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Performativity and Affect in Education

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Article abstract

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Performativity and Affect in Education

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Abstract: *This essay examines the concept of performativity in relation to what are perceived to be reasonable and unreasonable affective responses to discourse. It considers how discourse, especially in classrooms and other educational contexts, produces effects, and how it is that those effects are sometimes seen as attached to the discourse, and sometimes as attached to the person who perceives and displays the effect. When discourse produces strong affective responses, sometimes the discourse itself is seen as unreasonable and in need of socializing (e.g., racist and homophobic slurs), and sometimes the person is perceived as "overreacting" to language that is not considered inherently affectively charged. Such distinctions, whether made explicitly or not, shape educational contexts and offer a hidden curriculum of "appropriate" affect. The essay traces the concept of performativity through the work of Austin, Derrida, Butler, and Cavell, and then extends it to affect theory to see how performativity can help us think through the provocation or production of feelings beyond individual psychological explanations.*

Introduction

When the editorial office of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo was attacked in Paris on January 7, 2015, the ensuing media storm revolved not just around the condemnation of the violent attacks themselves, but also around the more general incomprehensibility of the anger that the cartoons of (the Prophet) Muhammad seemed to provoke in some Muslims. This anger—expressed also by Muslims who would never act upon their feelings in physically violent ways—was considered incomprehensible, unreasonable, disproportionate to the triviality of their object: drawings, mere lines and colour on paper.

In response to the first days of the media debate, the Moroccan-Dutch writer Abdelkader Benali (2015) published an op-ed in *The New York Times* in which he recalled his own angry outburst in history class many years earlier. Benali is not only a well-respected writer who has published a large number of novels, plays, and essays, but also a liberal, public intellectual who participates in many ways in the Dutch cultural scene. This made the recollection of his anger in class more striking, as it could not be dismissed as another demonstration of the gap that supposedly separates the "reasonable, liberal European" from the "unreasonable, illiberal North African." Benali wrote:

> Something snapped. I was 13 years old, dreaming of books and girls and nothing else—a healthy Dutch kid with a Moroccan background who freewheeled through life. Then something happened that made me feel different from the pack. One day in history class, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie became the subject. Our teacher talked about freedom of expression; I talked about insulting the Prophet. There was an awkward silence. What was that Abdelkader guy talking about? Fatwhat?
>
> But our teacher, Mr. Fok, understood me. He claimed the fatwa didn't make sense. How could somebody be offended by fiction? How could using one's imagination lead to the death sentence?
>
> I remember standing up, my voice rising as I struggled to make an argument about the holiness of the Prophet to me and my community. And the more Mr. Fok responded with cold and rational analysis the angrier I got. Didn't he get that this was about more than reason and common sense? Didn't he get that mocking the Prophet was a moral crime?

> My classmates looked at me like a madman. By then I was standing and shouting. I'd never felt
> such anger before. This wasn't about a novel, this was about me. About us. I wanted revenge. Mr. Fok
> just looked at me, amazed by my temper and a bit annoyed, and dismissed me from class.

The essay goes on to recount how Benali turned to literature, how he re-read the *Satanic Verses* four years later and came to appreciate the book differently. But he is also compassionate toward his younger self, understanding how easy it is for anger to take "a wrong turn."

The essay prompted me to think further about the perception of reasonable and unreasonable affective responses to discourses, whether spoken, written, or visual. How does discourse, especially in classrooms and other educational contexts, produce effects, and how is that those effects are sometimes seen as attached to the discourse, and sometimes as attached to the person who perceives and displays the effect? In countries such as Canada, France, and the Netherlands, some words and images—think of racist and homophobic slurs—are considered so inherently offensive and harmful that they are commonly outlawed in schools. Other words and images, however, including the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, or Mr. Fok's comment that the fatwa didn't make sense, are not as commonly seen as unacceptable, and any effects they may produce are attributed to the one affected. When is the discourse seen as unreasonable and in need of socializing, and when the person?

These questions prompted me to return to the concept of performativity, about which I have written previously (e.g., Ruitenberg, 2008), to see how it can help us think through the provocation or *production* of feelings beyond individual psychological explanations. In this paper, then, I want to retrace some of the basics of theories of performativity, to return to a discussion of the affective force of the words and images we circulate in educational contexts.

In order to address the concept of performativity I will trace two trajectories, each beginning with the work of the English language philosopher John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960). Of course it is possible to trace back from Austin to see the philosophical influences that led him to discuss performativity but, for the purposes of my analysis here, I will not trace the theoretical trajectories of "performativity" beyond Austin's work. The first trajectory focuses on the ways in which Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have critiqued and extended Austin's work; the second addresses Stanley Cavell's uptake of the category of perlocution introduced by Austin.

