



---

## Review: Mattering

Reviewed Work(s): Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" by Judith Butler; Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism by Elizabeth Grosz

Review by: Pheng Cheah

Source: *Diacritics*, Spring, 1996, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), pp. 108-139

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566255>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Diacritics*

JSTOR

# MATTERING

*PHENG CHEAH*

**Judith Butler.** *BODIES THAT MATTER: ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF “SEX.”*

*New York: Routledge, 1993.*

**Elizabeth Grosz.** *VOLATILE BODIES: TOWARD A CORPOREAL FEMINISM.*

*Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.*

Any cursory survey of contemporary cultural-political theory and criticism will indicate that the related concepts of “nature” and “the given” are not highly valued terms. The reason for this disdain and even moral disapprobation of naturalistic accounts of human existence is supposed to be self-evident: simply put, in a post-Newtonian age, nature refers to the totality of objects governed by immutable causal laws. If human existence was merely natural or given, then we would never be able to alter the conditions that bring about human oppression. Antinaturalism in contemporary theory, however, betrays a deep fear in its repetitive tirades against the natural. For if it is so obviously precritical to treat human existence as given, then why does antinaturalism need to be articulated again and again? This obsessive pushing away of nature may well constitute an acknowledgement-in-disavowal that humans may be natural creatures after all. Furthermore, as a theoretical position, antinaturalism itself is produced by the polemical energy that strives to keep nature at bay, in quarantine from the sphere of human life. Consequently, antinaturalism works with a conventional philosophical definition of nature which it may do well to question. We may therefore be justified in claiming that, far from being tired superstitions that savvy discourse analysts and cultural constructionists can leave behind, the concepts of “nature” and “the given” are, in fact, neuralgic points, the contested sites around which any theory of political transformation is organized.

In its conventional usage, nature is opposed to a whole host of other terms: history, culture, law, production, and so forth. The slipperiness of nature, however, is seen in the fact that the relation between nature and its others defies characterization as a simple relation of exteriority between two ontologically distinct terms. For instance, the relation of nature to history can be posed not only in terms of the modification of nature by historical agency but also from *within* the realm of historical agency insofar as the constraints of structure or construction on transformative rational agency seem to replicate the limitations or weightiness of nature. Feminism is an exemplary site for rehearsing this fundamental questioning of the distinction between nature and its others because it must refute biologicist and naturalistic justifications for the oppression of women even as it must affirm women’s bodily specificity as the minimal consensual stuff which grounds feminist practice. As Zillah Eisenstein astutely observes in spite of her own intellectual allegiances, “if the body is already engendered in this way, how can we claim our bodies without reproducing the inequities of the gender-system? . . . [S]o we become involved in explicating patriarchal relations without knowing where patriarchy begins and ends in the definition of a woman’s or a mother’s body. What aspect of the body constitutes a woman’s potential capacities, and what part articulates her oppression?” [73,

---

*I would like to thank Jonathan Culler and Biddy Martin for their careful reading of an earlier draft of this paper. They should not, however, be thought to endorse the views expressed therein.*

75]. Philosophically speaking, the giving of body or matter—what I propose to call “mattering”—may be the process where history and nature become uncannily indistinguishable in a manner that is both enabling and disabling for political transformation, its condition of (im)possibility.

Thus far, the productive unease in feminist theory occasioned by the body as the ambivalent ground of both oppression and emancipatory transformation has resulted in debates over the sex/gender distinction and the question of essentialism/antiessentialism.<sup>1</sup> Discussion has, however, primarily centered on the strategic deployment of the body as a political resource. Two recent books—Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*—stand out because they promise to raise discussion to a level where political issues concerning the body can be reevaluated through a rigorous rethinking of the relation between nature and its others: culture, history, and society. The authors of these books share the distinctive aim of articulating a feminist theory that is centered on a *philosophical* exploration of the status of the body. Both Grosz and Butler are trained in Continental philosophy, where the secondary status of the body often grounds the misogyny and phallocentrism of patriarchal philosophemes.<sup>2</sup> Both insist on the value of a philosophical rearticulation of the body so that feminist theory does not blindly base its axiological claims on a self-defeating phallocentric philosopheme of the body. This means that while feminist strategy and queer politics provide the impetus and immediate frame of reference of these books, feminist and queer politics also function as examples that illustrate and inform a general reformulation of alternative philosophies of the body. Both Grosz's critical expositions of Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze in order to elaborate a corporeal feminism and Butler's provocative readings of Plato, Aristotle, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Žižek, and Laclau in terms of her theory of gender performativity obey the generalist tendency of philosophical thought.

My essay is limited to a consideration of the general theoretical positions taken by both authors. In the first section, I will consider their different accounts of the politics of bodies in terms of the ontological claims they presuppose or make in relation to previous philosophies of the body. In the second section, I will attempt a slightly different account of dynamism by drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida. I will also suggest why such an account is more plausible from the perspective of the political situation of feminist postcoloniality-in-neocolonialism.

### *Two Theories of Corporeal Dynamism*

In the immediate instance, Grosz's and Butler's return to the body can be understood as a reaction to the inadequacies of social constructionism as a paradigm for feminist theory. Simply put, social constructionism espouses the primacy of the social or discourse as constructive form over preexisting matter which is said to be presignificative or nonintelligible. Butler and Grosz are critical of this position for various reasons. For Butler, social constructionism oscillates between two untenable positions. In presupposing and so retroactively installing the category of “nature” in the prelinguistic position of a *tabula rasa*, social constructionism can consider sex either as natural and thus unconstructed or as the fictional premise of a prediscursive ground produced by the concept of gender [6]. In the first scenario, sex cannot be accounted for and political contestation is confined to the level of gender conceived as the interpretation or meaning

1. On the sex/gender distinction, see Gatens. On essentialism, see Grosz, “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism,” Fuss, Kirby, and the special issue of *Differences* entitled *The Essential Difference*, edited by Schor and Weed.

2. On phallocentrism and misogyny in Continental philosophy, see Lloyd; Irigaray; Le Doueff.

of sex. The second scenario leads either to a linguistic monism that cannot explain how the bodily materiality of sex can be produced by language/discourse or to the anthropomorphizing of “construction” into a nominative subject endowed with the power of self-causation and causing everything else. Grosz points out that feminists concerned with the social construction of subjectivity recode the mind/body opposition as a distinction between biology and psychology and locate political transformation in psychological change where the body either is irrelevant or becomes the vehicle expressing changes in beliefs and values [17]. This effectively ignores the point that the body is a unique social, cultural, and political object. It also bears the mark of differences (sex and race) that are not easily revalued through consciousness-raising precisely because they are material differences which are not eradicable without disfiguring the body [18].

This critique of social constructionism can also be understood in the broader philosophical terms of the need to rethink the link between materiality and intelligibility, nature and its others and ultimately, the form/matter distinction itself. Indeed, and this constitutes the strength of their work, Grosz and Butler share the polemical agenda of distinguishing their understandings of the body from (i) a post-Cartesian mechanistic account of the body as a natural entity, immutable and governed by natural laws of causality and (ii) a teleological account of nature where intelligibility and matter are united in a body which strives toward an internally prescribed final goal.<sup>3</sup> As Grosz observes in her succinct account of Cartesianism, a mechanistic understanding of the body is harmful to feminist theory because it deprives women’s bodies of agency by reducing the body to a passive object, seen as a tool or instrument of an intentional will rather than a locus of power and resistance [9]. But while a teleological account of nature invests bodies with activity, this activity is always the predication of intelligible form. This can lead to a biological-deterministic justification for the oppression of women particularly because the form/matter distinction originating from Greek philosophy is always articulated through a gendered matrix where the productive or creative agency of form is associated with a masculine principle while matter, which is passively shaped, is coded as feminine [Grosz 5; Butler, ch. 1]. Thus, Butler suggests that “[w]e may seek a return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which the term can be put” [29].

One might further argue that despite the Cartesian sundering of intelligence from nature in the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as ontologically different substances, Cartesian and Greek ontology are continuous insofar as the form/matter and mind/matter distinctions are subtended by a common opposition between intelligent activity and brute passivity. In a mechanistic understanding of nature, the form/matter distinction which was interior to bodies in Greek ontology becomes an external relation, either practical-causal or theoretical-contemplative, between rational consciousness and objective exteriority. Thus, by rethinking the body as something invested with a transformative dynamism or agency, Butler and Grosz also question the pertinence of the oppositions between intelligible form and brute matter, culture/history and nature.

This has immense ramifications for political criticism insofar as the form/matter distinction is germane to the paradigm of exteriority that underlies modern political thought. Within this paradigm, oppression is generally regarded as a social, historical, or cultural phenomenon and is to be distinguished from a state of war which sometimes characterizes the state of nature (as in Hobbes). In nature, a state of war is an irreducible necessity, a brute fact. By contrast, oppression belongs to the realm of the political, a realm instituted through rational legitimization as the order that elevates us from a natural state

---

3. For a concise but probably dated account of different conceptions of nature in the history of Western philosophy for a nonspecialist reader, see Collingwood.

of violence. Unlike natural violence, oppression thus has a meaningful dimension insofar as it is either rationally justified or unjustified. By this reckoning, the political critique of unjustified oppression is either the attempt to recover some preexisting outside to historical oppression, an outside determinable by political reason, or a reconstructive project which projects an ideal exterior to be employed as a guiding thread. Put another way, the exteriority of reason to power is seen as the condition of retrieving the body into a state of peaceful plenitude outside power relations. Such characterizations of oppression and political critique presuppose the form/matter distinction. Oppression is the subordination of bodies to a system with irrational form. Correspondingly, political change is conceived precisely as trans-form-ation, the alteration of the irrational form of this systemic hold on bodies to a more rational form. The primacy of formative agency over matter and bodies and the exteriority of political reason to power constitute the capacity to drag bodies out of the obfuscation of power relations. Simply put, this is a fundamental ontological presupposition of political theories as different as consciousness-raising, Marxist notions of ideology and praxis, Habermasian discourse-ethics, and social constructionist feminism. Sexual oppression, however, challenges the presupposition of an outside to power because oppression occurs at the level of the constitution of bodily materiality as sexed. Thus, Butler's and Grosz's attempts to rethink the body in more dynamic or productive terms are also immensely important contributions by feminist philosophy to feminist practice and strategy.

Although Grosz and Butler share a common polemical stance, their positions diverge in approach and in substance. Grosz's project is exploratory and more pedagogically inclined. She tries to piece together a different ontological framework for feminist theory by evaluating alternative philosophies of the body. Butler attempts to elucidate and clarify the provocative theory of gender performativity she formulated in *Gender Trouble* by returning to genealogical sources in philosophy and the philosophy of psychoanalysis and by illustration through readings of literary and filmic materials. Ultimately, the substantive difference in their positions turns on how they refigure the form/matter distinction in their attempts to invest the body with dynamism. In the rest of this section, I will assess the ontological claims and presuppositions of both theories of the body.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is intended as an improvement on social constructionism. While she accepts the premise that gender or sex is socially constructed, she urges us to understand construction as involving the materialization of determinate types of bodies through the repetition of gender norms.

