



# Troubling the Body: A Feminist Critique of Corporeal Politics

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Troubling the Body:  
A Feminist Critique of Corporeal Politics

A dissertation presented  
By

Emily Rider Neill

To

The Faculty of Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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## Troubling the Body: A Feminist Critique of Corporeal Politics

### **Abstract**

In the last 30 years, the category of the body has been an area of intense interest for critical inquiry, particularly for feminist theoretical approaches across the disciplines. Through the adoption of a variety of critical frameworks, feminist debates centering on the body have produced a spectrum of theoretical elaborations proposed as interventions and/or political programs to resist and dismantle oppressive structures and hegemonic thought. Taking seriously the feminist critical mandate that theories of domination are generated for the purpose of struggling against oppression, this thesis challenges the presumption that *the body* is a productive starting point for articulating feminist liberative goals. Attention to the theory of difference and the theory of power at work in every feminist project that centers the body is central to analyzing the capacity of its proposals to challenge structures of oppression. Through a close examination and critique of representative feminist theoretical and theological body projects and the critical frameworks they employ, I show how a concern for marginalized bodies and developing effective political strategies for redressing the mechanisms of that marginalization is

better accomplished by specifically NOT using the body as the rubric or source for one's theoretical and political endeavors. After taking account of the political capacities of different critical frameworks for this endeavor, I propose the structural rhetorical framework as best suited to and capable of exposing the operations of structural power and naming the dynamics of *othering* that produce, regulate, and enforce the content of categories of difference and their hierarchical valuations. I arguing against an understanding of critical theory as perpetually 'advancing' and advocate instead for the continued use of categories and modes of analysis that are best suited for addressing structural inequality. Finally, I propose that following the critical arc of body studies reveals a move away from the political in academia which is particularly evident in the trend towards 'new materialism', a critical framework which evidences no political commitment to the marginalized, and make a special appeal to feminist theologians to hold their and other feminist work accountable to stated political goals on behalf of marginalized persons.

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For Me  
You did it. I told you. Now get on with Life.

## Introduction

Over the course of the last 30 years, the category of the body has been an area of intense interest for theological, philosophical, and critical inquiry, and particularly for feminist theoretical approaches across the disciplines. In Western philosophical and religious traditions, an entrenched hierarchical dualism has identified women with the devalued side of that hierarchy and the *female* body has become a potent site for negative portrayals of “the feminine”, “materiality” and “sexuality.” As feminists have taken up a critique of dualism as a means of challenging its destructive hierarchies, the “problem of the body” has become a compelling locus for generating feminist theory and a pivotal site for re-articulating *difference* in less binary terms. Through the adoption of a variety of critical frameworks, feminist debates centering on the body have produced a spectrum of theoretical elaborations proposed as interventions and/or political programs to resist and dismantle oppressive structures and hegemonic thought. Taking seriously the feminist critical mandate that theories of domination are generated for the purpose of struggling against oppression, this thesis is in an investigation into whether this ‘body’ of work fulfills that commitment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am not unfamiliar with the many critiques (from black and brown women, post-colonial theorists, queer and trans theorists) around the use of the term ‘feminist’ which is often characterized – and for good reason – as reserved to describe the experience of white women of the ‘first world’. Elaborating on this could constitute a dissertation. My use of the term throughout this dissertation could be broadly characterized as a combination of Cheri Kramarae’s famous definition that feminism is the radical notion that women are people, and bell hook’s characterization of feminism not as an identity, but as a politics or praxis. I will address these critiques as I unpack the limitation of various critical frameworks and the body projects that adopt them in coming chapters. A central line of my argument

Though not always explicit within the terms of a critical framework, I will argue in this thesis that in every feminist project that centers the body as its theoretical starting point, the theory of difference and the theory of power at work in analyzing oppression is central to its ultimate capacity for challenging structures of oppression. I would like to challenge the thesis that the body is a productive starting point for articulating feminist goals and show how a concern for marginalized bodies and developing effective political strategies for redressing the mechanisms of that marginalization is better accomplished by specifically NOT using the body as the rubric or source for one's theoretical and political endeavors. My evidence for advancing this argument emerges through a closer examination of some representative feminist critical body projects from feminist theory and theology and an analysis of the theories of power and difference that animate the critical frameworks they adopt.

The critical frameworks I will address centrally in the works of the theorists I focus on are the sex/gender framework, the psychoanalytic framework including its adaptation of post-structuralist/postmodern theory<sup>2</sup>, the 'new materialist' framework, and the framework of intersectionality. I will address the liberal framework more marginally

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in this dissertation is that because bodies in western culture have been so saturated as primary signifiers of *male and female* difference, feminist body projects, even those that seek to critique male/female dualism as primary, have often been limited in their scope of analysis *because* they use the body as a starting point for their theoretical endeavors. My analysis of the theories of difference implicit in the critical frameworks adopted by feminist theorists and theologians is intended to show how some of those historical exclusions are reproduced in feminist work.

<sup>2</sup> I use post-structuralist here to refer to a group of critical approaches sometimes collapsed under the rubric 'postmodern' but which for my purposes here refers to those that adopt the insights of post-structuralism's theory of signs and signification as part of an articulation of difference and the operations of power. In this thesis Lacan and Foucault are the theorists who most prominently inform my discussion, though predominantly featured through feminist rearticulations.

as it informs some of the assumptions built into the sex/gender framework. The structural-rhetorical framework, which deeply informs my own constructive proposals, is also not the explicit focus of any one chapter but appears throughout my analysis as part of an overarching argument. I will begin the thesis with a brief over-view of these frameworks and the parameters of body projects articulated in their terms, followed by a description of the theoretical landscape from which these projects emerge, and then proceed to a series of “deeper dives” into illustrative body projects categorized (imperfectly and incompletely) by framework.

## **i. Critical Frameworks - An Overview**

### **a. The Sex/Gender Framework**

One of the first groups of feminists drawn to the body as a site for theory were those who used the sex/gender framework for analyzing Patriarchy. At its most basic, sex/gender is a critical lens for understanding sexual difference, but that difference is limited to the binary of male/female. Body projects undertaken within this framework often focus primarily on gender oppression in their critical analysis and ‘see’ gender as the most definitive difference represented on bodies. Theorists in this group are prone to reproducing binary dualism in many guises because they preserve a very powerful binary – male/female – at the center of their analysis. The sex/gender framework has also been used critically to split apart the terms of ‘biological’ sex and ‘socially constructed’ gender. In this delineation, feminist theorists acknowledge that gender differences are not essential (rooted in biology), but rather are shaped by social forces in the form of

gender norms and reinforced within/by cultural institutions (centers of patriarchal power) like the State, the Church, and the Family. In this view we are socialized *into* genders and provided an opportunity to insert *resistance* to proscriptive masculine and feminine gender norms and heteronormativity. In a post-structuralist adaptation of this version of the framework, the inert biological body theorized as “underneath” the mantle of gender identity is critiqued as preserving the ahistorical foundational space of ‘the real’. Here biology is no longer seen as ‘the basics of sex’. Rather, both biological sex and gender are understood as thoroughly constructed, materialized through repetitious practices that can either align with proscribed norms or deviate from them (either on purpose as a form of resistance, or unintentionally, as a ‘failed’ and often punished ‘performance’). Body projects undertaken in the former understanding of the framework often embrace the biological body ‘underneath’ gender as the ‘lost’ female body once again made invisible by ‘cultural’ gender and social inscription. In exculpating the (apparently lost) materiality of bodies they typically reinscribe the male/female binary by reifying a form of biological sex not yet troubled by the poststructuralist critique of biology.<sup>3</sup> Body projects undertaken within the post-structuralist adaptation of the sex/gender framework provoke feminist anxieties about ‘vanishing’ *real* bodies with a thoroughgoing dismantling of the sex/gender binary.<sup>4</sup> Though useful as a tool for exposing how

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of thinkers/works in this group are Emily Martin’s *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (esp. Chapter 2 and 12, pgs.15 and 194), Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (pg. 165-184 and 277-300), and Vicki Kirby’s *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. (pg.7-50). There is cross-over here with the material framework that is also concerned with a certain ‘loss’ of the body’s materiality in more discursive articulations which I will address further on in this overview.

<sup>4</sup> This is where categorizing theorists by framework gets tricky as theorists in this camp have a lot of cross over with those in the post-structuralist adaptations of psychoanalytic

interested these hierarchically dualistic normative terms are for organizing reality, by locating the production of difference in a psychologized rhetoric of linguistic differentiation, they often lose a critical grip on analyzing the structures of domination that enforce (and in my argument also *produce*) those differences that operate to marginalize particular bodies. The terms of binary difference are ‘decentered’ through a ‘proliferation’ of terms of difference, apparently freeing bodies from the entrenched and highly regulated cultural binaries which serve to constrain bodies psychologically, socially, and structurally.

### **b. The Psychoanalytic Framework**

The Psychoanalytic framework is based in Freudian psychology and theorizes sexual difference as a process of differentiation, both psychological and somatic, which is constitutive of individuated selfhood. Individuation is achieved by moving from an infantile undifferentiated mother attachment (pre-Oedipal) through the Oedipal stage, wherein the child is driven to his or her appropriate (heterosexual) object of desire, resolving in the achievement of ‘femininity’ or masculinity’.<sup>5</sup> Feminist theorists see promise in the non-essential understanding of sexual difference and the pre-oedipal indeterminacy of gender. Feminist adaptations rearticulate the differentiation stage in

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theory. I would include here those who surreptitiously rely on psychoanalytic theory such as: Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* and *Space, Time & Perversions: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Moira Gatens’ *Imaginary Bodies*, and Rosi Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference*. These theorists *also* crossover to some degree with those in the materialist camp given their concerns about articulating the materiality of the body and the need to disrupt limiting binaries.

<sup>5</sup> See Freud’s 1905 volume *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1905. For girls in Freud’s theory, femininity is realized as the desire to be the object of masculine desire.



terms of relational attachment (object-relations) rather than Freud's more sexually specific schema. This adaptation, used in concert with the sex/gender framework, prescribes new social *practices* as a means of disrupting rigid binary gender roles (primarily around child rearing)<sup>6</sup>. Body projects based in this adaptation of the framework most often come in the form of individualized revaluing projects that center relationality or other less binary modes of being as "women's way of knowing" which, if widely adopted, might shift otherwise oppressive gender norms for behavior. The focus on deep psychological structures and individual practices has the effect of orienting these body projects inward, where such 'different ways of knowing/being' are often stranded "in" bodies, furthering a potential to reinscribe essentialist understandings of women in the very terms they had been cast within hierarchical dualism. Despite overtures to cultural structures of domination, a focus on the psychological undermines a consistent or rigorous analysis of structural constraints on the social roles and locations available to individuals in a given context.

The post-structuralist psychoanalytic framework relocates the categories of Freudian analysis from the body into the terrain of language.<sup>7</sup> Often referred to as 'the

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<sup>6</sup> Representative thinkers/works in this genre are Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (esp. pgs. 5-63, Harvard University Press, 1982) Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (University of California Press, 1978), Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, (Harper & Row, 1976), Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (esp. pgs. 183-219, Pantheon, 1988), and Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis*, (Allen Lane, 1974), esp. pgs. 305-407.

<sup>7</sup> I refer predominately to the work of Jacques Lacan for this understanding as the theorist who strongly influenced many feminist theorists. Feminist critique and adaptation of Lacan's work focuses primarily on his theories of self-formation/individuation, speech and language, and the phallus. For a primary source, see Lacan's *Ecrites*, esp. pgs. 75-81,

linguistic turn' in psychoanalysis, the process of individuation in this model is understood as forming the basic structures of the psyche, which, in turn, creates the conditions for the emergence of language.<sup>8</sup> Together, these dynamics constitute the Symbolic Order, which brackets the conditions of possibility for difference/differentiation of any kind, but paradigmatically for the formation of subjectivity through the process of individuation-- in which a Self becomes conscious of itself as also an object outside of itself (objectifiable) - it's/the Other.<sup>9</sup> This 'splitting' of the consciousness, characterized fundamentally as self-alienating, produces the structure and dynamic of the self which develops a love/hate relationship with its 'other', who refuses integration. This dynamic in relation to the Other is in turn that which animates much of human relation in culture. Feminist adaptations of this framework begin with a recognition that the qualities that come to be associated with the self's Other neatly map onto the category of Woman (or The Feminine) as defined in (and by) western dualism.<sup>10</sup> These are the same binaries that inspire the feminist impetus to 'recover' the body from its abject position: subject/object, spirit/matter, mind/body, male/female. Sexual Difference, then, is still understood as foundational in the organization of difference though this time embedded in and encoding the very logic of language and rooted in a universal psychological structure. This opens

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197-268, 757-584. W.W. Norton & Co., 2005.

<sup>8</sup> The entirety of this process which contains the relationship between the signified and the sign, is referred to as the Symbolic Order by Jacques Lacan. See *Ecrits*, (The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis pgs. 197-268).

<sup>9</sup> This process is referred to as the 'mirror stage' by Lacan. See *Ecrits*, (The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience, pgs.75-81). Though initially theorized by Lacan as a literal stage of development that took place in infants from 6-18 months by means of an actual mirror, he later nuanced the understanding of this process as representing the formation of a permanent structure of subjectivity within the Symbolic Order.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote #11 for specific references.

the door to a variety of feminist appropriations: from rhetorical theories of the disruptive power of the Feminine in the Symbolic Order, to anti-essentialist theories that identify the decentering of the nature/culture binary as an escape from the tyranny of a whole cast of devaluing binaries.<sup>11</sup> Body projects within this framework also range widely and include: essentialist leaning revaluation projects, which center the “abject” metaphorical language of the female body to make visible the otherwise invisible Feminine in the Patriarchal Symbolic Order; theories of Performativity, which run with the dismantling of the nature/culture binary to theorize the materialization of bodies in non-biological terms; theories of gendered bodies whose differences, as materialized through reiterative language practices, may proliferate in their symbolics to include many differences and avoid the essentialisms of identity through the ‘never complete’ nature of signs and their relation to materiality; and postcolonial theories, which deconstruct the oppressive *Othering* of brown bodies through the universalist and totalizing gestures of more privileged western subjects.<sup>12</sup>

According to some of these critical strategies, the displacement of formerly biological categories of sexual difference into symbolic and linguistic terms apparently undermines the danger of reinscription inherent in essentializing sex differences. I will

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<sup>11</sup> I refer specifically here to the work of Luce Irigaray (*This Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University, 1985 and “When Our Lips Speak Together,” *Signs* 6 (1), pgs. 69-79, 1980) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990 and *Bodies That Matter*, Routledge, 1993) respectively, but other representative thinkers/works who may fall into this category are too numerous to list here. I think it very telling that Irigaray and Butler, who have such different political programs/analyses, both base their work in a framework with the same foundational assumptions.

<sup>12</sup> Examples of such arguments in the order in which I list them above can be found in the following texts: Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press, 1985, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Mayra Rivera’s *Poetics of the Flesh*, Duke University, 2015, and Chandra Mohanty’s *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, *boundary 2*, Vol 12 (3), Spring-Autumn 1984, pgs. 333-358.

argue that the centering of sexual difference as constitutive of all difference in the Symbolic Order has some troubling consequences for theorizing differences outside of the sex/gender frame, as does the apparently universal structure of the 'Other' relative to the Subject. Theorized as the permanent structure of subjectivity, there is a flattening effect for any analysis of differences *among* Others given the complex intersectional relationship between different vectors of identity.<sup>13</sup> The self-referential quality of this closed system of signs also has a flattening effect on power analysis as it too is trapped in a linguistic frame to which there is 'no outside'. Lastly, the internalized and psychologized referent of this framework often narrows the site of resistance theorized to one articulated in more individualized terms.<sup>14</sup> Given the powerful cultural binaries of western dualism, I am skeptical that the strategic restatements of difference within the psychologized, symbolic, and linguistic approaches above could meaningfully challenge or transform the dominant episteme. Without a power critique at a structural level, and an understanding of oppressions as multiple, differently inflected, but *interlocking* and co-

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<sup>13</sup> Depending on who is wielding this theoretical framework, who and how the position of subject is theorized relative to its *others* may be more of an 'exercise' in confronting the true other, rather than a practice based in reality. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" as well as in essays from her book *In Other Worlds* (Routledge, 1998, pgs. 102-124, 161-183) addresses the difference it makes *who* is theorizing about *which* Other. Also pertinent here is Teresa Ebert's book *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* (University of Michigan, 1996) in which she articulates (and challenges) the concept of "ludic theory": the branch of postmodernism that sees politics primarily as a linguistic and textual practice focused on subverting cultural representations of difference.

<sup>14</sup> It would be hard to quickly summarize the specific political projects and proposals of the feminist work that engages this framework in its varied forms. I have instead outlined in this introduction what I propose are the common theoretical stumbling blocks built into this framework's parameters: an over-emphasis on sex difference as primary marker of difference at the expense of a more intersectional analysis, and a psychologized site of transformation, which situates analysis in the individual and undermines a more co-constitutive theorization of structures of domination. I will show more specifically how various scholars engage in these theoretical dynamics in the chapters that follow.

constitutive, the pervasive and persistent cultural binaries of western dualism are loose signifiers free to capture and constrain ‘others’ where dominant subjects prefer they remain.

