Excitable Speech: Judith Butler, Mae West, and Sexual Innuendo

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Abstract

Working with Judith Butler's Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, this essay pursues a series of questions on the performativity of speech acts, using sexual innuendo as an example. As performed by the provocative American playwright and classic Hollywood film star, Mae West, sexual innuendo provides an instance of "excitable speech" that allows for the exploration of speech as a site of political resistance. The questions that frame this discussion are as follows: How are vulnerability and agency produced in speech? What are the foreclosures or censors at work in producing speech and the speaking subject? What constitutes the "force" of the performative speech act? How is the speech act repeatable? And do these conditions leave room for Butler's notion of linguistic agency, where the speech act works to undermine linguistic conventions through resignification? Finally, the essay offers queer readings of Mae West in order to demonstrate the concept of "discursive performativity," which underpins Butler's argument.

KEY WORDS: speech acts; sexual innuendo; performativity; linguistic agency; Judith Butler; Mae West.

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> What is so perilous, then, in the fact that people speak, and that their speech proliferates? Where is the danger in that? (Michel Foucault, 1972)

> Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me? (Mae West, 1978)

Mae West, American playwright, screenwriter, and classic Hollywood film star, became a figure of both controversy and popularity in the 1920s with the pro- duction of her three off-Broadway plays titled "Sex" (1926), "The Drag" (1927), and "The Pleasure Man" (1928). The relatively overt sexual content and homo- sexual characters and narratives of West's plays aroused criminal charges of ob- scenity, indecency, and immorality against West and her theatre crews, indicted by the Grand Jury of the county of New York (West, 1997, p. 205). Censorship and celebrity followed West through her film career beginning in the 1930s and lasting until the 1970s, her television and radio appearances from the 1930s to the 1950s, and her return to the theatre in the 1940s.

The brazen, buxom blonde West is famous for her sexual innuendo. With lines such as "Anytime you got nothing to do—and lots of time to do it—come on up" (*My Little Chickadee*, 1940), she established herself as a sharp-witted, provocative, and transgressive *parleuse*. Her suggestive quips are still, irresistibly, repeated in various commercial and colloquial forms. To date, however, there has been little written explicitly about the connection of this kind of "irresistible repeatability" to the performativity of speech acts. In this essay, the example of West's performative sexual innuendo becomes a particularly irresistible occasion through which sexual innuendo and its performative repeatability are explored.

My discussion takes as its point of departure Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997). In this work, Butler investigates the impact of speech acts, and the qualities and conditions that render speech acts felici- tous (successful)—whether injurious or pleasing. As well, Butler observes the social constraints and regulatory norms that condition our struggle for legitimacy as speaking subjects. She argues that these conditions constitute the speaking subject as vulnerable in the production of speech. Next to this, however, she carves out a theory of linguistic agency that rests upon the notion of "discursive performativity"—that speech has the potential to resignify meaning and context against regulatory norms. In this spirit, Butler offers an account of speech as a site of agency and political resistance for the subject in discourse.

Working alongside Butler, this essay pursues a series of questions on the performativity of speech acts, using sexual innuendo as an example. Demonstrated by Mae West, sexual innuendo provides an instance of "excitable speech" to explore the possibility of speech as a site of political resistance. The questions that frame this discussion are as follows: How are vulnerability and agency produced in speech? What are the foreclosures or censors at work in producing speech and the speaking subject? What constitutes the "force" of the performative speech act? How is the speech act repeatable? And last, do these conditions leave room for Butler's notion of linguistic agency, as underpinned by a "discursive performativity," where the speech act works to undermine linguistic conventions through resignification?

LINGUISTIC VULNERABILITY, LINGUISTIC AGENCY

> Too many girls follow the line of least resistance—but a good line is hard to resist. (Mae West, 1936, as referenced in West, 1975)

While as individuals, we use language to compliment, seduce, demean, and dispute others, we are simultaneously vulnerable to the other's address. It is in both the agency and vulnerability accorded to us through the relation of address that we are constituted as subjects in discourse. Butler (1997) calls this Althusserian notion the "linguistic condition of survivable subjects," where "[o]ne comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the other" (p. 5). Essentially, recognition by others through verbal address legitimates our participation in discourse as agents of speech. We are not, however, "free agents," so to speak, because we are vulnerable in another sense to the regulatory norms and conventions of language.

