

*Introduction · Alterity Politics:
Toward an Ethics without Lack*

Others are anxious to get to know you better.
— Empress of China fortune cookie

These days, it seems that everybody loves “the other.” University professors and corporate CEOs alike proclaim the importance of diversity; even Arby’s fast-food restaurant reminds us that “Different is Good.” Of course, once one tries to specify what “the other” means within a particular context (once a specific other or difference is named by a discourse), a flurry of anxious criticism ensues: for example, in recent literary and cultural studies, first-wave feminism has been accused of heterosexism and indifference to race; a certain Marxism is accused of ignoring gender and the specificity of non-Western cultures when it defines otherness in terms of economic class; some postcolonial discourses are chastised for indulging in Eurocentric theorizing rather than attending to the lived exclusions of diasporic lives; deconstructive discourses are faulted for ignoring any concrete others, while Habermasian communicative rationality is charged with anthropomorphism. The list inexorably goes on.

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Judith Butler thematizes this problem concisely in *Gender Trouble*: theories of identity and alterity “that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an *embarrassed ‘etc.’* at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete. This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the *exasperated ‘etc.’* that so often occurs at the end of such lines?” (143; my italics). There is a certain way in which this book is nothing other than a series of engagements with this quotation and the myriad problems with which it confronts us: Why is it so difficult to “situate” and respond to a set of specific others—ethically, politically, or theoretically—and what does the difficulty of doing so teach us about identity politics and the possibility of what I call an alterity politics? Can this “failure” of sameness be rethematized as an affirmation of difference? What possibilities are there for concrete responses that do not merely or finally reduce otherness to a subset of the same, to a subset of an inquiring subject’s identity? These are the questions that I will most consistently return to in the course of this book. If *identity politics* is an attempt to thematize the other in terms of its similarities with the self, I am interested here in constructing an ethical *alterity politics* that considers identity as beholden and responsive first and foremost to the other.

There is, of course, a theoretical or ethical component to the word “politics” as it is used in formulations like “identity politics” or “alterity politics,” and I should make it clear from the outset that I use the word in a fairly narrow sense as a negotiation that takes place in what might still loosely be called a *polis*, situated at a particular space or place. This book is not about alterity per se nor about politics per se, but about the imbrication of the two. It is in fact this imbrication of the theoretical and the social that gives force and definition to my sense of *ethics*. As a mode of inquiry, ethics necessarily concerns itself both with general theoretical structures and specific concrete responses; indeed, one might argue that its ability to bring together the theoretical and political is one of the reasons ethics has reemerged so centrally in recent critical discourse. Any interesting or useful ethics is precisely a politics of the other, a linkage of theoretical necessity with concrete response. Finally, it is only in such concrete ethical response that “alterity” and “politics” are imbricated, and as such it is this response—this *performative responsibility*—that I will take as my primary topic as well as my mode of inquiry throughout this book.

Here in the introduction, I investigate the ways in which the elusive “etc.” of identity politics is linked in much current discourse to the notion of identity’s “failure.” I begin here because, on a larger scale, thematizing alterity as *other than a lack or failure of plenitude* is the principal vector connecting the seemingly odd assemblage of material treated in this book. In the end, it is this refusal of lack—the refusal to thematize difference in terms of the possibility or impossibility of sameness—that ties together the disparate figures and topics engaged in this work.

The Failures of Identity Politics

Of course, no discourse of otherness can hope to map the entire conflicted terrain of alterity in the postmodern world(s), where totalizing theories have fallen out of favor for very good theoretical and practical reasons. History continually reminds us that such totalizing theoretical and political systems are dangerous for marginal groups, and hence constitute the wrong place to start thinking about a multiculturalist politics of the other. However, although the postmodern inability or unwillingness to produce an all-encompassing theory of otherness has been an enabling factor for the multiculturalist project at large, the inability to locate and attend to a series of specific others has not, it seems, proven to be similarly empowering. In fact, this inability to treat multiple subject positions—the inability to attend to more than one specific alterity at a time—has come to be the dominant critique of so-called identity politics.¹

