

BUTLER'S ANTI-REALIST FEMINISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>Bodies That Matter</i> . Routledge, 1993.....	BTM
<i>Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?</i> Verso Books, 2016.....	FW
<i>Gender Trouble</i> . Routledge, 1990.....	GT

## Abstract

### BUTLER'S ANTI-REALIST FEMINISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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This thesis responds critically to Butler's anti-realist theory of gender, in which she claims to overturn the distinction between "sex" and "gender," and argues that "sex" is itself partly formed and shaped by its involvement in hegemonic discursive norms and practices. It does this in two parts, through a close reading and analysis of several key texts in Butler's *oeuvre*. In the first part, this thesis argues that Butler's denial of sex as an independently existing bodily reality is a product of her anti-realism, which results in a radical form of social constructionism that claims that both "sex" and "gender" are discursively constituted. The thesis looks at the considerations she uses to ground this position, and finds them to be wanting. In the place of this anti-realism, a form of critical realism is defended. In the second part of the thesis, Butler's anti-realism is connected to her theory of feminist political activism, and it is argued that several features of her preferred model of political resistance as the "subversive repetition" of cultural hegemony, a model in which the

influence of deconstruction is visible, are a direct consequence of her commitment to anti-realism. The thesis will argue, furthermore, that Butler's anti-realism has a negative effect on her political program overall, leaving her without the resources to provide full accounts of a number of concepts that are crucial for any contemporary form of critical feminist political activity, like "body" and "agency." And lastly, this thesis advocates a revised structural theory of gender as a new theoretical basis for contemporary political resistance, one which holds that "gender," along with race, class, and other social categories, is a set of micro-level and macro-level structures existing at the confluence of a number of interrelated and intersecting social and cultural factors, through which individual lives are constrained and enabled by various kinds of socially instituted and structured forces.

## Introduction

In a recent introduction to feminist philosophy, Alison Stone writes that this relatively new movement, which "arose in the early 1970s and has developed most strongly in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia," is responsible for introducing a number of terms, concepts, and problems into the wider field of philosophy (1). The problem of how to define and understand "woman" as a concept, "whether there is anything that all women . . . have in common and, if women are too diverse to have anything in common, what makes them all members of the kind or group," has been one of the most important of these (Stone 3). It has been important because, in both a historical and a contemporary context, feminism has often been understood as a movement for furthering the interests of women, and ending their subordination and oppression by men. If this is so, then finding a clear answer to the question what is a woman, and who does and does not count as a woman, becomes critical for refining and determining the goals and boundaries of feminism as a political movement by and for women. However, it has proven difficult to answer these questions without either lapsing into essentialism, in which it is argued that there are some necessary and sufficient features that all women have, or reductionism, in which it is argued that being a woman is a fixed and immutable part of one's personal identity. As Riley writes, "In general, which female persons under which circumstances will be heralded as "women"

often needs some effort of translation to follow: becoming or avoiding being named as a sexed creature is a restless business" (3). The difficulty involved in answering the question of women's identity quickly threatens to unravel the unity of feminism as a movement and political program, leaving us with something different and potentially less secure in its place.

The theoretical distinction between "sex" and "gender," where "sex" refers to the biological features of bodies, and "gender" refers to the social meanings and practices which sexed bodies take on, became popular among feminists after the 1970s, and it was introduced partly in the belief that it could help to resolve some of the problems surrounding women's identity. For those working with the sex-gender distinction, "woman" is a social category, referring to group of people bound together by living under a shared set of norms, laws, customs, and regimes that put them in a subordinate position. Rubin, for instance, writes of the "sex-gender system," defining it as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). This formulation had the advantage of combatting traditional ideas about women's "essence" or "nature" by drawing an analytical line between natural and social conditions, so that women's current state of inferiority or powerlessness could be explained as the result of social processes rather than as a reflection of their inborn nature.

However, the "sex-gender" distinction has not gone without criticism. Nicholson (81) holds that the contemporary conception of gender is a "coatrack" theory, in which gendered features, such as personality and behavior, are the result of socialization, and they



are thrown on top of a body which remains invariant across cultures. The view thus amounts to a form of "biological foundationalism," in which it is assumed that shared biological features form the ground for social differences in perceptions of sexed identities, but not a biological determinism, in which gender flows from sex directly. Nicholson observes that this allows feminists to combine similarity and difference, so that women can have different roles in different cultures depending on their gendered socialization, but there is a common bodily identity that grounds these differences. Nicholson suggests that this harms feminism by ignoring the social processes by which bodily features are identified and given importance, and that it leads to an "additive" conception of identity in which identity is nothing more than the sum of a collection of features, such as gender, race, class, and so on. Gatens (7-9) holds that distinguishing "sex" from "gender" leads us back into the dualism between mind and body, in which "gender" takes the role of an active mind or consciousness, while "sex" is modeled on a passive body. Thus, just as the conscious mind has the capacity to actively impose its thoughts and meanings on an inert body, so an active gender can write over a passive body. Gatens goes on to criticize this conception from a psychoanalytic point of view, suggesting that the "mind-body" dualism was shown to be untenable when Freud first observed the phenomenon of hysteria, which involves a transference of psychic symptoms onto the body, complicating the boundary between the two. Furthermore, Gatens observes that one cannot rigidly distinguish between the effects of social behavior and those of the body, because of "the obvious divergence between feminine behavior or experience that is lived out by a female subject and feminine behavior or experience that is lived out by a male subject (and vice versa with masculine

behavior)" (9). And finally, Moi (4-6) criticizes the "sex-gender" distinction, and its postmodern variants, for leaving us with an insufficient conception of subjectivity and the body. She claims that the concept of "sex" rapidly becomes almost empty, insofar as from it one is led to conclude that any body involved in social and cultural practices, or which takes on social meanings, becomes a product of gender rather than sex, so that sex is pushed further and further back, and we are left with an impoverished view of the body. To overcome this problem, Moi recommends that feminists return to the concept of the "lived body," that of a concrete, situated body inhabited by a subject, with determinate features and abilities, and faced by a combination of projects and constraints.

The most widely known criticism of the "sex-gender" distinction, and its solution to the identity of "woman," is undoubtedly that presented by Butler. In her first several books, Butler scrutinizes not only the distinction between sex and gender, but all forms of feminism that rest on the belief in the identity of "women," or the existence of a group of subjects who are unified by some essential feature. She observes that, though the sex-gender distinction returns the focus to social structures, it still leaves our belief in the existence of bodies with naturally "sexed" features intact. But she asks, "Can we refer to a "given" sex or a "given" gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is "sex" anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such "facts" for us?" (GT 9). The point of these rhetorical questions is to draw attention to the discourses through which the "given" features of the body become knowable by us, and so to show that our "sex" is as much of a discursive construction as

gender. She writes, "If the immutable character of sex is contested, then perhaps this construct called "sex" was always-already gender, and the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (GT 9-10) In turn, Butler herself advances a new theory for understanding gender, in which it is not a set of traits or roles imposed on a "given," sexed body, but it is rather part of a process of instituting and reiterating norms that is itself responsible for the formation and constitution of bodies.

In this thesis, I will respond critically to Butler's deconstruction of the sex-gender distinction, and her redefinition of women's identity. To do this, I will do a close reading of several of Butler's first books to identify the claims which she uses to defend her anti-realist view of sex. I will hold that Butler does not succeed in proving the generalized form of social constructionism which she defends, in which not only gender but also sex is discursively constituted, and that a critical form of realism and naturalism about sex and gender is a stronger position. However, Butler's anti-realism is closely connected to her broader political program, and in the second half of the thesis I will hold that Butler's metaphysical views harm her views of the body, agency, and political resistance, on which feminist political activity rest. In the next several paragraphs, I will give a more in-depth summary of the contents of the thesis to come, presented section by section.

First, I will review and summarize Butler's views on the meaning of "woman" and the sex-gender distinction in her first several books. I will consider Butler's criticisms of some of the conventional assumptions within feminist theory, such as the belief in "woman" as the unified subject category of feminism and the distinction between "sex" and "gender," including her claim that sex is always-already gender. I will characterize her

view as a radical form of social constructionism. I will also review Butler's alternative model of gender as performativity, in which gender is conceived as the cumulative result of a reiterated series of gestures, movements, and enactments. From this there follows her model of political resistance to norm-governed behaviors as a form of subversive repetition, in which the normative resources of compulsory heterosexuality are taken up and repeated in a manner which diverges from their original direction and intent.

In the second section, I will review what I take to be Butler's three main arguments for her anti-realism and anti-naturalism in detail. The first argument holds that, in her words, reference to extra-discursive reality is impossible, insofar as the boundaries of our reference delimit the world and thus come to partially constitute it. In the second argument, Butler draws attention to the constitutive and formative influence of discursive practices on bodies and bodily comportment, holding that both sex and gender identity are in fact the result of discursive activity. And in the third argument, Butler draws attention to the ways in which supposedly "neutral" scientific portrayals of sexual characteristics are, in fact, influenced or overdetermined by the terms, concepts, and logic of compulsory heterosexuality. I will respond critically to all three of these arguments, and defend a critical form of realism which has room for processes of social construction.

However, Butler's claims about the "metaphysics" of sex and gender cannot be separated from her overarching political purpose, which is to write about the oppressive and violent conditions under which sexed and gendered minorities live, and to give them resources for political resistance. So third, I will try to show that Butler's metaphysical views harm the effectiveness of her political project in a number of ways. First, I will hold

that Butler's views do not give her room for an ontologically and empirically rich grasp of "nature," such as her belief in a discursively determined reality into which "nature" is always-already folded. Second, I will argue that Butler's view of the body as social and discursive construction risks leaving feminists with an impoverished view of embodiment, including the body as a felt, lived reality. Third, I will argue that Butler's view of agency is also insufficient, insofar as she denies the existence of a "doer behind the deed," and does not provide an adequate alternative account of how political agency and active resistance are possible. This is not because, as some critics have held, Butler's view is either overly "voluntarist" or "determinist," but because the question of agency is effectively bypassed in her work. And finally, I will argue that Butler's view of resistance as a form of "subversive repetition" puts significant restrictions on any kind of liberatory politics. The strongest restrictions that Butler puts on political resistance come from her deconstructionist commitments, from which it follows that the gendered identities of compulsory heterosexuality can be destabilized from within, but never overcome or transcended completely.

In the fourth section, I will offer an alternative theoretical account of gender, and the relation between "gender" and "sex," that preserves the advantages and overcomes the disadvantages of Butler's position, and draws on insights from the work of Young. Young (*Throwing* 18) criticizes the universality of the term "gender" within current feminist theory. Her position is that "gender" is not a useful term for describing women's subjectivity and experience, insofar as "gender" is a general category, and it is not clear how gender combines with the other features of a person's identity to form an individual;

in place of gender, she prefers the conception of the "lived body," taken from existential phenomenology, where personhood is conceived in particular and determinate terms. However, she claims that "gender" is a useful concept for the analysis of the social structures, rules, and norms in which women live and through which they act. I will agree with Young that existential phenomenology provides a number of important terms, concepts, and methods for the description of individual experience, and that it provides a deeply powerful account of the body and agency. However, I will argue that gender is still a critically important concept for this kind of phenomenological analysis, acting as a bridge between the study of public structures of social life and the study of private experiences, insofar as gender is one mode through which the individual is constituted as a social being.

This thesis also differs from Butler's approach in its broader strategy. In a deconstructionist vein, Butler seeks to undermine oppressive normative regimes, like that of compulsory heterosexuality, by subverting them from within, following their own logic to a point of internal rupture or discontinuity. In this respect, Butler affirms that the conceptual and logical resources of compulsory heterosexuality are the only ones available in which to articulate claims about gender identity, and strongly criticizes versions of feminist politics which seek either to return to a notion of female identity "before the law" or in a utopian future. As she writes, "limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse" (GT 12). In this thesis, I will recommend another way forward. I will hold, instead, that the task of feminist theory must involve moving beyond the restrictive concepts and dichotomies that have traditionally structured discourse about women's lives and grounded their oppression, and searching for new terms, concepts, and theories that

can do justice to them. Butler is correct to point out that feminist theorizing can only take place in a determinate social and discursive context, and that political resistance can only be advanced from a site located within present society, but to recognize the situatedness of both discourse and political activity does not require bowing to the limits of a hegemonic and oppressive *status quo*, either in whole or in part. This is because feminist revolution only begins from the present, but by no means ends there, because knowing that human activity occurs in and through social discourse does not determine *which* discourse we will choose to define us. It is only with this realization that the study of gendered social structures and practices can get over the "playfulness" of an ultimately impotent deconstructive critique, and come into its own as the radical historical labor of rebuilding the world from the ground up, constructing new concepts, new theories, and new practices for an open plurality of ways of being.

