

Bodies and Norms

The Revolution of Simone de Beauvoir

Philosophy seldom revolved around the field today known under the name of gender studies, but the concepts from which the idea of gender is built are as old as thinking itself. The first musings on the cosmos (Diels 1960: 105), an ordered whole characterised by harmony and proportion, were based on the division of opposites. Pythagoreans were said to have determined the ten principles (Aristotle 1991a, 11 [986a23–986b3]) classified into two columns of cognates: limited/unlimited, odd/even, single/plural, right/left, male/female, resting/moving, straight/curved, light/darkness, good/bad, square/oblong. First principles are constitutive for the functioning of the cosmos: nature is ordered (*physei*) and the social world of norms is legislated (*nomoi*) in line with them.

Thus, from the very beginning of philosophical thinking, the male/female couple was given a particular position in thought itself. In that couple, the female was one half of the dyad which, although in absolute terms necessary for order and harmony, represented the ‘dark side’. For the Greeks, this was confirmed not only by the nexus of badness and femaleness, but also by the link between the female and disconcerting indeterminacy (plurality, the absence of limit, purposeless movement without rest). Aristotle developed this distribution of being further, by allocating form and matter oppositionally: ‘The body is from the female [. . .] the soul is from the male’ (Aristotle 1991b, 45 [738b]). The female provides the material, the male fashions it; the male is characterised by activity, the female by passivity, its ontological function being a mere reception of form; the male is distinguished by the capacity to produce, to create something new out of itself, the female by non-productivity, incapacity, sluggishness. Both sides are necessary, for without them there would be no life, but in the order of things their positions are unequal, reflecting the asymmetry of form and matter, soul and body. On the basis of this, it

is also possible to think and justify the ‘natural’ configuration of the political community, because it is supposed to reflect the harmonious configuration of the cosmos: ‘for the soul rules the body with the rule of a master, whereas understanding rules desire with the rule of the statesman or with the rule of the king [. . .] Moreover, the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to natural inferior, and that of ruler to ruled’ (Aristotle 1991c, 8 [1254b5–15]).

When, many centuries later, Freud, paraphrasing ‘the great Napoleon’ (Freud 1912: 189), declared that anatomy is destiny, his ruminations were no less anchored in a metaphysics strongly resembling the one devised by early cosmologists, despite his current subject being not the cosmos, but the universal state of the civilised man. The notion that anatomy is destiny came to be interpreted as if the whole lifeworld of an individual is defined and conditioned by an unchanging skeletal configuration of its body. The given arrangement of bones and organs determines one’s position in the universe. For a woman, it is her uterus; and her entire existence is inscribed in the proportions of her pelvic structure. Although Freud himself never made this particular claim, it was readily available among his contemporaries, such as, for example, Patrick Geddes. This today largely forgotten Scottish polymath, biologist, geographer, sociologist and urban planner relied on the discoveries of the young science of biology to claim that the sexes were entirely different, but complementary and mutually dependent, such an arrangement being necessary for an evolutionary harmony of the human species. The physiology of the cell provided him with an explanation of the ‘biological fact’ that human females are more passive, conservative, sluggish and stable, while males are more active, energetic, eager, passionate and variable (Geddes and Thomson 1889: 270; see Laqueur 2003: 6). On second look, new kinds of knowledges (biology) and their new discoveries (the cell) only confirmed old ‘facts’, produced long ago through Aristotle’s combination of rudimentary forms of observation and the first cosmological principles. Similarly, the value of these supposed facts went beyond science: they were used to order the sphere of social and political life. Thus, Geddes claimed that ‘what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament’ (Geddes and Thomson 1889: 267). The year of the proclamation was 1889, and the insight was very timely. While the suffragists were attempting to perform fundamental changes in the sexual political sphere, they were confronted with their supposed nature and essence that emanated from their plural, limitless, curved

and dark body. The Victorians might have believed that they were beyond metaphysics – they were in no need of external warranty, an unmoved mover or God of Scripture, to confirm the structural difference: the physiological axiomatics of the cell did all the work.

The notion that anatomy or biology is destiny – that the givenness of the cellular life is the basis of social and political acts – invalidates the difference between nature and society, between what we are, as complex sets of physical, chemical and biological processes, and what we do (and what is done to us) within our communities into which we were born with particular bodies. Although the language of Victorian science sounds more contemporary to our ears, in its essence it is not far removed from the mystical Pythagorean opposites on which cosmic harmony rests. Men and women are different; the difference is fundamental in kind; one side contains a surplus, the other bears a lack; there is active form and passive matter. The gendered order of the universe is a natural, not a social issue.

In this sense, gender – the specific positioning of male and female in the functioning of the universe – was part of philosophical thought from the beginning. The gendered arrangement of the natural and social cosmos was different, and the main difference lay in the unyielding postulate pertaining to the side of the female: to paraphrase Beauvoir's famous line, a woman is simply born. *Woman is*: her anatomy, her sex cells. The essence of a woman is given in the destiny of her corporeity. From that point of view, the idea that one is not born but rather becomes a woman represented a true revolution in the way socio-sexual ontology is thought. Beauvoir famously claimed that 'no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [. . .] described as feminine' (Beauvoir 1956: 273).

Simone de Beauvoir confronted the whole history of thinking of embodied destinies by posing a question: what is a woman? (*ibid.*: 13). The question was not particularly new, but her answer to it was. She is resolute that woman is not the female, a being imprisoned in her sex (*ibid.*: 33), entirely wrapped by her organs, the grand female, an imaginary creature that feeds on 'shreds of the old philosophy of the Middle Ages which taught that the cosmos is an exact reflection of a microcosm – the egg imagined to be a little female, the woman a giant egg. These musings, generally abandoned since the days of alchemy' remain persistent despite the scientific precision with which they are demonstrated, so Simone de Beauvoir urges for a scrupulous

admittance that ‘it is a long way from the egg to woman’ (ibid.: 42–3).

Laws regarding woman rest on a paradox: ‘The married woman has full legal powers. These powers are limited only by the marriage contract and the law’ (ibid.: 143). (At the time of writing *The Second Sex*, this logical incoherence cloaked in legal language was still in force!) Society created the conditions in which it would be very difficult for a woman to become human, that is, it created the conditions in which one part of humanity can be imagined as reducible to the womb. The world given to each woman is a world in which she is

treasure, prey, sport and danger, nurse, guide, judge, mediatrix, mirror [. . .] the Other in whom the subject transcends himself without being limited [. . .] she is the Other who lets herself be taken without ceasing to be the Other, and therein she is so necessary to man’s happiness and to his triumph that it can be said that if she did not exist, men would have invented her. (Ibid.: 201)

This gallery of (imagined) female figures, from treasure to mirror, is not a mere reflection of an enlarged uterus, but a product of social forces, multiplied over centuries, renewed in each woman and each man, in a social structure that left women living dispersed among males (ibid.: 18). This could be defined as the space of gender, of social reality that adheres to and subsists on the corporeal frame of the woman, who is, among mammals, ‘the most individualized of females [and] the most fragile [. . .] she who most dramatically fulfils the call of destiny [of her extravagant fertility (ibid., 88)] and most profoundly differs from her male’ (ibid.: 53).

Although Beauvoir is unambiguous in her refusal of the anatomical *fatum*, the female in Beauvoir (the body of the female sex) cannot be renounced. In that sense, biology provides one – definitely insufficient – answer to her fundamental question: what is a woman? However,

I deny that they [the data of biology] establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why a woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever. (Ibid.: 60)

Categorically refusing to blend vague naturalisms with even vaguer ethics, proclaiming such attempts to be pure nonsense, Beauvoir not only refutes the likes of Geddes, but confronts the whole

philosophical tradition occupied with the essences that remain inherent in being, thinking and acting.

If a female is born, a woman becomes. Despite the fact that, for Beauvoir, a woman has a certain biological beginning, it is the process of becoming that provides the full answer to the ontological question about what a woman is and what she is now. In order to imagine a state in which subjection would cease to be the only available option in the process of becoming a woman, Beauvoir underlines the importance of possibilities. The possibilities refer to a potential future, to what a woman may be. Existence – dispersed, contingent, varied – exercised by actual women is opposed to the static imperishable, inevitable, changeless myth of the Eternal Feminine (ibid.: 260). Finally, the drama of woman consists in the fact that, through her projects, she seeks to expand her existence into an indefinitely open future, since a woman is ‘a free and autonomous being like all human creatures’ (ibid.: 27). However, in contrast to other human creatures, woman does this while at the same time being defined as the Other, as object or immanence.

The Project and the Body: Beauvoir via Hegel and Sartre

The notions of possibility, freedom and existence are fundamental for the conception of being as becoming. Man does not inhabit the kingdom of necessities – his is not the sphere of immanence; he is free – nor does he live a reified life of an object, predetermined by an inner essence. The man became what he is due to the possibility of free choice of his own existence. Therein lies the key difference between man and thing. A thing is such by way of necessity and belongs to the order of necessity: it cannot be other than it is. Being other than a thing, according to the philosophy of existence, a man is destined to have an unreified existence. However, to speak of fate or destiny here is to speak only metaphorically, because the fate of man is freedom, unpredetermination, a being unconditioned by essences: ‘that I do not become an object, is for me a possibility of freedom’ (Jaspers 1956: 175). Autonomous freedom, which Beauvoir also evokes, entails the absence of givenness of what one is, as one is only what one becomes. The being that becomes ‘*is not, but can be and ought to be*’ (ibid.: 1) – ‘indeed, our existence is nothing but a *could be*’ (Abbagnano 2020: 267). That there is a field of autonomous freedom, of possibilities, means that a man – or his destiny – cannot be defined in advance: ‘He will not be anything until later, and then

he will be what he makes of himself' (Sartre 2007: 22). Man is only what he has become – existence precedes essence. The first principle of existentialism is, according to Sartre, that man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.

