ex-centric relation of Rancière to queer theory, as we shall see. Both Rancière and Foucault are indebted to a Kantian understanding of the reduction of the multiplicities of experience to categories, and despite their differences of focus, how they analyzed the effects of this categorical imperative, I would argue, were significantly distinct from the Derridean and Lacanian influence that came to mark much queer theory.

Queer theory developed what I am tempted to consider a 'paradigmatic' discourse, where the destabilization of the sexed and sexually-desiring subject, was theorized through a Derridean understanding of *écriture* and a Lacanian reading of Freud. At issue was the *inadequacy* of representation, the inability of language to fix the subject, which instead gets spoken through a language which destabilizes it. The discursive production of the homosexual subject, queer theory argues, is marked by incompleteness, ambivalence and instability precisely because of the inability of representation either to adequate the object it refers to, or to control the discourse-effect it engenders. Most, though not all the essays in *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, Gay theories* (Fuss, 1994), for example, problematise the stability of identity through deconstruction and psychoanalysis.

In 'Seeing things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex,' Lee Edelman (1994: 173-91) intricately explicates Freud and Derrida by deranging the equalization, through 'ocular proof,' of sexual identity with sexual acts. Edelman's virtuoso reading figures the 'infectious indecency of sodomy' backwards, as it were, to analyze the structural ambivalence of representational adequacy and scopic certainty. His argument is predicated on the

centrality of doubt in Freud's understanding of 'the powerful ambivalent tendencies in the pre-genital phase, which from then on become attached to every pair of opposites' (Freud, 1972: 77, qtd. in Edelman, 1994: 190). If same-sex sodomy is one defining character of homosexual identity, then pre-genital ambivalence infects the binaries generated by 'normative' sexuality. The scene of gay male sex (sodomy) as the ocular proof of homosexual identity is destabilized by 'the indeterminacy of the primal scene' (Edelman, 1994: 190). The turn to Freud, which suggests a *description* of the doubt-ridden ambivalence of binary sexual identity is immediately deliteralised by turning to Derrida who argues that turning one's back (to Plato) becomes 'a very amorous position' (Derrida, 1987: 178, qtd in Edelman, 1994: 191). By bottoming up the 'P' of 'Plato, Philosophy and phallogocentrism' into the 'D' of 'Derrida and deconstruction' (1994: 190), Edelman's psychoanalytic deconstruction of sexual identity undermines the epistemological certainty of sight. He reveals seeing sodomy as just 'seeing things,' and conceptualizes writing itself as sodomitical – 'writing, performing a sodomitical reversal, gestures towards the persistence of a 'pre-genital' indeterminacy that the law of castration would deny through institutional categories of present and not present' (1994: 190). The 'figuration of sodomy' rather than its self-evident transparency, replaces sodomy as cause and homosexuality as effect with the '(il)logic of metalepsis that refutes the possibility of defining clear identities or establishing the security of fixed positions' and 'discovers, instead...the sodomitical (il)logic of the primal scene that comes always both before and behind it' (Edelman, 1994: 191). Sodomy as a bodily practice then, far from defining identity, embodies the essential figurality of sexual identity. This figurality undermines binaries of presence and absence, and writes indeterminacy into the text of sexual identity. At issue is both the critique of identity and the *mode* through which the critique was conducted. Despite the differences between Derrida and Lacan, a complicated *and* often reworked (Butler, 1997) conjunction of the two got deployed in queer theory.

The night of light

The relationship of bodily practices and identity was crucial to Rancière's oeuvre, particularly since the 1981 publication of *La nuit des prolétaires* (translated into English as *Nights of Labour: The Worker's dream in Nineteenth-century France* in 1989). A decade's worth of archival research into workers' struggles in nineteenth-century France reveals that worker-being is not found through an equation between labour as practice and 'worker' as category. Questioning the overlap between the 'order of thought' and 'the "social order"' (2003 [1983]: xxv), Rancière sardonically observes that the historian's 'heartfelt love for science and for the common people' (1989: 11) assigns to the worker 'not words, [but] deeds; not heroism, the daily round; not impressions, numbers; not images, the real thing' (ibid.). *Nights of Labour* demonstrates, that is, *shows*, that the worker was engaging precisely in what was not his/her preserve – employing words, attempting heroism, registering impressions, producing

images. The French workers of the nineteenth century 'created newspapers or associations, wrote poems or joined utopian groups...claiming the status of fully speaking and thinking beings.' Rather than the "importation" of scientific thought into the world of the worker' or 'the affirmation of a worker's culture,' there was 'a transgressive will to appropriate the 'night' of the poets and thinkers, to appropriate the language of the other' (2003: 219).

