9

Lisp, Mumble, Mute, Pause, Stutter

Only later do the words come.

First, there is the movement, not as sounded expression, nor as a fully realized articulation; not yet. More a soft animation unfurling from the deep knot of memory to suddenly float and then capsize into breath; at this instant, this indescribably slow revelation, a line starts to make its way. Back to front, to the side and then over, down and back again—the line whose wavering pulls forward a set of words; not even, more a mist of thinking from which I begin to hear the preceding moment, the initial gap, when the words held themselves back in search of form. That is, a moment of pause and hesitation, of uncertainty; *before* the word that would start the line tumbling forward and over itself, as an opening, for the other.

It is my interest to hang onto this hesitation, this gap, to occupy the prolonged moment, this *being on the verge of speech*. In such a gap we might detect the life of the voice, its arrival, as a slow irruption between the lips, and which irritates the air in front with sudden force. With this pause, this gap we might capture the body as it tries to move forward, as it seeks to propel itself into a second body, the body shimmering in the wake of speech—what Annette Stahmer calls the "voice body" and which assists us in *becoming*, in coming out.[1]

This *threshold of speech*, this *prior to*, is suggested in Christian Kesten's *zunge lösen* ("releasing the tongue"), a composition for the mouth staged by any number of performers.

The piece consists of the following elements:

- (Fine) Slaps of the tongue on the bottom of the mouth
- (Visible) Tongue movements

– Tongue movements, which articulate a (chance) text, based on a given material of phones, the atoms of language (syllables and smaller). Through breath, they are made audible from time to time (whispering). Tongue movements and breath function as independent layers which interact.

Lips and jaw don't move. They only open at the beginning to a relaxed position and close at the end.[2]

The work gives us the mouth exposed, opening and then closing, with its tongue a figure poking out, then slipping back, induced by "the atoms of language" that steer the mouth toward speech. In following these movements, we may hear not the voice, or any sound *per se*—maybe a whisper . . .—but rather an oral site always already preceding speech; a reverberating gap—this oral *cavity*—allowing for and conditioning what may appear: a syllable suddenly there on the tongue (Figure 9.1).

In focusing on this threshold of speech, the gap, and the cavity, I'm interested in considering the mouth as a vessel not filled with language, but more so, *haunted* or stammered by it. The hesitant moment of all such vocal pauses lead the way for considering the greater territories of lisping, stuttering, and finally aphasia. Might stuttering give us this gap, this hesitation, amplified and embodied, performed and tensed, to afford a glimpse onto the profound nature of the speaking mouth? And importantly,

FIGURE 9.1 *Christian Kesten,* zunge lösen, *1999. Performed by WE SPOKE: Serge Vuille and Guy-Loup Boisneau, 2011. Photo: Andreas Zihler.*

a view onto a subject under duress by the force of a linguistic order? A tensing of the body under the pull of voice? Within its tiny repetitions, its clicks and pops, its irregularities, might stuttering put on display this *prior to speech*, a speech caught in the mouth, this pause, or lag, of a body moved by and *moving into* speech? Or, expressed also in the lisp, as a softening of the articulated, a prolonged sibilance, where the mouth slips over words and letters? Kesten's composition gives entry into such openings, exposing not the grain of a voice, but its *material envelope*, allowing us to query the mouth as *rhythmed* by a certain linguistic friction.

Interrupt

The vocal lag or lisp interrupts the production of a proper speech, yet one that may supply it with added cultural breath, a friction that leads the way toward a poetics and politics of the oral imaginary. *The very discursive performative that drives this lexicon, and which sets its sights on capturing a horizon of expanded utterance*, which is equally an expanded sociality—for what or whom might be left out.

Stuttering may be understood as a form of *negotiation* played out in sudden rhythmical breaks, a sort of beating that catches the breath, the tongue, and the jaw; a voice that staggers over vocabularies, and against the contour of words—stuttering as a complex, somatic weave that holds the voice, stammers it. Yet, the interruption of proper speech is to be found already *in* the mouth: "The threat to coherence, to the established course, to smooth flow, proliferates in the mouth that utters . . ."[3] Christof Migone underscores speech as always already prone to erring. To open the mouth is to already open the way for mishap, salivation, excess—the mouth "cannot help but get confused, jumbled, mixed up."[4] For Migone, there is a primary tension found in the relation between the mouth and language, the buccal and the spoken, corporeality and linguistic grammar, that stuttering captures or makes explicit. The stutter breaks into language, into the scene of speech, to interrupt that steady stream of words with an unmistakable gyration. What comes forward, in this mouth movement, is not only the stigmatization often experienced by the stutterer, but also the subsequent appearance of something—*the thing* . . .—that haunts the dominant functionality of wording and the foundational narrative of proper speech.[5]