## Section 1

Butler's work has had an immense influence on feminist thought, queer theory, and philosophy, and has had a wide reception in both the academic world and popular culture. The author of one popular introduction to Butler's thought observes that her work became widely known at a historical moment when a number of popular movements for social recognition, including the radical feminist movement and the gay rights movement, were being forced to think critically about the problem of "identity" (Lloyd 4-7). The feminist movement, for instance, had come to be seen by some as a social movement for advancing the ideals of middle-class white women, while ignoring and marginalizing the needs of black women, other minority women, and lesbian women; the ideas of what it is to be a "woman" promulgated by feminists were not universally valid, but rather applied to the lives of a specific subset of "women" only. Butler's theoretical work offered an alternative way forward for some of these groups, harshly criticizing the belief in the category of "identity," and suggesting a form of political resistance that did not rely on the existence of identity or a special class of subjects. In this section, I will present a summary of Butler's criticisms of certain dogmas in contemporary feminism, as well as an outline of her own positive view of gender. First, I will review Butler's criticisms of the distinction between "sex" and "gender," and with it the belief in "identity," and her claim that "sex" is itself only a form of gender. Then, I will turn to Butler's alternative model of gender identity,



one which sees gender embodied in the social and discursive norms of a given regime, and gender identity as the effect of the ongoing uptake of these norms by conforming subjects. Lastly, I will show how this reiterative model of gender norms presents a novel account of how political rebellion and resistance are possible, through a form of "parody."

Butler intervenes critically into the contemporary state of feminist theory, calling into question a number of its most common presumptions and goals. First, Butler questions the centrality of the category "women" in feminist theory, observing that it is usually assumed that feminism exists for and is produced by women, and that one of its goals is to improve the representation of women. However, she observes that the unity and stability of this category has come into question, with the recognition that feminism has often mistaken the interests of white, middle-class feminists for those of women as a whole. It also assumes that the subjects known as "women" exist before and outside of their representation, so that representation is only extended to them; however, Butler observes that the criteria for being a subject are set up within the domain of representation itself, and that such regulative and exclusionary practices have a role in the production of subjects. She writes, "But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures (GT 3). Furthermore, she holds that the category of "identity" is a throwback to the paradigm of the metaphysics of substance, which presumes that entities are individuated by enduring substrates which take on and lose accidental features over time. If this framework is extended to persons, there comes the thought that persons are defined by a pre-social, pre-discursive self or *cogito* which endures through time. Butler writes,

"The unproblematic claim to "be" a woman and "be" heterosexual would be symptomatic of that metaphysics of gender substances. In the case of both "men" and "women," this claim tends to subordinate the notion of gender under that of identity and lead to the conclusion that a person is a gender and is one in virtue of his or her sex" (GT 30).

Butler contests the distinction between sex and gender which has become common in much feminist theory, where "sex" refers to biological features of bodies, and "gender" refers to the social meanings given to sexed bodies. She observes that if gender really is distinct from sex, and sexed bodies are given while genders are constructed, then there is no reason why the "feminine" gender can only be connected with "female" bodies, and the "masculine" gender can only be connected with "male" bodies, or why there should only be two genders. However, she goes further than this. Butler asks whether we can "refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is 'sex' anyway?" (GT 9). The point of these questions is to put into question the "givenness" of sex by refocusing attention on the discursive and social processes by which the categories of "sex" are constructed or produced. "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (GT 9-10). Thus, Butler seeks to subsume "sex" within "gender" by holding that sex is discursively produced by the same means as gender, undermining the distinction between "sex" as natural and given and gender as socially constructed. What precisely this claim implies will be considered later on. More specifically, Butler conceives of the dominant norms of gender

as those of compulsory heterosexuality, in which there is a linear relationship among sex, gender, and desire. The matrix of compulsory heterosexuality presumes that bodies are divided into two binary sexes, "male" and "female," and that two genders, masculine and feminine, reflect these two sexed body types. Furthermore, heterosexual desire is a reflection of gender, so that each gender is sexually oriented toward individuals of the opposite gender, and, by extension, body type. It follows that under compulsory heterosexuality, non-conforming bodies, such as those of intersex people, non-conforming genders, such as queer genders, and non-conforming sexual orientations, such as those of gay and lesbian people, are rendered either invisible or unintelligible, treated as perversions of a given, natural order.

In response to this dilemma, Butler recommends a new theory of gender, in which gender is no longer secondary to a sexed body, but replaces the theory of gender which stems from compulsory heterosexuality with one which treats gender as performative. The concept "performativity" in this context has a definite theoretical sense, and does not refer to "performance" in the sense of a fictional rendering of a role, as in an actor's performance. In this context, a "performative" act is understood like a performative speech act, as defined in the speech act theory pioneered by Austin, where a performative is a sentence which does not say something about the world, such as "The black cat is on the mat," but rather does what it says, and thereby is this doing. A few illustrations of this kind of sentence include, "I bet you a hundred dollars," "I swear to tell the truth," or "I promise I will meet you there"; these sentences do not indicate a fact about the world, but make what it is they say the case by doing it. This line of thought was taken up again by Derrida in his

"Signature Event Context," in which he observes that all such speech acts necessarily invoke and derive their force from already existing norms, customs, and conventions (1-24). Thus, by way of illustration, in a marriage ceremony in which a pastor says, "I pronounce you husband and wife," their sentence only has force due to the existence of a number of determinate preconditions, such as his official status as a member of the church, correct dress, a planned meeting and ceremony, and the traditional authority of the church to bring people together in spiritual union. In this way, Derrida holds that linguistic acts always have an "iterative" structure, drawing on, quoting, and reiterating existing norms and conventions to have an effect.

Thus, Butler holds that gender is discursively constructed insofar as it is performative, writing that

"acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (GT 185).

In this theoretical reformulation of gender, Butler resolves three problems all at once. The problem of the identity of woman is revealed to be only the effect of a certain universalizing normative regime that produces the illusion of an underlying core of bodily and gender identity. The distinction between "sex" and "gender," formerly conceived of as oppositional terms, evaporates, with the recognition that the notion of an "essence" of sexed

bodily identity before or outside of discourse is itself an illusory effect of a certain form of discursive activity. And third, the constructed status of the body is understood with the recognition that the supposedly fixed and natural identity and tendencies of the body are only solidified through a process of behaviorally repeating normative practices. Butler thus identifies the construction of social identities as an open-ended process, which involves any number of disruptions between and within lives, and always involves the possibility of novelty.

It is on the basis of her theory of gender as a ritualized repetition of norms that she derives a new model for political and social resistance to the discursive. The "law" which governs the formation of identities does not hold once and for all, but rather only gains its legitimacy and its continued existence through its continuous reiteration in normative practices, so that its force is precisely that of enforced repetition. However, this process of repetition, occurring over time, opens up contingent opportunities for the revision and diversion of the law from its original source and intention, generating new identity formations that complicate and break down the boundaries between sanctioned and unsanctioned bodies, practices, and desires. Butler writes that as an effect "of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such construction, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (BTM xix). Butler often refers to drag as an illustration of how identities can be taken up in a subversive way, holding that by combining gender identities with bodies that do not normally exist together, drag

"denaturalizes" heterosexual roles, showing that bodies, personalities, and desires, exist in no necessary or fixed relation to one another. This is a form of parody, but a parody which is directed toward the very concept of an original, showing the belief in its "given" status to be an illusion. I will return in the third section to the problems raised by Butler's model of social resistance, but in the next section I will turn to a critique of Butler's theoretical arguments for anti-realism.

## Section 2

In this section, I will review and respond critically to what I take to be Butler's main arguments for her anti-realism and anti-naturalism about "sex," which are as follows. First, Butler holds that it is impossible for us to think about or refer to a non-discursive reality, insofar as our thought or reference itself necessarily includes this reality within the discursive realm. Second, Butler argues that what is "real" is thoroughly formed, shaped, and delineated by our discursive practices, so that what we naively believe to be "pre-discursive," "pre-given," or "non-discursive" is produced by discourse, and so that "sex" is not "unconstructed." Third, Butler brings into question the "neutrality" and "objectivity" of scientific discourse about sex, claiming that it is not a set of neutral descriptions of how our bodies are but also relies on the norms of compulsory heterosexuality for its intelligibility; it follows from this that there is no strict division between "facts" and "norms," in this case facts about sex and the norms of gender, so that the distinction between sex and gender dissolves once again. I will consider each of these claims in turn, and hold that none of them are successful in proving an anti-realist viewpoint, and I will conclude by briefly recommending a form of "critical realism" as a more plausible and viable stance for feminist theory. By calling Butler an "anti-realist" I do not mean to suggest that for her gender identities are illusions or in some sense "unreal." By "realism" I mean the theoretical view that there is an independently existing reality, and that we can either

think or know about this reality; in turn, by "anti-realism," I mean the position that we cannot think or know about the real as it is in itself, but only as it is for us, as in the context of discourse.

Butler, to reiterate, criticizes the distinction between sex and gender used by many feminists, in which "sex" is a given reality of the body, while "gender" is the set of social meanings and practices assumed by sexed bodies. For Butler then, because "sex" as a pre-given, pre-discursive feature of the world is only knowable by us within a discursive and social context, and the positing of this "sex" can only be done retrospectively from within the terms of a dominant discourse, "sex" is as much of a social construction as "gender." The following two passages will serve to greatly clarify the details of Butler's argument.

"To concede the undeniability to "sex" or its "materiality" is always to concede some version of "sex," some of "materiality" . . . . To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exclusively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity for reference to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of referentiality is altered" (BTM xix).

"Indeed, to "refer" naively or directly to such an extra-discursive object will always require the prior delimitation of the extra-discursive. And insofar as the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself. This delimitation . . . marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer" (BTM xx).

What is going on in these passages? Here, Butler is bringing into question the view of reference as a relation between two entirely distinct and separate realms, one within discourse and one outside of discourse. Butler holds that whenever we "refer," we



inevitably refer to something or other, so that in choosing the boundaries of our reference we are forming and delineating what is referred to. For Butler, then, there can be no reference to a "pure" extra-discursive reality, because by forming and shaping what is referred to this reality is folded back into the discursive, or rather in recognizing this we realize that it was discursive all along. It is important to note that Butler's claim is that it is precisely what is seemingly extra-discursive that is delimited and formed through discourse, and that the "stuff" of the extra-discursive thing is determined by what is included in our reference to it, so that there is no boundary between the discursive and the extra-discursive. However, this does not mean that there is nothing "outside" of discourse for Butler, and much of the focus of her work is directed toward the understanding of this very "outside." But it is a different kind of outside, as she writes, "as a constitutive "outside," it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders" (BTM xvii). This constitutive outside is nothing other than the domain of abjected, rejected, and devalued bodies that lie on the borders of social intelligibility and recognition, and live in a position of permanent precarity and vulnerability.