The well-known failures of identity politics—its disintegration into partisan bickering, its inability to forge links among subaltern groups, its tendency to situate others while resisting its own situatedness—are often treated (by both its proponents and its critics) as a symptom of Butler’s “embarrassed ‘etc.’”² identity politics as a project is doomed to fail because every specific identity likewise fails to be complete, falls short of some kind of plenitude. The specific “I” that lacks wholeness is symptomatic of a generalized “we” that lacks wholeness, and vice versa. In an attempt to redescribe or reencounter this seeming “failure” of identity, theorized reinscriptions of identity politics—ones that eschew simple appeals to the asocial authenticity of subjective experience—argue that any particular identity is actually predicated upon (and thereby inextricable from) the differences that form Butler’s “horizontal trajectory of adjectives.” As William Con-

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nolly argues in *Identity/Difference*, for example, “Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (64). If we’ve learned anything at all from the so-called linguistic turn in the human sciences, we’ve learned that any state of sameness actually *requires* difference in order to structure itself. Identity is structured like a language: we can only recognize the so-called plenitude of a particular identity insofar as it differentiates itself from (and thereby necessarily contains a trace of) the ostensible nonplenitude of difference. Like Saussure’s famous characterization of language, subjective identity knows only “differences *without positive terms*” (*Course*, 120; italics in original).

This realization that difference structures sameness comprises what we might call the theoretical success of multiculturalism. The sense that there are no simply positive terms in postmodern life has certainly led to liberating effects, among them what Connolly calls an increasing “appreciation of difference” (*Identity/Difference*, 167). As he writes, identity’s necessary dependence on difference has kept open a space for the other: “When this bond through differentiation is acknowledged, the moral demand for an all-embracing identity grounded in the truth of a fixed moral code loses some of the power it exercised over the self” (167). In other words, the success of a poststructuralist-multiculturalist identity politics lies in its recognizing the structuring space of otherness; this recognition has in turn shown the way for further concrete deployments of toleration and respect, “enabling the self to bestow value upon the alter-identity it contests” (167).

However, this redescribed theoretical and practical realization of alterity’s necessity is not only identity politics’ success, but also paradoxically its failure: identity politics’ *theoretical success* (the realization that difference grounds sameness) belies its inevitable *social or political failure*. As the sad facts of the daily headlines and radio talk-show programs attest, people aren’t walking through the open door of respect and recognition in large numbers. The theoretical recognition of our common intersubjective ground somehow hasn’t abrogated the social problems of identity politics. For social theorists, this is perhaps not surprising: no “theory” can guarantee harmonious societies, and in fact, the contemporary linguistic-turn philosophies of difference—where intersubjectivity is based on the paradigm of linguistic response, the necessity of difference in structuring the same—seem merely another version of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic

of recognition that has been familiar to social theorists for nearly two hundred years. As Axel Honneth reminds us, Hegel is the great thinker of intersubjectivity, insisting as he does on the “interlocking of individuation and recognition,” where “every individual is dependent on the possibility of constant reassurance by the Other” (189). Because none of us can be Hegelian masters or Saussurean positive terms, we are all cousins to Hegel’s bondsman or Saussure’s differences, tied to a system of social recognition for our intersubjective desires, meanings, and identities.

In both social and linguistic accounts of identity formation, then, the very notion of intersubjective ground is based on a certain *failure or lack*: I can’t have everything—I lack completeness; I cannot be a “positive term”—so I live in/with the solace of others, who likewise lack such wholeness. As M. M. Bakhtin phrases this dilemma in his early work on ethics, *Art and Answerability*, “I turn to the outside of myself and surrender myself to the mercy of *the other*. . . . I know that in the other as well there is the same insanity of not coinciding (in principle) with himself, the same unconsummatedness of life” (128). The intersubjective community is a community of lack in which each person or group is compelled to give up the hopeless project of totalization for the attainable mini-totality of social recognition. Such a political community of the “we” finds its commonality in difference defined as a lack of sameness; in response to this situation, interest groups within such a community of difference band together under identity markers to supplement this (un)foundling lack.

