

SO  
MUCH  
WASTED

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HUNGER, PERFORMANCE, AND THE MORBIDITY OF RESISTANCE



PATRICK ANDERSON

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Perverse Modernities

*A series edited by*

*Judith Halberstam*

*and Lisa Lowe*



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Hunger, Performance,  
and the Morbidity  
of Resistance

PATRICK ANDERSON

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for four:

Shannon Jackson

Della Pollock

Ruth Wilson Gilmore

and

Kaja Silverman



contents

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Acknowledgments ix

INTRODUCTION

Hunger in the Event of Subjectivity 1

ONE The Archive of Anorexia 30

TWO Enduring Performance 57

THREE How to Stage Self-Consumption 85

FOUR To Lie Down to Death for Days 110

AFTERWORD The Ends of Hunger 138

Notes 153

References 173

Index 185



## acknowledgments



Septembers and Octobers in Berkeley are always surprisingly hot. The heat shouldn't really be a surprise — it happens every year — but when it descends upon the Bay Area after a deceptively cool summer everyone moves a little more slowly than usual, as if rehearsing for the staging of a William Faulkner novel. What makes the heat endurable is the light, which Janet Adelman once described to me as “filtered through honey.” It is relentlessly beautiful, mesmerizing in the broadest sense of that word.

Septembers and Octobers in Berkeley also seem to constitute an informal earthquake season. There's nothing geologically true about that claim. But I have felt the ground shake most furiously during the fiercest heat waves. I always jump toward the nearest doorway (no longer considered the safest place to be during an earthquake, but the Doorway Method is too ingrained in me to allow for any other) and, when there, notice that I am sweating not from nerves, but from the searing heat. There are earthquakes during other times of the year, but in my experience the fiercest come in the aching intensity of a Berkeley fall.

So I count myself lucky to have pursued my graduate training in a place where I was so severely physically unsettled during the same months that I was mentally roused from the slumber of summer vacations. This was a helpful reminder, every year, that learning is deeply embodied, and that the body is exceedingly smart. As with everything else I know, I learned this from others; like Berkeley autumns, my relationships to those who have helped me craft this book are textured with trembling heat, the kind of quivering flush that Bataille might have called *ecstasy*. I am end-

lessly fortunate in my collection of colleagues, mentors, and friends — my chosen families — to have found and forged relationships with people who not only occasion in me both vulnerability and pride, but also welcome my stuttering but persistent attempts to profess gratitude with a wholly insufficient ineloquence.

This book is not really mine to dedicate, but I dedicate it nonetheless to four women who have changed me in earthquake-y ways. Shannon Jackson, who set out on the long haul of advising me when I was an undergraduate at Northwestern and then when I was a graduate student at Berkeley, has been supportive and demanding in all of the traditionally academic ways, but has buoyed me in many other ways too. Our long history and shared intellectual vocabularies set the scene for our work together, but her wit and endless kindness filled that scene with warmth. She is family, friend, colleague, and forever trusted mentor. Della Pollock has embodied the ironic (and often disturbing) sense of loving humor required to be a conscientious academic. She is, quite simply, one of the smartest and most generous people I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Ruthie Gilmore, whom I first met shortly after one of those precipitous minor earthquakes, looked me in the eye, laughed lovingly, and told me everything I was doing wrong. She is the personification of what David Román calls “critical generosity,” and I am convinced that I learned from her how to teach and how to engage with the work of others. Kaja Silverman taught me how to read and how to care about what I write. More important, she has shown me how caring for oneself can be a radical form of caring for the world, and vice versa, which has clarified my relationship to the horrors of U.S. politics after September 11 and to the trauma of private pain. Kaja is family too, the best kind.

Other mentors have been similarly uncompromising in their guidance and care. The late Dwight Conquergood, my first true mentor, grabbed me early in my intellectual life and showed me the importance of rigorous political action, humble ethics, and difficult compassion. I think of Dwight almost every day, and I profoundly miss his harsh, uncompromising care. I can only dream that he would have heard the echoes of his own voice in this book. Bill Worthen, also a longtime mentor, taught me how to work with tireless abandon, never forsaking the meticulous geekiness we share; he is always, always ready to share a laugh, a priceless quality in a quintessential academic. D. Soyini Madison taught me how to speak the language of generous, gracious questions, one of the hardest intellectual lessons I have ever had to learn. Chris Berry exemplifies the calm hand and

steady eye of someone with real patience—all too rare in this line of work—and showed me how the academic’s life must not be limited to exercises of the mind. Caren Kaplan was tough on me when I thought I knew what I was doing; I will forever be grateful to her for once saying, “Okay, fine, you’re done with that. But here’s what’s next.” Mary Zimmerman taught me how precise a body can be and also gave me the chance to learn how to stay standing on a slippery slope in a pool full of cold water. This has turned out to be an unusually adaptable skill.