What does it mean to make something of oneself? What distinguishes man from moss, fungus or cauliflower, is that he consciously projects into the future: each man is 'nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions' (ibid.: 37). The man is not only architect, but also the main construction worker, the maker and governor of his existence. His existence is becoming; his reality is incessant action. The process of becoming consists of an endless series of acts that are quintessentially chosen. Yet, although man appears as autonomous architect of his own project, each man is at the same time humanity itself: all of humanity reproduces itself in each and every man. Thus, every man has total responsibility, since every choice is an affirmation of the value of the chosen. To support this, Sartre offers a typically Beauvoirian example:

If I decide to marry and have children – granted such a marriage proceeds solely from my own circumstances, my passion, or my desire – I am nonetheless committing not only myself, but all of humanity, to the practice of monogamy. I am therefore responsible for myself and for everyone else, and I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man. (Ibid.: 24–5)

Let us now return to *The Second Sex*. It seems that the figure of an independent woman with which Beauvoir concludes her book goes in the direction of Sartrean godlike freedom of action, at least in the form of a project for the future. But the story of the second sex is rather about something else. It tells us that not everyone is their own project – not everyone, not yet. Not everyone is a sum of their actions: a woman, who is a human, is at the same time defined as the Other, the object and immanency, rather than as the Absolute, the subject and transcendence. Simone de Beauvoir introduced gender in the naive existentialist universalism, fully exposing the fact that the human was interchangeable only with man/'he'.

What follows from here are several equally important quandaries. Either there is something wrong with the notion of humanity and its universal reach, or humanity appears under different guises, some of which are somewhat less human. Or, perhaps, since they are not men, women are human only to a certain extent, only partially.

The ontological question, what is a woman?, which *The Second Sex* attempts to answer, demanded rethinking what existence, possibility and freedom mean when applied to a certain portion of humanity. As a true existentialist, Beauvoir claimed that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. However, even if the female is not the essence of woman's existence, the process of becoming a woman – of existing humanity in the form of womanhood – is a process of becoming the Other, not a project in which she becomes solely what she makes of herself.¹

The question that *The Second Sex* opened up is surely: is there a human freedom unconditioned by gender? In other words, to what extent is freedom defined as the very possibility of transcendence of the body, and how the embodiment of certain humans precludes them from attaining one such bodiless freedom? This is, however, not the only crucial question that *The Second Sex* made possible. We also have to consider whether a woman can become otherwise? Can she, in her process of becoming, become something other than a woman, that is, the Other? Can this lead to certain outcomes that are not given or known in advance? Can she – by way of non-becoming woman – perchance become something other than man, the emblematic autonomous freedom, not tied down by the body?

It seems that Judith Butler embarked upon her considerations of gender precisely with these questions in mind. The question – can one become differently? – is, I would argue, the cornerstone of what will gradually become the theory of performativity. This, in turn, is closely related to the question of the body. Contrary to a deep-seated assumption that the theory of performativity neglects the body (Duden 1993; Alamo and Hekman 2008), I argue that Butler sought to return the body to thought. But to make this possible, the 'body as such' – an abstraction, a genderless body or a body imprisoned in sex – needs to be dislodged from thought and replaced by bodies understood as lived and plural processes of becoming.

In order to grasp these processes to which Butler's entire oeuvre is devoted, the body is not to be equated with sex. The justification for their untying also originates from *The Second Sex*. Detached from sex understood as the immanence of life of the species, as well as from the Sartrean bodiless sum of actions, the body is given a chance to emancipate itself from its reified status in thought. In that sense, the question of becoming otherwise goes beyond the liberation of the female (body) from its path of otherness, from its imprisonment in sex. It equally demands emancipation of thought from the

reduction of being to the duality of subject (as *res cogitans*) and the Other (as *res extensa*), where *res extensa* is lived either as *the* body or as the transcendence of the corporeal, that is, in which the body is, ultimately, the destiny of woman, whereas bodilessness is merely a possibility for man.

From here we should turn to one of the most epic episodes in the history of philosophy, to further clarify the nexus between the body and becoming. The episode concerns the struggle of two self-consciousnesses that ends with their transformation into lord and bondsman. Beauvoir drew her own understanding of otherness from Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Lloyd 1983: 2; Butler 1986: 43–4; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Purvis 2003), and *The Second Sex* could even be read as an extended elaboration of an embodied, and of course gender-marked, version of the lord and the bondsman. The same episode greatly influenced Butler's philosophical endeavours, as will be discussed at various places in this book. I will now focus on Butler's first reading of the struggle of self-consciousnesses in *Subjects of Desire*, in a chapter entitled 'Bodily Paradoxes: Lordship and Bondage', which strongly impacted the general direction of her thought.

At the moment of encounter, in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, neither of the two self-consciousnesses is primary: they meet as equals. Their equality in sameness is reflected in the way they approach one another – to both, the other consciousness appears as an inessential object, a pure other. They are the same so long as they need the other to affirm their respective independence from their respective alienation in the other (SD: 50–1). In other words, they both equally demand recognition of their substance. Their desire for recognition creates an unwilling bond between them, which turns into a ferocious struggle unto death where both self-consciousnesses desire to prove themselves as independent beings for themselves. However, the major consequence of this potentially absolute negation is in fact the creation of a sense of appreciation of life. The newly discovered desire for life (SD: 54) is what in the next step produces inequality, that is, domination of the lord over the bondsman, where recognition becomes one-sided and unequal. In Hegel's words, 'one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman' (Hegel 1977: 115).

Butler reads this episode in quite a peculiar way, introducing a surprising corporeal dimension, absent in Hegel's text. For Butler,

at the very moment when the two self-consciousnesses appear to one another, each becomes conscious of itself and of the body as a limit: from now on, ‘corporeality everywhere signifies limitation, and the body which once seemed to condition freedom’s concrete determination now requires annihilation in order for that freedom to be retrieved’ (SD: 51). Becoming a self-consciousness assumes a desire to transcend the immediacy of ‘pure life’, but the price of such a desire is a very probable death. Thus, a radical life-and-death struggle culminates either in a fully autonomous death, which has to remain empty and unrecognised because both self-consciousnesses perish, both willing to lay down their lives in the struggle against the immediacy of mere living; or, it leads to domination as a continuation of annihilation within the context of life. In both cases, the body is annihilated. In their struggle for recognition, whatever its ultimate result, ‘each self-consciousness engages in an anti-corporeal erotic which endeavors to prove in vain that the body is the ultimate limit to freedom, rather than its necessary ground and mediation’ (SD: 52). Becoming lord and bondsman introduces a dynamic in which the bondsman as ‘the Other must now *live its own death*’, appearing as an illusion of ‘an unfree body, a lifeless instrument’ (SD: 52), while the lord lives an illusion of having managed to overcome the immediacy of life in the form of a free disembodiment. ‘The lord’s identity is essentially beyond the body; he gains illusory confirmation for this view by requiring the Other to *be* the body that he endeavors *not* to be’ (SD: 53; cf. *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1997b [hereafter PLP]: 34–52).

Unlike Hegel, whose travelling subject continues its journey on a thorny path to absolute knowledge, Butler stops at this episode (both in *Subjects of Desire* and, generally, in later writing). The episode, however, echoes in her first texts on gender, in which a bondsman, a living and embodied Other, intersects with a woman, a body imprisoned in its immanence, as read through Beauvoir. Their intersection ushers in a view on the body, since in Butler lord and bondsman appear, significantly, as figures of embodiment. The lord’s mastery consists in defining the corporeal field – the lord is the one who defines the Other as the body, the body as the feature of the Other. Defined by another, the bondsman becomes the body in its very essence, bonded because enslaved to its essence. Similarly, the ‘women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence, and existence as a woman becomes what Hegel termed “a motionless tautology”’ (Butler 1986: 44).

However, the masculine detachment from the body – which seems to be also the basis of the grand project of becoming a sum of one’s own acts (the acts performed, so to say, without a body) – re-emerges in the form of denial (‘the denial of the body, as in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave, reveals itself as nothing other than the embodiment of denial’ [Butler 1986: 44]). On the other hand, feminine essentialised embodiment, the complete imprisonment in and by the body, may end either in a reverse and total denial of embodiment (in striving to become a lord/a man), or in passive yielding to bondage which will never be resolved by a specifically female form of ‘labour’ (since, according to Hegel, it is labour that in the end emancipates the bondsman from subjection). Woman’s path to autonomy is onerous, because she is required to relinquish the body in order to become a set of bodiless acts, or to remain enslaved by her body as destiny, which is her fate regardless of any possible acts. The answer to the question ‘can one become otherwise?’ must then offer a way to overcome the dualist division into unfree, non-acting bodies, and free, acting disembodiments. In that sense, we can claim that the theory of performativity sprang from Butler’s early commitment to the notion that the body is the necessary ground for freedom and a point of its mediation (SD: 52).

Could One Not Become Woman?

For Butler, the body is never bodiless. It is neither an abstractable body as such, a generalisable entity outside living processes, nor a destined given, reducible to a hidden essence emanating through its changing appearances (this kind of ‘body’ is just another, so to say ‘female’ side of the abstraction). The rejection of a bodiless body implies the need to grasp bodies differently – as lived, plural, changing, vulnerable, capable of pleasure, exposed to violence, and yet also as the ground for freedom, not its limit. The body is material, but its materiality is not a grave to possibilities, either in the old Platonic sense, or in certain feminist sentencing of women to sex,² and thus also to otherness radiating from female bodies. The body is mine, inextricably bound to this individual that I am, but its life is at the same time mine and not mine. We become social beings precisely by virtue of our bodies.

