

RECONSIDERATIONS: We Got the Wrong Gal: Rethinking the “Bad” Academic Writing of Judith Butler

Cathy Birkenstein

It is hard to think of a writer whose work has been more prominently upheld as an example of bad academic writing than the philosopher and literary theorist Judith Butler. In 1998, Butler was awarded first prize in the annual Bad Writing Contest established by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, and early in 1999, was lampooned in an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* by Denis Dutton, one of the chief architects of the contest. Quoting Butler’s award-winning sentence, Dutton claimed that Butler’s “inept,” “jargon-laden” prose was typical of the obscurantist writing being admired and emulated in the most elite circles of today’s academic humanities:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibilities of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Qtd. in Dutton)

Passages like this, Dutton argued, show that Butler and the other allegedly incomprehensible writers targeted by his contest are mere “kitch theorists” who, unlike genuine philosophers like Kant and Aristotle, “hope to persuade audiences not by argument but by obscurity.” Such writers, Dutton claimed, only “mimic the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work.” Butler’s sentence, Dutton wrote, “beats readers into submission and instructs them that they

Cathy Birkenstein is a lecturer in English at the University of Illinois–Chicago and co-director there of the Writing in the Disciplines program. She is co-author with Gerald Graff of the textbook *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, and of articles on writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, and *College Composition and Communication*. This essay is part of a larger projected study on myths and misunderstandings regarding academic discourse.

are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it.”

The way Dutton pitches the story, this is a classic emperor-has-no-clothes moment. Though Butler, like her other tenured radical colleagues, is supposed “to teach students how to write,” she herself, Dutton suggests, cannot put together a coherent sentence. Her writing, despite its high pretentiousness, Dutton charges, seems incapable of delivering “genuine insight.”

These, of course, are familiar charges that have been leveled against difficult academic writing, and sometimes against all writing in the academic humanities. They raise questions about which there still remains little consensus, even a full decade after *Philosophy and Literature* discontinued its Bad Writing Contest in 1999, and six years after Butler and several of her defenders answered the critics of difficult academic writing in a volume in 2003 (Culler and Lamb). Is “bad” academic writing in the humanities as reader-repellent as is charged? Is the difficulty of this writing merely a pretentious bluff—an attempt to divert attention from its lack of content? Do writers who produce this ostensibly unreadable prose betray their obligation to address lay, nonspecialist audiences? Or, as its defenders reply, is the apparent difficulty of this writing justified or even necessary for expressing its challenging, heterodox content? Are difficult writers like Butler being true to ideas that would only be compromised by being reduced to popular forms and conventional registers?

In 1999, the same year Dutton took Butler to task in the *Wall Street Journal*, the feminist moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum published a harsh, widely cited critique of Butler in the *New Republic*, claiming that Butler’s “ponderous and obscure” writing, like that of other postmodern feminists, breaks with the normal communicative practices that characterize “both the continental and Anglo-American philosophical traditions” (38). Since Nussbaum spends over half of her review quarrelling with the specific arguments that Butler advances in her books, one might have expected Nussbaum to concede that Butler does make comprehensible arguments that readers can discern well enough to either agree or disagree with. Nevertheless, like Dutton, Nussbaum claims that readers, including herself presumably, are “baffled by the thick soup of Butler’s prose” (38). Instead of “trad[ing] arguments and counter-arguments” (40), Nussbaum insists, Butler enacts a rhetorical “mystification that eludes criticism because it makes few definite claims” (38). According to Nussbaum, Butler writes in a “teasing, exasperating way,” presenting herself as “a star who fascinates, and frequently by obscurity, rather than as an arguer among equals.” Echoing Dutton, Nussbaum concludes that Butler “bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on”—though again, Butler’s alleged lack of clarity did not prevent Nussbaum from vigorously disagreeing with her (39).