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I have previously rehearsed several of the arguments staged in this book in the pages of academic journals whose editors, readers, and publishers I would also like to thank. Chapter 1 is a substantial extension and rethinking of my essay “Anorexia Nervosa and the Problem of ‘Men,’” published in *Women and Performance* 18, no. 2 (2008); similarly, chapter 2 draws from an early essay on Henry Tanner and Chris Burden, “Trying Ordeal,” published in the *Radical History Review* 98 (spring 2007). Chapter 4 was previously published and includes several small revisions here as “To Lie Down to Death for Days” in *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 6 (2004). In the introduction and afterword I have included several sections from a short comment piece published as “On Feeding Tubes” in *TDR* 49, no. 3 (2005); and a short portion of the conclusion was published as “There Will Be No Bobby Sands in Guantánamo Bay” in *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009). I wish to acknowledge Taylor and Francis, the MIT Press, and the Modern Language Association for permitting me to reproduce revised and extended portions of this work here.

To strike a more personal chord: I am especially indebted to the many friends and medical specialists who assisted with my own acute experience with mortality in the early years of the twenty-first century. Clinics, hospital rooms, operating theaters, and the dark, noisy interiors of MRI machines were the places where I truly absorbed the personal and political significance of death. I am equally grateful for extended conversations with Chris Berry, Mona Bower, Lisa Cartwright, Giovanna Chesler, Catherine Cole, Reid Davis, Anne Finger, Nadine George-Graves, Nitin Govil, Val Hartouni, Larissa Heinrich, Georgina Kleege, Sam Martin, Joe Nugent, Monica Stuftt, Richard and Barbara Tittle, and especially Kaja Silverman, all of whom have helped me to understand (and to endure) that experience in unexpected ways. But my extraordinary mother

deserves all of the credit for my survival. She gave up months of her life to be with me when I most needed her; just as significant, she set aside her own need to mourn so that she could bear witness to mine. These are unspeakably selfless gifts from an enormously strong and sensitive person, and I can only hope to live up to her example.

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Patrick Anderson  
San Diego, California  
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INTRODUCTION

hunger in the event of subjectivity



The nutritive soul, in beings possessing it, while actually single must be potentially plural. . . . There is one function in nutrition which the mouth has the faculty of performing, and a different one appertaining to the stomach. But it is the heart that has supreme control, exercising an additional and completing function.

— Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age*,  
*On Life and Death, On Breathing*

I see you. I don't see you dying. I see you. I don't see you living. I see you. I don't see you.

— Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor*

I begin with the image of a dying man. He lies on an iron-framed bed, a red bandanna tied around his forehead, his friends and family standing nearby, photographs of others like him hung in a grid on the wall behind. He is gazing off slightly to the left of the camera; he looks startled to be at the center of so much attention, as if he has awakened in a place other than where he fell asleep. His emaciation is extreme, and one can see through the sheets draped across his body the gaunt, weakened limbs beneath. He smiles, or nearly smiles, at nothing in particular, or nothing we can see.

The terms that we attribute to this image will depend upon the scene of its enactment— for example, a hospital ward, a gallery space, a prison cell— and upon the colloquy that imbues its composition. But the condi-

tions of the image are clear: this man is starving, and because he starves, he is going to die. Knowing that the man has chosen to starve, actively refusing to satiate a hunger that has become profound beyond description, complicates the way we see him. Is this an image of psychological distress, of performance, of political resistance? What will allow us to distinguish between those three conditions of cultural practice? How will the image change, its meanings becoming more refined, when we are finally able to categorize it? What does it hope to do?

This book is about self-starvation. One of the most recognizable and diagnosable symptoms of what has historically been called nervous disorder, self-starvation has simultaneously been an extremely disturbing and yet alluring cultural practice to behold, an exceptionally compelling demonstration of political argument, an immensely pious mode of religious prostration.<sup>1</sup> As a form of cultural practice unkind to the blind hope that life continue unfettered by the intervention of death, the meaning of self-starvation oscillates wildly between perversity and pleasure, devotion and resistance, hope and despair, love and loss. Indeed in its various articulations and in the many representational forms that attempt to frame, commemorate, or embody it self-starvation works against the drive to wrench these terms into opposition.