J. L. Austin's Performatives

In *How to Do Things With Words*, posthumously published in 1962 and based on a series of lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1955, Austin distinguished "performative" from "constative" utterances. Where constative utterances are statements that describe or report something, the term "performative sentence" or "performative utterance" or simply "performative" "indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (pp. 6-7). Common examples of performatives are "I invite," "I apologize," "I promise," and so on. The crux of a performative, in this basic sense, is that it does not represent a pre-existing act or phenomenon, but constitutes it: "I invite you" does not represent a pre-existing invitation but produces the invitation; "I apologize" does not represent a pre-existing apology but produces it, and so forth.

In response to the principle of verification of the logical positivists, which holds that propositions are meaningful only if they are verifiable either internally, on formal logical grounds, or externally, on empirical grounds, and that all other propositions should be considered "nonsense," Austin points out that although

performative utterances are not true or false they are not nonsensical either. This does not mean, however, that all performative utterances are successful or "felicitous." Depending on the interlocutors and the context in which the utterance is made, a performative utterance can achieve (felicity) or fail to achieve (infelicity) what it sets out to perform.

Austin subsequently analyzes the grammatical appearance of performatives, and observes that not all performatives are explicit performatives of the form "I apologize." He suggests that "any utterance which is in fact a performative should be reducible, or expandible, or analysable into a form with a verb in the first person singular present indicative active (grammatical)" (pp. 61-62). This is an important step: from positing only explicit, verb-based performatives such as "I promise," "I apologize," "I welcome you," and so on, he has expanded the notion of performatives to include the possibility of other grammatical forms, such as adjectives and statements. When a jury in a court says "Guilty," that is equivalent to the explicit performatives "We find, pronounce, deem you to be guilty" (p. 62). When a teacher says to a student, "This is the last time I accept a late assignment," that is equivalent to the explicit performative "I warn you that this is the last time I accept a late assignment." Austin goes on to observe that without knowledge of the total speech act—which includes the utterance itself, the person making the utterance and the situation in which the utterance is made—it is not possible, with any certainty, to expand a primary utterance (such as "This is the last time I accept a late assignment") to an explicit performative (such as "I warn you that this is the last time I accept a late assignment"). Primary utterances are, in and of themselves, ambiguous in their performativity.

After some further explorations Austin finds himself unable to produce a clear criterion for distinguishing performative from other utterances, and decides to "make a fresh start on the problem" (p. 90). In Lectures VIII through XII, he explores how we can do things *in* saying something and how we can do things *by* saying something, and for this reason he distinguishes between the performance of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. In brief, locution refers to the performance of an act *of* saying something; illocution refers to the performance of an act *in* saying something; and perlocution refers to the performance of an act *by* saying something. For example: *in* saying "I'm getting married!" the girl announced her engagement (illocution); *by* saying "I'm getting married!" she dashed the hopes of a former lover (perlocution). Austin indicates that he is particularly interested in illocutionary acts, as distinct from locutionary and perlocutionary acts, and he observes that "there is a constant tendency in philosophy to elide [the illocutionary act] in favour of one or other of the other two" (p. 103).

Austin realizes that the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions relies on what is meant by "producing effects." In Butler's (1997) concise explanation, "the illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself" (p. 3). Austin (1962) insists that although illocutionary acts are "connected with the production of effects in certain senses" (p. 115), acts are not illocutionary merely because they produce consequences. Illocutionary acts rely on the force of *convention*, which dictates that in certain circumstances, the issuing of a particular utterance is itself the performance of an act (and not merely a locutionary one). The distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is at the heart of the discussion about the alleged offensiveness of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons to which I referred in my introduction: some take cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad as illocutionary acts that inherently perform "offense"; others take such cartoons as perlocutionary acts that are not inherently offensive but may, nevertheless, have the effect that some people feel offended by them. This discussion illustrates that the conventions required to make illocutionary acts work as such are context-specific; the question about the acceptability or unacceptability of cartoons of (the Prophet) Muhammad in a culturally diverse society is a question about the conventions of (at least part of) the

Muslim community versus the conventions of a secular-liberal society.[1] I will return to the notion of convention a little later, as both Butler and Cavell further study the role of convention, although in quite different ways. First, however, I will detail how Derrida critiques and extends Austin's work.

Jacques Derrida and the Total Speech Act

Derrida employs the concept of performativity in many of his texts, but his direct response to Austin's (1962) *How to Do Things With Words* is the essay "Signature Event Context" (1972/1988). In this essay Derrida addresses some important assumptions of speech act theory, such as that speech is a more primary form of communication than writing, that speech and writing can be treated simply as communication with clear intentions, and that the origin and context of an utterance are fully determinable. Traditionally, and especially in philosophy, writing has been considered a mode of communication that is derived from, and extends the communicative potential of, speech. Speech is thus considered more primary than writing, and the logic of writing is usually understood through the logic of speech. Derrida takes on this "phonocentrism" of traditional philosophy. In a classic deconstructive move, Derrida inverts the hierarchy of the binary pair (speech over writing), in order to let the binary collapse altogether. He examines the written sign, in which the concept of *absence* (notably of the author and reader) manifests itself more clearly, and subsequently examines whether and how absence plays a role in speech.

