10. The Question of Social Transformation

Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations. Probably we could all agree on that, even if "gender" is not the preferred word for some. And yet the question of the relationship between feminism and social transformation opens up onto a difficult terrain. It should be obvious, one would think, but something makes it obscure. Those of us to whom this question is posed are asked to make clear what we already assume, but which is not at all to be taken for granted. We may imagine social transformation differently. We may have an idea of the world as it would be, or should be, transformed by feminism. We may have very different ideas of what social transformation is, or what qualifies as a transformative exercise. But we must also have an idea of how theory relates to the process of transformation, whether theory is itself transformative work that has transformation as one of its effects.

In what follows, I will argue that theory is itself transformative, so I will state that in advance. But one must also understand that I do not think theory is sufficient for social and political transformation. Something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels that involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise

of theory. I would add, however, that in all of these practices, theory is presupposed. We are all, in the very act of social transformation, lay philosophers, presupposing a vision of the world, of what is right, of what is just, of what is abhorrent, of what human action is and can be, of what constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions of life.

There are many questions that form the various foci of feminist research, and I would not want to identify any one of them as the essential or defining focus. I would say, however, that the question of life is in some ways at the center of much feminist theory and, in particular, feminist philosophy. The question about life might be posed in various ways: What is the good life? How has the good life been conceived such that women's lives have not been included in its conceptualization? What would the good life be for women? But perhaps there is, prior to these questions, all of which are important questions, another question: the question of survival itself. When we consider what feminist thought might be in relation to survival, a different set of questions emerges: Whose life is counted as a life? Whose prerogative is it to live? How do we decide when life begins and ends, and how do we think life against life? Under what conditions should life come into being, and through what means? Who cares for life as it emerges? Who tends for the life of the child? Who cares for life as it wanes? Who cares for the life of the mother, and of what value is it ultimately? And to what extent does gender, coherent gender, secure a life as livable? What threat of death is delivered to those who do not live gender according to its accepted norms?

That feminism has always thought about questions of life and death means that feminism has always, to some extent and in some way, been philosophical. That it asks how we organize life, how we accord it value, how we safeguard it against violence, how we compel the world, and its institutions, to inhabit new values, means that its philosophical pursuits are in some sense at one with the aim of social transformation.

It would be easier if I could lay out what I think the ideal relation between genders should be, what gender, as a norm and as an experience, should be like, in what equality and justice would consist. It would be easier. You would then know the norms that guide my thinking, and you could judge whether or not I have achieved the aims that I have set out for myself. But matters are not so easy for me. My difficulty will emerge not out of stubbornness or a will to be obscure. It

emerges simply out of the doubled truth that although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. There is perhaps a confusion here, since many will say that the opposition to violence must take place *in the name of the norm*, a norm of nonviolence, a norm of respect, a norm that governs or compels the respect for life itself. But consider that normativity has this double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the aims and aspirations that guide us, the precepts by which we are compelled to act or speak to one another, the commonly held presuppositions by which we are oriented, and which give direction to our actions. On the other hand, normativity refers to the process of normalization, the way that certain norms, ideas and ideals hold sway over embodied life, provide coercive criteria for normal "men" and "women." And in this second sense, we see that norms are what govern "intelligible" life, "real" men and "real" women. And that when we defy these norms, it is unclear whether we are still living, or ought to be, whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be, whether our genders are real, or ever can be regarded as such.

A good Enlightenment thinker will simply shake her head and say that if one objects to normalization, it is in the name of a different norm that one objects. But that critic would also have to consider what the relationship is between normalization and normativity. Since it may be that when we talk about what binds us humans, and what forms of speech or thinking we seek in an effort to find a common bond, that we are, inevitably, seeking recourse to socially instituted relations, ones that have been formed over time, and which give us a sense of the "common" only by excluding those lives which do not fit the norm. In this sense, we see the "norm" as that which binds us, but we also see that the "norm" creates unity only through a strategy of exclusion. It will be necessary for us to think through this problem, this doubleness of the norm. But in this essay, I would like to start first by asking about the kind of norms that govern gender, and to ask, in particular, how they constrain and enable life, how they designate in advance what will and will not be a livable existence.

I would like to proceed with this first task through a review of *Gender Trouble*, the text in which I originally offered my theory of

gender. I would like to consider this theory of gender explicitly in terms of the questions of violence, and the possible transformation of the scene of gender violence into a future of social survival. Second, I would like to consider this double nature of the norms, showing how we cannot do without them, and how we do not have to assume that their form is given or fixed. Indeed, even if we cannot do without them, it will be seen that we also cannot accept them as they are. I would like to pursue this paradox toward the end of my remarks in order to elucidate what I take to be the political stakes of feminist theory.

Gender Trouble and the Question of Survival

When I wrote this text, I was several years younger than I am today, and I was without a secure position in the academy. I wrote it for a few friends of mine, and I imagined maybe one or two hundred people might read it. I had two aims at the time: the first was to expose what I took to be a pervasive heterosexism in feminist theory; the second was to try to imagine a world in which those who live at some distance from gender norms, who live in the confusion of gender norms, might still understand themselves not only as living livable lives, but as deserving a certain kind of recognition. But let me be more honest than that. I wanted something of gender trouble to be understood and accorded dignity, according to some humanist ideal, but I also wanted it to disturb—fundamentally—the way in which feminist and social theory think gender, and to find it exciting, to understand something of the desire that gender trouble is, the desire it solicits, the desire it conveys.

So let me consider these two points again, since they have both changed in my mind, and as a result, they compel me to rethink the question of change.