These critiques had been anticipated in 1998 by Susan Gubar, who argued in *Critical Inquiry* that Butler's "obscurantism" is so "at odds with normative syntactic procedures" that it hinders the "tolerance and understanding needed for open dialogue" and separates "feminists within the academy [from] [. . .] women outside it" (894, 880-81).¹ And two years earlier, the journalist Katha Pollitt, writing in the *Nation*, complained that Butler and other "silly" "pseudo-leftists" combine a reckless rejection of "reason, logic, [. . .] and other Enlightenment watchwords" with an annoying "penchant for bad puns and multiple parentheses." According to Pollitt, Butler and other "self-infatuated" "humanities profs" write so poorly that even they themselves

don't really understand one another's writing and make their way through the text by moving from one familiar name or notion to the next like a frog jumping across a murky pond by way of lily pads. Lacan...performativity . . . Judith Butler . . . scandal . . . (en)gendering (w)holeness . . . Lunch!

From across the political spectrum, then, and both inside and outside the academy, Butler and other difficult writers are accused of being elitists who, despite their egalitarian pretensions, promote a discourse that values flash over substance, and obfuscation over lucid argumentation.

Defenders of such writing have not sat by idly in the face of these accusations. In perhaps the most concerted response to date, several literary and cultural theorists, including Butler herself, came together in the 2003 volume *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, edited by Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb. The contributors argue that the attacks on difficult writing rest on a set of double standards: that they target writers like Butler who are influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism, while saying nothing about those who write in equally opaque ways in non-continental, analytic and empirical traditions; furthermore, that the accusers apply a standard of transparency to writers in the humanities that would never be applied to writers in the sciences, law, or medicine, where opacity and jargon are often expected if not demanded.

Yet one thing is curious about many of the defenses of Butler's alleged difficulty. Instead of refuting the charge that this writing is in fact bad and opaque, as one might expect, these respondents concede the substance of the charge or even embrace it. That is, many of the contributors to *Just Being Difficult?* agree that Butler's type of writing *is* deeply inaccessible, but insist that this inaccessibility is necessitated by the ideologically laudable goal of disrupting our culture's normative, sedimented ways of thinking, questioning the status quo, unsettling readers, and ultimately leading them to new insights.

Margaret Ferguson, for instance, whose essay opens the collection, sets the tone by quoting favorably the following passage by Theodore Adorno, which is also quoted

favorably by several of the collection's other contributors. Lamenting how most consumers approach communication in mass, commercial society, Adorno writes,

Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar. (Qtd. in Ferguson 19)

In other words, Adorno suggests, commercial society tends to reject anything that does not reinforce conventional common sense—its preexisting vision of what the “understandable” and “familiar” look like. Conversely, Adorno suggests, unconventional language that refuses to conform to the already familiar has the subversive potential to jar us out of this complacency into new, unexpected, and more productive ways of understanding.

Citing this Adorno passage in her own essay in *Just Being Difficult?*, Butler argues that “the demand that language deliver what is already understandable appears to be a demand to be left alone with what one already knows.” Indeed, Butler even sees in the demands for clear, accessible, popular writing a parochial defense of “self-satisfied-ignorance”:

What does it say about me when I insist that the only knowledge I will validate is one that appears in a form that is familiar to me, that answers my need for familiarity, that does not make me pass through what is isolating, estranging, difficult, and demanding? (203)

Although Butler does concede that there are merits to writing lucidly for a broad, popular audience, she insists that such writing tends ultimately to reinforce pernicious “relations of subordination and exclusion,” while language that is “ruled out as [. . .] unintelligible” can be a “resource [. . .] to rethink the world radically”—or, as she puts it in a *New York Times* article answering her critics, “to [. . .] provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world” (“Values of Difficulty” 201; “Bad Writer” A27).

Along similar lines, Michel Warner defends difficult theoretical writing in the humanities on the grounds that it “keep[s] alive an alternative that may be reanimated in some distant future,” even if it is unclear to mainstream readers today (119). Taking a different tack, Rey Chow sees the difficulty of theoretical, postmodern writing not as an elitist attempt to prevent communication with nonacademics, as the “anti-theory moralists” suggest, but as a laudable attempt to resist capitalist globalization—as a “heroic, if Sisyphean effort to obstruct the path of a sweeping global instrumentalism,” which requires language to “become more clear, more accessible, and more useable [for] [. . .] the developing nation” (99, 102). Obfuscatory prose, in short, strikes a blow for the proletariat! And finally, John McCumber sees the “suspect” call for clarity as a “misguided effort” to “force us all to remain in ancient and oppressive habits of thought” (69). Though he himself writes in a register that is itself unexpectedly intelligible and clear, McCumber argues that, instead of maligning the

“seemingly unintelligible words” of Butler and those she summarizes and quotes, we should celebrate such words as “emancipatory” expressions of “playfulness, improvisation, and freedom itself” (69).