Thus, somewhat in contrast with the generally accepted view, I argue that Judith Butler began to develop her theory of performativity out of the imperative to think bodies differently, in order to make

the life of bodies more capacious. The idea of the body as the locus of sociality would become central for Butler's later work, but its rhizomes can already be found in the early interpretations of gender, drawn from her readings of Beauvoir, through Hegel, Wittig, Rubin and Foucault. Here is a representative quote:

As a locus of cultural interpretations, the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations. No longer understood in its traditional philosophical senses of 'limit' or 'essence', the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted in the flesh. (Butler 1986: 46)

The body functions as the junction of cultural interpretations, as a site of socially mediated interactions. My body – the configuration of materiality in this very concrete form – is at the same time given over to others, who see, understand and interpret it in this way or that, according to available social tools of interpretation. This is, however, not only done by others around me. I myself also acquire and appropriate the interpretations that are at my disposal, which I receive from the social and cultural context to which I belong. My body is the field in which I become who I am by virtue of others and together with them. But as bodies are always gendered in some way, I do not become an I in some abstract sense; rather, the I is gendered, and gendered according to the interpretative possibilities available to it. As cultural and social, the interpretations can never be axiomatic; they also always contain the possibility to be different. Which is why, quite in line with Beauvoir, there is freedom and there are fundamental limitations at play, there are both possibilities and constraints.

Butler's aim in her early texts is not to demonstrate which side prevails in this either/or situation. She remains primarily interested in what possibilities open for bodies in their processes of becoming. It comes as no surprise that the most promising conclusion she drew from Beauvoir is that 'women have no essence at all, and hence, no natural necessity, and that, indeed, what we call essence or a material fact is simply an enforced cultural option which has disguised itself as natural truth' (Butler 1985: 516). Butler's answer to the question – how one lives this cultural option, that is, how one interprets bodily available possibilities – takes us to the core of the theory of performativity. Let us, however, dwell for a moment on the 'most promising

suggestion of Simone de Beauvoir, namely, that women have no essence at all' (ibid.). If one is not born a woman, perhaps one also need not become one? If the essence is absent and there is, in fact, no ultimate answer to the question what a woman *is*, would it then be possible for a 'cultural option', regardless of the body it happens to inhabit, to transform into something which is neither Other, nor the Sartrean godlike subject making himself into what he is? Is becoming otherwise possible and how? For that, we need to see how Rubin liberated the body from gender, and then also how Wittig liberated gender from nature.

Butler openly acknowledged the great significance of Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' for her own approach to gender (Rubin and Butler 1994: 68; GT: xi). Rubin began this enormously important text with a question that paraphrases Marx and echoes Beauvoir: what is a woman? Without much hesitation, she declares that a woman is a woman, but she 'only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations' (Rubin 1997: 28). The implication is that outside these relations, she might play some other role or become something else. Rubin calls the shaping of the raw material of human sex and procreation the 'sex/gender system'. This arrangement is a product of specific social relations, which are, moreover, also productive of sociality itself. On Rubin's expanded map of the social world, humans are labourers, peasants and capitalists, but they are also wives, domestics and prostitutes. Political economy, so rarely interested in the sphere of gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, or the conceptions of childhood and family, needs to understand and formulate a human productive activity in which we do not appear essentially as labourers and capitalists, and only accidentally as women and men. For this reason, Rubin adds Lévi-Strauss and Freud to Marx and Engels, trying to show how the structures of kinship and incest taboo enforce the specific production of relations through which we become men and women.

Sex is, for Rubin, not a (biological) condition of possibility for gender. Rather, gender, as the arrangement that makes sex socially productive, limits the possibilities of the body (not only female, but all bodies). 'The social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality', where gender functions as a 'socially imposed division of the sexes' (ibid.: 40). What becomes of great importance to Butler are Rubin's insights of this peculiar reversal of sex ('body') and gender (the socially

productive uses of bodies), their unfixed nature, a certain system of social meanings, and the cultural positioning of practices, desires and anatomies. The cultural interpretations of our supposedly speechless anatomies are not so much reflection of our primary sex characteristics, as much as they are the reiterations of the elementary positions in a system of exchange constitutive of social relations. A cultural interpretation of bodies is enabled by replicating a system in which women function as gifts and tokens of peace between military units, change households, take other names as their own, act as someone else's property; while men, on the other hand, organise this exchange to expand the circles of kinships, imposing 'social ends upon a part of natural world' (ibid.: 38). What is socially sanctioned as natural is the exchange of sexual access, genealogical status, lineage, property, rights and the movement of people. Bodies become male and female through these social relations, becoming legitimate (or illegitimate) actors of social exchange.

The path from being born to becoming a woman is, in Rubin's rendering, a process of continual cultural inscription of gender identity onto the body, produced for the sake of the production of sociality itself. Thus, it seems that women are not at all oppressed by their bodies. What is oppressive is the specific gender configuration of the female body as something susceptible to oppression, a configuration in which penis and vagina seem indissoluble from the symbolic position of lord and bondsman. 'Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity [being either man *or* woman] is the suppression of natural similarities' (ibid.: 40). Through her reversal of the positions of sex and gender, Rubin seems to have opened up the possibility of liberating bodies from the binary division imposed on them by gender.

The liberation, however, cannot happen on its own; a 'cultural evolution' is as necessary as economic revolution, because it provides us

with the opportunity to seize control of the means of sexuality, reproduction, and socialization, and to make conscious decisions to liberate human sexual life from the archaic relationships which deform it [. . .] [Feminist revolution] would liberate forms of sexual expression, and it would liberate human personality from the straightjacket of gender. (Ibid.: 52)

In the spirit of the revolutionary 1970s, Rubin believed that the archaic sex/gender systems could be eliminated, because they are

not ‘an ahistorical emanation of the human mind; they are products of historical human activity’ (ibid.: 55). After their elimination, there would be no obligatory sexualities and sex roles: ‘the dream I find most compelling is one of [. . .] society in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love’ (ibid.: 54). The anatomy of sex becomes irrelevant, since a female need not become a woman. Beyond the binary configuration of gender, bodies can become differently.

The way Monique Wittig expanded the idea that one is not born a woman can be marked as the point of departure for the theory of performativity. Wittig’s text ‘One is Not Born a Woman’ represents a fierce attack on those who believe that Simone de Beauvoir’s dictum allows for a conclusion that the basis of women’s oppression is both biological and historical. For Wittig, there is nothing ‘biological’ or natural that would have any substantial role in constituting the categories of woman and man. Both categories are exclusively political and economic (Wittig 2002: 15). Those who cling to the bond of nature and history consent to a myth. They return to the same mythical female disclosed and denounced by Beauvoir: “‘woman’ does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while “‘women’ is the product of a social relationship’ (ibid.). The mythical ‘Woman’ that remains forever rooted in her sex, socially natural and naturally oppressed, helps naturalise the historical phenomena, which, in the final instance, stands in the way of any possible change. Since this oppression, although social in origin, cannot be dissociated from nature, anatomy, one way or another, remains the destiny of women. For Wittig, however, there is a ‘living proof’ that this is not so: ‘by its very existence, lesbian society destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a “natural group”’ (ibid.: 9). The lesbian is a woman that is not Woman; she is, however, not a man either. Although born in the female body, she never becomes a woman, if becoming a woman means to be in relation to a man, one that implies the subjection of Other to the Absolute. The lesbian is the locus in which sex and gender collapse. Regardless of her being born female, she stands outside the relations that predispose those born female to become ‘a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone’ (Rubin 1997: 28). And while Rubin dreamt of the feminist revolution that would forever disarrange the links between gender, compulsory heterosexuality and limitations to female sexuality, Wittig demanded a guerrilla ‘destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of

women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression' (Wittig 2002: 20).

Now, even if Butler may have had some sympathy for Rubin's dream of androgynous society, she turned away from both Wittig's and Rubin's revolutionary conclusions. This shift is the nucleus of her specific understanding of performativity and, a fortiori, agency. Butler neither endorsed their ideas of destruction (of sex/gender system, of heterosexuality), nor did she accept their utopias in which the power relations are no more, that is, in which sex (Wittig) or gender (Rubin) is transcended. It could be argued that the whole project of *Gender Trouble* is one extended polemic against a desire for transcendence and its attendant political meaning. Abandoning the desire for transcendence helps her remain complicit with a body lived now, rather than in some indeterminate (unlived) future, as well as to accept whatever agency there is at the moment, *before utopia*, in this body and in this life. However, while rejecting their political projects, Butler uses Wittig and Rubin to read Beauvoir in a performative way: the link between sex and gender is not fixed and can be brought into question; one could become in various ways, despite becoming being culturally delimited; the very presence of various 'cultural options' shows that becoming is not grounded in anatomy, biology or nature, but that it follows some other patterns that are part of the social/historical organisation of reality; finally, binarity in the sphere of gender stands in the way of the possibilities of liberation of the body. Since gender is not fixed (in sex), Butler will conclude that the possibilities for unmaking binary oppositions lie in gender itself. As performative, gender appears more capacious and open for social lives of various bodies, that may have the capacity to change the society and power relations it rests upon.

