Spells and Hate Speech: Linguistic Violence and Vulnerability in the *Harry Potter* Series

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"Dumbledore is dead!" Voldemort hurled the words at Harry as though they would cause him unendurable pain.
—*Deathly Hallows* (p. 592)

1. Introduction

In "On Linguistic Injury," Judith Butler puts literary and linguistic theories of performativity into a political context.[1] Butler takes her terminology from J. L. Austin's seminal essay "Performative Utterances."[2] In that essay, Austin considers performative speech, which he describes as

> perfectly straightforward utterances, with ordinary verbs in the first person singular present indicative active, and yet we shall see at once that they couldn't possibly be true or false. Furthermore, if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something.[3]

From this basic definition Austin goes on to explain the rules that govern this particular use of words. Performativity relies on rules which include, but are not limited to: the existence and acceptance of a convention if the words rely on this convention to perform their action; the absence of "infelicities," such as insincerity in the speaker's intention; and understanding on the part of the

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[1] Judith Butler, "On Linguistic Injury," in Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-41.

[2] J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 233-92.

[3] Ibid., p. 235.

listener. Actions such as promising, marrying, and naming are all given as examples of how we use performative speech.

Butler develops and interrogates Austin's theories in much of her work, most famously in her account of gender as performative in *Gender Trouble*.[4] However, in "On Linguistic Injury" she focuses on the implications that performativity has for the mediation of race and gender discourses through hate speech and pornography. Butler finds Austin's theories to be crucial to debates on these matters as these are instances in which it is necessary to think of a form of "speech" as inseparable from conduct. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series we can see such concerns enacted through the novels' metaphor of "words as weapons." In the novels, the "as though" in the quotation that serves as the epigraph of this article is elided, and the books take the reader from the realm of analogy to that of metaphor. The scar on Harry's forehead becomes the physical signifier of the wounding power of words, a power that is literalized as the metaphor of magical injury throughout the books. This highlights what Butler refers to, following Austin, as the illocutionary function of words, which is an implied action or performance that the words carry with them. Butler writes:

> [L]inguistic injury acts like physical injury, but the use of the simile suggests that this is, after all, a comparison of unlike things . . . . Indeed it appears that there is no language specific to the problem of linguistic injury, which is, as it were, forced to draw its vocabulary from physical injury. In this sense, it appears that the metaphorical connection between physical and linguistic vulnerability is essential to the description of linguistic vulnerability itself.[5]

In literalizing these metaphors the novels show the powerful effects of linguistic vulnerability and linguistic injury, as well as the problematic relationship between them. The metaphor of "words that wound," that is, the metaphor of physical for linguistic injury, is, as Butler says, a comparison of unlike things. It is as though in order to discuss the effects of words we must use an intervening metaphor; we cannot talk about the pain of words in a direct fashion. The "essential" connection that Butler makes between physical and linguistic vulnerability becomes exposed in the *Harry Potter* novels and, so, can be discussed and challenged, albeit with the intervening distance of the metaphor.

In this article I will discuss how this connection between physical and linguistic vulnerability becomes exposed in the *Harry Potter* novels, first, through the power of naming and of linguistic communities, and then through the novels' depiction of hate speech as differentiated from spells. I will then

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[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[5] Butler, "On Linguistic Injury," p. 4.

discuss the power of citation to shape the future of linguistic communities, allowing the use of hate speech to be curtailed and changed. I will conclude by suggesting how Butler's analysis and Rowling's universe can be seen alongside each other to suggest a way of transcending the harm of wounding words while still functioning within the boundaries of language and its historicity.

2. Naming and Community

The *Harry Potter* books may appear morally simplistic as they ostensibly create a reductive dichotomy of good versus evil. However, in considering the socio-linguistic status of the characters in the novels—in particular, the novels' central doubling of Harry/Lord Voldemort—the moral boundaries are revealed as complex, built as they are on the power of language and naming. The power of naming is hugely significant in the novels, especially in *Philosopher's Stone*, in which Harry enters the Wizarding World for the first time, having been taken from it before he can remember and being "kept in the dark" (quite literally, in the cupboard under the stairs) by his muggle (or non-wizarding) uncle and aunt (Vernon and Petunia Dursley). On entering the wizarding community, Harry discovers not only a new set of allegiances, but also a new linguistic community that has constructed his identity wholly in his absence. Butler writes that "[o]ne may meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, even with shock."[6] Harry shows his distance from the socially constituted self to whom he has recently been introduced:

> "He *is*," said the first twin. "Aren't you?" he added to Harry.
> "What?" said Harry.
> "*Harry Potter*," chorused the twins.
> "Oh, him," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I am." (*PS* pp. 71-72)

The distance Harry feels toward his socially constituted self, shown by his reference to this construction in the third person, asserts his special status in the novel and draws attention to the way Harry has been constituted in language, outside of any linguistic community he might recognize.

