

Aion, Kronos and Kairos: On Judith Butler's Temporality

Kattis Honkanen

The problem of temporality has been central to critical theorists and has been theorized by many¹. Poststructuralist understandings of phenomena, such as sexuality, are broadly considered to be fundamentally historical. We seem to agree on an epistemology that states that all knowledge at any moment in history will have a history and therefore, will be located in time. What do the words 'history' and 'temporality' mean in these specific contexts? Are they part of some language game or do they refer to "an actual past"; to all the "real" events that took place "in the past"? When we talk about history, do we necessarily think of chronological time and memory? And does the question of how we experience time come to mind when we speak of temporality? How should we approach temporality and historicity and how are we to theorize the relationship between them? In this essay I will open up these questions by pointing out some aspects of how historicity, temporality and temporal expressions are used in Judith Butler's works.

¹ Elizabeth Grosz's books on Bergson, Darwin and other scholars of futurity (2004, 2005) are especially interesting feminist interventions in this field. Judith Halberstam develops ideas of Nietzschean forgetting in her forthcoming work. For postmodern problematizations of temporality see also Ermarth 1992 and Jenkins 2003, 1999. For an overview of theorizing queer temporality see Freeman 2007.

This essay is constructed around one main thesis: that the temporality of performativity is that of cairiological time. I trace the seeming paradox in Butler's historicism when the time of performativity is cairiological rather than chronological. In order to ground my position, I will first present a critical reading of Aion, Kronos and Kairos temporalities. The temporal structure of performativity casts a queer light on the place that is given to the historicity of meaning in theories of performativity.

Butler frequently uses temporal expressions such as "always already", "pre", "from the start", "before" and "in advance". Temporal expressions such as "always already" and "pre" are used as deconstructive tools by which ontological and metaphysical assumptions are questioned (Butler 1999, 189, 183, 142, 48; Butler 1995a, 42, 43, 46, 50). Temporality thus becomes a central element in Butler's argumentation whenever she questions "prediscursive" ideas, ideas that are supposedly natural, pre-cultural or ahistorical. She also uses temporal expressions, such as "from the start", "before" and "in advance", in order to deconstruct dichotomies such as nature/culture, and sex/gender and finally, also when she argues for a deconstructive political project instead of a foundational identity-based feminism that is projected into the future.

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It appears to me that postmodern linearity can be used positively for political purposes by rewriting the meanings invested in the concepts of temporality, chronological time, Aion, cairology and now-time. Although Butler's historicism is an essential part of her theory of materialization, I posit that a cairological conception of time is more compatible with her performative account of politics. In order to realize the possibilities offered by a rethinking of temporality we must conceptualize temporal concepts as discourses – sites for thinking and resistance. If chronological time is the time of the public sphere and history; Aion is the time of experience and personal transformation and the cairological time is the time of opportunity. Linearity is a nontemporal element that operates within all these temporal forms. Cairological time has the the political potential to revive the core element of poststructuralist philosophy – temporality – and its epistemology as non-developmental, non-successive and non-chronological. One such example could be Judith Butlers' conceptualization of gender:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time (Butler 1999, 22).

We can see here how time is in constant movement making it impossible for gender to become a temporally-fixed totality. The temporality of this kind of gender is necessarily very far away from developmental progressivity, despite incorporating elements of a temporal process.

History, temporality and now-time

History is useful by virtue of "its power to enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality", but this power is manifested more on its provision of "the form attached to events" than in the simple apprehension of the events themselves (Humbolt in White 1973, 180).

History is not easily banished from our repertoire of useful tools to think with (Felski 2000, 13).