Bodies and Norms

To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the 'appearance' of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms that demand that we become one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame); the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that in the course of its repeated enactments risks undoing or redoing the norms in unexpected ways, opening up the possibility of

remaking gendered reality along new lines. The political aspiration of this analysis, perhaps its normative aim, is to let the lives of gender and sexual minorities become more possible and more livable. (NT: 32)

This paragraph from *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* summarises the main points of Butler's understanding of performativity of gender, which will be examined at length in the remainder of this and the next chapter. The passage signals that the 'keywords' around gender are performance, enactment and appearance. The reality of performance, enactment and appearance is not a given one, but depends on certain actions, which at the same time function as the space of negotiation with the extant power relations (and this is why reality can be remade). The passage also states clearly the normative aspirations that spurred such analysis of reality; however, the very central position in it belongs to the concept of the norm.

This chapter is, however, called 'Bodies and Norms' for a reason. Namely, my claim is that bodies and norms are the two pillars of Butler's theory of performativity. Bodies perform, and the performance is guided by norms. Agency, which I discuss in the next chapter, provides the link between bodies and norms, that is, between the performance itself and the constraints that channel it.

Now, the concept of norm entered Butler's philosophy via Foucault. The obligatory relations through which we become recognised as women and men, in which our bodies 'speak' (in our name, and instead of us), delineating our life paths in socially acceptable and intelligible ways, are most frequently referred to as norms. In addition to norms, Butler also borrowed from Foucault the notion that reality is saturated with power relations, that norms are constantly reproduced in the most mundane circumstances, that it is impossible to reach some stable ground of utopia where there would be no power relations (or where 'good power' reigns), that agency is tied to its exercise, here and now, within power relations.

What is the norm for Foucault, and why is it, as a rule, discursive? As is well known, Foucault never dealt with sex/gender distinction. His 'political economy of a will to knowledge' (Foucault 1978: 73) revolves around sex, and sex for Foucault denotes far more than anatomy fixed onto the body: it is about practices, sensations, prohibitions, incitements, proper and improper appetites, desirable and undesirable thoughts, about desire that is manageable and should be managed politically. Sex is, above all, constituted as a problem

of truth (*ibid.*: 56) – not something residing within us, not even something we do or indulge in, but something discursive through which we become aware of ourselves as sexual, through which we come to learn the truth about sexuality (Mort and Peters 2005: 13). This ‘problem’ does not manifest itself through risqué stories only. It refracts through the enormous variety of the forms of speech: social, political, economic, medical, moral hygienic and legislative. ‘Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it’ (Foucault 1978: 26). It is a web of discourses that has the power to govern bodies in myriad ways.

This discursive web – a dispositive of sexuality – accounts for economic relations, systemic exchange and transfer of name and property, work of drives, for having and being a sex, yet it is, on the whole, irreducible to any of them. This historically newer formation began to emerge when it became socially expedient to develop and multiply new techniques for maximising life, and politically opportune to institute an order of life of a new class that affirmed itself through care for the ‘body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent’ (*ibid.*: 123). The dispositive of sexuality was first established for a purpose other than kinship arrangements as described by Rubin. In order to show that sexuality is a new thing, Foucault elaborated on the differences between the deployment of sex from the seventeenth century onwards and what he calls the dispositive of alliance (*ibid.*: 106). The latter refers to a complex system that defines the rules of conjugality, legislates certain transfers, supports certain statuses and specific forms of wealth circulation. Sexuality, on the other hand, is tied to historically more recent devices of power, is not primarily governed by reproduction, provides means of population control, and is relayed through the body and its various intensifications. The history of the political dispositive of sexuality is a history of bodies of sorts, focused on the direct connections between power and the body – its functions, physiological processes, sensations and pleasures (*ibid.*: 152). Only with the dispositive of sexuality does power penetrate deep into the body, into the most material and vital. This is how sex emerged – as something discrete and corporeal, separate from other organs, bodily functions and sensations, enabling, however, their specific groupings into an artificial, fictitious unity, which from now on functions as a causal principle – becoming at the same time the most material and the most speculative bodily element (*ibid.*: 152–6).

The historically new formation of sex seems not to belong to the body, but it also does not seem to function as a 'gender supplement': something belonging to the social sphere simply grafted onto the body. For Foucault, and later also Butler, sex lives through discourses, through knowledges that produce and maintain its truth, asserting that it is indeed something and what that something is ('anatomy is destiny' is one such authoritative assertion), imprisoning the body in the truth of sex, in a fictitious aggregation of axiomatic meanings – that is, the norm. The norm is at the same time restrictive and productive. Truths about the body inform it, put the body in motion, produce, conduct and govern it. The body becomes, incomparably more than in the dispositive of alliance, a locus through which power prismatically refracts.

Foucault's insistence on the engendered character and the historical novelty of this formation is of the utmost importance, as it invites us to imagine a possibility of an emergence of yet another, hitherto unknown dispositive. Foucault is certainly interested in such a possibility, as would Butler be later. They also share an interest in breaking away from sex, foregrounding the 'claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance' (ibid.: 157), crucially, through tactical reversals of the mechanisms of power, through the invention of a different set of norms. Butler remains Foucauldian whenever she insists that there is no point outside, prior to or beyond power, no site free from power, which is one of the main claims of *Gender Trouble*. Power can be redirected, bent, transformed, multiplied, because the discourse through which it works 'transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (ibid.: 101); but it can never be abolished once and for all. Lastly, Butler's first mentioning of subversion is related to Foucault's rejection of a possibility to transcend the binary opposites: to subvert them is to have them proliferate to a point where binarity itself becomes meaningless. 'His tactic, if that is what it can be called, is not to transcend power relations, but to multiply their various configurations, so that the juridical model of power as oppression and regulation is no longer hegemonic' (Butler 1985: 514). Subversion, it seems, may function as a passageway to a new dispositive not based on binaries. Their relentless multiplication, brought to life by subversive practices, may derange the hegemony of the current system of norms.

Bodies and Acts: Doing, Crafting

Thus far I have presented the frames Butler combines in forming her early understanding of sex and gender, with the main emphasis on the body.³ My claim – with which I am consciously departing from common interpretations – is that gender is a posterior, sequential concept, serving as an explanatory tool for a more primary object of Butler’s consideration. Although she is a world-renowned gender theorist, and her concept of performativity is as a rule tied to gender, at the core of her earlier, and I would argue also later, considerations on gender are, in fact, *bodies and acts* – that is, what one does with one’s body. I emphasise this not only because of the obstinate accusations of a certain somatophobia (Butler 1993a: 110; BTM: xix), but also because the body provides significant links between the phases of Butler’s work which this book aims to sew together.

Butler’s text that introduces the notion of the performative, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, also provides us with the definition of *becoming* as a stylised repetition of acts. It is the body that is stylised, although what is constituted in the process is an illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler 1988: 519). Gender happens in time – and its temporality is emphatically social. Here Butler defines her task as an examination of the ‘ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts’ (ibid.: 521). The corporeality that acts is not the carrier of culture, or a material facticity, or a *res extensa* onto which cultural meanings are plastered. The body is not a piece of matter, but ‘a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities’: meanings are materialised with, through and in the bodies, and so one is not a body, ‘but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body’ (ibid.).

Our bodies are active loci of cultural interpretation; they do the interpretations. Doing oneself is a certain dramatisation in the form of reproduction of available conventions and through available rituals that in the given circumstances have some socially relevant meaning. But we do not do ourselves from time to time, occasionally, when we are particularly inclined to interpret the social script. One does one’s body daily, again and again, in an endless repetition of acts. What we repeat or re-enact by our own corporeal stylisations are certain possibilities that are at our disposal, certain norms that

are there for us as historically conditioned beings. The body, therefore, materialises possibilities – those present, available, allowed, socially given to us.

To explain this further, let us take an example from the history of clothing. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women in the west wore long gowns that always covered their ankles in public. This social rule, today seeming perfectly contingent and quite Victorian, was observed indiscriminately, even in some very odd circumstances, such as horse-riding. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was unimaginable for a woman to ride dressed as a man, that is, in breeches. Instead, women riders were supposed to sit side-saddle, to accommodate their impracticable dresses and the strict dressing/moral codes of the time. In the mid-nineteenth century, the first form of trousers for women appeared in the United States. Bloomers, as they were known, were gathered around the ankles and worn under a slightly shorter skirt, heralding dress reform, if somewhat unsuccessful at first (Tortora and Keiser 2013: 26). Their name came from Amelia Bloomer, the first US woman to own, operate and edit a newspaper for women, *The Lily*. She wore and unabashedly promoted the garment in her journal as a form of women's emancipation. Although we are speaking about a mere hundred years, it would be a long path from the crinoline, a whalebone-hooped petticoat that rapidly came to replace the short-lived and ridiculed bloomers, to Mary Quant's miniskirt, with sleeveless dresses worn under the knee in the Roaring Twenties and the factory overalls of Rosie the Riveter in between. From today's point of view, it feels incomprehensible that until very recently women were forbidden from wearing trousers. Conversely, Scottish kilts and priestly robes notwithstanding, men wearing skirts still represents an almost improbable social transgression.

Of course, we should be always careful with examples. Doing or crafting one's gender is not about apparel or, to what the perplexing word 'stylisation' might lead, about fashioning one's appearance in line with cultural commodities. Butler explicitly links it to the late Foucault's understanding of the stylistics of existence (Butler 1988: 521; GT: 190), which in this context can be misleading too (cf. Butler 2001a; Boucher 2006: 137; Käll 2015). However, the example of trousers tells us something about the social world, or the world of norms, within which we do our bodies. Our existence, embodied and therefore gendered, is manifested – appears, has its phenomenal form – in certain ways, or styles. The birth of a girl is the birth of a body that will throughout its life be stylised as feminine in an attempt

to affirm its femaleness: the existence of a woman is a continuous process of becoming one. Stylised affirmation involves the active crafting of certain models or ideals to embody certain social standards or patterns. This engagement is by no means deliberate; we do not knowingly calculate what and when to perform, with intention and specific results in mind. It is not a project in the existentialist sense, nor a set of premeditated, intentional acts. The affirmation refers to the adoption, appropriation and internalisation of models that are already everywhere around us (but also inside us, which Butler describes as the 'psychic life of power'), such that they appear as our own, an integral part of our will and self-understanding.