However, this line of thought relies on a fallacious inference, which is pointed out by Haslanger (119-122). Haslanger observes that the claim, "We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that the things we refer to have the boundaries they do," can be read in two ways. On one reading, it should be understood as, "We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that *the boundaries of our reference*, i.e. our referents *qua* things referred to, are what they are," which is an uncontroversial point. On

the other reading, it is understood as, "We make it the case (through our discursive practices, etc.) that *the boundaries of objects we refer to*, i.e. our referents *qua* individuals, are what they are," which is a much more controversial claim (121). In holding that reference to an extra-discursive reality forms or shapes the boundaries of that reality, Butler moves without argument from the first meaning of "boundaries of our reference," i.e. the scope of what is and is not referred to, to the second meaning, i.e. the boundaries of the physical entities being indicated. This rhetorical shift can be seen in the transition from the claim that "to "refer" naively or directly to such an extra-discursive object will always require the prior delimitation of the extra-discursive," which reflects the first reading of "the boundaries of our reference" *qua* what is and is not referred to in an act of speech or writing, to the claim in the next sentence that "insofar as the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself," which reflects the second reading of "the boundaries of our reference" *qua* the physical and spatial limits of the objects being talked about. It is, of course, true that to refer to any particular thing one must refer to *that* and only that thing, so that the act of reference is limited, but this does not license the further inference that the discursive act of reference itself shapes the things to which it refers. I am able to look out of my window and think, "I see a pot of pansies by the side of the house"; in doing so, I do *not* refer to the geraniums, or lantana, or begonias, or indeed any of the other manifold of objects in front of me, and so my act of reference is limited, but by fixing the boundaries of my reference to the pansies and them only I do not thereby physically shape or change the boundaries of the flowers in any way. In other words, Butler's inference rests on a subtle but mistaken slide from the first to the second

understanding of referent, moving from the claim that our discourse gives our reference boundaries, to the claim that our discourse does not and cannot refer to a purely non-discursive reality, or rather that there is no hard line between the discursive and the non-discursive, foreclosing by fiat the possibility of objects which we can think about or to which we can refer without having a direct effect on them.

Butler commits a similar fallacy in a discussion of Freud, concerning the distinction between the body *qua* physical organism and the body *qua* idea. Butler writes, "... it would not be possible to speak about a body part that precedes and gives rise to an idea, for it is the idea that emerges simultaneously with the phenomenologically accessible body, indeed, that guarantees its accessibility" (BTM 30). In other words, because there is no distinction between the body *qua* idea and the body *qua* individual to be found in our consciousness, there is no accessible body which exists entirely distinct from our idea of it. However, this inference ignores the very distinction it is trying to disprove; it is of course true that one cannot have an idea of the body without having an idea of it, but it does not follow from this that the body as conceived cannot exist without our idea of it, or that we cannot have an idea of the body as it exists separate from our thoughts. Butler infers from the premise that one cannot have an idea of the body without having an idea of it, or rather our mental access to the body coincides with this idea of it, to the conclusion that one cannot have mental access to a body which is not partially constituted via that idea. However, this inference, the goal of which is to remove the distinction between the two senses of "body," "body" as physical thing and "body" as idea, only works by eliding these two very senses; in the premise, "body" is used in the first sense, while in the conclusion

"body" is used in the second sense. To do this is to negate the conceptual distinction between epistemic access and ontic constitution.

This point can be made even more clearly by turning to Berkeley's so-called "strong correlationism" and one of the most compelling criticisms of his "master argument." The term "correlationism," introduced by Meillassoux, is "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5). The thesis of correlationism is that we are, in one way or another, cut off from the absolute, or the in-itself; we only have access to reality as it is for us. Furthermore, Meillassoux holds that the foremost architect of modern correlationism was Kant, who forbade knowledge of things in themselves, and restricted our knowledge to appearances constructed under the transcendental *a priori* forms of intuition. The absolute, the in itself, and the "outside" are forever cut off from us insofar as the subject and object can only be considered in their relation to each other. However, on the other hand, the subject, as the occupant of the "inside" of thought, cannot be understood apart from its constitutive relation to a certain "outside," the other term of the correlation. Meillassoux writes, "But if this outside seems to us to be a cloistered outside, an outside in which one may legitimately feel incarcerated, this is because in actuality such an outside is entirely relative, since it is—and this is precisely the point—relative to us. (7). It is clear from this that Butler counts as a correlationist, insofar as the very theme of her project is to deny us any reference to or knowledge of the outside of discourse. But what kind of correlationist is she? Meillassoux identifies two forms of correlationism that are dominant in historical and contemporary philosophical practice. The "weak" form of correlationism,

which is to be identified with Kant, holds that there is *some* relation between thought and being in itself, because Kant prohibits "any knowledge of the thing-in-itself . . . but maintains the thinkability of the in-itself" (35). The "strong" form of correlationism, which Meillassoux identifies with the thought of Berkeley and Fichte, holds "not only that it is illegitimate to claim that we can *know* the in-itself, but *also* that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least *think* it" (35). It is strong correlationism that Meillassoux concerns himself with in his text, and it is to this form of correlationism that I now likewise turn. The clearest statement of strong correlationism is embodied in Berkeley's "master argument," which serves as the most important and seemingly conclusive motivation for his subjective idealism. Berkeley writes,

"it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind; to make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived and unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas" (22-23).

The form of Berkeley's argument is as follows. Berkeley begins with the premise that "It is impossible to conceive or perceive something without conceiving or perceiving it," and from this infers the conclusion that "It is impossible to conceive or perceive something which is not a concept or perception." First, this inference could not be right because one cannot get from a tautological premise to a non-tautological conclusion (Brassier 57). What is going on here? The confusion is that Berkeley is equivocating between two senses of the word *things*; things as conceived or perceived, and things in

themselves (physical beings). As Brassier notes, "it is only by substituting 'things' in the first and tautological sense of *ideata* for 'things' in the second and non-tautological sense of physical objects that Berkeley is able to dismiss as a 'manifest absurdity' the realist claim that it is possible to conceive of (physical things) existing unperceived or unthought" (57). In other words, in the premise, "things" refers to things in the second sense, but to get from this to the conclusion, one has to substitute things in the first sense, things as *ideata*. Berkeley cannot get his argument off the ground without *assuming* that physical things are nothing other than things *qua* perceived or conceived, the very conclusion which his argument was intended to prove, thus begging the question. It is clear that Butler's fallacy has a similar form. In several contexts, she seeks to move from the premise that we cannot think, refer to, or have discourse about something without thinking, referring to it, or having discourse about it, to the conclusion that we cannot access things that are not constituted through our thought or discourse. In all of these cases, the inference relies on a slide from a non-discursive reading of "things" to a discursive one.

The second argument Butler brings to bear against realism about sex turns on the definition of "social construction." In one sense of social construction, a thing counts as "constructed" if it is defined as being in the social world; thus, governments, laws, institutions, and sports are all socially constructed because they exist in and through social relations of different kinds. However, for something to be "constructed" can also mean that it was produced, formed, or shaped, so that for a thing to be socially constructed it must have been produced as a result of social relations; for example, buildings, roads, bridges, and commodities are all socially constructed in this sense. The difference between these

two senses of "social construction" can be made more clear through the example of "weight." In many modern societies, weight has great significance for perceptions of beauty in both sexes, so that individuals who are seen as either too thin or too heavy are viewed as unattractive, and there is pressure to conform with certain model body types. The norms and customs surrounding "weight," such as those concerning how it is measured, depicted, and judged, are all social constructions in the sense that they are constitutively social. However, weight is also partly socially constructed in the sense that both the weight of individuals and the mean weight of populations is to a large degree influenced by social processes, including the preparation, production, and consumption of food. It must be noted that weight is not only the result of social factors, but also depends on a variety of biological constraints and inputs; there is a relatively determinate range of possible weights that a mature human body can have for an extended period of time, and the conversion of food into bodily matter is a biological process. Thus, for a complex occurrence like "weight," it is often necessary to invoke instances of social construction in both senses. Butler often writes as if she has this second definition of "construction" in mind, as when she holds that construction, "not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process, which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration" (BTM xix). Thus, if the distinction between "sex" and "gender" is put forward on the basis that "sex" is an intrinsic feature of bodies while "gender" is a produced social construction, Butler could be read as bringing this distinction into question by holding that "sex" is also produced as a result of social processes, so that sex and gender would be on a par.

However, there are several problems with this line of criticism. The first is with the redefinition of the "materiality" of sex. For Butler, "sexed" bodies are not material in the sense of being inert and fixed substances with intrinsic properties; instead the bodies we consider to be "material" are the results of an ongoing, repeated process of formation, in which "sex" as a regulative ideal becomes enacted in normative practices that have the effect of producing bodies, so that their "fixed" status is only a contingent feature of material bodies insofar as they have been formed within a closely regulated, hegemonic discursive regime. Furthermore, this redefinition of "materiality" is presented as a response to classical doctrines on matter and form, suggesting that it is not only meant to apply to "sexed" bodies, but to be a general theory of "materiality" as such (BTM 7). However, this theory leaves a number of fundamental questions unanswered. What is it for something to be "material?" If the formation and concretization of the "material" body is the result of normative practices, then what is it that is enacting these practices and serving as the locus of agency, and what are these practices acting on? How can a social practice produce a body? How does this theory apply to the formation of entities that are outside of society, like rocks and trees, which are not caught up in discursive practices and their self-fulfilling prophecies in the same way human bodies are? The closest that Butler comes to responding to these concerns and clearing things up is when she writes that the "materiality" of the body is "a 'that which' which prompts and occasions . . . a site of enactments and passions of various kinds" (BTM 37). This "materiality" is not strictly reducible to the discursive and the practical, since, as she writes, the terms and concepts we use "to 'denote' the materiality of the body are themselves troubled by a referent that is never fully or



permanently resolved or contained," but at the same time the material and the discursive are ontologically inseparable (BTM 37); however, if the material always continues to exist as an excess over and above its involvement in and formation by discourse, then what is it? How is it possible to even refer to this non-discursive material remainder *qua* non-discursive, the "that which," if reference as a discursive act always forms and shapes the materiality to which it refers? If this question cannot be definitely answered, then how can we hope to understand the ontological relation that stands between the discursive and the material, and lies at the center of her account? The problem is that Butler cannot both hold that reference inevitably forms and shapes the parts of the material world to which it refers, and refer to a non-discursive "proto-matter" as the unformed "that which" that is acted upon by reference (Stone 55-65). Butler obviously wishes to defend herself from accusations that she reduces what is real to what is within discourse, but her most definitive position on materiality only serves to confirm these concerns.

Second, Butler seeks to support her own view of "construction" by referencing Foucault's views about regulatory practices as productive, with his views on "sex" being of particular importance. However, this comparison misconstrues the nature of Foucault's claims about the formation of "sex", because "sex," for him, does not refer to an attribute of "bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures," while Butler's do, but to a fictional unity and regularity imposed on these diverse functions through the relationships between sexuality and power. He writes, "Sex—that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are, that point which enthralls us through the power it manifests and

the meaning it conceals, and which we ask to reveal what we are and to free us from what defines us—is doubtless but an ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation" (155). However, Butler includes within the scope of the features of sex she sees as "constructed" even the physical features of the body itself. As a result of this, she is caught in the untenable position of providing a supposedly generalized theory of "materialization" as an effect of discursive regimes, while not providing a thorough account of the workings of this process, or reflecting on the evidence for many non-discursive factors and processes in the formation of materials. For Foucault, genealogical study is used to show how forms of social control are produced and reproduced through the movement of bodies, the spread of discourses, and the multiplication of power relations. However, this method does not entail that bodies and their features are "constructed" by or exist only through discourse, but rather shows that bodies come to take on new pleasures, desires, habits, and behaviors as they come into contact with and are invested by power.

And lastly, it is difficult to understand how the physical differences between human beings, including sexual variations, could be the result of social construction. In what sense are sexual features like the genitalia produced as a result of social construction? The genitals are formed as the result of biological, molecular, chemical, and chromosomal influences, and they belong to the body at birth, so in what way could they be the result of discursive practices? The only reply available to Butler, or at least the one most consistent with her other positions is the following. Butler could hold, "The sexed features of the bodies, such as the genitals, are formed through our repeated acts of naming, classification, and categorization, so that in referring to these bodies as "sexed" in various ways,

determining what counts as "sexual," and including and excluding types of bodies within our categories, we are producing the boundaries of bodies *as* sexed." This response does not save Butler, though, because it falls back into the fallacy identified in the first argument for anti-realism about "sex." The sexed anatomies of bodies are no more the product of our repeated references to and classifications of these bodies, than our discourse about bodies is identical to the bodies themselves. The confusion rests on a failure to mind the scope distinction between the boundaries of bodies *qua* physical individuals and the boundaries of our bodies *qua* our acts of reference.