As Marc Shell outlines in his extremely poignant book, being a stutterer can lead to difficult experiences of ridicule: "Being teased in the schoolyard was not the only problem. One day, the school principal, Mr. Webster, asked me into his office. He explained to me that stuttering was a 'sure sign' of being mentally deficient, or 'retarded.' My failure to read aloud properly, said the principal, was not *my* 'fault.'"[6] Examining histories of stuttering individuals and related narratives, found in linguistic and religious traditions

in particular, Shell also points to various "techniques" developed by a stutterer as means for negotiating these social tensions and the words or vocabularies that trip up one's speaking, for instance by changing one word for another in midsentence (intralinguistic synonymy). As Shell suggests, such techniques lead a stutterer to develop a "second language," one that shadows a primary language and that derives from a negotiation with all that bears down on the one who misspeaks.

Extra

Moments of fluid speech are actually quite rare. Rather, speech is most often punctuated by small interruptions and hesitations, notably pronounced in the micro-vocables *er*, *um*, and *uh*—those "additions" so annoying to the operations of broadcast media in particular. A series of vocables that take up residence within the flow of wording and that, rather than undermine speech, aid in the steady stream of thought by giving space, for an instant, so as to let what's next find their way. *Er*, *um*, and *uh* begin the process of voicing by bringing sound into the mouth, massaging lip and tongue into movement, and pushing air through the passages of the oral cavity, so as to stir it into motion, in preparation for the enunciative act. In preceding the spoken, these hesitations come to *assist* in the final delivery of words: they figure a *gap* in order to get the body going. Breaths that ease onto the plane of wording without fully arriving, and that no less register the intentionality of the speaker—they say: *I intend to speak more*. Or, *I can't find the words yet*.

As intervals, these *disfluencies* or *extra* phonemes are interruptions, yet one's that stave off any absolute break: they catch the mouth, letting it linger for an instant; we can almost hear the silent word taking shape here at the back of the mouth as one attempts to hold the conversation, and the interlocutor, within a flow of the spoken. Yet there is always a looming void just on the other side, an emptiness that infringes upon these small utterances and threatens to propel speech into full breakdown: if one hesitates too long, letting *er*, *um*, and *uh* take over, recovery may be difficult. In being drawn out, or held too long within the mouth, these spacings may also overtake us. In this regard, such breaks, like the stutter, interrupt our speaking. Yet, they do so by inflecting its rhythms; they expose the body, uncovering language as a material sculpted by the oral cavity.

Er, *um*, and *uh* thus reveal a body within the motion of speech, and a mouth in search of words—that is, a mouth in search of voice. Subsequently, speech can be appreciated as a dramatic movement, a choreography modulating all the intensities that pass between body and language, between emotional energy and semantic meaning, between memory and conversation. The gaps and spacings that do appear, here and there, only reinforce and remind of this primary action: that one is located within the flow of surrounding life,

and wherein language is central. *Er*, *um*, and *uh* reveal a body tuning itself to the sociality of speech, of being in front of another, and navigating all the affective geographies encapsulating our individuality.

By hearing in the *stop* of speech a tussle between body and language, the mouth that trips or lags behind, *that shies away*, may also remind of hidden musicalities, of difficult silences, of the needed gaps by which we may find the means to progress, through any number of "second languages," slipping and sliding—a *lisping* . . . a mumbling—as well as a phonic profusion; tuning as well as detuning—that is, negotiation and *performance*. As an amplification of the inherent relational dynamic of the voice, stuttering raises this into a tension; it stammers speech with the somatic logic of the mouth to sound all the breaths and rhythms, punctuations, and hesitations that words come to impart.

Scratch/Delay

Shifting perspectives, these stammered poetics also find a certain musical expression or equivalent in the operations of backspinning and scratching within traditions of hip-hop and rap. The appropriation of turntables as instruments renders the vinyl record a potent surface, not only for sampling, but also for cutting, breaking, and scratching the *in-between*, an amplification of exactly that point of the stammer or the lisp.

"The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (1981) is a perfect rendering of early hip-hop, capturing the DJ aesthetic in which samples—and in this case, we cruise through a montage of familiar riffs, beats, and lyrics, from Blondie to Queen to Chic—all cut and scratched together, are performed with unexpected dexterity. These turntable musicalities accentuate precisely that point of capture, the gap between repeated samples, to produce a "stutter effect"[7]—one sample cut into another, further underscored in the scratch, where the record is pushed and pulled, back and forth, as an act of radical suspension: the beat is forced onto unsteady ground, in a dizzying spell of capture and release; we hang there, in this gap, the stammered and lisped dynamics agitate us for an instance, as a body, only to support a feverish audition.