These opening quotes suggest that history is something that we use and consume. We think with history and temporality² and we act according to our understanding of these phenomena. We seem to "know" that history is for real but we also seem to be able to "experience" temporality. Hence, historicity also has its affective side. There is something about historicity that we can "feel" and "sense". To experience time as past, present and future, rather than as a series of instants or now-points in which every now-point has the same weight or significance, is, according to Hayden White, to experience historical consciousness, *Geschichtlichkeit* (White 1987, 179). Martin Heidegger demonstrated that our understanding of the present is a kind of co-understanding of the past or the future (Chanter 2001, 100). Historical narrative can thus be thought of as another way of speaking about this fundamental temporal experience. In Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) the historicity of objects and of our very being is explained

² Historicity and temporality are not the same. They are intrinsically connected, though, and both aspects need to be considered separately to understand their effects on the way we think.

through temporality. The fact that we understand ourselves as historical and that we conceptualize the subject as profoundly historical is, according to Heidegger, based on temporality. The subject exists historically only because it is *temporal* in its very being (Heidegger 1962, 278, 428, 434). I find this argument convincing and therefore I will discuss both historical and temporal aspects of Butler's work. The various temporal forms, Kairos, Chronos and Aion become all the more important to discuss at length because these operate as grounds for historicity. The parallel reading of temporality and historicity also reveals the discrepancy between the cairological temporality of performativity and the historicity of Butler's epistemology in general.

The event

The notion of the event is central to politics but also to the writing of history. The immediacy of the event is connected to the temporal structure of now-time. Epistemologically speaking, now-time produces knowledge of presence, of things in the "here and now". Now-time makes phenomena present and "real" and is a key ingredient to the comprehension of history. Now-time also is vital for the subject's ontological constitution. The concept of now-time enables us to comprehend ourselves as being part of temporal movement. Such temporality also conditions the use of politics that involve "becoming visible": we become visible by placing ourselves in various temporal presents. Historicizing is a practice that uses the logics

of this fundamental temporal structure of linking 'nows'. Political subjects thus have a need to "fill" history with narrative. In a tautological turn, those narratives become intelligible by being "filled" with history.

We understand the event as point-like, as something that happens and passes away or as a thing that is yet to come. The western conceptualization of time has mainly been understood as abstract, linear time, which consists of a motion from the earlier to the later (Lindroos 1998, 12). Modern narrative shares a similar temporal structure of a beginning, middle and end. Under the dominant linear conception of time that consists of clear breaks, time is comprehensible as something that can be measured and counted. What is it that we measure when we measure or "count time"? According to Heidegger we count the nows. When time is understood as a flowing stream of nows we can count the nows and we comprehend them as linear. No matter how far we proceed in dividing it up, it is always a now (Heidegger 1962, 474–476). The now is such a basic element of temporality that without it, it would become something entirely different. Clock-time is derived from now-time, and if it were translated into the language of history it would be demarcated by series of events. According to Heidegger, time is understood as a succession of nows, as a flowing stream of nows, as the course of time. This sequence of nows is also understood to imply both sameness and continuity:

In every "now" is now; in every "now" it is already vanishing. In every "now" the "now" is now and therefore it constantly has

presence as *something selfsame*, even though in every “now” another may be vanishing as it comes along. Yet as *this* thing which changes, it simultaneously shows its own constant presence. (Heidegger 1962, 475.)

Time here carries the image of eternity: the sequence of nows is uninterrupted and has no gaps. I would guess that this basic structure of temporality also can be found operative in the movement of *differànce* and “becoming”. The continuity of time is indissolubly present-at-hand (Heidegger 1962, 475–476). Time as a sequence of nows is always already in the present now. This sequential idea of time as a stream of nows is a basic element in the chronologically ordered perspective of history as linear movement, as a temporal course (Lindroos 1998, 85). It is also notable how now-time is crucial in “making present”. Its ability to move constantly and eternally and still stay in the present is a fundamental and forceful paradoxical aspect of temporality. Epistemologically now-time is needed for phenomena to appear and to be perceivable as historical. The interminable succession of “nows” might even be seen to work against the transformative possibilities offered by a supposedly real movement from the present to the future or the past. What I would like to suggest here is that now-time is the mobile core of any temporality without which there would be no potential for chronology, experiential time, Aion or caiology. Linearity is made of now-time and conceptualised as this kind of temporal movement; there is of course nothing intrinsically negative or positive about it. There is nothing problematic with linearity as such and it should not be confused with progressivity,

teleology or causality.