*What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of power in the Foucaultian sense. . . . Crucially, then, construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through a reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. [9–10, Butler's emphasis]*

Two important points need to be emphasized about this radicalization of "construction." First, construction is not only an interpretive or hermeneutic activity that attributes meaning to preexistent matter such as sex but is instead a process of materialization. Second, the category of matter, or more precisely, the matter of human bodies, is not just an ossified product of the activity of the subject but an interminable process which Butler links to Foucault's notion of productive power. Butler's theory of materialization thus has

the advantage of rendering the material category of sex into a site of permanent contestation. On the one hand, it alerts us to the fact that the body, not just consciousness, is a crucial link in the circuit of social production and reproduction, both constituted by and also constituting a given social order. This means that a consideration of the material category of sex is as crucial to feminist contestation as gender norms because the former is a materialization of the latter. But by the same token, a theory of sex as a dynamic process of materialization rather than a substance also cautions us against an unquestioning positivist affirmation of sex as a material bedrock for axiological claims. For Butler, this radical understanding of constructionism does not foreclose the agency of the subject but indicates the need for a nonvoluntarist account of agency. The interminable process of construction involves a set of constraints that constitute the human agent through time. These constitutive constraints circumscribe the realm of cultural intelligibility at any given moment, thereby limiting the meaningful political claims available to the human will in general which is constituted within this field of forces. Hence, the alternative account of agency Butler proposes involves an examination of “the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition” [7]. The possibility of transformation inheres in the instabilities of this matrix as it materializes through time rather than in the claiming of a vantage point outside of power relations.

Butler’s refiguring of the link between matter and ideality has three main theoretical limbs or genealogical sources: a Foucaultian historicization of the Aristotelian concept of the schema; a psychoanalytical account of morphology or the imaginary body schema and a performative account of the linguistic designation of bodily boundaries. Each of these offers resources for her critique of an anthropocentric notion of willed agency and the mechanistic notion of matter the former implies by reopening the form/matter distinction. Thus, in chapter 1, Butler suggests that a critical return to the teleological concept of matter in Plato and Aristotle may be timely because “matter appears in these cases to be invested with a certain capacity to originate and to compose that for which it supplies the principle of intelligibility . . . [and is thus] defined by a certain power of creation and rationality that is for the most part divested from the more modern empirical deployments” [32].

For Butler, the Aristotelian notion of schema is provocative because of its indissociability from matter. The latter cannot appear as a body in phenomenality without the form that constitutes it by supplying it with a principle of recognizability. Butler suggests, however, that the unity of intelligibility and matter in the same body postulated in Greek ontology needs to be understood in historical rather than natural terms. In order to be useful for feminist theory, these principles of formative intelligibility need to be seen as cultural variables. For Butler, Foucault’s account of the constitution of the materiality of the body by power is a salutary historicization of the Aristotelian schema. Commenting on Foucault’s discussion of how the prisoner’s body is produced by power, Butler writes:

*[T]he soul is taken as an instrument of power through which the body is cultivated and formed. In a sense, it acts as a power-laden schema that produces and actualizes the body itself. . . . [N]ot fully unlike Aristotle, the soul described by Foucault as an instrument of power, forms and frames the body, stamps it, and in stamping it, brings it into being. Here “being” belongs in quotation marks, for ontological weight is not presumed but always conferred. [33–34, emphasis added]*

Butler’s reading of Foucault accords the political, historical, or cultural an explanatory priority over the ontological or the realm of being: for her, form, the condition under which “ontological weight is . . . always conferred,” is always a function of historical production. To the extent that matter itself becomes a product-effect of form, the priority

Butler confers to historical form is not a critical reinscription of the form/matter distinction. It is instead a hypertrophy of the productive power conventionally accorded to form as the principle of dynamism. The difference here is that form is now seen as an instrument of power. Thus, Butler seems to ascribe to “materiality” qualities that one might call superstructural or ideological:

*Materiality designates a certain effect of power. . . . Insofar as power operates successfully by constituting an object domain . . . as a taken-for-granted ontology, its material effects are taken as material data or primary givens. These material positivities appear outside discourse and power, as its incontestable referents, its transcendental signifieds. But this appearance is precisely the moment in which the power/discourse regime is most fully dissimulated and most insidiously effective.* [34–35]

This definition of materiality indicates that although much of Butler’s book is written as a general critique of the role played by matter or nature as a concept in the anthropocentric metaphysics of the subject, her investigations are also confined to the materiality of *human bodies*. In her syncretization of Foucault/Aristotle, matter is invested with dynamism and said to be open to contestation only because the matter concerned is the product of sociohistorical forms of power, that is, of *the human realm*.

Now, humanism is an anthropocentrism. But a critique of humanism which stresses that the human subject is an effect rather than merely given is still anthropologistic insofar as its domain of investigation still remains non-natural. This anthropologistic horizon is even more salient in Butler’s use of the psychoanalytic notion of the imaginary anatomy. Here, a strong antinaturalism begins to emerge because she theorizes the fluidity and malleability of bodies in terms of the unique role played by the psychical body image in the formation of *human* bodily subjects. Briefly, Freud argues that the psychical investment of a body part actually constitutes it because it is only through this investment that the body part becomes phenomenologically accessible to us at all. In his theory of the mirror stage, where the imago plays a fundamental role in the genesis of the ego, Lacan develops Freud’s postulate into an account of subject constitution according to which it is impossible to determine the chronological priority of the psychical image of the body or the physical body. For Lacan, the psychical body image is not merely a mapping of a prior body but the condition through which bodily materiality appears and can be experienced as such. Put another way, physical experience of the body as the provisional center of all experience emerges simultaneously with the idea of the body.

Philosophically speaking, Lacan’s concept of the body image is a transcendental-phenomenological investigation of the conditions under which the experience and apprehension of one’s own body is possible. Thus, the psychoanalytic notion of morphology differs from Foucault’s account of the body because it does not explain the *causality* of social-historical forms in producing the materiality of bodies. The former is a transcendental argument about ontological conditions of possibility; the latter is an argument about historical causality. Butler synthesizes the two approaches by conflating the element of prohibition in the psychoanalytic notion of identification with Foucault’s microphysical account of regulation.<sup>4</sup> The notion of morphology as a projected body

4. “*If prohibitions in some sense constitute projected morphologies, then reworking the terms of these prohibitions suggests the possibility of various projections, variable modes of delineating and theatricalizing body surfaces. These would be ‘ideas’ of the body, without which there would be no ego, no temporary centering of experience.* To the extent that such supporting ‘ideas’ are regulated by prohibition and pain, they can be understood as the forcible and materialized effects of regulatory power” [64, emphasis added].

schema which delineates and produces the human body through identification indicates the phantasmatic nature of human bodies. In Butler's view, the Lacanian account of the morphological imaginary offers ontological corroboration for Foucault's historical-causal argument about the materialization of ideal forms.

But the fit between the ontological and historical aspects of Butler's theory is uneasy since it involves some confusion between a psycho- or ontogenetic condition of possibility and an empirical cause. Indeed, Butler is aware that the notion of the body image carries a trace of Kantianism which she has to eradicate in the interests of consistency. Let us follow closely this point of tension in her argument. In Butler's view, a Kantian formulation of the body conceives the material body as noumenal, a pre-given ontological *Ding an sich*, and the psyche as an epistemological grid that establishes the body's mode of appearance as an object for cognition [66]. Butler suggests, however, that one could also see psychic projection as having a formative power since it is the body schema which delineates the boundaries of a bodily ego by uniting disconnected sensations which do not yet make up a body. The contours of the body or morphology, understood as "the mode by which the body is given, the condition and contour of its givenness" [66], would here be an intermediary term, a site of vacillation between psyche and matter. For Butler, the body schema is not a Kantian formulation of the body because the psyche is no longer only a grid which maps a preexisting material body but actually forms morphology ("the psyche is formative of morphology" [66]).

A difficulty, however, lies in the meaning of the predicate "formative" and its related verb, "to form." Butler's use of the word vacillates ambiguously between two possibilities, not quite a productive action (*poiesis*) or a causal transitive action (*praxis*) nor a representational/mediating act which renders something accessible to experience. On the one hand, Butler is careful to stress that the body cannot just be a causal effect of the psyche [66]. That would be an absurd form of idealism which denies the existence of intelligibility and materiality as two different orders of being by reducing materiality to a psychical effect. On the other hand, however, because she also has to insist on the productive power of psychical forms or images in order to distance her position from one where the body preexists its cognition, she has to ascribe a causality of sorts to the psyche. This causality is, however, restricted to the contours or surfaces of the body, the site where the body comes to mean, where it is intelligible. Just as Butler had earlier ascribed superstructural qualities to materiality, the materiality of the body now designates its contours of intelligibility and is suspended in quotes:

*It must be possible to concede and affirm an array of "materialities" that pertain to the body, that which is signified by the domains of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age, weight, metabolism, life and death. . . . But the undeniability of these "materialities" in no way implies what it means to affirm them, indeed, what interpretive matrices condition, enable and limit that necessary affirmation. . . . [E]ach of those categories have a history and a historicity, . . . each of them is constituted through boundary lines that distinguish them, . . . relations of discourse and power produce hierarchies and overlappings among them and challenge those boundaries. . . .*

*We might want to claim that what persists within these contested domains is the "materiality" of the body. [66–67]*

The category of materiality itself is now said to be a seductive construction, an epistemic object constituted through and by the network of productive power. By historicizing the process by which morphology is formed, Butler links morphology's formative power over materiality to a Foucaultian account of productive power. Like other feminist readers

of Lacan such as Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Gallop, and Margaret Whitford, she will destabilize the Lacanian separation of the Imaginary from the Symbolic by arguing that the formation of morphology is already a function of social value since the morphological scheme which is the condition of objective exteriority is already marked masculine.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than enter into that arena, I want to point out that the terms of that debate are anthropologistic and that in Butler's case, her anthropologistic argument about the historic-cultural dynamism of materiality *qua* morphology leads to an antinaturalistic account of bodies. Now, Lacan's notion of morphology is anthropologistic because, arising out of an account of "the ontological structure of the *human* world," it takes the existential differential between humanity and nature as its fundamental premise. The productive moment of the *imago* is a response to "an organic insufficiency in [man's] natural reality," where the "relation to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor uncoordination of the neo-natal months" ["The Mirror Stage" 4]. Consequently, compared to the permanence of nature, human ontology is an ontology of lack. But the experience of lack is also the possibility of human autonomy, because it propels humans from nature into culture, which will later take on the names of "society," "law," and "language." For Lacan, human autonomy from objective structure<sup>6</sup> originates in the body in the paradigmatic moment when the identification with an image of a stable body organizes the presubject into a subject.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Lacan characterizes this primordial cultural subjectivity as a formalism of the human body and proposes a revival of the Aristotelian notion of *morphe* ["SRE" 13]. The body image intervenes in the withdrawal of nature and maps a social place for the human being.<sup>8</sup> As a libidinally mapped body, the human body is therefore unnatural in its constitution.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding her critical reconfiguration of the Imaginary/Symbolic divide, Butler's reliance on the concept of morphology indicates that her account of the dynamism of human bodies presupposes a version of Lacan's separation between the Real and the Imaginary. As we have seen, the barrier between the Real and the Imaginary corresponds to the distinction between nature and its anthropologistic others. My point here is that Butler's account of dynamic materiality makes sense only within this anthropologistic horizon. By exploring the historical materialization of ideal forms, Foucault's account of productive power raised the question of a causal and dynamic relation between intelligibility and materiality in general. Instead of addressing this question directly, Butler obscures it by conflating an ontogenetic condition of possibility with an empirical cause in her synthesis of Foucault and psychoanalysis. This conflation

5. She also argues that the privileging of the phallus as the ultimate signifier in the Symbolic occurs through a disavowed phallocentric specular idealization of the penis as a body part.