Part of what binds the wizarding community together, both linguistically and in political allegiance, is the way its members refer to Harry's nemesis, Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is almost exclusively referred to as "You-Know-Who." The linguistic complicity suggested in this term—a term that binds the addresser to the addressee—strengthens the identification that the wizards feel toward each other and refers to their shared history, a history from which Harry has been excluded since his entry into language. He refers to Voldemort by his correct name:

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[6] Ibid., p. 31.

> "I didn't know anything about being a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort—"
> Ron gasped.
> "What?" said Harry.
> "*You said You-Know-Who's name*!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed, "I'd have thought you of all people—"
> "I'm not trying to be *brave* or anything, saying the name," said Harry, "I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean?" (*PS* p. 75)

Harry does not know the history of Voldemort's name nor his own history, and so he does not understand the power behind the name, the power that the other characters recognize and so try to displace by substituting Voldemort's name for the claim to solidarity signified in the term "You-Know-Who." We can see how the name has an injurious effect, to the point of an effect on the body through Ron Weasley's gasp, a physical sign that shows the direct connection between the word and the psychosomatic pain it causes. Butler writes:

> Clearly, injurious names have a history, one that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance, but not explicitly told. This is not simply a history of how they have been used . . . it is the way such histories are installed and arrested in and by the name. The name has, thus, a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name . . . a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force.[7]

Harry, as outside of that history, does not recognize the force of the name as the linguistic locus of the trauma associated with Voldemort's insidious reign. This period is figured in the novels as a social trauma on the level of an almost-Holocaust, which they understand and relive when the name Voldemort is used. Harry clearly realizes the importance of these linguistic bonds from which he has been excluded as we see him attempt to establish such a connection with Ron through the emphatic "See what I mean?"

Harry may be excluded from this community, as he was removed from it at the time of his parents' murder, when he was a one-year old and too young to remember. However, his entry into language is at the crux of the novels' treatment of what can simplistically be referred to as "good" and "evil." Butler describes the entry of the subject into language as "interpellation," heavily bound up with naming and the violence of survival and threatened death. This is exemplified through the history of Harry Potter, a subject who is brought into language by the threat of annihilation. Voldemort's Avada Kedavra, the most fatal curse known to wizards, brings

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[7] Ibid., p. 36.

Harry to language as he struggles for survival and overcomes certain death—he is forced to recognize himself as an individual, independent of his parents, through his orphanhood. The violence remains as a physical scar on his forehead, as through his naming Harry is injured:

> But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyse the one it hails, but it may produce an unexpected or enabling response.[8]

The Avada Kedavra curse is derived from the term "Abracadabra," a nonsense word used in magical performances. Perhaps not coincidentally, some claim that the origins of the word Abracadabra lie in the Aramaic phrase for "I create as I speak," giving it the implicit suggestion of performativity.[9] Significantly, Harry as a linguistic being is created in this act of destruction. The curse becomes Harry's induction into language and, just as Butler says, it fixes him; it gives him his identity as it marks him (physically and linguistically) as apart from other people, while at the same time producing the "enabling response" that allows Harry to stand as a beacon of power against Voldemort. The wizards refer to him afterwards as "the boy who lived." Rowling uses this as the title for the first chapter of *Philosopher's Stone*, obviously as a play on the traditional beginning of a children's story that uses the formula, "There once was a boy who lived . . . ." In this context, however, the phrase also takes on the suggestion of the phrase, "The boy who lived to tell the tale." Harry survives in spite of Voldemort's attempt to remove him from language altogether through his annihilation. We can therefore see Harry as a locus for the conflict between naming as injurious and naming as necessary to identity. The incident with Voldemort will shape the rest of Harry's life and defines his identity from the moment of his introduction into the Wizarding World. Butler writes:

> There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility that solicits existence, to that primary dependency on a language we never made in order to acquire a tentative ontological status.[10]

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[8] Ibid., p. 2.