Perhaps, though, one could argue that the subjective differences of identity markers—Bakhtin’s “unconsummated life” or Butler’s “embarrassed ‘etc.’”—are better understood as a postmodern celebratory *excess* of identities rather than a nostalgic, modernist lament for the *lack* of common identity. On this line of reasoning, because each “I” is open-ended and excessive, I cannot simply conflate myself with the other, but I am nevertheless bound to an intersubjective realm where we each negotiate our ever-shifting social identity. As Amarpal Dhaliwal argues, perhaps “(re)conceptualizing identity as a process” of excessive self-creation offers a way out of the recriminatory traps of identity politics: perhaps “identity,” in other words, “should be posed as continually changing, changeable, and not as a fixed endpoint to be ultimately achieved” (84).

Paradoxically, it is here we might note that the seeming *excess* of perception that accrues to the intersubjective, self-overcoming “I”

remains a certain kind of *lack*: the excessive I remains an identity that lacks wholeness or complete control over its circumstances, so it must continually reinvent itself to cope with changing circumstances. As Bakhtin writes of his social theory of intersubjective dialogics, although “the interrelationship of ‘I–the other’ is not convertible for me in lived life in any concrete way” (*Art*, 23 n), for me the other nevertheless exists in the same intersubjective dialogic space and faces similar human tasks; like the “I,” “the other . . . cannot complete himself by himself” (24). I need the other to realize myself and vice versa; our mutual *excess* of perception and restless adventure of desire is made possible by our mutual recognition of an essential *lack* of wholeness. Bakhtin continues: “what is lacking, moreover, is precisely *external* unity and continuity; a human being experiencing life in the category of his own *I* is incapable of gathering himself into an outward whole that would be even relatively finished. . . . In this sense, one can speak of human being’s absolute need for the other, for the other’s seeing, remembering, gathering and unifying self-activity—the only self-activity capable of producing his outwardly finished personality” (35–36). As in Lacanian theories of expropriation from the real into the symbolic, intersubjective identity theories like Bakhtin’s maintain a notion of excess that is subtended by a prior notion of lack. Bakhtin maintains, “Correlative with this excess, there is a certain deficiency” (23 n); or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it with a bit more chiasmic flair, “We come across identity when predicates fail. Identity is the surplus which cannot be captured by predicates” (*For They Know Not*, 36). My excessive subjectivity, in other words, is “incapable of gathering” itself into a whole, and in turn I recognize that each of us shares this excessive lack of wholeness, which can be rethematized in social terms as the subject’s need for recognition in an otherwise groundless social landscape. In the end, whether it is thematized as nostalgia for wholeness or a celebration of possibility, “human being’s absolute need for the other” remains a function of shared human lack or incompleteness. And, as Michael Holquist writes of Bakhtin’s identity-based dialogics, “a first implication of recognizing that we are all unique is the paradoxical result that we are *therefore* fated to need the other if we are to consummate our selves” (“Architectonics,” xxv).

For all its gains, such a contemporary intersubjective or multiculturalist reinscription of identity politics remains unable to deal with the other *as* other; it continues to thematize differences among persons, groups, and discourses in terms of (the impossibility of their)

sameness. Each group or identity wants to rule the field, but it can't, so every group and individual must share this lack, mourn collectively for what each can't have. In turn, however, it is precisely this lack or expropriation that bolsters the recriminatory politics of resentment that has plagued and continues to plague identity politics. Connolly argues that the recognition of otherness within the self should have opened a distinctly ethico-political space of acknowledgment: "to acknowledge a variety of contingent elements in the formation of identity is to take a significant step toward increasing tolerance for a range of antinomies in oneself" (*Identity/Difference*, 178). However, if this need for recognition and intersubjectivity hasn't exactly cashed out in an increasing tolerance of alterity, at this point we might simply want to ask, why not? Why hasn't the postmodern realization of difference's necessity led to an increased social respect and tolerance?