In that sense, when a Victorian woman wore a long, heavy and utterly impractical riding habit, this she did not do for its convenience, nor indeed because she consciously refused to deviate from the fashion of the day, but because the norms of the time prescribed only this particular behavioural pattern. There was no alternative available to horse-riding women; trousers were not a 'cultural option' that could have been interpreted by female bodies. Around her were other women who also wore comparable garments. The 'morals' that spoke through petticoats and riding breeches reflected a gender difference, which then impacted the agility of a rider. From here, it is a short step to Geddes' 'biological fact' of passivity, sluggishness and stability in the human female, and activity, spiritedness, eagerness and passionateness in the males. The 'biological fact' was further confirmed by the invisible physiological life of the sex cells. However, on a more mundane level, one accessible to those not versed in the mysteries of a new science, it spoke through gowns that made not only horse-riding extremely inconvenient, but prevented any kind of rapid movement, jumping, bending or running. This continual physical restraint, supposedly caused by cells, but safeguarded by garb, was then translated into mannerliness, and from there into distinctive traits of the entire gentler sex: meekness, timidity, decency and other similar qualities that outline the field of Victorian femininity.

Femininity/masculinity is thus about the stylisation of the body, but it also entails a certain stylisation of the will, of manners and modes of comportment, ways of apprehending our place in the order of social relations and adopting, not necessarily consciously, ideas of what that particular place implies. We are born bodies that throughout their lives 'get crafted into genders' (Butler 1988: 525) through a bodily adoption of the normative standards. In that sense, Woman does not refer to this or that woman, but to a set of norms to which

every body born with recognisably female sex characteristics must seek to conform. This is an active crafting, a series of innumerable achievements, lasting continuously throughout one's life.

Each and every one of us strives to embody the gender norm. The norm is a rule, a standard of what is valued and valid; but it is also that which is normal, according to the norm, normalised – desirable through the workings of the norm, that from which one is not supposed to refrain. The norm operates as an implicit standard of normalisation (UG: 42). The norm imposes, organises and sustains patterns of sociality, against which we orient ourselves when reading others and assessing the extent and ways they too observe, or deviate from, the norm. As a standard of normalisation, it allows certain types of acts and practices to become acknowledged as valued and valid, and accords them social recognition (as well as protection, for example, through legislation and other forms of institutionalisation). As both prohibitive and productive, the norm provides the parameters for something or someone to appear within the field of social intelligibility. Thus, the norm works as a divider: it helps operationalise the (historically volatile) boundary between the knowable and legible, and the rest, that which remains (and should remain) non-appearing, unknown, unknowable and illegible. If one performs their social existence, not to appear means to socially disappear: their becoming is a becoming unreal. 'Having or bearing "truth" and "reality" is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way in which power dissimulates as ontology' (UG: 215).

What does 'having truth, bearing reality' mean? The world in which our bodies become crafted into gender is a social world. If bodies are thought as living and plural, then even those fundamental physical features – extension, mass, matter – have a social reality. They appear only in the space of the social world, not as static physical entities or, in another register, a motionless mass of bones swathed in tissue, but as dynamic modes of becoming, co-defined by the world. Within a given social reality, bodies appear as the processes of embodying. The truth of these processes can be confirmed only within social reality, in which bodies 'speak' themselves and are given meanings as they occupy space contiguous with other bodies, having a certain shape of pelvis or bosom, being underfed or old, having this or that skin colour. Materiality of the body materialises too: the material is not simply there, but becomes through the materialisation of available meanings, becoming real through the materialisation of possibilities, possible 'cultural options'.

Apart from spatiality, the embodying process is also characterised by a certain duration. As Butler often underlined, the temporality of our becoming embodied is markedly social and essentially repetitive. The norm, or set of norms, that precede us in time, impress on us, form and condition us, act on us from all sides, often in contradictory ways. This continues ‘with a tenacity that is quite indifferent to our finitude’ (*Senses of the Subject*, 2015c [hereafter SS]: 5). The acts of embodying these norms provide us with reality and truth. There is, however, no specific point in time when the acting stops, because the norm is embodied in full and is from then on lived as the model itself. Quite the contrary, the conformation to the norm and the confirmation of its truth is a continual, repetitive process. One never becomes one’s gender once and for all.

This is where the idea of performative begins to emerge, providing the nexus between bodies and norms. The reality of gender as a norm depends on its embodying, on performing gender. ‘Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real to the extent that it is performed’ (Butler 1988: 527). There is no reality of gender that would be outside of its performance; but also, bodies have no reality apart from the one they perform.

The notion of performance, although obviously belonging to a register of a certain social ontology, invites us to think in theatrical metaphors. Reality could be figured as a grand stage on which the life of bodies takes place. Somewhat like professional actors who embody characters, supplying voice and gesture to a script, we too embody our genders by reading the script of the norms that surround and inhabit us. And, like professional actors who excel in portraying Medeas, Cassandras or Lysistratas, or else remain pale copies of more talented colleagues, we too perform the script to varying degrees of success. As is the case with the performances repeated many times, some will be better than others. Some may seem quite bland and unpersuasive, sometimes to the point of being comic, even farcical. And while we watch, we may start to feel deceived, irate, develop an urge to yell or throw something at the actors. Likewise, our own embodying of the gender ideal can border on parody, especially as the text we get to interpret is never unambiguous. Public condemnation can and does ensue when we have ‘bad’ performances. In the process of constant repetition, failures, misinterpretation of the script, but also exaggerations and caricatures, are always possible. Of course, the theatrical metaphor has its limits. Once the curtain drops, professional actors leave the stage, lauded or panned,

and their performance stops (at least the professional performance they freely and consciously chose). No such break appears in the labour of embodying one's gender: the stage lights never dim, as our performance is not a matter of decision. We literally perform our gender in order to live.

The assertion that the life of the body is a performance means that the body does something, that it performs, in a continuous and repetitive manner, countless series of actions that enable it to live, on a 'stage' – which can be variously termed as (social) reality, the (social) world (of norms), or sociality – where bodies are given meanings, where they become intelligible, legible, recognisable. Gender is one such intricate web of meanings or power relations. It is neither the exclusive nor the most substantial one, but it has an enormous influence on how the reality of the bodies is shaped. Appropriating the norms through their repetitive performance, and thus continually re-establishing them is a complex form of the life in the body, which, failing to perform properly, puts to risk the life itself. Because, 'if existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of the established gender is in some sense to put one's very existence into question' (Butler 1986: 41–2).

Early on, Butler set herself the task of examining simultaneously how gender is established through specific bodily acts and what are the possibilities for the transformation of gender through those very acts (Butler 1988: 521). Performativity is, in that sense, always already an 'account of agency' (Butler 2009b: i). In other words, performativity is about the question how bodies live in a social world in which they perform the very norms that enable them to live: what is it that they do; but also, what is it that they can do, in order to perhaps live otherwise, in a world in which no body would be unreal and untrue? By the end of this chapter, I will have further elaborated the nexus between norms and bodies, focusing on why we craft our bodies the way we do, and why – if we could become otherwise – we become men and women.

Gender and Sex: De-essentialised Body

From what has been already said, we may claim that gender is the norm enacted and materialised through our daily performances of our bodily existence. Our performances take place in the world, which recognises us as real or, in the absence of this recognition, makes us unreal. However, what happens with sex, if bodily enactments take

place in the sphere of gender? In other words, if in the social sphere everything is reducible to our repetitive crafting, what happens with the 'non-social' sphere, to the domain of nature in which we are born before we begin to embody the norm? Is there, in fact, any reason to keep these 'spheres' apart, if the life of the body never really ceases to be performative, or, in a Beauvoirian register, a becoming?

The debates on sex and gender that began in the 1950s appeared first in relation to sexology and those 'otherly sexed' (Germon 2009). The distinction was further taken up by second wave feminism (Millet 1970), becoming a staple of feminist theory to this day, surviving through numerous policy documents that attempted to mainstream gender equality on national and international levels. According to the standard definition, sex is a natural or a material or a biological basis upon which gender is overlaid. That basis 'belongs to' the body, and it is, so to speak, determined by the body – by its anatomy, hormones, chromosomes, genes, depending on the level of the refinement of the scientific knowledge that describes it at a given moment in time. Being 'in' the body, sex is prediscursive, similar in its somatic muteness to bones and blood. Gender, on the other hand, is a social or cultural effect of sex: since I was born female, I acquire feminine traits and become a woman. It is a discursive superstructure built on a prediscursive base, or a cultural construction drawn from the fixed natural substrate, becoming imbued with specific values through the action of various social forces. Without a gender superstructure, the uterus and testicles are just another natural form of pistil and anthers. However, value categories, entirely absent from the world of gladioli, redwoods and sunflowers, turn nature into culture.

The feminist discovery of gender was emancipatory, as it was largely assumed that what is constructed and learned could be deconstructed and unlearned. The existing framework of values, nested in the social and cultural sphere, could be dismantled, expanded and prospectively equalised – almost despite the materially immutable nature of sex (taken as a given at the time when the idea of gender first appears), which still retained many aspects of destiny. The dismantling was supposed to be done by women, who – being the subject of change, of the political action – functioned as an identity around which the feminist demands were grouped and in whose name they were articulated.