> In order for my "written communication" to retain its function as writing, i.e. its readability, it must remain readable despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver, determined in general. My communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. (p. 7)

This fundamental iterability is one of the most important characteristics of the written sign. Derrida explains iterability as the possibility of iteration, where iteration is a repetition that is never self-identical, a repetition that introduces alterity in one way or another. Derrida concludes that phonemes (sounds), just like graphemes (marks), are marked by iterability. "This structural possibility of being weaned from the referent or from the signified (hence from communication and from its context) seems to me to make any mark, including those which are oral, a grapheme in general" (p. 10). So, rather than considering written signs through the logic of spoken signs, as has been done traditionally, Derrida indicates we can understand spoken signs through the logic of written signs.

Having dethroned speech as the original form of discourse, Derrida (1972/1988) thus extends the theory of speech acts to a theory of discursive acts more generally. He also questions the temporal boundaries of Austin's "total speech act" by arguing that this act, now better referred to as "total discursive act," extends beyond the present discourse into past and future as it includes not only the present immediate context of the discursive act, but also each context in which the discursive act been used in the past (citation) and can be used in the future (iteration). In an oft-quoted passage, Derrida asks rhetorically:

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[1] The prohibition against visual depictions of the Prophet Muhammad is not a settled issue. As Grabar and Natif (2003) point out based on historical research, "the Islamic world had a much more complicated and sophisticated concern with religious or pious imagery than is usually suggested" (p. 36).

> Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"? (p. 18)

Put differently, each spoken or written word, in order to be intelligible, must refer to previous uses of itself (citationality), and each spoken or written word, once released by its speaker or writer, can be re-used and changed in the process (iterability).

Another feature of performativity to which Derrida pays attention is the way in which performativity dissimulates itself, that is to say, how it disappears from view once the discursive force has brought something into being. One example of this is a declaration of rights, such as human rights or children's rights. "Declaring" is an obvious performative verb, as it does not represent a pre-existing declaration but rather brings a declaration into being. Derrida (1990/2002) points out that,

> as speech act, as performative utterance that disclaims itself, to the extent that it produces the force of law by claiming to describe or observe a "nature" that everyone is supposed to be familiar with and share, a declaration of rights always remains paradoxical.… Because of its essential claim to found itself on a natural right, a declaration of the rights of man interprets itself as a descriptive statement. It claims to found its prescriptive statements … upon observations. (p. 32)

A declaration of rights appears to be a descriptive (constative) sort of text, outlining rights that people already held. However, there were no rights as such before they were declared: the declaration brought the rights into being. This dissimulating character of performatives, which shows itself so clearly in declarations of rights, is also at work in the kinds of performatives Butler analyzes. The effect of appearing "to describe or observe a 'nature' that everyone is supposed to be familiar with and share," as Derrida puts it, is precisely what makes the performativity of gender and other apparently natural identities so difficult to analyze and convey.

Judith Butler and the Politicization of Performativity

Judith Butler takes as her point of departure Austin's observation that performative utterances need not take the recognizable form of the first person singular "I apologize" and "I invite." What matters is not whether a verb or phrase is a performative, but whether it has performative force and how the workings of that force may be understood. Butler's work focuses not on singular utterances in special circumstances, but on the performative force of discourse through repetition in media, legal, medical, political and everyday discourses.

As Butler (1997) has argued, single discursive acts with illocutionary force are relatively rare, as they rely on the particular authority of the speaker/writer: the marriage commissioner who can effectively "declare" two people married, the judge who can effectively "pronounce" someone guilty, etc. (see also Ruitenberg, 2008). The prime example of the performative force of an utterance by a speaker with "special authority" comes from Louis Althusser (1971/1994), who discusses the interpellation of the subject by divine address. Butler (1997) points out that in Althusser's argument, "power is understood on the model of the divine power of naming, where to utter is to create the effect uttered. Human speech rarely mimes that divine effect" (p. 32). Most illocutionary force does not stem from such single acts that are easily recognizable as performatives, but rather from "ordinary" discourse that conforms to convention that has been built up, over time, by repetition and the sedimentation of layer upon layer of discourse. Butler (1993) expresses this crucial insight into discursive performativity:

> [P]erformativity is … not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. (p. 12)

In other words, rather than as the creative power of a single utterance by a sovereign speaker, performativity is better understood as the *cumulative* power of repeated speech, writing, and other discourse.

As I suggested in the previous section, the dissimulation of performativity and of the conventions on which it relies enhances its effectiveness. At the end of this chapter I will discuss how emotions can, likewise, be performatively produced through conventions. Megan Boler (1999) argues that "emotions are not simply located in the individual, are not simply biological or privately experienced phenomena, but rather reflect linguistically embedded cultural values and rules and are thus a site of power and resistance" (p. 6). However, the conventions that enable the performative production of emotions are dissimulated and the idea that emotions are natural and spontaneous individual experiences remains "deeply embedded in our language and conceptual frameworks" (p. 5). (Perhaps the dissimulation is so effective that even Cavell underestimates the role of conventions in the emotional effects of discourse.)