### c. The Material Framework

The material framework has developed in large part as a response to the linguistic turn in post-structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks’ incapacity, according to certain feminist theorists, to adequately capture and theorize the *materiality* of bodies. Material in this instance refers to a new theoretical development emerging out of corporeal feminism, environmental feminism, and science studies, and should be distinguished from ‘materialist’ feminisms, which emerge from Marxist feminism.<sup>15</sup>

A tendency in postmodern feminist theory to focus on the *discursive* at the expense of the *material* has been at the heart of this theoretical turn, and the body projects taken up within this framework begin with a critique of the discursive approach as mainly having been analyses of discourses *about* the body, rather than analyses of the corporeal practices of *lived* bodies. The theoretical goals of this framework are to ‘make

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<sup>15</sup> With regard to *materialist* feminism (based in Marxism) I rely primarily on Rosemary Hennessy in her works *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (Routledge, 1993) and *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives* eds. w/ Chrys Ingraham (Routledge, 1997). For an interesting discussion of the (apparent) difference between Marxist and materialist feminism see Martha E. Gimenez’s article “Marxist Feminism/Materialist Feminism” on the Feminist Theory Website <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/mar.html> 1998). Examples of *material* feminist references include *Material Feminisms*, eds. Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo (Indiana University Press, 2008), Susan Hekman’s *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures* (Indiana University Press, 2010), Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), Vicki Kirby’s *Telling Flesh* (Routledge, 1997), Moira Gatens’ *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (Routledge, 1995) and Rosi Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011) and *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013). I will look explicitly at Braidotti’s *Posthuman* text in Chapter 3.

matter *matter*' in more significant ways and to construct a ballast against the tendency in postmodern feminism to define theory as unconstrained play. This is epistemologically described as deconstructing the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging the other, constituting a 'material turn' in feminist theory<sup>16</sup>. Body projects within this framework are focused on new articulations of materiality that include post-humanist elements (technology, the environment, and animals) as a means of breaking down old dichotomies of nature/culture, material/discursive, human/nonhuman as well as reworking the understanding of subjectivity to reflect this more holistic *embeddedness* of the material body. This conception of material is far afield from that more ideological notion adopted/adapted by materialist feminists whose 'materialism' was grounded in a critique of the "historical totalities that affect women's lives" (patriarchy, racism, capitalism, nationalism) and whose critique of postmodern theory is founded in its localized, fragmented political strategies and 'self-defeating' notion of social reality as characterized by the logic of contingency.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the notion of the material as characterized in the epistemological 'material turn' is given to a focus on the 'force' of the material body on social and political reality and a desire to parse out the exact connection between the historical and the *biological*. As I will argue later in my analysis of the works of Rosi Braidotti and Maya Rivera, body projects articulated in this material framework often suffer from a lack of traditional materialist understandings of the working of power in history and culture. They are in many ways depoliticized as they get lodged in the language of a vitalist ontology almost Spinozan in

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<sup>16</sup> The understanding of this 'material turn' as an epistemological shift is proposed by Alaimo and Hekman in their edited collection, *Material Feminisms* (Intro, pgs. 1-19).

<sup>17</sup> See Hennessy and Ingraham's *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, pgs. 1-16.

quality, remaining largely situated in the realm of individual bodies and their newly theorized interconnectedness.<sup>18</sup>

#### **d. The Liberal Framework**

Though I do not take up the liberal framework in a direct way in this thesis, its legacy of presumptions about who constitutes the/a subject of the frame (whether it be of the nation state, philosophy, medicine, even rational religion) haunts almost every critical framework taken up by feminist theorists and theologians (among others). The Man of Reason is the object/subject of many of the foundational critiques feminists have made in critical theoretical as well as political and institutional spheres. Though the ideals of liberal democracy maintain an appeal to some as a framework capable of generating deliberative forms of justice, its inability to account for structural inequality and any robust understanding of difference has proven particularly unproductive for feminist political and theoretical purposes.<sup>19</sup> In short, the liberal framework assumes the ideal of a democracy inhabited by individual citizens endowed with the full rights of participation in civic life, wherein all citizens have the same structural relationship to the institutions that constitute and guarantee those rights. Rights are conceived of as ‘negative’, in the

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<sup>18</sup> I do not mean to claim here that material feminist theorists are not concerned or do not articulate a power analysis and critique of oppressive structures, but rather that as they choose to articulate their political concerns *through the body*, this structural material aspect of their analysis is often lost. Those who fall into the feminist materialist camp and are specifically concerned with theorizing the force of historical vectors that operate to locate bodies according to their gender, race, class, and sexuality do *not* use the body as their central motif for articulating political reality and, I argue, fare far better in articulating their critical projects.

<sup>19</sup> See Seyla Benhabib’s exchange with Jurgen Habermas, especially her discussion of the ‘concrete’ versus the ‘generalized’ Other in *Situating the Self*, (Yale University press, 1992).

sense that they guarantee freedom *from* encroachment of or violation by another citizen or institution.<sup>20</sup> I use the word “assumes” deliberately to indicate the hidden presumptions built into this ideal, which have proved problematic for any specific body that is not white, male, and propertied. Feminists have adapted the liberal model in pragmatic ways given the social and political contexts in which they operate. In many instances, ‘rights’ have proven a useful way to gain access to and obtain protection or support from a system not designed with them in mind. The critique of the liberal model’s inability to effectively account for structural differences between individuals has been the main point of entry for feminist adaptations of the framework. They have contributed to the development of legislation that articulates and protects group rights, and have also struggled against those group rights being construed as protectionist, such that through the offer of protection as part of a group, one must give up other rights as an individual.<sup>21</sup> Amendments 13,14,15 and 19 have provided some scaffolding for expanding the conception of citizenship in the U.S., but in practice the liberal model and

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<sup>20</sup> Though a critique of Liberalism or Liberal democracy is by now all but rote in feminist work that acknowledges postcolonial, black feminist and intersectional critiques of its presumed ‘citizen’, I find the most thorough and compelling unmasking of the framework in Iris Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990). Nancy Fraser’s work is also very enlightening in this regard, especially her early essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Social Text* No.25/26 (1990), pgs. 56-80. See also her more recent books *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (Polity Press, 2008), and *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neo-Liberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> This is particularly clear in legislative battles around women’s rights in the workplace with respect to pregnancy. Within the classical liberal framework, women could either be given unfettered access to the workplace, but no consideration or dispensation should they become pregnant OR be protected under a law that categorically defined them by this difference and thus barred them from certain jobs and controlled the circumstances around their pregnancies in the workplace. See Martha Minnow’s *Making all the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* (Cornell University Press, 1990), pgs. 19-100, 146-172, 267-311) and Drucilla Cornell’s *Beyond Accommodation* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), pgs. 199-164.



its central conception of the individual has been difficult to decenter as part of an analysis which includes structural oppression. Feminist proposals that have built on the liberal framework have been articulated predominantly in the terms of communitarian theories of justice/ethics that allow for a more socially embedded and relational conception of the subject and a more deconstructionist understanding of the socio-political sphere.<sup>22</sup> Body projects that have been taken up within the framework have largely been within the field of feminist jurisprudence and have tried to expose the limitations of a liberal conception of the individual when applied to the interdependence of life represented in the pregnant body or in the disruption to individual property rights rooted in biological understandings of the self, given the techniques practiced in the field of reproductive technologies.<sup>23</sup>

#### **e. Intersectionality**

The framework of intersectionality was first articulated within black feminist thought as a critique of the inability of the sex/gender framework to adequately reflect the experience of subjects whose identity was shaped by multiple differences (not just gender). Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, coined the term that describes

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<sup>22</sup> As referenced above, see Seyla Benhabib's *Situating the Self*. Also Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey's *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Communitarian Debate* (University of Toronto, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> An early incarnation of this dissertation was to explicitly focus on women's bodies in the law and the politics of difference within the liberal framework, but I leave that topic to another time as its breadth is too vast to treat even cursorily within the current argument. Many of the issues provoked within that framework around black bodies and the law will be addressed in Chapter 4. See Zillah Eisenstein's *The Female Body in the Law*, (University of California Press, 1989), and *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Routledge, 1996), pgs. 13-62. Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, (Harvard University Press, 1992), and Dion Farquhar's *The Other Machine: Discourse and Reproductive Technologies* (Routledge, 1996), especially pgs. 13-40, 63-94, 147-178.

subjectivity as mutually constituted by vectors of race, gender, class, sexuality and imperialism.<sup>24</sup> Feminists who have taken up the framework have used it as a means of including more identities in their analysis of oppression and in the process expanded their conception of the many and varied kinds of difference that shape subjects' experience.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See her ground breaking article, "*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color*" in *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Postcolonial theorists (sited above) and feminist theorists and theologians of color have always used intersectional analysis, whether named as such or not. From Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech 'Aint I a Woman' at the Women's Right Convention in Akron Ohio which laid bare the inherent inadequacy of an analysis of oppression based solely on gender, to those black feminists of the civil rights and feminist movements like Ella Baker, Elaine Brown, and Mary Church Terrell, who found their specific experiences of oppression sidelined in the organizations they helped found and lead. The Combahee River Collective was formed in response to the frustrating and persistent separation of race, gender and class in the civil rights, feminist, and socialist movements that carried over into the 'second wave' of feminism and named black women's triple oppression as social location a central one for unmasking and challenging the oppressive structures of White Capitalist Patriarchy. And the ever-louder voice of black feminist intellectuals like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Michelle Wallace, among others, interrupted academic feminist conversations that neglected to theorize the interlocking nature of oppression and continue to do so to this day. There are also white feminist voices who, from the start, have understood and addressed this more intersectional understanding of oppression and they too were often marginalized for their unsanctioned views and analysis within feminist and socialist movements. Lucretia Mott and the Grimke sisters were early participants in the feminist movement who did not see the struggle against women's oppression as separate from the struggle against the abolition of slavery. White feminist activists of 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles such as Jessie Daniel Ames, Selma James, Peggy Terry, and Gloria Steinem worked to form political organizations, support communities, and protest the structures and forces of racist, sexist, and classist structures of oppression in support of those triply marginalized. And women writers, scholars and theologians like Adrienne Rich, Ruth Frankenberg, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza have used intersectional analysis – again whether named as such or not – as the foundation of their critical work. I include this cursory overview of intersectional analysis as a means of indicating that though there is a specific point where this term was coined, this understanding of how oppression functions is not new. How it has been applied (or not) within social movements, between social movements, and in critical theory has had significant consequences for the articulation of political programs of resistance and critical strategies for challenging structures of oppression. To provide an extensive citation of all work that integrates intersectional analysis would be quite a task. My goal in this dissertation is rather to understand the difference intersectional analysis has made

Most significantly, they have gained a more complex understanding of the ‘subject’ through an analysis of how differences are co-constitutive and as a result, shifted their critiques of oppression. Though critiqued by some as a heuristic that traps political analysis in the limited arena of identity politics, for those who have utilized the framework as fundamentally structural in nature, its capacity to elucidate the operations of power are formidable.<sup>26</sup> This structural understanding of the framework not only allows for analysis of multiple identities, but also exposes how power operates to *produce* categories of difference, position them hierarchically in relation to one another (and the center of power), and regulate and enforce those locations. It allows for an analysis of particular experiences within structures of domination without essentializing identity, and explicitly theorizes the workings of power between the subject and structures of domination. Body projects within this framework focus on the particular context within

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to ‘body projects’ as I have defined them in my introduction.

<sup>26</sup> See Anna Carastathis’ recent book *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestation, Horizons* (University of Nebraska, 2016) pgs. 1-14, 125-162. Her book lays out the critique that in becoming the ‘winning’ feminist strategy for analyzing and challenging structures of oppression, intersectionality has often been shallowly understood and shabbily applied. As a result, its focus on difference in the form of identities essentializes differences, dividing those who might otherwise be allied in political movements. Her thesis suggests that intersectionality needs to be recovered and returned to its ‘roots’, which are grounded in coalition politics and a more *provisional* sense of identity. This argument is definitely feminist in tone, but others have come from more conservative corners as a means of discrediting both identity politics as political correctness and intersectionality as the bludgeoning stick for the feminist theory police. Most of the feminist work I have focused on understands intersectionality fundamentally as a structural analysis that relates individual experiences of oppression to overarching structures that shape and constrain the identities of individuals and groups. Intersectionality is a *practice* of elaborating that interaction and as such understands identity as *inherently provisional*, not essential, as it is both shaped by outside forces and requires and delimits a response from those who experience identity categories so defined. Intersectionality is in fact a framework of analysis historically articulated as a means of problematizing a more essentialized and universalized concept of “woman” and gender discrimination.

which (raced, classed, gendered) subjects are located in hierarchical structures of domination, and address the effects for those bodies relative to that analysis.<sup>27</sup>

### **f. Structural Rhetorical Framework**

The Structural Rhetorical framework operates similarly to the intersectional heuristic that has centered structures of domination as part of its analysis.<sup>28</sup> The role of the “rhetorical” in this framework exposes the interested and located nature of all productions of knowledge and understands the field of rhetorical production broadly as including speech acts, texts, performances, and other forms of communication. The “structural” part of this framework both interprets these rhetorical productions of knowledge as having structural weight to shape, contain, curtail and reproduce hegemonic power, but also insists on locating and analyzing those rhetorical productions within what Schussler Fiorenza identifies as Kyriarchal structures of domination. Kyriarchy names an intersectional understanding of the connections between social systems built around domination and oppression. Within Kyriarchal structures of power, subjects are situated relative to one another as oppressed, oppressors, or both depending

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<sup>27</sup> For representative works see Dorothy Roberts’ *Killing the Black Body*, (Vintage Books, 2017), Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Fortress Press, 2010), E Francis White’s *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*, (Temple Univ. Press, 2001) and Kelly Brown Douglas’ *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, (Orbis Books, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> I adopt this framework in large part as articulated by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her many scholarly works in biblical hermeneutics, feminist theological re-imaginings, and critiques of the politics of theological education. As a scholar of biblical studies our points of reference are different, but our methods of analysis can be applied to any context understood as a field of power in which representation, language, texts, rituals, institutions and the interpretations of these cultural productions produce, contain, locate, regulate, and provide inspiration for alternative imaginings for the subjects and groups within them.

on how their multiple identities are valued/ranked within those hierarchies. Borrowing from many of the critical traditions outlined above, this framework takes special care to articulate how power operates on many levels and in many forms – whether through language, social norms, institutions (family, church, university), internalized oppression, structures of domination or even critical frameworks of analysis. Like the intersectional framework, a structural rhetorical analysis provides the critical tools to both articulate particularly located experiences of oppression by an individual or group, and the larger structures of power within which those experiences are shaped. Body projects articulated within this framework, like those articulated within the intersectional framework, focus on the particular context within which (raced, classed, gendered) subjects are located in Kyriarchal structures of domination, and address the effects for those bodies relative to that analysis.

## **ii. The Field of Controversy**

Having given an overview of the critical frameworks I will address in the work of select feminist theorists and theologians – sex/gender, psychoanalytic, material, liberal, intersectional, and structural rhetorical-- I will now situate the body projects taken up in the dissertation within the broader theoretical debates going on in feminist theory and theology. As I proposed at the start and will argue throughout, the critical impact of feminist theories of the body hinge on their theoretical elaborations, whether implicit or explicit, on the nature of difference and the operation or theorization of power. Over the past 30 years, these theorists and theologians have adapted to and adopted the critical

insights about difference and power emerging from ongoing theoretical debates more broadly. The ‘turn to the body’ by feminist scholars was first formulated within the categories of critical theory<sup>29</sup>, but the critical insights and terms of postmodern theory’s discursive framework were readily adopted when it arrived on the scene, and more recent projects have been articulated in what I have referred to elsewhere as a material framework.<sup>30</sup> Though the arc of these theoretical shifts and the exact meaning of such broad theoretical labels has generated much discussion and debate in itself, the epistemological struggle over which categories of analysis are most productive or well suited for feminist projects continues to animate the debate about whether and how ‘the body’ as analytic category is a potent site for generating feminist theory.<sup>31</sup> The time period of roughly 1990-present that my analysis covers, brackets a few important critical shifts: a shift from the modern to the ‘postmodern’ which is epistemologically referred to as ‘the linguistic turn’; a ‘turn to the body’ within which I will look specifically at

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<sup>29</sup> By critical theory I refer loosely to the Frankfurt school and the adoption by feminist theory of critiques of modernity, capitalism, and positivistic analysis in favor of ideological critique and struggles for emancipation from oppressive circumstances.

<sup>30</sup> Again, my understanding of the ‘new materiality’ draws largely on its explicit formulation as such in the edited volume *Material Feminisms* (eds. Alaimo & Hekman, Indiana University Press, 2008). The editors have also produced monographs along these lines including Alaimo’s *Bodily Nature: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, (Indiana University Press, 2010) and Hekman’s *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*, (Indiana University Press, 2010.). For further references and explication of this understanding of materiality, see Footnote #33.

<sup>31</sup> See *Feminism/Postmodernism: Thinking Gender*, ed, Linda Nicholson (Routledge, 1989), Teresa Ebert’s *Ludic Feminism*, (University of Michigan Press, 1995), Grewal & Kaplan’s *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, (University of Minnesota, 1994), Seyla Benhabib’s *Feminist Contentions*, (Routledge, 1995) & *Situating the Self*, (Polity Press, 2007), Kathleen Canning’s essay “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience”, *Signs*, 19:2 (Winter 1994), pgs. 369-ff, Rosemary Hennessy’s *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, (Routledge, 1992), and Sarah Ahmed’s *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), among others.

feminist projects, though it is evident more broadly across academic disciplines; and a contemporary shift still ongoing referred to as ‘the materialist turn’ and constituting a renewed interest and focus on theorizing matter and materiality. Amongst material theorists, I will look specifically at feminist projects, but the ‘new materialism’ is also evident in disciplines ranging from physics and environmental studies, to psychology and cognitive science.