In the first instance: feminist theory. What did I understand its heterosexism to be, and how do I now understand it? At the time, I understood the theory of sexual difference to be a theory of heterosexuality. And I also understood French feminism, with the exception of Monique Wittig, to understand cultural intelligibility not only to assume the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine,

but to reproduce it. The theory was derived from Lévi-Strauss, from Lacan, from Saussure, and there were various breaks with those masters that one could trace. After all, it was Julia Kristeva who said that Lacan made no room for the semiotic and insisted on offering that domain not only as a supplement to the symbolic, but as a way of undoing it. And it was Cixous, for instance, who saw feminine writing as a way of making the sign travel in ways that Lévi-Strauss could not imagine at the end of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. And it was Irigaray who imagined the goods getting together, and even implicitly theorized a certain kind of homoerotic love between women when those lips were entangled to the extent that one couldn't tell the difference between the one and the other (and where not being able to tell the difference was not equivalent to "being the same"). The "high" at the time was to see that these French feminists had entered into a region considered fundamental to language and to culture to make an assertion that language came into being through sexual difference. The speaking subject was, accordingly, one who emerged in relation to the duality of the sexes, and that culture, as outlined by Lévi-Strauss, was defined through the exchange of women, and that the difference between men and women was instituted at the level of elementary exchange, an exchange which forms the possibility of communication itself.

To understand the exhilaration of this theory for those who were working within it, and for those who still do, one has to understand the sea-change that took place when feminist studies turned from being the analysis of "images" of women in this or that discipline or sphere of life to being an analysis of sexual difference at the foundation of cultural and human communicability. Suddenly, we were fundamental. Suddenly, no human science could proceed without us.

And not only were we fundamental, we were changing that foundation. There was a new writing, a new form of communicability, a challenge to the kinds of communicability that were fully constrained by a patriarchal symbolic. And there were also new ways for women as the gifts to be getting together, new modes, poetic modes, of alliance and cultural production. We had as it were the outlines of the theory of patriarchy before us, and we were also intervening in it, to produce new forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability that were outside of its terms, but were also contesting its inevitability, its totalizing claim.

So it sounded rather good, but it did produce some problems for many of us. In the first place, it seemed that the model of culture, both in its patriarchal and feminist mode, assumed the constancy of sexual difference, and there were those of us for whom gender trouble was the contestation of sexual difference itself. There were many who asked whether they were women, and some asked it in order to become included in the category, and some asked it in order to find out whether there were alternatives to being in the category. In *"Am I That Name?"* Denise Riley wrote that she did not want to be exhausted by the category, but Cherríe Moraga and others were also beginning to theorize butch–femme categories, which called into question whether the kinds of masculinities at stake for a butch were always determined by an already operative sexual difference, or whether they were calling sexual difference into question.[1]

Femmes posed an important question: was this a femininity defined in relation to a masculinity already operative in the culture, part of a normative structure that could not be changed, or was this the challenge to that normative structure, a challenge from within its most cherished terms? What happens when terms such as butch and femme emerge not as simple copies of heterosexual masculinity and heterosexuality femininity, but as expropriations that expose the nonnecessary status of their assumed meanings? Indeed, the widely cited point that *Gender Trouble* made was the following: that categories like butch and femme were not copies of a more originary heterosexuality, but they showed how the so-called originals, men and women within the heterosexual frame, are similarly constructed, performatively established. So the ostensible copy is not explained through reference to an origin, but the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy. Through performativity, dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized. But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or claim the place of symbolic necessity, and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established.

I'll return to the theory of performativity, but for now, let me explain how my account of this particular rift between high structuralist feminist theory and poststructuralist gender trouble has become reformulated for me.

In the first instance, at work in my exposition of this transition from sexual difference to gender trouble, or indeed, from sexual difference to queer theory (which is not the same, since "gender trouble" is but a moment of queer theory), there is a slippage between sexual difference as a category that conditions the emergence into language and culture, and gender as a sociological concept, figured as a norm. Sexual difference is not the same as the categories of women and men. Women and men exist, we might say, as social norms, and they are, according to the perspective of sexual difference, ways in which sexual difference has assumed content. Many Lacanians, for instance, argued with me that sexual difference has only a formal character, that nothing follows about the social roles or meanings that gender might have from the concept of sexual difference itself. Indeed, some of them evacuate sexual difference of every possible semantic meaning, allying it with the structural possibility for semantics, but having no proper or necessary semantic content. Indeed, they even argue that the possibility of critique emerges when one comes to understand how sexual difference has not only become concretized in certain cultural and social instances, but how it has become reduced to its instance, since this constitutes a fundamental mistake, a way of foreclosing the fundamental openness of the distinction itself.

So this is one way of answering me, and it comes from the formalist Lacanians: Joan Copjec and Charles Shepherdson, but also Slavoj Žižek. But there is a stronger feminist argument that implicitly or explicitly takes issue with the trajectory I have laid out. It is articulated most buoyantly, most persuasively, perhaps by Rosi Braidotti whose most recent work I consider as part of the chapter, "The End of Sexual Difference?" in this book.[2] I think the argument goes something like this: we must maintain the framework of sexual difference because it brings to the fore the continuing cultural and political reality of patriarchal domination, because it reminds us that whatever permutations of gender take place, they do not fully challenge the framework within which they take place, for that framework persists at a symbolic level that is more difficult to intervene upon. Critics such as Carol Anne Tyler argued, for instance, that it will always be different for a woman to enter into transgressive gender norms than it will be for a man, and that *Gender Trouble* does not distinguish strongly enough between these very different positions of power within society.