Now-time shows itself in the process of repetition in Butler’s work. Iterability is a process characterized by temporal movement and central to performativity and to the possibility of subversion. One can of course ask whether Butler fixes now-time into a chronological order where the past is always present in the now or whether her historicity is just another mode of taking temporal movement into account.

Chronology

Chronological time also implies an idea of movement and transformation. What is peculiar to chronological movement in contrast to linearity is that the order of chronology cannot be reversed without losing the very meaning of the term. Within a chronological temporal structure the present is constantly in the process of becoming past and the future is seen either to lie ahead or to being in a process of entering the present. Chronological order involves an idea of the “before” of the present (the past), and the “after” of the present (the future). In contrast to chronological movement, simple linear succession would mean indistinguishable instants (Ricoeur 1985, 53). Chronology is understood as minutely empirical, where measurable “nows” follow one another. Conceived of as events, dates, or eras and periods of the past (the elements of history), chronology is the empirical material that historical narrative is built upon. Within historiography, now-time becomes a chronological order of events; the nows are understood

as “happening,” as those events on which the “real” in the writing of history is based.

Chronology is an objective, measurable time. Chronology is also understood as an order that exceeds individual existence. Chronology refers to the quantitative aspect of time (Lindroos 1998, 11–12). Chronological order is stronger than simple linear succession. Linear succession can change direction without losing its linear character. Linearity means “arranged in a line” and linearity thus remains more open to the necessities of particular arrangements than chronology. One can even think of multiple linearities simultaneously and reversals where the earlier turns into something later. Within chronology events have to follow one another in a particular order and move in one direction only. Chronology implies a more strict arrangement of events in the order that they supposedly “have occurred.”

A chronological order, when used in historical narratives, is causal – the first thing leads to the next and not the other way around. As an example of a chronological list, consider the following entries in *The Annals of Saint Gall*:³

709. *Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died.*

710. *Hard year and deficient in crops.*

711.

³ Monumenta Germaniae Historica contains this text. It is a list of events that occurred in Gaul. The writers are unknown (White 1987, 6–7).

712. *Flood everywhere.*

713.

714. *Pippin, mayor of the palace, died*

715. 716. 717.

718. *Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.*

....

(Quoted from White 1987, 6–7.)

Although the entries follow one another, there is no narrative involved, there is no need to narrate and further explain the events. It is as if chronology itself would suffice. What is important and central in this list is the sequence of years. The order itself is the narrative here (White 1987, 9) and the “intervals” between the earlier and the later can be measured. A linear arrangement does not necessitate causal succession between the arranged items or events. With linearity, there is no idea of measurement involved in this sense. Linear temporality seems to be a more flexible arrangement. You can even think of linearity in non-temporal terms, as spatial length, for example, or as a spatial nexus of various linear axes. I think it is fruitful to consider these possibilities for the purpose of deconstructing temporality. At times it is just assumed that ‘we’ all agree that linearity should be “broken” (Freeman 2007, 163). Postmodern linear time, a time that underlines the multiplicity and flexibility of linearity, may provide a better model for other kinds of mobility and transformation than chronology. By considering how a linear temporality would effect the historicity of critical theories, for instance

of performativity, we can rethink the meanings invested in their temporalities.