6. "[T]he imaginary anatomy referred to here varies with the ideas (clear or confused) about bodily functions which are prevalent in a given culture. It all happens as if the body-image had an autonomous existence of its own, and by autonomous I mean here independent of objective structure" ["SRE" 13, *emphasis added*].

7. "It is the stability of the standing posture, the prestige of stature, the impressiveness of statues, which set the style for the identification in which the ego finds its starting point and leave their imprint in it forever" ["SRE" 15, *emphasis added*]. Note that these words connote form, shape, and outline.

8. "It is the gap separating man from nature that determines his lack of relationship to nature, and begets his narcissistic shield, with its nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which he is forever cut off, but this same structure is also the sight where his own milieu is grafted on to him, i.e. the society of his fellow men" ["SRE" 16].

9. "There is a specific relation here between man and his own body that is manifested in a series of social practices . . . in that it denies respect for the natural forms of the human body" ["Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" 11].

works by separating human bodies from immutable nature. Butler can argue that matter possesses a dynamism because it is always the matter of human bodies she tacitly refers to and because she already presupposes that human bodies inhabit a distinct ontological realm characterized by historical production, power, and ideal forms. Butler's pun that "bodies matter" expresses this amenability of human matter(s) to intelligible form which is the source of the dynamism of human matter. Since she takes it for granted that the nature of human bodies is already cultural, she does not consider that the instability of the opposition between nature and culture, as exemplified by human bodies, may be rooted in a yet unexplored causal relation between intelligibility and matter in general.

Indeed, it is possible to pose the question of a causal relation between intelligibility and matter in general within psychoanalysis if, instead of relying on the anthropological thesis that psychic life is unique to humanity, one investigated the broader ontological basis for the emergence of the psyche. It is because Butler does not explore this question that she does not quite succeed in escaping a Kantian formulation of the body. We have seen that Butler redefines bodily materiality in terms of the contours delimiting a body. It is true that in her account the body is no longer a preexistent entity awaiting phenomenological recognition, since the body is morphological. Nevertheless, the idea of morphology presupposes a state of disconnected sensations which are subsequently organized into a body. Hence, if the morphological body is not to be another quasi-Kantian epistemic grid, then morphology must have a causal power over these disconnected sensations in order to unite them into a body. The issues of the causality of ideational forms over matter or the mutual interactions between intelligibility and matter in general seem crucial at this point. Butler, however, explores these issues in the attenuated form of the referential relationship between language and matter. Having suggested that language and materiality are implicated terms that are never fully identical or different from each other because materiality is a constitutive demand for language which is yet always posited through signification, Butler asks the following question and offers the following answer:

*[W]hat then do we make of that kind of materiality that is associated with the body, its physicality as well as its location, including its social and political locatedness, and that materiality that characterizes language?... To answer the question of the relation between the materiality of bodies and that of language requires first that we offer an account of how it is that bodies materialize, that is, how they come to assume the morphe, the shape by which their material discreteness is marked. . . . And within the Lacanian view, language understood as rules of differentiation based on idealized kinship relations, is essential to the development of morphology. . . . Bodies only become whole, i.e., totalities, by the idealizing and totalizing specular image which is sustained through time by the sexually marked name. . . . What constitutes the integral body is not a natural boundary or organic telos, but the law of kinship that works through the name. In this sense, the paternal law produces versions of bodily integrity; the name which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative. [69, 72]*

The hypertrophy of productive form we witnessed earlier appears here as the power of names to sustain the bodily integrity and material discreteness initially conferred by the imago through reiteration. Once again, production does not operate causally at an atomistic level but formatively, at the level where bodily boundaries are repeatedly delineated, this time by means of a performative use of language. The specter of Kantianism returns precisely because materiality becomes present, is given body, materializes only in being named or signified in language, which cannot quite avoid the



role of being an epistemic grid of sorts. Furthermore, however inhuman and antipathetic to intentionality language is in structuralist accounts of signification, language remains coextensive with humanity unless one begins to think of *the condition of possibility* of language as a system of marks in general prior to the opposition between nature and its anthropologistic others. But since for Butler, linguistic form and iteration remain within a sociohistorical or cultural horizon, one can say that despite her trenchant critique of the metaphysics of grammar and the intentional subject, the dynamism she attributes to bodily materiality remains a function of sociohistorical form, where form is the anthropologistic process of signification *sans* subject.

So far, I have been discussing the theoretical sources of Butler's account of the agency of bodies. I want now to outline her account of subversion and relate its major shortcomings back to her anthropologistic theory of the agency of bodies. As we have seen, Butler's theory of productive historical forms/schemas synthesizes Foucault's notion of productive power with a psychoanalytic notion of repressive identification and a performative/iterative account of signification. It results in an account of subversion where the body's dynamism derives from negativity. The understanding of bodies as a process of materialization introduces a gap between regulatory ideals or norms and the bodies through which these norms are forcibly materialized through persistent reiteration. Since these hegemonic norms form bodily boundaries through exclusion, Butler suggests that the instabilities of reiteration offer the possibility of counterhegemonic rematerializations through the resignification of those alternative ideals of sex previously repressed as abject bodies deprived of symbolic value. Butler insists on the need to supplement Foucault with psychoanalysis because it offers an account of prohibition and repression which usefully points to this domain of abjected bodies excluded in the formation/constitution of body ideals [22]. However, because these abject bodies occupy the structural position of a condition of possibility whose exclusion or denegation is necessary to the constitution of any norm, they cannot be significatively affirmed as counterhegemonic norms, new identitarian grounds for political claims, without producing their own constitutive violations in turn. In her readings of literary and filmic examples of queer performativity, Butler suggests that since all agency is enabled by the reiteration of hegemonic discursive norms, there are no guarantees that acts such as passing and drag do not end up reinforcing these very norms. This is a valuable caution that political critique must be interminable. Butler's point is that because one is always implicated in that which one opposes, one must resist seeing political contestation in terms of a pure transcendence of contemporary relations of power [241]. Thus, she urges us to refigure this structural position of exclusion—which she calls a constitutive outside—"as a future horizon . . . in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome" [53]. The irrecuperability of this outside functions like the force of absolute negation. "[It] acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability, illuminating the violent and contingent boundaries of the normative regime . . . through the inability of that regime to represent that which might pose a fundamental threat to its continuity" [53].

Abstracted from its immediate situation of gender and queer politics, this idea of a constitutive outside serves as the basis for a radical vision of the political which exceeds the conventional political ideals of distributive justice, inclusive representability and egalitarian sharing. Butler's notion of the constitutive outside is the culminating point of her refiguring of the form/matter distinction in order to invest the human body with dynamism. Her theory of productive historical forms tries to wrench the concept of agency away from both the essentialist determinism of matter and the freedom of construction.<sup>10</sup>

---

10. "There is a tendency to think that sexuality is either constructed or determined; to think that if it is constructed, it is in some sense free, and if it is determined, it is in some sense fixed. These oppositions do not describe the complexity of what is at stake in any effort to take account of the conditions under which sex and sexuality are assumed" [94].

Butler attempts to dissociate her position from a Kantian account, where ideal form is imposed on preexisting matter, precisely because she sees the Kantian position as a dogmatic and essentialist move in which matter is posited as an immutable given that exists outside (hegemonic) form. She suggests that this move is replicated by Slavoj Žižek, who locates the possibility of political contestation in a Lacanian notion of the Real which resists hegemonic discourse.<sup>11</sup> For Butler, the notion of the Real is an uncritical characterization of matter as immutable. Instead of being a positivity capable of retrieval, the Real is a negativity that resists signification. Butler suggests that Žižek's position is dangerous because it ends up permanently attributing the outside of discourse to specific social or sexual positions which can then be affirmed only through a celebration of psychosis. As an alternative, she proposes the idea of a dynamic outside [189]. She argues that matter is invested with a subversive dynamism which is the negativity associated with the vicissitudes of signification and iteration. The dispute with Žižek thus centers on how the constitutive exclusions of hegemony are to be characterized: should the subversive agency of human materiality be characterized as the negativity of immutable matter outside hegemonic form or as the negativity inhering in the iterative materialization of human bodies through hegemonic form? The important point here is that, although Butler disagrees with Žižek on the source of the subversive agency of materiality, they both share a similar understanding of the form/matter distinction where matter is immutable and form is a principle of dynamism. For Žižek, the Real has the force of absolute negation because it is an ahistorical, immutable, and unsymbolizable substance which calls for signification but which signification can never hope to capture. Now, although Butler invests matter with a sociohistorical or significative negativity, she shares a similar understanding of the immutability of matter insofar as for her the dynamism of matter pertains only to the morphological boundaries of *human* bodies as they are delineated by regulative norms of power through psychical identification and the performative linguistic action of naming, which delineates referents as objects *for* human beings. What is never once posed in Butler's debate with Žižek is the possibility that matter could have a dynamism that is neither the negativity of the unsymbolizable nor reducible to a function of productive form. In other words, both Butler and Žižek agree that matter is immutable *outside a social-anthropological purview*.

To return to a point I made earlier, insofar as for Butler matter itself becomes a product-effect of historical form, she does not reinscribe the form/matter distinction but instead extends the productive power conventionally accorded to form as the principle of dynamism. We saw that this extension of the productive power of form to human materiality relied on the anthropological divorce of humanity from nature. This thesis of the unnatural nature of human nature allowed Butler to conflate an ontogenetic condition of possibility with an empirical cause and to reconcile Foucault with Lacan. Thus, instead of using the instability of the nature/culture opposition in human bodies as a point of departure to explore a possible causal relation between intelligibility and matter in general, Butler merely dissimulates the conventional form/matter distinction by displacing it into an opposition between inert passive nature and its anthropological others. Yet the excluded category of natural materiality, matter outside a social-anthropological purview, returns to trouble Butler's account of agency.