The third criticism of the sex-gender distinction which Butler puts forward brings into question the "neutrality" and "objectivity" of scientific discourse on sex. Butler notes, in a discussion of the political significance of gynecology, while it is held that women as a group are defined by the ability to be impregnated and give birth, there are many women who never are and never can become pregnant, but are nevertheless identified as women. From this, she suggests that the privileging of pregnancy as the defining feature of women's identity is not a neutral description, but is instead reflective of the norm of compulsory reproduction, in which it is women's social role to give birth and be mothers. Butler asks, "Why shouldn't it be that a woman who wants to have some part in child-rearing, but doesn't want to have a part in child-bearing, or who wants to have nothing to do with either, can inhabit her gender without an implicit sense of failure or inadequacy?" (34). A further illustration comes from intersex individuals, those born with genitals that deviate from the normal division into male and female. It is a common practice to perform corrective surgeries on intersex infants that give them more "normal-looking" genitals; however,

these surgeries are performed on individuals who are too young to consent or understand the consequences of the procedure, and they can have a variety of adverse effects, including sterilization, inability to feel sexual stimulation, scarring, incontinence, and trauma, leading to protest from many members of the intersex community. These can be usefully interpreted as illustrations of a kind of criticism that attacks the putative "neutrality" of scientific discourse from a social constructionist perspective. Butler claims that the truths of scientific discourse about "sexed" bodies are not universal and objective, but are instead influenced by our hegemonic social discourse about gender. There is a clear link between this line of thought and Butler's deconstruction of the boundary between the natural and the cultural, or the discursive and the non-discursive; for Butler, "sex" is not only a descriptive, but a normative and political category, so that for her the line between the facts about what "sex" is in science and our norms about what genders ought to be is dissolved, and the distinction between "sex" and "gender," along with the distinction between facts and norms, breaks open once again.

The concerns raised by Butler about scientific authority, and the impact of norms and values on scientific research, have also been raised by contemporary philosophers of science. These philosophers have subjected the received view of science as a kind of research that is only concerned with what "is," not with what "ought" to be, to critical scrutiny. John Dupre observes that a number of common terms serve the double function of describing and evaluating, such as "courageous," "funny," "rude," "slovenly," and "kind" (30). The same is true in the human sciences, such as psychology, criminology, sociology, and medicine; this is because one of the tasks of science is to accurately classify and divide

up the world, and in these fields many of the divisions are informed by our interests and concerns (e.g. who is healthy or not healthy, what is legal or illegal, sane or not sane, etc.). Furthermore, as a general rule science is a social process, so the questions, theories, and interests that guide the direction of scientific research are determined by the participants in this process. Butler is thus well within her rights when she questions the "neutrality" of some scientific research, and suggests that some of what is taken to be "fact" about individuals who are differently bodied and differently sexed is, in fact, a reflection of the norms and rules of compulsory heterosexuality.

For the human sciences, "objectivity" cannot be achieved by detaching its methods from all considerations of our values, concerns, and interests, precisely because the distinctions the human sciences track are informed by these, and their use cannot be collapsed into a purely descriptive or explanatory sense. Instead, "neutrality" and "objectivity," while still necessary ideals for research, have to be reconceived not as the result of detachment, but as the end product of an inclusive and dialogical process of comparing and reflecting on both what is and what matters the most to us. This point about the partially normative status of theories, methods, and concepts in the human sciences can be demonstrated with reference to psychiatry. The most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual [DSM], the DSM-5, defines a "mental disorder" as "a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual . . . that reflects a dysfunction in the . . . processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities" (20). It is clear from the definition given that the concept of "mental

disorder" is a normative concept ("disturbance," "dysfunction," "disability"), representing what is judged to be a harmful deviation from correct or proper functioning in thought and behavior. Indeed, as the manual itself stresses, "it is not sufficient to simply check off the symptoms in the diagnostic criteria to make a mental disorder diagnosis. Although a systematic check for the presence of these criteria as they apply to each patient will assure a more reliable assessment, the relative severity and valence of individual criteria and their contribution to a diagnosis require clinical judgment" (19). Thus, on this model, a mental disorder cannot be distinguished only through a list of common signs; the identification of an individual as "disordered" is a normative judgment that requires clinical experience, and must also be informed by a consideration of the social and personal context in which the disorder arises, the well-being of the individual, the relative severity of the typical features, and an understanding of what constitutes proper and improper functioning.

Some of the most prominent defenders of a revised view of scientific method have been feminist philosophers, like Sandra Harding. Harding (127) defends a standpoint theory of objectivity for science, which she refers to as "strong objectivity." She is critical of the notion of objectivity operative in empiricist theories of science and knowledge formation, holding that it rests on a belief in a universal form of subjectivity, and an unmediated mode of access to the world, and is thus uncritical of its own capacities for knowledge formation. The approach of standpoint epistemology, on the other hand, recognizes that knowledge formation occurs in a social, discursive, and cultural context, and that the concepts, interests, questions, and background assumptions that communities of observers and researchers bring to the table have an effect on scientific work. Therefore,

"strong objectivity," as a form of objectivity that recognizes the situatedness of knowledge, is also more self-reflective than "weak," empiricist objectivity, insofar as it recognizes the necessity of taking a critical stance toward both the position of the knower and the object of knowledge. Moreover, Harding holds that a focus on the experiences and viewpoints of women is necessary for revising and challenging implicit assumptions operative in male-directed research. This is not to say that women or the members of any other marginalized or oppressed group have a straightforwardly privileged relation to knowledge or its production, or that "experience" has an infallible role in the formation of knowledge, so that the experiences of marginalized groups would obviate the need for scientific tests and refinements. It serves rather as a reminder, first, that scientific knowledge grows out of and is a refinement of our everyday modes of coming to terms with the world, not as a radical detachment from them, and second, that because male-directed science has reinforced itself by systematically excluding women from institutions of higher education and research and defining them as unfit for rational thought, the best way of critiquing and challenging these presumptions is by giving women a voice and attending to their own views and their own lives.

I would argue that the involvement of normative and expressive concerns in much scientific work should not lead us to "relativize" science or doubt its ability to lead us to the truth. It should, I hold, instead lead us to revise our concepts of "neutrality" and "objectivity"; scientific work is neutral and objective when it is done well, but this is not because scientific researchers detach themselves from their work and take a purely disinterested point of view, but because it involves a community of researchers with

distinct interests, questions, and backgrounds, devising hypotheses and submitting them to testing through reliable methods in accordance with some fundamental epistemic rules. Furthermore, the inclusion of values in the "human" sciences does not diminish their realism, since the divisions in the world they inform and track are as real as any other. Thus, the way to contest notions of "sex" that are informed by the concepts and norms of compulsory heterosexuality is not necessarily to bring into question the reality of sex, but to contest the salience, relevance, and justice of these norms for our social purposes.

I have held that Butler's main arguments for her anti-realism and anti-naturalism do not succeed in proving their conclusion; I will now suggest, furthermore, that the theoretical and political needs of contemporary feminism are better served by a form of realism about sex and gender. The term "realism" has a number of definitions and uses, but I have defined it as a theoretical belief that there is an independently existing reality, and that we can think and know about this reality. I hold, furthermore, that a commitment to realism has a number of important advantages for feminist theory. First, most feminist theorists are involved in the business of producing or at least implicitly relying on statements that are either true or false. Second, many feminist theorists, including many social constructionists, are involved in critiquing dominant norms and conceptions of what a woman is or ought to be; realism allows us to make sense of important components of critique, those which involve statements that are either true or false, as a process of moving from incorrect beliefs about the world to correct ones, or in other words as a process of correction and improvement. Third, realism in the second sense lets us make sense of a number of features of our world, the fact that it includes not only human beings and their



activities, but also the fact that the world seems to go on both before and after us, the fact that we encounter other people, physical objects like mountains, rivers, and trees, the stability of the world, and so on. And lastly, it heads off forms of idealism and skepticism, which imply that we know nothing or that we are confined to a world of mere appearances. But this realism is not opposed to social construction as such; as a *critical* realism, it does not take for granted commonly accepted claims about what is real, but sets itself the task of determining what is real and what can be real. To this effect, social construction is a crucial conceptual tool, since it is through the study of processes of social construction that received claims about what is "natural" or "necessary" for women can come under scrutiny, and it is by virtue of investigating the concrete workings of processes of social construction that we can determine what possibilities for the future of sex and gender might lie ahead.

The critical realist position is not opposed to the insights of social constructionism, in at least three respects. First, this form of realism recognizes that the world includes a number of entities, processes, roles, and individuals that are constitutively, or by definition, social. For instance, teachers and students are socially defined roles, and sports and languages are distinctively social systems and activities. The events of a soccer game cannot be understood simply as a series of causally determined events, but must be understood as the coordinated action of a set of social agents following a finite set of well-defined and determinate rules. Second, critical realism observes that social processes have an extensive causal impact on the world, so that there are also many things that are socially constructed in a causal sense; this notably includes, but is not in any way limited to, the construction of roads, buildings, and bridges, the growing of crops, the manufacture of

countless products, and the production and formation of human beings. Indeed, in the "Anthropocene," the boundary between what is naturally caused and what is socially caused is increasingly blurred, as the impact of human activities of production and consumption has come to be felt throughout the globe's ecosystem and climate. And third, critical realism recognizes that the processes by means of which we come to know the world, from discourse to scientific research, are inevitably social, but insofar as it remains a *realist* position, it does not accept the inference from this premise to the conclusion that all of the things known by us are also constitutively social.

Furthermore, this critical realism is part of an overarching commitment to "naturalism." Rosen observes that ". . . a flexible and relatively undemanding naturalism functions for us as an unofficial axiom of philosophical common sense" (210). There are relatively strong and weak forms of naturalism, some of which hold only that philosophy should not overstep the boundaries set by the natural science, such as by disagreeing with its conclusions or positing entities not warranted by it, and some of which go so far as to say that philosophy should become more like the sciences, or should ultimately defer to them. For my purposes, by "naturalism," I simply mean two core beliefs. The first is the ontological belief that we are embodied beings, existing in space and time, in causal relations with other beings, along with rocks, trees, mountains, stars, buildings, dogs, and cats. The second is the methodological belief is that our best way of coming to know about the physical world is through the sciences, and that philosophy should not overstep the boundaries set by the sciences or contradict its findings by trying to do its work for it. In other words, the concrete work of devising hypotheses, constructing a technical discourse,

designing and executing tests, composing results, and reporting on findings should be left to scientists themselves, and the role of philosophy is to study the nature, limits, and structure of scientific theories, and to engage in productive dialogue with scientists on their results insofar as they bear on issues of philosophical importance. It follows from this that the "real" which critical realism holds we can think about and know is nothing other than the reality of the natural world. It is also true that part of this reality, indeed most of it, is not socially constructed, both in the sense of being defined by social and discursive factors, and in the sense of being brought about by those factors.

As a final note, it might be worried that by combining realism with a commitment to naturalism, and by giving such importance to the dialogue between philosophy and science, I run the risk of reviving the specter of biological determinism, or the belief that "biology is destiny." However, I think such fears are unfounded. First, a number of feminist critics, such as Fausto-Sterling, have brought into serious question views that treat gender identity as a linear consequence of genetically inherited traits, or that believe there to be some biologically essential "core" of women's identity. Fausto-Sterling holds that every socially and personally significant trait of a mature human being emerges at the confluence of a system of inherited and environmental factors, interacting with one another dynamically to form a complete human being (61-89). And second, to reduce our destinies to biology ignores the fact that our lives are lived out in the context of structures that shape and constrain the possibilities that are open to us, and that as a rule the total structural context in which any individual acts spans a number of distinct levels, all of which both add a new set of possibilities and affect the levels above and below them. In this

understanding, the body, and the division of bodies into sexed types, is only the lowermost level of constraints that bind us, while the most important levels for understanding the contemporary situation of women are normative, social, and political. Thus, though undergoing the process of bearing, giving birth to, and raising a child as a woman does necessarily involve limiting your choices in some ways, partly for purely physical reasons (e.g. reduced mobility, *ceteris paribus* less free time, etc.), there are also a number of constraints faced by mothers that are social in origin (e.g. increased likelihood of poverty, job insecurity, etc.), and so can be relieved through policy interventions and altering incentives.