Where the feminist engagement with postmodern theory meets the feminist turn to the body is where my theoretical inquiry really begins. Among a few other theoretical advantages, postmodern theory was initially attractive to feminists because of its focus on the problematic of *difference*, which for theorists of the body is ground zero for addressing the problems of marginalized bodies.<sup>32</sup> Its predominately discursive methods of analysis, however, also made certain feminist theorists uneasy with its apparent ‘vanishing’ of the *materiality* of bodies. In fact, I would argue that it was feminist anxieties about postmodernism (not unjustified) that gave rise to what I described above as the ‘materialist turn’ and its adoption/adaptation in feminist body studies. This ‘new materialism’ purports to address both the anxiety of the loss of the materiality of bodies, and the persistent problems of dualism so easily activated in body studies, by deconstructing the material/discursive dichotomy and rearticulating both aspects of

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<sup>32</sup> The most archetypal examples of this work are Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2006) and her *Bodies that Matter* (Routledge, 2011), but other important examples are Susan Bordo’s book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, (University of California Press, 1993) pgs.215-300, Jana Sawicki’s *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*, (Routledge, 1991), and even Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

reality in dialectical relation, retaining both elements without privileging either.<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, as explained by Susan Hekman, one could “more readily account for the agency, semiotic force, and dynamics of bodies and natures when theorizing the interaction of representation and agency in the struggles of postmodern subjects.”<sup>34</sup> Given this cursory sketch of the overarching critical shifts that animate the backdrop of the body projects I explore, I will lay out some important points of conflict in these theoretical

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<sup>33</sup> To expand further on this growing theoretical development (see footnote #30), the materialist turn and the ‘new materialism’ depicted in collections like Alaimo and Hekman’s *Material Feminisms* (Indiana, 2008) and Diane Coole and Samantha Frost’s *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Duke, 2010), draw from the insights and instigations of corporeal feminism, environmental feminism, and science studies. Its better known practitioners include such thinkers as Donna Haraway in her *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Indiana University Press, 1994) and *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of the Material*, (Columbia University Press, 2017), Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Duke University Press, 2007), Vicki Kirby’s *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, (Routledge, 1997) and *What if Nature Was Culture all Along?* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017). This last monograph is part of the *New Materialisms Series* which is described as providing “a discursive hub and an institutional home to this vibrant emerging field’ and as attempting to address “how materiality permits representation, actualizes ethical subjectivities, and innovates the political.” Co-editor of the series, Rosi Bradotti, also contributes in this area in her works *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011) and *The Post-human*, (Polity Press, 2013). As noted earlier, feminist materialism in this sense should be distinguished from ‘materialist’ feminisms, which emerge from Marxist analysis. Well-known feminist materialists and their representative texts include Teresa Ebert’s *Ludic Feminism and After: Post-modern, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism*, (Michigan, 1995). Lise Vogel’s *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, (Pluto Press, 1995), Christine Delphy’s *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression*, (Massachusetts, 1984), Michele Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*, (Verso, 1980), and Rosemary Hennessy’s *Materialist Feminist and the Politics of Discourse*, (Routledge, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> This epistemological and self-defined ‘ontological project’ is, again, well represented in Alaimo and Hekman’s edited volume, *Material Feminisms*, but can also be found in the works of those who are now ‘claimed’ by the ‘new materialism’ but have not always named their critical frame as such: Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Vicki Kirby. See footnote #33 for specific references.



struggles to provide a solid foundation for the questions I bring to the field of controversy.<sup>35</sup>

### a. From Modernity to Postmodernity

At a most basic level, what is at stake in the shift from ‘modern’ to ‘postmodern’ is what Teresa Ebert, among others, has identified as the replacement of ideology critique with the notion of *discourse* as initiated in the work of Foucault<sup>36</sup>. In Foucault’s methods of archaeology and genealogy, we see a fundamental shift in the theorization of the dynamics of power.<sup>37</sup> This shift takes place through the development of what is often

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<sup>35</sup> To describe the various positions that inhabit this ‘field’ as a ‘controversy’ is perhaps an indulgence of my own argument. In many instances, individual authors and theorists I compare and contrast may not see themselves as in conversation with one another. From an interdisciplinary perspective, however, I cannot help but see these various theoretical projects as of a piece and part of my project in this dissertation is to *put* them in conversation. My overarching goal as a scholar is to provoke a larger conversation about the efficacy of using the body as a point for producing or anchoring theoretical projects. To be clear, I am *not* anti-body. Rather, I believe the most productive way of addressing the harm done to bodies marked as different in marginalizing ways is to account for the *source* of hierarchical categories of difference: from whence they come, in relation to what, the conditions of their production and reproduction, the possibility of resistance to them, or the reorganization of power relations such that identity is not defined in reference to a hierarchical norm.

<sup>36</sup> I find Ebert’s overall characterization and critique of postmodernity’s supersessionist position vis a vis more structural (modern?) categories of analysis very incisive and particularly helpful in making my own arguments about how different critical frameworks deeply impact where feminist theoretical projects end up relative to their political goals. See Ebert’s *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (University of Michigan Press, 1995). In addition, Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser prominently engage with this critical shift in their work. Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press, 2006) and Fraser’s *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Polity Press, 2007), are great examples. For a fantastic exchange on the philosophical issues that portend this epistemic shift see *Feminist Contentions*, (Routledge, 1995) featuring a philosophical exchange between Butler, Fraser, Drucilla Cornell and Seyla Benhabib (edited by Benhabib). See also Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*, (Vintage, 1982).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Also see *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (Vintage Books Edition, 1994) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (Vintage

referred to as ‘the linguistic turn’ in critical theory, a theoretical prioritizing of the *discursive* as the privileged arena for articulations of power and the production of meaning. Drawing from both French critical theory and its psychoanalytic decentering and destabilizing notions of the subject as well as from a Nietzschean tradition of *genealogy*, Foucault sought to undermine modernist notions of the willing subject as deliberate actor in a social field of power defined as emanating from the top down.<sup>38</sup> In this modernist framework of the political, ‘subjects’ knew their own motivations for acting, could readily identify their oppressors in the form of institutions, dominant classes, or individuals, and sought ‘liberation/emancipation’ through revolutionary efforts to transform oppressive structures and the hegemonic ideologies that maintained them. In place of what he saw as overly causal and instrumentalist explanations of ‘subjects’ and their oppression by/resistance to organized loci of power, Foucault sought to enact his own decentering strategy: theorizing the socio-political field of power as *dispersed*, and ‘subjects’ within that field as both powerful and powerless, both subject to and capable of resisting, cultural inscriptions of meaning. Through the methods of Archaeology and Genealogy, Foucault renounced the willful and centralized subject of ‘modern’ critical theory and transformed its materialist foundations into a primarily discursive field of contestation. Within this discursive sphere, a politics of resistance takes the form of struggles for control over *meaning* accomplished through ‘acts’ of

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Books Edition, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> See Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, (Oxford, 1989) and *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Penguin Classics, 1973).

interpretation and discursive intervention. The maintenance of power is accomplished through effective deployments of hegemonic discursive formations.<sup>39</sup>

### **b. Postmodern Theory and Feminist Theory**

The resistance politics of Foucault's work has been an important locus for feminist interest in the framework, but it has offered feminists other apparent theoretical benefits as well. Epistemologically, the closed system aspect of this linguistic-symbolic approach—namely, its theorization of difference in terms of interrelated signs-- has appealed to feminist philosophers and ethicists concerned about the 'problem' of foundationalism.<sup>40</sup> Feminist theorists set on dismantling universalizing foundations for philosophical thought provoked an apparent 'crisis of relativism' and initiated a struggle to find other means of situating ethical norms that informed their political projects. The shift of political analysis into the discursive realm, provided an apparently non-foundationalist alternative for 'grounding' feminist theory and praxis.

Postmodern critique of the meta-narratives of modernity and the subsequent decentering of Truth (versus truths) also mapped nicely onto feminist theoretical concerns and positions. The discursive theorization of power as dispersed and the ensuing proliferation of sites of conflict revealed new possibilities for resistance at potent axes of feminist struggle: the public/private, social/psychological, local/global. Feminist theorists saw all these elements of the discursive framework as potential alibis of their critical theory, but as I referenced at the outset, there were others who were more skeptical of the framework's alignment with feminist political goals.

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<sup>39</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Vintage Books, 1982, pg.31-39

<sup>40</sup> Benhabib, Seyla. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (Routledge, 1995).

One such alarm was sounded by feminists of color who were concerned about the apparent loss of the subject given its decentered and dispersed theorization in postmodern thought. Having only recently gained a seat at the table and acquired recognition *as* subjects, mestiza Gloria Anzaldua, black feminist bell hooks, and postcolonial theorist Chandra Mohanty (among others) questioned the timing of a theoretical loss of the willing subject, and challenged the claims of concern for ‘the oppressed’ by its auteurs (predominately white men) to be anything more than a thought experiment.<sup>41</sup>

Another red flag raised by feminist critics was at the collapsing of all socio-political analysis into the discursive and a concern over whether the discursive framework is capable of addressing the specific feminist goal of analyzing systemic forms of oppression.<sup>42</sup> Anxieties also arose about how the metaphors of a linguistic

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<sup>41</sup> See hooks, bell, “Postmodern Blackness”, *Postmodern Culture* Vol. 1 No.1 (Sept 1990). Though hooks ultimately argues that some of the critical tools of postmodern theory are useful for black feminist theory, particularly around the issue of essentialism, at the point of writing this article she is critically aware of who its progenitors are (white academic men of privilege) and their relative lack of any real concern for black life. hooks is always a reliable example of a brand of feminist thinking that sees theory as providing ‘tools’ for political praxis. As she so simply and elegantly puts in *From Margin to Center* (Routledge, 2015.), feminism should be understood as a *politics* not an *identity*. Similarly to hooks, postmodernity’s notion of fragmented identity aligned with Gloria Anzaldua’s formulation of mestiza consciousness and her challenge to essentialism, but because of its antagonism towards class analysis and history, she was distrustful of its capacity, ultimately, to express an effective social criticism. See *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (Aunt Lute Books, 1987). Mohanty’s work, which is centered around a critique of universalizing positions, resists what she sees as the depoliticizing work of postmodernity’s relativism. Though she at times adopts discursive methods, her approach is a more dialectical one and historical materialism informs her analysis of how structures of oppression produce and constrain identity markers in self-formation. See *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> As I will explore in future chapters, feminist resistance to and adaptations of postmodern theory have mainly to do with a reworking of the ‘leveling’ effect enacted by the discursive framework within the socio-political sphere and its limitations in theorizing the operations of centralized foci of power. Feminist theorists and theologians Teresa Ebert (*Ludic Feminism*, 1995), Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 2007), Rebecca

framework -- inscription, textuality, and the mapping of surfaces--- had a flattening effect that erased the reality of material bodies in culture and lead to a subsequent call for rearticulating the *materiality* of bodies as not outside, but not reducible to, the sphere of representation.

Where my own critical argument is concerned, the most significant controversy regarding the (apparent) alignment between feminist theory and postmodern theory is their common focus on the problematic of *difference*. Feminist theorists, and particularly those focused on corporeal matters like sexuality, desire, and women's bodies, are critically concerned with undermining the powerful hierarchical dualisms in western thought that consistently marginalize women within these categorical domains.<sup>43</sup> The

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Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*, (Crossroad, 1989), and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, (Beacon Press, 2005) among others, were wary of postmodern theory's apparent disdain for any understanding of the collective force of the structures of oppression that feminist analysis and struggle had worked so hard to unmask, and called out the erasures and occlusions of power that postmodernism, along with its possibilities, could bring for feminist struggle.

<sup>43</sup> The extent to which these theoretical lines have been debated in feminist literature is deep and ongoing. It would be impossible to name all those who have been and continue to be a part of this discussion because the central problematic of how difference is theorized, I would argue, animates almost all of feminist theory. For some particularly pointed sources on the matter see Ellen T. Amour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race - Gender Divide*. (Chicago, 1999), Linell Cady's *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, (Columbia, 2013), pgs 3-24, Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, 1990), Elizabeth Spellman's *Inessential Woman: Exclusions in Feminist Thought*, (Beacon, 1988.), Martha Minow's *Making all the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law*, (Cornell, 1991), Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, & Difference*, (Routledge, 1989), Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (Cornell, 1985), Cherrie Moraga and Glorian Anzaldúa's, *This Bridge Called My Back*, (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), Chandra Mohanty's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Indiana, 1991) and *Feminism Without Borders; Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Duke, 2003), Seyla Benhabib's *Feminism as Critique: on the*

focus on a re-articulation of difference in less dualistic and oppressive terms appeared a sound theoretical path to undermining the unyielding grip of hierarchical dualism on women's bodies in particular. With its proliferation of differences and disruption of dualistic logic, postmodern theory's articulation of difference seemed to provide a path towards that liberation.

Within the symbolic order of the discursive framework all differentiated meanings and hierarchies of meanings are initiated, reproduced, as well as resisted and possibly transformed. This includes constructs of gender, race, sexuality and class difference (among others). Some feminist theorists have found such a discursive understanding of identity categories helpful, for example, in tackling the problem of essentialized difference often reified in the sex/gender framework or in articulations of identity politics.<sup>44</sup> Essentialized notions of difference, articulated as inhering "in" individuals, often deflect analyses away from larger organizing structures of domination and focus attention primarily on localized and identity specific experiences of oppression. But as suggested in the critiques of postmodern theory above, the critical and political claims of the discursive framework may raise similar concerns.

In postmodern theory, the proliferation of difference apparently undermines hegemonic and naturalizing social discourses and through this disruption, a theoretical

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*Politics of Gender*, (Minnesota, 1996), and *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, (Routledge, 1995) to name a few from across multiple disciplines.

<sup>44</sup> Representative feminist projects that adopt some form of this framework include Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990), *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 2011), and *Excitable Speech* (Routledge, 1997). See also the collection *Feminists Theorize the Political*, (eds. Butler and Joan Scott, Routledge 1992). Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, (Indiana, 1994), *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (Routledge, 1995) and *Space, Time and Perversion* (Routledge, 1995), and Rosalyn Diprose's *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference* (Routledge, 1994).

space for resistance and agency is opened. But does the ‘difference’ of postmodernism, focused on localized productions and contestations, also work against a more systemic analysis of domination and oppression? Replacing social *contradiction* with social ‘*difference*’ in the multiplication of sites of power appears to depoliticize power differentials, and *proliferation* may disperse powers’ operations to the point of inoculating the effects of any organized resistance. Both insights bring us full circle back to Teresa Ebert’s provocative question: what is the political and economic context in which such a discursivist theory is hailed so rapidly and unquestioningly as *surpassing* a more materialist-based approach to socio-political critique?<sup>45</sup>

### c. The Politics of Difference

What *can* postmodern theory adequately theorize, and how effectively can it account for the kinds of oppression and domination faced by ‘different’ subjects, as feminist theorizations of difference are concerned to do?<sup>46</sup> Part of what I will argue and show in the ensuing chapters is how the discursive framework’s theorization of difference obscures hierarchies of power and does not provide adequate tools to theorize the centers of power that produce marginalizing categories of difference. Ebert captures this succinctly in her depiction of Foucault’s notion of social difference:

“(it) is a concept that isolates difference in a locality and cuts its relation to other differences and, most importantly, to the *cause* of difference.”

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<sup>45</sup> *Ludic Feminism and After: Post-modern, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism*, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> For an excellent collection of essays on this topic see Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds) *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, Northeastern University Press, 1988.

I share her skepticism and her critique of the framework in asking whether the categories of materialist analysis are no longer relevant or necessary in relation to those theorized by postmodernism?<sup>47</sup> Ebert brings an important critique to the ‘linguistic turn’ of postmodern theory and the push to see postmodernity’s critical concepts as ‘surpassing’ those of modernity. She draws attention to this super-secessionist tendency in critical theory by slowing down the rush to abandon the critical tools of ‘the past’ and interrogating the capacity of postmodernity’s notion of difference and its theorization of power to transform or dismantle concrete structures of oppression. In juxtaposing her feminist materialist approach, which refuses to displace the mechanisms of centralized imperial power and the exploitative labor relations it reproduces, to the postmodern discursive theory and its notion of dispersed loci of power and resistance, she exposes the troubling limits for a feminist critique such a framework has to offer in its refusal to theorize centralized loci of power. Her feminist framework for analyzing the marginalizing operations of power along axes of class, race, sexuality, imperialism and colonialism articulates an interlocking system of oppressive ‘structures’ that produce, regulate and reproduce those ‘differences’. In contradistinction, postmodern understandings of difference as dispersed, proliferating, and localized do not provide the critical means for articulating material power differentials, hierarchies of difference, or a

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<sup>47</sup> To be clear, Ebert’s use of ‘materialist’ here refers to its Marxist roots rather than the ‘material feminist turn’ I described in the frameworks section of this chapter. Ebert’s critique, which is directed at the ‘linguistic turn’ in both feminist theory and feminist postcolonial theory, emerges from a feminist interpretation of Marxist materialism and understands the role of critique as the production of historical knowledges that mark the transformability of existing social arrangements and the possibility of a different social organization free from exploitation (*Ludic Feminism*). As sited earlier along with their representative works, feminist thinkers of this materialist brand of feminist critique in addition to Ebert include Christine Delphy, Michele Barrett, Annette Kuhn, Anne Marie Volpe, Lise Vogel and Rosemary Hennessy, among others.



robust critique of the production of the very terms and content of ‘differences’ relative to power relations outside the meaning and force different signs may accrue in the field of discursive production. In relation to an understanding of the *progression* of critical theory, the question must be asked relative to the goals of feminist projects: do postmodern categories of analysis – particularly its theorization of difference - offer the critical tools and concepts required for feminist praxis? Throughout this thesis, I hope to model the same hermeneutics of suspicion as I question the efficacy of critical liberation projects articulated through the body by feminist theorists and theologians.