Butler distinguishes gender performativity from a willed and self-controlling act by alerting us to the weightiness or imbricatedness that characterizes a being constituted in discourse. She sees this weightiness of being-in-discourse as the result of political identification wherein a signifier within a chain of signification is taken up:

---

11. For an extended comparison of Lacan's Real with Kantian noumenality, see Kremer-Marietti.

*"Agency" would then be the double movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where "to be constituted" means "to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime" the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, 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.* [220]

The point I want to stress is that by defining “constitution” as repeated identification, Butler confines the term within an ideational scenario. Consequently, she hesitates before the question of what sustains the causal power of intelligible form over matter, the question of what allows intelligible form to materialize as matter in general. Yet this question seems unavoidable. For if “‘to be constituted’ means ‘to be compelled to cite, to repeat or to mime’ the signifier itself,” it must be asked: what are the ontological conditions under which the compulsion to identify can take place? Since my first question can be read as a positivist foreclosure of the enablement of the signifier, let me rephrase it: what is the nature of matter as such that discourse can have a formative or even causal power over bodies that the ideational scenario of psychical identification implies? Does not the concept of morphology as a mediating term between psyche and matter presuppose this question of the causal power of ideas over matter and vice versa but cannot ask it? Put another way, if *nomos* or *tekhnē* can become *physis*, then must there not be another nonanthropologic level of dynamism subtending these different orders, irreducible to mechanical laws of causality and naturalist teleology, of which the performativity of language would only be a case? This would imply that political change can no longer be understood as a function of sociohistorical form *qua* the sole principle of dynamism. Instead, the category of the political itself needs to be rethought outside of the terms of history and culture, which are its time-honored cognates.

Why is a rethinking of the dynamism of materiality that, in the first instance, no longer just inheres in embodiment as spatial extension or in a subjectified or linguisticized realm more salutary to a rethinking of the political? What are the practical implications of theorizing dynamism at a nonanthropologic level of the given or nature prior to and exceeding the form/matter distinction? Butler’s account of productive historical forms and her theory of performative agency take the notion of phantasmatic identification—the assumption of the material mark of sex or the intelligible outline of a body through imaginary and symbolic ingestion—as the paradigm for oppression and subversion. Her immediate frame of reference is, of course, the field of gender, sexuality, and desire. Generalized into a political theory, this notion of phantasmatic identification promises to democratize contestation through the interminable proliferation and destabilization of provisional cross-identifications: “the contemporary political demand on thinking is to map out the interrelationships, without simplistically uniting, a variety of dynamic and relational positionalities within the political field. Further, it will be crucial to find a way to both occupy these sites *and* to subject them to a democratizing contestation in which the exclusionary conditions of their production are perpetually reworked (even though they can never be fully overcome) in the direction of a more complex coalitional frame” [115]. It is, however, not at all clear that all aspects of oppression can be reduced to or explained by the paradigm of regulatory identification/internalization of norms and, hence, that all subversion be inevitably centered on the contestation of *forms of identity*. Scholars in queer and feminist studies have cautioned against the reduction of sexual oppression to the internalization of constraining identity-forms [see Grosz; Martin]. I want to make two related but different points. First, the implausibility of identification as a paradigm of oppression is especially salient in scenarios of oppression where material marks are constituted through *physical* and not ideational ingestion, not necessarily of the order of the visible, such as the tracings of the digestive tract by inequalities in food

production and consumption or the weaving of the body through superexploitation, where hegemony does not function at the level of the outlining of *morphe* or form and is not necessarily even knowable. Second, the apparent plausibility of the identification paradigm is, in part, based on the tacit presupposition of an established culture of democratic contestation within the constitutional nation-state form.

Indeed, like most political theory, Butler's attempt to rethink political alliances across various minority signifiers such as "sex," "ethnicity," or "culture" clearly presupposes the North Atlantic scenario of constitutional democracy within passive capitalist relations.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even if we accept—and I have many reservations about this claim—that democratic contestation is the universal ideal for all polities, Butler's theory of the political seems not to work so well in the situation of global neocolonialism, where oppression occurs at a physical level; transnational corporatism truncates the development of a transformative democratic culture and subversion consists in the protracted negotiation by various levels of actors (extending from the bourgeois postcolonial nation-state to unorganized peasant labor and nonwage workers) with the economic imperatives of the global system. *Cosmo-political* transformation or change in a global sense of the political covers various discontinuous levels, extending from the rearticulation of needs by subaltern ecological resistance to state-sanctioned development to the (sometimes spurious) assertion of cultural identity by the postcolonial nation-state against international human rights organizations. All these efforts must tap the motility of the material linkages (labor and fiscal flows, international relations) in which the respective actors are constitutively mired and which make up the global-system. Here, precisely because change must be posed in terms of how a global-systemic field of forces—what Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer, Lefebvre and others, following Marx, called "a second nature"—produces the bodily reality of the disenfranchised, a hypertrophying of productive historical or cultural form as the operative principle of dynamism seems ineffectual. By contrast, the dynamism that inheres in the linkages and interconnectedness effected by processes of globalization might be described as an incalculable tendentiousness where form and matter, culture and nature, are woven together in an immanence that escapes rational decision and calculation. Philosophically speaking, this is why we need an account of the political agency of bodies that no longer respects the form/matter or nature/culture distinctions.

At this point, I want to turn to Elizabeth Grosz's refiguring of the form/matter distinction, because it results in an account of the political agency of bodies that is different from Butler's. Although Grosz also theorizes bodies in terms of the social constitution of nature by relying on a productive account of power, unlike Butler she actually makes an ontological claim about why human bodies are amenable to acculturation:

*I will deny that there is the "real," material body on one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. It is my claim . . . that these representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such. The bodies in which I am interested are culturally, sexually, racially specific bodies, the mobile and changeable terms of cultural production. As an essential internal condition of human bodies, a consequence perhaps of their organic openness to cultural completion, bodies must take the social order as their productive nucleus. Part of their own "nature" is an organic or ontological "incompleteness" or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organization. [x-xi]*

---

12. I have developed this line of argument more fully in a discussion of the limits of the neo-Kantian political morality of the early Habermas; see Cheah.

While Grosz's allusion to the Lacanian thesis of the organic incompleteness of human bodies indicates an anthropological focus (more on this later), the important point to note is that Grosz suggests the existence of a bidirectional causal relationship between sociocultural forms and materiality. This means that for her the productive power of cultural forms over matter or nature—what she calls “inscription” with a nod to Derrida—is not limited to the delineation of intelligible bodily boundaries but extends to the “stuff” of matter. Indeed, because Grosz sees the causal relationship as bidirectional, she ascribes a dynamism to materiality that exceeds an anthropological purview to include all organically animate bodies.

*Human bodies, indeed all animate bodies, stretch and extend the notion of physicality that dominates the physical sciences, for animate bodies are objects necessarily different from other objects; they are materialities that are uncontainable in physicalist terms alone. If bodies are objects or things, they are like no others, for they are the centres of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency. . . . Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. [xi]*

Grosz elaborates this thesis of the volatility of bodies by tracing the bidirectional constitution of psychical interiority and material exteriority, the drifts or vectors from inside out (part 2) to outside in (part 3) in her critical expositions of various theories of subjectivity. By figuring the embodied subject in terms of the model of the Möbius loop or three-dimensional figure “eight,” she suggests that a third term may subtend and exceed the mind/body split. This third term is figured as the torsion or rotation from interiority or exteriority and vice versa, the vanishing point where outside and inside, materiality and intelligibility become indistinguishable.

Grosz's chapters on Freud, Lacan, and Foucault, intellectual resources she shares with Butler, provide the clearest sites of contrast with Butler. In her chapter on psychical topographies, Grosz presents a broader discussion of Freud and Lacan than Butler's account of the morphological body, because she makes a sustained attempt to understand the ontological basis for the constitutive augmentation of the natural body by cultural processes. First, where Butler uses Freud/Lacan to suggest that the psychical body image provides the contours that constitute the condition through which the bodily ego appears and can be experienced as the center of perception, Grosz's more detailed study of Freud suggests that the ego must be seen as an *interface* arising from the *interaction of two different perceptual surfaces*: the surface that records external sensory experience such as bodily sensations and the surface where these sensations are subjectively experienced [37]. While Grosz cautiously adds that this does not make the ego an effect caused by the body or its surface, this consideration of the interactive role of bodily sensations in the constitution of the ego (downplayed by Butler) implies a point or moment where sensations and perception are taken over by a fantasmatic dimension and so become indistinguishable from psychical life.

Grosz returns to this point by linking the notion of psychical topography to the question of the relation between psychology and biology in Freud's “Project for a Scientific Psychology.” For Grosz, Freud's earlier interest in how psychical or mental qualities such as memory could emerge from purely neurological quantities of excitation poses the question of the genesis of the psychical from the biological. But where Freud remains within Cartesian dualism by postulating a psychophysical parallelism between consciousness and a third neurological system mediating between mnemonic and perceptual neurological systems, Grosz suggests that his hypotheses support the more radical claim that “consciousness . . . is the result of a particular modality of quantitative excitations,

that it *is*, and not just accompanies, the periodicity of excitations” [51]. This implies a causal relation between biology and psyche which is, Grosz argues, elaborated in the attachment of sexual drives to biological processes. The important point to note here is that for Grosz, this derivation and departure of drives from instincts in the movement of anaclisis or propping results in the alteration of biological instincts themselves through their mimicry or retracing by sexual drives [54].

Consequently, her reading of psychoanalysis is distinguishable from Butler’s in two respects. First, psychical processes have a constitutive power over biological processes which are not confined to the level of intelligible form but literally inscribe and change the anatomical, physiological, and neurological rhythms of bodily life [60, 76], although the moment of impingement may begin with mimicry at the level of form as the notion of propping suggests. Furthermore, where Butler cannot quite escape a Kantian account of morphology, Grosz suggests that this power of the psyche is a causal power over the body. But second and more importantly, this is not a monism. Grosz suggests that the causal power of psychical processes is not unidirectional. Psychical processes do not impose themselves upon biological processes unilaterally but are demanded to augment biology through a constitutive susceptibility in the latter. Thus, Grosz observes that “[s]exuality insinuates itself in the various biological and instinctual processes because there is, as it were, a space which it can occupy, an incompleteness at the level of instincts that it can harness for its own purposes. . . . In this sense, paradoxically, human subjects are biologically social, social out of biological necessity. A lack at the level of instincts distinguishes the advent of human desire from animal need” [54–55].<sup>13</sup>

We can therefore see that although both Butler and Grosz invest the materiality of the human body with agency, their arguments proceed from opposite directions. We have seen that for Butler, the dynamism of matter is a function of sociohistorical form and that the agency of bodies is the force of negativity which inheres in the repetition of these repressive but productive norms. For Grosz, however, human biological matter possesses a positive life-force which produces consciousness, culture, and sociality as its necessary supplements. This emphasis on the positive dynamism of bodies leads Grosz to distinguish between negative and positive theories of desire, the former exemplified by Plato, Hegel, Freud, and Lacan and the latter by Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze,<sup>14</sup> and to favor a positive theory of desire and corporeality in part 3 of her book. The question is whether Grosz’s account of the positive dynamism of corporeality no longer privileges the *anthropos* as the original source of dynamism. No clear answer can be given to this question. Those parts of Grosz’s book that develop her ontological argument of a bidirectional causal relationship between intelligibility and materiality certainly indicate a radical displacement of the nature/culture and form/matter distinctions as they pertain to the agency of bodies. However, this move is also undercut by her reliance on Lacan’s anthropological thesis about the biologically social nature unique to human subjectivity,

---

13. Cf. “[T]hese theorists and clinicians have demonstrated the extreme pliability, the inherent amenability of the body image to immense transformations, upheavals and retranscriptions according to psychical, biological, social and signifying changes. The body image does not map a biological body onto a psychosocial domain, providing a kind of translation of the material into conceptual terms; rather it attests to the necessary interconstituency of each for the other, the radical inseparability of biological from psychical elements, the mutual dependence of the psychical and the biological” [85].