Undoubtedly, Butler was impacted by Joan Scott's definition of gender as the 'primary way of signifying relationships of power'

(Scott 1986: 1067). As she claimed much later, Scott showed that gender always needs to be contextualised and seen as producing ‘apparently unrelated domains, such as class, power, politics, and history itself’ (Butler and Weed 2011: 3). It is not possible to know what a category of gender ‘is’ apart from the way it is produced, mobilised and deployed. When it comes to sex, Butler is very close to an understanding that sex is a ‘somatic fact’ created by a cultural effect (see Fausto-Sterling 2000: 21). However, what seemed to have incited the particular gender trouble Butler became renowned for was the emancipation in the sphere of gender that was supposed to be brought about by women as subjects of feminist politics. *Gender Trouble* begins with a quandary: ‘Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims’ (GT: 7)?

The complex story of sex and gender, identities, subjects, coherences and foundations – forged in the dense language of *Gender Trouble* that veers between disciplines, but still heavily relies on profoundly philosophical tools,⁴ and promises to think politics but then thinks ontology – seems to be premised on the following question: what is the life of the bodies for which sex, gender and desire are not causally related (as would be in the case of one born female, therefore become a woman, therefore desiring men) – and do these bodies matter? As we already know, Butler’s motivation to pose such a question is political, as she wanted to imagine the lives of gender and sexual minorities as more possible and more liveable (NT: 32). However, the question is also unrelentingly philosophical, as it further complicates the idea of the body. With it, the body forever ceases to be thinkable as a kind of derivative of the ‘body as such’, as bodies always come in genders. But if gender remains defined as the expression of sex, a social or cultural effect of a natural cause, then this definition also goes against the lived bodies that diverge from such causality. The lives of these bodies seem not to fit their designations, even those – or precisely those – that were supposed to work for their emancipation (and Butler does think that gender can be such a designation⁵). For that reason, the question ‘do all bodies matter?’ is equally relevant for feminism as emancipatory politics. Feminism ought to take into account a ‘moral and empirical problem’, articulated by the end of Butler’s first text on gender:

What happens when individual women do not recognize themselves in the theories which explain their insurpassable essences to them? When the essential feminine is finally articulated, and what we have been calling 'women' cannot see themselves in its terms, what are we then to conclude? That these women were deluded, or that they are not women at all? (Butler 1985: 516)

Lastly, this question has important ramifications related to the understanding of the social reality of bodies. If within established reality certain bodies have no available possibilities to embody, they would remain not only unequal, but also, significantly, less human, and so always exposed to some form of violence. The theoretical struggle for the emancipation of the possibilities should thus also be understood as a struggle against violence.

The emancipation of the body Butler was after, when putting gender into trouble, rests upon the expansion of the sphere of gender and on its permanent untying from sex. The latter is in fact the condition of the former. And although it may seem that Butler ventured to undo the tie only in *Bodies that Matter*, which figures sex in its subtitle, this had already taken place in *Gender Trouble*: 'If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all' (GT: 9–10; cf. earlier in Butler 1986: 45).

How are we to understand such a claim? The conflation of sex and gender does not only put in question the mainstay of feminist theory, but it seems to fall back on theses one would ascribe to the likes of Patrick Geddes. In fact, Butler does the former, without doing the latter. The statement 'anatomy is destiny' (or the like) does indeed reify destiny through anatomy. No distinction between sex and gender is possible, because *sex is* gender: the essence conditions existence. With their doubling, the domain of gender was seen, at least potentially, as liberated; but sex remained a metaphysical given: although the sphere of gender can be changed and is about becoming, *sex is*. What Butler suggests – that *sex is gender* – de-essentialises the body that was supposed to 'carry' sex. The assumption of the causal, expressive or mimetic relation between a mute sex and a chattering gender did not manage to emancipate the body from its fixed place in the established ontology.

So far, the body has been referred to as the locus of materialisation of norms, the point where power relations refract in each individual,

a cultural situation. Does this mean then that the de-essentialisation of the body assumes that nothing of its materiality or naturalness is there to stay? What happens with the natural body, and its natural accompaniment, sex, after its de-essentialisation? What happens with the matter that the body is, so to say, regardless of its performative actions?

Butler was at various times accused of idealism, postmodernism, discursive essentialism, linguistic monism, for the erasure of the reality of bodies or of propagating the disembodiedness of women. These notions were so powerful that in some places, such as Germany, they provided the framework for feminist debates for years (Hark 2001). It is, of course, hard to disentangle these accusations from various related or unrelated phenomena: the so-called theory wars, revolving around the professed detachment of the language of theory from real life and material hardships, decried as the pretentious nonsense of the 'Pomo Left' (Duggan 1998: 13); the insistence on the 'ludic postmodern erasure of the political in the name of discursive difference' (Ebert 1993: 10), in which the operations of socioeconomic arrangements become obscured by the play of disembodied signifiers; reframing of the polemical gap between gender and sexual difference, where the latter supposedly more truly represents bodily existence and experience of women (Braidotti 1994); the appearance of queers and their continual pressure on the coherence of categories of sexual identities, in whose 'fantasy world of ambiguity, indeterminacy and charade, the material realities of oppression and the feminist politics of resistance are forgotten' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994: 465); the institutionalisation of gender studies and their tentative removal from politics or activism, etc., etc. All this notwithstanding, Butler *is* wary of the naturalness of the body as the mute foundation of gender. She does question the natural that should be beyond discursive reach, that is, the material boundary and interior into which one supposedly cannot penetrate.

Responding to Braidotti's criticisms once, Butler 'confessed' that she is not a very good materialist, because whenever she tries to write about the body, she ends up writing about language (UG: 198). This is, however, insufficient to separate good from bad materialists. Although the body is a physical object as described by physics, a complex set of organs as described by anatomy, and a complex set of tissue functions as analysed by physiology, each of these 'appearances' of the body is always and primarily given in language, setting apart certain corporeal aspects from others. Bodies are in language

whenever we think or speak (about) them, regardless of jargon or register, and notwithstanding the various scientific fields' pretensions to accurately reach a non-linguistic, material understanding of them. Whatever this 'natural' body is, it comes to us through a linguistic mould: language fabricates, produces and constructs the body. The natural is always already said or thought as social.

We can imagine someone protesting: does this mean that this body of mine is, in fact, not bodily, that it has no reality outside language, no matter, no natural residuum that remains forever prediscursive, unutterable? Is my volume, my mass, the texture and the firmness of my tissue just a series of illusions? Is there nothing material in me capable of resisting the invasive reduction of social construction? Are there no bodily processes, such as fluid discharge or gravity, that are part of the corporeity beyond its sociality? A response to such questions would be that the body depends on language to be known, but also exceeds linguistic capture. For Butler, 'the body is not known or identifiable apart from the linguistic coordinates that establish the boundaries of the body – *without* thereby claiming that the body is nothing other than the language by which it is known' (SS: 20). Yet, the search for the separate, pure, extralinguistic bodily ontology does nothing but underscore the chasm between language and body (SS: 21).

So, we may rest assured that the body is corporeal and material, that it has surfaces that are firm and impermeable, and that it is characterised by the processes that belong to corporeity itself. But, when the bodily discharges turn into sweating, when bleeding is termed to be menstruation, and gravity translates into pregnancy, these corporeal processes become socially encoded and saturated with meanings that do not spring out of corporeity itself. Whatever the matter of our interiors, we materialise the possibilities according to what is available to us in the social world. Karen Barad is right when she claims that the crucial limitation of Butler's theory of materiality – if it is indeed a limitation – is that it concerns the materialisation of human bodies, or more precisely, only their surfaces, 'through the regulatory action of social forces (which are not the only forces relevant to the production of bodies)' (Barad 2007: 209), without exactly explaining how the norms materialise the very substance of the human body. Butler is not interested in the substance of the flesh or matter or nature 'as such'. She is after a lived body, a body that lives in a social reality, a body that comes to us – appears as knowable, intelligible and legible – only through language, or cultural

articulations (Blumenfeld and Breen 2005: 14). This does not necessarily mean that there is no ‘matter’ or ‘nature’ – that they do not exist. It only means that what we seek to grasp as natural reaches us as already naturalised, linguified, culturally articulated – social.

This takes us back to sex, the supposedly most material, natural and corporeal foundation of gender. Each time when we attempt to say something about sex, which supposedly resides in the sphere of non-discursivity, it reaches us ‘as gender’. It comes to us in the form of Geddes’ sluggish cells and Freud’s anatomy, both of which point to something ‘in’ the body, ushering both the historical idiom and its tacit ontological assumptions disguised as scientific truths. If we wish to, for example, reject Geddes’ or Freud’s stylisation of sex, but still persist in holding on to it as a natural prediscursive foundation, then “sex” becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access’ (BTM: xv). Sex thus comes to us either as already absorbed by gender, or as a fictional entity, somewhat like the mythical wandering womb.

Butler’s interest in sex is, however, not only epistemological, restricted to the question ‘what can we know about the true nature of our bodies?’. It is, from the start, also emphatically political. The detachment of the body from sex as its natural anchor opens up possibilities for bodies in the sphere in which transformation is possible, the sphere of gender. Retaining the causal or mimetic relationship between sex and gender not only leaves us with biological determinism, but it extends biology to the sphere which, presumably, ought not to be determined by destiny. That is why Butler asks: ‘If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?’ (GT: 10–11). If social construction of gender is possible in one way only, if even in the sphere of gender there are no other possibilities than those naturally imposed by the sex-substrate, ‘then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny’ (GT: 11).