#### **d. The Body in Frame – Why Difference Matters**

Foucault and others who adopt a discursivist framework employ notions of knowledge and power that enable a *particular* understanding of how difference is produced and how differences come to mean in social practice. Through an analysis of the critical frameworks adopted in the body projects of the feminist theorists and theologians who occupy the pages of this project, I will make explicit the theories of difference operating within each. By so doing, I advance an argument about *why* and *how* difference and its theorization in relation to identity and power is so critical to feminist projects rooted in the body and whether the critical categories of the frameworks adopted for articulating body projects have the capacity to achieve the political critiques and political goals set before them.

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Against the backdrop of these broader theoretical and epistemological possibilities for feminist theory, I will investigate where the different frameworks adopted by feminist theorists and theologians lead their body projects. In Chapter One I examine the work of Goddess and Eros Thea/ologians and highlight some limitations of the sex/gender framework for liberationist critique. A focus on sexuality and the morphology of female bodies is proposed in these theologies as sources for less hierarchical and dualistic articulations of bodiliness in largely *recuperative* body projects. Along with theologian Kathleen Sands, I explore the proposal that we may be asking sexuality to carry too much cultural weight for feminist liberation projects.

In Chapter Two I look at the role that sexual difference and discursivity play in feminist rearticulations of bodies through the process of *materialization* in the psychoanalytic frame. Here I will argue whether and how sexual difference comes to stand in as paradigmatic of all differences and how this distorts a critical articulation of differences *other* than gender. I argue that the seeds of the ‘new materialist’ articulation of bodies moves critical feminist theory and theology towards the apolitical in a return to metaphors of embeddedness, the natural, and the “radical” potential of enlivened matter.

Chapter Three more explicitly interrogates the ‘new material’ framework and explores how the ‘radical potential of enlivened matter’ plays out in body projects articulated in its terms. This framework, though evident across many disciplines, is particularly seductive for body projects in that it touches upon all the major points of appeal of the body for feminist theory and theology explored in Chapters 1-2: Recovery of bodies from both the oppression of patriarchy and the ‘disappearing’ of discursivity, an appeal to nature and the natural with a defense against essentialism, and a surgical

undermining of the house of cards that is western dualism with the toppling of the foundational mind/body paradigm. As in previous chapters, I focus here on what power analysis is present in the description/depiction of the body politic and how a theorization of difference shapes the body of thought.

Chapter Four will look closely at the impact *intersectional* analysis makes on body projects and the feminist theological work that reflects this framework of analysis. My conclusion proposes that feminist theorists and theologians concerned about marginalized bodies might most effectively address the politics that affect bodies by NOT theorizing out of the body. Rather, I insist on the need for political analysis using *the tool* of a structural rhetorical framework to expose the operations of oppressive power, and name the dynamics of *othering* that produce, regulate, and enforce the content of categories of difference and their hierarchical valuations. I argue against an understanding of critical theory as perpetually ‘advancing’ and advocate for the continued use of categories and modes of analysis that are best suited for addressing structural inequality, rather than obscuring its operations. I conclude that following the critical arc of body studies reveals a move away from the political, which is manifest in the current critical trend of new materialism and endorse structural rhetorical and intersectional frameworks for providing a better measure of accountability in our political commitment to the marginalized. Lastly, I make a special appeal to feminist theologians who have an ethical mandate to fight against oppression, to lead the way on this charge, and to hold each other and feminist theorists outside of theology accountable to their stated theoretical goals and claims on behalf of marginalized persons.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Sex/Gender and the Limits of Sexuality**

This chapter sets out to examine and question the effects of using a dualistic gender analysis as a foundational analytic when taking the body as the focal point in generating theory and critique. Through an examination of several exemplary texts in the field of body studies<sup>48</sup>, I want to show how those feminist theorists and theologians who ground their work in the sex/gender framework get stuck in a gender binary and, consequently, produce theories of difference along the same lines. Drawn to the body as a potentially disruptive site for exposing how difference has operated to marginalize errant bodies/subjects, the explicit and implicit objective of these theorists is to produce more inclusive theories of difference. However, as I hope to show through the texts I examine below, when theorists analyze difference along the gender binary either overtly in a critique of Patriarchy, or more tacitly when using critical frameworks like psychoanalysis

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<sup>48</sup> The premise of my dissertation and one that I believe has been born out in my interdisciplinary studies in religion, gender and culture is that one can claim that there is indeed a field of ‘body studies’. The many and various works that populate this field are situated across multiple disciplines and have often been written in the terms of and with the frameworks developed within a particular author’s discipline. However, the unifying impetus in works that take the ‘turn to the body’ and which I focus on to make my own argument, is a desire to redress the inequalities endured by bodies deemed as ‘different’ within a larger field of power and identity. Much of this struggle takes place under the larger rubric of feminist theory, though not all (queer theory is also notable for its focus on the body). For the most part, the theorists I focus on are feminist, though their critical approaches can vary quite a lot. In fact, it is exactly the implications of these different theoretical approaches to theorizing the body that provide the crux of my own argument about whether a focus on the body helps or hinders the political objectives of those who take it as their focus.

whose foundation is built on the symbolic of male/female difference, their analysis of how difference operates through structural power relations is often flattened along with their analysis of the operations of power. The relationship of one's theory of difference to one's theory of power is central to my overall critique of those who take the body as a starting point for their work. In this chapter, I will elaborate how critical this relationship is for those whose analysis relies on the sex/gender framework where a binary conception of gender foundationally shapes that analysis.

I begin with a particular corpus of feminist theological work, Theology and Eros theology<sup>49</sup>, whose focus on the body by various paths leads to an analysis of oppression primarily structured through the lens of gender difference.<sup>50</sup> This has consequences for their treatment (or occlusion) of other forms of marginalized difference and in their articulation of the operations of power as it relates to marginalized differences, as I will examine below.

The most basic impetus that focuses feminist theologians' work on the body is a project of *recovery*. The female body in theological traditions has historically been

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<sup>49</sup> Eros theology is also often referred to as 'Theologies of Sexuality'. As I will elaborate in this chapter, the main premise of such theologies is that our bodies (especially marginalized bodies) are *not* a source of sin or corruption as they have traditionally been cast in monotheist patriarchal religions, but are rather a site that may help us to better know and understand G\*d and divine relation in the world. The common theme among Eros theologians is a 'recovery' of the body, though the conception of the Divine, Eros, and the exact role that human sexuality plays in the unfolding of human and Divine relations varies among different works. Some feminist theologians who have contributed in this area include Carter Heyward (whose work I take up in this chapter), Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Hunt, Catherine Keller, and Marcella Althaus-Reid. See also Lisa Isherwood's edited volume *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism* (NYU Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> There are of course other examples of feminist theology that employ this framework (Mary Daly, Merlin Stone, and Sally McFague to name a few), but I find these two bodies of work an exemplary place to investigate the framework's implications for feminist theological understandings and articulations of difference.

located on the wrong side of a long list of western dualisms' 'Others': as human (vs. divine), material (vs. spirit), body (vs. mind), corrupt (vs. pure), and most substantively for this group of theologians, *female* (vs. male). In the words of founding mother Mary Daly from her path-breaking work, *Beyond God the Father*, "If God is male, the male is God".<sup>51</sup> This centuries-long history of patriarchal denigration and its perpetuation of hierarchical dualism lead to a foundational critique of Patriarchy in the field as a universal structure oppressing all women and provided a unifying focus for feminist theologians on the difference *gender* makes. As the most apparent site of this difference, the body became a loci not only for revalorizing female bodies/subjectivities and reclaiming the feminine (female) body as site of the sacred, but also as a base organic metaphor for formulating new paradigms in which to think through new conceptions of the divine, human relationships, and relations between the human and the divine.

### **i. Theology and Goddess Spirituality**

One branch of this feminist theological tree is known as *Theology*, whose practitioners, for the most part, deserted patriarchal monotheist religions as irredeemable to remake traditions focused on women's experiences and values and defined over against the destructive hierarchy characteristic of patriarchal religions. Key theological pillars derived from this focus on women's experience include a valuation of the fertility of the earth, the creative power of female bodies, and the shared divine force animating all of nature— plant, animal, and human-- found in the life-giving spirituality of the

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<sup>51</sup> Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Women's Press, 1986.

Goddess tradition. Some widely recognized and representative scholars and practitioners of Thealogy are Carol Christ, Starhawk, and Melissa Raphael.<sup>52</sup>

For theologians, the focal point of critique in their reconstruction of religion and spiritual practice is the dualistic and hierarchical nature of the patriarchal Divine. The most fertile ground for reversing this destructive dualism is a focus on *embodiment*, and *women's* embodiment in particular. For Christ and others rediscovering and remaking the Goddess religion, women's bodies and women's experience become sites of resistance to and transformation of patriarchal reality. Christ describes broadly what that transformation of terms and understanding looks like as it emerges out of women's experiences and values:

The Goddess is the power of intelligent, embodied love that is the ground of all being. The Earth is the body of the Goddess. All beings are interdependent in the web of life. Nature is intelligent, alive, and aware. All beings are interdependent in the web of life. As part of nature, human beings are relational, embodied and interdependent. The basis of ethics is the *feeling* of deep connection to all people, and all beings in the web of life.<sup>53</sup>

Where patriarchal monotheism and its transcendent male god has desacralized and demonized women's bodies and all that falls on the downside of its dualisms-- nature, immanence, emotion, the Feminine-- Thealogy seeks to resacralize the *Divine* Feminine.

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<sup>52</sup> See foundational text in the field of feminist theology, *Woman Spirit Rising*, eds. Judith Plaskow & Carol Christ, (Harper One, 1992). See also Christ's influential book *Laughter of Aphrodite* (Harper, 1991), and more recently *Goddess and God in the World*, eds. Christ & Plaskow, (Fortress Press, 2016). Starhawk's notable works include *The Spiral Dance* (1991), as well as *The Earth Path*, (Harper San Francisco, 2006), and *Webs of Power*, (New Society Publishers, 2010). Melissa Raphael's important contribution to the field include *Thealogy and Embodiment* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) as well as *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess* (Pilgrim Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Christ, Carol P., *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, Routledge, 1997, pg. 117. Christ's description of material inter-relation foreshadows this development in the 'new' materialism of a decade later, illustrating the unfortunate academic practice of depicting theoretical 'developments' as *successive*.

This resacralizing of the denigrated is achieved primarily through a *strategy of reversal*.

In the words of theologian Melissa Raphael, who draws heavily on Mary Daly's

influential works on the reversals of patriarchy<sup>54</sup>:

Post-patriarchal reconstructions of female sacrality can often be summarized as 'reversing the reversals...'<sup>55</sup>

In opposition to a patriarchal god imaged as static, unchanging, pure spirit, and male, theologians conjure an immanent divine in the embodied reality of their daily lives, including the bodily changes and processes whose leaky boundaries patriarchal religion has found so difficult to accommodate: menstruation, birth, sexual activity, menopause, aging and death. This state of constant flux is the stuff of the *Feminine* and the very source of Theology's reimagined Divine-- the immanent and dynamic energy of *Creative flux*, part of a web of connectedness of all things. In this reversal, women *as women* enjoy a special and particular embodiment of the sacred power of the universe<sup>56</sup>:

...That patriarchal construction of female otherness need not be reversed into sameness but into a positive celebration of otherness as mark of holiness. While spiritual feminism accepts that female otherness has been used against women, that term also has a spiritual/prophetic meaning that needs to be retrieved and reversed on feminists' own terms. Then female otherness is no longer the mark of denied subjecthood, but a mark of *the numinous power of female being*.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See especially *Beyond God the Father* and *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Women's, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, pg.24.

<sup>56</sup> For more on the resacralization of the female body, see Melissa Raphael's *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) and Mary Daly's *Outercourse*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1996) among her other important works cited above. To be clear, not all theologians exclude men from the possibility of enjoying this same embodiment of divinity but given that men have been the subjects of theology for most of history, theologians do not feel it is necessary to spend more time articulating that process. In addition, the structural impediments to achieving the insights central to a theological worldview are built into patriarchy's world view.

<sup>57</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, pg.36.



In this formulation of reversal, which I would characterize as typical of Theology more generally, we see the dualistic gender binary deployed intact, despite an acknowledgement of how dualistic ‘othering’ is and has been used against women historically. The categories within which difference has been articulated are male/female (thinly veiled by some as masculine/feminine) and the understanding of oppression is read predominantly along those lines, extended concretely and metaphorically to those materialities and characteristics that are likewise sorted. In this formulation, the *materiality of female bodies* and what appears to be formulated as their inherent connectedness to nature, animals, the goddess, and other humans, is articulated as the seat from which a web of relation radiates outward—in opposition to the rigid and destructive dualistic hierarchies of Patriarchal religion. But does this vision offer a critique of hierarchical dualism after all? Melissa Raphael argues that there is indeed something different that emerges from this reversal and that elevates it above the ‘sameness’ of reproducing patriarchy’s dualistic ‘othering’, primarily that its orientation is *towards the oppressed and the exploited*:

It is true that this reverted knowledge is still ideological knowledge in that the theory and the method consciously serve the interest of the knower. Yet it is quite unlike ideology in being *altruistically* constructed in the interests of justice for nature and the oppressed, not individual women alone. It is at once a local narrative of women’s liberation and an eschatological metanarrative of the redemption of nature from patriarchy.<sup>58</sup>

Raphael differentiates the gender dualism in Theology from that in Patriarchal monotheism by claiming for it a structural critique in the guise of its “eschatological

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<sup>58</sup> Raphael, Melissa, *Theology & Embodiment*, pg.37.

metanarrative”. Does her claim that Theology embraces the oppressed by fundamentally reshaping the image of the divine in more holistic and inclusive terms truly accomplish this deconstruction? I would suggest that her admission of the ideologically interested nature of the reverted knowledge produced by theologians functions in the very same way that patriarchal knowledge functions in eclipsing the specific oppressions experienced by women marked by differences *other than gender*.

Though constructive theology, particularly of the feminist variety, has relished the freedom to creatively reimagine as it deconstructs and critiques, my concern here is twofold: First, in locating the source of that reimagining in women’s bodies, where the object of critique is an overarching Patriarchy and the foundational terms of difference are thus articulated through the binary of male/female, some of the most flattening and exclusionary aspects of patriarchy’s dualism are imported directly into the Theological project. When “women” are conceptualized as a monolith over against “men”, the possibility of theorizing important differences between women (or men) who’s identity is constituted by markers other than gender, can be obscured; second, and directly related, the underestimation or denial of hierarchy or power differentials between women oversimplifies and undermines insight into how power operates to constitute, regulate and maintain the differences which locate women relative to one another in the larger socio-cultural arena<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Foucault would refer to this as the ‘field of power’ and I will treat his reconceptualization of power and how it is taken up by feminist theorists in a later chapter when looking at the work of Judith Butler and others. As I analyze the work of thinkers from many fields, I will try to stay rooted in the terminology relevant to their field while keeping my own critique across fields rooted in the consistent terms of my inquiry: theories of power, critical frameworks, and theories of difference as they relate to an author’s use of ‘the body’ in their various projects.

Though certainly theologians have done much to advance a more self-consciously embodied framework in theology to counter the denigration and inequalities wrought by a rhetoric of spiritual hierarchy and domination, when these questions of difference and power are brought to the fore, other questions emerge: What is this resacralized and earthly body? *Whose* body? It is not only important to question the essentialist implications here of locating the divine in female biology, but to look closely and carefully at what exactly is reconstituting that category of difference and who can occupy that social location. To do this effectively, we must question whether this formulation of the divine, in the words of Raphael, really *is* “altruistically constructed in the interests of justice for nature and the oppressed”. How well does this Theological revisioning permit a broad vision and critique of structural power relations, if at all, and how, given its formulation, does it depict how power operates? Absent a critique of structural power relations (which is not, I would argue, accomplished by a *stated intention* for the oppressed), we must question how representative of women’s experience of exclusion this ‘sacred body’ of Theology might be.

## **ii. Feminist Theological Critiques of Theology**

Feminist theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite offers some informative critique in her book “Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White” when she questions the relevance of the construction of the sacred female body in feminist Theology for black women and articulations of Womanist theology<sup>60</sup>. Concerned about

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Womanist’ is a term forged by black women writers and theologians in response to/critique of both white feminism/feminist theologians, and black liberation theology (authored largely by men – see for example James Cone’s *A Black Theology of*

the limitations a dualistic gender framework imposes on much theological thinking, Thistlethwaite's immersion in womanist writings, both literary and theological, helps to unmask the way a dualistic gender analysis obscures and even erases important differences between women. This is evidenced not only in the limited terms in which difference is articulated and theorized, but consequently, in Theologian's inability to see further behind the curtain at the intersecting structures that produce and regulate the multiple categories of difference within which subjects are located. Given the limitations of the sex/gender framework, a critique of differential power relations between women is foreclosed.