### Section 3

In the previous two sections, I, first, summarized Butler's anti-realist view on the formation of gender identities, and her rejection of the division between "sex" and "gender," and, second, offered several criticisms of her central theoretical arguments for her position. In this and the next section, I will turn to the political and social implications of Butler's radical version of a constructionist ontology. Butler's theoretical stance is inseparable from her practical and political project, including her vision of feminist resistance, so that the criticisms I have made of her stance cannot fail to have relevance to her politics. However, in what follows I will argue that the lack of theoretical support for Butler's anti-realism has the consequence that at a number of points her political program is also insufficiently articulated, bringing into serious question the viability of Butler's postmodern program for the multiplication, complication, and liberalization of social identities as a guiding vision for feminism. I will identify and describe four problematic moments in Butler's political thought: her concept of "nature" and the "natural"; her concept of the body and the experience of embodiment; her discussion of agency; and her treatment of rebellion as subversion.

First, Butler's anti-realism leaves her with an impoverished conception of "nature" and the "natural." It is well known that one of the most persistent oppositions that feminists have had to contend with is that relating men to "culture" and women to "nature"; in this conception, men are said to have reason and freedom, and so are fit to be a part of public

life, and women are said to be purely instinctive, and so are confined to the private sphere and the home. As Beauvoir writes, in reference to women, "it is not upon her positive value but upon man's weakness that her prestige is founded. In woman are incarnated the disturbing mysteries of nature, and man escapes her hold when he frees himself from nature." (84) The realm of "nature" is seen as unruly and threatening on this historical account, a source of discord that shows the limits of humanity's control over its own future, and as a result of this it becomes crucial for us to control and dominate nature as much as possible. This power structure is extended to woman through her naturalization, and the "feminization" of nature, so that it comes to be perceived as socially necessary that women and their reproductive abilities be tightly controlled.

How should feminists contest this vicious cultural image? As Alcoff observes, they are caught in a double bind, writing, "women have been oppressed by a two-prong attack: by being associated with nature (more closely than men) and by a simultaneous degradation of nature, putting it and us down with the animals and far away from the grace of God" (160). It follows from this that the opposition in question cannot be effectively contested by simply choosing one side over the other. If feminist theorists want, on the one hand, to deny that women are closely allied with nature by holding that women are intellectually on a par with men, and that they have a rightful role in social and political life, then they run the risk of unwittingly allying themselves with a masculinist conception of culture that entails domination as a goal. If feminists, on the other hand, hold that there is a unique relation between women and nature or life, but "revalue" nature as good, then one could retort that this simply confirms women's inferior status, being shut off from the uniquely

human achievements of higher thought and freedom. It seems that the best way to effectively combat this ideology is by rejecting the "either-or," mutually exclusive terms of the binary itself, and one way to do this is by affirming that all human beings are both natural and cultural. It is true, of course, that we are all products of the natural world; we are physical beings who need food, water, and shelter, have bodies that are vulnerable to injury and death, and are descended through evolution from other living things. However, we are not beings in nature like any other, but have specific abilities, reasoning and forming culture, and embracing these abilities does not involve a specific commitment to a form of culture that relies on the degradation and domination of the natural world. This way of overcoming the "feminization" of nature is straightforwardly compatible with the broad naturalism outlined at the end of the previous section.

Butler also overturns the dichotomy of nature and culture, but she does this, not through a form of naturalism, but through what I have called her radical constructionism, by insisting that "nature" is always already a part of culture. She holds that any appeal to a pre-discursive, "natural" reality, like a natural foundation for sex, is an effect of and reflection of the terms of a form of regulatory discursive law. This is again because, on Butler's view, in talking about or referring to something outside of or before discourse, we are folding that thing into discourse, so that it is partially discursively constituted. This leads Butler to question the meaning of the concept "nature" itself. Butler argues, with other feminist scholars, that "the very concept of nature needs to be rethought, for the concept of nature has a history, and the figuring of nature as the blank and lifeless page, as that which is, as it were, always already dead, is decidedly modern, linked perhaps to emergence of

technological means of domination" (BTM xiv). However, Butler goes beyond other feminists in the degree to which she believes that the material and natural world are social constructs.

It was demonstrated in the previous section that Butler's arguments for anti-realism, including by extension anti-realism about "nature," are fallacious. However, that discussion did not touch on the normative consequences of such an anti-realism. In pursuing this strategy, Butler risks reinserting a masculinist construal of culture in which it dominates or overcomes the natural. Butler herself seems conscious of this risk, as when she writes, "construction as a kind of imprinting or imposition . . . [is] tacitly masculinist, whereas the figure of the passive surface, awaiting that penetrating act by whereby meaning is endowed . . . [is] tacitly or--perhaps--quite obviously feminine" (BTM xiv). In this moment at least, Butler seems acutely aware of the significance of this form of social construction, one which can be figured almost as a violation of the pre-discursive and natural world. But is her alternative successful in avoiding the masculinist implications? It is true that, for Butler, the "natural" is not a neutral, meaningless surface waiting to be overcome by culture, but this is because what we call "nature" is always partially constituted and formed by the very discourse that identifies it, so that according to her nature has no existence independent of discourse. There is no fight with nature in Butler's social constructionism because, in a sense, the fight has always already been won—indeed, it was never a fight at all. This is not to say that in Butler's schema there is no room for contestation over the discourse, terms, and concepts we use to talk about nature, but all of this occurs within a theoretical context where nature lacks a strict ontological independence from our mode of reference



to it. This picture of the relation between human activity and nature carries its risks at the present moment, when climate change has brought to our attention the depth and complexity of our relationship with nature, a relation embodied in thick networks of causal interdependency that span multiple levels and dimensions. Alcoff writes, "Eco-feminists call for rejecting the project of transcendence even while we resist the deterministic justifications of patriarchal ideologies . . . The project of mastery is an ethical relation to the non-human world, but it is built on a particular metaphysical account of that world and its relation to the human" (161). The lessons of the era of climate change likewise work to destabilize the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, but in a causal rather than a discursive register. It is true, on the one hand, that climate change demonstrates the success of the human project of dominating and altering nature, insofar as our economic activity, deforestation, construction of urban centers, pollution, and resource extraction have had effects on the globe on a scarcely fathomable scale; on the other hand, it shows how much the natural environment exceeds both our knowledge and control, and how dependent we are on the natural world, as the devastation to be brought on by climate change will show to terrible effect.

However, to affirm this form of naturalism is not to accept uncritically the traditional concept of "nature," with its problematic political and normative overtones. As Plumwood writes, "oppressed groups—including nonhumans, women, people of non-Western culture or races, those who perform manual or bodily labor, or others identified as of a lower, supposedly less rational class—have often been envisaged in Western culture as less human, as a form of nature or as closer to "nature" (4). Furthermore, some forms of

naturalism have tried "to naturalize oppression, invoking nature to universalize and justify, to depict as "natural" and unalterable oppressive arrangements that are actually contingent and quite open to change" (6). It is critical now that we introduce either a revised concept of "nature" and the "natural," or a suitable replacement concept, a concept of what exists independently of us and is not strictly speaking human, which does not denigrate the natural and "dehumanize" it. These considerations reveal a further downside of Butler's discussion of the opposition between "culture" and "nature," which is that it is entirely concerned with combatting the "naturalization" of certain socially constructed norms and identities by showing that they are not given or immutable. There is nothing wrong this in itself as a critique of sexist, racist, and oppressive ideologies that use this strategy, but on its own it is a one-sided, overly negative treatment of the concept of "nature," and it must be supplemented with either a positive revision of "nature" or a replacement concept that stresses its liberatory elements and commonality with humanity, such as Plumwood's "progressive naturalism" (5).

Second, Butler's anti-realism leaves with her a poor conception of the body as a concrete reality. Butler's view of the body is deeply influenced by Freud and Lacan, who distinguishes between the physical body and the "imaginary" body, where this refers to an internal sense of the body's contours, boundaries, and shape. This body image is in turn bound up with the self, since as Freud writes, "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (20). The theory of the "mirror stage," introduced by Lacan in a landmark paper, builds on this account, by suggesting that a child's sense of their own body as an identifiable unity comes from seeing their own reflection; in other words, our inner sense of self is generated

by our psychical contact with an outside entity (75). However, Butler introduces two crucial modifications to this account. First, she contests the distinction between the body and our image of it, the body in itself and the body for us, as a consequence of her anti-realism. She writes, "The bodily ego produced through identification is not *mimetically* related to a preexisting biological or anatomical body (that former body could only become available through the imaginary schema I am proposing here, so that we would be immediately caught up in an infinite regress or vicious circle)" (BTM 57). Second, she holds that the formation of the bodily ego is not the result of a pre-social encounter or experience, like looking in a mirror, but is instead a consequence of our situation in social life. The body is determined by its involvement in normative and regulatory practices, and its "identity," its having a recognizable, fixed shape at all, is the direct effect of reiterated conformity. The cultural "law" of a given society decides what kinds of bodies there can be, what features they can have, what they can do, and how two or more bodies can interact with one another; those bodies that fall outside the limits of the socially approved and recognizable recede from the public eye, but they signify a set of possibilities that always threaten to undermine the contrived self-identity of other bodies.

For Butler, what it is to have a body is bound up with what it is to be a subject, because just as subjects are formed by being socially identified and positioned, in their subjectification, so bodies are identified and formed through their involvement in normative practices that subjects undertake. There are some kinds of bodies, movements, feelings, desires, and so on, that are socially permissible and fall within a society's given model for corporeal intelligibility, while others are not and do not. Butler devotes

considerable attention to how bodies that fall outside of these boundaries, such as queer and lesbian bodies that fall outside the purview of compulsory heterosexuality, can complicate and subvert the very boundaries that exclude them. But while this might suffice for a description of the body as it is discursively represented and identified, it does not tell us about the body as it is experienced and lived. To be a subject is not only to be subjected to norms and regulatory laws, it is also to be a subject of experience. Young defines the "lived body" as "a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation," where situation is a mixture of facticity and freedom. This division between "facticity" and "freedom" as conditions for bodily subjectivity derives from existentialist phenomenology, and is visible clearly in Beauvoir's work. The facticity of the body consists in the given features and constraints of its situation, including the body's physical features, the streets and buildings that surround it, its habits and movement patterns, and so on. However, the lived body also involves freedom, insofar as the subjects of bodily experience have projects and motives, and the ability to overcome themselves in order to work toward the completion of these projects. The body is also crucially in an intentional relationship with the world, being directed and oriented toward it by its power of movement, which delineates a space of predefined habitual motions for the body to traverse. It is this phenomenologically rich conception of the body which is fundamental for theorizing embodiment and subjectivity, since it allows for the wealth of bodily experience itself.

In her paper "Throwing Like a Girl," Young illustrates the use of the concept of the lived body through the "feminine" style of movement. Young observes, following Straus,

that little girls and little boys, in our current social context, differ in their ability to make use of lateral space in their movements; Straus notes that little girls are in some ways less physically skilled than little boys, writing, "The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and bend the forearm backward" (qtd. in *Throwing* 27). It seems that this difference in ability cannot be accounted for purely biologically, as with a difference in muscle mass, because it is a matter of how the body is used rather than what the body is composed of. Young suggests that this phenomenon of "throwing like a girl" is part of a broader mode of "feminine" bodily comportment, writing that in "lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force . . . we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing . . . tend not to put [our] whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men" (*Throwing* 33). Young suggests that the origin of these difficulties lies with how little girls and young women are socialized in modern Western societies, so that while boys are encouraged to go outside, get dirty, pursue sports, and physically exercise, women are less actively encouraged in these activities and "is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes" (*Throwing* 43). Young formally refers to this as an "inhibited" structure of intentionality, in the sense that women do not regularly use their body's full capacity for coordinated, habitual, natural movement in its immediate spatial vicinity. This illustration shows that a concrete, detailed description of bodily experience is both possible and necessary for feminist theory, but the

vocabulary needed for it cannot be found in Butler's relatively abstract descriptions of the norms governing the social identifiability of bodies.