Rancière's 'showing' is not a depth-hermeneutic that plunges below the surface of deeds and daily drudgery to reveal the truth of worker 'consciousness.' Rather, he announces '[We] are not going to scratch images to bring truth to the surface, we are going to shove them aside so that other figures may *come together* and *decompose* there' (1989: 10, emphases added). This mode of showing does three things at once. Firstly, if workers act as workers should not, and therefore undermine the categorical imperative of (identity as) juridical identification, this undermining coordinates a counter-*commonality* – a coming together which destabilizes the social order by disrupting the border between self and other. This is a process of becoming-worker by becoming other, *with others*. It is a polemical configuration of the social precisely because it links together self-othering with community rather than common-selves with community. Secondly, and following from the first, these nocturnal figures produce a being-together *before* the subject (worker) is made. What is shown is not the completion of stable identity, but a before-identity in the process of being made (composed) and unmade (decomposed). The worker, assigned to incarnate the discourse of truth of the historian – he 'who can know neither it [the discourse of truth] nor himself but who cannot help but manifest it in his words and his action' (1989: 12) – never arrives at such a conjunction of body, time and space on which this discourse is predicated. Hence, the historian's 'strange fascination for the truth of the popular body,' and hence also his condemnation of those "unclassed intellectuals,' 'petty bourgeois ideologists" (ibid.), who by taking part 'in the work of perversion' fail to incarnate 'on (their) proletarian bodies the truth concealed by the daily religion of commodity exchange and word exchange' (ibid.). Thirdly, while for the historian, the theory of labour must coincide with the labour of his theory by coming together and *decomposing*, the flux generated by the proletarian (as pure production, pure unascribed and unassigned proliferation of bodies) is ungraspable by the historian's desire for the worker's body in its stable purity as incarnation of the labour of his theory.

What *proletarian* nights reveal is the coming-together and decomposition of the figures of 'worker-dreamers, prattlers, versifiers, reasoners, and indulgers in sophistry whose notebooks serve as a replacement screen in the mirror of reality granted and appearance withheld and whose falsetto voice creates dissonance in the duet of mute truth and contrite illusion. Perverted proletarians whose discourse is made up of borrowed words' (1989: 15). By registering impressions and borrowing words and images, these workers produce a gap between their bodies and the discourse of truth which confers

on those bodies a mute intentionless speech unbeknownst to the worker. *The intellectual labour of these workers is not solicited, as a response to an official discourse; rather, they derange a discourse which assumes the incapacity of workers to do anything but work.* This gap between incarnation and mute speech, which Rancière later in *L'inconscient esthétique* will call the 'domain of the aesthetic unconscious,' (2001: 44) is populated by shadowy figures whose making and unmaking undermine the lived experience of 'identity' as self-embodiment, refiguring the community through 'antagonistic subjectivation' (2003: 226). This process Rancière charts in 1983 parallels what Foucault in 1981 (English translation 1989) described as the radical threat that homosexuality poses not by asking the question 'Who am I?' (1989: 308) but by exploiting the paradox of a social order traversed by 'affective intensities' that both 'keep it going and shake it up' (1989: 309, emphasis added). 'Askesis' as the 'work that one performs on oneself' but that one 'happily...never attains' (1989a: 309) figures a self-in-the-making which shakes up a social order by redrawing the affective intensities traversing it. The unattainable stability of the self and the disruption of a social order are linked in the temporality of the present continuous.

What are the consequences of this figuration of proletarian perversion for re-thinking queer theory's deconstruction of the sexual subject? Firstly, it is striking that the proliferation of discourse (words, speeches, images) by these proletarian subjects-in-the-making is not a response to an incitement to discourse but the manifestation of a 'transgressive will' that violates the 'order of discourse.' *La parole ouvrière* (Rancière and Faure, 1976) and *Louis-Gabriel Gauny: Le philosophe plébéien* (Rancière, 1983) document the activities and words which interrupt the discursive production of a subject and manifest this transgression through the disordering of bodies, words and times. What is common to the community is made and unmade through the becoming-subject of the worker, not by a deconstructive reading of the subject as effect of the errant signifier but by the errancy of words traversing different bodies.