Thistlethwaite argues that the experience of redemptive embodiment articulated by Theologians which locates a liberative theology in the "natural and sacred body", poses specific problems for black women who have a very ambiguous relationship to 'nature' given the context of slavery in U.S. history.<sup>61</sup> In fact, contrary to Theologians' gender critiques, it is *not* true that all women have always stood for nature and been

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*Liberation* and Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance!*). In both instances, authors such as Jacqueline Grant (*White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*) and Dolores Williams (*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk*) among others, attend to the absence of representation of the experiences of black women and develop a religious conceptual framework, which reconsiders and revises the traditions, practices, scriptures, and biblical interpretation with a special lens to empower and liberate black women. The term Womanism was first developed by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose* where she describes its derivation from the term *womanish*, commonly used in Black daily language by mothers to describe adolescent daughters who act outrageous and grown-up, in contrast to *girlish*. Walker famously defined the term in relation to (white) feminism in her introduction as follows: A womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (*Mothers Gardens*, xii). Other notable thinkers in this tradition are Katie Canon, Emily Townes, Renita J Weems, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Shawn Copeland (whose book *Enfleshing Freedom*, I will treat in Chapter 4).

<sup>61</sup> *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White*, Crossroad, 1989, see pgs. 27-43.

treated like the earth, exploited and raped. In the United States, it is *black* women who have predominantly been identified with nature and white women with culture<sup>62</sup>. This both explains white women's desire to reclaim their embodiedness and relationship to nature and black women's deep ambiguity towards nature as it is romantically depicted in much of Theology. Black women relate to nature and embodiment in a complex way because they have been excluded from the post-patriarchal harmonious web of connectedness that characterizes Theologians' reimagining of the divine for themselves.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her many books examining the structural power relations that inform the boundaries of identities in biblical texts, early Christian communities, and the contemporary lives and locations of women vis a vis citizenship and the polis, describes this positionality as the colonized 'white lady' who is coopted by the gender system to perform the 'kyriarchy of power.' Schussler Fiorenza in her elucidation of the importance for feminist theology and theory of differentiating between a person's *structural position* and her *subject position*, argues that by losing sight of one or the other, a feminist critique is undercut, and opportunities for reimagining without reinscribing harmful hierarchies are short-circuited. I rely heavily on this critical articulation throughout my own work as it has made clear to me the very foundation for my thesis argument: that many feminist theorists and theologians who seat their analysis IN the body, lose sight of how identity categories are power effects engendered by structures of domination and articulated in essentialist ontological terms. Given a long history of patriarchally defined biological determinism and feminist theory's saturation with the sex/gender framework, this tendency to see the body as *gendered first and foremost*, leads to a foreclosure of a more intersectional understanding of how structures of domination produce, regulate, and enforce hierarchical identity categories, which intersect in many places and must be analyzed as such. This history and analysis are well documented and argued in the works of many feminist theorists and womanist theologians, some of whom I treat in Chapter 4's discussion of the intersectional framework. Chapter 4 argues that an intersectional framework operates as a critical tool for parsing out how power operates in relation to identity and difference, particularly in relation to the status of black bodies and the history of slavery.

<sup>63</sup> In Patricia Hill Collins' classic text *Black Feminist Thought* (Routledge, 2008), she traces four historically controlling images of the black woman perpetuated within white supremacy and defined over against white women's cultural/bodily purity: the Mammy, the Black Matriarch, the Welfare Mother, and the Jezebel. Though all these representations in some way mark black women's bodiliness, they also largely deny black women subjectivity or agency. Depending on the dualism in question, then – nature/culture, body/mind-- in the system of slavery, black women always found themselves on the wrong side. Their ambivalence in each instance reflects the struggle,

A post-colonial perspective on this theological revisioning from Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan also illuminates important critiques of feminist theologies constructed within a dualistic gender framework. She too takes issue with locating a redemptive and healing theology *in the body* and notes that the language of the erotic, present in both Theology and in Eros theology (which I will take up below) is virtually absent from the theologizing of non-white women beyond the shores of Europe and the United States. This is because in places like Thailand and the Philippines, the female body is still constructed primarily in terms of a body to be sold. In these cultures, “flesh” constitutes the flesh trade, and ‘the erotic’ power of men over women’s bodies. She describes the experience of female embodiment by non-white, non-western feminists as “tragic in a manner that white feminists can't even begin to imagine”.<sup>64</sup>

This is not to say that Asian feminist theologians are not concerned to address harms done to the female body, as they most definitely are. Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung points out that pain and suffering must be the epistemological starting point for Asian women’s theological reflection because this is their reality: “Asian women’s epistemology is an epistemology from the broken body, a broken body longing for healing and wholeness”.<sup>65</sup> However, and with quite important critical differences, their

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much like white women under Patriarchy, over control of the terms of hierarchical dualism. Unlike (white) women who focus on the gender binary as source of critique, the experience of racial hierarchy and white women’s part in it make clear that a reversal strategy within a dualistic framework provides limited insight into the complex workings of power. I will address this more fully in Chapter 4 as part of my argument for the critical importance of intersectional analysis for articulations of difference and the operations of power.

<sup>64</sup> See “The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, Orbis Books, 1994. See also her important monograph, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>65</sup> In *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, Orbis Books,

constructive theologies do not so much focus *on/in the body*, but on the structures of power that *locate bodies* as inferior, polluted, violable. Over against certain gestures in feminist theology emerging from the United States, Asian feminist theologians bring a postcolonial critique to a gender framework that cannot account for their own subjectivity. By way of a critique of feminist theologian Mary Daly's work in *Gyn/Ecology* (also well known for her use of a dualistic gender framework), Kwok names the erasure of differences between women in the quest to establish a transcultural theory of Patriarchy as a form of 'imperial feminism' where western women's claim of universalism replicates the masculinist stance they criticize and in so doing dangerously colludes with colonialism.<sup>66</sup> Articulated quite clearly in the words of postcolonial feminist theorist Meyda Yegenoglu:

Although feminist theory has successfully revealed the phallogentric bind of the claims for neutrality and universality, it has nevertheless, by privileging sexual difference to other forms of difference, itself remained blind to the imperialist and ethnocentric bind of such a gesture. The relegation of the pretension of universality only in the domain of sexual difference carries the risk of phallogentric gesture in representations of cultural difference and the ethnocentric bind of phallogentrism.... The apparently benign appeals to a common good for universal womanhood and the presumption that all women are being spoken for in the name of global sisterhood are not free from colonial and masculinist fantasies of attaining a sovereign subject status."<sup>67</sup>

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1997, pg. 39.

<sup>66</sup> See Kwok & Donaldson, *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, pg.76, Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Beacon Press, 2006. See also Audre Lorde's "History is a Weapon: An Open Letter to Mary Daly" written to her upon the publication of *Gyn/Ecology*, and later published as part of Lorde's collected writings in, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984.

<sup>67</sup> *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Yegenoglu, Meyda, Cambridge University Press, 1998 (pgs. 105-6).

Theology's revisioning of the immanent feminine divine seated in the (female) body and radiating outward in a web of connection, though seemingly all-embracing and inclusive, in truth threatens to collapse whose bodies and experiences can be articulated in its terms, as well as the possibility of articulating how differential power relationships are structured by many terms of difference (not just gender). I argue that these limitations are a direct result of using a dualistic gender framework that operates primarily in the work of theology as a strategy of reversal, privileging gender difference as the most meaningful axis along which to struggle against oppression.

### iii. Eros Theologies

As observed above by Kwok Pui Lan, another strand of feminist theology that revalorizes and centers (women's) bodies and sexuality to redress the destructive hierarchical dualisms of Patriarchy is Eros Theology. Otherwise known as Theologies of Sexuality and deeply connected with gay and lesbian theology, Eros theologies diagnose the primary source of our alienation from the Divine in Patriarchy as a lack of true mutual connection with others, and locates the body as the site where we may best heal that divide.<sup>68</sup> In this theological tradition, *the body in relation* becomes an important site for

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<sup>68</sup> Some representative gay and lesbian theologians and texts are: Katherine Keller's *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* (Beacon Press, 1986), Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, (Harper San Francisco, 1996), Elizabeth Stuart's *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*, (Mowbray, 1996), Rita Nakashima Brock's *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008), Mary Hunt's *Fierce Tenderness: a Feminist Theology of Friendship*, (Fortress Publishers, 2009), and to some degree Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, (Routledge, 2000). Althaus-Reid is more closely associated with Queer Theology, which, though sometimes understood as the combination of gay and lesbian theology under one umbrella, is also more expansive in its understanding of



theological knowledge of other persons, the world, and the Divine as a thoroughly immanent aspect of those relationships. The *Erotic* as a theological category encompasses both human and divine layers of mutual relationality and functions similarly to the web-like imagery in Theological reimaginings-- as a connecting energy between all beings.

Drawing largely from the iconic formulation by Audre Lorde, the erotic in Eros Theology is understood as “the power of true feeling which once experienced drives us toward its realization in every aspect of our lives”.<sup>69</sup> Eros theologians like Carter Heyward, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Kathryn Keller laid the foundations for this branch of feminist theology and though I will not extensively treat this group, I do want to explore how its broad reliance, however explicit or implicit, on the sex/gender framework and its focus on the body, have resulted in some of the same critical shortcomings I addressed in the underpinnings of the Theological tradition.

Similarly, to the goddess theologians, the focus on relationality already suggests the possibility of reinscribing a very traditional patriarchal framework (strategy of reversal), wherein what is ascribed to women and the feminine is exactly the social work

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the disruptive forces of sexuality and desire for doing inclusive theology. Queer theology, which I do not take up specifically in this dissertation, can be understood as theology that addresses the needs and experiences of LGBTQIA people, as a practice for reading cultural texts (of all forms) against the grain - ‘queering’ in the tradition of a hermeneutics of suspicion - and/or more generally as the practice of challenging/deconstructing societal norms/boundaries as a means of opening up new ways of thinking and living. Though I do not deal with the field of queer theology separately in this dissertation –and it certainly deserves a dissertation of its own at this point- queer theory is well represented in the content and methods of many of the feminist thinkers I address outside of this section. The feminist critical hermeneutic could, in many senses, be called *queer* when it works to unmask and challenge gendered norms, uncovers the untold stories of those excluded from history’s formal texts, and expands its imaginative reconstructions to include the marginalized.

<sup>69</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, pg.55-56,58.

of relationships and connection. This is not to say that mutuality as a social model of right relation is bankrupt, but to suggest that this critical approach, in common with that used by Theologians, may still be operating within the terms of the dominant framework. Carter Heyward, in her (representative) work *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, defines the Erotic specifically as “power in right relation” where structures of patriarchy keep us fearful of realizing our ‘inherent interrelatedness’, our sexualities are “our embodied yearning to express a relational mutuality”, “right relations” produce justice and just relations among all humanity, and relationships not characterized by mutuality are expressions of ‘alienated desire.’<sup>70</sup> Posited as an explicit critique of Patriarchy’s alienated subject, this framework for reimagining a just world founded on our inherent interpersonal capacity for connection raises some of the same concerns about clarifying the operations of power that seating theology in the body raised in the omissions of Theological reimaginings. Does mutuality between persons expressed through our bodies, and specifically our sexuality--even when characterized as the manifestation of God— displace Patriarchy’s universalized subject or its dualistic terms of ‘different’ identity?<sup>71</sup> Does this radically immanent alternative envisioning of the Divine really undermine or offer an effective critique of the powers operating within the hierarchically dualistic conceptions of the Divine it is imagined over against? What tools of critique does Eros theology give us to account for and counter

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<sup>70</sup> Carter Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, pg. 25.

<sup>71</sup> The universalized ‘subject’ of Patriarchy referred to here is that one articulated within the liberal framework of the enlightenment era, theorized as the isolated cogito, man of science, self-reliant, free-willing agent, unencumbered in/by the public sphere, and certainly not enmeshed in social structures outside of his willing action. This is the universalized male subject/citizen that animates most of Patriarchy’s articulations of subjectivity, the critique of which is the foundation for much of feminist theory and theology.

what some feminist theologians call *structural evil*, the maintenance of hierarchies of oppression?

#### **iv. Feminist Theological Critiques of Eros Theology**

Critiques of Eros theology and its capacity to counter oppressive power structures have come from different viewpoints and include both feminist theological voices and those inflected by broader debates in feminist theory about the status of sexuality in feminist critical thought. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite again brings important critical questions to the table in her book *Sex, Race and God* regarding the particularity of white women's subject position in U.S. culture and how that plays out in the articulations of *Eros* and *mutuality* within theologies of sexuality. She posits that as white women have been socialized into connectivity and seen as providing the cohesive glue holding society together, these metaphors have served to perpetuate the dominance of white culture. As such, an uncritical dive by feminist theologians into images of webs, matrixes and connection is in danger of simply perpetuating "the white assumed privilege of owning the world".<sup>72</sup> Though not denying that reflection on the relations between women is relevant, she insists that until this is done in such a way as to deal seriously with structural differences between women, feminist theologians are in serious danger of reproducing a framework of invisibility, which excludes an encounter with 'the terror of difference'. The construction of the divine must contain a sufficient 'Otherness' that constantly calls us away from an easy language of relationality. She is skeptical about whether a notion of divinity as thoroughly immanent as that found in many Eros

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<sup>72</sup> *Sex, Race, and God*, pg. 91.

theologies can adequately theorize the truly ‘other’, especially in its preoccupation with the experiential relations of individuals. These critiques mirror my concerns about several critical frameworks that ‘get stuck’ in a psychologized mode of inquiry and exploration such that structures of oppression are occluded.

Another productive site of critique is the ongoing debate, present in both feminist theological and feminist theoretical circles, about how much weight sexuality can or should carry in the struggle for women’s emancipation.<sup>73</sup> The simultaneity of the debate in both spheres also highlights my argument for a cross-disciplinary critique of the sex/gender framework and its snare of sexual difference as a major limitation on multi-axial structural power analysis.

## **v. The Limits of Sexuality- Notes from the Sex Wars**

Feminist debates within theologies of sexuality mirror a secular feminist debate referred to historically as the “pro-sex and anti-sex wars”. Both seek to locate a space of agency and resistance within a culture saturated by Patriarchy’s dualistic constructions of sexual difference, with particular attention to how that has affected women’s bodies/embodiment. What I would suggest is implicitly at stake in both is a struggle over

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<sup>73</sup> See as examples Kathleen Sands article “Uses of the Thea (o) logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 8 No.1 (Spring 1992), Beverly Harrison’s discussion of the ‘sexuality question’ in her article “Sexuality and Social Policy,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, pgs. 242-55 and again, Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*. Important sources in the secular debate include Gayle Rubin’s article “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Vance, Carol S., Pandora, 1992. Rubin’s article includes a compelling analysis of the dangers inherent in conflating sex and gender. See also Mariana Valverde’s *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, (New City Publishers, Philadelphia, 1987).

whether the sex/gender framework offers adequate resources for articulating non-oppressive feminist resistance.

In the secular debate, the *Anti-sex camp* represented by thinkers such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon understands Patriarchy's control over the content of sexuality and gender (sexual practices and gender roles) as so totalizing within its hierarchical structures that there is little room for women to express any form of non-patriarchal sexuality, thus rendering the site of sexuality largely irredeemable as a potent source of resistance from within.<sup>74</sup> The formulation of how sex and gender operate in relation to patriarchal power here essentially conflates the two, such that men's social power over women is directly reflected in the forms sexuality takes in Patriarchy<sup>75</sup>. *The Pro-sex camp*, in opposition to such an ideologically entrenched vision of (patriarchal) sexual identity, sees an opportunity in the gap between sex (uality) and gender (roles) to posit a less over-determined subject.<sup>76</sup> In this formulation, the free expression of *Desire*

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<sup>74</sup> See especially Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Plume 1989) and MacKinnon's *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (2014) and *Only Words* (Harvard University Press, 1996). A collection of Mackinnon's collected writings over her 40-year career was recently published by Harvard University Press (2017), entitled *Butterfly Politics*. The collection nicely traces her arguments about sexuality, inequality, power, and the state in a series of her most influential essays.

<sup>75</sup> For both Dworkin and MacKinnon that structure is one of domination and submission, where men are always dominant/dominate and women are always submissive/subservient. See Mackinnon's *Only Words* and Dworkin's *Pornography*.

<sup>76</sup> The importance of the theoretical separation of sex and gender cannot be underestimated for feminist thought more broadly. Its usefulness to practitioners across disciplines are many and varied and as I suggested in my introduction to critical frameworks, represents the beginning of an epistemic shift in critical thought towards discursive analysis, a.k.a. 'the linguistic turn'. Judith Butler's formulation of its significance for work on the body is argued in her iconic book *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 2011), which I will treat further on in the dissertation. Also critical to this notion of gender as socially constructed and separate from biological sex-- which eventually leads to the interrogation of biological sex as equally constructed -- are post-structuralist theorizations of difference/s as proliferating and power as plural and multi-

serves as a form of resistance to the rigid sexual roles reserved for women in Patriarchy.<sup>77</sup> In all three endeavors-- theologies of sexuality and mutuality, anti-sex critiques of patriarchal sexuality, and pro-sex advocacy for proliferations of desire-- sexuality is seen as having a direct link to the social and as such, depending on the perception of the subject at hand, providing a lever for effecting social change, or at least for positing an alternative to Patriarchy's worldview. But for all three I would also argue that one can detect background straining against the limitations the sex/gender framework imposes on these feminist attempts to challenge oppressive structures. The lever that sexuality apparently provides locates that struggle, first and foremost, in the *body* and thus foundationally conceptualized at an interpersonal level, despite gestures towards a class of mutual sufferers-- women. The sex/gender framework identifies Patriarchy as the primary source of oppression and Gender as the principal focus of power analysis. What are the effects, then, of this narrowing of analysis on the theorization of oppression and the means of resistance to it? All three cases, I would argue, come up short *because* a focus on the body has led them astray by 1.) Centering (intentionally or not) the interpersonal as the site of struggle and thus taking the structural context out of sight

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local. All have been utilized by feminist theorists and theologians as sites of political disruption/resistance.