Others suggest that the problem has to do with psychoanalysis, and with the place and meaning of oedipalization. The child enters desire through triangulation, and whether or not there is a heterosexual pair who are functioning as the parents, the child will still locate a paternal and maternal point of departure. This heterosexual dyad will have symbolic significance for the child and become the structure through which desire is given form.

In a sense, there are important alternatives to be thought together here. I am not suggesting that they can or should be reconciled. It may be that they stand in a necessary tension to one another, and that this necessary tension now structures the field of feminist and queer theory, producing their inevitable tension and necessitating the contentious dialogue between them. It is important to distinguish among theorists of sexual difference who argue on biological grounds that the distinction between the sexes is necessary (Barbara Duden, the German feminist, tends to do this[3]), and those who argue that sexual difference is a fundamental nexus through which language and culture emerge (the structuralists and the non-gender-troubled poststructuralists do this). But then there is a further distinction. There are those who only find the structuralist paradigm useful because it charts the continuing power differential between men and women in language and society and gives us a way of understanding how deeply it functions in establishing the symbolic order in which we live. Among the latter, I think, there is a difference still between those who consider that symbolic order inevitable, and so ratify patriarchy as an inevitable structure of culture, and those who think that sexual difference is inevitable and fundamental, but that its form as patriarchal is contestable. Rosi Braidotti belongs to the latter. One can see why I have had such useful conversations with her.

The problem arises when we try to understand whether sexual difference is necessarily heterosexist. Is it? Again, it depends on which version you accept. If you claim that oedipalization presupposes heterosexual parenting or a heterosexual symbolic that exceeds whatever parenting arrangement—if there is one at work—then the matter is pretty much closed. If you think that oedipalization produces heterosexual desire, and that sexual difference is a function of oedipalization, then it seems that the matter is closed again. And there are those, such as Juliet Mitchell, who are presently troubled by this issue, even though

she is the one who, in *Psycho-analysis and Feminism*, declared the patriarchal symbolic order not to be a changeable set of rules but to be "primordial law" (370).

I take the point that the sociological concepts of gender, understood as women and men, cannot be reducible to sexual difference. But I worry still, actively, about understanding sexual difference as operating as a symbolic order. What does it mean for such an order to be symbolic rather than social?[4] And what happens to the task of feminist theory to think social transformation if we accept that sexual difference is orchestrated and constrained at a symbolic level? If it is symbolic, is it changeable? I ask Lacanians this question, and they usually tell me that changes in the symbolic take a long, long time. I wonder how long I will have to wait. Or they show me a few passages in what is called the Rome Discourse, and I wonder if these passages are the ones to which we are supposed to cling for hope that things might eventually change. Moreover, I'm compelled to ask, is it really true that sexual difference at the symbolic level is without semantic content? Can it ever be? And what if we have indeed done nothing more than abstracted the social meaning of sexual difference and exalted it as a symbolic and, hence, presocial structure? Is that a way of making sure that sexual difference is beyond social contestation?

One might wonder after all of this why I want to contest sexual difference at all, but the abiding assumption of my earlier gender theory was that gender is complexly produced through identificatory and performative practices, and that gender is not as clear or as univocal as we are sometimes led to believe. My effort was to combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there, interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence, something that we cannot deny, something which, natural or not, is treated as given. The theory of sexual difference makes none of the claims that natural essentialism does. At least one version of sexual difference argued that it was the "difference" in every identity that precludes the possibility of a unified category of identity. There were, in this regard, at least two different kinds of challenges that *Gender Trouble* needed to meet, and I see now that I needed to separate the issues and hope that I have begun to do that in my subsequent work. Nevertheless, I still worry that the frameworks we commit ourselves to because they describe patriarchal domination well and may well recommit us

to seeing that very domination as inevitable or as primary, more primary in fact than other operations of differential power. Is the symbolic eligible for social intervention? Does sexual difference really remain other to its instituted form, the dominant one being heterosexuality itself?

What was it I imagined? And how has the question of social transformation and politics changed in the interim?

Gender Trouble ends with a discussion of drag, and the final chapter is in fact called "From Parody to Politics." A number of critics have scrutinized that chapter in order to resolve the transition: how do we get from parody to politics? There are those who think that the text has belittled politics and reduced politics to parody; some claim that drag becomes a model for resistance or for political intervention and participation more generally. So let us reconsider this controversial closure, a text I probably wrote too quickly, a text whose future I did not anticipate at the time.

Why drag? Well, there are biographical reasons, and you might as well know that in the United States the only way to describe me in my younger years was as a bar dyke who spent her days reading Hegel and her evenings, well, at the gay bar, which occasionally became a drag bar. And I had some relatives who were, as it were, in the life, and there was some important identification with those "boys." So I was there, undergoing a cultural moment in the midst of a social and political struggle. But I also experienced in that moment a certain implicit theorization of gender: it quickly dawned on me that some of these so-called men could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would. And so I was confronted by what can only be called the transferability of the attribute. Femininity, which I understood never to have belonged to me anyway, was clearing belonging elsewhere, and I was happier to be the audience to it, have always been very happier to be its audience than I ever was or would be being the embodiment of it. (This does not mean, by the way, that I am therefore disembodied, as some rather mean-spirited critics have said or implied.) Indeed, whether we follow the framework of sexual difference or that of gender trouble, I would hope that we would all remain committed to the ideal that no one should be forcibly compelled to occupy a gender norm that is undergone, experientially, as an unlivable violation. We might argue theoretically