Third, Butler's anti-realism has consequences for her views on agency. Butler rejects any notion of a subject, ego, or self, which lies behind one's actions and holds responsibility for them, or a subject that has autonomy, a "doer behind the deed." Butler holds, rather, that subjects lie at the end point of a process of "subjectification," in which subjects are formed, shaped, and molded through the reiteration of regulative norms, that together work to position subjects in social space. To be a subject is precisely to be subjected to the norms of a regulatory discourse. However, Butler does not deny that there is agency. The norms of a dominant discourse are produced in and through their reiteration in practices and behaviors, and this reiterative structure necessarily exposes norms to contingent differentiation; the fact that norms need to be repeated means that they have an iterative structure, so that they are never fully, once and for all, realized, but rather they must be continuously taken up, again and again, leaving room for contestation. For Butler, agency occurs in this room laid out by the reiteration of norms. She writes, "if there is *agency*, it is to be found . . . in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law . . . the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands" (BTM xxi).

However, Butler's views on agency have not gone uncriticized. It has been held by some critics that Butler's treatment of the social construction of identities leads either to a kind of "determinism" or a kind of "voluntarism." Butler holds, on the one hand, that social identities, and which possibilities are available for identification, are completely

constrained to those that are recognizable within a dominant discourse, such as compulsory heterosexuality, and that conformity to the terms of this discourse is enforced by the fact that it encompasses the entirety of livable social space. These identities are formed over time through the compulsory reiteration of normative acts and practices, and are thus entirely within power, never outside of it; this seems to amount to a form of determinism, in which our identities and acts are determined completely by the terms of a given discourse. But other critics observe that Butler at times seems to suggest that we can shift or change our identities at will, as when she uses "drag" as a model for the subversion of the heterosexual matrix. The example of "drag" seems to suggest that we can change our identities as easily as putting on a new set of clothes. Indeed, precisely because Butler denies that there is any essential "self" beneath or grounding our identities, and they amount only to the cumulative effect of our acts and behaviors, there is no reason why we can't change our identities voluntarily by changing how we act. This would, in turn, be a form of voluntarism, and Butler's social constructionism seems to be suspended between the twin options of "determinism" and "voluntarism."

Butler replies that both of these are misunderstandings of her position. The constructionism she defends is not determinist, insofar as the norms that regulate the formation of social identities can be contested, and have an intrinsically open, unstable structure; however, it is not voluntarist either, because this contestation and the changes that could result do not emerge from an act of the will, but from the variation in the norms themselves as they are repeated differently over time. Thus, she rejects views in which "constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of

human agency" (BTM xviii) and those in which "constructivism . . . is illogically identified with voluntarism and free play" (BTM 59). I concur with Butler that her position does not reduce either to "determinism," where the construction of our identities would be completely fixed with no room for resistance, or to "voluntarism," where construction would be a kind of "free play" that is pure contingency. However, I would argue that the real problem is neither of these, but the fact that she bypasses the question of agency in favor of an account of change. Butler's response to those who accuse her position of lacking room for freedom and agency is that resistance to the enforced reiteration of norms is always possible, because the necessarily reiterative structure of the law is one in which those norms are open to being destabilized and contested over time. Butler writes, "agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose. The more insistent the foreclosure, the more exacerbated the temporal nonidentity of that which is heralded by the signifier of identity" (BTM 167). Butler is undoubtedly correct that the "hiatus" is an important condition of agency, insofar as to exercise our freedom we must have the capacity to introduce a change or break into a given situation. However, Butler holds not merely that the "hiatus" is a condition of agency, but that it *is* agency; thus it is insufficient, because while Butler has succeeded in showing that, on her model, the enforcement of the law inevitably leaves room for variation and change in how that law is taken up, it is only an account of change, not agency. There are many disputes about what conditions are needed for us to fundamentally count as agents, but it is clear that the concept of agency is closely related to those of "choice" and "decision." To



have freedom, in the human sense of "freedom," is to be someone who has the ability to make choices by reflecting on what one will do next, to reliably follow through on those decisions, and thus to be responsible or accountable for them. In order to live, we must make decisions and follow through on them every day, such as where to work, where to live, who to keep company with, what to buy, what to wear, and so on. In a political context, there are choices concerning whether and how to further one's political beliefs, such as through voting, civil disobedience, protest, communication, or even terrorism; to be a political agent one must have at least some of these options available and have the ability to decide on them. Furthermore, insisting on the centrality of the concepts of the "freedom" with which we choose and the "self" who chooses, does not require the return to a metaphysics of substance and transcendence of the kind Butler critiques; "freedom" can be understood simply as a capacity for deliberation and action that we deploy across a variety of situations, and the "self" can be understood, not as a thing, but as the set of beliefs, memories, and desires most central to our self-understanding, and called upon whenever we reflect on a decision that bears on our identity and projects. In short, to have "agency" and "freedom" is to have a suitably broad range of choices at one's disposal and the capacity to act on them without being under duress, while in Butler's account "agency" reduces to a structural property of norms.

Fourth, and finally, Butler's anti-realism has consequences for the possibility of feminist resistance to existing power structures. Butler frequently criticizes feminist positions and movements that seek to contest the norms governing sex and gender by moving outside the discursive regulation and constitution of sexual and gender identities,

either by returning to a pure, natural condition "before the law," or by creating a future world in which there are unlimited possibilities for gendered expression, referring to these ideas as both utopian and impractical. These criticisms follow straightforwardly from Butler's own anti-realism and radical constructionism, according to which there can be no sexed or gendered identity which is not at least in part constituted by the terms of some regulatory discourse, so that the notion of a free and utopian sexuality outside of any norms or discourse is revealed as an incoherent fiction. Butler writes, "If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is "before," "outside," or "beyond" power is a cultural impossibility and politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself." (GT 42). Butler does not deny that we can contest the terms, concepts, and identities of a predominant discursive formation, but she holds that we can only do so from the inside, by internally subverting them. It was noted in the previous discussion of agency that, for Butler, the norms governing the formation of identities do not exist once and for all, but must be taken up and reiterated in our behavior and practices, and that within this reiterative process there is room for resistance and change. Butler writes, "it is . . . by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up . . . as that which escapes and exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly fixed and defined by the repetitive labor of the norms" (BTM xix). In other words, political and social resistance occur through a form of subversive repetition, in which new possibilities for identity unfold as we take up the norms of a social regime in ways that confound and undermine the boundaries between its "inside"

and "outside." Butler often refers to the presence of "butch" and "femme" identities in lesbian communities to demonstrate this thesis; some have criticized these identities for naively reinstating heteronormative gender roles, but Butler suggests that they serve to undermine the integrity and legitimacy of these very roles by displacing them from their intended context, breaking the supposedly unitary relation between gender and sexuality. However, from this it follows that not only can we not contest oppressive norms by leaving them for a realm of sexual freedom outside of power, but that there is also no such thing as a complete break from the terms of the given discourse in which we find ourselves. This comes as a further elaboration on Butler's discursive constructivism; not only is it that there is nothing which exists that is not constituted by discourse, but there is nothing accessible to us that is not constituted in the context of a historically specific discourse.

It is clear that some of the motivation for Butler's model of rebellion as subversion comes from her involvement with deconstruction. The deconstructive strategy, introduced by Derrida, is a method of critical reading, one which works from within the internal logic, terms, and concepts of a text in order to destabilize and subvert it; this often occurs by displacing traditional oppositions, such as that of "speech" and "writing." In these conceptual oppositions, one term (e.g. speech) is treated as higher than or more original than the other term (e.g. writing), but deconstruction shows that the two terms are inseparable, so that there is no strict boundary between them, and the hierarchy is inverted and twisted. The key target of this procedure for Derrida was the terms, concepts, and doctrines of the "metaphysics of presence," a relatively unified set of positions in the history of metaphysics holding that what is most real is a form of self-present, pure being.

The task of deconstruction is to unsettle these dogmas, but at the same time Derrida holds that we cannot simply leave this worldview for some other one, since the discourse of traditional metaphysics is the only one we have. Derrida writes, "The movement of this schema will only be able, for the moment and for a long time, to work over within, from a certain inside, the language of metaphysics. The work undoubtedly has always already begun. We would have to grasp what happens in this inside when the closure of metaphysics comes to be named" (44). Thus, deconstruction is forced to work from within logocentrism, showing that the boundary between what is "inside" and "outside" this system can never be settled once and for all, so that its significance is put perpetually in question. The comparison between Butler's strategy and this one is obvious. Just as deconstruction holds that the only possible or feasible way of contesting the claims of hegemonic metaphysical discourse must come from within that discourse itself, so Butler proceeds by holding that the formation of new identities can only occur by undoing, recombining, and diverting the given identity positions of a hegemonic discourse.

Butler's warnings against pursuing a politics that is directed toward a perfect, utopian past or future are well-taken; she rightly reminds us that dreams of total revolution, such as those motivating some forms of lesbian separatism, do us no good in the concrete fight to get more just and equitable living and working conditions for women, any more than embracing anarcho-primitivism is a useful strategy for combatting global climate change. However, it is not clear why one should accept on *a priori* grounds that the only possible norms and identities for gender must come from within compulsory heterosexuality, or any other hegemonic gender discourse. If our current paradigm of

compulsory heterosexuality truly is, as Butler repeatedly emphasizes, a contingent product of our history rather than a reflection of "human nature," then there seems to be no reason why we cannot adopt or construct identities, social roles, and modes of life that have little or nothing to do with the norms of our current situation. If feminists are interested in radically critiquing, contesting, and transforming the received identities that women take on and the conditions in which they live and work, then Butler's theory of gender norms seems to impose an unnecessary set of limitations on how this revolution can be undertaken.

#### Section 4

In the last two sections of this thesis, I have responded critically to Butler's views on gender. In the second section, I took a close look at Butler's arguments for her anti-realist approach, and concluded that they were not sufficient to prove her thesis; in its place, I advocated for a realist position that would be broad enough to include social constructionist insights. In the third section, I held, moreover, that the conceptual resources of Butler's theory were not sufficient to support her own political project, a form of feminism capable of contesting the oppressive norms of current social regimes. In this section, with these criticisms in mind, I will offer a solution to these difficulties by recommending an alternative theory of gender that both incorporates several of Butler's most crucial thoughts on the social production of gender norms and identities, while building on them in order to avoid the shortcomings of her own approach. First, I will review what I take to be several of Butler's most crucial insights into the social conditions of gender and their relation to the formation and production of identities. Second, I will present a structural theory of gender as a constructive replacement to Butler's own approach, drawing heavily from the work of Iris Marion Young. Third, for the sake of empirical detail, and to make clear the stakes of a structural theory of gender, I will list and describe several of the most important dimensions of gender understood as a social structure, focusing in on the social placement of women. Fourth, I will show how the structural theory of gender can be expanded to provide an account of the formation of gender identities. And finally, I will show how the

structural theory of gender can overcome several of the downsides to Butler's radical constructionism listed in the previous section.

There are three insights contained in Butler's theory of gender and gender identity that are crucial for the purposes of this thesis. First, Butler criticizes views of "identity" that take it to be a feature of a pre-social "self," some necessary feature of ourselves that exists outside of and before our entry into social and political life. For Butler, we have an identity insofar as we are members of societies with determinate characteristics, which treat some identities as recognizable and others not, some socially sanctioned and other not, and they require that individuals have identities in order to be socially recognizable, as a condition for appearance in public space. Second, Butler recognizes that there is a crucial relation between norms, rules, and laws at the social level, and personal identities and lives at the individual level, and this relation is instituted at the level of practice. The rules and norms we live by are not reducible to the actions of any one individual, but at the same time the force of those norms, unlike laws of nature which affect us whether we like it or not, cannot be found anywhere outside of our obedience and conformity to them. The relation thus goes two ways; on the one hand, norms, rules, and laws are sustained and modified through our practices and attitudes to them as they unfold over time, and on the other hand, those guidelines provide the conditions for our continued existence in social space. And third, Butler recognizes that the answer to the question of where gender norms, and the personal identities that follow from them, come from, cannot be found in "human nature" or any such pre-social fiction; we are social beings through and through, and so the answer must be found in the concrete historical, social, and political circumstances that led

to the formation and maintenance of systems of gendered norms. In short, even though large-scale social change hardly ever occurs overnight, the objects of such changes are contingent and so are open in principle to radical revision. However, as I discussed in the previous section, these insights are weighed down by Butler's commitment to anti-realism; for her, it is not enough that we and our identities are merely situated in and understood through social and discursive structures of various kinds, we are in fact constituted by them, as well. I have shown that her insistence on this anti-realism risks leaving her with an insufficient means of conceptualizing some of the dimensions of subjectivity that cannot be reduced to the social realm, e.g. embodiment and agency.