<sup>77</sup> Desire as a trope for a kind of 'free floating' category or force of change haunts many feminist formulations that seek to find a less constricted space for theorizing resistance. Particularly in feminist adaptations of the psychoanalytic model, where drives and desires have animated the categories of that framework since Freud's original articulations, Desire functions as a sort of repository for unresolved theoretical threads, which then animate the 'dispersed' intentions of the subject. I have often thought of it as the lovechild of psychoanalysis and postmodern theory in that it fits nicely into those frameworks' notion of a dispersed subject who's 'excesses' are where we must look for disruptions of hegemonic thought, the universalized knowing subject, or anything we find too over-determined by the confines of theory. It's the proverbial get out of jail free card when you theorize yourself into a seemingly determinist corner.

and/or making the theorization of the subject/agency primary (instead of both/and) 2.) Falling prey to the powerful forces of biological determinism in western dualism by reading gender off the body as the primary marker of difference and thus foreclosing an intersectional analysis, and finally 3.) Theorizing the operations of power accordingly and thus positing forms of resistance in, I would argue, less than effective terms.

In the anti-sex camp, the conflation of sex and gender essentializes the categories of male (men) and female (women) in a Patriarchy conceived as an oppressive monolith, depriving analysis of a more historicized or constructed view of the contingent content of those categories or the differences other differences (besides gender) might make in that analysis. The resulting vision for resistance and change is the *legislation or social regulation of pornography* (in the language of Eros theology, *alienated sexuality*). When a form of this legislation was passed in Canada, it resulted in feminist bookstores being shut down for ‘indecentcy’. The pro-sex camp, though thoroughly constructionist in their conception of gender, over-estimates the ‘freedom’ of their gendered subjects from the social structures in which they are embedded, thereby uncritically (if unintentionally) importing a version of the liberal willing individual into the center of their political program: a *proliferation of desires and sexualities* as effective disruptive political resistance to the oppressive structures of a rigid hierarchical gender binary.

In Eros theology, *Desire* also takes a prominent role though in the theological context it is imagined along the lines of what Theologians describe as the *connectivity between all things*. Social change comes in the form of ‘right relation’ realized as Eros operates through individual bodies. Much like the proliferating desires theorized by pro-sex feminists, Eros functions largely as an ahistorical force of goodness. It is, in fact, the

Divine in its immanent form. This radically immanent concept of the divine is seated IN individual bodies and unfolds through interpersonal relation, expressed through our sexualities as the connecting force between humans. Feminist theologian Kathleen Sands critiques this formulation as a *romanticization* of Eros, which casts the ‘desire for mutuality’ as essentially constitutive of human nature, and as a fundamental source for creativity and ‘good’ power (i.e. expression of ‘right relation’.) According to Sands, this formulation forces a theorization of sexuality into essentialist territory and threatens the possibility of adequately accounting for and theorizing real *evil* –i.e. that there can be *bad* power rather than just *distorted* power.<sup>78</sup>

## vi. Conclusions

Sands’ critique echoes my broader concern that a focus on sexuality within the sex/gender framework as a transformative site for power critique does more to occlude the power structures that locate bodies than it does provide an opportunity for rearticulating just relations.<sup>79</sup> When theorized thusly, Eros theology follows the secular feminist debate about sexuality down a long meandering path of deliberating whether and which *sexual acts* carry inherent moral meaning as expressions of ‘right relation’ or, as more broadly articulated in the secular pro-sex/anti-sex debate, whether the conduit of

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<sup>78</sup> See Sands’ *Escape from Freedom: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1994, especially 77-81, and 114-116.

<sup>79</sup> Sands is not as outright critical of the endeavor of theologies of sexuality in their entirety and still labels sexuality as “an elemental power that can carry a variety of goods, but which is fundamentally characterized by intensity”. She argues for the inclusion of a notion of ‘tragedy’ as a temper on the romanticized version of Eros that could account for and hold accountable experiences and expressions of sexuality that are harmful and ‘sinful’ in “Uses of the Thea (o) logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 8 No.1 (Spring 1992).



sexuality reinforces current power relations, or provides an opportunity to contest, reshape, or escape them. From within the structural rhetorical frame that I bring to this analysis, these positions represent sides of the same coin. All three positions *start with* a central concern for the redemption of the (female) body from its denigrated position in patriarchy's hierarchical dualism. What *follows* is a shared presumption that sexuality has or should have this central a role in analyzing oppressive relations. What *results* from all three approaches is an analysis of power that gets stuck in either the interpersonal or along only *one* axis of hierarchically valued difference – *gender*. What is eclipsed as each approach employs the sex/gender framework in their analysis, are the *generative* operations of structural power along *multiply intersecting* axes of identity.

Though I would not argue that the individual context does not matter or has nothing to show us about how oppression operates or what resistance looks like, in the absence of a simultaneous analysis of the overarching structures of power which determine the content and hierarchical valuation of differences between subjects, such analysis may well support as many relations of domination as it disrupts. If the true aim of feminist theory and theology is a struggle to dismantle oppressive structures, it should also be to thoroughly interrogate whether its theoretical formulations in fact *do so effectively*. The most basic insight of my thesis argument is that grounding one's theory *in* the body as a starting place for such critique reliably leads one astray in this regard, within many of the critical frameworks adopted by feminist theorists and theologians. In my next chapter, I will explore how *sexual difference*, within the broader rubric of *materialization*, operates largely in feminist body projects to reproduce the constraints of male/female difference and undercuts a structural power analysis that theorizes difference

as multiple and intersecting.

## Chapter 2

### **The Limits of Sexual Difference: Psychoanalysis, Discursivity and The Materialization of Bodies**

In the last chapter I argued that feminist theologians and theorists of the body often undermine the stated liberative goals of their projects by employing the sex/gender framework. Primarily this occurs because: 1.) They ‘read’ gender as the primary marker of difference mapped on bodies, 2.) A focus on only one axis of oppression leads to both a binary understanding of difference and a less complex analysis of the operations of power, and 3.) The centering of the body and individuals’ habitation of the body as the locus of their political projects often draws their analysis away from the productive role that structural power relations play in locating and regulating hierarchical identity categories. In this next chapter, I will take up the ubiquitous theoretical trope of *sexual difference* and its prominent role in feminist body projects focused on the process of *materialization*. By materialization, I refer primarily to that notion developed within the psychoanalytic framework and its ‘linguistic turn’ by theorists Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault and adapted to feminist purposes as a means of theorizing embodiment and, particularly, the embodiment of gender.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> See Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrites: The First Complete Edition in English*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005). See also Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, (Harvester Press, 1980) and *Archaeology of Knowledge*, (Vintage Books, 1982). I am aware that there is a much longer history of thought along these lines, particularly that developed in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology from which many feminist theorists of the body also draw in the development of the ‘new materialism’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work on embodiment, perception and ontology

The notion of sexual difference that haunts most articulations of materialization also arises from within the psychoanalytic framework, as described in my Introduction. It too is primarily discursive in its guise and represents the foundation of *all* difference, born of the differentiation of self (from other), calling forth the very conditions of possibility for the emergence of language as it erupts into the world of signs, and is ever after caught in the play of *différance*. What sexual difference comes to symbolize, however, and how it functions critically in the body projects I will take up in this chapter, poses some critical challenges to the political proposals and claims of its adopters.

In what follows, I focus primarily on two foundational and representative works in the ‘field’ of body studies: Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* and Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*.<sup>81</sup> Though the work of these thinkers crosses many disciplinary

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is most salient in this regard. There was mutual interest and influence among his post-structuralist contemporaries, which included Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, when it came to theorizing the *lived body*. His major work in this area, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), is often cited by feminist theorists of the body. For my purposes in this chapter, I will focus primarily on the work of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz (works cited throughout), but the postmodern theorization of materialization has become so central to feminist work on the body (and elsewhere) that it is either directly utilized, or critically addressed in most feminist work since the publication of Butler’s ground-breaking monograph, *Bodies That Matter*, in 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Theories of Representation and Difference), (Indiana University Press, 1994) and Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (Routledge, 1993). Both thinkers have written books since on other topics, particularly Butler who is a prolific critical thinker. I am, however, specifically focusing on their theoretical articulations of the body as site of the political and these canonical works shaped and continue to shape the intellectual landscape. Grosz has recently been adopted as a ‘founding mother’ of the ‘new materialism’ and has adapted her work in that direction. Her early essays are now included in ‘new materialist’ collections and her monographs are summarily listed in any litany of the ‘new materialist’ canon. See her collected essays in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, (Routledge Press, 1995) and her most recent monograph which reflects a more current focus on rearticulating the ontological in the new materialist movement, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of the Material*, (Columbia University Press, 2017). I see the context of my work as taking up

boundaries and could be read within the oeuvre of feminist theory, queer theory, new materialist, or postmodernist theory, for the purposes of my argument I will focus on the salience of the psychoanalytic model and how its foundational conception of sexual difference inform their arguments and frame of analysis to pose some specific problems in a discourse concerned with the politics of the body. Though in overall approach, the framework operates quite differently in the work of Grosz and Butler, I focus on it as a means of tracing the tenacity of sexual difference at the heart of it's critical structure, and the power that this binary dualism has to shape the theory of difference operating in their approaches more broadly.

### **i. Feminist Critical Theory and the Body**

Like the theorists and theologians I treat throughout this dissertation, Grosz and Butler begin with the belief that the body plays a unique role in situating 'different' (marginalized) subjects within cultural contexts and that as such, it requires the special attention of feminist theorists. Just what role the body plays, in answer to which problematic and how it is theorized differs for Grosz and Butler, but some of their critical tools are the same, and that is where I want to focus for the greater purposes of my own argument. They both theorize the *subject* largely in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, using the language of the Symbolic and its psychically and socially productive power<sup>82</sup>, as well

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that proliferation of work written about the body which emerged in the early 90s - often referred to critically as the theoretical "turn to the body"—and which contemporary feminist body projects continue to situate themselves in relation to as a sort of unofficial canon or ongoing conversation.

<sup>82</sup> Though both authors often rely on the theories of Freud in articulating a host of problematics, many of their critical terms and language – of the Symbolic, of *constraint*, of *intelligibility*—comes out of the linguistic terminology adapted by Lacan to

as drawing from related post-structuralist and postmodern theories to employ terms like: abjection, inscription, (re) iteration, materialization, regulation, proliferation, and discursive practice.<sup>83</sup> This language is put to use by both scholars as they attempt to describe what dynamics are at work in producing bodies and in describing how different bodies come to mean through categorization, identity formation, structural relation, and regulation.<sup>84</sup>

Though Butler and Grosz use these new critical terms to different effect, their texts share a certain prescriptive quality as they position the body either as a potent site for solving a theoretical problem, or as the theoretical problem itself, in relation to which they situate their theoretical approaches as ‘solutions’. From this macro perspective, what informs my overarching critical inquiry into endeavors that center the body as a theoretically potent space to produce a politics of liberation from oppressive structures is a larger question and concern about the function of critical feminist theory. The challenge of my critical question is this: when a theorist chooses to articulate a political program or critique through the body, does it matter how effective their theoretical insights are in redressing/addressing the problematic they have identified as such? How does theory

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psychoanalysis and by Foucault’s adaptations of that terminology to his reformulation of the dynamics of power and bodies. Lacan has often been described as the father of the ‘linguistic turn’ in psychoanalytic theory as he was the first to apply the findings of linguistics to the study of psychology and psychoanalysis. Though I will not go into depth here describing the specifics of his contributions to the field, I will make explanations along the way as necessary.

<sup>83</sup> Such terms connote a specific notion of surface, which is utilized and theorized differently by Grosz and Butler.

<sup>84</sup> In contrast to those theorists and theologians I have examined thus far, the *productive* aspect of *power* that both defines and constrains the contents of identity categories is newly articulated and begins to draw focus to those structures/conditions within culture which don’t simply enforce pre-existing differences that already inhere IN bodies, but *produce* categories of difference and locate them hierarchically in relation to one another.

perform in these texts-- as a descriptive device meant to elucidate political, psychological and social dynamics as an end in itself, or as a program of politics? And if this is not an either/or, is it meaningful theoretically to question whether critical *strategies* perform a good critical service? As I turn to the specific work of Grosz and Butler, I will first lay out why each theorist has identified the body as an important focus of their text relative to others and, subsequently, examine how effectively their critical approaches deal with the political problem they have defined. My deeper concern is to do with my own skepticism about the body's effectiveness as a site for producing feminist analysis of structural oppression or the production of difference. As such, my analysis is intended to shine a light on whether and how the body and its metaphors in these projects prove to be productive sites for articulating a politics of liberation and equality.

## **ii. Sexual Difference and the Male/Female Binary**

Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* is a self-defined "experiment in inversion": a theoretical attempt to rethink subjectivity in non-dualistic terms.<sup>85</sup> Having identified the mind/body dualism as a central problematic for feminist theory, Grosz sets out to undermine this binary in which mind and body are theorized not only as separate types of thing (one mental, one physical), but as symbolic markers of maleness and femaleness. Referencing the long and well-documented feminist critique of the association of femaleness with *body*, *materiality*, and *irrationality*, Grosz goes on to critique feminist theorists for regularly reproducing these dualisms in their own work. She argues that the

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<sup>85</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.

critical frameworks they have employed have either missed the opportunity to theorize the body *itself* or failed to disentangle women from a degraded notion of bodiliness. Her focus on the body as the central matter of inquiry is, in fact, her *strategy* for undermining this entrenched dualism and the source of a new articulation of subjectivity that is more than simply the ‘mind’ of traditional androcentric philosophy. In her rearticulation, the subject is *part* of the body, and mind and body are indeed one entity; matter is animated, and mind is material.<sup>86</sup> She calls this project a *reconfiguration of the body* and posits that it is through this process that *other* (non-dualistic) ways of understanding corporeality, sexuality, and the differences between the sexes will emerge. In stark contrast to my own thesis, and in many senses in support of it, Grosz argues that using the body as a starting place for theorizing subjectivity over against mind/consciousness has the added *bonus* of inevitably raising the question of sexual difference because bodies’ surfaces are where we commonly ‘see’ these differences.<sup>87</sup> Built in to Grosz’ critical strategy, then, is a centering of the binary of sexual difference, even as its devalued female side is meant to *disrupt* the assumed norm of the male subject.

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<sup>86</sup> In this regard she ‘foreshadows’ what Alaimo and Hekman claim is a new epistemic shift from the postmodern ‘linguistic turn’ to a ‘material turn’ in their edited volume *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press, 2008). This is also why throughout this thesis I try not to introduce work from a ‘supercessionaist’ point of view. Many of the concepts and arguments that feminists bring to the table at different periods are still relevant, vital and in play.

<sup>87</sup> While Grosz sees this as a boon to her analysis in its disruption of a presumed male subject (human), for me, it is an overt articulation of the *problem* of using the body as a metaphorical site for rearticulating a more inclusive theory of difference-- exactly because, for feminist theorists, it often appears true that sexual difference is the *most obviously* represented difference on the body’s surface. The extent to which this may well be culturally engrained in the gaze of white feminists in particular as they look to/at the body is a subject I have/will touch on throughout.



In the introduction to her critical framework, some familiar problems re-emerge from a project seeking to articulate subjectivity *through* the female body using its metaphors of surfaces and flows. Against the backdrop of a psychoanalytic conceptual landscape, Grosz makes a series of elisions between the concepts of corporeality, subjectivity, sexuality, and sexual difference, at times collapsing them in ways reminiscent of Mackinnon and Dworkin's rendering of the sex/gender framework.<sup>88</sup> Tracing how these concepts get woven together within the *mélange* of her framework exposes what I consider to be significant elisions in how her reconfiguration of the body meets (or does not meet) the proposed goals of its disruptive potential.

Grosz's focus on the body, like many of the body-focused thinkers I've treated, leads her immediately to sexuality as a potent extension and expression of its actuality. Although she articulates sexuality's meaning along 4 axis (see footnote #88), the argument she advances at the heart of her project focuses primarily along its third axis: *an identity where the sex of bodies (gender) designates at least two different forms, usually understood by the binary opposition of male and female*. Reminiscent of the identifications that are made in Eros theology and the sex debates, sexuality here starts down the slippery slope to *identity* (an essential truth of one's being), and sexual identity, as mapped on the body, is understood through the binary of male and female. Almost immediately this leads Grosz to an understanding of sexual difference not only as a gendering marker on bodies, but as the foundational difference through which patriarchal

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pg. viii. This slippage can be seen in Grosz's definition of sexuality, which she breaks down as fourfold: 1.) as a drive, primarily defined in the field of psychoanalysis, 2.) as an act or series of practices and behaviors involving orgasm, 3.) as an identity where the sex of bodies (gender) designates at least two different forms, usually understood by the binary opposition of male and female, and 4.) as a set of orientations, positions and desires through which pleasure is sought.

social reality is structured and organized. I quote at length to provide a clear idea of the breadth of her formulation:

As a determinate type of body, as sexually specific, it infects all of the activities of the sexes, underlying our understandings of the world well beyond the domain of sexual relations or the concrete relations constituting sexual difference. Our conceptions of reality, knowledge, truth, politics, ethics, and aesthetics are all effects of sexually specific--usually male-- bodies and are thus all implicated in the power structures which feminists have described as patriarchal, the structures which govern relations between the sexes....<sup>89</sup>

The psychoanalytic framework, which positions sexual difference as primary in its symbolic organization of difference, is clearly at work in Grosz's formulation. For her argument, however, she positions the body as the central location for representing sexual difference, where the psychoanalytic framework theorized it as a structure of the subconscious. She continues:

Sexual difference is thus a mobile, indeed volatile, concept, able to insinuate itself into regions where it should have no place, to make itself if not invisible, then at least unrecognizable in its influence and effects. It becomes a pivotal term in negotiating the intersections of feminist and modern European philosophy and in locating the body as a central term in this negotiation.<sup>90</sup>

Given the goal of her corporeal project-- to undermine the mind/body dualism and its association with maleness and femaleness-- her engagement of this framework and her welcome embrace of its foundational imaginary of sexual difference, are worrying. But her appropriation of the tools and terms of a variety of frameworks invite adaptations to the psychoanalytic frame as she develops the methods of her project. Grosz has started by positing the body's sexual specificity as a means of disrupting and exposing the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pg. ix.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pg. ix.

supposed neutrality of the universal (male) subject<sup>91</sup>. She has also, however, articulated the danger for feminist theorists of reinscribing denigrating notions of difference and, in what I see as one of the few boons of the linguistic turn in psychoanalytic theory, understands categories of difference as inscribed *on* the body rather than inhering *in* bodies. In so doing, she both side steps any immediate charges of essentialism, and lays the groundwork for articulating the process by which differences comes to mark bodies as they are located in and by structures of domination.