Employing three turntables, this particular mix reworks existing matter to lead us directly into the center of a hybrid sonority, a "sonic fiction" drawing forward the beat over the melody, the break over the time signature. These breaks, of course, find expression in break dancing, and especially, in acts of popping. Quickly contracting and releasing muscles, popping creates jerky movements timed to the beats of the mix. All such jagged and exaggerated tensions move the body along in robotic fashion, though giving way to surprising fluidity; as in the sampled mix and related scratch, the particular vocabulary of the pop achieves great agility and elegance, giving

deep suggestion for the stammer and the stutter, the lisp and the *disfluent*, as vehicles for cultural expression.

The aesthetics of the mix, and its expression of the stuttered, the stammered, the broken beat, finds a deeper and hallucinatory appearance in the legacies of reggae and dub music. Dub's absolute obsession with delay and echo leads the mix into greater uncertainty; the swaying rhythms of the dancehall, punctuated by the stylized syncopation or back beat expressed in the guitar's tinny chording, are suddenly thrown into disarray through delay's exaggerated repetitions. Such electronic repeats break into the mix to stagger the logic of duration, melody, and lyric. Dub deepens the space of the cut, locating the break, the gap, within a composition of repetition, bass grooves, percussive spread, and the stoney rhythms of delay.

Weak

The break, cut, scratch, dub, and delay all support a notion of the pause, the disfluent, and the stutter as cultural and linguistic platforms, narratives of what I'd like to refer to as "the weak." It is my view that interrupted speech supplies our oral imaginary with poetical matter; matter equally generative of an assemblage of bodily expressions founded on weakness. I'd like to suggest that interrupted speech may provide a vehicle for an agency of the weak-mouthed, the weak-footed, or the weak-minded, where "lackluster" vocability may in effect spirit another type of logic or epistemology.

To give greater focus onto this notion of the weak, I'd like to turn to the work of Gianni Vattimo, and in particular, his idea of "weak thought." Vattimo's philosophical project of weak thought, developed notably in the 1980s, specifically aims to challenge metaphysics, as the truth of Being, in support of an "anti-foundationalism." For Vattimo, metaphysics performs a primary suppression by limiting "the free play of dialogue and interpretation" and by "silencing those voices that are not appropriately related to the foundation" of Being.[8] In contrast, Vattimo understands Being not as a foundational narrative, but rather as "an event" located within a historical framework, and one passed down, as a type of echo, from being to being. As he states: "Being never really *is* but sends itself, is on the way, it transmits itself."[9] In this regard, the foundational narrative of metaphysics is overturned by a "positive nihilism" where the "occurrence of being is a background event."[10] Weak thought stakes out a position by which to unsettle "powerful thought" and the "violence" of metaphysics; weak thought is a project that ultimately opens a space for "the silenced" and in support of public life. "Instead, Being is dissolved in the history of interpretation, in which there are no facts, only more or less cogent interpretations."[11]

Read in an expanded way, weak thought is extremely suggestive for a model of subjectivity prone to digression, susceptible to dislocation and

distraction, a horizontal perception aimed at interconnectivity, dialogue and even, slowness. In this regard, I find in weak thought support for the weakly spoken, and for weak bodies; lazy tongues, incredibly slow sentences, and prolonged repetitions manifest also in the slow learner. In short, weak thought as the basis for *delayed presence*.

"I think, however, and speaking in general, that the manner in which humanity can experience and live its human dimension in this postmodern world is by developing the positive potential of a 'declining' experience of values, one that is more diffuse and less intense."[12] Following Vattimo, we might learn from this "declining" and diffusion a form of weak speech tuned to the delicate and *interrupted* movements of the spoken, that is, language as it lives inside the mouth, and in particular, from the mouth that squirms in the midst of the stutter, with all the materiality of its animate force placed there on the lips, against the teeth, and on the sky of the mouth.

These weak poetics may spirit an interrogation of linguistic ordering, of the powerful and the proper, staged in the very gap or cut of disfluent hesitations. A gap in which power performs to shame the stutterer, according to a narrative of "foundational speech," but also where we might rescue the primary energies of the spoken, exemplified by way of a certain *noise*.