Surprisingly, then, many who defend Butler’s writing and the type of theoretical discourse it represents agree with Butler’s critics that her writing is inaccessible when judged by normative standards of accessibility. While Dutton, Nussbaum, and others condemn Butler’s alleged inaccessibility to mainstream readers, Butler and many of her allies praise that alleged inaccessibility on the grounds that it has the subversive potential to liberate those very same readers. But is Butler’s writing really that inaccessible and unintelligible? Does her writing really depart from common standards and conventions of clarity? My own view is that, far from breaking from recognized standards of intelligibility, Butler’s writing conforms to those standards in ways that are missed by both her detractors and most of her defenders, Butler included. Though Butler’s writing certainly does have unclear moments, it would not have had the wide impact it has had were it not for its ability to consistently make recognizable arguments that readers can identify, summarize, and debate. Butler’s writing has succeeded in circulating as widely as it has in academic circles and beyond not because it breaks with the traditional pattern of “trad[ing] arguments and counter-arguments,” as Nussbaum insists (40), but precisely because it makes systematic use of this classic argumentative pattern, and does so in ways that all writers (and readers) can learn from.

I am not the first to notice Butler’s rhetorical adeptness. In his essay in *Just Being Difficult?*, Jonathan Culler defends the difficulty and opacity of some philosophical writing, but rightly insists that these terms do not describe the sentence that won Butler the Bad Writing Prize and that Dutton mocked as incomprehensible in his *Wall Street Journal* article. Culler argues that, when Butler’s sentence is restored to the context of the three-page essay that surrounds it, it actually makes a lot of sense. After quoting the award-winning sentence, Culler states,

This is difficult writing, certainly, although not excessively so once one understands a few key terms and has in mind some particular illustrations of the process at stake. My undergraduate students quickly become able to handle it. (47)

Culler observes that “despite the high level of abstraction,” the essay represents “quite pedagogic writing,” in that “key points are rephrased and repeated, so that if you don’t catch on the first time around, you have another chance when they come around again” (47). To Dutton’s claim that Butler merely “mimic[s] the effects of rigor [. . .] without actually doing serious intellectual work,” Culler retorts, “I think

this is complete rubbish, actually. I wonder who it is who has failed to do serious intellectual work—such as read Butler’s three page article” (45). Although “rubbish” might not be my word of choice, Culler, I think, is absolutely right. Butler’s writing is far more lucid than her detractors (and many of her defenders, I would add) imagine. Though I will analyze Butler’s award-winning sentence shortly, I now want to extend Culler’s insight about Butler’s rhetorical skillfulness by showing that she not only uses terms clearly and makes key points in a consistent, coherent, helpfully repetitive (or “pedagogic”) fashion, but also organizes her points in the very argumentative, pro/con pattern that she has been condemned and praised for avoiding.

To see what I mean by this unnoticed polemical pattern in Butler’s writing, let us start with the opening two sentences of what many consider one of Butler’s most difficult books, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

Contemporary feminist debates over the meaning of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. (vii)