This is obviously an extremely complicated question, but we might haltingly begin to address it by pointing out that because intersubjective theories argue that we *need* each other for recognition and happiness, such theories continue to harbor a regulatory ideal of complete subjective freedom, which is actually *freedom from recognition, freedom from difference itself*.³ It is not necessarily surprising, then, that *needing* the other often shows itself as *resenting* the other. As Wendy Brown argues, insofar as it measures subjective injury in terms of exclusion from a kind of white male normativity of self-determination, a politics of identity inexorably harbors the ideal along with a resentment toward it; she contends that, "like all resentments, [identity politics] retains the real or imagined holdings of its reviled subject—in this case, bourgeois male privileges—as objects of desire" ("Wounded," 394). Brown goes on to argue that because identity politics' productive moment consists in the "politicization of *exclusion* from an ostensible universal" (398), it thereby remains "a protest that reinstalls the humanist ideal—and a specific white, middle-class, masculinist expression of this ideal—insofar as it premises itself on exclusion from it" (398). Finally, identity politics suggests, we need the other because we've all been excluded from the privileges of an ideal or autonomous self.

Such need is, however, a recipe for continued subjective control. As Emmanuel Levinas writes, at first people are happy for their needs: they need others, food, and so on, what Levinas calls "independence through dependence" (*Totality*, 115). These happy needs, however, only point to a time when need can finally be overcome in fulfillment.

He maintains: “need is the primary movement of the same. To be sure, need is also a dependence with regard to the other, but it is a dependence across time, a dependence that is not an instantaneous betraying of the same but a suspension or postponement of dependence, and thus the possibility to break, by labor and by economy, the very thrust of the alterity upon which need depends” (116). As Levinas suggests, the exterior dependence to which need inexorably points is kept at bay by the subject’s positing a future time when need’s purpose will have been comprehended or its grasp broken by fulfillment. In other words, a regulatory freedom from alterity watches over the lack that forces the subject—resentfully—into an economy of mutual recognition. In this way, the interior subject’s *need* for the other actually shelters it from alterity. As Levinas argues, “Needs are in my power; they constitute me as the same and not as dependent on the other” (116).

We do, however, need to go slowly here. As Brown insists, such a critique of identity politics does not wish to treat social needs or exclusions from privilege as trivial or unreal, but rather to point out that the horizon of expropriation (which identity politics depends upon) reduces rather than heightens attention to the specificities of interpellation and identity production. For example, the much ballyhooed return of the angry white male in American political discourse (which I discuss at length in chapter 7) has its phantasmatic roots in the majority of such men’s very real exclusion from a white, middle-class male ideal of power and privilege. When Norm from Scranton calls Rush Limbaugh to complain of his expropriation, he appeals to the same sense of need, exclusion, and frustration that drives more obviously righteous claims to discrimination. However, the telling point in this return of the angry white male is that a discourse of identity’s lack—failure to attain the ideal—tends to level all identity “failures” onto the same plane, and thereby to homogenize the very specific traumas that accrue to a particular subjectivity. Norm’s anger, though very real, is simply not of the same order as other brands of social interpellation. Likewise, discriminations based on age, weight, race, style of dress, and physical challenge are obviously not of the same category, and getting a lousy table in a restaurant is not in any meaningful way akin to being denied employment, even if both events take place for to the same discriminatory reason. At its strongest, however, an identity politics of exclusion attempts to conflate these specific injuries around the common theme of lack or expropriation: any specific lack or failure becomes a symptom of a more generalized lack;

likewise, what we have in common is that we all lack in some way. We meet upon the common ground of intersubjective impasse.

One could, of course, reinscribe this impasse as the ethical or political itself. One could argue, as Žižek does, that due to the subject's founding expropriation, it necessarily "bears an indelible mark of failure and the Ought—and thereby its inherent *ethical* character" (*For They Know Not*, 110). Likewise, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe rethemmatize the political precisely as an ethico-political confrontation with a necessary impossibility or failure. As they write of their post-Marxism, "Let us avoid any temptation to go back to the 'origins.' Let us simply pierce a moment in time and try to detect the presence of that void which the logic of hegemony will attempt to fill" (8).