[9] Some sources citing this etymology of the word "Abracadabra" are gathered in Craig Conley, *Magic Words: A Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2008), p. 66.

[10] Butler, "On Linguistic Injury," p. 26.

This dependency on language is described by Butler almost as original sin, as she refers to the subject constituted in language as "one afflicted with impurity from the start."[11] Like original sin, language is handed down through the generations with no choice on the part of children, such as Harry, who are brought into a linguistic system that they did not make. This is because language is citational; it relies on repetition to give it meaning and, as such, can never truly be original or specific to an individual. From Harry's entry into language he, like all of us, is dependent on that language and on the community with whom it is shared.

Harry shows that he has been constituted in language by Voldemort through his constant insecurity that he will become like Voldemort, or that Voldemort is connected with him in some deep and irreversible way. For this reason the books cannot be criticized for a reductive view of good and evil. Paradoxically, Voldemort has created Harry and made him who he is through the act of attempting to annihilate him. Significantly, this link is shown through the other language that Harry was introduced to by Voldemort, namely, Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes:

> "You can speak Parseltongue, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly, "because Lord Voldemort . . . can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his powers to you the night he gave you that scar." . . .
> "Voldemort put a bit of himself in *me*?" Harry said, thunderstruck. (*CoS* p. 245)

These close connections between Voldemort and Harry develop through the series and show how Harry's constitution in language and his identity are wrapped up in Voldemort's. The named and the one who gives the name are destined to exist together, both in mutual dependency and in opposition. The link between the entry into language and original sin is again brought to mind through the connection with the serpent image, and suggests that one is inevitably always-already tainted, as one is necessarily constituted in language and steeped in language's historicity from the time when one is able to seize some agency.

Voldemort, and the constitution of his name through the books, also provide a fascinating example of the power of naming. In *Chamber of Secrets*, Voldemort takes on the guise of Tom Marvolo Riddle, the boy he was when he was a student at Hogwarts, preserved through a magical diary. At the climax of the novel Riddle writes his name in the air with his wand, then rearranges the letters to reveal that his name is an anagram of I AM LORD VOLDEMORT. He explains:

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[11] Ibid., p. 28.

> "You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry—I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!" (*CoS* p. 231)

Voldemort here seems to suggest that he believes his agency in choosing his name is part of what gave him his power in the first place. In distancing himself from his questionable background, he creates a name that he must live up to and so prophecies his own destiny. Of course, the name Voldemort is not an original name lacking in historicity, just as the spells in the novels are not original creations. The ritual and citation needed to give words their power is present in all of the magical words in the novels. The name Voldemort is French for "flight of death," and the spells in the novel are simply Latinate approximations of the effects the spells produce. While Voldemort claims to have "fashioned [himself] a new name," he has in fact taken on an old name, using the power already instilled in the words before he uses them as a name for himself. He has not even escaped his specific origins, or what he sees as the shame of being half-muggle: his new name is still an anagram of the old, so he fails even in purging the history of his origins from his name. In believing he has created his name for himself Voldemort fails to acknowledge the power of language; he places himself above language. He may believe that in changing his name he is distancing himself from the father who abandoned him, but, even in that father's absence, he is still responsible for bringing Voldemort to language in the same way that Voldemort does for Harry. Voldemort's name is based on his father's; just as Harry is brought to language by his orphanhood, so Voldemort is brought to language by his father's abandonment. It is arguably Voldemort's mistaken belief in his sovereignty over language that leads him into the hubris that will enable his downfall.