Some theorists suggest that we are vulnerable to the norms and conventions of language or speech as a *prior* condition of becoming social, speaking subjects. Lacanians, in particular, argue that our entrance into the world of "speakability" requires a foreclosure (refusal or denial) of the "unspeakable"—those utterances that exceed the bounds of social norms (Butler, 1997, p. 135). The speaking subject must practice this foreclosure in order to emerge as a legitimate and intelligible participant in the Symbolic Order.[3] Here, as Butler (1997) notes, "unspeakability" becomes a condition of subject formation (p. 135); for what we are not allowed to say is, arguably, as formative as what we do say. To speak the unspeakable, then, results in social sanction or penalty and the risk of one's status as a legitimate participant in speech (Butler, 1997, p. 133).

Mae West, known for her sexually "aggressive" language and racy puns, transgressed both hegemonic American middle-class values and gendered filmic conventions that normalized passive female subjectivity. These transgressions re- sulted in the censorship of West's work, and further inflamed an already heated campaign against the representation of "crime" and "sex" in Hollywood movies as enforced, specifically, by the Motion Picture Production Code of 1934 (Curry, 1996, p. 46). It was evident that West's style of provocative speech, especially as she insisted on sex as both pleasurable and economically beneficial for women, was considered to be offensive by the censor's standards. So while West may have made significant gains for sexual expression and for representations of women's sexual agency, she was simultaneously the target of industry regulations that suc- ceeded, at least in part, to restrict her creative genius and threaten her legitimacy as a mainstream performer.

As made apparent by West's catch-22, Butler (1997) is concerned with the kind of linguistic agency that can be had if subjects themselves are inextricably formed within the restrictive and regulatory conditions of language:

> If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power . . . And how, if at all, does linguistic agency emerge from this scene of enabling vulnerability? (p. 2).

This question might be reframed another way for our present example: If "Mae West," as a cultural icon, is necessarily formed within the restrictive censors of the American entertainment

industry, how is West's *risque´* performance effec- tive, if at all? Or, what allowed Mae West to be popular, even irresistible, in the face of insulting cultural critics and public organizations that fought to have her performances banned from public viewing? To approach these questions, I inves- tigate more closely how language constitutes the subject through restriction and foreclosure.

FORECLOSURE AND THE SPEAKING SUBJECT

> Censorship made me. (Mae West, in Jennings, 1971, p. 6).

Foreclosure can be understood as a forced loss or an exclusionary restriction— a shutting out of certain realities or possibilities. In regards to speech, we might think of foreclosure as a kind of censorship. This kind of censorship, however, does not happen after speech has happened (like the banning of Mae West's plays/films/interviews after their initial showings); this censorship happens prior to speech, determining the conditions of speakability (Butler, 1997, p. 41). In other words, foreclosure conditions the very emergence of the speaking subject upon her/his initial entry into the discursive world and limits her/his agency in speech.

Freud's (1915) account of the psyche provides a helpful model for under- standing foreclosure. For Freud, the unconscious is a kind of censor. It works primarily to repress desires and impulses, to keep desires and impulses away from consciousness, particularly those that threaten the ego's idealized sense of self. However, not only does the unconscious censor consciousness, a *prior* censorship is exercised upon the unconscious itself. The censorship at work here is a kind of foreclosure—for this prior censoring of the unconscious effectively shuts out certain possibilities for *both* the unconscious and the conscious. Butler (1997a) notes that Freud's distinction between the repression of thoughts from entering consciousness and the foreclosure exercised upon the unconscious is significant here: That which is repressed (from consciousness), Freud insists, might once have lived apart from its prohibition (and later censored through prohibition). In the foreclosure exercised upon the unconscious, however, desire has been rigor- ously, pre-emptively lost from the start (Freud, 1915, p. 23).