Perhaps the most compelling ethico-politics of lack is Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theorizing of the "DissemiNation" in his essay of the same name. For Bhabha, the modern nation fills the void created by modernity's expropriation of the subject from earlier forms of social organization. He argues, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (291). What Bhabha calls the "double-time of the nation" (294)—a doubling that tries to suture "out of the many one" (294)—is the dual time of national metaphor, an attempt to carry over and teach a sense of identification (community and kin) that is always interrupted by what he calls the "performative" impossibility of such a "pedagogical" carrying over. The plenitude or wholeness of national time is, according to Bhabha, necessarily interrupted by an "*anterior* default of a presence" (305); there is, in other words, a void or alterity that marks the impossible founding of the nation, an irrepressible absence or lack of wholeness that lies beneath the performative suture "We the people."⁴

In Bhabha's "DissemiNation," one might say that the exclusionary violence of the "colonial" always interrupts the attempt to configure the "postcolonial." As he explains, the plenitude or "pluralism of the national sign, where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier's 'loss of identity' that inscribes the narrative of the people in the ambivalent, 'double' writing of the performative and the pedagogical" (305). At the postcolonial site of the modern nation, there is always this anterior interruption—this originary, disseminated void or "loss of identity" before the performative founding of the nation's seemingly seamless origin. This originary lack creates "always the

distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present" (295). Bhabha calls this interruption a "repetition of that minus in the origin" (306), and for Bhabha this "minus" or lack becomes the necessary site of ethical and political resistance within the always already conflicted postcolonial nation.

Thus the homogeneity—or, in Laclau and Mouffe's parlance, the hegemony—of "the people" must be thought in this double time: the time of the nation, the people, and the same becomes the time of difference's exclusion, a presence constantly interrupted by the alterity of an impossibility or void at the origin. Bhabha sums up this site of postcolonial resistance:

the performative introduces a temporality of the "in-between" through the "gap" or "emptiness" of the signifier that punctuates linguistic difference. The boundary that marks the nation's selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production with a space of representation that threatens binary division with its difference. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal form of social representation, a space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations. (299)

Bhabha here insists that the nation's "other" is always already an internal question; the other is at the heart of any attempt to constitute sameness. Because absence both founds and unfounds identity, any "gap" in the nation's self-definition becomes a privileged site for locating ethical resistance, and for a political rearticulation of national and subjective identity.

Although I find Bhabha's politics of originary lack and resistance to be compelling, I wonder whether it doesn't remain predicated on the possibility of some kind of wholeness or plenitude. The specificity of any individual or group in Bhabha's "DissemiNation" is related originally to the specificity of an absence: identity is first and foremost the site or cite of a certain *lack*, and this subjective lack mirrors the founding lack of the nation—thereby, on Bhabha's reading, highlighting contest and difference within a groundless, divided social sphere.

However, just as identity politics harbors normativity in its notions of injurious exclusion, I wonder whether Bhabha's notion of a society of lack—as well as Žižek's and Laclau and Mouffe's, admittedly in different ways—doesn't protect a kind of normative plenitude, if only as

that which can never be accomplished. In other words, the primary relation—to oneself and to the other—remains an imaginary relation of expropriation: revelation comes from incompleteness, lack, slippage. But to term this noncenter of the social or the subject a “failure” presupposes the normativity of some state that is somehow not constituted by these interpellative social conditions, a state where the nation or the subject would or could be undivided. In a discourse like Bhabha’s, which strives to highlight the constitutive social conditions of the postcolonial subject’s emergence, it seems odd to talk in terms of failure or lack, insofar as Bhabha’s analysis, as one of its founding premises, would want to expose the promise of complete subjective freedom as an ideological or transcendental chimera founded by and in hegemonic national narratives. In other words, in taking into account the social interpellations of the national subject, it seems that one would be obliged to account for *not-free* as otherwise than a *lack* or *failure of freedom*.