The passage does contain some jargon (“the indeterminacy of gender” and “negative valence”), and the second sentence lacks the kind of transition (a “But” or “However”) that would signal that it is challenging the views summarized in the first. Yet I would argue that not only is there is nothing fundamentally unclear about this passage, but that it contains a great deal rhetorically to commend it. Through the parallel use of “trouble,” Butler twice echoes the key term of her book’s title, signaling that these opening sentences are offering a helpful introduction to what the book as a whole will be about. And what it appears to be about is how this “gender trouble” need not, in Butler’s view, “carry such a negative valence” as is ascribed to it by those engaged in the “contemporary feminist debates” referred to in the opening sentence. In other words, these opening lines suggest that, while those engaged in “contemporary feminist debates” worry that “the indeterminacy of gender” will undermine feminist activism, I, Judith Butler, will be arguing in this book that this indeterminacy need not be feared—or, as is asserted later in the book, that it should in fact be actively courted as the basis of a feminist politics that is even more radical and far-reaching than that of the trouble-fearing feminists I am responding to. To translate the passage into even more blunt terms: “Although many feminists are troubled by the inability to define *woman*, I, believe that this trouble may be precisely what feminism needs”—or, “Though many feminists fear that the ‘indeterminacy of gender’ will undermine feminism, I assert that this indeterminacy is precisely what feminism needs to fuel its most radical projects.”

It is true that Butler might have avoided some of the criticisms of her writing had she spelled out her point as bluntly as I just have. But what she does write, far from being opaque and esoteric, could still stand as a model for all academic writing,

much of which may be superficially clearer at the sentence level but lacks Butler's polemical dexterity. Not only do Butler's two opening lines contain something much academic writing sorely lacks—a clear, overarching argument or thesis—but they usefully contextualize that argument by framing it as a challenge to some commonly held belief. Hence, before readers have advanced more than an inch down the opening page of her book, Butler not only has provided them with a succinct preview of her book's central argument (that what many see as bad news for feminism should not be seen so negatively), but also has suggested why that argument matters, which she does by indicating who thinks otherwise, and what other arguments her own is responding to or correcting. In so doing, Butler's writing acquires not just clarity but an underlying motivation and exigency that are woefully absent in the work of many less trendy, traditional writers.

Furthermore, as *Gender Trouble* progresses, Butler does not forget the essential contrast she has established in these opening lines between her own argument and the one she is answering. In keeping with Culler's observations about her repetitive, "pedagogic" style, she keeps returning to and extending this contrast as she moves through the rest of her text. In case readers do not grasp the opposition on their initial encounter, Butler gives them several more chances to process it by returning to it, reframing and redescribing it with a difference in modified terms.

In the following passage, for instance, Butler rearticulates her opening contrast as one between a humanist, foundationalist, origin-seeking position that she is challenging and a "genealogical critique" that she endorses and credits to the work of Michel Foucault. Using the classic road-mapping term *rather* to signal this opposition, Butler states,

A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; **rather**, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. (viii-ix; bolding added)

Echoing this opposition a bit later and marking it with another road-mapping cue, *instead*, Butler writes,

[I]t is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the question of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. **Instead**, we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequences of a radical critique of the categories of identity? (ix; bolding added)

Passages like these go far toward refuting the charge made by Dutton, Nussbaum, and others that Butler is a pretentious, hollow writer who simply "bullies readers" or "evades" argumentation. On the contrary, these passages suggest that Butler goes out of her way to make her central argument almost impossible to miss—not just

by restating it numerous times in a variety of formulations, but by highlighting its presence with clear direction markers, as is further underscored by the *but* and *ought also* in the following passages²:

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of woman, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. **But** *politics* and *representation* are controversial terms. (1; bolding added)

It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique **ought also** to understand how the category of “woman,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (2; bolding added)

In light of such passages, it is hard to agree with Nussbaum’s charge that Butler “makes few definite claims” and refuses to posit an “audience of specialists eager to debate (38),” or with Gubar’s charge that Butler thwarts “the tolerance and understanding needed for open dialogue” (880–1). If ever there were a rhetoric aimed at fostering “open dialogue” and creating an “audience [. . .] eager to debate,” Butler’s would be it.

Again, this is not to deny that *Gender Trouble* contains stretches that are so filled with “recondite abstractions,” as Gubar calls them (896), that readers can get lost. In Butler’s summaries of Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir, and Monique Wittig in her Introduction, for instance, it is sometimes hard to tell whether Butler is agreeing with these thinkers, disagreeing, partly agreeing and disagreeing with them, or using one to critique the others. Even then, however, these challenging moments tend to be contained, since Butler, given what Culler lauds as her repetitively “pedagogic” manner, inevitably returns to some restatement of the central opposition that structures her book. So even though readers may lose Butler’s thread for a paragraph or two, she repeats her book’s central structuring opposition often enough that, with a little effort, they can always find their way back to it.

