

recognise themselves as the object of the address. The 'binding' effect of the word is also a 'blockage': it stops the word moving or acquiring new value. The sign is a 'sticky sign' as an effect of a history of articulation, which allows the sign to accumulate value. The stickiness of the sign is also about the relation or contact between signs. The word 'Paki' becomes an insult through its association with other words, other forms of derision. However, such words do not have to be used once the sign becomes sticky. To use a sticky sign is to evoke other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association. The word 'Paki' might then stick to other words that are not spoken: immigrant, outsider, dirty, and so on. The association between words that generates meanings is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value*. I am describing this accumulation of affective value as a form of stickiness, or as 'sticky signs'.

What is the relationship between signs and bodies? As I argued in the first section, economies of disgust also involve the shaping of bodies. When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body *becomes* sticky. Such bodies become 'blockages' in the economy of disgust: they slow down or 'clog up' the movement between objects, as other objects and signs stick to them. This is how bodies become fetish objects: as we shall see, feelings of disgust stick more to some bodies than others, such that they become disgusting, as if their presence is what makes 'us sick'.

## SPEAKING DISGUST

---

The question, 'What sticks?', is not simply a question of how objects stick to other objects, but also about how some objects more than others become sticky, such that other objects seem to stick to them. It is important not to neutralise the differences between objects and to recognise that some objects become stickier than others given past histories of contact. In this section, I will address how disgust works performatively not only as the intensification of contact between bodies and objects, but also as a speech act. In other words, I want us to reflect on how disgust can generate effects by 'binding' signs to bodies as a binding that 'blocks' new meanings.

What do I mean here by performative? According to Judith Butler, performativity relates to the way in which a signifier, rather than simply naming something that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names. Performativity is hence about the 'power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration' (Butler 1993: 20). The temporal dimension of performativity is crucial. On the one hand, the performative is futural; it generates effects in the constitution or materialisation of that which is 'not yet'. On the other hand, performativity depends upon the sedimentation

of the past; it reiterates what has already been said, and its power and authority depend upon how it recalls that which has already been brought into existence. This model of performativity relates to my argument about the temporality of disgust: it both lags behind the object from which it recoils, and generates the object in the very event of recoiling.

Given this paradoxical temporality, performativity involves iterability (Butler 1993: 13). A performative utterance can only 'succeed' if it repeats a coded or iterable utterance: it works precisely by citing norms and conventions that already exist (Butler 1993: 13; see also Chapter 5). Importantly, the historicity of the performative and its role in the generation of effects cannot be separated. If the performative opens up the future, it does so precisely in the process of repeating past conventions, as to repeat something is always to open up the (structural) possibility that one will repeat something with a difference. Significantly, iterability means that the sign can be 'cut off' from its contexts of utterance; that possibility of cutting is structural to the writerly nature of signification (Derrida 1988).

We can relate the question of 'cutting' to the question of stickiness. Thinking of how signs are sticky – and in particular how they may stick to other signs – also demonstrates the (equally structural) resistance to cutting. This resistance is not inherent within signs, but is dependent on how signs work in relation to other signs, or how the signifier sticks to a signified in a chain of signifiers (see Lacan 1977: 154). Although it is possible that signs will be cut off, the resistance to being cut off, in the stickiness of the sign, relates to the historicity of signification. The resistance is not in the sign, but a 'sign' of how signs are already associated with other signs through metonymic proximity (word-to-word) or metaphoric displacement (word-for-word). While this historicity plays a crucial role in theories of performativity and iterability, it is linked to repetition, to the very fact that signs must be repeatable, and with them, forms or conventions. I want to expand our understanding of the historicity implicit to signification, reconceiving historicity in terms of stickiness as well as repetition: stickiness does not relate to conventions that are explicit, but to the attachments that implicitly govern ways in which signs work with other signs. How does the stickiness of signification relate to the performativity of disgust?

To name something as disgusting – typically, in the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' – is performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But to say something is disgusting is still to 'make something'; it generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object*. Indeed, the word 'disgust' is itself a sticky sign, insofar as other signs stick to it ('yuk', 'bad', 'savage'), and insofar as it sticks to some bodies and objects ('the naked

savage'), rather than others. To name something as disgusting is to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken. The relationship between the stickiness of the sign and the stickiness of the object is crucial to the performativity of disgust as well as the apparent resistance of disgust reactions to 'newness' in terms of the generation of different kinds of objects. The object that is generated as a disgusting (bad) object through the speech act comes to stick. It becomes sticky and acquires a fetish quality, which then engenders its own effects.