The difficulty inherent in a politics of lack, then, is that difference is thought symptomatically, in terms of its relation to an originary, normative lack or plenitude. As I will argue in various ways in this book, such a notion of difference-as-lack underestimates the *productive* qualities of alterity.⁵ Throughout this book I suggest that identity and difference are not *an effect* of an originary loss or plenitude, but rather that identity and difference, though they certainly are located in specific chains of effects, likewise *produce effects*. Certainly, the politics of lack is also concerned first and foremost with producing effects; as Bhabha rightly points out, one of the effects such failure can produce is resistance and skepticism concerning the supposed wholeness put forth in hegemonic national narratives. However, it seems that resentment, rather than collective resistance, has been the preeminent social effect of the politics of lack. And perhaps this resentment is itself a symptom of a larger problem with an identity politics of collective lack: subjectivity thought as lack seems inexorably to separate the subject from what it can do; it thematizes the subject as an effect (a noun) rather than an effectivity (an action).

If the subject is nothing other than a symptom of a founding lack, its primary mode of agency is then directed toward making up for that lack: the dominant effects it produces are futile attempts to suture an originary gap. As Žižek maintains, such a subject can, at its best, learn to enjoy its symptom, come to grips with the “humble consent that ‘all is NOT rational,’ that the moment of contingent antagonism is ir-

reducible, that notional Necessity itself hangs on and is 'embedded' in an encompassing contingency" (*For They Know Not*, 169). Although this insight about irreducible contingency is perhaps itself irreducible, the explanation of such contingency offered here seems to recuperate a fairly familiar and problematic transcendentalist horizon: the reason X failed is because everything fails. As Žižek contends, "Reflection, to be sure, ultimately always fails" (86), so the founding moment of expropriation recurs in all the subject's subsequent productions.

Perhaps all "postmoderns" can agree that reflection, like any other subjective action or response, is not in control of its outcomes; but this hardly seems to signal or necessitate its "failure." Why not say that reflection, to be sure, always produces effects far beyond the ones intended? This is clearly what Žižek means when he talks of Hegelian-Lacanian failure; as he writes, "essence" is "the name for the impossibility that hinders the constitution of a full identity-with-itself" (*For They Know Not*, 37): to say that reflection fails is to say that it produces more than it can control because it lacks a stable ground. However, to thematize this excessive production of effects as a hindrance or failure, and then to read that failure as an allegory of the inexorable process of loss, seems to cover over the important affirmative qualities of alterity or difference. Certainly, the subject is an effect, but it is an effect that produces all kinds of other effects, and these effects are not merely recuperable within the process of mourning for a lack. In other words, it seems that understanding difference in terms of allegorical expropriation—as the constant discovery of lack—underestimates the hazardous productivity of difference's specificity.

As long as identity is not thematized as a hazardous performative *act*—a verb rather than a noun, a multiple becoming rather than a monological symptom, a deployment of force rather than an assured process of mourning, a subjection that calls for(th) response rather than the revelation of an assured lack of wholeness—it seems destined to remain a locus for resentment, naming itself always in terms of its expropriation from an ideal that it can't ever hope, and doesn't even wish, to attain. As Gilles Deleuze polemically maintains, "Those who bear the negative know not what they do" (*Difference*, 55); in other words, whereas its proponents take the process of loss and mourning to be an ethical expropriation of the subject, for Deleuze this process is actually the assured movement of a resentful subjectivity. Those who tarry with the negative, he suggests, know all too well what they do: they know that totalization will fail, the subject will be frustrated,

promises will inexorably be broken. And it is precisely because of this *success*—because lack surreptitiously returns the horizon of wholeness to the subject—that ethics, like cultural and sexual difference, must be reinscribed outside the realm of loss, lack, or failure.⁶ It is, at least, in the name of such a project that this book will proceed.

Promises, Promises

Hegel, that great thinker of identity as lack, long ago ruined introductions for all of us: proper discourse, he insists in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, should do or perform something, not merely offer promises of work to come. As Hegel shows us, and a host of psychoanalytically inflected speech-act theory confirms, prefacing promises are invariably broken because the later materialization of the promised deed will always produce a remainder. The deed will always exceed (and thereby fall short of simply fulfilling) the original promise. In the prefatory promise, we confront yet again the excess-that-is-lack.