One persistent misunderstanding about the concept of performativity in Butler's work is that it refers to the subject's performance of gender and other identities. I have previously discussed this "voluntarist" misunderstanding in detail and I don't want to replicate the argument here, but do want to reiterate the point that performativity means not that the subject "performs" gender and other identities the way an actor performs a role, but rather that the identity categories, and hence the intelligible subjectivity of the subject itself, are *performatively produced* by the discourses in which the subject participates (Ruitenberg, 2008, p. 263). In this conception of subjectivity, individual subjects still have agency and responsibility, but these cannot be understood outside of the discourses available to them. As a result, issues in schools such as bullying, zero tolerance policies for hateful speech, and censorship of controversial materials can be understood and addressed differently (see Ruitenberg, 2005; 2008).

Jacques Rancière and the Performative Production of Inequality

The French post-Marxist philosopher Jacques Rancière, while not working in the theoretical lineage of Austin, nevertheless shares an interest in the workings of power through discourse and, more specifically, in the maintenance of, and intervention in, social inequality through speech acts. As a student of Althusser he has a good understanding of interpellation and, like Butler, is interested in how subjects might talk back to these interpellations.

Rancière's critique of the ways in which the assumption of inequality sustains inequality is highly relevant for education. In *Disagreement*, Rancière (1995/1999) provides an analysis of the performative force of a phrase that is not uncommon in pedagogical situations: "Do you understand?" Rancière discusses the contradiction between the nature of understanding, which presupposes intelligence, and contexts in which the speaker is not at all interested in such intelligence and the phrase signals something like, "Have you heard my command and will you obey it?" Rancière writes:

> In ordinary social usage, an expression like "Do you understand?" is a false interrogative whose positive content is as follows: "There is nothing for you to understand, you don't need to understand" and even, possibly, "It's not up to you to understand; all you have to do is obey." … This performative gives those

it addresses to understand that there are people who understand problems and people who have only to understand the orders such people give them. (pp. 44-45)

The phrase is, as many children have experienced when addressed in this way by a parent or teacher, a trap: if one says one understands, one indicates a compliance with the order, and if one says one does not understand, one indicates a lack of intelligence. But as is the case in the work of Butler, the power in this discourse is not absolute, and there are opportunities for resistance and "insurrectionary speech" (Butler, 1997, p. 163). Rancière (1995/1999) suggests, for example, that the addressees of "Do you understand?" might resist the way in which the phrase positions them by responding:

We understand what you say when you say "Do you understand?" We understand that in saying "Do you understand?" you are in fact saying: "There's no need for you to understand me, you don't have the wherewithal to understand me, and so on." (p. 46)

This kind of resistant speech is, in Rancière's work, how politics occurs: as "the instituting of a quarrel" (Rancière, 2004, p. 5), an instance of subjects talking back to structures that have performatively produced them as inferior in some way. This also illustrates Butler's conception of agency, in which the subject derives agency from the very discursive processes in and through which it is cast (see Ruitenberg, 2008). Insurrectionary speech is thus a way in which, in Butler's terms, those who are not supposed to have agency demonstrate their agency or, in Rancière's (1995/1999) terms, those who are supposed to be less intelligent demonstrate their "equality of intelligence" (p. 34). The question is who is able to speak back effectively, especially in educational contexts, which are always marked by power differences both among students and between students and teachers. Whose resistant speech will be heard as reasonable resistance and whose as merely the protestation of a "madman"?

Stanley Cavell and the Perlocutionary Force of Emotives

As I mentioned above, when Austin (1962) found himself unable to clearly delimit the category of "performatives" in relation to other categories of utterances, he decided to "make a fresh start on the problem" (p. 90) and approach the question of performativity through the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary force. This is Stanley Cavell's (2005) point of departure when he suggests that "Austin's theory must re-begin again—going back again to the fact of speaking itself, or I might say, to the fact of the expressiveness and responsiveness of speech as such" (p. 17). What Cavell, who studied with Austin, means by that is that Austin's theory, which has focused largely on illocutionary effects, needs another strand of exploration: into perlocutionary effects and, in particular, *passionate* perlocutionary effects.

Cavell (2005) observes that Austin has been "skittish" and "sheepish" about emotions in speech and even accuses him of breaking off his analysis "catastrophically early, … at just the point at which passion would have had to come systematically into play" (p. 156). Given the great lengths to which Austin goes in order to contest the then dominant logical positivist principle of verification, Cavell is surprised that Austin does not make more of an effort to dispute the similarly dominant conception of emotions as "more or less a detachable issue" (p. 163). Austin very briefly mentions "mood," "tone of voice," "cadence" and "emphasis" as "primitive devices in speech" that serve to give utterances performative force (p. 74), but he does not discuss these devices in terms of passion, emotion, or feeling, and does not elaborate on the constitutive nature of expressions of emotion in implicit performatives.