3. Wounding Words

Voldemort's attitude toward his "foul, common Muggle" father is extended to all muggles and amounts to racism against the non-Wizarding World. This is a theme the books often return to, particularly through the term "Mudblood," a highly offensive word used to describe wizards or witches with muggle parents. This term again muddies the waters (so to speak) between what constitutes a spell or a curse and hate speech. When Draco Malfoy uses this word for the first time, toward Hermione Granger, Ron responds with an attempt to curse him. The fact that a curse which will have physical ramifications is considered an appropriate response to the insult, shows the force of the words and again highlights the similarities between spells and wounding words of the kind that are used in our world. The

situation is more interesting because although the word is directed at Hermione she, as a muggle-born, does not attach meaning to the word. Harry does not understand the word either, as a newcomer to the wizards' linguistic community:

> Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. (*CoS* p. 87)

> [Hermione] said, "But I don't know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course." (*CoS* p. 89)

Again, the importance of the linguistic community is shown through the exclusion not only of Harry, our narrative center in the story, but also the exclusion of the one at whom the word is aimed. Despite the fact that Hermione is the one insulted, the word still manages to cause distress to the others who overhear purely because of its invocation and the memories the word elicits. The word is divisive and affects the whole community, not just the one who says it and she at whom it is directed.

This incident could be seen as the beginning of Hermione's political awakening as she allies herself in the later novels with the cause of the house-elves who are kept in a position of slavery in wizarding society. In her efforts to have the house-elves' situation recognized, she takes the language surrounding house-elf oppression seriously:

> "We've been working like house-elves here!" [said Ron].
> Hermione raised her eyebrows.
> "It's just an expression," said Ron hastily. (*GoF* p. 197)

This solidarity deepens as the novels progress toward what seems to be a return to power for Voldemort. In a conversation with the goblin Griphook, Hermione's identification of the mudbloods as a social category, one in need of protection from persecution, aids the ability of the Wizarding World and the wider magical community to join forces in driving out Voldemort's fascist regime:

> "As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"
> "We do!" said Hermione. She had sat up straight, her eyes bright. "We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf, Griphook! I'm a Mudblood!"
> "Don't call yourself—" Ron muttered.
> "Why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "Mudblood, and proud of it! I've got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys'!"

> As she spoke, she pulled aside the neck of the dressing gown to reveal the thin cut Bellatrix had made, scarlet against her throat. (*DH* p. 395)

In appropriating the mudblood epithet as a social marker, Hermione aims to create her own community, centered around the word. Again, this is something that Voldemort fails to anticipate. In picking out various groups to target he inadvertently creates pockets of resistance based around his own categories—mudblood, goblin, house-elf—creating solidarity against his regime among various defined social groups.

4. Citation and Transcendence

In discussing this spectrum, between wounding words and words that actually constitute spells, it is useful to consider the most severe spells in Rowling's world, namely, the three Unforgivable Curses. These curses are the Avada Kedavra curse, which is fatal; the Cruciatus curse, which tortures its victim; and the Imperius curse, which controls the victim's actions. In *Goblet of Fire*, these curses are demonstrated to the students in class and the mere mention of them brings back trauma for both Neville Longbottom, whose parents were tortured to insanity with the Cruciatus curse, and of course Harry, whose parents were murdered with the Avada Kedavra curse that he himself survived. The "mentioning" of the curses in the classroom highlights the problems faced by bringing such painful terms into discourse outside of their original context:

> [I]n the political and social critique of such speech . . . 'mentioning' those very terms is crucial to the arguments at hand, and even in the legal call for censorship, in which the rhetoric that is deplored is invariably proliferated within the context of legal speech . . . . The critical and legal discourse of hate speech is itself a restaging of the performance of hate speech.[12]

Barty Crouch, Jr., in the guise of Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody, acknowledges these problems. He points out that there is no counter-curse to the Avada Kedavra curse, but still insists, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, *but you've got to know.* No point pretending . . ." (*GoF* p. 193). In his insistence he shows an awareness that there are problems with this "mentioning" of the hate speech, but he sees knowledge as the first step toward combating its effects.

However, the pain of "mentioning" is shown by the reactions of already experienced students in the classroom situation of Hogwarts, particularly Neville's reaction. As he sees the Cruciatus curse performed on a spider, he experiences a physical effect: "Neville's hands were clenched upon

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[12] Ibid., p. 14.

the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified" (*GoF* p. 190). This shows the problem with the "mentioning" of such terms, a problem Butler tries to tackle in her analysis. As she says, "there is no way to invoke examples of racist speech, for instance, in a classroom, without invoking the sensibility of racism, the trauma and, for some, the excitement."[13] Harry finds this to be the case at Hogwarts, as those students without personal experience of the curses fail to understand their significance from Moody's demonstration: "They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn't found it very entertaining" (*GoF* p. 192).