14. “Where desire is construed as negative, a lack or incompleteness, it is a function and effect of the mind, psyche, or idea: its phenomenal form dictates its key characteristics. Where desire is understood as positive production, it is viewed ‘behaviorally,’ in terms of its manifest connections and allegiances, its artifice, its bodily impetus. The psychoanalytic and phenomenological accounts of the body thus presume and entail the notion of desire and the ontology of lack, while the Spinozist, productivist notion entails an externalized perspective” [222n1].

a dictum that remains implicit despite the positive theory of corporeality she elaborates in the later parts of her book.

Grosz's questioning of the binary opposition between nature and culture is articulated at an ambitious level of ontological generality even if this articulation is brief. Unlike Butler, who restricts the term "materiality" to the anthropologistic confines of human bodies, Grosz suggests that the human body itself can be reduced neither to a natural, raw, or presocial entity nor to a social, cultural, or signifying effect "lacking its own weighty materiality." Grosz wishes to reexamine the interaction and engagement of the two terms in human bodies, "the production of the natural in the (specific) terms of the cultural, the cultural as the (reverse) precondition of the natural" [21], as a destabilization of the nature/culture opposition in general.

*It is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, to completely transcribe it without residue into the cultural: this itself is the monist, logocentric, gesture par excellence. Instead, the interimplication of the natural and the social or cultural needs further investigation—the hole in nature which allows cultural seepage or production must provide something like a natural condition for cultural production; but in turn, the cultural too must be seen in its limitations, as a kind of insufficiency that requires natural supplementation. Culture itself can only have meaning and value in terms of its own other(s): when its others are obliterated—as tends to occur within the problematic of social constructionism—culture in effect takes on all the immutable, fixed characteristics attributed to the natural order. Nature may be understood not as an origin or as an invariable template but as materiality in its most general sense, as destination (with all the impossibilities, since Derrida, that this term implies). The relation is neither a dialectic (in which case there is the possibility of supersession of the binary terms) nor a relation of identity but is marked by the interval, by pure difference. [21]*

Grosz suggests that if we want to investigate the paradoxical interplay between nature and culture of which the human body is a case, then we have to consider what it is in both terms which allows this interplay to happen. Here, an inquiry into the differential constitution of "nature" and "culture" in their interdependence discloses a philosophically prior space or movement that Grosz calls "materiality as destination." This is a nonsubstantialist reinscription of the concept of matter outside the form/matter distinction as the dynamism of subindividual differences of forces. I will call this dynamism "mattering."

The shift here is from a model of independent subjectivity to an attempt to track the constitutive miredness of autonomous subjectivity in the always-already occurring momentum of a cross-hatching of hetero-determinations. Within the context of the political argument of Grosz's book, this dynamism of differences of forces has an ethical significance because, in reminding us of the differential constitution of materiality, it alerts us to the fundamental role played by sexual difference (*qua* example of pure difference in a Saussurean-Derridean sense) in the constitution of corporeal identity. In an allusion to Luce Irigaray, Grosz suggests that sexual difference as an ethical problematic should be thought not as a comparison between two types of independently existing sexual identities but instead as a constitutive interval between the sexes which always remains unbridgeable by experience or knowledge [208]. The founding status of the movement of differentiation is here incarnated as an aporia between sexual difference and sexual identity. On the one hand, feminist political theory must ground itself, however provisionally, in a sexual identity. On the other hand, the insistence on that ground seals off sexual identity from the ongoing relations of differentiation that constituted that identity in the first place and that are the conditions of its reconstitution through time.

Sexual identity would, in a sense, be a violation of sexual difference. Yet this violence should not be understood in opposition to peace. Sexual identity and sexual difference are in an aporetic embrace. This is because difference or absolute alterity as such can appear only in its effacement. Hence, sexual difference as the closest phenomenal analogue to pure difference gives itself to be violated in its codings as sexual identity. In Grosz's words, "the framework . . . of sexual difference entails not the concept of a continuum, a wholeness, a predivisional world as plenum, but the simultaneous recognition and effacement of the spacings, the intervals . . . that bind each 'thing' to every other and to the whole of existence without, however, linking them into an organic or metaphysical wholeness" [209].

The ethical dimension of the alterity or exteriority in mattering brought out by Grosz is different from Butler's idea of the constitutive outside. Both notions of exteriority point to outsides that remain irre recuperable and are thus sites for a persistent critique of hegemony. Butler's notion of the constitutive outside, however, refers to an outside formed through the exclusionary materialization of human bodies as meaningful bodies. It consists of abjected bodies excluded from symbolic significance in the formation of historical bodily ideals. Consequently, for Butler, this outside returns like the repressed, as the force of negative disruption within reiterative signification that characterizes the failure of conformity to symbolic ideals. By contrast, the constitutive trace of alterity in Grosz's sense occurs at a prior level of the very giving of matter in general within a shifting field of differences of forces. It is neither positive nor negative: it is a generative violence that needs to be affirmed as the condition of possibility of the subsistence and reconstitution of bodies as they continue to exist in time. Because it refers to the recalcitrant residue left over by the materialization of symbolic ideals, Butler's notion of the constitutive outside does not carry the same sense of affirmative responsibility to constitutive alterity.

Butler has recently argued that the positions of Derrida and Foucault are incompatible on the grounds that the former is concerned with the production of limitless (im)possibilities at a transcendental or logical level whereas the latter is concerned with the fabrication of local ideals which "enhance the sense of politically practicable possibilities" ["Poststructuralism" 10–11]. I will consider Derrida's work in the next section. Here, I want to suggest that although Grosz does not explore this point, her emphasis on the generative violence of difference in the constitution of corporeality, a position indebted to Derrida, might not be discontinuous with Foucault's position because its questioning of the form/matter distinction also implies an undoing of the opposition between the transcendental and the immanent analogous to Foucault's rethinking of power as a shifting substrate of forces. In my discussion of *Bodies That Matter*, I questioned the accuracy of Butler's attempt to make Foucault compatible with a psychoanalytic notion of identification. Here, I want to suggest that Butler's reading of Foucault does not take into account that Foucault's exploration of the constitution of the prisoner's body led him to contemplate a positive notion of dynamism, not reducible to a function of productive historical form or signification, which he called a microphysics of power, a level mediating between the state and the materiality of bodies and their forces, constituting the very physicality of bodies by penetrating their pores rather than just delineating their surfaces [*Discipline and Punish* 28]. It is immensely significant, I think, that notwithstanding Foucault's profound historicism, he subsequently theorized power at a nonanthropological level of generality, in terms of *differences of forces* that engender states of power only in the last instance:

*[P]ower must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and*

*confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. Power's condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise . . . and which also makes it possible to use its mechanism as a grid of intelligibility of the social order . . . is the moving substrate of force relations, which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. . . . One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure [like language or signification]; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is a name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. [History of Sexuality 93]*

The important point here is that the moving substrate of force relations which is the condition of possibility of power cannot be understood solely as a function of historical or social form. For while power is not an ontological structure or substance that precedes sociality, it is nevertheless not reducible to it, because social hegemony must be understood as a codification of these force relations. Yet, although these force relations are immanent to a given sociohistorical situation and can have empirical causal effects, they are paradoxically also quasi-transcendental because they represent a condition of possibility for grasping the *Socius*, a grid of its intelligibility, which cannot “itself” be accessible to cognitive or practical-intentional mastery and control. This is because the field of shifting force relations is unmotivated although not capricious. Thus, power as a field of forces is “something” that can only be named catachrestically because it can only be descriptively isolated in its dissimulation in sociality. Given Foucault’s emphasis on how ideational norms can materialize as physical bodies through power, one can also see this simultaneous inertia and productivity, passivity and activity of differences of forces<sup>15</sup> as the effaced trace, which is the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility *and* the immanent causal origin of empiricity, physicality, materiality, or nature. The conventional opposition between transcendentality and immanence is here undone along with the opposition between nature and culture. Whereas in Butler’s use of Foucault, the nature or matter of human bodies is understood as a product of historical/cultural form, in my reading of Foucault, the weightiness or immutability of nature is now to be understood as an effect of differences of forces that are philosophically prior to the anthropologistic distinctions between form/matter, nature/culture, or nature/history.

Like Grosz’s account of the generative violence of difference in the constitution of corporeality, Foucault’s notion of power as a field of forces also points to the dynamism of mattering. It is important to emphasize that this responding/responsibility to the giving of matter is perpetually fraught with risk. The dynamism of mattering is neither active nor passive, positive nor negative, present nor absent, since “it” exceeds an anthropologistic horizon. Consequently, *both* the immutability of nature or the given and the variability of culture, history, the social, or production can be understood as the product-effects of “mattering,” the quasi-transcendental site of their interimplication, the condition of (im)possibility of nature and its anthropologistic others. To make another point that Grosz does not make, this means that the dynamism of mattering is not *a priori* enabling or

---

15. “I was putting forth the hypothesis that there was a specificity to power relationships, a density, an inertia, a viscosity, a course of development and an inventiveness which belonged to these relationships and which it was necessary to analyze” [“Clarifications” 184].

disenabling, useful or harmful to human theoretical or practical activity. Like Butler's notion of the constitutive outside, the dynamism of mattering is a founding and enabling violence. The crucial difference is that Grosz focuses on the relationality of bodies, not only at the ideational or subjective level of cross-identification, but also in terms of the differential inscription of materiality—"the complex intertwining relations of mutual production and feedback of materially different bodies, substances, forms of matter and materially different inscriptions, tracings, transformations" [189]. This, coupled with her insistence on the open-endedness of materiality which remains incalculable for humanity, provides a fruitful philosophical point of departure for exploring the precarious possibilities of agency in scenarios of material interconnectedness other than democratic contestation. I have suggested that neocolonial globalization is one such urgent scenario.

It should, however, be said that Grosz's brief articulation of the interminable responsibility to mattering is, as she realizes, undercut by her heuristic use of the Möbius loop as a model for subjectivity. Two points are important here. First, although the Möbius loop is an apposite figure for the interimplication between the inside and outside of the subject, exterior corporeal surfaces and psychical or conscious interiority, it remains a figure of autonomy insofar as the interplay between inside and outside is limited to the inside and outside of the subject. Thus, Grosz acknowledges that "utilizing the Möbius strip limits our understanding of the subject in terms of dualism but links it to a kind of monism, autonomy or self-presence that precludes understanding the body, bodies, as the terrain and effect of difference" [210]. Second, despite her gesturing toward the nonanthropological dimension of mattering in her thesis about the openness of materiality as destination, Grosz seems to intern the dynamism of mattering within an anthropological confine in most of her discussions by giving an anthropo-ontological explanation for the torsion between culture and nature, intelligibility and materiality. This is because, like Butler, Grosz also relies on the Lacanian thesis of the natural lack in mankind, the thesis of the innately social nature of humanity, as the condition of possibility of culture.