More chilling and more compelling, self-starvation works to disrupt what is arguably *the* oppositional pairing underwriting the troubled but relentless project of humanism: what Sigmund Freud evocatively narrates as the move between *fort* and *da* and what we know more colloquially as the conflict between life and death.<sup>2</sup> Pushing the limits of the climactic vanishing point of human possibility, embracing the potential of *disappearance* for the experience of *becoming*, self-starvation represents the most extreme domain of what Michel Foucault called subjectivation and what Martin Heidegger called *Dasein*, through a radical and paradoxical embrace of mortality.<sup>3</sup> Hovering at the very brink of disappearance—we might say, *aimed* at the death of the subject<sup>4</sup>—self-starvation conceptually and methodologically obtains its significance as cultural practice not simply in gesturing toward absence, but in viscerally and affectively summoning us to bear witness to the long, slow wasting away of human flesh.

In this book I explore the political economy of self-starvation in several specific cases, staging a critical intervention around what I am calling the politics of morbidity. Although I begin from the most base definition of self-starvation as an expressive and extended refusal to eat,<sup>5</sup> I do not attempt to engage or explain every practice or category of practices that

involves temporary or long-term fasting. Instead I summon into conversation three institutional domains in which self-starvation achieves its most historically pronounced presence: the clinic, the gallery, and the prison. I seek to examine the manner in which self-starvation stages the event of *subjectivation*: the production of political subjectivity in the context of subordination to larger institutional and ideological domains. What does it mean for the clinic, the gallery, and the prison when one performs a refusal to consume as a strategy of negation or resistance? How does self-starvation, as a project of refusal aimed (however unconsciously) at death, produce violence, suffering, disappearance, and loss differently from other practices? What are the meanings of those registers, and against what forces might they be positioned? How is the subject of self-starvation — simultaneously the *object* of self-starvation — refigured in relation to larger institutional and ideological drives? How is that subject refigured in relation to the state?

These questions are at the heart of my writing. In pursuing them I argue that practices of self-starvation perform subjectivation by staging and sustaining the ultimate loss of the subject occasioned by death.<sup>6</sup> Indeed self-starvation reveals death to be at the core of what it means to forge subjectivity in the context of a specific political world. Death and dying *haunt* self-starvation, just as mortality attends the most intimate experience of subjectivity. This latter argument, staged in various articulations across the disciplines, builds on Freud's work on instincts and the death drive and Heidegger's account of *being-toward-death* and coalesces into what I am calling the politics of morbidity:<sup>7</sup> the embodied, interventional embrace of mortality and disappearance not as *destructive*, but as radically *productive* stagings of subject formations in which subjectivity and objecthood, presence and absence, life and death intertwine.

The conceptual starting point for my exploration of these practices is where Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler converge in reflecting upon the condition of subjectivity — perhaps an obvious place to begin, but one that bears some explanation. Subjectivation, the term I am using to consider the modes through which self-starvation obtains its most profound political impact, has become the preferred translation for Foucault's *assujettissement*, a concept that folds subordination and agential subjectivity into the very same function. The word *subjectivation* is intended to preserve both aspects of that function, suggesting that subjectivity, classically conceived as a somewhat pure form of human agency, is underpinned by subjugation to more dire forms of institutional and ideo-

logical power. In his clearest and most pithy articulation of this argument Foucault reminds us that “there are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and controls.”<sup>8</sup> Resonating deeply with Althusser’s notion of interpellation, an iterative “hailing” by which subjects are summoned into belonging to a given structure of state power, Foucault’s concept of subjectivation implies that we experience ourselves as subjects insofar as we have been summoned into such a belonging and insofar as we recognize ourselves as such within the context of a given set of institutional power relations.

In a passage strikingly similar to Foucault’s, Althusser stages the subject within an unresolved drama of determination that stipulates *freedom* only within the context of subjection:

In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. . . . The individual is *interpellated as a (free) subject . . . in order that he shall (freely) accept his submission*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection “all by himself.” *There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.*<sup>9</sup>

Althusser articulates this argument in what he calls a “little theoretical theatre,” a street scene in which a policeman accosts a person with a simple phrase — “Hey, you there!” — whereupon the subject turns (a “mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion”) in response.<sup>10</sup> In answering the policeman’s call the subject becomes a subject: interpellated by the policeman’s hailing, she or he is *subjected* in both senses of the word.