about whether social categories, imposed from elsewhere, are always "violations" in the sense that they are, at first and by necessity, unchosen. But that does not mean that we have lost the capacity to distinction between enabling violations and disabling ones. When gender norms operate as violations, they function as an interpellation that one refuses only by agreeing to pay the consequences: losing one's job, home, the prospects for desire, or for life. There is also a set of laws, criminal and psychiatric codes for which, still, imprisonment and incarcertion are possible consequences. Gender dysphoria can be used in many countries still to deny employment or to take away one's child. The consequences can be severe. It won't do to call this merely play or fun, even if those constitute significant moments. I don't mean to say that gender is not sometimes play, pleasure, fun, and fantasy; it surely is. I only mean to say that we continue to live in a world in which one can risk serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure one seeks, the fantasy one embodies, the gender one performs.

Let me continue, then, by offering a few propositions to consider:

(A) What operates at the level of cultural fantasy is not finally dissociable from the ways in which material life is organized.
(B) When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic, and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments, an ontology (an account of what gender *is*) that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make.
(C) The point to emphasize here is not that drag is subversive of gender norms, but that we live, more or less implicitly, with received notions of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not.
(D) This differential effect of ontological presuppositions on the embodied life of individuals has consequential effects. And what drag can point out is that (1) this set of ontological presuppositions is at work, and (2) that it is open to rearticulation.

The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Foucault makes plain, a question of power. Having or bearing "truth" and "reality" is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way in which power dissimulates as ontology. According to Foucault, one of the first tasks of critique is to discern the relation "between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge."[5] Here we are confronted with the limits of what is knowable, limits that exercise a certain force but are not grounded in any necessity, limits that one interrogates only at a risk to one's secure and available ontology: "[N]othing can exist as an element of knowledge if, on the one hand, it . . . does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if, on the other hand, it does not possess the effects of coercion or simply the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational or simply generally accepted, etc."(52).

Knowledge and power are not finally separable but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking the world: "It is therefore not a matter of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would repress the other or how the other would abuse the one, but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system" (52–53).

If we consider this relation of knowledge and power in relation to gender, we are compelled to ask how the organization of gender comes to function as a presupposition about how the world is structured. There is no merely epistemological approach to gender, no simple way to ask what are women's ways of knowing, or what might it mean to know women. On the contrary, the ways in which women are said to "know" or to "be known" are already orchestrated by power precisely at that moment in which the terms of "acceptable" categorization are instituted.

In Foucault's view, the critic thus has a double task: to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own "conditions of acceptability of a system," and "to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence."[6] So it will not be enough to isolate and identify the

peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things. Rather, it is necessary to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, and the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility it promises. What this means is that one looks for the conditions by which the object field is constituted as well as the limits of those conditions, the moment where they point up their contingency and their transformability. In Foucault's terms, "schematically speaking, we have perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it" (58).

What this means for gender, then, is that it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable.

The turn to drag performance was, in part, a way to think not only about how gender is performed, but how it is resignified through collective terms. Drag performers, for instance, tend to live in communities, and there are strong ritual bonds, such as those we see in the film *Paris is Burning*,[7] which make us aware of the resignification of social bonds that gender minorities within communities of color can and do forge. Thus, we are talking about a cultural life of fantasy that not only organizes the material conditions of life, but which also produces sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible, and which works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. This threat of violence tells us something about what is fundamental to the culture in which they live, a culture that is not radically distinct from what many of us live, even as it is not the same as what any of us probably live. But there is a reason we understand it, if we do; this film travels, because of its beauty, its tragedy, its pathos, and its bravery. Its pleasure crosses cultural boundaries in a way, because what also crosses those boundaries, and not always in the same way, is the threat of violence, the threat of poverty, and the struggle to survive—all of which are more difficult for people of color. It is important to note that the struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy. It is part of it. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise.

Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.

This brings me back to the question of politics. How is it that drag or, indeed, much more than drag, transgender itself enters into the political field? It does this, I would suggest, by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted. Fantasy is not simply a cognitive exercise, an internal film that we project inside the interior theater of the mind. Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself. Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification—depending on their interactions—and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future.

As a consequence of being in the mode of becoming, and in always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise, the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation. These corporeal realities are actively inhabited, and this "activity" is not fully constrained by the norm. Sometimes the very conditions for conforming to the norm are the same as the conditions for resisting it. When the norm appears at once to guarantee and threaten social survival (it is what you need to live; it is that which, if you live it, will threaten to efface you), then conforming and resisting become a compounded and paradoxical relation to the norm, a form of suffering and a potential site for politicization. The question of how to embody the norm is thus very often linked to the question of survival, of whether life itself will be possible. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those who experience survival itself as a burning issue.

This is one way in which the matter is and continues to be political. But there is something more, since what the example of drag sought to do was to make us question the means by which reality is made and to consider the way in which being called real or being called unreal can be not only a means of social control but a form of dehumanizing violence. Indeed, I would put it this way: to be called unreal, and to

have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against which the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality. To be called a copy, to be called unreal, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed. But consider that it is more fundamental than that. For to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject as a possible or potential subject. But to be unreal is something else again. For to be oppressed one must first become intelligible. To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human. It is to find oneself speaking only and always as if one were human, but with the sense that one is not. It is to find that one's language is hollow, and that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in one's favor.

If gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance. Although there are norms that govern what will and will not be real, and what will and will not be intelligible, they are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as nonnatural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation. What this means is that through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced *and* altered in the course of that reproduction. The point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested.

The derealization of gendered violence has implications for understanding how and why certain gender presentations are criminalized and pathologized, how subjects who cross gender risk internment and imprisonment, why violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence, and why it is sometimes inflicted by the very states who should be offering such subjects protection from violence.

So what if new forms of gender are possible, how does this affect the ways that we live and the concrete needs of the human community? How are we to distinguish between forms of gender possibility that are valuable and those that are not? These are questions that have been understandably posed to my arguments. I would respond that it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist. The genders I have in mind have been existing for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality. It is a question of developing, within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have always been living. Because the norms governing reality have not admitted these forms to be real, we will, of necessity, call them new. But I hope we will laugh knowingly when and if we do. The conception of politics at work here is centrally concerned with the question of survival, of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life. Lastly, I would ask what place the thinking of the possible has within political theorizing. One can object and say, ah, but you are trying only to make gender complexity possible. But that does not tell us which forms are good or bad; it does not supply the measure, the gauge, the norm. But there is a normative aspiration here, and it has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom. The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity.

From Norms to Politics

In the essay, "Gender Regulations," I argue that the sense of what a norm is and what, finally, is "normative" depends on the kind of social theory from which these terms emerge. On the one hand, norms seem to signal the regulatory or normalizing function of power, but from another perspective, norms are precisely what binds individuals together, forming the basis of their ethical and political claims. When,

in the analysis above, I oppose violence done by restrictive norms, I appear to appeal to a norm of nonviolence. It would seem to follow that norms can operate both as unacceptable restrictions and as part of any critical analysis that seeks to show what is unacceptable in that restrictive operation. This second sense of norms is associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas who identifies norms as the basis for the possibility of community or, indeed, any understanding that humans might hold in common. If we cannot accept that there is this possibility of commonness in the sense that he holds out, are we still precluded from making strong political claims, for instance, against gendered violence?

If we consider Habermas's argument in *Between Facts and Norms*, it is clear that he relies on norms to supply a common understanding for social actors and speakers: "Participants, in claiming validity for their utterances, strive to reach an understanding with one another about something in the world . . . the everyday use of language does not turn exclusively or even primarily on its representational (or fact-stating) functions: here all the functions of language and language-world relations come into play, so that the spectrum of validity claims takes in more than truth claims" (16). He further explains that "in explicating the meaning of linguistic expressions and the validity of statements, we touch on idealizations that are connected with the medium of language" (17). He makes clear that without these idealizations at the heart of language, we would not have the resources by which to orient ourselves to disparate kinds of claims made by any number of social actors. Indeed, the presumption of a common set of idealizations is what gives our action order and what orders it in advance, as well as what we take account of as we seek to order ourselves in relation to one another and a common future "With the concept of communicative action, which brings in mutual understanding as a mechanism of action coordination, the counterfactual presuppositions of actors who orient their action to validity claims also acquire *immediate relevance for the construction and preservation of social orders; for these orders* exist *through the recognition of normative validity claims*" (17, my emphasis).

Here we can see that norms, which orient action toward the common good, and which belong to an "ideal" sphere, are not precisely social in Ewald's sense. They do not belong to variable social orders,

and they are not, in Foucault's sense, a set of "regulatory ideals" and, hence, part of the ideal life of social power. On the contrary, they function as part of a reasoning process that conditions any and every social order, and which gives that order its coherence. We know, though, that Habermas would not accept the "ordered" characteristic of any social order as a necessary good. Some orders clearly ought to be disrupted, and for good reason. Indeed, the order of gender intelligibility may well qualify as one such order. But do we have a way to distinguish here between the function of the norm as socially integrative and the value of "integration" under oppressive social conditions? In other words, is there not an inherently conservative function of the norm when it is said to preserve order? What if the very order is exclusionary or violent? We might respond, with Habermas, and say that violence goes against the normative idealizations found functioning, implicitly, in everyday language. But if the norm is socially integrative, then how will the norm actually work to break up a social order whose "order" is purchased and maintained through violent means? Is the norm part of such a social order, or is it "social" only in a hypothetical sense, part of an "order" that is not instantiated in the social world as it is lived and negotiated?

If the Habermasian point is that we cannot hope to live in consensus or in common orientation without assuming such norms, is the "common" in this instance then not instituted precisely through the production of what is uncommon, through what is outside the common, or what disrupts it from within, or what poses a challenge to its integrity? What is the value of the "common"? Do we need to know that, despite our differences, we are all oriented toward the same conception of rational deliberation and justification? Or do we need precisely to know that the "common" is no longer there for us, if it ever was, and that the capacious and self-limiting approach to difference is not only the task of cultural translation in this day of multiculturalism but the most important way to nonviolence?

The point is not to apply social norms to lived social instances or to order and define them (as Foucault has criticized) nor is it to find justificatory mechanisms for the grounding of social norms that are extrasocial (even as they operate under the name of the "social"). There are times when both of these activities do and must take place We level judgments against criminals for illegal acts and so subject

them to a normalizing procedure; we consider our grounds for action in collective contexts and try to find modes of deliberation and reflection about which we can agree. But neither of these is all we do with norms. Through recourse to norms, the sphere of the humanly intelligible is circumscribed, and this circumscription is consequential for any ethics and any conception of social transformation. We might say, "we must know the fundamentals of the human in order to act in such a way that we preserve and promote human life as we know it." But what if the very categories of the human have excluded those who should be operating within its terms, who do not accept the modes of reasoning and justifying "validity claims" that have been proffered by western forms of rationalism? Have we ever yet known the "human"? What might it take to approach that knowing? Should we be wary of knowing it too soon? Should we be wary of any final or definitive knowing? If we take the field of the human for granted, then we fail to think critically—and ethically—about the consequential ways that the human is being produced, reproduced, deproduced. This latter inquiry does not exhaust the field of ethics, but I cannot imagine a "responsible" ethics or theory of social transformation operating without it.