A related set of “not X but Y” contrasts structures the text that contains the sentence for which Butler won the 1999 Bad Writing Award: her 1997 article, “Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time,” a sympathetic exposition of the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In one classically contrastive sentence, Butler states,

“patriarchy” or “systems” of masculine domination are **not** systematic totalities bound to keep women in positions of oppression, **but, rather**, hegemonic forms of power that expose their own frailty in the very operation of their iterability. The strategic task for feminism is to exploit those occasions of frailty as they emerge. (14; bolding added)

In this sentence, as in so many others, one can virtually hear Butler talking to skeptics standing by her side, telling them, “No, no, people, please, don’t be mistaken. Patriarchy *is not* a system that operates in such and such a way (in a way that is hopelessly

unchangeable), *but rather* one that works in such and such a way (that, as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, inadvertently creates opportunities for its own subversion).” In the following passage, this dialogue continues:

I would clearly agree that the incorporative and domesticating possibilities of capital are immense. **But I would also argue** that any theory that fails to think the possibilities of transformation from within that “systematic” formation is itself complicit with the idea of the “eternal” character of capital that capital so readily produces. (13–14; bolding added)

In other words: “**Sure, dear friends, I concede that** [. . .] capitalism is extremely powerful. **But I would point out that** [. . .] we only aid those powers if we see them as immutable.”

It is this basic opposition or dialogue—between those who see hegemonic powers as immutable and Butler’s own view of them as transformable—that renders accessible the 1998 award-winning sentence that Dutton scorned as so obviously impenetrable, and that I will now quote again:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Qtd. in Dutton)

To be sure, nobody would claim that this is a concise, economical sentence. But as Culler points out, it has been so prepared for by its surrounding context that, with a little effort, reasonably educated readers can be expected to understand it. What I would again add to Culler’s insight is that, like all of the other Butler passages quoted above and many others I could cite, even this admittedly cumbersome sentence conforms to a conventional pattern of polemical argumentation and counter-argumentation that, in its purest form, can be reduced to a schema like “We need to stop doing this and start doing that instead,” or “I agree with X and Y because, in contrast to those who assert _____, they assert _____.” Or, to hug up even more closely to Butler’s own sentence structure itself,

The move from _____ to _____ marked a shift from _____ to _____, which has in turn inaugurated a renewed conception of _____.³

Though Butler’s sentence has been widely read as incomprehensible, it contains no fewer than four road-mapping phrases that highlight its dialectical structure: (1) *move from _____ to _____*; (2) *shift from _____ to _____*; (3) *inaugurated*; (4) *renewed conception*. Far from flouting standard conventions of argumentation, Butler’s supposed

disaster of a sentence has a very clear goal: to argue that Laclau and Mouffe, whose views about the iterability of power she had been championing throughout her essay, have ushered in an important new way of thinking that sees hegemony in less static ways than had earlier Marxist theorists and that, in emphasizing repetition and temporality, presents hegemony not as fated or inevitable, but as productively open to renegotiation and change.

Butler, then, is not an impenetrable, esoteric writer who rejects conventional communicative practices, as both her detractors and defenders suggest. Instead, she is a powerful rhetorician who commands the most important of these practices, not only, as Culler points out, by repeating concepts frequently and explaining her references, but also by conforming very closely to the classic rhetorical pattern that Kenneth Burke characterizes as dialecticism, negation, or “perspective by incongruity.” This practice involves pushing off against other views, developing one’s

[p]hilosophy [. . .] partially in opposition to other philosophies, so that tactics of refutation are involved, thus tending to give [one’s] calculus the stylistic form of a lawyer’s plea. (113)

What Burke says of literary works—and of a great variety of everyday “symbolic actions” like praying, consoling, seeking freedom, and scapegoating—applies well to Butler’s writing: it presents its central assertions “not in isolation, but as the answer or rejoinder to assertions current in the situation in which it arose” (109).