Of course, this creates a problem for me, insofar as I've already made a number of promises here: to thematize a relation with the other that does not merely return to the same, to discuss the general state of ethics and performative subjectivity in recent theoretical discourse, to work out a notion of difference as other than lack or failure of sameness. To take up these promises adequately, then, I will also have to proceed according to a different performative logic of the promise, one that does not merely return to the assured inevitability of the broken promise or the negative assurance of lack or slippage. To move beyond the assured negativity of failure, I will need to enact a logic of the promise that is not phrased in exclusively negative terms, a promise other than one that is constantly being broken.

That being the case, perhaps we can agree from the outset that promises can only be fulfilled or broken by other promises: acts call for other, future acts, not some state of plenitude or lack in which further acts would either be unnecessary or futile. Such a positive logic of the promise puts a sharper point on the sense of ethical response that permeates this text: throughout, I will argue not that response to alterity is called for(th) because subjects and the political spaces they inhabit are invariably incomplete, but rather that response is necessitated in and from a positive or "performative" logic of alterity. As Jacques Derrida writes, a promise "is a singular promise. Its per-

formance does not promise, literally, to *say* in the constative sense, but again to *do*. It promises another 'performative,' and the content of the promise is determined, like its form, by the possibility of that other" (*Truth*, 3). A response, Derrida argues, is always a "response in deed, at work rather in the series of strategic negotiations. . . . response does not respond to a problem or question, it responds to the other—for the other" ("At This Very Moment," 17). Response to the other, this book will argue, is finally about action, about producing deeds and negotiations, not about mourning for a loss or lack.

Of course, this architectonic of response invariably begs difficult questions concerning to whom or what one responds, and how one enacts that response. As Charles Altieri argues, perhaps such a "stance yields too quickly to the allure of an ungraspable otherness, without sufficiently elaborating possibilities for identification and judgment" (321 n). For Altieri, and a host of other critics, because "responsiveness per se does not show where responsibility lies in conflict situations" (220), such an ethics remains a contentless generality, without the political force to ensure respect for the other. Such responsibility remains an inevitably broken promise.

Altieri presents a serious challenge to a performative alterity politics of response, but I will try to take up both this *critique* and the *enactment* of responsibility in the performance of specific analyses. To take up these questions on a merely metatheoretical level would only serve to confirm Altieri's worst suspicions. Suffice it to say at this point, that there are good theoretical and political reasons *not* to restrict response from before the fact; there are, in other words, good reasons not to name or know beforehand those or that to which one owes ethical response, as I try to show in chapter 3, treating Burroughs and Levinas. Hopefully, the myriad and shifting subject matters of the following chapters will exemplify—though in chapter 5 that word itself becomes complicated in my treatment of ethics and exemplarity in Van Gogh and Warhol—the kind of response that is called for in and by our groundless postmodern landscape.

Rather than representing a bug in the programming, I take this text's multiple sites of intervention to be a positive, if not essential, feature of a performative ethics, which must embody a site-specific "drift" that is necessary to the outward, affirmative movement of responsibility. Specifically, chapter 1 introduces the notion of "performativity," heavily influenced by Judith Butler, that I will deploy throughout the book. Chapter 2 discusses Bakhtin's and Levinas's

differing understandings of dialogic ethics. Chapter 4 revisits the question of lack as ethical expropriation in Žižek, Butler, and Paul de Man, and chapter 6 performs a Deleuzian reading of race and ethical becoming-other in Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed. Chapter 7 focuses many of the book's energies and arguments through a performative diagnosis of a specific political subject position, the North American "angry white male." The conclusion revisits many of the themes of this introduction by taking up the question of ethical choice and the performative affirmation of alterity.

Certainly, these remain mere promises, but as Derrida reminds us, "a promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain 'spiritual' or 'abstract,' but to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, [and] organization" (*Specters*, 89). In the end, it is not a necessary failure or the resentment of a broken promise that drives alterity politics; rather, it is the positive promise and concretization of different actions, practices, and organizations that orient and give force to an alterity politics of response.