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<sup>91</sup> Grosz is not the first or only feminist theorist to use the corporeal specificity of male/female bodies as a disruptive device for exposing the presumption of the (white) male subject. In the field and practice of feminist jurisprudence, for instance, we see the same strategies employed to expose how ‘difference’ operates in liberal legal thought: constructed as difference *from* an assumed (but invisible) norm of the white male subject/citizen. Representative texts are Zillah Eisenstein’s *The Female Body in the Law* (University of California Press, 1990) and Martha Minow’s *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* (Cornell University Press, 1991). In feminist jurisprudence, women’s bodies and their biological differences from men’s bodies, particularly around childbearing and reproductive technologies, are potentially very disruptive of this invisible norm and a potent site at which to expose that presumption. In early legal approaches to the ‘problem’ of difference, analyses that did not disrupt the liberal framework entirely resulted in a series of ‘special natures’ arguments where women, conceived as fundamentally different from men, were then controlled through protectionist legislation (in the workplace, around pregnancy, etc.). The liberal framework proved incapable of robustly theorizing difference, and those feminists who uncritically adopted the individualistic subject at the center of this framework became ensnared in an either/or conception of difference. The same dilemma can be seen in the philosophy of one of feminist theory’s most famous foremothers, Simone De Beauvoir who, earlier in the century, concluded that in order for women to be treated equally (under the law), their differences *from* the presumed male legal subject could not be acknowledged or adequately addressed. From within the liberal framework, the biology is destiny argument is not so much disrupted by an attention to sexual difference and its multiplication of subjects under the law. Rather, because the framework already carries within it a dualistic understanding of difference as difference *from*, arguments made in its dualistic terms more often than not *reinscribe* rather than disrupt, their place. For a very important formulation of how difference operates in the liberal framework, see Iris Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton University Press, 1990).

### iii. Materialization, Discursivity & Difference

Following the critical insight of Lacan, Grosz does not posit the biological body as a ‘real’ substance *underneath* culturally inscribed/materialized gender.

I hope to show that the body, or bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, pre-cultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved by social pressures external to them, but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type.<sup>92</sup>

This elaboration of the social construction of different bodies implies an understanding of the production of *differences*, not just sexual difference.

“The bodies in which I am interested are culturally, sexually, racially specific bodies, the mobile and changeable terms of cultural production.”<sup>93</sup>

Given her concern with the hierarchical valuation of differences and her strategy to disrupt their dualistic logic through a focus on the body, Grosz’ attention to sexual difference could be less consequential than, I will argue, it turns out to be. Despite her emphasis on the importance of *specific* bodies, Grosz’ assertion of the radical potential of

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<sup>92</sup> *Bodies*, pg. x. Here Grosz rehearses an argument that will be adopted and extended by the ‘new materialist’ feminists as they identify this body of theory as largely concerned with ‘representation’ and reject this in favor of a (new) materialism which (apparently) blends a notion of the material as ‘real’, but protects itself against charges of foundationalism by articulating an ongoing interaction or process of materializing variously named ‘interactionism’, ‘viscous porosity’, ‘intra-action’, and ‘agential realism’. See Susan Hekman’s *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*, (Indiana University Press, 2010), Karen Barad’s, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Duke University Press, 2007). Donna Haraway’s *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium – Female Man-Meets-Onco-Mouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, (Routledge, New York, 1997), and Nancy Tuana’s “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina” pgs. 188-213, in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>93</sup> *Bodies*, pg. xi.

the body to disrupt dualistic notions of difference is diminished as those ‘specificities’ remain a vague and inconsequential part of her methods.

The body is the ally of sexual difference, a key term in questioning the centrality of a number of apparently benign but nonetheless phallogocentric presumptions which have hidden the cultural and intellectual effacement of women: it helps to problematize the universalist and universalizing assumptions of humanism, through which women’s—*and all other groups*’—specificities, positions, and histories are rendered irrelevant or redundant.<sup>94</sup> (Italics mine)

Though the “specificities, positions and histories” of “all other groups” could provide a source of disruption to the universal male subject that Grosz seeks, she looks at the body and sees primarily male/female difference. Rather than theorizing the interlocking operations of ‘othering’ in the production of differences, she instead tacks on *all other groups*’ differences as derivative of the primary difference gender represents on the body. Notwithstanding her claim that any ‘other’ subjectivity may stand to benefit from a more inclusive rearticulation of corporeality, I wonder whether a focus on the body read primarily as male and female can *really* do the work of articulating other identities. Are all differences the same as gender in their relative location to the universal male subject? Does gender operate differently when it’s raced-gender? These are some of the critical questions that a structural rhetorical framework begs of her corporeal project, but discerning how all the critical elements she brings to her own framework play out in relation to her stated goal is important for making counter arguments about the potential of the body as a productive loci for feminist theorizing. In the analysis that follows I will

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, ix-x. Grosz does follow this effusive hope for the body’s potential with the one-line caveat, ‘But, of course, it is not without problems of its own, major risks and dangers with which it must negotiate and deal.’ We will explore these further on.

discern how the various critical elements of her framework come to undermine her rearticulations.

#### **iv. Rearticulations and Reproductions of Difference**

Grosz spends a great majority of her book retrieving parts and pieces of a theory of corporeality from her male predecessors to use in her own feminist rearticulation.<sup>95</sup> She focuses on the great “masters of suspicion” who first dethroned the rational, willing subject: Freud, Nietzsche, Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault-- those theorists who in challenging the enlightenment subject, ended up emphasizing the *productivity* of the body.<sup>96</sup> In the process, she also takes up their philosophical concerns as her own beginning with Descartes’s articulation of the ‘problem of the body’ born of his quite radically dualistic philosophy: that of the outside/inside gap.

Identified by many feminists as the father of western dualism, Descartes’s musing on the gap between the body’s perceiving eyes and knowing mind is a classic articulation of the mind/body dualism that Grosz identifies as at the root of women’s oppression. In

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<sup>95</sup> She claims that all these theorists, despite their important contributions to an articulation of corporeality, do so mostly unintentionally, or at least without specifically identifying the body as a site worthy of theorization. This characterization in a way fuels the focus of her critiques as a *recovery* process, similar to that we saw animating feminist theological reconstructions which, in my opinion, potentially blinds her to her own reproduction of dualism through a focus on sexual difference as primary.

<sup>96</sup> In her critique, however, she sees this emphasis amongst male philosophers as largely accidental, or at the very least, inevitably hampered by the assumption of a universal male body and the consequent generalizing of all experience as male, non-cognizant of the specificity of *particular* bodies. As I suggested earlier, I believe that it may be this critique of androcentric universality that leads Grosz to so heavily emphasize the *gendered* aspect of her critique to the exclusion of a more nuanced problematizing of the theorization of difference. In focusing on the gendered exclusions of white male philosophical thought and the disarticulated nature of *female* specificity, she ends up universalizing and emphasizing female bodily experience as a counter measure that might redress all ‘others’ experience of exclusion from (positive) cultural representations.

answer, Grosz employs Lacan's metaphor of the Mobius strip, the inverted three-dimensional figure eight, as a metaphorical interruption of that mind/body boundary. This alternative representation of the relation between mind and body was one not made up of two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance, but somewhere in between these two alternatives.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of The Enlightenment's liberal framing of the 'subject', Grosz also feels the need to rearticulate the *specificity of female* bodies as an important redress to the exclusions/distortions produced by the presumption of the universalized male subject/body. Drawing on the work of French feminists Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, this female specificity also becomes a source for rearticulating non-dualistic conceptions of corporeality where the morphology of the female body and its flows, model a kind of interdependence between outside and inside. It is here where she picks up parts of the psychoanalytic framework and its symbolic foundation of sexual difference that is so central to French feminist recoveries of the *Feminine*. She adopts this recovery project primarily from Irigaray and in so doing mimics its critical location as a re-articulation of female specificity over against Patriarchy's erasure of (sexual) difference.

As I highlighted earlier on, she is not totally naïve about the dangers of such a recovery effort and tips her hat to worried colleagues who wring their hands over whether images of female flow and the very metaphor of the body itself may well serve to reproduce the denigrating traditions she is trying to undermine.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Bodies*, pg. xii.

<sup>98</sup> This is a concern I share and on which I base my critique of many of the texts within this dissertation. The constructive project of my thesis proposes a *structural* rhetorical

This project hovers close to many patriarchal conceptions of the body that have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical, or universalist terms. But I believe that it does so in order to contest these terms, to wrest a concept of the body away from these perils.<sup>99</sup>

As defense against the potential ‘mis-reading’ of her rearticulation as reproducing the missteps of earlier feminist projects (essentialist and anti-materialist), Grosz articulates a classification of feminist theoretical work on the body within which she locates categorizes herself in/as a ‘*difference feminists/ism*’. This taxonomy and her self-identification within it both clarifies aspects of her position and raises more questions about her understanding of the terms, tools, and critical frameworks at play in her own project. Her classification provides an overview of feminist theoretical approaches to the body that, though I may disagree with in its particulars, I include a discussion of here as a means of clarifying elements of her framework and providing context for other body projects in this dissertation and beyond.

## **v. A Classification of Feminist Approaches to the Body**

Grosz classifies these approaches into three camps: *egalitarian feminism*, *social constructionist feminism* and *sexual difference feminism*.<sup>100</sup> Among *egalitarian feminists*

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analysis which both addresses how individuals are located within an interconnected hierarchy of identity categories and analyzes the operations of structural power which both define and police those categories. I argue that a structural rhetorical framework is able to undermine the naturalized hegemony of patriarchal dualism, redressing the concerns that Grosz raises without the attendant risks posed by centering the body in one’s critical framework.

<sup>99</sup> Though clearly she is confident that this is possible, and that this is indeed the path to redress the inequalities in representing subjectivities that have haunted women and other ‘others’ over the centuries, I think my analysis will bear out that although this may be the case for white women (and even this is doubtful) it is certainly not the case for non-white women or other minorities with multiple identities who confront the same dynamics of denigrating ‘othering’ which her theoretical rearticulation purportedly seeks to redress.

<sup>100</sup> She does not do so with any sense of absolutism, but rather peppers her analysis with



she includes liberal feminist or humanists, conservative feminist, and ecofeminist viewpoints, all of which share what I have referred to elsewhere in the dissertation as the liberal framework's understanding of difference. All are marked, according to Grosz, by the assumption of an underlying dualism of nature/culture. Within this group, women's bodily differences from men either become a problem in a public sphere where the notion of citizenship is based on an (assumed) male norm or are valorized and given special significance and specific feminine knowledge. Such bodily differences include menstruation, pregnancy, maternity, and lactation. What is shared epistemologically in this grouping is the assumption that women's bodies indeed ARE *special* -- they are conceived across the board as more natural, more embedded, and certainly less transcendent (or put positively, more grounded). The theoretical strategies dictated by such a conception of the body are equally untenable to Grosz as 'solutions' to the problem of the body.<sup>101</sup> On the one hand, a negative assessment of the body dictates women must move beyond the limitations of their bodily constraints and ignore the particularities of their biologies in the effort to be more like the presumed male subject/citizen of the public sphere (e.g. De Beauvoir). On the flip side of this either/or framework, maternity becomes the benchmark for achieving femininity and women *become* their bodies (matter), reinscribing the patriarchal mind/body dualism in which

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caveats about cross over and the shortcomings of cataloguing thinkers. *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 14.

<sup>101</sup> From Grosz' perspective, this is true for the most part because they reproduce false dilemmas of the body based on an uncritical adoption of an androcentric lens of analysis. She represents the spectrum of practitioners in this group as Simone de Beauvoir to Shulamith Firestone most well known for their texts *The Second Sex* (Gallimard: Paris, 1949) and *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (William Morrow & Company, 1970) respectively.

women are conceived of as primarily bodily<sup>102</sup>. For Grosz, neither represents viable solutions for a non-dualistic corporeal subjectivity.

Her second category of feminist theorists, *social constructionists*, proves to be quite a catchall grouping. Here she includes thinkers like Michele Barrett, Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, Marxist feminists, psychoanalytic feminists<sup>103</sup> and, very loosely defined, *those committed to the social construction of subjectivity*.<sup>104</sup> She delineates her “loose” understanding of *social constructionist* as those with a theoretical formulation of gender as socially constructed *role* over against *biological* sex where categories of identity, such as maleness and femaleness, are *socially* marked in the space between. Grosz applauds this formulation as sharing her positive assessment of the body as a place of productive representation but is critical of the persistence of dualism implied as the ‘biological body’ (aka the ideological space of ‘the real’) is left intact, without further theorization. In this framework, political struggles are aimed at the *neutralization* of the

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<sup>102</sup> How and whether such movements in social space or achievements of femininity are possible for non-white women is a question that Grosz does not address in this critique. If she included a race analysis from the start, I suspect she may not have been able to successfully argue the merits of her new metaphors of corporeality and their philosophical and political benefits for *all* women.

<sup>103</sup> As may be apparent from my own treatment of her work, I would locate her amongst the psychoanalytic feminists given her reliance on sexual difference as an organizing principal for her inquiry, but my understanding of that framework is more expansive and includes the constructivist insights brought into the field by the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis. This just goes to the point of the relative usefulness of such a taxonomic practice, and I include in this critique my own decision in this dissertation to use ‘critical frameworks’ as an organizing principal, which, as I have discovered along the way, presents its own problems and is certainly not a perfect solution. Ultimately, we categorize thinkers to clarify our own arguments as well as to locate our positions relative to other arguments. Inevitably, such categorizations are reductive, and mine are no exception. I would only add that what is most relevant in such an endeavor is whether one’s own argument is made in clear terms that someone else may meaningfully contest on those grounds.

<sup>104</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 16.

sexually specific body through a social reorganization of gendered tasks and socialization, like childrearing practices.<sup>105</sup> Because gender is conceived as a malleable aspect of sex differences, the primary strategy for correcting power imbalances between gendered subjects is through changing the *content* of femininity and masculinity at the social/cultural level. But because these social constructionists stop theorizing at the social level of prescriptive gender roles for men and women, the body, as it turns out, is NOT the real object of theorization. The mind/body and nature/culture dualisms are reproduced as the body is conceived of as “mere media” of communication rather than understood as the object or focus of ideological production/reproduction. According to Grosz, the limits of dualistic thinking will remain intact unless the body is fully rearticulated in a non-dualistic corporeal feminist framework.<sup>106</sup>

A concrete idea of what her own framework consists of finally emerges in her characterization of the last grouping of feminist theorists, *sexual difference* feminists. This group is where she situates herself along with such feminists as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens, Vicky Kirby, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor, and Monique Wittig among others.<sup>107</sup> The most important critical tenet of

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<sup>105</sup> In my introduction to critical frameworks, I locate such feminist analysis within the sex/gender framework, remarking that as feminists break apart ‘biological sex’ from ‘gender’ and start theorizing about the social construction of gender, they see gender roles as a productive point of intervention to produce social and political change.

<sup>106</sup> For feminist body projects of this era (the 90s and early aughts), ‘corporeal’ was the term used to denote theories of ‘matter’ as in the ‘stuff’ of the body. This later gets translated into (new) *materialism*, which, as I have noted elsewhere, is not the materialism of Marxist analysis, but rather a ‘new’ focus across many fields, on the constitutive force of matter conceived as animated, enlivened, and intermixed with consciousness.

<sup>107</sup> For the purposes of my own argument here, that she locates herself as a ‘sexual difference feminist’ is very significant. As I have cited elsewhere, Grosz argues that sexual difference is a fundamentally structuring difference marked on bodies, even if

this group, according to Grosz, is that they share a common *prioritizing of the body* as crucial in understanding women's psychical and social existence. Over against egalitarian and social constructionist feminist theorizations of the body, Grosz differentiates this concern as focused on the *lived body*, which she defines as that which is represented and used in *specific ways in particular cultures*. She distinguishes sexual difference feminists in two important ways. First, she depicts this group as having taken particular care to deal with the *historicized body* as category of analysis, rather than a universal body that is often smuggled in unwittingly by feminists who have adopted androcentric frameworks of analysis. Second, in their use of (apparently) more developed notions of social construction that do not depict a hard boundary between surface and interior, the body is prioritized as something that *itself requires theorization* and problematization, where other feminists have left the category untouched.<sup>108</sup>

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'symbolic' in the linguistic sense. I would further argue that, despite some lip service to 'other differences', she sees the marking of male/female difference as PRIMARY. One of the main strands of my own analysis of the more general theoretical effort to construct a liberative corporeal politics is that a reductive analysis of difference-- in particular one invested in male/female difference as primary-- cannot adequately address the experience of subjects whose bodies are marked by multiple differences.