This habit of answering “assertions current in” her “situation” fits surprisingly well with Butler’s postmodern, post-structuralist agenda. Granted, Butler’s use of this conventional, dialectical form does contradict her suggestion that “forms that are familiar to me” reinforce the status quo and are to be avoided. But Butler claims that gender norms saturate our everyday lives, and that we cannot simply reject them. She opposes the idea that one could simply dispense with gender norms, as if “one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night” (*Bodies* x). Finally, then, Butler’s adherence to classical argumentative norms is compatible with what she says about gender norms, since both reside not in dispensing with forms altogether, but in embracing them, watching for instabilities in their repetition and finding ways to use them to our advantage.

Furthermore, I would argue that the specific rhetorical form of “trad[ing] arguments and counterarguments” (Nussbaum 40) that Butler relies on as a writer fits well not just with such Enlightenment notions as universalist normativity, global instrumentalism, linguistic transparency, and the liberal marketplace of ideas that both her critics and defenders associate it with, but also with her own post-structuralist commitment to difference, conflict, alterity, and listening to the voice of the Other. That Butler’s dialectical writing aligns with her vision of progressive political action

and subjectivity can be seen in the following statement from her 1992 essay “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism”:

[T]his “I” would not be a thinking, speaking “I” if it were not for the very positions that I oppose, for those positions, the ones that claim that the subject must be given in advance, that discourse is an instrument of reflection of that subject, are already part of what constitutes me. (9)

Butler’s claim that she is “already” constituted by the “positions” she “oppose[s]” suggests that she engages her critics not just as a matter of rhetorical practice, but also on some level as a matter of theory. As she says in the passage above, there would be no reason for her to state her own views were it not for those “current in [her] situation,” in Burke’s terminology (109), who hold the contrary position that the subject is a self-generating entity “given in advance” and that “discourse is an instrument of reflection.”

The essay from which I just quoted, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” presents a particularly strong model for writers of how this answering of counter-positions can operate. Once again refuting those who see her as simply “bullying readers” and evading standard norms of argumentation, Butler proceeds by repeatedly summarizing those who disagree with her postmodernism position and see it as “dangerous” and “irrational,” as she herself puts it on the article’s opening page:

I know the term [postmodernism] from the way it is used, and it usually appears on my horizon embedded in the following critical formulations: “if discourse is all there is . . .,” or “if everything is a text . . .,” or “if the subject is dead . . .,” or “if real bodies do not exist . . .” The sentence begins as a warning against an impending nihilism, for if the conjured content of these series of conditional clauses proves to be true, then, and there is always a then, some set of dangerous consequences will surely follow. So ‘postmodernism’ appears to be articulated in the form of a fearful conditional or sometimes in the form of paternalistic disdain toward that which is youthful and irrational. (3)

After defending postmodernism against these “critical formulations,” Butler returns to another version of these formulations when she writes, “A number of positions are ascribed to postmodernism [. . .]: discourse is all there is [. . .]; the subject is dead, I can never say ‘I’ again; there is no reality, only representations” (4). Then, after several more rounds in which Butler again defends postmodernism, returns to her critics, and then states her own position again, she gives her critics still more air time:

There is the refrain that, just now, when women are beginning to assume the place of subjects, postmodern positions come along to announce that the subject is dead [. . .]. Some see this as a conspiracy against women and other disenfranchised groups who are now only beginning to speak on their own behalf. (14)

So unwilling is Butler to coerce or bully readers that she persistently gives the objections to her own positions a fair hearing, thereby risking that readers will find these objections more persuasive than her own refutations.

Perhaps the ultimate instance of Butler's making herself vulnerable to objections can be found in her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*. In the seven paragraphs that open the Preface, Butler devotes herself not to advancing her own argument, but again, as should not be surprising by now, to ventriloquizing the views of those who find her central argument to be so misguided as to be foolishly naïve, if not ridiculous. Because, as Butler explains, she “persist[s] in this notion that bodies were in some way constructed,” she keeps encountering those who want to “take [her] aside” and, knowing her arguments about the constructed nature of sexuality and gender from her previous work, repeatedly ask her in “exasperated,” “patronizing” tones, “What about the materiality of the body?” and again, with even greater exasperation, “What about the materiality of the body, *Judy*” (ix)?