Consequently, an active/passive split resurfaces in Grosz's reduction of the dynamism of materiality to the positive activity of human bodies. This occurs often, when propositions made about the agency of bodies refer only to the active ability of human bodies to overcome biological constraints. For instance, Grosz suggests that the human body has a capacity "to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment, to continually augment its powers and capacities through the incorporation into the body's own spaces and modalities of objects that, while external, are internalized, added to, supplementing and supplemented by the 'organic body' . . . surpassing the body, not 'beyond' nature but in collusion with a nature that never lived up to its name, that represents always the most blatant cultural anxieties and propositions" [187–88, emphasis added]. And despite her caution that one should not dismiss nature, Grosz also uncritically employs the conventional philosopheme of production in her claim that the human body should be seen as "a cultural interweaving and production of nature" [18] or that "the body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; . . . [but] is itself a cultural, *the* cultural product" [23]. Furthermore, despite her astute observation that the body is indeterminably positioned between material weightiness and cultural variability so that either trait may be used depending on whether one opposes essentialism or social constructionism, the emphasis on strategic use favors variability as a higher level of strategic cognition. Often, the weightiness of matter or nature in general is played down. Or inhuman nature carries an unfavorable connotation in comparison with human nature, which is fluid and capable of retranscription, as in Grosz's remark about psychoanalytic accounts of the body: "[T]he body which it [psychoanalysis] presumes and helps to explain is an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it and consequently

capable of reinscribing the forms of sexual identity and psychical subjectivity at work today” [60–61].

At such moments, the dynamism of mattering as a questioning of the form/matter, activity/passivity distinctions is as attenuated by Grosz as it is in Butler’s account of the productive power of historical forms. One sees the exclusive identification of dynamic activity with human materiality in Grosz’s reading of Foucault. Drawing a contrast between Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s accounts of the power-body nexus, Grosz argues that the body is a passive target of power in Foucault, whereas for Nietzsche the body is the active site from which the will to power emanates.

*Foucault’s anti-humanism dismisses consciousness as a mode of active resistance to power’s alignments; but at the same time he seems to strip corporeality itself of its multiplicity of forces. Nietzsche’s bodies, like Foucault’s, are inscribed by power, branded to create a memory, but this is precisely because the body’s forces, the forces of forgetfulness are so strong. For Nietzsche the body’s forces are the site for resistance because of their impetus and energy, not simply because of their location and recalcitrance.* [147]

Grosz advocates a displacement of the active capacity for transformation traditionally accorded to consciousness into a multiplicity of corporeal forces. Instead of questioning the thematic opposition between passivity and activity which underlies the form/matter and mind/body distinctions, she merely reverses the correlation of activity with mind by ascribing it to body or matter. Consequently, although Grosz and Butler differ in their refiguration of the form/matter distinction and although their readings of Foucault differ (Grosz locates agency in the active recalcitrance of bodily materiality to power, whereas Butler locates agency in the vicissitudes of the iteration of historical form), like Butler, Grosz also misses the peculiar dynamism implied by Foucault’s account of power.

In my discussion of Foucault, I suggested that it was the peculiarity of bodies as a paradoxical inmixing between history/culture and nature, *tekhnē* and *physis* which led to the thinking of power as differences of forces, a dynamism in excess of and constituting the distinction between nature and its others. Foucault’s suggestion that “the rallying point for the counter-attack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” [*History of Sexuality* 157] should, I think, be read in terms of his rethinking of power. Grosz, however, reads Foucault as arguing that the body is a passive target and a site of resistance by virtue of its recalcitrance as brute matter. She criticizes Foucault for gesturing toward bodies and pleasures as some natural outside preexisting the exercise of power [155]. However, what is at stake in the thinking of power as differences of forces is not that bodies are thoroughly invested with historical power (Butler) nor that the positive activity of bodily forces is a site of recalcitrance to historical power (Grosz). The stakes are instead a thinking of the dynamism of materiality as a process (mattering) suspended between the active and the passive, a dynamism that obeys an inhuman temporality which is incalculable by human political reason because as the condition of possibility of both, it oscillates undecidably between the passive weightiness of nature and the active variability of culture and history. If Grosz finds Foucault’s formulation of bodies and pleasures an “enigmatic” throwback to nature as raw materiality for a theoretician of productive power [155–56], I want to suggest that this enigma is a consequence of the paradoxical dynamism of mattering. Foucault’s “bodies and pleasures” do not refer to a prehistorical outside of the agency of sex-desire but the instability of unequal force relations. These force relations are both the condition of possibility and impossibility of the agency of sex-desire. As a condition of possibility, these force relations engender states of sex-desire which in turn codify pleasures.

Alternatively, as a condition of impossibility, these force relations can be affirmed by various strategic realignments as loci of resistance to the hegemonic states of sex-desire.

In sum, Butler's theory of productive historical forms ascribes the dynamism of human bodies to the negativity inhering in their constitution through identification with images or schemas. This relies on an ontological distinction between human bodies from the immutability and passivity of natural bodies outside a human purview. Although Grosz rethinks the agency of bodies in terms of the dynamism of materiality as destination, she codes this dynamism as the positive energy and activity that is the natural capacity of human bodies to be othered from the real. Both remain within an anthropologistic horizon insofar as they take an othering from nature as the mark of humanity. A more metaphysical name for humanity's "othering from nature" would be "freedom."

### *Deconstructive Materialism?*

My discussion of Butler's and Grosz's provocative and challenging attempts to rethink the dynamism of bodies indicates the immense difficulty of sustaining a radical questioning of conceptual categories as fundamental to our thinking as the nature/culture, form/matter, and active/passive distinctions without lapsing into an anthropologistic position. In the previous section, I argued that although Foucault's theory of power is commonly read as a historicist or sociological theory, it is, in fact, an attempt to grasp an inhuman or subindividual dynamism prior to the above conceptual distinctions. I also suggested that Grosz's emphasis on the generative violence of difference, a position indebted to Derrida, was continuous with Foucault's position although she does not read Foucault in the same way. Unlike Deleuze or Derrida, Foucault does not scrupulously document the relationship of his work to the history of philosophy. In this section, therefore, I will elaborate on the inhuman dynamism of mattering by turning to the work of Derrida. Before I do this, however, I want to situate the approaches of Grosz and Butler in relation to the intellectual history of anthropologistic theories of ethical transformative agency in order to juxtapose the work of Derrida with this intellectual trajectory.

Simply put, all anthropologistic theories of practice or transformative agency share three common axioms. First, they all regard the given as something inert and immutable, whether the given is conceived as that which is prior to human use or as nature in the Newtonian or Cartesian sense, the totality of objects governed by immutable causal laws. Second, they suspect, with some justification, that whenever human existence is described as merely given, such a description has oppressive consequences. Third, they try to show that human existence is dynamic and that this dynamism is the source of resistance or transformation. Of course, the contents of anthropologistic theories of ethical transformative agency vary widely and are sometimes antithetical to each other. The variance almost always occurs in how different theories conceptualize the dynamism of human existence. Consider, for instance, the most opulent tradition of practical philosophy, the humanist trajectory of German idealism and Marxist materialism. For Kant, practical freedom is grounded in the transcendental causality pertaining to ideas of reason. This causality is the ability of the human will to escape the bonds of facticity by prescribing universal rational form onto the sensible world. This dynamism is attributed to the ontological constitution of the *anthropos* as a creature of reason: "reason will not give way to any ground which is empirically given [because] reason does not . . . follow the order of things as they present themselves in appearance, but *frames for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas*, to which it adapts the empirical conditions" [A.548.473, emphasis added].

This ascription of dynamism to anthropologistic form which is characterized as the wherewithal to trans-form the given persists, via Hegel's notion of Spirit (the reconcili-

ation of universal form with the manifold of matter by human activity), in the materialism of Marx. In overturning Hegel, Marx suggests that the dynamism of historical change stems from material forces of production rather than the labor of the Concept. Yet the early Marx's ethical humanist critique of alienated labor relies on an anthropological theory of human production as free self-conscious activity: the realization of human essence by self-externalizing and self-objectifying processes which form external nature in accordance with human needs [see "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts"]. Despite the break between historical materialism and the earlier contemplative materialism, the ascription of dynamism to anthropological form remains in the later Marx's characterization of the labor process as the realization of purposive human form in matter: "At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*Verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it" [Capital 284]. This *leitmotif* of human self-objectification is the ontological basis of Marx's concept of revolutionary practice: revolutionary practical consciousness is the teleological destination of creative self-fulfilling labor. The proletariat as universal class must grasp the totality of the previous history of exploitation and its alienating social forms to transcend it because this totality is the monstrous negative image of purposive form in the labor process. The point I want to make is that Marxist materialism reduces the alterity of the given to something that is entirely amenable to human transformative activity because it is a social process. Lukács's critique of reification is the best example of this reduction of the given to an effect of social process.

But anthropological theories of dynamism can also be antihumanist. Thus, Butler cites Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" with approval for grasping that praxis as socially transformative activity is constitutive of materiality itself[250n5] even though for her, the source of subversion is not an intending collective revolutionary class-subject but the iteration within the processes of identification and signification that delineate bodies. And as my discussion of Butler and Grosz indicates, antihumanist positions can attribute dynamism either to anthropological form or to anthropological materiality. For Butler, resistance inheres in the way in which social and historical forms materialize; for Grosz, resistance issues from the dynamic life force of human bodily materiality, the life force that issues from the natural amenability to transindividual acculturation of the *anthropos*.

By dismissing the given outright as a dogmatic concept or by reducing nature, even human nature, to an effect of "the social," "history," "culture," or "language," an anthropological theory of ethical transformation leaves unanswered many questions concerning the interimplication of these terms with what they oppose. I have already rehearsed some of these problems in discussing Butler and Grosz, so I can be telegraphic here. For instance, on what ontological basis do we assert the formative/causal power of "culture," "language," and so forth over the given? How can we explain the complex emergence of the psyche from materiality and the interplay between the two in human beings? More generally, how can we explain the possibility of language, culture, history, and the social? Even if we resort to the thesis that these features co-belong with human existence, we still need to pose the question of the possibility of human existence. Conversely, if we follow antihumanist theories of signification and regard language as an inhuman structure by which the human speaking subject is constituted, we need to turn a critical eye toward why this inhuman structure is often regarded as the constitutive mark of the *anthropos* alone. In other words, what is it that is inhuman about language that might lead to a broader investigation of the relation of the human to the inhuman in general in which we may grasp the complexity of the given without appealing to an ontotheology? To rephrase the gist of these questions by deforming slightly Grosz's thesis of the

volatility of bodies, how might the incompleteness of human bodies lead us to consider the inhuman dynamism that is the openness or vulnerability constitutive of all finite bodies because they are given and can cease to exist in space-time?