By stealing away to wander aimlessly without knowing who to speak to or who not to speak to, writing destroys every legitimate foundation for the circulation of words, for the relationship between the effects of language and the positions of bodies in shared space. (2004: 13)

Thus we have: the deployment of words by bodies then, rather than the movement of the signifier textualizing the body; the effects of language borrowed and circulated, rather than a linguistic paradigm destabilizing the subject; a counter-intuitive relation between bodies and words in the production of an antagonistic community-in-the-making, rather than the dissolution of identity through a textual reading of the body. If the textuality of sodomy writes the body as the site of the failure of representational adequacy, the meanderings of proletarian bodies and hybrid speech function less as figurations of representational failure; rather, the production of resistant nocturnal

bodies is figured through a play between words, bodies and the world, and their historically-specific conjunctions and disjunctions.

Queer theory's turn from a critique of identity to identification as a process, poses the question 'what comes *after* the subject?' Rancière's historiography 'recovers' an unstable present in the past where subjectivation is taking place in the temporality of a *before-the-subject*. Hence he argues that in that period (the early 1980s) 'I did not want to define natures of subjects but processes of subjectivization' (2008a: 75). 'Subjectivization' in queer theory is often related to Foucault. Judith Butler's Althusserian reworking of the concept in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997: 83-105) points out the paradoxical process by which the subject produced by a discourse is dependent on that very discourse to resist it. *Asujettissement* is the word that captures this dialectic of subjection and agency. Queer theory, like Rancière, clearly was not interested, in arriving at the "nature" of the (homosexual) subject, but its deconstruction of the subject posed the question of what came after the subject had been deconstructed. When Rancière uses the word 'subjectivation,' the emphasis is not on how the subject is produced by discourse but on how subjectivation is the process of self-othering in the precarious temporality *before* any subject is stabilized. The temporal vectors of subjectiv(iz)ation move in opposite directions.

Further, this process of subjectivization is not tied to any identity. However, if queer theory argues for a politics of *difference* based on the instability of a sexuality traversed by language, for Rancière the focus is on the polemical configuration of bodies, words and times through *equality*. In 'Politics, Identification and Subjectivization' he argues:

The process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being...enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of color, or others. But the enactment of equality is not ...the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question. The name of a community that invokes its rights is always *the name of the anonym*, the name of anyone. (1992: 59-60, emphasis added)

Acts of emancipation equalize anyone with anyone else. They fissure the social yet produce a community of equals not by positing the equalization of identities but by producing polemical counter-commonalities in the temporality of an always-arriving subject-in-the-making.

Rancière focusses on the *demonstration* of acts of subjectivation rather than a theorization of the subject's psychic structure or its citational capacity. The refusal to theorize the subject is integral to his critique of the politics of theory, which he developed in *La leçon d'Althusser* (1974). Less the 'application' of a theoretical paradigm from the Olympian distance of an intellectual vantage point ('the

labour of theory') Rancière's early interventions were intimately-involved with the material, sometimes producing a 'strange idiom' (2008b: 174). In his book on Joseph Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Emancipation* Rancière conjoins different languages and epochs to produce 'ironic' (2008b: 186) lessons rather than straightforward paradigms. This is not rhetorical flourish but a politically-motivated activation of the critique of intellectual mastery by blurring the boundary between one speaking subject (the theorist) and another (Jacotot). When compared with much of queer theory's deconstruction of the subject, the difference becomes very apparent: in the latter a fully-developed theoretical model often precedes or anchors a specific reading in the narrativization of the argument.

Paradoxically then, where queer theory deconstructed identity as the subject-effect of discourse (Foucault), it went on to produce an imposing counter-discourse of subject-formation. Lee Edelman's Lacanian case for *sinthomosexuality* (2004: 33) is one of the most recent deployments of this theory-object relation. Rancière, particularly in his early work, explicitly rejects this temptation. If the historian's 'love for the common people' motivates the production of the worker's body as incarnation of his truth, Rancière's figuration of subjectivation ignores the traditional intellectual temptation of providing a theory of the subject. No theory of the subject emerges either *après-coup* or before the subject to be deconstructed. The subject is not a self theorized before-hand, but a before-the-subject in its (un)making. *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (2003) exemplifies best this dis-embodiment of 'the people' from any discourse that produces it. One could argue, particularly in the 'readings' of Wordsworth and Rosellini's *Europa '51*, that the writing matches the precise unfolding, overlap and disjunction between a moving subject-in-the-making and a world. This is also queer, a queerness not delineating a subject where the body incarnates an identity but the *jeu-croisé* of bodies, words, images before-the-subject that 'happily never arrives.'