I hold that this problem can be overcome by absorbing Butler's insights into a structural theory of gender, inspired by the work of Iris Marion Young. Young writes, "Structures denote the confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilization of resources, and physical structures, which constitute the historical givens in relation to which individuals act, and which are relatively stable over time" (*Throwing* 20). The societies in which we live are comprised of a countless variety of operative structures and rules that provide people with resources and constraints, assets, and risks, opportunities and locations, and so on. She goes on to distinguish between "macro-level" and "micro-level" structures. The macro-level structures, on the one hand, are present at an impersonal, social level, as "large-scale systemic outcomes of the operations of many institutions and practices which produce outcomes that constrain some people in specific ways at the same time that they enable others" (*Throwing* 20). The micro-level structures, on the other hand, occur at the level of interactions and practices, and refer to "patterning of practices and



interactive routines, the rules which actors implicitly and explicitly follow and the resources and instruments they mobilize in their interactions" (*Throwing* 20). Thus, on this account, "gender" can be understood as a complex set of structures occurring at both the micro-scale and the macro-scale, a confluence of factors that serve to differentially shape, constrain, and enable people's lives, thereby dividing them implicitly into assorted groups through their life paths and outcomes.

In order to show concretely the elements and stakes of a structural theory of gender, I will briefly describe several of the most important gendered structures, as they apply to women.

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#### I. Women and political power

The winning of the right to vote was one of the most important historical achievements of the feminist movement, one which was critically necessary to give the women's movement a platform in public life, and women a legal path toward expressing their political interests and influencing their own government in democratic societies. However, it is also crucial for individual women to occupy positions of political power and authority, so that even at the highest levels of government women's interests are directly understood and spoken for. However, while the number of female world leaders and politicians has been on the rise, it is still a long way from equity, and this lack of women in power constrains and inhibits broader social action on behalf of women's rights and interests. There are currently over 20 women serving as heads of state or government around the world, with many of these leaders being in Europe, in countries such as Iceland, Lithuania, Denmark, Finland,

Moldova, and Germany. Pew records that out of the 148 countries studies by the World Economic Forum in 2014 and 2016, only 56 have had a female leader, no more than 38%, and in 31 of those countries, a woman has not led for more than 5 years ("Number of women leaders"). Furthermore, there are several female leaders whose positions of authority have come under severe pressure, such as President Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan, whose country's sovereignty has been denied and threatened by China for decades, and former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, who was arrested and deposed by the military of Myanmar in a coup in February 2021 ("Number of women leaders"). The U.S. has never had a female president, and in 2021, there are only 26 women serving in the U.S. Senate, and only 118 women serving in the U.S. House, putting them at 26% and 27.3% respectively. Furthermore, turning to the state level, women currently make up 28.1% of all state senate seats and 31.8% of all state house and assembly seats, and to date only 44 women have served as state governors in a total of 30 states ("Data on women leaders"). The ongoing lack of parity between men and women in political power suggests that the struggle for adequate representation remains a key component of any effective feminist politics.

## II. Women and reproductive rights

The reproductive rights of a population can be ensured through a number of means, including informing women about their choices, giving access to safe and legal abortions and family planning resources, providing access to contraceptives, providing access to medical professionals, and ensuring that women are free from various forms of coercion. However, countless women, particularly in the developing world, do not have access to

these resources, leaving them in a position of considerable bodily vulnerability. This is a fundamental constraint on the autonomy of hundreds of millions of women, insofar as their lack of control over their sex lives and their bodies leads to further economic and social vulnerability, as they become unable to pursue their own life plans free from interruption and more rapidly become dependent on men for protection and financial support. The WHO records that 25 million abortions per year, or 45% of all abortions per year, are unsafe, most of which occur in low-income countries ("Worldwide"). The prevalence of maternal mortality, the rate at which women die from complications in pregnancy and childbirth, declined between 2000 and 2017 by 38 percent, to 211 deaths for every 100,000 live births ("Maternal mortality"). However, while in 2000 there were 451,000 women and girls who died from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, in 2017, there were still 295,000 deaths by these means. A report observes, "Two regions, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, account for 86 percent of maternal deaths worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africans suffer from the highest maternal mortality rate—533 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, or 200,000 maternal deaths a year" ("Maternal mortality"). Furthermore, many women around the world, again mostly concentrated in low-income countries, have insufficient access to birth control. Another report observes that roughly 225 million women in low-income and developing countries have an unmet need for modern methods birth control or contraception, where this number divides into 160 million women using no method, and 65 million using an unsafe, traditional method of birth control ("Maternal mortality").

However, reproductive rights are not only insecure in the developing world. In the U.S., *Roe v. Wade*, heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, secured women's constitutionally protected right to legally have an abortion in most circumstances; however, the anti-abortion, or "pro-life" movement, led by the traditionalist Christian right, has consistently opposed this decision by seeking to overturn abortion rights nationwide, and has recently gained in momentum under a conservative court.

### III. Women and popular culture

The concept of "objectification" is critically important for much feminist theory, where it is defined roughly as the incorrect and immoral treatment of a person as a thing. Nussbaum provides a detailed analysis of this concept, suggesting that objectification can involve imputing at least seven different properties to a person (257). However, even without this degree of formalization, it is clear that the objectification and sexualization of women is a pervasive aspect of culture. Some examples of this include a lack of female main characters in narrative media, misogyny in rap lyrics, sexualized presentation of women and girls in television shows and movies, the presentation of women in passive roles or as victims, and the bombardment of women with pictures of unrealistic beauty standards. It is held by experts that these cultural forces have highly damaging effects on the mental well-being of young women, including girls and teenagers; as one article observes, referring to a report from the APA, "The report suggests that the sexualization of girls impedes the healthy development of a girl or young woman in several different areas. For example by undermining her confidence and making her feel dissatisfied with her body, this can result

in negative self-image and lead to feelings of shame and anxiety" ("Sexualization of girls...")

The prevalence of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder, most common in young women in the Western world, is an extreme result of this trend. These disorders are known to have some of the highest mortality rates of all mental disorders. The authors of one review article write, "The reported incidence rates of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are up to 8/100,000 persons/year and 13/100,000 persons/year, respectively," and they go on to observe that while the incidence of anorexia has seemed to plateau since the 1970s, the rates of bulimia have been on the rise (Sharan and Sundar). There are most likely a number of factors responsible for the presence of an eating disorder in any given patient, including both genetic and environmental contributions, but it is thought by many that culture has a particularly important role to play. Sharan and Sundar write, "The view that eating disorders are etiologically related to the internalization of the social pressure resulting from the standards of female beauty of the modern industrial society or Western culture holds a dominant position in the current discourse around etiology of eating disorders," and go on to list teasing by friends and family, exposure to media, and comments from authority figures as specific contributions (Sharan and Sundar). However, these disorders are an extreme example of a more general phenomenon, the damaging effect of the current presentation of women in media on the body images of young women.

The universal presence of pornography has also been a point of considerable contention for feminists. It has been estimated that the pornography industry is worth

roughly between \$6 and \$97 billion. In 2019, one of the most popular porn websites measured that it received some 42 billion visits in total, with 115 million visits per day, 39 billion searches performed, and over 1.36 million hours, or almost 170 years worth of new video content uploaded that year (Pornhub). It is clear that the porn industry is both immensely profitable and has an immense audience, but many feminists have criticized pornography as a tool of women's oppression. Thus Dworkin writes, "Pornography is an essential issue because pornography says that women want to be hurt, forced, and abused; pornography says women want to be raped, battered, kidnapped, maimed; pornography says women want to be humiliated, shamed, defamed; pornography says that women say No but mean Yes—Yes to violence, Yes to pain" (152). Furthermore, feminists have debated both the legality and desirability of restricting the freedom to produce pornography, considering such issues as the protection of freedom of speech, the right to privacy, the role of pornography in the encouragement of sexist attitudes and behaviors, and the risk of a concession to the traditionalist right.

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These three cases illustrate both the importance and pervasiveness of gendered social structures, but they also show that these structures generally have three important characteristics. First, "gender" is multi-dimensional; this is simply to say that the constraints, opportunities, and resources produced by gendered social structures are of a number of different kinds, and that "gendered" individuals are so gendered because they are placed within this complex space of relations. Second, the social structures of gender are "dynamic," they are not fixed features of "human nature," but are contingent products

of human action, and are subject to change, often in radical ways, over time. It is only necessary to look at the history of the women's movement in the last several decades to see how fundamental are the changes in the social position of women, from increased participation in government, to involvement in the workforce, to more equal representation in public life; to recognize this is not to deny the difficult work that lies ahead in achieving equity and justice for members of marginalized and oppressed genders, but to show that the structures that exercise this unfairness and perpetuate oppression are, in the end, contingent and so subject to change. Third, "gender" is an interrelational structure. The effects of gender often do not combine with those of "race," "ethnicity," "class," "sexual orientation," and so on by simply adding to them; rather, they combine by taking on novel forms of their own, so that what it is to be a black woman is not reducible to simply the sum of what it is to be black and a woman. It is by recognizing these three features that we see how a structural theory of gender can be sufficient to deal with a wide variety of problems in the conceptualization of gender.

Before continuing, a few words need to be said about the interrelational nature of gendered social structures, and how it relates to intersectional theories of power. The feminist theory of intersectionality holds that the systems of power that oppress and dominate groups of people do not have only one dimension, such as racism or sexism, but two or more such dimensions, and that when these dimensions combine the result is not merely the sum of the two forces considered separately, but often a novel product that results in a distinctive set of experiences, challenges, and hardships that must be understood on their own terms. The invention and development of intersectionality and intersectional

research has been pioneered by the work of a number of black feminists, who have often had to cope in their work with the problem of cultivating a mode of consciousness and practicing forms of organization and resistance that both combine and differ from mainstream feminism and anti-racism, since the former has too often taken the interests of white, middle-class women as the norm, and the latter has taken the interests of black men as the norm. These feminists include the Combahee River Collective, who wrote that "systems of oppression are interlocking," and defended a form of black feminism that was influenced by feminist, anti-racist, and socialist ideas (210); and Kimberle Crenshaw, who introduced the term "intersectionality" in her criticisms of discrimination law, writing that its "focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination (140). In a recent book, Collins presents and defends intersectionality as a "critical social theory," writing that it combines "critical analysis and social action, with theories that can cultivate the strongest links between the two proving to be the most resilient and useful" (3). However, intersectionality has come to be the subject of considerable debate within feminist theory, with some suggesting that it should be replaced by another concept, such as Lugones's notion of "enmeshment" (459). The recognition that gender is often interrelational is in broad agreement with the core insights of intersectionality, but this thesis uses the more general term "interrelational" to sidestep the debates concerning the possible limitations of the intersectional view.

How does the transition from these "gendered" social structures to the formation and production of gender identities occur? It occurs, as Butler recognizes, at the level of



practice; the social structures we have described together form a complex space of constraints, rules, and opportunities that serve as "channels" for the direction of individual practice, opening up some paths and cutting off others. To have a gender identity is to be involved in practices over the course of a life that are systemically constrained and facilitated by a broad set of gendered social structures; "systemically" because the relative benefits and harms of these structures are correlated as groups, standing and falling together, and differentially distributed to individuals depending on how they are physically marked, and "broad" because one such structure is most often not enough to make a significant difference in an individual's life by itself. As Young writes, "Frye aptly likens this form of constraint to a birdcage. Looked at one by one, no wire is capable of preventing a bird from flying. It is the joint relationship of the wires that prevents flight" (*Justice* 55). This view of identity dovetails nicely with Alcoff's "positional" treatment of identity, where this is opposed to an "essentialist" view, in which a person's identity is determined by features that are intrinsic and necessary to that individual. Alcoff writes, "The positional definition, on the other hand, makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on" (148). Thus, the structural theory of gender, combined with a positional account of identity formation, provides a constructive replacement for Butler's own most important insights into the relation between gendered discourses and gender identities.