Let me suggest here as a way of offering a closing discussion to this essay that the necessity of keeping our notion of the "human" open to a future articulation is essential to the project of a critical international human rights discourse and politics. We see this time and again when the very notion of the "human" is presupposed; it is defined in advance, and in terms that are distinctively western, very often American, and therefore parochial. The paradox emerges that the "human" at issue in human rights is already known, already defined, and yet it is supposed to be the ground for a set of rights and obligations that are international. How we move from the local to the international is a major question for international politics, but it takes a specific form for international feminism. And I would suggest to you that an anti-imperialist or, minimally, nonimperialist conception of international human rights must call into question what is meant by the human, and learn from the various ways and means by which it is defined across cultural venues. This means that local conceptions of what is "human" or, indeed, of what the basic conditions and needs of human life are, must be subjected to reinterpretation, since there are historical and

cultural circumstances in which the "human" is defined differently or resignified, and its basic needs and, hence, basic entitlements are also defined differently.

Resignification as Politics

Does "resignification" constitute a political practice, or does it constitute one part of political transformation? One might well say that politicians on the Right and the Left can use these strategies. We can surely see how "multiculturalism" has its right-wing and left-wing variants, how "globalization" has its right-wing and left-wing variants. In the United States, the word "compassionate" has been linked to "conservative" and this struck many of us as an abomination of "resignification." One can point out, with full justification, that National Socialism was a resignification of "socialism." And that would be right. So it seems clear that resignification alone is not a politics, is not sufficient for a politics, is not enough. One can argue that the Nazis appropriated power by taking the language and concerns of democracy against itself, or that Haitian revolutionaries appropriated power by using the terms of democracy against those who would deny it. And so appropriation can be used by the Right and the Left, and there are no necessarily salutary ethical consequences for "appropriation." There is the queer appropriation of "queer" and, in the United States, a rap appropriation of racist discourse, and the left-wing appropriation of "no big government" and on and on. So appropriation by itself leads to myriad consequences, some of which we might embrace, and some of which we might abhor. But if it does work in the service of a radical democratic politics, how might it work?

Does resignification work as a politics? I want to suggest here that as we extend the realm of universality, become more knowing about what justice implies, provide for greater possibilities of life—and "life" itself is a contested term, one which has its reactionary and progressive followers—we need to assume that our already established conventions regarding what is human, what is universal, what the meaning and substance of international politics might be, are not sufficient. For the purposes of a radical democratic transformation, we need to know that our fundamental categories can and must be expanded to become more

inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations. This does not mean that a social engineer plots at a distance how best to include everyone in his or her category. It means that the category itself must be subjected to a reworking from myriad directions, that it must emerge anew as a result of the cultural translations it undergoes. What moves me politically, and that for which I want to make room, is the moment in which a subject—a person, a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place.

One might hesitate and say, but there are fascists who invoke rights for which there are no prior entitlements. It cannot be a good thing to invoke rights or entitlements to what one considers a "livable life" if that very life is based on racism or misogyny or violence or exclusion. And I would, of course, agree with the latter. For example, prior to the overthrow of apartheid, some black South Africans arrived at the polling booths, ready to vote. There was at that time no prior authorization for their vote. They simply arrived. They performatively invoked the right to vote even when there was no prior authorization, no enabling convention in place. On the other hand, we might say that Hitler also invoked rights to a certain kind of life for which there was no constitutional or legal precedent, local or international. But there is a distinction between these two invocations, and it is crucial to my argument.

In both of these cases, the subjects in question invoked rights to which they were not entitled by existing law, though in both cases "existing law" had international and local versions that were not fully compatible with one another. Those who opposed apartheid were not restricted to existing convention (although they were, clearly, invoking and citing international convention against local convention in this case). The emergence of fascism in Germany, as well as the subsequent emergence of constitutional government in postwar Germany, was also not limited to existing convention. So both of those political phenomena involved innovation. But that does not answer the question: which action is right to pursue, which innovation has value, and which does not? The norms that we would consult to answer this question cannot themselves be derived from resignification. They have to be derived from a radical democratic theory and practice; thus, resignification has to be contextualized in that way. One must make substantive decisions

about what will be a less violent future, what will be a more inclusive population, what will help to fulfill, in substantive terms, the claims of universality and justice that we seek to understand in their cultural specificity and social meaning. When we come to deciding right and wrong courses of action in that context, it is crucial to ask: what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created? Hitler sought to intensify the violence of exclusion; the anti-apartheid movement sought to counter the violence of racism and exclusion. That is the basis on which I would condemn the one, and condone the other. What resources must we have in order to bring into the human community those humans who have not been considered part of the recognizably human? That is the task of a radical democratic theory and practice that seeks to extend the norms that sustain viable life to previously disenfranchised communities.