Significantly, Migone understands such noise as the appearance of "the foreign." Stuttering, in other words, may be heard as the articulation of radical porosity—an agitation precisely upon the lines of the delimited body, the one functioning under the orders of the proper and the powerful. "Most experts do agree, however, that somewhere along the line a stutterer has been bullied to be vocally clear."[13] If the stutter is to be understood as the result of external pressure, it might also be heard to *speak back* this pressure, returning it precisely in the form of the unclear, the improper, the tensed, and the pressured. It is above all the noise of a pressured mouth, whose lisped speech, as George Watsky eloquently demonstrates through a hyperbolic poetry focused upon the letter S—that very point upon which the lisp rests—may also cut into the principles of the proper.

> My subtle lisp is not sinful. I'm not sorry Saturday,
> I'm not sorry Sunday; I'm spiritual and when I speak I
> celebrate the Sabbath seven days a week.
> I've got special S sauce all smothered on my skull
> walls like a tossed salad so silk screen the Sistine
> ceiling on my soft pallet.
> I sing along with super seensters reciting Sufjan
> Stevens songs in skinny jeans.
> Dance salsa with soccer moms sneaking out in skimpy
> see-through sarongs.
> I will answer your questions in stout with my sexy
> subtly lisping sparkling incisor small.[14]

Watsky's litany of the S delivers the lisp as an attack on the law and order of the vocally clear; it returns to the "speech bullies" the very thing they abhor, to ultimately prolong the agitation, the vocally unsure, and in doing so, to harness the energy of the poetic, there in the logic of the weak mouth.

The poetics posited by Watsky—as that which hovers in a mouth navigating the territories of proper speech—finds an elaborated reference in the phenomenon of beatboxing. Stemming from hip-hop, as a vocal imitation of the first "beatbox" machines, the practice has developed significantly since the 1980s. Here the mouth is used as a percussive machine, capturing all the turntablism of the hip-hop mix there on the tongue, between the lips, to perform an extremely rich assemblage of multiple breaks, gaps, and rhythmical cuts. Beatboxing creates a sonic poetics precisely from the agitating stammers of the broken voice.

An inside contorted by an outside; a background coming forward; a voice pressed inward, or pressing back, *beating*, flushed or flummoxed, and whose sudden hesitation brings into relief these forceful tensions provoked at the very moment one opens the mouth. "If one conceives the body as porous, it becomes impossible to think of an individual without a collective, impossible to keep your distance, impossible to delimit the outside from the inside."[15] All such interrupted speech, disfluent articulations, lisped and stuttered words reveal these relational intensities, always already in the mouth and yet conditioned by the looming narrative of proper speech. Instead, the porosity Migone highlights may support the weak body, a body always already as an echo of another—being to being, and in the throes of so many exchanges.

This radical porosity is at play in Richard Serra's video work *Boomerang* (1974). Through the invasive dynamics of the echo, the work can be heard to capture this foreignness, of what has already been passed down, or what lurks within. In the video, the artist places a microphone in front of a woman (the artist Nancy Holt). The woman wears headphones and can hear her speaking voice, yet delayed—her voice comes back to her, slightly behind her own speaking. The woman speaks, talks about this experience—she refers to the situation, tries to describe what she is hearing, and how this echo disrupts her speech, her ability to control her own thinking. Something is always coming back to interrupt her:

> Yes, I can hear my echo and the words are coming back on top of me
> Uh, the words are spilling out of my head
> and then returning into my ear
> It puts a distance between the words and their apprehension, or their comprehension
> The words coming back seem slow, they don't seem to have the same forcefulness as when I speak them
> I think it's also slowing me down

I think that it makes my thinking slower
I have a double-take on myself
I am once removed from myself
I am thinking and hearing and filling up a vocal void
I find that I have trouble making connections between thoughts
I think that the words forming in my mind are somewhat detached
from my normal thinking process
I have a feeling that I am not where I am
I feel that this place is removed from reality . . .[16]

Serra's *Boomerang* stages the dynamics of echoing sound, and in doing so, captures a body tripping up, and an unsettled speech. As the woman states, it's as if she is absent from her own body, *evacuated*, to become stranger to herself, with her voice coming back to her as though from another reality—she is out-of-sync. The work operates as a sort of test, a laboratory aimed at this difference of oneself, and its ultimate amplification. The mouth, in this regard, is a definite echo chamber that may at times give way to this porosity of the body outlined by Migone—that it is susceptible to any number of intrusions.