I want to suggest that the work of Jacques Derrida is a rigorous attempt to rethink the dynamism of the given outside an anthropologistic horizon. The reduction of the given to something amenable to or constituted by anthropologistic transformation is premised on an initial separation between subject and object. Dynamism is either the action of the human subject on the object (humanism) or the constitutive immersion of subjects and objects within a trans-subjective anthropologistic structure such as society, culture, or language (antihumanism). Heidegger's critique of the subject/object distinction attempts to break with this trajectory.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Hegelian idealism and Marxism, which sublate the opposition between subject and object into a larger unity and make the given into a product of the labor of the concept (Hegel) or human material labor (Marx), Heidegger alerts us to a scene of giving that is prior to the distinction between subject and object. He considers how objects are given to finite subjects by the movement of a nonanthropologistic withdrawing Being: "Finite intuition of the being cannot give the object from out of itself. It must allow the object to be given.... Because our *Dasein* is finite—existing in the midst of beings that already are, beings to which it has been delivered over.... [*Dasein*] must offer [the independent being] the possibility of announcing itself" [17–18]. Both determinate objectivity and determining subjectivity are constituted by this giving/gift of objects in space-time.

Derrida breaks with Heidegger in his reformulation of the nonanthropologistic dynamism of the gift of being—the question of original finitude—in terms of original difference instead of the original presence of Being set apart from the empirical world in "its" withdrawal. For present purposes, we can say that a major part of Derrida's endeavor is an interminable working through of the practical and theoretical implications of his reformulation of original finitude as difference.

*An interval must separate the present from what it is not for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as a present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject.... And it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, stricto sensu nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protensions . . . that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace or différance. ["Différance" 13, emphasis added]*

One practical stake in reformulating the dynamism of the gift of being as the constitutive interval of *différance* is the attempt to go beyond the problem of an original cause which would not itself be an effect of a prior presence, a problem generally solved by the unsatisfactory notion of a self-causing being as pure presence [see *OG* 290–91]. Because "it" is nothing but the sheer play of differences of forces which constitutes every present being in space-time, the peculiar "causality" of *différance* denotes a nontransitivity which is neither simply active or passive and which "cannot be conceived either as passion or as action of a subject or an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient" ["Différance" 9].

In a rare comment, Derrida explicitly relates the "causality" of *différance* to Foucault's rethinking of power as the multiplicity of immanent force relations:

---

16. For a critique of Heidegger's residual anthropologism and its political consequences, see Derrida, "The Ends of Man" and Of Spirit.

*Even if, as Foucault seems to suggest, one no longer speaks of Power with a capital P, but of a scattered multiplicity of micro-powers, the question remains of knowing what the unity of signification is that still permits us to call these decentralized and heterogeneous microphenomena “powers” . . . I do not believe that one should agree to speak of “force” or of “power” [unless] . . . one takes account of the fact that there is never anything called power or force, but only differences of power and of force, and that these differences are qualitative as well as quantitative. In short, it seems to me that one must start, as Nietzsche doubtless did, from difference in order to accede to force and not vice versa.* [“Afterword” 149]<sup>17</sup>

I have already suggested that Foucault should not be read as reducing the dynamism of productive power to social or historical relations. In the above passage, Derrida suggests that power is not, in the first instance, located in the positive capacity of some body but in a nonlocalizable relationality or differentiating movement prior to and constituting the relata and their capacities. This attribution of a causal power to difference has two important implications. First, it deforms the opposition between the transcendental and the immanent. As that which constitutively inhabits the order of presence even as it remains irreducible to presence, *différance* can be thought neither as a transcendent noumenal ground without relation to presence nor as a set of transcendental conditions that allow an ineffable exteriority to be experienced. Rather, these differences of forces are a field in which all determinate being is in relation. Second, where much contemporary criticism regards “culture” and “discourse” as the privileged sites of the dynamic othering of the *anthropos* from the given and view them as historical versions of the transcendental conditions that constitute empirical reality, the “causality” of *différance* designates a nonanthropological and dynamic conception of nature and history, nature as history, in which the founding oppositions between *physis* and its others are undone.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Derrida suggests that “culture [is to be thought] as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring; all the others of *physis*—*tekhnē*, *nomos*, *thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind etc. as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis* in *différance*” [“Différance” 17].

Consequently, the nontransitive causality that characterizes the dynamism of the given cannot be conceived in terms of the action of a subject on an object that typifies

17. Cf. Derrida’s brief remarks on power in Foucault [“To do justice to Freud” 265–66] and his reflections on the paradoxes of power in “To Speculate—‘On Freud.’” Gilles Deleuze makes the same point: “force is never singular but essentially exists in relation with other forces, such that any force is already a relation, that is to say power” [Deleuze 70].

18. The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears as such and thus permits a certain liberty of variation among the full terms. The absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of another origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace . . . describes the structure implied by the “arbitrariness of the sign” from the moment that one thinks of its possibility short of the derived opposition between nature and convention, symbol and sign. . . . Without referring back to a “nature,” the immotivation of the trace has always become. In fact, there is no unmotivated trace: the trace is indefinitely its own becoming unmotivated. . . . Thus, as it goes without saying, the trace whereof I speak is not more natural than cultural, not more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming-unmotivated of the sign and with it all the ulterior oppositions between *physis* and its other, is possible. . . . The immotivation of the trace ought to be understood as an operation and not a state, as an active movement, a demotivation and not a structure. [OG 46–48, 51, emphasis added]

humanist anthropologistic accounts of agency. The dynamism of the given is the subtending movement that enables a subject to act on and affect an object. But neither is it reducible to the constitutive power of discourse in antihumanist accounts of agency. Derrida explicitly distinguishes his view of the culture of and within nature, culture as originary nature, from Greek philosophy's teleologized notion of nature as the generous donor to which all of nature's others are to return, as well as from the post-Cartesian sense of naturality to which the concept of human production as the imposition of purposive form on the given is opposed on the grounds that these ascribe dynamism to intelligible form [see *GT* 127–28]. But his position should also be distinguished from antihumanist accounts of agency, because these cannot explain how the given comes to be immersed in anthropologistic formations (seen as dynamic because contingent, contingent because artificial) and how these contingent formations emerge from the given. Nor can they satisfactorily account for why it is that these dynamic formations can constrain us like a second nature after radical critique has exposed them as contingent non-natural processes.

In contradistinction, Derrida's thought of the culture of nature locates contingency in the very gift of being. The gift is marked by incalculable chance in a paradoxical unity with necessity: "If it is not to follow a program, even a program inscribed in the *phusis*, a gift must not be generous. . . . The gift, if there is any, must go against nature or occur without nature; it must break off at the same blow, at the same instant with all originity, with all originary authenticity. And therefore, also with its contrary: artifice, and so on" [*GT* 162]. He suggests that the emergence of contingent anthropologistic formations presupposes the originary contingency of the gift as its condition of possibility. Thus, although he has mostly been read as a theoretician of linguistic undecidability, Derrida has always desisted from privileging language and instead generalizes the diacriticity of the linguistic sign into a mobile and weblike "structure" of differences and referral that is the condition of possibility of any self-identical unit or formation (conscious, organic, or nonliving, that is, subjectivity, substance, or matter) presented in space-time. This is not merely an argument about the constitutive role of differentiation/exclusion in the dynamic delineation of intelligible bodies for human recognition by ideational forms (for example, Butler's idea of the constitutive outside). It is an argument about the constitutive role of differences of forces in the very being of a thing, in the materialization of matter in general. For Derrida, "spacing," another name for original difference, "designates . . . a 'productive,' 'genetic,' 'practical' movement, an 'operation'" [*P* 94]. The system of spacing/alterity is even "an essential and indispensable mechanism of dialectical materialism" [*P* 94].

What account of transformative agency follows from the dynamism of the given? Rephrased from the side of individual bodies, spacing or *differance* designates the constitutive susceptibility of finite bodies to a process of othering from their self-identity. This process of othering inscribes or weaves these bodies into a larger network, a nontotalizable "structure," a moving base that sustains and relates every determinate object, entity, subject, or social formation. This "structure" is not a transcendent exteriority but a sensible transcendental weave (Derrida calls it "general textuality") where the ideal and the empirical, form and matter, are no longer separate levels that meet at various interfaces but infinitely interlaced [*OG* 290]. Deliberative consciousness, an indispensable element of rational subject-agency, is thus mired in, conditioned, and enabled by a shifting force-field, the bounds and tendencies of which it cannot cognitively map into a definitive set of determinations or a totality because consciousness is constituted by that shifting force-field. Cognitive mapping, although necessary, is also impossible, because the gesture of differentiation that allows a given act of mapping to take place must, in turn, presuppose a prior enabling difference for which that act cannot account. Put another way, finitude as such cannot be grasped or mapped out. It is radical and original contamination. Two important implications for practical philosophy follow

from this. First, the source of oppression and its reach cannot be definitively confined and mapped out by the political subject, the subject of calculation. However, by the same token, the tendencies of conditions determined as oppressive at a given moment are not exhaustively predictable. Currently oppressive conditions are not inherently oppressive. Their oppressive character depends on how they are inscribed, at a given moment, in a larger textuality. Thus, in the context of intellectual work, Derrida points out, “no concept is by itself, and consequently in and for itself, metaphysical, outside of all the textual work in which it is inscribed” [P 57].

To return to Butler and Grosz for a moment, their antihumanist anthropologistic accounts of transformative agency acknowledge but also guard against radical contamination in different ways. Butler acknowledges radical contamination by stressing the contingency involved in the assumption of emancipatory signifiers as identities for political contestation. However, because she limits contingency to the realm of discourse and the production of bodies by anthropologistic form and does not consider the interdependence of symbolic and material constraint in the materialization of bodies, she has little to say about scenarios of contestation where the constraints on and enabling conditions for the resignification of identity are primarily material rather than discursive, economic rather than ideational. Although Grosz does attribute dynamism to the life force of a materiality that is not controllable by consciousness, her identification of this life force with human corporeality leads to the coding of this dynamism as activity and the overvalorization of its emancipatory capabilities.