So I have concluded it seems with a call to extend the norms that sustain viable life; so let me consider the relation between norms and life, since that has been crucial to my inquiry thus far. The question of life is a political one, although perhaps not exclusively political. The question of the "right to life" has affected the debates on the legalization of abortion. Feminists who are in favor of such rights have been called "anti-life," and they have responded by asking, "whose life?" And when does "life" begin? I think that if you were to canvas feminists internationally on the question of what life is or, perhaps more simply, when does life begin, you would have many different views. And that is why, considered internationally, not all women's movements are united on this question. There is the question of when "life" begins, and then the question of when "human" life begins, when the "human" begins; who knows, who is equipped or entitled to know, whose knowledge holds sway here, whose knowledge functions as power here? Feminists have argued that the life of the mother should be equally important. Thus, it is a question of one life versus another. Feminists have argued that every child should be wanted, should have a chance at a livable life, and that there are conditions for life, which must first be met. The mother must be well; there must be a good chance of feeding the child; there must be some chance of a future, a viable and enduring future, since a human life with no futurity loses its humanness and stands a chance of losing its life as well.

We see the term "life" functioning within feminism, and between feminism and its opponents, as a site of contest, an unsettled term, one whose meanings are being proliferated and debated in different ways in the context of different nation-states with different religious and philosophical conceptions of the problem. Indeed, some of my opponents may well argue that if one takes as a paramount value the "extension of norms that support viable life," it might follow, depending on your definitions, that the "unborn child" should be valued above all. This is not my view, and not my conclusion.

My argument against this conclusion has to do with the very use of "life" as if we know what it means, what it requires, what it demands. When we ask what makes a life livable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life. And so there are at least two senses of life, the one, which refers to the minimum biological form of living, and another, which intervenes at the start, which establishes minimum conditions for a livable life with regard to human life.[8] And this does not imply that we can disregard the merely living in favor of the "livable life," but that we must ask, as we asked about gender violence, what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability. And what are our politics such that we are in whatever way possible, both conceptualizing the possibility of the livable life and arranging for its institutional support? There will always be disagreement about what this means, and those who claim that a single political direction is necessitated by virtue of this commitment will be mistaken. But this is only because to live is to live a life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future. But to assume responsibility for a future is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness. It also implies that a certain agonism and contestation will and must be in play. They must be in play for politics to become democratic.

Democracy does not speak in unison; its tunes are dissonant, and necessarily so. It is not a predictable process; it must be undergone, as a passion must be undergone. It may also be that life itself becomes foreclosed when the right way is decided in advance, or when we impose what is right for everyone,without finding a way to enter into

community and discover the "right" in the midst of cultural translation. It may be that what is "right" and what is "good" consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, to know unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and to recognize the sign of life—and its prospects.

Beyond the Subject with Anzaldúa and Spivak

In the United States, there were and are several different ways of questioning the foundational status of the category of the subject. To question the foundationalism of that category is not the same as doing away with the category altogether. Moreover, it is not to deny its usefulness, or even its necessity. To question the subject is to put at risk what we know, and to do it not for the thrill of the risk, but because we have already been put into question as subjects. We have already, as women, been severely doubted: do our words carry meaning? Are we capable of consent? Is our reasoning functioning like that of men? Are we part of the universal community of human kind?

Gloria Anzaldúa, in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, writes in both Spanish and English as well as native Indian dialects and compels her reader to read all of these languages as they attempt to read her book. She clearly crosses the border between academic and nonacademic writing, emphasizing the value of living on the border, living as the border in relation to an array of different cultural projects. She says that in order to have social transformation one must get beyond a "unitary" subject. She is in favor of social transformation, has struggled for it her whole life, has taught in the university, and has struggled in the movements. Do we say that she belongs to the group called "academic feminists"? Well, it would be ridiculous to exclude her from that group.[9] Her work is read in the academy. She sometimes teaches at the University of California. She struggles with different movements, especially for Latin American women, who suffer in the United States from lack of health care, exploitation within the labor market, and often with immigration issues as well. When she says, for instance, that she is no unitary subject, that she does not accept the binary oppositions of modernity, she is saying that she is defined by her very capacity to cross borders, as a Chicana. In other

words, she is a woman who was compelled to cross the border from Mexico to the United States and for whom that border constitutes the geopolitical imaginary within which (across which) she writes her fiction. She struggles with the complex mix of cultural traditions and formations that constitute her for what she is: Chicana, Mexican, lesbian, American, academic, poor, writer, activist. Do all of these strands come together in a unified way, or does she live their incommensurability and simultaneity as the very meaning of her identity, an identity culturally staged and produced by the very complex historical circumstances of her life?

Anzaldúa asks us to consider that the source of our capacity for social transformation is to be found precisely in our capacity to mediate between worlds, to engage in cultural translation, and to undergo, through the experience of language and community, the diverse set of cultural connections that make us who we are. One could say that for her, the subject is "multiple" rather than unitary, and that would be to get the point in a way. But I think her point is more radical. She is asking us to stay at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into question, and through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and of living in the world to expand our capacity to imagine the human. She is asking us to be able to work in coalitions across differences that will make a more inclusive movement. What she is arguing, then, is that it is only through existing in the mode of translation, constant translation, that we stand a chance of producing a multicultural understanding of women or, indeed, of society. The unitary subject is the one who knows already what it is, who enters the conversation the same way as it exits, who fails to put its own epistemological certainties at risk in the encounter with the other, and so stays in place, guards its place, and becomes an emblem for property and territory, *refusing self-transformation, ironically, in the name of the subject.*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has a similar view, although she would say, has said, that whereas Anzaldúa maintains a notion of a multiple subject, she has a notion of a fractured subject. Indeed, her view is that we cannot appreciate the oppression that women of color have experienced within the global political and economic framework of first world imperialism without realizing that "women" as a unitary category cannot hold, cannot describe, that this category must undergo crisis and

expose its fractures to public discourse. She asks, time and again throughout her work, what does it mean not only to listen to the voices of the disenfranchised but also "to represent" those voices in one's work. On the one hand, it is possible to treat the disenfranchised as if they were voiceless and to appoint oneself as the voice of the disenfranchised. I think we saw this, quite problematically, when the American feminist Catharine MacKinnon announced at the Vienna Human Rights Forum several years ago that she "represented the women of Bosnia." Perhaps she thought that the women of Bosnia were voiceless, but she certainly learned otherwise when they made plain their clear public opposition to her effort to appropriate and colonize their position.