Butler explains:

I took it that the addition of “Judy” was an effort to dislodge me from the more formal “Judith” and to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorized away. There was a certain exasperation in the delivery of that final diminutive, a certain patronizing quality which (re)constituted me as an unruly child, one who needed to be brought to task, restored to that bodily being which is, after all, considered to be most real, most pressing, most undeniable. [. . .] If I persisted in this notion that bodies were in some way constructed, perhaps I really thought that words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance?

Couldn't someone please take me aside? (ix-x)

What is interesting about the voice of the particular interlocutor that Butler engages in this passage is that it could just as easily be that of an Average Jane or Joe on the street as that of a seasoned academic. Put another way, the skeptical voice that Butler engages in this passage belongs no more to academic culture than it does to the common sense of mainstream culture, to average folk who want to construct Butler not as an authoritative professor but as an “unruly child”—or, perhaps, a bungling, head-in-the-clouds philosopher—in need of *their* superior guidance. “Come on, *Judy!*” they say. “The body isn't constructed. Get real!” Or, as Butler herself puts it later in yet another paraphrase of their countervoice,

For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these “facts,” one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. (xi)

One way of reading *Bodies That Matter* is as an elaborate explanation of why these “irrefutable experiences” do not tell us “what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means” (xi).

Rather than walling herself off from mainstream culture's dominant common sense, then, Butler engages it ("bodies are real"; "the category of 'woman' is unproblematic"), though in a way that ultimately challenges instead of capitulates to it. I would argue that a central reason Butler's writing circulates as widely as it does is not that it "beats readers into submission" (Dutton) and evades the conventions of argumentation, but that it enacts these conventions expertly, inviting into its pages readers from a broad range of educational backgrounds and ideological perspectives, specifically those inclined to disagree with her. And it not only encourages those readers to debate her, but goes so far as to provide them with arguments and techniques for debating her in case they are not sure how.

My response, then, to those who see Butler as a bad, incomprehensible writer: you got the wrong gal. The academic world may indeed harbor many mystifying, incomprehensible writers, but Butler is not among them. The real culprits we should be concerned about are not Butler, Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha, and other theorists typically accused of bad writing, but the many academic writers, whether traditional or theoretical, whose work fails to register on readers because it lacks a discernible argument or point. These are speakers and writers often encountered at conferences and in the pages of journals who may be exceedingly intelligent, knowledgeable, and well-read, and may even be perfectly lucid from sentence to sentence, but who fail to offer an overarching argument or claim, or if they do, fail to suggest who disputes that claim and thus *why* it needs to be offered in the first place.

In the end, then, Butler's example challenges some major misconceptions about the nature of academic writing. First, it challenges the idea that difficult academic writing must adopt a form that is itself difficult or impenetrable—or, more precisely, that challenging, complex academic contents can be conveyed only through writing that itself avoids simple or conventional rhetorical forms. More specifically, my analysis suggests that the most difficult, complicated academic writing that has a wide impact does not avoid binary oppositions and other conventional polemical structures, but is itself polemical, dialectical, and binary. Even writers who wish to challenge or deconstruct binary oppositions must rely on such oppositions, if only the opposition between those who rely on binary opposition and themselves. Second, Butler's example challenges the idea that writing that follows a dialectical, "I argue X as opposed to Y" format must necessarily result in texts that are reductive, simplistic, mechanistic, or overly antagonistic—or, as McCumber argues, inherently reactionary or "oppressive" (69). Indeed, the many passages taken from Butler's writing above suggest that this "not X as many argue but Y" format can produce texts that, even while taking a strong position, are democratic models of many-sided dialogue and

debate—of listening respectfully to what others think, rather than repressing or maligning it. And third, Butler’s example refutes the idea that challenging common sense means flouting traditional dialectical patterns, as many defenders of difficult academic writing suggest. On the contrary, Butler’s writing shows that a text’s revolutionary impact will be blunted unless it can be read in terms of a sharp “X not Y” contrast—unless, that is, readers can see what commonsense belief is being challenged or revolted against.