It is not only 'disgusting objects' that are generated by the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' What else does disgust do? We can return to my reflections on abjection. To abject something is literally to cast something out, or to expel something. How can speech acts involve abjection? How do abject bodies and objects relate to abject speech? In disgust reactions, 'words' are also cast out or vomited. The speech act, 'That's disgusting!', can work as a form of vomiting, as an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating. That is, to designate something as disgusting is also to create a distance from the thing, which paradoxically becomes a thing only in the act of distantiation. We might recall here that vomiting involves expelling something that has already been digested, and hence incorporated into the body of the one who feels disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 27). Ingestion means that one has already been made disgusting by the perception of something other than me as being disgusting. To name something as disgusting is not only to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object that then comes to stick, but also to the subject. In other words, the disgusted subject is 'itself' one of the effects that is generated by the speech act, 'That's disgusting!'

However, the speech act is never simply an address the subject makes to itself. The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect. In other words, the subject asks others to repeat the condemnation implicit in the speech act itself. Such a shared witnessing is required for speech acts to be generative, that is, for the attribution of disgust to an object or other to stick to others. In addition, the demand for a witness shows us that the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' generates more than simply a subject and an object; it also generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event. A community of witnesses is generated, whose apparent shared distance from an event or object that has been named as disgusting is achieved through the repetition of the word 'disgust'. Elspeth Probyn in *Carnal Appetites* argues persuasively that others are required to witness the distantiation from an object implicit in naming something as disgusting. As she puts it: 'Through public statements, we want

to distance ourselves from this uncomfortable proximity. In uttering the phrase, we call upon others to witness our pulling away' (Probyn 2000: 131). The sharing of the physical processes of both casting out and pulling away means that disgust works to align the individual with the collective at the very moment both are generated. We can examine the way in which such speech acts generate effects by reflecting on how 'That's disgusting!' worked as a response to the events of September 11.

The internet has been a powerful means by which such a community of witnesses to the events of September 11 has been produced, along with other technologies or forms of mediation. On the internet, organisations and individuals have responded to the events on home pages, as well as message boards that have also allowed individuals to respond to each other's responses. This generation of a community of shared witnessing does not require subjects to be co-present, nor does it require that the speech act be made to an addressee who is co-present. The speech act instead takes the form of writing that is posted, with all the risks involved in posting a letter, given that the letter might not reach its destination (Derrida 1987). So what role does disgust have in generating a community in the face of September 11?

In the mediation of the events of September 11, the images seem saturated or even 'full' of affect. The images are repeated, and the repetition seems binding. The signs of the collapse of the buildings, and of bodies falling from the sky, are an invasion of bodies, spaces, homes and worlds. The images that appeared on television screens of the event as it unfolded, and which were repeated after the event, were images of trauma. They were also traumatic images. We did not have to see through the images to witness their trauma. To be a witness to the event through watching the images was to be affected by the images, which is not to say that we were all affected in the same way. As Marusya Bociurkiw puts it:

The subsequent replaying of the Twin Towers' collapse (every few minutes on the first day; every few hours for months afterwards, and then every six months) seemed to enact the compulsion to repeat that characterizes post-traumatic stress. The compulsive return speaks to an unconscious desire to return to the state of trauma. By repeating or returning to unpleasurable experiences, the traumatized subject unconsciously hopes to achieve mastery, and thus to return to pleasure. (Bociurkiw 2003: 21)

The repetition of the images of trauma suggests a need to replay that which has yet to be assimilated into the individual or collective psyche. Critics such as Bociurkiw, Butler and Eng have analysed responses to September 11 in terms of the politics of trauma and grief (see also Chapter 7). Disgust may

also be crucial to how the event impacts on others; indeed, the event is often attributed as 'being disgusting'. How does that attribution work? What does it do? Disgust involves a fascination with the event as image, in the desire to get closer to the image as if it were a salient object in the present. Take, for example, the following response to September 11 posted from Urban Outlaw Productions:<sup>3</sup>

Roughly a month out and the disgusting, damnable events of September 11, 2001 still resonate in my heart and mind daily, if not hourly. I suppose there is some minor consolation in that fact, as for a full week immediately after the attacks, the shell-shocked feeling was omnipresent and inescapable. Not only did every aspect of the media, from television and radio to newspapers and the Internet, saturate us with seemingly every sordid detail of the tragedy, but that was almost all that was heard on the streets, all that we spoke of in private, all that was discussed on an e-group or in chat rooms. It infiltrated almost every facet of our lives. For many I am sure the terrorist incidents curtailed concentration, sleep, and invaded dreams . . . or nightmares.