Significantly, these curses are punishable by life sentences in the wizarding prison of Azkaban and the other curses and spells are heavily regulated. These prohibitions open discussion of the importance of state intervention in censorship and protecting its citizens from linguistic injury. On this point Butler is ambivalent, as she associates a separation of speech from conduct with laissez-faire attitudes that allow cases of hate speech and linguistic injury to proliferate. However, there remain the aforementioned problems with the legal citation, or "mentioning," of such speech as a re-enactment of the original crime. The solution found to these issues in the *Harry Potter* series is similarly ambivalent. There is an argument made for the "mentioning" of such speech as a means of overcoming the power of a word. Dumbledore says, "Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself" (*PS* p. 216). This reflects one of Butler's conclusions that "the saying of the unspeakable become[s] part of the very 'offense' that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival."[14]

So, how do the texts suggest that this ostensible paradox can be escaped? If the naming of these wounding words re-enacts their trauma and their power, but is also necessary in breaking new ground for language and in creating a history for the word in which it can be appropriated, then what grounds can we find to help a community overcome linguistic injury? The *Harry Potter* books point to something anterior to language, finally finding refuge there from the extreme social trauma the books depict and from the "original sin" of induction into language. The reason given for Harry's survival of the Avada Kedavra curse is his mother's sacrifice; she died for her son and in doing so gave him the protection he needed to survive. Dumbledore explains to Harry, "of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped" (*DH* p. 568). In using this as an escape from the realms of magic, or

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[13] Ibid., p. 37.

[14] Ibid., p. 41.

of linguistic violence and vulnerability, it is finally suggested that that which is anterior to language, represented through the maternal body and the maternal connection, will conquer the violence of the law and language.

However, it is not enough to escape to the realms of non-language in search of a solution. Language, as tied up in the law and in how humans function as political and individual subjects, must be interrogated in order to find a way for the community practically to overcome linguistic injury. Butler states that her purpose in discussing linguistic injury is to attempt to recast injurious words in order to give them "affirmative modes." She writes, "by affirmative, I mean 'opening up the possibility of agency', where agency is not the restoration of a sovereign autonomy of speech, a replication of conventional notions of mastery."[15] The novels also find a response to this problem of language. Harry repeats his first encounter with Voldemort in *Deathly Hallows*, repeating his originary subordination. He survives the Avada Kedavra curse once again. In this repetition of what had been thought impossible, he creates a new citation with new possibilities and increases the community's hopes for linguistic survival, closely bound up with physical survival itself. In surviving an Unforgivable Curse for the second time he destabilizes the realms of possibility, questioning the social structures and hierarchies that had been taken as rigid. He creates a new pattern of survival, transforming the exception into a new rule. This offers new possibilities for the linguistic community and annihilates Voldemort, who relies on the now-defunct system for his power. In his victory Harry shows that "these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open."[16]

5. Conclusion

In considering the role of linguistic injury in the *Harry Potter* novels and, in particular, the role that Harry plays in disrupting the linguistic community of the Wizarding World, the reader can see that the novels are more morally ambiguous than they may appear at first sight. As I have shown, the mirroring of Harry and Lord Voldemort highlights the fact that they rely on each other for their existence: neither of them is purely evil, or innocent. There is also a disruption of what could be considered the Christian trajectory of the narrative. There may be a temptation to view Harry as a Christ figure, given that, in a sense, he "dies" for the sins of his community. However, while Harry does have to go through a kind of death in order to save the Wizarding World, his survival is not a singular event specific to him, it is not a "miracle"; it is the citational nature of his act, the fact that it is

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[15] Ibid., p. 15.

[16] Ibid., p. 38.

repeatable, that saves the Wizarding World. This is the true lesson of the series if any is to be found: that free will can change the very structure of the community for the better. As Dumbledore says, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*CoS* p. 245). This argument is consistent with the novels' rejection of racism and other forms of hate speech, as it suggests that the subject retains agency within a linguistic system—and, to retain this agency, the subject must have the power to bring about the system's alteration. Harry's original insistence that he is not innately special, despite his reputation in the Wizarding World, is proven to be true. Although he creates the citation, it is the repeatability of his survival, a repeatability that must extend to all other members of the community, that breaks the power of Voldemort's linguistic injury, creating space for the community to overcome the trauma of the past and to open a future where all members of the community have some agency.