Given the history of the missionary, of colonial expansion that takes place in the name of "cultivation" and "modernity" and "progress" and "enlightenment," of "the white man's burden," feminists as well must ask whether the "representation" of the poor, the indigenous and the radically disenfranchised within the academy, is a patronizing and colonizing effort, or whether it seeks to avow the conditions of translation that make it possible, avow the power and privilege of the intellectual, avow the links in history and culture that make an encounter between poverty, for instance, and academic writing possible.

Spivak has translated the work of Mahasweta Devi, a fiction writer who is also an activist, whose work, thanks to Spivak, appears in the academy, at least the English speaking one. Devi writes as a tribal woman, for and about tribal women, but the "tribal" is precisely what becomes complex to identify in the course of her writing. Her voice arrives in the first world through a translation, a translation offered by Spivak, in which I, as reader, am asked to respond. Spivak insists that this writing, the tribal South Asian writing of Devi, cannot simply be called "tribal" or made to represent the "tribal" because in this writing there is also, and by way of the tribal, a vision of internationality at stake. In Devi's stories, women suffer in part because the land is exploited and ravished, because the traditional means of labor are systematically effaced or exploited by developers. In this sense, it is a local story. But those developers are also linked to broader currents in global capital. As Spivak puts it, "a strong connection, indeed a complicity, between the bourgeoisie of the Third World and migrants in the First cannot be ignored."[10]

If we read Devi closely, we see that she is making connections, living connections, between the tribal and the global, and that she is herself, as an author, a medium of transit between them. We should not think, however, that this transit is smooth, since it takes place via a rupture in representation itself. Devi comes to me through Spivak, which does not mean that Spivak authors her, but only that authorship is itself riven; what emerges from this translation, however, is a political vision that maintains that the possibilities of long-term global survival, of long-term radical environmental politics and nonviolence as a political practice depend *not* on a disembodied "reason" that goes under the name of universality but on elaborating the sense of the sacred. Spivak thus writes, "large-scale mind change is hardly ever possible on grounds of reason alone. In order to mobilize for non-violence, for example, one relies, however remotely, on building up a conviction of the 'sacredness' of human life" (199). Spivak also accords Devi the name of "philosopher" and offers the following advice for radical thinking and activism: "I have no doubt that we must *learn* to learn from the original ecological philosophers of the world, through the slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name of 'love'—to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education, and health care. This for me is the lesson of Mahasweta [Devi], activist/journalist and writer" (201).

For Spivak, the subaltern woman activist has been excluded from the parameters of the western subject and the historical trajectory of modernity. That means that for the most part, the tribal woman is a spectator to historical advance. Similarly, if we consider the traditions of Afro-Caribbean writings, we can ask as well whether these writings are inside the traditions of modernity, or whether they are, always, and in different ways, commenting on what it is to live "outside of history." So it should be clear that I think a critical relation to modernity is necessary.

We have witnessed the violence that is done in the name of the west and western values, as public skepticism in the United States and Europe has been stoked by questions such as: did Islam have its modernity? Has Islam yet achieved its modernity? From what point of view do such questions become possible, and in what framework are they sensible? Can the one who poses such questions know the conditions

of his or her own asking? Without the Arabic translations of classical Greek texts, some of those texts would be lost forever. Without the libraries in Islamic cities throughout the world, the history of western values would not have been transmitted. It is telling that the preservative function of cultural translation is precisely what is forgotten here when we question whether Arabs have anything to do with modernity.

Clearly, we do not know our own modernity, the conditions of its own emergence and preservation, when any of us ask this question. Or rather, we are showing that what we call "modernity" is a form of forgetfulness and cultural erasure. Most importantly, we see the violence done in the name of preserving western values, and we have to ask whether this violence is one of the values that we seek to defend, that is, another mark of "western-ness" that we fear might be lost if we agree to live in a more culturally complex and hybrid world? Clearly, the west does not author all violence, but it does, upon suffering or anticipating injury, marshal violence to preserve its borders, real and imaginary.[11]

For those of us in the United States, there is some doubt whether there will ever be a significant public discourse outside of Left journalism and the countermedia, for instance, on the question of how a collective deals with its vulnerability to violence. Women know this question well, have known it in nearly all times, and nothing about the advent of capitalism made our exposure to violence any less clear. There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. There is the possibility of becoming violent. But perhaps there is some other way to live in such a way that one is neither fearing death, becoming socially dead from fear of being killed, or becoming violent, and killing others, or subjecting them to live a life of social death predicated upon the fear of literal death. Perhaps this other way to live requires a world in which collective means are found to protect bodily vulnerability without precisely eradicating it. Surely, some norms will be useful for the building of such a world, but they will be norms that no one will own, norms that will have to work not through normalization or racial and ethnic assimilation, but through becoming collective sites of continuous political labor.