Here, the object that disgusts has saturated the subjective world; disgust names the penetration of the world by that which is deemed sickening. The 'getting-in-ness' of the disgust reaction constitutes the object only through its proximity, its fatal nearness. The 'disgusting events' have 'invaded' and 'saturated' life itself such that they still resonate in life, even after the attribution of 'That's disgusting!' has been made. Note the slide between what is sickening and the 'shell-shocked feeling'. It is the inability to grasp the event in the present, or even to 'feel its impact', which demands the event is replayed, again and again, as the repetition of the sounds of trauma. This fatal proximity of the event is such that it can register its impact only through a perpetual recontamination of the homes and bodies of 'the disgusted'.

The disgust reaction creates an object, which we can describe as a border or fetish object, insofar as it admits to a prior contamination. The very 'pulling away' from the event is what allows it to acquire this fetish quality. At the same time, the generation of the object also creates the subject. By naming the event as disgusting, the subject 'stands out' in the 'standing apart' or 'pulling away' from the event. The posting is posted to other anonymous net readers; it speaks to an audience who is assumed to share this feeling of disgust and being disgusted. The sharing of disgust (through shared witnessing of that which is designated as disgusting) also becomes a shared rage or anger *about the ingestion of the disgusting* (about the ways in which it saturates one's life, minute by minute).

The ingestion of the disgusting constructs the objects of disgust, by identifying the bodies that 'cause' the event. The posting moves on:

Those who died have had their lives snuffed out for what is truly an insanely hateful and imprudent cause. This is a cause based on some twisted form of what these terrorists would call religion. These brainwashed, lost and depraved subhuman beasts must be sought out, flushed from the holes in which they cower, and annihilated like the vermin they are.

Here, the bodies of others become the salient object; they are constructed as being hateful and sickening only insofar as they have got too close. They are constructed as non-human, *as beneath and below the bodies of the disgusted*. Indeed, through the disgust reaction, 'belowness' and 'beneathness' become properties of their bodies. They embody that which is lower than human or civil life. The sexualised and militaristic nature of this description is crucial. Hidden in holes, the others threaten through being veiled or covered. The others who are the objects of our disgust must be penetrated or uncovered. We must 'get to them' to 'get away from them'. The proximity of others is here an imperative. They got too close (the event was only possible given this fatal intimacy), but we must get closer, if they are to be expelled. So the word 'disgust' is articulated by the subject, as a way of describing the event, which works to create the event as a border object, as a marker of what we are not and could not be. The word 'disgust' is then transferred from the event to the bodies of those others who are held responsible for the event. But how are those others ingested and expelled? What does this do to the bodies of those who narrate their disgust?

The posting then says: 'And the people, the survivors, and those of us who live, we move forward. We press on into a changed world with a new national mindset that has been violently thrust upon us. It remains to be seen what the ramifications are of the actions perpetuated on us by these Middle Eastern terrorists.' Here, the possibility of 'moving on' is dependent on the origin of terror as coming from another who is recognisable. That is, the transference of affect – such that the disgust is no longer 'in me' or 'ours' – involves an identification of bodies as its object; they are named as 'Middle Eastern terrorists'. Clearly, disgust sticks to the bodies of the others that are named; it is transferred from sign to body. But it can do this work of transference only by sticking together signs. The naming of disgust metonymically sticks these signs together, such that the terror and fear become associated with bodies that are already recognised as 'Middle-Eastern'. It is the association or contact between those signs 'Middle-Eastern' and 'terrorists' that 'blocks' the sticky flow of disgust.

Such ‘blocking’ means that the ‘pulling away’ of the disgust reaction simultaneously ‘pushes out’ the bodies of those others who surface as the objects of disgust. Of course, the ‘sticking together’ of these signs depends upon an economy of recognition in which some bodies more than others will be identified as terrorist bodies, regardless of whether they have any official links with terrorist organisations. This economy of recognition has become a part of lived reality on the streets in many countries where any bodies who ‘look Muslim or Middle-Eastern’ have been the victims of racial assault or abuse because they are associated with terrorism, or ‘could be’ terrorists (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, the sticking of disgust to some bodies, a sticking which never finishes as the possibility remains open that other bodies ‘could be’ terrorists, generates other effects. The speech act, ‘It’s disgusting!’ becomes ‘They are disgusting,’ which translates into, ‘We are disgusted by them.’ We can see this shift in the final sentence of the posting:

September 11, 2001 should provide a valuable lesson to the world about the tenacity of our safety and the importance of the lives of rational people. People who are adjusted to survive, strive, and cope in a civilized society, something these ghastly, empty, and, basically, sick terrorists forfeited.