Thus, if we are not born but become women, our becoming is not determined by a facticity, an invariant, unchangeable pattern from within. ‘Indeed, it becomes unclear when one takes Simone de Beauvoir’s formulation to its unstated consequences, whether gender need be in any way linked with sex, or whether this conventional linkage is itself culturally bound’ (Butler 1986: 45; GT: 152). The

unstated, implied radical consequences of this are that the boundaries of gender are not prescribed by the assumed boundaries of sex, that there is no single way of becoming a man or a woman, and that bodies could materialise possibilities that may be unavailable to them in the social reality shaped by determinism of biology *or* culture.

Repetition under Constraint

‘Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of the substance, of a natural sort of being’ (GT: 45), while sex is this ‘natural sort of being’. Like gender, sex neither belongs to us, nor is it ‘a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility’ (BTM: xii).

Gender is something that one becomes, stylising one’s body for the sake of being viable. No essence directs this becoming, which in Butler’s radical way of reading Beauvoir also never stops, never fully comes to be. Instead, it is ‘an incessant and repeated action of some sort’ (GT: 152), a repeated process of materialising the norm that qualifies a body for life. The time of this action is not just the present time of my acts. Its time encompasses the past and the possible futures of my own performances and the performances of others, to whom I am directly or very indirectly exposed. The temporality of gender is social, and it is mine only to the extent that I, in my own time, reiterate and reproduce what is already there for me in the form of possibilities. The space where gender is crafted is not interior, but public: even when no one else is around, others are constitutive for the enactment of my own bodily stylisations. Gender as a norm requires my repetitions, which is ‘at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation’ (GT: 191). Endlessly repeated acts by an endless number of actors who do their gender, appear as socially available possibilities for all subsequent stylisations of bodies. Over time, they sediment: the acts begin to appear as something one is or has.

Sex is thus not an essence, but an appearance of something essential, of a natural being, of substance. Gender as performance ‘*produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that

array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth' (Butler 1991: 28). Incessantly repeated acts through which social reality is constituted produce an effect that there is something 'behind' the performance, something more real, more permanent, more lasting, more substantial that conditions the performance itself – as its internal schema, essence, cause, original. But there is nothing in the background of the acts. My gender is my imitation of the gender norm, which gets reproduced by my attempts to approximate and embody the norm.

If there is no internal truth of gender, the question is then – and this seems to be the central question of the theory of performativity – what makes us repeat, both in general and in specific ways? If gender is only an incessant and repeated action, why does it not take place in a variety of ways? Why is it that we (generally) act in a binary way, becoming either women or men? We might conjecture that it was precisely this question that motivated Butler's radical rereading of the notion of becoming, remodelled after Rubin, Wittig and Foucault. The notion of the performative was necessary to help further develop the unstated consequences of the idea that one is not born, but becomes, a woman. One indeed becomes, performatively, but not in an unconditioned way, choosing what, when and how to become. In a way, Butler rearticulated Sartre's idea that an existence is a sum of the realisations of possibilities, a sum of one's actions, but with an important – Beauvoirian – caveat: the realisation of possibilities takes place in a world that was there before any individual actor began to make any conscious choices; the possibilities we realise take place within an unchosen, rigid regulatory framework; we act within a framework of norms that qualify the body for an intelligible life. We become a sum of our actions under constraint, and act ourselves into men or women by the force of compulsory heterosexuality.

The constraint is rearticulated and renewed with every repetition, with every new approximation of the norm – either outwardly, or on the inside, as 'there are workings of gender that do not "show" in what is performed as gender' (PLP: 145). Psychoanalysis would need to meet Foucault to explain the psychic life of power, to show how what plays out or is exteriorised also stands in relation to what is repudiated, disavowed or barred from performance. It also helps Butler work through the double life of the norm, its attachment to our stubborn attachments to it. Lastly, the constraint plays out not only through the corporeal theatrics, the way we talk, the way we walk, or our passionate psychic attachment to our subordination to

the norm (PLP: 6); it is also very much part of the material organisation of life, which voices itself through a 'specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of family' (MC: 42). Under constraint, we repeat our gender not only because we desire recognition that qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility, but also in order to be socially reproduced as persons.

Bodies materialise possibilities, those that are available to them in the established social reality. Their availability is organised according to norms of intelligibility that are socially productive, and on the basis of which we become acknowledged as true and real. Life in which 'one' embodies the norm qualifies the body as human. Those 'bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside of the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the object against which the human itself is constituted' (GT: 151). To 'be' human is to be socially intelligible as one.

It has already been argued that Butler's main object of thought was the lived body. There are bodies that are lived differently to the prescribed norm, that have fewer (or even no) possibilities to embody the norm(s) in a social reality that is nevertheless also theirs. Knowing these bodies, making them appear in the register of knowability or intelligibility, particularly within feminist emancipatory politics, was one part of Butler's aim. Understanding the norms that organise the field of intelligibility was, however, never solely a philosophical enterprise. As Butler claims in an important interview with Irene Meijer and Baukje Prins:

My work has always been undertaken with the aim to expand and enhance a field of possibilities for bodily life. My earlier emphasis on denaturalization was not so much an opposition to nature as it was an opposition to the invocation of nature as a way of setting necessary limits on gendered life. To conceive of bodies differently seems to me part of the conceptual and philosophical struggle that feminism involves, and it can relate to questions of survival as well. The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology. (Meijer and Prins 1998: 277)

Being unintelligible means being deprived of the resources that can be life sustaining. It means being exposed to violence (more) and barred from equality in a more profound sense, as someone who lives, but

not quite equally to others; as someone who is real, but not entirely thinkable in reality mottled with shadowy regions. Embodying the norm *improperly* leads to various kinds of derealisation and dehumanisation. Embodying the norm *improperly* amounts to becoming (gendered as) monstrous, ‘unthinkable, abject, unlivable’, not mattering in the same way (BTM: x). The critical question – might such a reality be made differently (GT: xxiv), or might it be remade (PL: 33) – is what invites an insurrection at the level on ontology. Instead of bodies changing, making them conform to what they are not – a strategy employed for centuries – in order not to be condemned to death within life (GT: xxi; AC), it is established norms that need to be transformed.

This chapter focused on the first part of Butler’s early stated task (Butler 1988: 521). It sought to show the relation between bodies and norms, or how gender is constituted through specific corporeal acts. The following chapter concentrates on the second part of that task: to examine what possibilities exist for the transformation of gender through such acts. In Butler’s philosophical endeavour, the ontological and political lines of inquiry are rarely separated, even for heuristic purposes. This is why the theory of performativity needs to be understood as a theory of agency.

Performance/Performativity

The books written immediately after *Gender Trouble* sought to elucidate the theory of performativity and expand it in various directions. The Preface to its second edition is categorical: ‘Much of my work in recent years has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*’ (GT: xv). The term used here – ‘outline’ – is quite appropriate, since *Gender Trouble* is not a book *on* performativity. To complicate things further, this book (which also largely applies to Butler’s entire opus, even to texts written as ‘compendiums’) does not seek to lay the foundations, to offer a firm frame with precisely defined theoretical levers. Quite the contrary, performativity there only emerges as a possible frame that would have to be filled in by way of other texts elaborating points that *Gender Trouble* only touches upon. Crudely speaking, *Bodies That Matter* elaborated on the workings of power in the sphere of materiality, introducing the key notion of citational politics; *The Psychic Life of Power* turned from matter to interiority, delving into the psychic effects of social power; and *Excitable Speech*

worked out the link between performativity and language, bodily and speech acts, and offered an important account of vulnerability, which would become paramount for her later work.

The theory of performativity outlined in *Gender Trouble* has bodies and norms at its centre. It looks into those that perform, act or do ('their' gender), and into how gender regulates bodily acts by discursive means. Widening the sphere of discursivity, which remains a deep Foucauldian trace in Butler's work, to make room for the psychic, and later institutional and infrastructural dimensions as well, should be understood both as an attempt to expand the theory of performativity, but also to go beyond it.

At this level, the meaning of performativity could be drawn entirely from the famous Nietzschean postulate: there is no essence, being, inner core, subject or self behind (or prior to) the act, 'there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything' (Nietzsche 1989: 45). Although Butler reserved the notion of fiction for sex as an inner core of the woman-subject, and was less sceptical about the misleading influence of language and less disparaging about the subject than Nietzsche (who called it 'a changeling' [ibid.]), for her theory of performativity, the absence of substratum is (anti)foundational. Performativity relies neither on the determining essences nor on the intentional subject. Its foundation – mere doing – is a contingent one. Performativity is about bodies that are in incessant and manifold performing processes. These performances are imitations or bodily approximations of the norms, which also affirm and maintain the validity of the norm. Bodies perform their gender, thus participating in the production of the social reality that co-defines future acts of any other bodies. A Butlerian translation of Nietzsche, for the purposes of her nascent theory of performativity, would be: 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (GT: 185). To this we can add, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick does, that the performative always carries the double meaning of the dramatic and non-referential, encompassing the polarities of non-verbal and verbal bodily action. Furthermore, the non-referentiality always includes aberrance, 'the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity' (Sedgwick 2003: 7).