Freud's analysis can be extended to explain the way that psychic foreclosure finds its expression in speech. When the subject speaks, she/he always does so by excluding, censoring, and rejecting ideas and meanings. This is not a solely conscious or cognitive effort but, largely, an unconscious process of both foreclo- sure and repression as played out in the psyche. That speech is unconscious of its foreclosures means that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the utterance of the speech act is not necessarily a statement of truth but, rather, a mode of indirect access to what speech cannot possibly say out loud (Felman, 1992). This means that while it remains unsaid, the unspeakable or what is foreclosed is still present in the speech act, albeit as unconscious to both the speech act and its speaker.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) also offers an account of foreclosure that is helpful here. Spivak maintains Lacan's (interpretation of Freud's) notion of foreclosure as a barring or blocking of ideas, but extends this analysis to address, specifically, the barring of certain subjectivities from intelligibility. Effectively, Spivak argues that the production of the white

Western subject is achieved through the foreclosure of the "native informant" (p. 6) as typified by the subaltern woman. For Spivak, the sense of foreclosure at work in this production is,

> [t]he sense brought to the fore by Lacan, . . . [which is to be found] for instance, in [what] Freud writes . . . [about] "a much more energetic and successful kind of defence. Here, the ego rejects [*verwirft*] the incompatible idea *together with the affect* and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all" (p. 4, emphasis in original).

Spivak parallels Freud's notion of foreclosure by the ego with the way in which white Western subjectivity (and discourse) rejects the idea of non-Western or sub- altern women. Subaltern women are excluded as if they never existed at all, treated as incompatible with an idealized western liberal-humanist notion of subjectivity, while the fact that the chimera of the white western subject relies upon subaltern women's exclusion for its own fac ade, goes unacknowledged.

An example of the kind of foreclosure Spivak describes is inherent to the production of Mae West as a North American cultural icon. Particularly in West's films, African American actors appear in the roles of maid and/or attendant (in various respects) to West's character. The characters played by these actors are gen- erally to be found at West's disposal as (female) domestic servants or (male) exotic servants. Their agency as subjects in speech is, for the most part, denied. Instead, their presence serves to reinforce West's position as the (sexually and racially) dominant figure of the scene. Ramona Curry (1996) observes this relationship:

> . . . the maids clearly augment West's featured—and fetishized—status, enhancing the star's aura of power and sexual allure through their roles as servants and through their vividly contrasting visual presence, their dark skin, hair, and costumes setting off West's shimmering bleached-blonde whiteness (p. 87).

Curry's analysis shows that, in fact, West's character is effectual precisely be- cause certain linguistic possibilities have been shut out and pushed underground— namely the linguistic agency of racialized "others." This foreclosed agency, then, becomes part of the unsaid of West's jokes and, arguably, part of what gives her jokes their conventional force.

As the above example shows, foreclosure is not only restrictive—it is also pro- ductive since it determines what constitutes intelligible speech and the possibility of agency *upon* this foreclosure. In chapter 4, "Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency," Butler (1997) elaborates on Foucault's idea of how censorship produces the conditions of discursive agency for the speaking subject: "[C]ensorship is not merely restrictive and privative, that is, active in depriving subjects of the freedom to express themselves in certain ways, but also formative for subjects and the legitimate boundaries of speech" (p. 132). When West (1975) claims "I wasn't conscious of being sexy until the censors got after me" (p. 87), and "Censorship made me" (West as quoted in Jennings, 1971, p. 6), she points to this constitu- tive power of censorship as it contributes to the reception of her speech and the production of her image as a cultural icon. Curry (1996) comments further on the relationship of censorship to West's success:

> Much of West's comedic appeal—like that of comedy more generally—derived precisely from her violating social mores in performance, even to the point of inviting censorship. Audience knowledge that West's performances had provoked censorship augmented her comic reception, for it alerted listeners and viewers to expect and catch possible sexual implications in almost every line and gesture. The threat of censorship enhanced, even yielded, the joke (p. 81).

For West, censorship worked not only to reinforce her image as a giftedly defiant performer; it actually reiterated the force of her jokes.

SPEECH ACTS AND THE "FORCE" OF THE PERFORMATIVE

> It isn't what I do, but how I do it. It isn't what I say, but how I say it, and how I look when I do it and say it (Mae West, 1975, p. 43).

J. L. Austin (1962) wrote that performative speech acts are utterances that produce action or perform an operation in their speaking (p. 32). Performatives work through the power of citation, meaning that they cite or invoke certain linguis- tic conventions thereby acquiring the power and legitimacy of social law (Butler, 1993, p. 225). "Felicitous" performatives are speech acts that achieve their in- tended actions or operation through this citation. The citation of conventions and social law accords them a certain "force" that is recognized by the recipient(s) of the speech act as meaningful and legitimate, securing their success. On the other hand, "infelicitous" performatives or "misfires," to use Austin's (1962) words, fail to achieve their intended action and are experienced as "void or without effect" (p. 16). For instance, sexual innuendo that fails to be experienced as a sexual hint is rendered impotent or infelicitous by this misrecognition.