This ‘we’ is named and renamed; first as ‘the people’, then as ‘the survivors’, and finally as ‘the lives of rational people’. The community of witnesses is named by the speech act, and generated in the act of being named. Such a community comes into being as ‘sticking together’ in the shared condemnation of the events, a sticking together, that not only spits out the word ‘disgusting’, but also ‘stands for’ the spitting out of the bodies of those who become stuck to the word itself (‘sick terrorists’). The disgust reaction hence vomits out the words ‘Middle-Eastern terrorists’, which comes to *stand for* and *slide into* the expulsion of the bodies of such others, who are recognisable as the cause of our sickness, from the community, nation or world. Such an expulsion will never be over given the possibility that other others ‘could be’ the cause of our disgust; the unfinished nature of expulsion allows its perpetual rejustification: we must be sick, to exclude the sick, again and again. Being sick is performed by the text, which allows the ‘word’ disgust to become a ‘sign’ of the other’s being.

This is not to say, however, that disgust always sticks, and that the transference of the stickiness from a sign, to an object, to a body and to other signs, always works to affect a community that sticks together: to adhere is not always to cohere. It is clear, of course, that the word ‘disgusting’ was repeated, again and again, in personal and official responses to the events.

But it is not clear that what was named disgusting was the same thing: each time the attribution ‘That’s disgusting!’ is made, the object, as it were, is remade, but not necessarily in a way that binds the community together. Some disgust reactions named their disgust at the way in which disgust has stuck to the bodies of some others. Take, for example, the following posting: ‘The war in Afghanistan is disgusting . . . While the need for increased security is undoubtedly on the minds of the American people, the means being discussed are as disgusting as the terrorist attacks themselves.’<sup>4</sup> Such disgust reactions involve ‘pulling away’ from the ‘pulling away’ of the disgust reaction that authorises a community of witnesses. In other words, the speech act ‘That’s disgusting!’ pulls away from the response to the event, which assumes that ‘they’re disgusting’ (in which the ‘they’ slips between sticky signifiers: terrorists, Middle-Eastern, Muslim) and should be expelled, or vomited out of the nation, the civil world. To put it even more strongly, the disgusting nature of the terrorist attacks is argued to be ‘replicated’ or ‘repeated’ in the response to the attacks themselves.

Disgust, therefore, as an imperative not only to expel, but to make that very expulsion stick to some things and not others, does not always work simply to conserve that which is legitimated as a form of collective existence. Disgust can involve disgust at what disgust effects as a form of collective existence (in this case, the war is seen as replicating that which is disgusting about terrorism). The feeling of being disgusted may also be an element in a politics that seeks to challenge ‘what is’. However, what the loop of disgust shows us is not simply the possibility of dissent within even the stickiest economies, but also how dissent cannot be exterior to its object. Dissent is always implicated in what is being dissented from. Furthermore, the limits of disgust as an affective response might be that disgust does not allow one the time to digest that which one designates as a ‘bad thing’. I would argue that critique requires more time for digestion. Disgust might not allow one to get close enough to an object before one is compelled to pull away.

Of course we must remember that critics of American foreign policy – those who have expressed their disgust at what has been authorised as disgust – have also been met with disgust reactions. One of the most repeated statements about disgust was directed towards Susan Sontag’s article in the *New Yorker*, which questioned the representation of the terrorists as cowards and suggested that the act was comprehensible in the sense that hatred towards the US could be explained. Statements such as Sontag’s implication that “‘we had it coming’ is “disgusting”” are repeated as a way of resticking disgust to its object.<sup>5</sup> So the economy of disgust does not stop, as it were, with the unsticking of the object of disgust. Disgust reactions that ‘pull away’ from those that stick a community together can themselves engender other disgust reactions. In pulling away from the pulling away, these disgust



reactions work to restick the sign 'disgust' to an object, which becomes salient as an effect of such collective transference. In other words, what gets unstuck can always get restuck and can even engender new and more adhesive form of sticking. Adhesion involves not just sticking to a surface, but giving one's support and allegiance. So we might need to persist with two questions, asked simultaneously. We might need to ask 'What sticks?' (a question that must be posed to ourselves as well as others). But we might pose this question alongside a more hopeful one: How can we stick to our refusal of the terms of allegiance?

## NOTES

---

1. Kristeva's work has especially been taken up by feminist critics interested in how women's bodies are associated with the abject, as well as the monstrous. I will not be engaging with such arguments here, but do wish to signal their importance. See, for example, Creed (1993) and Stacey (1997).
2. I use this example since this is an insult that has been addressed to me, and I remember its effects profoundly.
3. <http://www.urbanoutlaw.com/opinion/100901.html> Accessed 2 October 2002. I choose this site from thousands as it builds up a complex narrative around the word 'disgust'. Use a search engine, and type in 'September 11' and 'disgusting' and you can access many comparable web postings, usually on discussion lists.
4. <http://gauntlet.ualgary.ca/a/story/7458> Accessed 2 October 2002.
5. [http://www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/flashpoint\\_speech.htm](http://www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/flashpoint_speech.htm) Accessed 2 October 2002.