How do these subjects-in-the-making acting through emancipation 'in the name of an anonym' relate to Sedgwick's understanding of 'queer' as the solvent of all identities? If queer is the name for a critique of *all* identity, the resonances with Rancière's interventions seem apparent since emancipation is the equalization of anyone with anyone. On the other hand, how might queer theory's critique of *sexual* normativity, partly through psychoanalysis, relate to Rancière's anonymous subjectivations – given that the sexual or any other dimension does not lend any substantive identity to the bodies of the anybodies? A short excursus around the psychoanalytic reading of the subject might suggest a relation between anonymous subjectivation in Rancière and sexual dis-identification in queer theory. The differences between them will tellingly figure the themes of ethics, community and commonality with which the essay closes.

Ex-cursus around the subject

Queer theory's reading of Freud centralizes sexuality (particularly around desire), the drives and fantasy, as crucial to the formation and de-formation of the subject. This process is often read linguistically through the 'early' Lacan of the Symbolic, and the later Lacan's emphasis on the Real. In his *Beyond Sexuality*, Tim Dean (2000) develops a Freudo-Lacanian theory of sexuality *ungrounded* in sexual object-choice, similar at first glance to Foucault's argument for the 'desexualization of pleasure' (1989b: 384), that is the delinking of pleasure from genital excitation. By linking the Freudian unconscious with the Lacanian real, Dean argues that 'queerness is always relational, oppositional in the subversive sense, rather than the substantive' (2000: 231). This relationality is not substantive because the subject is ascribed neither a sexual identity nor a desire directed at a definite object. By distinguishing between 'two kinds of Other' (1997: 910) Dean argues that sexuality does not lend a substantive core to the subject's being, but is a destabilizing structure which generates a drifting of the subject unanchored to any *specific* other. This reading of psychoanalysis, already emerging in Leo Bersani's *Culture of Redemption* as an 'ethical-erotic project' (1990: 3), aims precisely at the dissolution of subjectivity without positing either gender, sexual object-choice or sex acts as determinant of sexuality. By taking sexuality beyond sexual object-choice, Dean also *returns* sexuality to a temporality of the past, of the uncoordinated sexual drives before becoming-infant, and whose polymorphous effects determine the future of all adult life ('homosexual' or otherwise). Reading Lacan's concept of the 'real' as a concept designating 'everything that *resists* adaptation' (2000: 230, emphasis in original), Dean evacuates the subject of a specificity based on sexual intelligibility. Dean goes on to argue that precisely because 'the real has no positive content, it has more to do with sex and death [than the symbolic or imaginary]' (2000: 230). *By understanding sexuality beyond object-choice, and coupling it to the Lacanian 'real,' which has no positive content, Dean's Lacanian reading of the subject installs indeterminacy at its heart.* Two points are important here. First, this rendition of sexuality makes psychoanalysis tell the truth of the non-substantive, relational drifting of the subject-that-never-arrives. In this sense, paradoxically, sexuality – by forming the core of the psychic subject in the unconscious – evacuates queerness of sexual content. This formulation comes close to my reading of queerness in Rancière, since no 'identity' structures his subject-in-the-making either – the acts of emancipation are not acts of the self but the enactment of an anonym. Non-identity, negativity as productivity and potential – all these bear a relation to Rancière's peculiarly non-substantive before-the-subject. For Dean and Bersani this desexualization of sexuality generates a relation to the self as self- (un)making via the 'impersonality' of the Other in the sense that neither the subject nor the Other is substantive but the site for the figuration of impersonal drives. Their arguments are routed via psychoanalysis through the subject and beyond sexuality, while Foucault does not take recourse to psychoanalysis, though like them he also underlines

desexualization as a potential practice of freedom. Rancière's understanding of potentialities are based neither on sexuality nor its desexualization, and enable thinking queerness outside any reference to psychoanalysis.

For Rancière the 'queer,' in my reading, could be seen as the process of antagonistic subjectivation rather than a theory of the subject's dissolution as effect of an ambivalent psychic structure. Here the proximity to Foucault's account of S/M (1989c: 322-34) for example is evident. That is, no theory, psychoanalytic or otherwise, is depended on, or constructed, to *explain* the conditions of possibility for the subject's dissolution. Rancière deliberately skirts around the subject of 'subject.' The 'transgressive will' which activates subjects-in-the-making, however, is neither unmediated nor *simply* auto-affirmation. (Here, the relation with Foucault is more complex, as we will see below). Because no privileged subject-position is elaborated, the transgressive will is the possession of *anybody*, which does not mean the subject is substantively empty – it means the subject is always *before* any substantialization into a 'self.' If in queer theory the sexual subjectivation of the subject produces queerness by desexualizing the sexuality at its core ('the primal scene'), Rancière's queer 'anybody' is not based on any core, even a non-foundational core of sexuality without sex. Parenthetically, although Dean and Bersani also argue that sexuality destabilizes everyone and thus anybody, not just homosexuals, their examples privilege same-sex male sodomy, non-reproductive sex and the male particularly in relation to gay male barebacking. The unspecified body's potential, for Rancière, is exercised only specifically, and in this sense, his arguments are not made by recourse to the signifier (Lacan/ Derrida for Edelman, 1994), or fantasy (Lacan/ Žižek for Dean, 2000) but in the present in which it equates two specific times – the time of sleep with the time of dreaming, the time of labour with the time of *times* (see Dasgupta, 2009).