Returning to Marc Shell's critical analysis of the ways in which stuttering performs as a sign of "deficiency," for Migone such a feature may in effect announce passage toward a productive undoing of the self held by the imperative of wording. Using stuttering as a metaphoric engine, Migone sets the scene for elaborating a vocal somatic whereby the voice is not captured by the foundational narrative of proper speech—of getting the words right. Rather, porosity introduces an instant of dynamic exchange in which voice is exposed to the confluences and contaminations at the heart of bodily life.

The weak thought of Vattimo is precisely a philosophy aimed at debunking pure narratives and symbolizations, and accordingly can be read to locate porosity and echoes within the powerful languages of philosophy to ultimately encourage a multiplicity of voices. The deficiency of the stutterer, and found in the echoes of *Boomerang*—this speech undoing itself, at odds with Being—introduces a vulnerable body. That is, a human body, and one open to the world.

Creole

To extend this examination, I'd like to consider the work of Édouard Glissant. Glissant's important analysis of colonialism triggers an extremely suggestive discourse, one sensitive to the complex productions of linguistic culture. Stemming from the discursive schools of the French Caribbean (e.g., found in the literary work of Aimé Césaire, and the theories of Frantz Fanon), Glissant

strives to rescue what he sees as "the poetic vitality," or "relational exchange" at the center of postcolonial cultures. The "creolization" of the French language, for instance found in the Caribbean, signals a "complex mix" that, for Glissant, "brings into Relation but not to universalize," rather to underscore "our identities" in dialogue with the possible, with multiplicity.[17]

> We are not going to save one language or another here or there, while letting others perish. The floodtide of extinction, unstoppable in its power of contagion, will win out. It will leave a residue that is not one victorious language, or several, but one or more desolate codes that will take a long time to reconstitute the organic and unpredictable liveliness of a language. Linguistic multiplicity protects ways of speaking, from the most extensive to the most fragile. It is in the name of this total multiplicity and in function of it, rather than of any selective pseudo-solidarities, that each language must be defended.[18]

Glissant's analysis cuts against the "normalization" of language often prompted by nationalistic identification. Is not language often called upon to withstand the pressures of hybridity so as to embolden the pronouncements of a nation? To carry forth traditions, and to secure the limited identity of a culture? Glissant instead reminds of the vividness of language in its "minor" status. Against the "dictations and decrees" of a colonizing empire, such minor linguistics is an opening for identities caught below or outside the powerful dominance of one culture over another.

> Dictating, decreeing: both activities (in their secret complicity: a decree affixes laws to us, a dictation is from an edict now essential) attempt to form a dam against what makes languages fragile—contaminations, slovenliness, barbarism. But what you would call barbarism is the inexhaustible motion of the scintillations of languages, heaving dross and inventions, dominations and accords, deathly silences and irrepressible explosions, along with them.[19]

Accordingly, the languages that search for ways around the colonial project, and that fester and err through oralities here and there, in bodies contaminated by the mixing reality of modernity, carve out all sorts of energetic socialities expressed in what Glissant boldly calls "the poetics of relation." I understand such poetics as a key platform for contemporary voicing. Glissant's work locates a space from which to support the hybridity central to postcolonial culture, not to overlook barbarity, rather to nurture local culture as a sheer cascade of identity in the midst of multiple languages. A cultural project whose languages veer along their course to negotiate the force of decrees and dictates with their own "scintillations"—an "inexhaustible motion" whose poetics cultivates the "migrancy" of relation.

Minor

In considering interrupted speech, we enter into a politics of the mouth. By tripping over the word, stuttering evidences the deep performative drive of the mouth under the spell of the linguistic. It stumbles precisely over a syllable, a grammar, a phoneme; the mouth gasps along the fault lines of a given vocabulary, to lisp over words, and in doing so, raises the volume on the very question as to what constitutes "proper speech."

Is not interrupted speech revealing a body negotiating the "decrees" of proper speech to which all subjects must turn? Is not the stutterer subjected to the particular laws that place blame on "contaminations, slovenliness, barbarism" and whose stammer performs under such law? This "slovenly speech," a deficiency that Shell seeks to undercut and which Migone supports as the beginning of a "foreign body"—a hybridity Glissant further calls "creolization" and finally, "the poetic"—might this represent what Michel de Certeau further terms the "noises of otherness"?[20] "Bodily noises, quotations of delinquent sounds, and fragments of others' voices punctuate the order of sentences with breaks and surprises."[21] These noises suggested by Certeau are precisely what disrupt "the organizing system of meaning," surprising the narrative of proper speech not with aggression or violence, but with what he terms "fragility"—*a fragile speech from a fragile body*. A weakness. The porous body, the creole body, or a "minor body" with a foreign tongue, whose stammering "tattoos . . . the body of discourse."[22]