Austin (1962) makes a further distinction between "illocutionary" speech acts and "perlocutionary" speech acts. In the case of the illocutionary speech act, the saying is itself a kind of doing, or, the speech is a performance of an act in itself (p. 99). For example, "I would like to apologize," conventionally, performs an apology—it does not only suggest an intended apology, as its literal meaning states, indeed, it *is* the apology. Distinctly, the perlocutionary speech act achieves certain *effects* by saying something (p. 121). Althusser's (1971) famous example is the hailing of the pedestrian by the police officer's shout, "Stop!" Here, it is assumed that the effect of the officer's shout is experienced after it has been heard. While the force of the illocutionary speech act is set in motion, simultaneous with its saying, by its situatedness within particular socially affirmed linguistic conventions (in the first instance, within the conventions of apology), the perlocutionary act is set in motion mainly by the subsequent actions it incites—in the second instance, by the pedestrian stopping and turning towards the call of the police officer.

Butler insists that Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocu- tionary speech acts is significant. Particularly, Butler (1997) is interested in his notion that the illocutionary speech act produces its effects *in the same time* as its utterance. For Butler, this distinction does not take account of how the meaning achieved by the speech act is produced historically and contextually—beyond the single moment of its articulation. She proposes that it is not only the conventional illocutionary force that renders a performative speech act felicitous, it is the *rep- etition of speech that recalls prior acts* that gives speech its performative power (p. 20):

> If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that "success" is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. What this means, then, is that a performative "works" to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force (Butler, 1997, pp. 226–227, emphasis in original).

The performative speech act, then, acquires its force through an accumulation of meaning over time, and through its relationship to its immediate discursive/temporal context. This relationship between speech and historicity, however, is covered up, hidden through the conventions by which speech is mobilized—through its articu- lation by a speaker. Ironically, it is the repeated stifling of constitutive historicity in speech that allows the performative speech act to be understood, yet this prevents us from knowing the historicity of speech.

REPETITION AND "DISCURSIVE PERFORMATIVITY"

> Women with "pasts" interest men because men hope that history will repeat itself (Mae West, 1975, p. 50).

Our simultaneous vulnerability and agency in language presents an ironic scenario: the speaking subject depends on restrictive regulatory norms and the aforementioned foreclosures in order to exercise linguistic agency. So, each time the subject "enters" speech, she/he repeats these foreclosures, thereby reinforcing them, her/his dependency on them, and their constitutive restrictions:

> If the subject is produced in speech through a set of foreclosures, then this founding and formative limitation sets the scene for the agency of the subject. Agency becomes possible on the condition of such a foreclosure. . . . Because the action of foreclosure does not take place once and for all[, however,] it must be repeated to reconsolidate its power and efficacy....Thus, the subject who speaks within the sphere of the speakable implicitly reinvokes the foreclosure on which it depends and, thus, depends on it again (Butler, 1997, pp. 139–140).

What Butler effectively argues in the above passage is that the restrictive norms and foreclosures of speakability are maintained through repetition—a repetition performed by the speaking subject who is *compelled* to repeat those foreclosures. According to this reading, foreclosure and regulatory norms are not singular or final events; rather, they are "reiterated effect[s] of a structure" (Butler, 1997, p. 138). On the double assumption, then, that foreclosure is not a final event and that it is the speaker who must reiterate its terms, Butler sees this as an opportunity to disrupt the chain of foreclosure's reiteration. Foreclosure's impermanence allows a space, somewhere between reiterations or repetitions, for the speaker to disrupt the conditions of foreclosure by *resignifying* meaning against or distinct from the terms of its prior usage.