Althusser's reminder that there is no 'time' of Capital, but 'invisible times' (1977: 99), becomes relevant here. Rancière's demonstration of the articulation of temporalities by the nineteenth-century French worker however, shows that the proletarian perverter of worker identity does not need the philosopher (Althusser) to uncover the 'errors of classical economics' (1997: 91) through the 'concept of time...constructed *out of* the reality of the different rhythms' (1977: 99) of different types of capital. Rancière's 'transgressive will' is not uncovered through the right reading strategy (Althusser's *Reading Capital*) or performance of writing (Edelman's *Homographesis*); neither is it an unmediated, ahistorical ontology of the subject (Nietzsche, Deleuze). It is a situated exercise of the potentiality of an always arriving subject-in-the-making. Here, again, the adjacency of Rancière and Foucault in thinking resistance is noticeable. As Butler (2002) argues, Foucault's ethics of the aesthetic stylization of the self is always situated. But 'it becomes unclear whether Foucault, like Deleuze, is arguing for an ontology of desire that approximates the Nietzschean will-to-power...or whether he is adequately depicting an

historically conditioned, un-precedented form of desire' (Butler, 1999: 227). Is Foucault's 'plenitude of the possible' (1983: 145) an ontological given of productive desire that *manifests* itself historically or is it a historically conditioned desire (Butler, 1999: 227-9)? And how does this relate to Rancière's 'transgressive will'?

Ethics and figuration

The self is a practical convenience promoted to the status of an ethical ideal (Bersani, 1990: 4)

Rancière (1999) emphasizes that the very absence of an *arche* to the social order, of which the *demos* is the proof, enables a politics of the possible. The transgressions of perverted proletarians are both an effect and a manifestation of this fundamental an-archy of the social order. Similarly, Foucault argues for the paradoxical dependence of the social order on affective intensities traversing and undermining it. However, as Judith Butler astutely notices, the Nietzschean 'will-to-power' manifested in the self acting on itself in Foucault's argument is 'historically *occasioned*' rather than '*determined*' (Butler, 2002: 228). In that sense Foucault's examples of transgressions, *by being events in history rather than acts of resistance made possible by certain historical circumstances* (Butler's point) lean toward an ontological argument, and like Deleuze, emphasize non-subjective productive desire as a constant, a pure potential *shorn of historical specificity and its conditions of possibility*. Rancière's anarchy of the social order, theorized through a critique of Plato and Aristotle, for example, emphasizes the inability of philosophy to escape the de-structuring core of the *polis* rather than an ontological purity of the desiring becoming-subject. In Nietzschean vein then, Foucault's undermining of the subject is thinkable because 'at the root of sexuality' (2000a: 72) is 'transgression,' as 'the act that carries [all existences and values]... to their limits and from there, to the Limit where an ontological decision achieves its end' (2000a: 75). The end of the act is both a goal, and a death, the goal of transgression becoming the death of the subject which traces the 'great skeletal outline' (2000a: 71) of the death of God. Ethics as a *transgressive* 'practice of freedom' (Foucault, 1994: 281-301) is not the redrawing of the community through the dialectical negation of a social order but the pure transgression of a self which in transforming itself leaves all considerations of ethics as community behind.

The light in the night

Some two decades before Foucault's book made its presence felt, primarily in the U.S. academy, in an essay in honour of Bataille, he developed a nexus between the subject, sexuality and transgression, in which language was crucial. The deconstructive paradigm in queer theory largely by-passed this argument though it was engaged with by scholars like Leo Bersani and others some years later. In thinking transgression through literature (Sade, Blanchot, Bataille) Foucault

describes the 'singular experience...of transgression' (2000a: 72) which 'affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it [limited being] leaps' (74). Subjective interiority, and language, explode in the non-referential sacrificality of sexual activity. The singularity of transgression is 'like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies' (2000a: 74). In sexuality resides no truth of the subject to be released from (Christian) repression; rather, after the death of God, 'sexuality is a fissure – not one that surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality but one that marks the limit within us and designates us as limit' (70). 'The language of sexuality' after Sade, Foucault argues 'has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation that ... dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression' (2000a: 70). Importantly, he argues that the experience of transgression is not opposed to anything, it is both so pure and so complicated, it must 'be detached from its questionable association to ethics,' and 'a divided world.' In other words, transgression is not arranged against *anything*, it does not negate any social ordering or ethical community, it is not 'the experience of contradiction...for dialectical thought' (2000a: 72).