It is critical to note the triply textured condition of this scene. For Althusser interpellation functions through discourse (the linguistic summons), embodiment (the material street, the corporeal turn), and ideology (a *faith* in sociality that invests the policeman with the presence of authority and that compels the subject to turn in response). In other words, Althusser’s iterative hailing stages interpellation and performs subjection along the intersecting axes of the discursive, the embodied, and the ideological. Foucault’s attention to the modes through which power is produced through everyday disciplinary practices hinges on precisely this point. Especially in the context of his institutional studies (pris-

ons, clinics, etc.), for Foucault the subject is made and remade as discourse, the body, and ideology (in Foucault's vocabulary, "knowledge") converge to facilitate and to provoke power's production.<sup>11</sup>

Here Judith Butler intervenes to explore further the relationship between subjectivity and freedom that Althusser all but forecloses under the sign of ideology. In her highly influential *Gender Trouble*, a book that has had such impact that it is difficult now to consider the question of subjectivity without summoning it into conversation, Butler proposes a model for gendered and sexual subjectivities based on the performative. First proposed by the linguist J. L. Austin in 1955,<sup>12</sup> performativity refutes a Cartesian metaphysics that divides the discursive and the material by demonstrating the social, cultural, and political *force* of language, by tracking the deeply consequential and material effects of language upon various arrangements of subjects into a "social." For instance, in Austin's classic example the institution of marriage is utterly and completely dependent upon the "felicitous" execution of certain speech acts, "I do" and "I now pronounce you . . ." whose very performance conditions and provokes that which they describe: the union of subjects into a domestic, familial unit. I will not trace or name the many social, cultural, and political effects that obtain once the contract of marriage has been performatively instituted, except to note that they are in fact *many* and to recall that those effects alter and condition the subjectivities of the parties involved in the speech act of the wedding.

For Butler the value of the performative as an analytic lies in its potential to explain further the power of the discursive function in subjectivation: if indeed Althusser's interpellant "Hey, you there!" describes an instance of subjectivation, it functions as such through the performative force of that incantation. Likewise for Butler the *promise* of the performative is in the potential for agential presence within the speech act. That is, the performativity of Althusser's scene depends not only upon the policeman's call, but also upon the passing subject's response: it is in this moment of turning, this "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion," that the performative effect of subjectivity obtains. But Butler cautions, "The source of personal and political agency comes not from within the individual, but in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies in which identity itself is ever-shifting, indeed, where identity itself is constructed, disintegrated, and recirculated only within the context of a dynamic field of cultural relations."<sup>13</sup>

In *Gender Trouble* performativity emerges as a compelling model for

the production of gendered and sexual subjectivities. “Genders can be neither true nor false,” Butler writes, “but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.”<sup>14</sup> Lest this argument be misconstrued, around, say, a confusion between theatricality and performativity,<sup>15</sup> to suggest that gender mimics theater (a set of staged practices in which subjects take on gender roles much as actors put on costumes), Butler begins her next book, *Bodies That Matter*, by clarifying the terms of her argument and by reclaiming its stakes. Gender is not a “taking on of masks” but “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.” She reminds us again of the “paradox of subjectivation,” rephrasing Althusser and Foucault to emphasize the centrality of the *normative* in the subject’s emergence: “The subject who would resist [ideological] norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms.”<sup>16</sup>

It is important to recall that for Butler discourse never bears a wholly oppositional relationship to the materiality of, for example, the body. Insofar as discourse can be said to produce the matter it simultaneously names, delineating between this matter and that, and thus creating the demarcations that make meaning legible, the matter of bodies is neither fully limited by nor fully subsumed within the domain of discourse. *Bodies That Matter* thus takes up the question of *mattering*—precisely, that is, the question of value, and how it comes to be attributed to some bodies but not others. The “power” that “produces and constrains” does not treat all subjects the same, and here the question of subjectivation becomes a distinctly political problem.

In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler foregrounds the politics of subjectivation yet further, in terms of the psychic processes—here we find a return to the consciousness to which Althusser and Foucault gesture—by which political subjects come to incorporate a desire *for* the very subjectivation that constrains, and paradoxically comes to *mean*, freedom. In a haunting articulation of this argument that dramatically restages Althusser’s street scene Butler writes:

Power that at first appears external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity. The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself. . . . The turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject.<sup>17</sup>