There is a second sense, however, in which repetition works in the production of language. While in the first sense, repetition works to reiterate foreclosures, in the second sense repetition works to accumulate and solidify meaning. In this sense, meaning is constituted through the repeated performance of the signifying mark— a process Butler calls "discursive performativity." According to Jacques Derrida (1988), this discursive performativity, the repetition of the signifying mark, is inherent to the production of language. Further, the word or mark must be flexible enough to be recognized and understood in new and various scenarios, beyond its intended receiver, in order to function as a sign within communication. Derrida (1988) states: "My communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers" (p. 7). In other words, speech must be repeated and repeatable in order to work, and this repeatability "presupposes that the formula [of the utterance] itself continues to work in successive contexts, that it is bound to no context in particular even as . . . it is always found in some context or another" (Butler, 1997, p. 147). Speech, then, is never fully constrained or determined by its originating context. Rather, speech is transferable from one context to another. And while it never retains exactly the same meaning as in previous usages (because of the specific discursive conditions by which it is rendered in each subsequent repetition), it retains enough significance in order to be recognizable and felicitous in new situations. In fact, recognition of the old meaning in the new context is what gives the speech act its intelligibility even when it is resignified as something totally different from its original.

Mae West used material repeatedly and often cited her own dialogue from one performance in another (Curry, 1996). These repetitions reinforced West's omnipresence and "quotability" by calling, to the viewer's attention, her perfor- mances over and over again. That West continues to be cited in various commercial and colloquial forms by others also proves her irresistible repeatability. One case that demonstrates this is as follows:

> Mae West sees a woman looking at her. West goes up to her and asks, "Is that a puddle you're standing in or are you just glad to see me?" (Curry, 1996, p. xvii).

This joke, that Curry (1996) suggests circulated among media scholars in the early 1990s, was not actually told by West. It is clearly fashioned, however, after West's most infamous line "Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me." The original, spoken by West's (female) character to a male character, is rewritten here to make the line's recipient a woman. The shift from male-defined desire as signified in the original joke by the gun/erection, gives way to a spillover of female (lesbian) desire as signified by the orgasmic puddle left by the woman.[4] Here, we notice that the substitution of the puddle for the gun is a significant break from the meaning of the old joke. The revised joke, however, is not entirely new, for it is still a play on the recipient's obvious desire for West. Further, it is in recognition of the old joke that the new joke gains its effectiveness and, I would argue, its ironic sense of humor. What is particularly irresistible about repeating/revising Mae West's sexual innuendo is not only the pleasure gained from the recollection of West's original text, but also the pleasure gained from recontextualizing the innuendo with new significance, meaning, and success. As well, the revision has undermined the conventions of the original joke, thereby breaking with the normative, heterosexual codes and articulations of desire. This is an example of Butler's (1997) "discursive performativity" as it functions as an instrument of resistance: the repetition of the

new joke (the puddle joke, in this case) that confounds rather than consolidates the old joke's normative efficacy.

SEXUAL INNUENDO AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF THE "UNSAID"

> A joke says what it has to say, not always in few words, but in *too* few words—that is, in words that are insufficient by strict logic or common modes of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it (Theodor Lipps, as quoted in Freud, 1905).
>
> Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before (Mae West, 1936 as referenced in West, 1975).

Sexual innuendo presents an especially interesting and complex case by which to examine performative speech acts and the potential of discursive performativity. This is because the meaning of sexual innuendo lies not in what is uttered, but rather in the effect of what is *unsaid* or what remains *unspoken*.[5] What is characteristic of sexual innuendo is its capacity for double meaning: first, a literal or uttered meaning that is generally non-sexual or platonic and, second, a suggested meaning that is characteristically sexual and unsaid. A simultaneity of meaning is thus required in order to produce the effect of an innuendo: what is said relies upon the unsaid meaning for its sexual suggestion, while the unsaid meaning relies upon the uttered sentence meaning for its (albeit indirect) articulation. Thus, the effect of innuendo relies upon the tension between the stated and the implied.

Sexual innuendo might also be characterized as a "double-entendre." The definition of "double-entendre" that Freud (1905) gives is of a joke constructed on a double-meaning that relies upon a word or words not invoking their "usual" meaning but, rather, in the context of the joke, having a "sexual" meaning (p. 75). Speech act theorist John R. Searle (1979) would likely take up sexual innuendo as a metaphor or indirect speech act, "[an] utteranc[e] in which the speaker means metaphorically something different from what the sentence means literally..." (p. 76). In addition to these, we can compare sexual innuendo to the categories of performative speech acts that Austin (1962) uses. Is sexual innuendo illocutionary? Does it perform something by its very saying? If so, what does it perform? Sex? Or is sexual innuendo better described as perlocutionary—that is, causing a certain effect (sexual interest?) by its saying? In the case of Mae West's performance of sexual innuendo, it is most obvious that her provocative speech caused great effect, but we could also say that her speech performed and continues to perform something in its saying. In a sense, the reiteration of West's speech performs "Mae West" and the complicated nexus of foreclosures and repetitions that typified her comedy. But let us examine how sexual innuendo, particularly, achieves its performative success.