Foucault affirms the need to resuscitate this 'non-discursive language' of transgression, 'this language which is sometimes immobilised in scenes we call 'erotic', and suddenly volatilized in philosophical turbulence' (2000a: 76). Foucault identifies the experience of dissipation and exhaustion with the 'spectacle of erotic deaths' (2000a: 83) in Bataille's *Le bleu du ciel*, which returns transformed through the 'desexualization of pleasure' in S/M. The night is illuminated with lightning flashes of a transgressive language beyond the sovereign subject, turning the interiority of the subject wielding language as representation, into the exorbitant subject and a language appearing in a lightning flash, giving birth to an obscure but dominant figure where death, the mirror and the double enact their roles' (2000b: 99). The 'enactment' of death will appear again, in queer theory, where light and night, and the obscurity of a language that spews out 'a wavelike succession of words to infinity' (99) will be linked to the self-relating subject's dissolution. Ethics, and the self, emerge as the disappearance of the self in the polymorphous profusion of languages without meaning, pure materiality devoid of sense (meaning). Art, and the aesthetic experience are located within this ethics of the self. Transgression, for Foucault, is *the event of pure difference*, the Kantian nonpositive affirmation, or in Blanchot's terms 'contestation.' Contestation is not a 'generalized negation, but an affirmation that affirms nothing, a radical break of transitivity' (Foucault, 2000a: 75). This pulsional extimacy of language and transgressive experience that 'affirms nothing' is crucial, for it returns in queer theory's coupling of ethics to sexuality. Sexuality, as we saw in Dean (2000), is not an affirmation of identity, whether it be sexual identity, gender identity, or any other form. Instead, sexuality is generalizable in its field of effects and experiences, not as the negation of anything but through the evacuation of meaning. In this

sense, the language of sexuality – what Foucault describes with the notion of sexuality as a ‘fissure’ – in Dean’s psychoanalytic reading suggests an aesthetics and an ethics of the self working on itself through the play of dissipation and exhaustion, a pure transgression of any substantialization of the subject in identity. Bersani’s ethico-erotic project, recently developed in *intimacies* (2008) is traceable to his critique of art as the agent of a ‘culture of redemption.’ Art, like psychoanalysis, figures this pulsional dissipation of the subject, and the essential ‘impersonality’ of sexuality. It is also through a reading of Bataille’s *Le bleu du ciel*, where sex, death and language are interrelated, that Bersani (1990) redeems culture from the positive futurity of redemption through the pulsional densities of Bataille’s Nietzschean language. An ethics of the self, then, is an acting on the self, which Foucault famously characterised as the use of pleasure beyond its normative sexualization. Bersani and Dean give this a decisively psychoanalytic cast, coupling the aesthetic and art in a subterranean world deprived of meaning (*sens*).

Aesthetics and ethics are related to each other in Rancière’s work too. In the time of the night and candle-light, words, bodies and acts combine polemically. Instead of embodying a truth which it unknowingly manifests itself, the body produces in the candle-light of the night a language that establishes a commonality, a community, an *ethnos* and therefore an ethics, that disincarnates the truth it must unknowingly manifest. The worker ‘who can know neither it [the discourse of truth] nor himself but who cannot help but manifest it in his words and his action’ (12), produces another body and the wrong kind of language. There is another body, of course, a ‘paradigmatic’ one, which also manifests without knowing a truth it embodies, Sophocles’ *Oedipus*.

For Rancière, psychoanalysis does not function as a clinical paradigm for establishing the truth of the subject. His reading of Oedipus in Freud produces psychoanalysis as one among many modes of thinking about thought, and art, that the ‘aesthetic revolution’ (2002: 133) makes possible. He argues ‘if it was possible for Freud to formulate the psychoanalytical theory of the unconscious, it was because an unconscious mode of thought had already been identified outside of the clinical domain as such, and the domain of works of art and literature can be defined as the privileged ground where this “unconscious” is at work’ (Rancière, 2009: 2). Through Vico’s reading of Homer’s *Odysseus*, Rancière shows that Oedipus, like the ‘true Homer,’ is readable according to an aesthetic regime ‘in which art is defined by its being the identity of a conscious procedure and an unconscious production, of a willed action and an involuntary process. In short, the identity of *logos* and *pathos* will henceforth be what attests to the existence of art’ (2009: 14). What this refiguration of Oedipus provides us with is an understanding of aesthetics as the idea of art and of thinking through the identity of opposites. The first of this pair, attributed to Hegel and Schelling is ‘a spirit’s odyssey outside of itself’ (2009: 14) in a to-and-fro with the specific materiality of arts it is opposed to, in a game of incomplete embodiments which