Questions of the "minor" are given fuller consideration by Deleuze and Guattari, particularly in their work on Kafka. In their examination of Kafka's use of Czech German in the 1920s, Deleuze and Guattari locate an operative tension: "Kafka deliberately kills metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary to metaphor."[23] In this regard, language turns into a substance whose mutation in writing suspends the sensefulness of meaning, allowing Gregor to become a beetle, dogs to play music, a badger to reflect upon noises overheard. A becoming-difference. "Instead, it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word." This "minor literature" exemplified in Kafka's work, for Deleuze and Guattari reveals the "internal tensions of a language"—"Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits."[24]

The operations of the minor described by Deleuze and Guattari supply a dynamic perspective on the "tensions" inherent to language, found not only in the writings of Kafka, but also in the mouth movements tripped up by the grammar of a major language. While Kafka's animals speak toward a becoming of form, a becoming different, the dynamics of the minor can also be heard as that which mobilizes, if not incarnates, the flexing and lisping of

the mouth in its *search for words*. Might we hear in the fragile noises that break onto the scene of proper speech that of a minor voice? A creolization unsettling any metaphysical notion of "origins"?

I'm interested to hear in the stutter (and all such related pauses and disfluencies) the production of an alternative: a negotiation that draws out the tensions of language, as that which captures the body and against which speech cuts, to materialize in a minor poetics and weak being. The "tensors" Deleuze and Guattari identify in Kafka's metamorphosing works, which express or amplify embedded tensions of a language, are additionally to be found in the stutter, the scratch, and break of rhythmed productions: jaw jittering, teeth clicking, throat stopped and tongue caught, each instant of these mouth movements draws out language's powerful capture, leading to the production of *tensed* and fragile speech.

Agency

In cataloging the movements of the mouth, I've been led into a space of animation, of exuberance and excess; even in the unvoiced hiss of the whisper, or the unsounded production of inner voice, there is still an energetic release, and a subsequent alteration of the formed and the fixed. The mouth is especially a vital organ, and a site of vitality. Yet surrounding all such animation there also appears a shutting down, a letting go, and a refusal; within the choreographies of mouth movements there exists the potentiality for keeping quiet, of silence, and of withdrawal. The pause and the gap central to the arena of stuttering and lisping have upon their horizon a prolonged silence.

To resist or to refuse the demands of speech, of "the forced narrative,"[25] leads us into a complicated territory, riddled with questions of citizens' rights, political representation, coercion, and torture, as well as the smaller currents flowing through relationships. To *not speak* is to draw into relief the embedded politics of voice in general, as that which always negotiates the operations of power and the obligations to *pronounce*.

> "Agency" would then be the double movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where "to be constituted" means "to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime" the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus of iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose.[26]

Judith Butler's argument here positions "agency" as a "citation" of an existing power discourse, and yet importantly, one whose realization necessitates a

"disloyalty" to the signifier—a gap, a hesitation, a performative appropriation; a process of interruption, inciting a debate on what or who is excluded, and which may unsettle the dominion of the symbolic. "Agency" is a gap realized and eventually filled in by an identity *in search* of articulation.

Such views return us to the territory of interrupted speech, to give radical suggestion for appreciating the stutter, for example, as one such perturbation. Is not speaking a process of seeking out agency? Does not the voice search through any number of vocabularies for an opening, toward argument, intimacy, or the communicative? To open the mouth is to open a space of negotiation, wherein self and the symbolic meet, to formulate an unsteady weave of vocalizations. Voice must be emphasized less as an articulation of certainty, and more as a *performative attempt* at identity. One that no doubt fully integrates all such hesitations, pauses, distortions, and disfluencies—these are, in effect, the very indication of agency, as being under the pull of language.

I'd like to prolong the "hiatus" and the hesitation even farther, along with the gap of agency Butler details, also to register the voice that may never return—a loss of voice. A mouth movement expressed through an absence, a nonmovement, a full stop. Mute.

Aphasia

Amidst the refusal to speak, and the difficulties in finding the words—of being choked up, stammering, or hesitating—aphasia comes to perform. As with all types of speech impediments, aphasia is mostly the result of sustained trauma or illness. The loss of speech is founded on the diminishing of motor functions due to cerebral damage or injury (notably afflicting stroke patients), as well as experiences of psychological and emotional trauma. In these instances of trauma, voice is literally choked back, restricted as a defense mechanism. "Trauma can rupture the circuit that makes up the vocal process, disturbing the boundary between inside and outside. Making sounds is an act of trust: to allow the intake and expulsion of air you must open up the body. A traumatized person finds such openings too risky."[27] Mutism thus fully locates us, by way of an absence, within the territories of the voice *as* agency and its breakdown.