We can start by asking, what constitutes a felicitous sexual innuendo? Or, how does sexual innuendo work? In the words of Searle (1979), "[h]ow is it possible for speakers to communicate to hearers when speaking metaphorically inasmuch as they do not say what they mean?" (p. 76). When West says, "Anytime you got nothing to do—and lots of time to do it—come on up," how does the receiver of her line understand what she means by her invitation to "do it"? At the very

least, we can be sure that the performative force of the innuendo is *implicit* because the significance of the act lies in what is unsaid. But, then, how is the unsaid performative?

For sexual innuendo to "work" or to be felicitous as a performative, it must resonate for the receiver with prior acts or signifiers of sexual desire. If it does not, she/he will experience the utterance to be platonic or barren of sexual suggestion. If this happens, the innuendo itself is infelicitous because it fails to repeat, for the receiver, something familiar enough to make the sexual intentions of the innuendo (and the speaker) understood. Note, however, that while sexual innuendo must repeat something "prior," it must not necessarily repeat that prior thing *in the same way*. "Is that a puddle you're standing in . . .?" does and does not recall its earlier version, "Is that a gun in your pocket. . . .?" While the puddle line's resonance with the earlier version of the joke constitutes its repetition, its difference from the earlier joke marks the moment where the speech act is resignified. The sexual innuendo could be considered *partially* resonant, for it both does and does not recall prior structures of reference.[6] This partial or ambivalent resonance is characteristic of all speech acts, however; for any utterance, while it repeats a prior act, never does so *as precisely the same act*.

THE QUEER WEST: RADICAL RESIGNIFICATIONS

> The best way to learn to be a lady is to see how other ladies do it (Mae West, 1975, p. 52).

Queer resignifications are one way that we can imagine "discursive performa- tivity" (Butler, 1997) functioning as resistance to normative structures in language and discourse. This has been shown, for instance, by the queering of West's "Is that a gun in your pocket . . .?" line (Curry, 1996, p. xvii). I will push this resig- nification further, however, and turn this innuendo into an even queerer one by recontextualizing the terms of the sexual innuendo once again:

> One woman sees another woman looking at her. The first woman goes up to the second woman and asks, "Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

The rendition given here presents yet another shift in the joke's constitutive terms. From the earliest version, focused on male desire as signified by the gun/erection, to the puddle version, focused on female desire as signified by the orgasmic puddle, this third version features a possible "lesbian phallus" as signified by the gun- suspected-to-be-a-dildo or some other form of female erection. While this version actually moves closer to the original in terms of its similitude of wording, it has turned the original on its head (pun intended) to expose the manipulability of the phallus as a strictly male signifier of heterosexual desire and, more generally, to demonstrate the transgressability of normative sexual codes through performative discourse.

A number of West's jokes offer queer re-readings without having to change the given words/terms of her line. "The best way to learn to be a lady is to see how other ladies do it," connotes lesbian sex whether West intended this or not, or the line could be given a gay male or drag reading of camp where it suggests advice from one queen to another. "They say gentleman prefer blondes, but who says blondes prefer gentlemen?" (West, 1975, p. 49) presents another opportunity that I will pursue here. There are several techniques involved in queering this joke.

The first requires an understanding of the joke as it was originally intended: West begins with the common idiom "gentleman prefer blondes," which literally suggests that men prefer blonde *women* as sexual objects. By introducing this idiom with the words "They say," West marks "gentleman prefer blondes" as a conventional perception. Her intent, then, is to challenge the validity of this convention by reversing the terms as such: "but do blondes prefer gentlemen, or perhaps some other kind of (less-gentle) men?" To queer this line takes West's challenge one step further where "who says blondes prefer gentlemen" becomes "who says blondes prefer *men* (at all)?" The queer line both repeats and builds on West's original undermining of social convention, but this time by challenging its heterosexual terms.