Although Cavell (2005) makes mention of the use of the concept of performativity in gender studies (p. 157), he goes back to Austin's text and considers performative and other utterances as single utterances, not as the repeated and ritualized utterances Butler (1999) has emphasized (p. xv). Cavell's extension of Austin's work consists of a more detailed consideration of perlocutionary acts and, in particular, passionate and emotive utterances. He proposes conditions for passionate utterances that parallel the conditions that Austin lists for successful or "felicitous" performative utterances. I am grateful to Cavell for highlighting that the concept of performativity also has bearing on emotions. I am not, however, interested so much in categorizing illocutionary and perlocutionary verbs and seeing if there are about equal numbers of each, as Cavell seems to want to do, but more in considering the illocutionary and perlocutionary (including passionate) effects of all utterances in educational contexts, to whom or what these effects are attributed, and how students are positioned unequally to contest them.

What puzzles me in Cavell's (2005) list of conditions for passionate utterances is his insistence on the absence of conventions in the functioning of passionate utterances. Where Austin (1962) writes that, for the successful functioning of an *illocutionary* utterance, "there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having certain conventional effects, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (p. 14), Cavell writes that for the successful functioning of a *perlocutionary* utterance "there is no accepted conventional procedure and effect" (p. 180). In other words, there are, according to Cavell, no conventions that predict or explain or help produce the emotional effects certain utterances have. In asserting this, Cavell seems to be following Austin's observation that "any, or almost any, perlocutionary act [including the production of feelings and emotional responses in one's interlocutor] is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever, and in particular by a straightforward constative utterance (if there is such an animal)" (p. 110). Of course, there is no guarantee that a particular utterance will produce particular emotional effects, but there certainly are cultural patterns in the connection of certain sets of utterances and certain sets of responses. I would call these patterns "conventions," noting that "in sufficiently special circumstances" an illocutionary act will also fail to produce effects (which is precisely why the existence of a convention is not, according to Austin himself, a *sufficient* condition for the felicity of illocutionary utterances, and why he lists several other conditions).

Austin (1962) actually acknowledges the cultural patterns in the connection between utterances and emotional effects:

> There are numerous cases in human life where the feeling of a certain "emotion" … or "wish" or the adoption of an attitude is conventionally considered an appropriate or fitting response or reaction to a certain state of affairs, including the performance by someone of a certain act, cases where such a response is natural (or we should like to think so!) (p. 78)

Part of this is uncontroversial and has little bearing on the discussion above; for example, if the "state of affairs" is that it is someone's birthday, the "appropriate or fitting response" is to wish this person a happy birthday. However, Austin's claim goes further than the appropriateness of expressing a wish; it includes the appropriateness of feeling a certain emotion. That was also my point above: the fact that social conventions are, by themselves, insufficient for fully explaining and bringing about perlocutionary effects does not mean that conventions have no bearing on perlocutionary utterances and effects. In the case of passionate utterances, in particular, it is obvious that social conventions exert significant influence on the ways in which emotions are felt, the ways in which they are recognizably expressed, and the emotions that, in turn, are provoked by the expression. In the words of Boler (1999) I quoted previously, "emotions … reflect linguistically embedded cultural values and rules and are thus a site of power and resistance" (p. 6). Discourse

does not produce effects randomly; however, some emotional effects are considered almost inevitably tied to the utterance, while others are considered more contingent on the reasonableness, resilience, or self-control of the person who is affected.

Ian Munday (2009) considers Cavell's (2005) argument on passionate utterances in the context of moral education. Munday argues that Cavell's emphasis on the passionate perlocutionary effects of everyday exchanges offers an important corrective to moral education, which has often focused on moral reasoning and aimed to keep the messiness of emotions out of its considerations. This messiness of emotions—or, in Cavell's terms, the "disorders of desire"—means that the effects of linguistic exchanges are never fully predictable. However, a complete disavowal of any predictability would amount to a disavowal of responsibility for one's utterances:

> Surely, coming to know what the probable effects of what I say will be is part of my moral development. To say that anything might happen, as the result of my speaking, is to renege on my responsibility for what I say. (Munday, p. 62)

Utterances produce affect in patterns of probability; understanding these patterns is part of what it means to speak responsibly even though the particular effect on a particular person in a particular circumstance cannot be predicted with certainty. In the case of Benali's experience, we could say that a teacher in the late 1980s in Rotterdam, where a considerable number of Muslim immigrants from Morocco and Turkey had settled, might have considered how simply dismissing a perception of insult to Muhammad might contribute to the sense of alienation and marginalization of a Muslim student. As is the case with illocutionary utterances, the conventions themselves can and do change, and strategic, critical responses to speech that offends or injures—regardless of whether the offense or injury is an illocutionary or perlocutionary effect—can contribute to such changes in conventions.[2]

In the next section, I discuss a different example, which revolves not around ethnicity and religion but around gender and sexuality. Not only do gender and sexuality offer prime examples of how performativity works (as Butler has discussed extensively), the powerful affective effects that discourses of gender and sexuality produce in schools also illustrate well how conventions regulate the performative production of affect, and where possibilities of resistant speech emerge.