Uniterable

To be mute leads us into particular histories related to deafness and dumbness, as well as an overall theoretical perspective to query the socialization of subjectivity. As Jonathan Rée chronicles in *I See A Voice*, deafness and dumbness historically chart a particular tension around the topic of agency,

and what may constitute individuality or citizenship, as deafness "entailed not just sensory deprivation, but exclusion from language as well, and hence from social and cultural achievement."[28] In both ancient Greece and Rome it was generally "permissible to kill deaf children up to the age of three," while other legal policies, for instance in Jewish traditions, "did not grant them the responsibilities or rights of adults—[the deaf and dumb] were neither liable to punishment, nor competent to own property, particularly buildings and land."[29] In this regard, deafness and dumbness brought forward challenges to legal as well as moral structures; the inability to fully hear or speak immediately placed one outside the normative lines of the social and political order, to force a tension with understandings of citizenship.

The mouth's ability to sound forth in speech is problematically placed at the center of what defines a subject, also leading to debates within the Christian churches whether "the deaf could ever be validly received into Christian communion, since they could neither show that they understood and accept the creed, nor confess their sins."[30] Such views no doubt carry forward into "pejorative attitudes enshrined in the very language of loss of voice"[31] captured in the psychological view of "the neurotic personality." (As I've tried to show, disfluence and speech impediments in general are also susceptible to such discriminations.)

Mutism though is often linked to trauma, fear, and anxiety, and is understood to express withdrawal, and a means for bypassing words and the inherent dangers found in speaking. "Losing one's voice can be a way of going on strike, a withdrawal from the social world . . ."[32] The difference between a lack of speech caused by deafness or illness, and that of aphasia forced by difficult experiences, is captured equally in terms of withdrawal, either from the point of view of a social or legal mechanism, which withdraws the subject, or by the personal conflict that silence may assist in alleviating. This double movement, or double withdrawal, captures the troubling perspective of how *exclusion* functions explicitly against the one who does not speak, or speaks with difficulty, to foreclose identity and participation.

Returning to Butler's outline of agency, as a "hiatus of iterability," we might wonder how the deaf and dumb figure? Metaphorically, many of Butler's terms—of iterability and enunciation—refer us to the domain of the spoken, of the speech act in general. In this way, mutism draws into the open the assumptions we make on what constitutes a "signifying practice." If one is *called* into being, traced out as a subject through the mechanics of *citation* and the signifier, what occurs when one cannot hear or speak? Of course, the force of inscription need not be only heard; surely, the order of power performs through multiple operations and means, locating us through familial and social bonds into the structures by which we gain identity. To be without voice though does make clear the degrees to which language itself radically operates within this overall process, and how law is fully operative through a linguistic and vocal imperative.

Imperial

I'd like to recall Adriana Cavarero's notion of the "uniqueness" rendered by voice and that comes to provide deep resonance and confirmation of individual being: "The voice, indeed, does not mask . . . It communicates the uniqueness of the one who emits it, and can be recognized by those to whom one speaks."[33] Such vocalized uniqueness, by functioning as the central point of the subject, also places great terror on those who cannot speak: "I felt as though helpless and I couldn't get out . . ."[34] In this regard, the voice and its loss delivers fundamental experiences of pain and fright; as stuttering, stammering, and lisping reveal, such uniqueness—that resonating glow of vocal communing—is often shaped or suppressed by the reign of proper speech, by what Patsy Rodenberg also terms "vocal imperialism": "As soon as we open our mouths and speak we are judged,"[35] judgments fueled by social structures that enable some to speak over others, and that carry forward through understandings of what constitutes the "right voice." In this way, the uniqueness of being so pronounced in voicing must be underscored as wielding a dramatic relation to power, to the ordering principles that may support, at times, but that may also certainly bully us into speech. Into being "properly unique."

With experiences of aphasia, such perspectives perform a definite capture onto individuals, especially for those whose loss of voice is the result of injury or trauma. To lose voice might be then to lose that uniqueness so precious to individuation, to the promise of social presence, and that afford routes toward participation. The loss of voice then is a loss of agency[36]; it is a prolonged hiatus that may never return the subject back into the iterability of identity. Or, by necessity, may also force open another route in and around the order of the sensible.