In his analysis of jokes, Freud (1905) observes that often what is unspeak- able, particularly criticism of social convention, is articulated through jokes as an undermining of social authorities: "the object of the joke's attack may . . . well be institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them *can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed of a joke concealed by its fac¸ade*" (p. 153, emphasis added). It is in this sense—that the joke functions to articulate an otherwise unspeakable criticism of authority—that Mae West is able to make her bold and defiant statements, for, arguably, they could neither be articulated nor heard outside of her comedic renditions.

At the same time that West challenges sex, class, and gender conventions, however, she relies upon these conventions by invoking them in her performances. Like the strategies of irony and parody, West's comedy must first erect social convention in order to subsequently undermine it. This is demonstrated in the op- positional structure of the joke: "They say gentleman prefer blondes [convention], but who says blondes prefer gentleman [undermining]?" The strategy used here, however, also reveals West's reinforcement of convention, namely heteronorma- tivity and racism, since she forecloses the possibility of same-sex desire or mis- cegenation in the blondes/gentleman joke. Only through the foreclosure of certain possibilities, then, is West able to set the stage for her own linguistic agency and for the possibility of articulating female sexual agency.

CONCLUSION

> An ounce of performance is worth a pound of promises (Mae West, 1975, p. 71)

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Butler's (1997a) follow up to *Excitable Speech* (1997), the author questions whether the ambivalent process of "discursive performativity"—whereby signification never occurs totally outside of discourse, but always within and sometimes against discourse—is capable of effectively subverting those restrictive conditions of language and subjectivity: "From a psychoanalytic perspective, . . . we might ask whether this possibility of resistance to a constituting or subjectivating power can be derived from what is 'in' or 'of' discourse" (p. 94). In other words, Butler expresses skepticism about the possibility of resisting the conventions of speakability from within language. For, as demonstrated earlier, the foreclosures that constitute the impossible "outside" of linguistic intelligibility also secure our entrance into and intelligibility within discourse as speaking subjects. While Butler argues in *Excitable Speech* (1997) that speech is never fully constrained

by its context (thereby allowing the speaker opportunities for agency within speech), speech can never be fully constrained by its speaker either. Therefore, while the indeterminacy of language allows for certain linguistic possibilities, this same indeterminacy constitutes vulnerability for the speaking subject—as speakers we are never guaranteed control of language.

Next, Butler (1997a) poses an even more difficult question: What does it mean that discourse not only produces the domains of the speakable, but is it- self "bounded through the production of a constitutive outside: the unspeakable, the unsignifiable?" (p. 94). In other words, what does it mean that language is constituted by discursive turns and psychic foreclosures that are ultimately un- knowable and incomprehensible to us as speakers and interpreters of discourse? How can we know the ways, for instance, by which sexual innuendo is rendered psychically meaningful for the participants involved? Or, how can we predict the discursive significance that will be attached to the uttering of a sexual innuendo in any particular or specific context? While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to pursue these questions in any depth, what they demonstrate is that the performativity of language and the relations between any subject and its utterance are ultimately "contingent and radically *heterogeneous*, as well as . . . contestable" (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995, p. 14).

That the performative speech act is not limited to any single context—indeed that it is transferable and contestable through this transferability—also means that speech proliferates beyond itself and its own intentions. As Shoshana Felman writes, most often in speech "the utterance performs meanings that are not precisely the ones that are stated or, indeed, capable of being stated at all" (Felman as quoted in Butler, 1997, p. 10). The potential for the utterance to perform meanings other than the ones that are stated is the "danger" Foucault (1972) speaks of when he asks, "What is so perilous, then, in the fact that people speak, and that their speech proliferates?" (p. 216). For Butler, it is the indeterminacy of discourse that characterizes this "proliferation" that allows for the possibility for speech acts to resignify conventional meanings, to function as resistance. And if we are to be seduced by Mae West's clever insistence that "an ounce of performance is worth a pound of promises," performative resignifications will speak louder than the words themselves to challenge the normative conditions of speakability.

NOTES

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3 The symbolic order, in Lacanian theory, is the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects. It is structured by language and the social institutions that language secures (Weedon, 1997, p. 50).

4 Unless of course the reader interprets the puddle to be a puddle of pee—where West's female admirer is assumed to have uncontrollably peed out of excitement and (platonic) envy.

5 Much of this analysis has derived from a reading and comparison of Linda Hutcheon's (1995) *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*.

6 I owe the articulation of this idea to Sharon Rosenberg in a personal communication.

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