The Performative Production and Resignification of Emotional Responses

Gender norms are strictly policed in schools, especially among students themselves, and those who transgress them experience, almost without fail, discursive acts that are replete with passionate investments and consequences. Imagine a teenage girl who has cut her hair short and who, upon arrival at school, is greeted by a classmate's question: "What did you do to your hair? Are you into girls now?" Thinking back to Rancière's (1995/1999) analysis of the phrase "Do you understand?", here, too, we are dealing with a "false interrogative" (p. 44). As illocutions, these questions position both speaker and listener in the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990, p. 45); in asking, "What did you do to your hair? Are you into girls now?", the speaker performatively produces herself as a legitimate guard of gender norms, and the addressee as potential

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[2] The distinction between "offensive" and "injurious" discourse is complex, and played a central role in discussions about the kind of harm done, or not done, by the previously mentioned *Satanic Verses* and Charlie Hebdo cartoons. See Asad, Brown, Butler, and Mahmood, 2009.

transgressor of these norms. As perlocutions, these questions can bring about a range of emotional consequences, but the heteronormative conventions and concomitant cultural patterns are such that the most commonly expected and produced emotional consequences are fear and shame.

Depending on the previous social positions of the girls, I might conjecture that the speaker expects a clear disavowal of queer desire and a confirmation of her status as legitimate guard of gender norms. Responses in this scenario might include blushing, tears and a silent departure but also an indignant, "No! I have a boyfriend, you know! I just need my hair short because I'm on the swim team," or a more apologetic, "I know, it's terrible, isn't it? This new girl at the salon completely screwed up my hair and I had a fit and even got my money back."

In all of these responses the basic desirability of long hair in the establishment of femininity is confirmed, and the position of the speaker as guard of gender norms is not contested. Although I have described one as tearful, the second as indignant and the third as apologetic, shame and fear play a role in all. Along the lines of the insurrectionary response to "Do you understand?", however, other responses are possible that resignify the speech both as illocution and in the expectations of its perlocutionary effects. For example: "I know that you don't really want me to tell you how or why I got a short haircut. I know that what you want is for me to confirm that you are right in connecting short haircuts with lesbians, and to deny that I am a lesbian. But you are wrong: there are straight women with short hair and there are lesbians with long hair. And I'm not 'into' anyone at the moment but if I end up 'into' girls, don't worry: you're not my type."

I am not naïve about high schools today, or about the insidious nature of girl-on-girl bullying, and am not suggesting that this kind of insurrectionary speech is, in all circumstances, likely or even prudent. However, this example serves to demonstrate the extent to which social conventions structure passionate utterances and their responses, as well as the possibility of affirmative resignification. Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2006) provide an interesting companion to my fictitious example above. During their ethnographic research in the UK they recorded the following discussion among white, working-class girls aged 14 and 15:

> Sam: We could be sitting together like now and the boys could say, "Oh—yer lesbian" or summit, and you just take it in.
> Carla: Laugh it off.
> Sam: We just laugh it off.
> Julie: Me and Carla do.
> Carla: We'll just say, "Oh yes!"
> …
> Julie: Me and Carla get called lesbians [by the boys] all the time but we just say, "Oh yeah, we're proud of it!" and we just shrug it off.
> Emma:Yeah. Because you know you're not.
> Samantha: When you answer back, they can't say anything because like …
> Carla: Exactly! We say "Yes, we are …"
> Nicky: … We turn round and say, "Oh, do you want a threesome or something," and he'll go, "Oh, I don't know" and they just like be quiet.
> (pp. 461-462)

Nayak and Kehily discuss how it became evident to them that these youth do not use the term "lesbian" "to signify that the girls are gay, but rather that they are 'frigid', boring and [or perhaps *because* they are] disinterested in boys" (p. 462). The girls' response is subversive, they write, because of its hyperbolic inversion of the suspicion of sexual frigidity and passivity to the bold invitation to a threesome. In terms of the power relations of the boys and girls involved in the encounter itself, it appears that the girls indeed

manage to invert the way in which the boys position them. The very fact that, as Samantha observes, they speak back at all certainly plays a role in this. In terms of the larger heteronormative power relations, however, and the more long-term performative effects of the exchange, I am not so convinced by the resignification supposedly demonstrated here. As Emma illustrates, the girls dare discursively take up a lesbian identity only because it is clear they do not "really" share this identity, and the undesirability of actual lesbian desire or identity is left unchallenged. In fact, the girls' boldness is produced in no small part by their daring uptake of a discourse that appears "obviously" (i.e., *conventionally*) undesirable.