Cyclical time

The idea of cyclical time is perhaps the most familiar of the temporalities offered as an alternative to chronology.⁴ Cyclical time has been presented as somehow more “natural” or authentic. It is as if this conception of time adheres to the rhythm of days, months, and years but also to bodies. Feminism also presented it as a solution to the problems of “man-made” chronology or progressive time. It has since been coded as “feminine” and thus sexualized. However, the notion of cyclical time, so frequently mentioned in feminist texts, does not automatically escape the basic logic of succession and causality invested in chronology (Felski 2000, 20; Adam 1995, Forman & Sowton 1989). Furthermore, there is nothing inherently anti-linear in a cycle. If circular patterns are endorsed, these can still by definition be arranged linearly. Even in their circularity, events still happen one after another. One can also ask if it is possible to reverse the order in a cycle. It seems that a cycle makes the order of events even more necessary and unchangeable in its connection to “nature”. Instants or now-points follow one another in cyclical time but the openness of linearity is still confronted by circularity and perhaps even causality.

⁴ For a presentation of feminist accounts of cyclical/linear time, see Felski 2000 and Adam 1995.

Aion

Experiential time is often presented as the other of chronology, the public, shared and communitarian time. The experiential level of time has been used to argue against Chronos, the time of the public sphere and history (Lindroos 1998, Braidotti 2002, 162). The GLQ special issue on queer temporality presents an emphasis on experiential time. Many of the contributors theorize the possibility of queer temporality in relation to experience, sensation, and the “felt”. (See for instance Dinshaw et al 2007, 178, 179, 185; Freeman 2007, 159). Aion offers possibilities to break the progressivist narratives of chronological temporality. When the order of chronology is denied, its flow of time seems to stop and what is left is an experience of a continuous present and “an expanding of time”. Experiential, individual and intimate, the time of Aion, is “all here and now”. If chronological time is collectively measurable, the only way we can measure Aion is through an idea of individual experiential “duration”. Chronology is more tightly constituted through the idea of measurements that are indifferent to differences in individual durations.

We can think of experiential time as something that enables us to break the temporal distance that we have to the past. In Aion time, one makes connections to the past that alter the present. Having said this we should keep in mind that a foregrounding of a shared present is not easily compatible with an idea of historicist (chronologically) situated knowledge. If we proceed to situate and contextualize experience by using the language of history and Chronos,

by using the language of history and Chronos, then we use it as an explanatory context. We historicize experience instead of departing from its unproblematic existence. Accounts of women's history that were based on subjective experience has been severely criticized (Scott 1991). I still hold on to the idea that the temporal structure of Aion is specifically connected to experience and memory. Experience is a psychological structure that cannot be understood by simply proceeding to historicize accounts of experience. The processes of experience and memory rework events and allow for personal transformation. New hopes, fears, or expectations enter experiences and can alter the experience retrospectively. Experiences also overlap and influence the construction of each other (Kosselleck 1985, 272–275). As I argued earlier, chronology does not allow for such retrospective effects. Conceptualized as the time of experience, Aion is characterized by the fact that it is built on a fundamentally a-chronological temporal structure.

Kairos

The temporal structure of Kairos prioritizes the present. On the basis of Benjamin's work, Kia Lindroos (Lindroos 1998) has discussed the idea of cairological time and argued that it enables the creation of a space where it is possible to think beyond chronology and its simple temporal causation.

The cairologic approach neither searches for means of measuring or understanding movement through temporal continuity, nor at-

tempts to control the dynamics of time and action through freezing them. Instead, this approach emphasizes breaks, ruptures, non-synchronised moments and multiple temporal dimensions. (Lindroos 1998, 12.)

Cairological time highlights aspects of now-time and develops these into a politics of temporality. Kairos uses the character of immediacy embedded in our understanding of the present to argue for change and for a politics of opportunity. Cairological time is simultaneously continuous, yet consists of qualitatively different times. With a change of the conception of time from Chronos to Kairos, Lindroos attempts to create a shift from historical categories of thinking towards political categories of action in the now (Lindroos 1998, 13). I understand cairological time as a conception of time that stresses the uniqueness and singularity of moments. It is based on the simultaneous self-sameness and presence of the constantly moving “now”. Cairological time is the time of presence in its double meaning: Kairos is both present and presence. It is verb-like. Our ability to see cairological time is opened up when we break the chain of chronology and free “moments” from the hold of a particular order. From a political point of view, Benjamin's ideas are relevant in their attempt to problematize the way historicity is connected to politics. He replaces historical categories of rationality with political categories of action, enabling us to see that politics is not as historically determined as we might think. Rather, politics becomes an ethical demand to respond with action to the circumstances that we are thrown into in the everyday.