Ultimately, then, Butler’s writing suggests that all the provocativeness and sophistication of academic writing will be lost on readers unless it is framed by a clear dialectical structure—that without this structure, difficult academic writing will be just plain difficult and have a limited impact on readers. As Burke suggests, writing, in order to move readers, needs some polemical operation to perform, some alternate view to correct, displace, or add to; and this means situating itself within a larger conversation, engaging democratically with alternate viewpoints, supplying an underlying motivation or reason for being, and thereby answering all-important questions like “Who says otherwise?” or “Who needs to hear this?” Ultimately, then, polemical argumentation and counter-argumentation are not the death of academic complexity, but its underlying foundation.

NOTES

1. Gubar herself builds on Linda Charnes’s complaints about Butler’s “jargon clotted [. . .] prose” (896).

2. My argument here about the role of contrastive signal terms builds on John Schilb’s point about how academic writers create exigence in their writing, defined by Schilb as the writer’s “purpose for writing, the contribution she will make to scholarship.” In analyzing a specific example of literary criticism, Schilb shows how the critic uses a contrastive signal term like *but* to help her establish this exigency. This “little word,” Schilb writes, helps the critic show that she “is moving beyond familiar truths or easy insights into deeper levels of analysis” (142).

3. This point that dialogical formulas underlie persuasive writing is heavily indebted to the work of David Bartholomae, Irene Clark, and John Swales and Christine Feak. Distancing himself from notions of writerly “self-expression” and “authenticity,” Bartholomae emphasizes the schemas and conventions that academic writers learn to master, and claims that his own writing was greatly improved as an undergraduate when a teacher suggested he use the following “machine”: “While most readers of ____ have said ____, a close and careful reading shows that ____” (641). Clark offers graduate student writers patterns for “entering the conversation” (24–25) of other scholars, rather than stating their views in isolation, while Swales and Feak offer scholars formulas for engaging in what they call the “obligatory practice” of “Creating a Research Space” for their own claims by “introducing and reviewing items of previous research” (243–4).

These ideas about the schematic, dialogical nature of persuasive discourse have been crystallized in a textbook that I co-authored with Gerald Graff, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*.

WORKS CITED

- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." 1985. *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Victor Villanueva. 2nd ed. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003. 623–53. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. "The Philosophy of Literary Form." *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. 1–137. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back." *New York Times* 20 Mar. 1999: A27. Print.
- . *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism.'" *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3–21. Print.
- . "Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time." *Diacritics* 27.1 (1997): 13–15. Print.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, Routledge, 1990. Print.
- . "Values of Difficulty." Culler and Lamb 199–215.
- Chow, Rey. "The Resistance of Theory; or, The Worth of Agony." Culler and Lamb 95–105.
- Clark, Irene. *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2007. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Bad Writing and Good Philosophy." Culler and Lamb 43–57.
- Culler, Jonathan, and Kevin Lamb, eds. *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- Dutton, Denis. "Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professors." *Wall Street Journal* 2 Feb. 1999: W11. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. "Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry." *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. 253–300. Print.
- Ferguson, Margaret. "Difficult Style and 'Illustrious' Vernaculars: A Historical Perspective." Culler and Lamb 15–28.
- Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- Gubar, Susan. "What Ails Feminist Criticism?" *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (1998): 878–902. Print.
- McCumber, John. "The Metaphysics of Clarity and the Freedom of Meaning." Culler and Lamb 58–71.
- Nussbaum, Martha. "The Professor of Parody: The Hip, Defeatist Feminism of Judith Butler." *New Republic* 22 Feb. 1999: 37–45. Print.
- Pollitt, Katha. "Pomolotov Cocktail." *Nation* 10 June 1996: 9. Print.
- Schilb, John. "Composing Literary Studies in Graduate Courses." *Disciplining English: Alternative Histories, Critical Perspectives*. Ed. David Shumway and Craig Dionne. Albany: State U of New York P, 2002. 137–48. Print.
- Swales, John M., and Christine B. Feak. "Constructing a Research Paper II." *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. 242–86. Print.
- Warner, Michael. "Styles of Intellectual Publics." Culler and Lamb 106–25.