Hegel argues culminates in Romantic poetry, that of Hölderlin. Opposed to this conjunction of pathos and logos is another odyssey, the Nietzschean/ Schopenhauerian movement which ‘turns its back on the appearances and the lovely causal order of the world of representation in order to face the obscure, subterranean and nonsensical world of the thing-in-itself’ (2009: 15). The transgressive experience, and language of sexuality encountered in Foucault’s Nietzschean reading of Sade, Bataille and Blanchot is clearly identifiable with this latter odyssey, propelled by pulsions of joy and suffering, and of joy *in* suffering. This is the language of transgression, the pulsional force ex-orbiting the subject into figurality, that queer theorists picked up. The pure materiality of the language of sexuality intertwines sex and death producing *figurality* rather than representation. Rancière, on the other hand, will maintain the indefinite play *between* representation and figurality, the odyssey of imperfect embodiments between spirit and materiality (Hegel/ Schelling) and the Dionysian pulsions of pure will that affirm nothing but themselves (Nietzsche/Schopenhauer).

Rancière’s understanding of the aesthetic, deeply indebted to Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, could be thought to fall between the two meanings of the term ‘sense’ in English – as the sensory and as meaning. Where the ethical turn in queer theory reads the aesthetic (literature primarily) as the evacuation of sense as meaning, Rancière figures ethics as community within the suspended moment of the impossible unity of form (sense as meaning) and matter (sense as pure, formless materiality). ‘Schiller’s aesthetic state,’ Rancière argues ‘by suspending the opposition between an active understanding and passive sensibility, aims at breaking down – with an idea of art – an idea of society based on the opposition between those who think and decide and those who are doomed to material tasks... this suspension of work’s negative value became the assertion of its positive value as the very form of the *shared* effectivity of thought and *community*’ (2004: 44, emphases added; Dasgupta, 2009). Art then ‘is a *production*, the identification of a process of material execution with a community’s self-presentation of its meaning’ (2004: 44, emphasis in original). The self-presentation of a community establishes, as we saw in relation to the proletarians of 19th century France, a commonality, a community as a form of being – together, that fissures the community where everyone is assigned their rightful place by philosophical discourse. A *partage*, as that which is shared and which divides, produces sensible configurations that derange ‘the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience’ (2004: 13). The difference between ethics and aesthetics in queer theory, and in Rancière’s thought becomes evident here. While the former sees the aesthetic as the field of art, literature in particular, where the self dissipates itself through the language of sexuality pushing beyond representation into non-meaning, Rancière sees the aesthetic as an idea of art where the suspended dialectic between passive materiality (non-meaning) and active subjectivity (producing meaning) produces a *partage du*

sensible, a conjunction of the sensible (meaningful) presentation of the community and its material execution.

The difference between ethics as an acting on the self by the self in queer theory, and ethics as the formation and de-formation of community through a *partage du sensible* is identifiable in the relative emphases on *sociality*, or *community* in both formulations. The relational self in Bersani's argument is essentially one of 'narcissism,' where 'self-*jouissance* ...dissolves the person and thereby, at least temporarily, erases the sacrosanct value of selfhood' (1990: 4). An ethics of narcissism is based on a 'sexuality [that] is socially dysfunctional...[which] brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart' (ibid.). Bersani's target is the sovereign subject, and his weapon the *jouissance* "figured' in writers such as...Baudelaire, Bataille and Flaubert.' Rancière's target, on the other hand, is less the subject, whose imperfect embodiment of truth he has already shown to be a convenient fiction. Rather, it is the ordering of bodies in space, and the distribution of words, time and spaces that his understanding of politics targets. Ethics is not the shattering of the self, or driving the people brought together *apart*. It is the political and aesthetic staging of community as a *contentious* being-together that produces a self-presentation of community to itself. It is contentious not because it undermines a sovereign subject, but because it 'is the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is heterogenous to it' (2003: 226). It is the making visible of subjects previously consigned to the dark where the self emerges as other, transforming itself, as an equal participant in a redrawn community from which it was excluded. There is thus a motility of the subject in both queer theory and Rancière, but where one is dissolving in the aesthetic experience of *jouissance*, the other is transforming in the aesthetic and political presentation of community.