Cavell might argue that "Yer lesbian" is a speech act that can produce any of a virtually limitless range of emotional responses; I would argue that in most schools the social convention of heteronormativity is solidly in place and creates conditions in which it is extremely unlikely for this phrase, addressed to two or more girls sitting together, to be heard as compliment or expression of admiration or approval rather than insult, accusation, or expression of disgust. Butler illustrates this poignantly in the following account:

> I remember once walking on a street in Berkeley and some kid leaned out of a window and asked, "Are you a lesbian?" Just like that. I replied, "Yes, I *am* a lesbian." I returned it in the affirmative. … Of course, what such a questioner is really asking is, "Are you this thing that I fear and loathe? Do you dare to say yes to this thing that you apparently are, at least on the basis of what you look like? And I have power over you to the extent that I am now seeking to expose you through the question I pose to you." To the extent that I was able very quickly to turn around and say, "Yes, I am a lesbian," the power of my interrogator was lost. (in Butler, Olson, & Worsham, 2000, pp. 759-760)

Butler's "of course" is not simply a rhetorical device seeking her audience's agreement, but an indication of the conventions driving the use and interpretation of a phrase such as "Are you a lesbian?" as an (illocutionary) interrogation of the addressee's sexuality that has passionate investments and effects.

Reconsidering Performativity via Affect Theory

In recent years several scholars have returned to the concept of affect and rethought it not as the emergence of feeling in an individual body and psyche, but as the emergence of feeling in a specific cultural and social context. There are conventions of affect, and of how affect becomes associated with some bodies rather than others in certain social and cultural contexts. In calling attention to such patterns and conventions, affect theory supplements speech act theory with considerations of the performative production of affect. About her book *Touching Feeling*, for example, Eve Sedgwick (2003) writes that it "wants to address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do, rather than submit to the apparent common sense that requires a strict separation between the two and usually implies an ontological privileging of the former" (p. 6). Sedgwick here positions her analysis and argument as one that attends to the breakdown of the binary pair reason/emotion. As Sara Ahmed (2014) describes this binary: "To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous" (p. 3). Sedgwick indicates that while speech that is explicitly recognizable as performative certainly has effects, there are other "aspects of experience and reality" that are not explicitly recognizable as performative because they do not take the form of propositional speech or even of speech altogether, that nonetheless produce effects. Put differently: if the concept of performativity is about what words do, it is important to note that words don't just do things, in the sense that they perform actions, but that words do things *to people*, that is, they affect people. For example, explicit performatives such as "I dare you," "I warn you" and "I assure you" all imply a desire to affect the addressee and to produce a

certain affect in that addressee: feeling challenged, feeling cautioned, feeling assured. More importantly: words are more likely to do certain things to certain people, to affect certain people in certain ways, and to produce certain kinds of affect in the process.

Sedgwick (2003) discusses the example of the performative "I dare you," whose effectiveness relies not only on a speaker and an addressee, but also on the actual or potential presence of others: "Although 'I dare you' ostensibly involves only a singular first and singular second person, it effectually depends as well on the tacit demarcation of the space of a third-person plural, a 'they' of witness—whether or not literally present" (p. 69). When I say "I dare you,"

> [I] necessarily involve a consensus of the eyes of others. It is these eyes through which you risk being seen as a wuss; by the same token, it is as people who share with me a contempt for wussiness that these others are interpellated, with or without their consent, by the act I have performed in daring you. (p. 69)

This same mechanism is at work in Nayak and Kehily's (2006) example of the British secondary school students. When one of the boys says, "Yer lesbian," this implicit performative can be rendered more explicitly as "I am calling you out as a lesbian." It is an interpellation that also depends on what Sedgwick calls "the tacit demarcation of the space of a third-person plural," in this case an assumed heterosexual and homophobic "they." The power-play involved in the boys seeking to position themselves as policing the girls' sexuality—to paraphrase, "I'm calling you out as sexually flawed because you don't seem interested in me"— and failing when the girls counter with, "I'm comfortable positioning myself as a sexual being, I'm just not interested in you," also shows that each speaker calls on a different third-person plural: the boy on other boys, the girl on other girls.

The very possibility of the assumed consensus of this third-person plural is the context of convention that Cavell neglects. I argued earlier that the social convention of heteronormativity is so solidly in place that it is very unlikely for this phrase, addressed to two or more schoolgirls sitting together, to be heard as compliment or expression of admiration or approval rather than insult, accusation, or expression of disgust. Sedgwick (2003) further illuminates this by calling attention to the asymmetry between the recognizability of the formulaic performative "I dare you" and "the lack of a formulaic negative response to being dared or to being interpellated as witness to a dare." It is not that no negative response is possible, but that such a negative response takes greater effort, not being able to call on the same citational repertoire as the performative it seeks to deny or disavow:

> I won't take you up on it. Who are you to dare me? Who cares what you dare me to do? The fascinating and powerful class of negative performatives … is marked, in almost every instance, by the asymmetrical property of being much less prone to becoming conventional than the positive performatives. (p. 70)

As we have seen, the response to a performative need not be negative but can also be hyperbolic, as we have seen in the example of British schoolgirls, who respond to "Yer lesbian" with "Oh yeah, we're proud of it!" or "Do you want a threesome or something?" This subversive speech is courageous and remarkable because, as Sedgwick puts it, "negative performatives tend to have a high threshold of initiative" (p. 70).