Although the Butler of *Gender Trouble* is (and would remain) critical of the 'metaphysics of substance', in quite a Nietzschean fashion,

she by no means refrained from shaping her understanding of performativity in terms of ontology. Bodily performances enact social reality in which they take place. The performative enactment is, so to say, bidirectional, it is simultaneously produced and productive. This can be also seen as the lasting trace of Foucault's understanding of power. What appears to be our deepest, most fundamental reality – our interiority, our being, regardless of our actions – is in fact 'an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body' (GT: 185). Certainly, one might wonder why a fantasy would be regulated and, even more so, why regulation would be linked to something interior. To this, Butler responds: 'If the "cause" of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the "self" of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view' (GT: 186). In that sense, what the theory of performativity seeks to show is that fantasy *is* regulated and that politics is somehow implicated in this regulation. Removing the self (in quotation marks) from the position of the necessary foundation enables the 'political and discursive origin of gender identity' (GT: 186) to come into full view.

Outlined thus, the theory of performativity offers a conceptual and a political corrective to the emancipationist aims of feminist theory. The theory of performativity aimed to emancipate lived bodies from (unliveable) essences, to emancipate agency from its phantasmatic foundations, to loosen the constraints of identities and open space for more collective struggles, an aim that remains as important for Butler to this day.

However, this 'outline' has instigated a host of complex questions which have occupied various interpreters of performativity. For the sake of clarity, they could be divided into three groups. The first group of questions deals with the 'performer': who performs if there is no doer behind the deed? What happens with the subject if the act cannot be localised within the self? Does the doer have a body, is it material, is it positioned within the material arrangements of reality, or is it somehow free-floating and unanchored? Does the actor have a soul – is there any room for psyche in the theory of performativity, or do the performative enactments take place exclusively on the surface of the body? The second set of questions is about the act itself and its invoked politicality: is a (political) act possible without a compact subject? What is the scope of an action and where does it take place? Is an act reducible to a speech act and is there performativity outside

language? Is an act anything but a performance, understood as a theatricalisation of an act? Lastly, the third group of questions revolves around the dispute on voluntarism/determinism: can there be any change within this rigid public regulation of our private practices and fantasies, or does it merely replicate what was formerly understood as biological determinism? Is there, quite the opposite, any restriction to the unrestrained will of the actor who derails gender norms seemingly on a whim? Is political agency reduced to a free play of signifiers, or genderfuck, or masquerading, or random slippages in the citational chain?

As already noted, possibly the key question that expanded the original outline of performativity is: why are we doing gender the way we are if there is nothing inside us that compels us to act thus? Put another way, is going against the grain of gender norms something now easy and playful, when we know that no interiority is there to bind us? This question, which was posed in *Gender Trouble* and has been framing feminist and queer theories and practices ever since, required that Judith Butler reflects further on the nature of the doer, or the acting subject. In that sense, the theory of performativity has evolved into a peculiar account of the performative constitution of subjectivity. On a different, related level, it demanded considerations of the nature of acts and action, with particular emphasis on the relationship between a performance (a bounded act, or a set of particular acts done by performing individuals) and performativity (reiteration of norms that precede, constrain and exceed the performer [Butler 1993b: 24]). The fundamentally political question – can possibilities be materialised differently? – belongs to yet a third plane, although still related to the problem of social transformation. A variant of this question, especially bearing in mind the somewhat offhand use of certain terms in *Gender Trouble*, would be: is the individual the one who breaks free from reiterative actions, or must the existing ‘body politic’ necessarily be called into question by collective struggle? ‘Body politic’ and politics of liveable life will later coincide and intersect when ‘the performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious [. . .] to demand the end to their precarity’ (D: 121).

It was pointed out many times that *Gender Trouble* produced one gross misunderstanding of the performative, enabling the interpretations of gender as a choice, a role, a construction we build, ‘as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a “one” who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides

with deliberation which gender it will be today' (Butler 1993b: 21). This misreading proved particularly important for Butler's later articulation of performativity as an account of agency, and the political articulation of the insurrection at the level of ontology. One of the more significant aspects of this shift in meaning has been the inclusion of Austin's understanding of performativity (Butler 1993b; BTM; ES), which had not been there from the start. It can be said that Butler's turn to language, through Derrida's reading of Kafka via Austin (Bell 1999), was supposed to complicate the initial idea of the performative act as a performance, which can always slide in the direction of the intentional subject. The turn to language, in which the bodily act became essentially supplemented by the speech act, could be understood as the key shift from individual acts towards the social constitution of action. In its subsequent iterations, the theory of performativity sought to explain how sociality both constitutes and constrains us, sometimes to the point of suffocation; how it generates inequality among lives at the fundamental level of our (gendered) existence; how it makes us vulnerable, exposed, precarious; how we live in a state of interdependence – so often socially, politically and psychically denied in favour of being considered discrete existences.

Notes

1. In one of her first texts, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', Butler considered the question of the choice to become a woman. She rejects the interpretations which lead to an understanding that women choose their oppression, that is, being the second sex is their freely chosen project. To the contrary: 'the phenomenology of victimization that Simone de Beauvoir elaborates throughout *The Second Sex* reveals that oppression, despite the appearance and weight of inevitability, is essentially contingent. Moreover, it takes out of the sphere of reification the discourse of oppressor and oppressed, reminding us that oppressive gender norms persist only to the extent that human beings take them up and give them life again and again' (Butler 1986: 41). A woman indeed becomes in the mode of the Other, but there is no necessity to such becoming. Both becoming and women are imaginable as far more contingent domains of existence.
2. Butler rarely thematises feminist sources with which she contends. *Gender Trouble* is an exercise in 'French feminism' for which French feminist theorists had little sympathy (cf. Delphi 1995; Moi 1999; Berger 2014), rejecting it as Americanisation or genderisation of feminist theory

(Möser 2019). The related contention on gender and sexual difference (Braidotti 1994; Braidotti and Butler 1994) appears marginal for the development of Butler's feminist position (UG: 174–203; Pheng and Grosz 1998). Although she seldom named the feminists she opposed, in the early 1990s there were strands of US feminism that collided with Butler's anti-identitarian thought, such as certain forms of maternalist thinking (CT: 49), and Catherine MacKinnon's style of radical feminism. Her distancing from the current represented by MacKinnon was profound and far-reaching, and Butler expressed it openly and very early, declaring that it makes feminism 'into a position which asserts the systematic domination of women by men, distils both these categories into very fixed places of power, sees women as always in positions of relative powerlessness, as victims who then only get to claim power through recourse to the state – a very frightening prospect' (Kotz 1992: 86). Rather, Butler's affinity tended towards black and postcolonial feminism (PL: 47), which in its own way calls into question the (white, western) meaning of 'Woman'. Furthermore, there was a certain humility in her own role and participation in feminist debates (FCR: 132). Just as those she opposed, Butler was also cautious in naming her 'allies'. She expressed her debt to Denise Riley (GT: 4), and I believe that Butler's feminist positioning is very much in line with Riley's words: "Women" is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation. Yet it must be emphasised that these instabilities of the category are the *sine qua non* of feminism, which would otherwise be lost for an object, despoiled of a fight, and, in short, without much life' (Riley 1988: 1–2). Indeed, when asked explicitly, Butler refused to offer a definition of feminism: 'I do not understand myself in a position to define feminism. It could be that I do not want feminism to have a fixed definition, but that is because I want it to remain alive, becoming more expansive, inclusive, and powerful' (Tohidi 2017: 462).

3. To this we should certainly also add Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a historical idea rather than a natural species, and an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Butler 1988: 520–1; Butler 1989). Although cautious towards the key phenomenological notion of intentionality (Phelps 2013), phenomenological thought is an important background for Butler's conception of the body (Stoller 2010; Foutier 2013; Käll 2015). Alongside the frames elaborated here, certain sociological and

anthropological ideas also had an impact on Butler's understanding of gender. In her text on performative acts (Butler 1988: 528), she explicitly references Kessler's and McKenna's (1978) thesis on gender as an 'accomplishment', and underscores her distance from Goffman's (1956) understanding of performance of gender roles and gender display. Kessler and McKenna are important for Butler because, drawing on Garfinkel, they argue that 'male' and 'female' are cultural events and the effects of gender attribution processes, rather than a collection of traits, behaviours or physical attributes (Kessler and McKenna 1978: 154). The idea of gender as some kind of action or 'deed' appeared in the sociological text 'Doing Gender', where gender is defined as 'a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment [. . .] Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures"' (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126). The individuals 'do' gender, but that doing is socially situated, interactional and institutional, and always at the risk of gender assessment. To the question 'can we ever *not* do gender?', they answer in the negative: 'Insofar as a society is partitioned by "essential" differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable' (ibid.: 137). Finally, Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* (1979) had inestimable significance for Butler's thesis that gender is drag, an imitation of the normative ideal. I discuss Newton's influence in Chapter 3.

4. *Gender Trouble* is organised around distinctions that play a fundamental role in the history of philosophical thought. On a closer look, it operates with quite a few of them, such as being/becoming; being/acting; essence/existence; thing in itself/phenomenon; essence/appearance; original/copy; inside/outside; contingent/necessary; natural/artificial; nature/construction; determinism/freedom.
5. In *Gender Trouble*, the notion of gender seems problematic; it makes trouble and gets into it, because of its reduction to two genders that, in fact, simply reinstates the binarity of sex (together with its fatefulness). *Gender Trouble* wishes to liberate gender from binarity, or from counting (Butler never cared about the possible number of genders, or to increase it), because identitarian formations of gender bring about new exclusions and, with them, also newer forms of violence. In its later iterations, especially in *Undoing Gender*, gender will function as a designation that is far more expansive and capacious, as it is by that time entirely untied from sex. 'To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the "masculine" and "feminine" is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative

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instance' (UG: 42). Thus, gender functions as the mechanism by which feminine and masculine are produced, naturalised and normalised in their exclusionary binarity, but it can also serve for the denaturalisation and de-normalisation of that same binarity.