Iterability and Kairos

Iterability is central within performativity. Performativity operates through repetition and more precisely, through an iteration of discursive elements. Performativity is a continuous discursive practice where “marks” are taken up, cited and used. Performativity is a name given to the process that works the capacity of *differance*. Iterability is based on an idea of meaning as constantly shifting. Iterability involves a shift in meaning, which according to Derrida has a temporal dimension:

[T]he time and place of the other time already at work, altering from the start the start itself, the first time, the at once (Derrida 1988, 62).

Derrida claims that the first time of taking up the mark, of repeating its meaning, alters “the first” time. Iterability alters the start itself. What kind of temporality might this imply? To me it resembles the “now-time” that I described before. In now-time every now is in the process of becoming another now but still stays present and self-same. The “other time in the first time” might be read as a minute description of the temporality involved in an infinitely ongoing process, as a mechanism of meaning construction, as a linear time. Iterability can also be interpreted as an expanded present, as an idea that brings every meaning and “time” into the ongoing now, a now that does not have a meaningful “before”, since the other time is always “at once” with this time. This would be the time of Kairos.

Interestingly, in Greek mythology Kairos is the personi-

fication of opportunity. I find that there are obvious advantages to reading cairological opportunity as an aspect of performative politics. Cairological opportunity is the place for subversion within performativity. Subversion is cairological. According to Kia Lindroos (1998, 252) the qualitative aspects of time have not been sufficiently theorized in relation to politics. The discontinuity or deferral related to iterability and translated by Butler into a place for subversion also falls into the realm of Kairos. An emphasis on Kairos highlights breaks and ruptures, elements central to iterability and performativity. Kairos is “composed of” non-synchronized moments and multiple temporal dimensions (Lindroos 1998, 12) and, I would like to add that Kairos is “composed of” *differance*.

The idea of a historical convention that iterability would stem from becomes suspect from a cairological perspective. Cairology’s non-synchronized moments and multiple temporalities “at once” is congruent to the idea of performativity as a “discursive happening” – a happening that is both determined and non-foreseeable. In this sense, iterability can also be read as “performance” in general. A cairological reading of iterability would thus give a different perspective to theories aiming to combine performativity and performance (Kaskisaari 2003, 9).

Contingency, performativity and time

It is in eternity, which is supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, that you are at once before all past time and after all future time (Augustine).

“Contingency” is central to Judith Butler’s theories. The idea of contingency has both temporal and historical features, which are closely tied to politics. The word “contingency” is widely used in critical theorizing and its use and meanings vary. According to *Merriam-Webster’s English Dictionary*, contingency can be defined as an adjective, meaning:

1: likely but not certain to happen: possible. 2: not logically necessary; especially: Empirical. 3 a: happening by chance or unforeseen causes b: subject to chance or unseen effects: Unpredictable c: intended for use in circumstances not completely foreseen 4: dependent on or conditioned by something else 5: not necessitated: determined by free choice. (Webster’s gives contingency the synonym ‘Accidental’) (Merriam-Webster Online.)

In Butler’s texts there is the nuance of accident and chance in the meaning of contingency. Perhaps the centrality of “contingency” could be read as an attempt to break out of the temporal necessity invested in chronology. But does contingency manage to break the strong chronological order embedded in the historical “always already”⁵, the element so central to Butler’s argumentation? If meanings are always already historical and thus have a history, how might we understand the role of contingency, the non-determined and accidental? “Contingency” can of course also take the opposite meaning. It could serve to emphasize the fact that phenomena are constituted by

⁵ Ordinarily “always” means “at all times” and “already” means “before this time”. Following from this, “always already” would mean “at all times before this time”. Furthermore “already” connotes the past, whereas “always” is connected to ideas about the eternal or infinite.

historicity, that they are dependent on it and lead to a kind of historical determinism.