Ahmed (2014) does not discuss the example "daring" but turns to the affective performativity of calling something or someone disgusting:

> To name something as disgusting—typically, in the speech act, "That's dis- gusting!"—is performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But

> to say something is disgusting is still to "make something"; it generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object*. (p. 93, emphasis in original)

Let us imagine that Julie and Carla in Nayak and Kehily's example above had been seen kissing by the boys. An emphatic "That's disgusting!" might have followed.[3] Reiterating Sedgwick's (2003) emphasis on the invoked "they of witness," Ahmed writes:

> The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect. In other words, the subject asks others to repeat the condemnation implicit in the speech act itself. Such a shared witnessing is required for speech acts to be generative, that is, for the attribution of disgust to an object or other to stick to others. In addition, the demand for a witness shows us that the speech act, "That's disgusting!" generates more than simply a subject and an object; it also generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event. A community of witnesses is generated, whose apparent shared distance from an event or object that has been named as disgusting is achieved through the repetition of the word "disgust." (p. 94)

When Abdelkader Benali (2015) recounts his memory of his angry outburst in history class, he does not recall the exact words that either he or his history teacher spoke. But he sketches a scene: "[My history teacher] claimed the fatwa didn't make sense. How could somebody be offended by fiction? How could using one's imagination lead to the death sentence?" The clerics who pronounced the fatwa and those who agree with them are named not as disgusting but as irrational, as not making sense, perhaps as ridiculous. For the record: I disagree with the clerics and the declaration of fatwas, in general. However, I am interested here neither in the criteria by which we might judge whether a text is blasphemous or offensive nor in the criteria by which we might judge the declarers of fatwas to be irrational or ridiculous. Rather, I am interested in the affective performative effects that such pronouncements have. Mr. Fok's presentation of the fatwa as a self-evidently irrational and disproportionate response called on other students in the class as a community of witnesses and positioned Benali and anyone else who disagreed squarely outside that community of witnesses. As Benali writes: "I know from my own experience that the lure of extremism can be very powerful when you grow up in a world where the media and everyone around you seems to mock and insult your culture."

As I have written elsewhere:

> Butler's work on discursive performativity gives educators a way of understanding that not all students have access to discursive conventions that will make their discursive acts—in the form of speech, writing, fashion, body language, or otherwise—socially intelligible and read as "normal." (Ruitenberg, 2008, p. 267)

What I did not address in that previous work is that the availability or lack thereof of *discursive conventions and a community of witnesses* that make discursive acts socially intelligible and acceptable, itself has affective effects. Ahmed's (2007) discussion of the "kill joy feminist" similarly illustrates this point: feminist comments—outside a context of a community of feminist witnesses—are read as inappropriate and as producing negative affect because they disrupt the discursive and affective conventions that regulate what women are expected to say and what they are expected to be happy about: "The feminist after all might kill joy precisely because she

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[3] An alternative possibility worth noting here is that the boys' response could be not "That's disgusting!" but "That's hot!" Where the former positions the girls as abject others, the latter positions them as objects of desire for the boys.

refuses to share an orientation towards certain things as being good, because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising" (p. 127). Benali (2015), similarly, refused to share an orientation towards freedom of expression being unequivocally good, and became the "angry, irrational immigrant," disconnected from his classmates and teacher.

One of the main effects of education—sometimes intentional, sometimes inadvertent—is that students become certain kinds of speakers and listeners—or, in less phonocentric terms, discursive participants. Teachers may aim for students to become more rational and reasonable discursive participants, for example, capable of speaking (writing) and hearing the speech (writing) of others in ways that produce desirable and avoid undesirable affects and other effects. In this essay I have wanted to trace the concept of performativity to provide a fuller understanding of the various aspects of the concept that are helpful for understanding the discursive dynamics of contested speech acts, including the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary effects, and the common dissimulation of the conventions that enable performative effectiveness. I have also wanted to extend previous discussions of performativity by focusing on the neglected aspect of the performative production of affect, countering claims that perlocutionary effects are entirely unpredictable. The affective dimensions of performativity, and the relations of discursive convention and power that enable some to invoke affect and a community of witnesses and enable others to resist or disavow their interpellations, are a valuable framework for analysing who or what is seen as unreasonable and in need of socializing, how this dynamic produces a "we" and "they," and how such divisions have affective consequences.

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