Touch

We might glimpse these powerful vocal operations more fully by considering the Jane Campion film, *The Piano* (1993). The film captures the experience of mutism through the main character of Ada, locating it as a psychosexual device central to the making of certain relationships. Here, mutism functions as the vehicle by which identities take shape, and are ultimately transformed. Developed against the backdrop of the colonial operations of the British in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century, Ada's story is one of a silence sounded by the haptic and the sensual, a silence that both opens onto a horizon of intimacy while shutting down her place within the social.

In the film we learn of Ada's sudden mutism at the age of 6 years, and of her subsequent obsession with her piano (though it remains unclear

which came first, her mutism or her piano playing, the two entering her life approximately at the same age); we also discover her closeness with her daughter, who comes to act as Ada's voice, translating her signing to the community around her.

Arriving in New Zealand after being married off by her father to Stewart, a landowner in New Zealand, Ada appears as a reluctant partner, withstanding her husband's advances and remaining in her world of silence, as well as the enveloping sonorities of her piano. Her subsequent relationship with Baines, a worker for Stewart but who also lives with the native Maori, radically alters Ada's life. Baines and Ada come to occupy equally marginal positions within the community; while Baines is white, he understands Maori and is tattooed with Maori symbols. In addition, we learn of Baines' illiteracy, which immediately places him as an echo of Ada—her inability to speak is juxtaposed with his inability to read, coupled as negatives within the sphere of colonial power in which language wields great force.

Yet, what are so active in the film are the sonorous operations of the piano. As Naomi Segal outlines in her analysis of the film, the piano both stands in for the voice while also importantly extending notions of language, and speaking, to that of the skin, the hand, and especially, the caress.

> Ada looked at her piano from where she sat in the kitchen breakfasting. A beam of morning light fell across the instrument, highlighting the polished sheen of the rosewood. She moved toward the piano, running a cloth across the top, then brushed the back of her hand along the keys in a familiar and intimate caress. It was as though the piano provided a repository for her emotions, she needed to touch it in order to know her own mind.[37]

The film develops through a series of tensions driven by silence: of the hidden, the unspoken, and the mute, an entire emotional landscape held in mist and uncertainty; a longing that is never articulated, but held and heard through the piano. The piano is, in fact, the only voice: against all the silences that circulate through the film, the piano sounds forth—unabashedly caressed, fondled, and cared for by Ada; it acts as the instrument that literally draws Ada out, unsettling Baines with sudden sensuality, and forcing the husband, Stewart, into jealousy.

I come to interpret Ada's mutism as an expression of hesitation, a refusal that subsequently draws out the barbarity of the system around her; her silence, in effect, triggers suspicion and gossip among the community, and finally, the hatred of her husband, who in a moment of rage brutally cuts off her finger with an axe.

In Ada we are given a mouth that distrusts the voice, that withdraws from the world of men and capital, to seek refuge in the plenitude of the

piano's tonal body; a union in itself, between her body and its responsive soundings, and which refers us to an unspoken past: what was it that drove Ada into silence? The sensuality at the center of *The Piano* is one that shifts from the order of affiliation and matrimony, and of patriarchal sensibilities, to that of sensuality and sonority, and in doing so, extends the voice to that of the hands, and the skin, in the formation of alternative relationships. Ada finds voice not through language and speech, but through a haptic intensity and a weakness of the heart. Her hands form a direct link to an enveloping assurance, bypassing the order of words and colonial possession in favor of the touch and related soundings.

Tremble

The weak, as I've been following here, is central to relocating "the right to speak" from the narrative of "proper voice" and toward the "creolization" suggested by Glissant; a move that may also include, in its supplemental vocabulary, a radical sensuality, where the lisp, the stutter, and the caress may perform as practices of unexpected agency, to support new modes of wording as well as being together. Here, the weak-mouthed may in fact provide the order of language with a raw poetics, explicitly allowing us to dialogue through an orality full of trembling and shivering dynamics.

These questions of the proper and improper, major and minor, underscore the difficulties the voice often negotiates. In this regard, I would underscore the voice precisely as a *search* for individuation. The voice is never fully given; rather, it demands investment and investigation, work and care. It supports our need for intimacy and sharing, as well as functioning within the greater territories of the political: to enable, empower, to challenge, as well as to refuse. The voice is rather unstable; instead, it continually brushes against so many relations and offices, histories and languages; it probes for openings and strives to reinforce existing exchanges, friendships, or traditions. It is endlessly shaped by movements in and through the mouth, and the overall structure of the senses. The voice is pressed out of us—to support us by literally taking away our breath. In this way, speaking also fundamentally weakens us, which might be one of its essential lessons.