When something is thought of as constructed it is seen to have its moment of constitution. Epistemologically speaking, it becomes present on a now-point on the axis of temporal variation. It comes into being, it “begins” and because it never can be fully constituted, it is produced “time and again.” These moments of constitution are considered to be contingent, iterable and temporal points, event-like particulars and specific nows. If contingency is conceptualized as “dependent on” and “conditional”, then history becomes a foundational condition in Butler’s theory. Butler argues the following:

These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning. (Butler 1999, 177.)

This is an excellent example of the way in which Butler’s theory operates with multiple temporalities at once. On the one hand we have the history of gendered styles that condition and limit the possibilities to act. On the other hand we have gender as performative, highlighting the present-centeredness of the moment of action, the contingent and dramatic construction of meaning. Its moment is cairological. Out of this mixture of temporalities arises a politico-temporal paradox that Butler frames as follows:

Gender performativity involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose. This is, oddly enough, historical work, reworking the historicity of the signifier, and no recourse to quasi-transcendental selfhood and inflated concepts of History will help us in this most concrete and paradoxical of struggles. (Butler 1995b, 136.)

Gender performativity is a political practice that opposes a delimiting historicity of meaning. This struggle reworks pastness and the historicity of meaning. If we forget the multiplicity of temporalities here, we might be lead into reformism. Chronologically conceptualized performativity can lead to a reformism that is caught in the “in between” of historicity and language. We might hinder the movement of Kairos by constantly consulting historical narratives in order to pin-point our specific discursive location and the limitations that our struggle is set against. The paradox of performative politics stems, among other things, from the incompatibility of performativity with chronology.

Butler’s political agent is in the present tense, action-oriented, and definitively is its continuous series of deeds and movements. The possibility for political agency lies in this very presentist openness and temporal movement. If we conceptualize performativity chronologically it becomes strangely rigid. From a chronological point of view political agency would be experienced as political moments or events. The contingent foundations that a politics out of history relies on are drawn from empiricism and the constative nature of historical language. Historicized contingent foundations would rely on the

apparent materiality invested in a chronological notion of time. Rather than strengthening this hegemony of chronology and historicism I want to underline the presentism in Butler’s theory of performativity. This presentism seeks the potential for transformation in movement, in being in the midst of the “now” of discursive political sites, in being *in medias res* (Butler 1995b, 131). This is a politics that grows out of our involuntary involvement in ethical relations (Butler 2005, 100). A politics of chronology seems to need a before and a now to enable the political subject to project its politics into the future. The modern political subject uses the chronological before to legitimize and construct itself through its political intentions in the now. These intentions are translated into the language of political reason and projected into the future. In Butler’s frame, the norms of political life or of political sites become depoliticized if these are defined “in advance.” One needs to throw oneself in, *in medias res*, into the flow of history and meaning and rework oneself; that is to rework the pastness that one is constituted by (Butler 1995b, 131).

In this essay I have argued that Butler’s theory of performative politics is cairological rather than chronological. The presentism underlying her ideas concerning subversion and iterability is not compatible with chronology. The historicity of her theory exposes it to the problem of chronology. It might even be that the cairological opportunities that performativity and iterability offer get lost in a too strong reliance on (the) historicity (of language). A historicist theory that hides a chronological understanding of meaning inconveniently postpones the desired moment

of cairological politics. I have suggested what a rethinking of historicity might be that is instead based on a cairological conception of time. Theorizing and practicing this possibility will alter both the language of history and the idea of cairology as “non-historical.” The mobile core of the now-point with its paradoxical simultaneous self-sameness and transformation is a temporal force that can be deployed in various discourses and in both restrictive and subversive ways.

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