I will pause for a moment to head off two possible criticisms. First, one might worry that this sort of account risks returning to a belief in "woman" as an essential identity, one

for which there are necessary and sufficient conditions, a belief in the very sort of universal identity for "women" that Butler so trenchantly criticizes. However, these worries are misplaced, because to recognize "woman" as a legitimate category is not to assert that it is reducible to a formal definition, or to rule out the possibility that the distinction between "woman" and not "woman" could come to be challenged and revised in the future. Young suggests that gender, including the identity "woman," be thought of in terms of a "series," a concept which she takes from Sartre. She writes, "a series is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others . . . The unity of the series derives from the way that individuals pursue their own individual ends . . . in response to structures that have been created by the unintended collective results of past actions" (724). This conception of gender usefully avoids many of the worries around relying on "woman" as a category, since it does not involve a rigid notion of unity, is respectful of diversity, and does not refer to properties possessed by individuals in their enormous variety, but merely points out the common social and cultural conditions in which they craft their lives. Second, one could hold that the notion of "identity" itself is fraught with assumptions. Much of Butler's work is as a critique of the notion of "identity," which she claims rests on the fictional beliefs in a pre-social self and substance metaphysics, the claim being that "identity" is only possible through the existence of an enduring, non-contingent substrate or set of essential attributes that define a given person. I will suggest that, due to the distinct philosophical meaning of "identity," with which the notion of "identity" at work here should not be confused, and controversies surrounding

the political value of "identity politics," the term "identity" should itself be dropped. In its stead, I would recommend the successor concept "social position." Alcoff, as was already mentioned, develops an alternative understanding of identity as positionality, where identity does not refer to the intrinsic attributes of an individual, but to the relational, extrinsic factors that determine their place relative to others in a society.

The structural theory of gender, I hold, does not suffer from the disadvantages that Butler's theory does. First, it recognizes that women's lives are constructed and situated within the context of gendered and other power structures, but it does not claim that they are wholly constituted or formed by them. Therefore, there is room for a richer vocabulary to describe subjectivity and agency. Young holds that any theory of "gender" which understands it in terms of social structures should be supplemented by the concept of the "lived body," which was discussed briefly in the previous section. She writes that the "lived body" is the body understood as a site for the rich experiences of a subject, an always embodied subject which exists both in the world and toward the world insofar as it finds that it is part of a larger physical and cultural context, and that it has the capacity to act on its surroundings. The lived body, moreover, includes any number of determinate features and characteristics, like skin, hair, spatial location, weight, and so on. The immense variety of human bodies also defies any rigid attempts at categorization; to exist as a lived body is to occupy one determinate location on a continuum of possible forms. It is this notion of the body as lived subjectivity that is missing in Butler's formulation.

However, Young makes a further claim about the lived body which I will not endorse, and which I suggest is inconsistent with some of her more detailed treatments of

female phenomenology. She argues that there is a hard line between social structures and the body insofar as it is the locus of individual identity, so that the concept "gender" only applies to social structures. She writes of the concept of the lived body, "it helps avoid a problem generated by use of ascriptive general categories such as "gender," "race," "nationality," "sexual orientation," to describe the constructed identities of individuals, namely the additive character that identities appear to have under this description" (18). This argument is not entirely convincing, however, because social structures are also not "additive." For instance, the theoretical concept of "intersectionality" was introduced by Crenshaw to designate the fact that the effects of systems of race-based, gender-based, and class-based discrimination are not "additive," and that their effects on individuals who fall into more than one of these categories cannot be understood as being simply their "sum." Crenshaw writes that these practices, "are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and . . . the intersection of racism and sexism factors . . . in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). Thus, if "gendered" social structures do not combine with other social structures, such as those governing race, class, sexual orientation, and so on, "additively," but still retain their legitimacy as categories, then there does not seem to be a special reason why the same could not be said of "gender" in the context of lived experience. I would suggest that the short step from this formulation to the recognition that the concept of gender applies both to social structures and lived experience, albeit in different ways, is a step worth taking.

Second, the structural theory of gender leaves room for a more robust conception of agency, and particularly political agency. For Butler, due to her anti-realism, there can be no "self," "subject," or "doer behind the deed" who is responsible for the actions and projects we undertake; what she calls agency reduces to change in the normative practices that individuals undertake. The structural approach recognizes that, insofar as we are social beings, the choices and decisions we are confronted with are more often than not within a social context (e.g. what to wear, where to work, who to socialize with, etc...). However, much as Young draws a line between abstract social structures and the concrete bodies that are positioned within those structures, so there is a line between the socially determined paths and options available and the agents who cognize, deliberate on, and choose among those options. This approach also succeeds in tracing a path between naive forms of voluntarism and determinism; it is not a form of "voluntarism" because our choices are always constrained and formed by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but it is also not a form of "determinism" because whenever there is more than one option at our disposal we have the ability to actively choose between those options.

Third, Butler's political program is one of "subversion" rather than "liberation," because for her norms are taken up through practices of enforced repetition and reiteration, and so because these norms define the space of what is socially recognizable, the best available option for challenging these norms is to recombine, divert, and subvert them from within. The influence of deconstruction on Butler's thought here is apparent, since just as Derrida held that there is no philosophical discourse outside that of onto-theological and logocentric metaphysics, there is no perspective outside of the predominant discourse of

the society in which one finds oneself from which to leverage a critique. As I argued in the third section, however, it is not obvious why one should accept this *a priori* limitation on the possibilities for successful feminist resistance. The correct task for those seeking to contest and undermine the unjust and oppressive power structures that constrain women and members of other socially subordinate groups is not to seek recourse to some pre-social realm, but to envision, design, and execute new social structures, those that bring us closer toward shared political ideals of equality, freedom, and justice.

## Conclusion

In Butler's work, genders are constructed through the effects of social and discursive norms and rules, and they are lived out when we conform to these norms through our practices; gender "identities," in turn, are the cumulative result of these normative practices, which give individuals a socially recognizable and sanctioned status by virtue of their endurance over time. In this thesis, I have responded to Butler's theoretical views on gender both critically and constructively, holding that in some respects they fall short or have undesirable consequences, and responding by including her most critical insights in a model of gender that takes social structures as its focus and object. I have finished by presenting the outlines of this structural theory of gender, one in which gender is conceived as a set of conditions, opportunities, constraints, rules, and norms that individuals find themselves positioned within, so that to be a "woman," to be a "man," or to be a member of any other gender, is to be positioned within sets of social structures that implicitly unite people as part of a group. However, one of Butler's most important insights is one I have not considered in depth, namely the recognition that almost all of the most important social structures have a regulatory function. These structures draw and maintain boundaries between those who are "in" and "out," those who are and are not deserving of benefits, entitled to rights, given opportunities, permitted to do with their bodies what they like, and so on. It is the people on the outer margins of any given social order who present the

greatest threat to its legitimacy, by bringing into question the necessity, practicality, and justice of the designation of some as fundamentally "less" than others.

The present political moment has seen the breakdown and formation of social limits and boundaries at an alarming speed. The spread of economic globalization has brought businesses, countries, and consumers into ever tighter and more intricate connections, forming a single worldwide network of trade relations and vectors for the movement of goods, services, and technology; but as national barriers have fallen away, the gap separating the rich and super-rich from the poor have grown wider than ever, representing the rising concentration of power in a financial elite. The ongoing refugee and migrant crisis has displaced tens of millions people, fleeing from conflict, violence, and persecution, while millions more are either stateless, or on the move seeking work and a better life in the developed and industrialized world; however, this movement of people, though a force of hope for many, has exerted pressure on the borders of many nations, and forced us to rethink the meaning of national sovereignty and citizenship, not least due to a rise in anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment among right-wing groups in the U.S., the U.K., countries in Europe, and other receiving states. But most drastically, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, first starting in late 2019 and early 2020, and continuing to the time of the writing of this thesis, has shown the risks involved in a constant flow of transportation across borders, which provides vectors for the spread of contagious and deadly viruses; in response, countries throughout the world have been forced to quickly establish borders, boundaries, and spaces at all levels of society to slow the spread of the virus, in an indefinite state of emergency. These social and historical trends, among others,



have brought a number of critical questions to the public's attention, concerning which social structures we want and do not want, and which divisions between people are just and unjust; there is no simple answer to any of these dilemmas.

The recent resurgence of the far right and white nationalism in a number of countries, led by Donald Trump in the U.S., Nigel Farage in the U.K., Marine le Pen in France, and Jair Bolsanaro in Brazil, can be seen as a reaction to this very phenomenon. The far right has responded to these critical questions by seeking to shore up and reinstate traditional boundaries and social divisions, a movement that is supported by the political strategy of laying blame whenever possible on the "other," in its countless guises. In the words and actions of Trump alone, this overall strategy is visible in calls for a border wall to keep out "criminal" Mexican immigrants, a ban on Muslim immigrants as potential "terrorists," an isolationist foreign policy, the removal of the U.S. from an international treaty on climate change, and baseless accusations of a liberal conspiracy to steal the last election through fraud. How can the progressive movement respond to these challenges, and what should its strategy be for dealing with the widespread alteration and collapse of social boundaries?

In her most recent work, Butler has turned to the question of "life," and the moral demands that a recognition of the importance of life entails. For Butler, life is inevitably "precarious" and vulnerable, where this means "living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (FW 14). The lives we live, and the livability of those lives, rely on the resources, shelter, and work that are provided to some extent by others, so that because we are dependent on them and vulnerable, and they are

dependent on us, we are in one another's debt and exposed in our moral obligations to them from the start, as members of a social "we." To recognize a life as important and as precarious is also to see that it is "grievable," that it would be missed if and when it is gone, a life whose death would be mourned. Thus, Butler holds that without grievability, "there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, 'there is a life that will never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost" (FW 15). The livable life is, therefore, inevitably conditioned, occurring in a social context that will provide it with the resources needed to support it, and the people to grieve it when it is gone. Butler holds that when life is understood in this way, it can serve as the basis for the recognition of a new set of obligations which are completely general in their scope, so that we are obligated "precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to "life itself," or rather, our obligations emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions" (FW 23).

However, Butler also recognizes that within our current social discourse, precarity is not equitably distributed, and the equal standing of all lives in their grievability and precariousness is often not observed. In particular, Butler has focused on the regulation of the visual culture of war, in which distinctions are drawn between pictures that can and cannot be seen by the public, dimensions of war and violence that can and cannot be rendered visible, and lives which can and cannot be seen as grievable. These top-down restrictions on the public access to and visibility of the lives and bodies of the most vulnerable, the sick, the hungry, the fleeing, and the dead, are the most fundamental barriers

to moral and political reflection. In this sense, to decide in an informed way on which boundaries should and should not be maintained, how we should distinguish between and divide people, and who is or is not deserving of what benefits and opportunities, we must already have the capacity to see beyond whatever barriers are present, to make the "other" available for moral reflection and deliberation. The danger of the rhetoric of the far-right movement is that it makes impossible the recognition of the "other" (e.g. Mexican immigrant, Muslim refugee, black victim of police brutality, etc.) as a moral subject, through a politics of stereotyping, fear, and blame. The structural theory of gender can be seen as only one instance of a more general approach, which seeks to direct social criticism and change toward overarching conditions rather than blaming individuals or groups. The task of the progressive movement is to present a real political alternative, to seek out, innovate, and implement new social and political structures that rise to the challenge of redistributing resources, protecting the most vulnerable, and encouraging mutual responsibility and civic involvement in these times of uncertainty. If Young holds that these social changes must be motivated by the pursuit of justice as rectification of unfair social conditions, then Butler grounds what does and does not count as fair in an ontology of the precariousness and vulnerability of life, a life that is necessarily held up by social mechanisms and support systems which make us reliant on one another and show our fundamentally equal moral standing. This union between a structural theory of gender and a focus on the lived conditions of the most marginalized and oppressed, presents a rich avenue for future research in feminist theory and a possible basis for a renewed mode of political engagement based on shared structures of lived commonality.

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