Comparing some instances of these two forms of subjects-in-their-(un)making illuminate the differences. Bersani's culture of narcissism which produces a self-shattering, turns into an impersonal narcissism through the 'ascetic sacrificiality' of barebacking. In a reading of Tim Dean's (2008) analysis of a Paul Morris film, Bersani (2008: 47-9) argues that 'breeding' (ejaculation in a bottom) turns the rectum into the place for 'conceiving death' (Bersani, 2008: 45), that is, a womb for breeding not life but the very unviability of life in its normative, ego-consolidating futurity. Bersani argues, reading a scene where semen collected from anonymous men is funnelled into the bottom's rectum, that this act establishes a *community* of viruses within the self (the bottom). 'Community' becomes internal to the self, carried by the self as a time-bomb, that will dissipate the self. It is a *sociality* with strangers that produces a community within the self to be self-destructed. Barebacking and breeding is thus a 'manifestation of a sexualized death drive' (Bersani, 2008: 45). The porn video figures community without substantive relationality, impersonal narcissism rather than inter-personal sociality. Community destroys a substantive relationality through an act of the self on the self mediated by

unknown others. The annihilation of the ego in the *Culture of Redemption* becomes the self-expansion of the ego to the point of dissemination in *intimacies* (2008). He interprets barebacking as a 'mode of ascetic spirituality' that 'implicitly critiques...the multiple forms of ego-driven intimacy' (2008: 55). The impersonality of this narcissism is figural since the ego's self-shattering plunges it into non-meaning instead of social intelligibility.

For Rancière, social intelligibility is precisely what is at stake in politics, for the presentation of the community and its meaning is based on comprehension, on the equalization of the intelligence of anybody with anyone else through the exercise of potentialities. The potency of words derives from the possibility of incarnating themselves in anybody and all bodies, and being understood as *words* rather than noise. Ethics is not the ascetic spirituality of ego-dissolution. It is the production of intimacy through a being-together by subjects constantly in-the-making. Perhaps Butler's (2004, 2008) understanding of ethical relationality and counter-intuitive alliances is closer to Rancière here. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), she interrogates the seeming opposition between feminist, queer, inter and trans-sex theory and politics, and the separatism they sometimes generate. Through a reading of *New Gender Politics*, Butler argues that commonalities can be forged by identifying their minimal points of intersection. Instead of dissolution of the self, then, the expansion of the contingent self's relationality. Forging relationalities through alliance politics here however, is predicated on both the assertion of difference and the forging of a commonality. For Rancière, however, alliance-politics would still assume a minimal identity (recall that acts of emancipation by 'women, workers, people of color, and others' are enactments of polemical equalization, not enactments of distinct communities).

Further, Butler thinks sociality here, not through the figural destruction of meaning (the death drive, the conception of death in the rectum), but precisely through intelligibility and the dialectic of subjection and agency based on *recognition* (a term, and focus, which is missing in Dean and Bersani's theorization of a beyond to sexuality). Like Rancière's subjects-in-the-making, the subject for Butler is continually negotiating (admittedly more in the Hegelian than the Kantian sense) with the spatial and temporal organization of bodies. However, where for Butler, dis-identification arises from the non-normative body citing the norm differently, for Rancière, community is formed by the wrong body citing the norm perfectly, through borrowed words spoken by improper bodies. Butler's sociality through imperfect citation and Rancière's relationality through counter-intuitive equalization come together and apart around the representation of community. Queer theory's interrogation of identity toward an ethics of the self and community and Rancière's argument of the subject-in-the-making through a disputive commonality spiral around each other. The distance between provides the space where the temporalities of the before and the after might further novel configurations of queerness.

Sudeep Dasgupta is Associate Professor at the University of Amsterdam, and teaches media studies with a focus on the relation between politics and aesthetics, globalization, migration and critical theory. His publications include a critical introduction to the joint Dutch translation of Jacques Rancière's *Partage du sensible* and *L'inconscient esthétique*, 'Visual Culture and the Place of Modernity' in Ackbar Abbas and John Erni (eds), *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Blackwell: London, 2004) and is the editor of *Constellations of the Transnational: Modernity, Culture, Critique* (Rodopi: Amsterdam & New York, 2006). His most recent publication is 'Conjunctive Times, Disjointed Time: Philosophy between Enigma and Disagreement,' in *Parallax* 52 (Special issue: Jacques Rancière: In Disagreement), 2009.

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