Let us contrast these accounts with Derrida’s account of transformative agency. In *Specters of Marx*, radical contamination is called “spectrality.” In the process of spectralization (as sketched out in Marx’s writings), an idea or spiritual form is incarnated or given a prosthetic body, which is then (mis)taken by the subject as his or her own corporeal body. The subject’s real body thus becomes spectral when it incorporates this prosthetic body. The important point here is that, for Derrida, spectralization is unavoidable for all finite beings. Commenting on the living body that is the ontological basis of Marx’s anthropologistic account of transformative agency, Derrida points out Marx’s foreclosure of the constitutive susceptibility of the human body to spectralization:

*The living ego is auto-immune which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: différence of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy . . . and direct them at once for itself and against itself. [SM 141]*

In order to live, active matter might seek to augment itself (and not just by compulsion) by taking on and being passively trapped by specters of what it is not. These specters can become a second nature. In spectralization, the active and the passive, matter and form, immutability and dynamism, necessity and contingency ceaselessly change places. For this reason, the dynamism of the given can be attributed neither to the productive power of historical forms (Butler’s position) nor to a material corporeality endowed with energy and activity (Grosz’s position at times). The point here is not just to reverse the correlation of activity with productive form by ascribing activity to matter. It is instead an attempt to grasp the peculiar dynamism of the given, which is prior to the distinctions between activity and passivity, form and matter because this dynamism is the constitutive play of difference. Elsewhere, Derrida suggests that “[t]he concept of matter must be marked

twice . . . outside the oppositions in which it has been caught (matter/spirit, matter/ideality, matter/form etc.)” [P 65].

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida describes his reinscription of the concept of matter as “a materialism without substance . . . for a despairing ‘messianism’” [168–69]. The adjective “despairing,” I think, indicates that because the dynamism of the given issues from the structural openness of finite being, its agency is that of the chance coming-together of certain factors, an unmotivated but not capricious cut-and-patch that can never constitute a cause that technical and political reason can fully master and harness. In other words, since, from a structural point of view, the dynamism of the given is a moving base, one cannot unconditionally affirm “it” as the necessarily enabling ground of political transformation. To return to the example of the autoimmune living ego, the specters that it ingests in order to survive may take on the names of “alienation,” “ideology,” “commodity-fetishism,” “reification,” and so forth. Yet, at the same time, Derrida’s position is “a despairing ‘messianism.’” This is because the same structural openness of finite social, economic, and political formations, their inscription within a changing force-field, can cause oppressive spectral bodies to mutate in unpredictable ways. One can begin only from a situation that is always already given, where one always already “is” and the dynamic complexity of this “is” implies a paradoxical accord of chance and necessity. This means that the opening of change is always receding and incalculable. Which means that change should be thought in terms other than the calculative initiation of a new causal chain. It should be thought in terms of an act of calculation that affirms, maximizes, or intensifies an incalculable nonanthropological transformation already in progress, in order to prepare for and allow this transformation to come into presence in its effacement, to coagulate into determinable reality. What is required is a rigorous responsibility to the spectral which accounts for the continuity between the constitutive susceptibility of finite bodies and their susceptibility to particular oppressive forms without reducing the former to latter.

Using the work of Derrida, I have suggested that in the sphere of human existence, the constitutive susceptibility of finite bodies is the condition of possibility of both political transformation and oppression. What makes a theoretical questioning of anthropologism urgent *at this moment, in this text?* I end with an example. It is well known that Marxist philosophy of an anthropological bent has failed to respond adequately to the persistence of a “second nature” in late capitalism. This is a central theme of *Specters of Marx*. One of these “second natures” is “the nation,” which Marx thought would disappear with the globalization of markets and the capitalist mode of production.<sup>19</sup> We know that although the nation regained a modicum of radical respectability as a result of socialist decolonizing nationalisms (exemplified, for instance, by the theories and projects of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral), its recompradorization as the postcolonial bourgeois nation-state in global neocolonialism has led to critiques of postcolonial national identity as an ideological form [see Appiah; Chatterjee]. The intensification of neocolonial globalization has led, in the past two decades, to culturalist reassessments in the South in which women are a crucial site for the rearticulation of postcolonial national identity. For present purposes, the curious question for the outside observer is this: given the patently negative consequences this cultural rearticulation of national identity will have for the social position and everyday lives of women, why do some women actively participate in these cultural reassessments at the same time that they are also gender activists?

This situation cannot just be explained away in terms of official nationalist ideology. Many Maghrebian states (for example, Algeria and Tunisia) do not have an Islamic government. In Sudan, “Islam is an integral part of the political culture and of popular

---

19. For a thorough account of Marx’s critique of nationalism, see Szporluk.

culture, even though in Sudan, as elsewhere, religion may be manipulated by elites” [Hale 150]. This means that cultural reassessments have to be understood as part of the popular reformulation of national identity. Alya Baffoun notes that “the persistence of traditional thought and the inability of the political elite to impose a pattern of a society based on a modern rationale are the ways by which the irrational and the mythical become a form of social organization and management” [174]. Indeed, Algerian Islamic groups understand their project of the Islamicization of the nation as a popular response to “the failure of the nationalist, modernist, socialistic and secular regimes of the post-independence era of the Arab World” [Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine 187]. Khawar Mumtaz observes that for Pakistani women’s rights activists, women who participate in fundamentalist movements are profoundly enigmatic because they reject the concept of gender equality, “see restrictions on women’s mobility and curtailment of legal rights as protective measures prescribed by religion (and therefore unquestionable), and condemn women agitating for rights as westernized and un-Islamic. At the same time a number of these women are also professionals, working as teachers and doctors. They demand a ban on polygamy, reject divorce by repudiation, condemn exploitation of women by men—all concerns with which the women’s rights activists are also occupied” [230].

The answer may be that the popular articulation of national identity functions as naturalized constraint on actions pursuing gender interests. “Women’s organizations range from participating in the fundamentalist movement, to working for reform within the framework of Islam, and to fighting for a secular state and secular laws. In spite of this wide range of tendencies and strategies, all of them have internalized some of the concepts developed and used by fundamentalists. In particular, they have internalized the notion of an external monolithic enemy, and the fear of betraying their identity—defined as group identity, rather than gender identity in the group” [Hélie-Lucas 398]. In the face of the apparent mutual exclusivity of being a feminist and being a nationalist in these cases, a gender activism has arisen in Egypt which is a form of low-profile pragmatic activism within the milieu of the popular-religious-national everyday rather than political in a highly organized or self-conscious sense [Badran 203]. Margot Badran notes that “today’s feminists in Egypt are women with layered identities, only one of which is feminist. By publicly asserting one identity they might be seen as giving priority to that identity over others, and this they are most unwilling to do” [207].

What is interesting about these examples of internalized/naturalized popular-national constraints on feminist interests is the strength of this popular-nationalist conviction in the face of the sacrifices it entails. It is crucial to remember that in neocolonial globalization, national identification is not a primary moment but a second nature induced by the shifting field of material forces. Like a compound formed in a chemical reaction that is not reducible to the different reactants, nation-ness is the unstable product of a gathering together of economic, cultural, and political factors. As such, this second nature can neither be rejected by an act of individual or collective will (humanist anthropologisms); outstripped by the sheer force of matter’s energy (Grosz); nor yet resignified solely by democratic contestation (Butler). In this scenario, nationness might be described as “spectral” rather than “ideological,” which does not mean that it cannot become an ideology serving the interests of state-elites. These unpredictable effects of the complex intertwining of culture and material forces—greater economic independence for some sectors which ameliorates “traditional” forms of patriarchal domination; intensification of religious nationalism as a result of the mortgaging of the postcolonial nation-state to global capital and the ensuing uses of fundamentalist nationalism to articulate gender interests—are not adequately captured by anthropologistic accounts of ethical transformation. I can see the precarious feminisms in neocolonial patriarchal postcoloniality as cases of deconstructive responsibility to the spectrality of nationness. To theorize the possibility of political transformation in this space is to unlearn the distinctions between

form and matter, history and nature, the active and the passive that come to us by reflex; to interminably learn the in-humanizing and disjointing lesson of responding to (our) mattering.

#### WORKS CITED

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House—Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Badran, Margot. "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt." *Moghadam* 202–27.
- Baffoun, Alya. "Feminism and Muslim Fundamentalism: The Tunisian and Algerian Cases." *Moghadam* 167–82.
- Bouatta, Cherifa, and Cherifati-Merabtine, Doria. "The Social Representation of Women in Algeria's Islamist Movement." *Moghadam* 183–201.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Poststructuralism and Postmarxism." *Diacritics* 23.4 (1993): 3–11.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books, 1986.
- Cheah, Pheng. "Violent Light: The Idea of Publicness in Modern Philosophy and in Global Neocolonialism." *Social Text* 43 (1995): 163–90.
- Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of Nature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1960.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Foucault*. Trans. and ed. Sean Hand. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion." *Limited Inc.* Ed. Gerald Graff. Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 111–60.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 1–27.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Ends of Man." *Margins of Philosophy*. 109–36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Given Time—I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. [GT]
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. and intro. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. [OG]
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Of Spirit—Heidegger and the Question*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980. [P]
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Specters of Marx—The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. [SM]
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'To do justice to Freud': The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis." *Critical Inquiry* 20.2 (1994): 227–66.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To Speculate—'On Freud.'" *The Postcard—From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987. 259–409.
- Eisenstein, Zillah. *The Female Body and the Law*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. "Clarifications on the Question of Power." Trans. James Cascaito. *Foucault Live* 179–92.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Foucault Live—Interviews 1966–84*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. Trans. John Johnston. New York: Semiotext(e), 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The History of Sexuality—Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1980.

- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking—Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Gallop, Jane. *Thinking through the Body*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Gatens, Moira. "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction." *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*. Ed. Sneja Gunew. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. "Experimental Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity." *Space, Time and Perversion* 207–27.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Jacques Lacan—A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism." *Space, Time and Perversion* 45–57.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Space, Time and Perversion—Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Hale, Sondra. "Gender, Religious Identity, and Political Mobilization in Sudan." Moghadam 145–66.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans. Richard Taft. 4th ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.
- Hélie-Lucas, Marie-Aimée. "The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity: Women in Muslim Personal Laws." Moghadam 391–407.
- Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp-Smith. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Kirby, Vicki. "Corpus Delicti: The Body at the Scene of Writing." *Cartographies—Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. Ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991. 88–100.
- Kremer-Marietti, Angéle. "Vérité kantienne et science lacanienne." *Revue internationale de philosophie*. 1 (1992): 6–28.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis." *Écrits* 8–29.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Écrits—A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Écrits* 1–7.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Some Reflections on the Ego." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34.1 (1953): 11–17. ["SRE"]
- Le Doueff, Michèle. *Hipparchia's Choice—An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* Trans. Trista Selous. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Long Hair, Short Ideas." *The Philosophical Imaginary*. Trans. Colin Gordon. California: Stanford UP, 1989. 100–28.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*.. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Martin, Biddy. "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias." *Diacritics* 24.2/3 (1994): 104–21.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Intro. Ernest Mandel. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts." *Early Writings*. Ed. Lucio Colletti. Trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975. 279–400.
- Moghadam, Valentine M., ed. *Identity Politics and Women—Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*. Boulder: Westview, 1994.

- Mumtaz, Khawar. "Identity Politics and Women: 'Fundamentalism' and Women in Pakistan." *Moghadam* 228–42.
- Schor, Naomi, and Elizabeth Weed, eds. *The Essential Difference—Another Look at Essentialism. Differences* 1.2 (1988).
- Szporluk, Roman. *Communism and Nationalism—Karl Marx versus Friedrich List*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Whitford, Margaret. *Luce Irigaray—Philosophy in the Feminine*. London: Routledge, 1991.