<sup>108</sup> Grosz perhaps makes the opposite argument I hope to illuminate in this dissertation as she tries to show how feminist theorists who DON'T focus on the body to produce critical theory cannot adequately take account of the bodies (and subjects) who are marginalized, exploited and degraded because they have been hijacked by the persistent dualism/s that haunt feminist theoretical approaches. According to Grosz, their understanding of difference as it applies to different bodies, has always already been corrupted by the destructive forces of dualism reproduced in these 'old' approaches. Although her corporeal theory appears to center a theory of difference, I argue that by defaulting to male/female difference as the primary signifier of all differences, she herself misses the opportunity to undermine a binary that very stubbornly adheres to bodies in western culture. I argue that politics seated in the body, even if they mean to articulate a theory of difference to analyze how power marginalizes 'different' subjects, tend to fall into one of two common traps: 1.) Either difference is theorized as on some level inhering 'in' bodies rather than as marked *on* bodies by overarching structures of power, which leads to a mis-articulation of the Kyriarchal structure of power, or 2.) Sexual difference

For difference feminists the body is figured as,

.... Interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, significance, and representation. On the one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange.<sup>109</sup>

Although this articulation of *difference feminism* shows promise of an accounting for structural pressures acting as producers of differentiated bodies, Grosz goes on to applaud the unequivocal claim that this group “shares a commitment to a notion of the fundamental, irreducible differences between the sexes” and that “*whatever* class and race differences that divide women, sexual difference *demands* recognition and representation, and as sexually specific, the body codes the meanings projected onto it in sexually determinate ways.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, for this group sexual difference is *primary*, and as the body is the site where sexual difference is the most obviously marked difference, it becomes the crucial site for struggles (by feminists and their patriarchal foes) to define and delimit the meaning of maleness and femaleness.

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serves as the default and foundational model for how the dynamics of ‘othering’ operate, where sex difference *appears* to be the most easily read difference on the surface of bodies. I believe this is a problem that arises largely among white feminists who experience their gender as the primary category of identity that ‘differentiates’ them from the assumed male norm, who then ‘add on’ race as ‘like’ gender difference, rather than expanding their whole understanding of how the dynamics of difference operate in less dualistic ways. I also think that because biological determinism has such a firm grip in western dualism, seeing male/female difference as a central organizing rubric is often hard to resist. It is truly hegemonic. For these reasons, feminist theorists who work specifically on the dynamics of power, theories of difference, or intersectionality have interrupted discussions of corporeality in important ways. I will address this specifically further on in the dissertation. I argue that they have done so in part by *NOT* prioritizing the body in their theoretical projects, even as their work effectively redresses the effects of inequalities *ON* marginalized bodies.

<sup>109</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 18.

<sup>110</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 18. Grosz defends against the charge of essentialism in this formulation by pointing to its valorization of differences *between members of the same sex* rather than an uncritical acceptance of universalist essences or categories.

## vi. Sexual Difference as Paradigmatic Difference

In this overview of the genesis of her project and its theoretical particulars and underpinnings, we return to this quite emphatic prioritization of sexual difference that seems on several levels to be at odds with her stated theoretical goals and claims. First and foremost, given her focus on *undermining dualism*, her repetition and emphasis of a very foundational dualistic organizing frame (male/female difference) would seem to *reinforce* dualism rather than undermine it. I would also argue that the emphasis of sexual difference derails the theoretical logics of some of the other (more promising) critical frameworks she borrows from in her corporeal rearticulation of the body and subjectivity. As I will argue below, I believe the lurking framework of psychoanalysis and its foundational analytic, sexual difference, undermines 1.) Her strategy to disrupt dualism by decentering the universal body, 2.) The critical impact of her emphasis on the specificity of *bodies* (in the plural) in all their historical concreteness, and 3.) The best potential of her adaptations of Foucauldian and Lacanian concepts to (re) articulate an understanding of how bodies are marked as different through rhetorical and institutional structures of power.

Beginning with 1: When Grosz sets out to disrupt the universal body with some of the critical terms and concepts of Foucault and Lacan, she appears to have the makings of a good structural analysis of how power is operating to produce and regulate a multiplicity of identities inscribed on the body:

Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only *bodies*—male or female, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between. Bodies can be

represented or understood...as a field, a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly even class, caste or religion) form body specifications.<sup>111</sup>

However, where one might expect following this description that Grosz' disruption of the universal body would lead to an articulation of difference as multiple and mutually constituted identities inhabited by subjects, she instead follows the lead of Lacan and Derrida and locates a theory of difference firmly in the psychological/linguistic realm.<sup>112</sup> In this framework, disruption of the hegemonic norm is achieved through the *proliferation of terms* for naming identity and difference.<sup>113</sup> In her analysis it looks something like this:

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<sup>111</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, 19.

<sup>112</sup> See footnote 113 for a description of the relevant concepts and theories I refer to in citing these thinkers.

<sup>113</sup> The Derridean term for this 'play' is *différance*, the Lacanian equivalent is *jouissance*. Though there is some difference between them given the specificities of their philosophies, I refer here more generally to the shift, in post-structuralist thought, to an understanding of difference as produced in and by language, unfettered by materialist (in the Marxist sense) forces and relocated into the realm of signs and signification. Whether you categorize thinkers in this movement as post-structuralist, postmodern, or psychoanalytic, the concept and role of *différance* refers not just to a notion of descriptive difference, but to the notion of the linguistic dynamics of the very determinations of *differing*. This is similar to the dynamic of *othering* as theorized by ideology critique (both androcentric and feminist), and not *totally* dissimilar to the dynamics of difference elucidated in structural rhetorical analysis. The most important difference in terms of the argument I'd like to make here is that structural rhetorical analysis locates the productive power of 'othering' in Kyriarchal structures of oppression versus a linguistic articulation of structures of the unconscious made legible only through an entrance into the realm of signs. In a very general sense, this group of thinkers understands language as *the* primary seat of cultural meaning production, including structural organizations of power. The strategy for producing change, then, is conceived of in linguistic terms – i.e. if you can change the language about how things mean and exist, and this does include deep structural notions of how we understand the world, then that is how we disrupt, dismantle, and challenge dominant systems of meaning and dominant arrangements of power. The proliferation of meanings that emerges when one disrupts the logic of a language system is the driving strategic force for affecting change. Though I can respect the impulse to explain and understand the oft times irrational basis for human divisions and hatreds, I have less faith in the power of this kind of framework to really drive structural change and I fear, despite its proclamations to the contrary, that a psychologically or

There are always only specific types of body, concrete in their determinations, with a particular sex, race, and physiognomy. Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities.<sup>114</sup>

There are two critiques I bring to this formulation that correspond with my proposed arguments 2 & 3 above. With regard to 2, given what we have seen of Grosz' positioning of sexual difference as primary, this particular reading of the disruptive function of multiple bodies to the assumed male norm embedded in the mind/body dualism could be read as a missed opportunity for a more plural understanding of difference. Could we not, rather, see the multiple different bodies in her articulation above disrupting the idea of any *one* difference functioning as a primary source for structuring all differences? And with regard to 3, when Grosz argues for the importance of theorizing bodies in their *specificity*-- particularized and historicized—I would suggest that she in fact undermines her thesis about *the body* being *the* most significant battle ground for determining the meanings of identity categories (like male and female). She does this by (unintentionally) demonstrating how *unstable* the body is as a site of sexual difference given the *many categories of identity/difference* rhetorically produced and regulated through it. Contrary to her logic, I might measure the disruptive value of her multiplicity of bodies and differences as directing our attention to the (more relevant) site from whence the meanings of those categories of difference are produced and

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symbolically based framework inevitably takes attention *away* from overarching structures of power.

<sup>114</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 19.



regulated.<sup>115</sup> To insert my own framework as a means of critique here, one alternative way she might have adapted Foucault's critical theory of power and Lacan's linguistic theory of difference, would be to recognize bodies as located in 'fields of power' and demarcated by rhetorically produced and enforced categories of difference. Combining those insights with a more rigorous structural analysis of power relations as productive both rhetorically and materially (and here I mean in the more Marxist sense of that word) starts to bring into view how power operates to marginalize subjects by naturalizing the content of different identities, and masking the source of how such differences are hierarchically structured, valued, regulated, and enforced.<sup>116</sup>

### **vii. Morphology and Ontology - The Turn Inwards**

In addition to the missed opportunities I have highlighted above, Grosz makes some other critical choices for her framework that I believe contribute to undermining her

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<sup>115</sup> Some might argue that it is not her intention to theorize difference inclusively and given the way that she drops other identity categories into her analytic diagnosis inconsistently and makes no effort to specifically theorize them, I might be inclined to agree. Certainly, on a critical level one of the arguments I am making is that given her lip service to an *overall* critique that includes the historical specificities of bodies in all their multiplicity, she fails to address anything but gendered (and largely white) identity. My more serious critique is that she indeed *intends* her critical framework to do the inclusive work of reformulating a subjectivity that could seriously account for bodily differences and inequalities and in the process lets sexual difference stand in for all other differences. In this effort she lets the (shorthand) notion of a 'proliferations of difference', theorized by the subjects most privileged in and by the academy, stand in for the actual work of articulating, mapping and addressing the structural and rhetorical locations of other 'different' bodies.

<sup>116</sup> Grosz, in fact, dismisses structural analysis out of hand claiming it proposes an interlocking grid of autonomous specificities of identity that then require "external connection with the other structures" (*Volatile Bodies*, pg. 19-20). She contrasts this structural model with *mutual constitution* as the more apt theoretical model for describing how these identities are *really* produced. The brand of structural rhetorical analysis I am arguing for *does* theorize mutual constitution of various identity markers and sees the rhetorical production and regulation of identity as a robust socio-cultural, linguistic and *structural* phenomenon.

stated goals of displacing dualism and rearticulating the body in less dualistic terms. Her investment in the terms of a psychoanalytic framework where the production of difference is theorized in more psychologized/internal terms-- even when materialized in/as language-- turns *her* focus on theorizing difference inward. The effect of this turn inward is a cascading one in which a delve *into* the body sets in motion a series of slippages from theorizing (sexual) difference, to the abject (feminine), to female morphology, to the ontological body-- all played out against the backdrop of a notion of sexual difference whose referent swings between *male and female* subjects/bodies or (and?) the *ontological grounding of all differences*. I believe it is her attachment to the psychoanalytic framework, its reliance on sexual difference as primary, and the slippages it fosters between the psychological, the Symbolic, and the social spheres that undermines the intended outcomes of her rearticulation on several levels.

To begin with, although ostensibly her focus on the specificity of women's bodies is as a disrupting force to the universal (male) norm, she frequently turns her attention to the "discrete categories of male and female" which she explicitly names "the problematic of sexual difference". Her account of what that is provides a glimpse into how the idea of sexual difference functions in her argument at multiple levels. The 'problematic' of sexual difference is characterized as a certain failure of knowledge in bridging the *gap of difference* between the sexes. "There remains something ungraspable, something outside, unpredictable, and uncontainable about the other sex for each sex". These, presumably, are men and women she is talking about.<sup>117</sup> But this 'gap' of difference goes on to represent the *larger* dilemma of *alterity*, the elucidation of which, she claims, provides

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<sup>117</sup> Grosz on a few occasions draws attention to the theoretical difference between the notion of *sexual difference* and any reference to the categories of male and female. However, despite this theoretical distinction in the frameworks she borrows from, the application of and articulated concern about difference seems very much to do with actual males and females. See footnote 119 for a similar example in the case of Julia Kristeva's critique of the Lacanian notion of the Phallus, where she argues convincingly that there are many and frequent elisions of this distinction in the psychoanalytic framework between symbolics and their apparent "referents". One of the main points of my challenge to a given frameworks' theoretical effectiveness when centering the body as theoretical starting point, is to show how very powerful dualisms, like male and female, can seduce theorists and misguide their critical articulations of the frameworks tasked with achieving their *political goals*.

for strategies concerned with representing, addressing, theorizing and articulating the structural dynamics of *all* differences:

Once the subject is no longer seen as an entity--whether psychical or corporeal--but fundamentally an effect of the pure difference that constitutes all modes of materiality, new terms need to be sought by which to think this alterity with and outside the subject. <sup>118</sup>

We are beyond bodies and subjects here, immersed in the primordial (ontological) soup of disarticulation where the language best suited to communicating such alterity is found, as we have seen earlier, in the unarticulated specificities of women's bodies. There emerges a certain circularity-- or perhaps inevitability would be a better word-- to Grosz' logic as she follows a murky interiorized path to her rearticulation of the body. Having led us to the morphology of women's bodies as a critical method for elucidating the dilemma of alterity, the constructive work of her project immerses us in ebbs and flows and back again to the paradigm of male/female difference as her phenomenology of flow maps the abject female body's qualities onto the social and symbolic relations of men and women<sup>119</sup>:

Could the reduction of men's body fluids to the by-products of pleasure and the raw materials of reproduction, along with en's refusal to acknowledge the

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<sup>118</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, quotes embedded in text and cited pg. 208.

<sup>119</sup> To be fair, the elision between the symbolic and the social is not Grosz' problem alone, though it has mostly been a critique by feminist theorists of androcentric analysis beginning with Lacan's formulation of the symbolic role of the Phallus over against its equation with the 'real' penis (or male social power). In this argument, put forward most memorably by Julia Kristeva, feminists contend that despite Lacan's insistence on the closed nature of sign systems/symbolics, that (male) theorists who claim they are only articulating deep linguistic structures of the psyche and processes of subject formation are indeed making an easy elision between the 'symbolic' role of the Phallus as marker of male power and the endorsement, reproduction, or reiteration of male social power. Perhaps an equivalent critique of Grosz would uncover that she herself is guilty of the strategy of reversal she pins on others – wherein she is revaluing and holding up as 'inherently more valuable' the morphological models in women's bodies which would translate into the social sphere as more equal relationships?

effect of flows that move through various part of the body and from the inside out, have to do with men's attempt to distance themselves from the very kind of corporeality – uncontrollable, excessive, expansive, disruptive, irrational—they have attributed to women? Could the ways in which men's body fluids are lived coalesce with the demands of a heterosexualized opposition between men and women in which women are attributed the very powers and capacities that men fear in themselves?<sup>120</sup>

At this morphological level, what sexual difference means in Grosz' formulation reaches to the foundational dynamic of the production of difference and what she finds there is: *Sexual Difference*.

### **viii. Sexual Difference = Male/Female Difference**

Finally, to complete the circularity of Grosz's logic as well as the loop of slippages I suggest follow from her reliance on the psychoanalytic frame, I want to further scrutinize how the meaning of sexual difference in her work seems to flow seamlessly between the spheres of the symbolic, the psychological, and the social in ways that make tracking the 'success' of her stated political aims for the body hard to trace.

In using the notion of the sexed body as a frame for my analysis of (sexual) difference, I risk that ready slippage from a focus on difference to one on identity. It is clear that there must be a relation between sexual difference and sexual identity, sexual difference, though, cannot be understood, as is commonly the case in much feminist literature, in terms of a comparison and contrast between two types of sexual identity independently formed and formulated. Instead it must be seen as the *very ground on which sexual identities and their external relations are made possible*...sexual difference is a framework or horizon that must disappear as such in the codings that constitute sexual identity and the relations between the sexes. *Sexual difference is the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but instead is implied in the very possibility of an entity, an identity, a subject, an other and their relations.*<sup>121</sup> (Italics mine)

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<sup>120</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 200.

<sup>121</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 208-9.

Though Grosz registers a brief recognition of the potential problems in this formulation and its ‘ready slippage’ between theorizing difference and identity, she seems untroubled by the specific use of *sexual* difference as in any way problematic. Sexual difference is not just a primary marker read off the body, but the difference that shapes all identity and difference, that foundationally conditions the very emergence of and structure of difference.<sup>122</sup> Given my contention about the impact for body projects of one’s theory of difference and one’s understanding of power, I am left wondering what critical work around dualism and inequality this frame could possibly provide? What started out as a project whose centering of bodies was justified as a political strategy for challenging concrete oppressions wrought by the exclusions of dualism would seem to have become very mired in the interior-facing symbolics of psychoanalysis and its grounding in sexual difference.

In Grosz’s final chapter she “cops” to having had a much more conceptual preoccupation than her initial project implied:

This chapter seeks to elucidate and negotiate a certain aporia. It seeks to question the ontological status of the sexed body – an issue which has generally remained submerged up to now in this book but which underlies many of its speculations...do bodies... have a specifically sexual dimension which is psychically and culturally inscribed according to its morphology? In other words, is sexual difference primary and sexual inscription a cultural overlay or rewriting of an ontologically prior differentiation? Or does sexual difference imply a differential mode of inscription?<sup>123</sup>

Despite Grosz’s proclaimed goal of articulating a *new* way of talking about the body in non-dualistic terms, her musings above provide evidence of a model of the body

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<sup>122</sup> This is a concept that emerges from within a school of psychoanalytic thought heavily influenced by linguistics and semiotics and includes such thinkers as Saussure and Derrida, as well as Lacan, all of whom Grosz draws on and sites. Grosz goes on to describe it thusly, “This notion of sexual difference, a difference that is originary and constitutive, is not, strictly speaking, ontological; if anything it occupies a pre-ontological – certainly a pre-epistemological – terrain insofar as it makes possible what things or entities, what beings, exist (the ontological question) and insofar as it must preexist and condition what we can know (the epistemological question). *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 209.

<sup>123</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 189

she has presumed from the start, one on which sexual difference was *already* for her the most pressing question at hand. I would suggest that Grosz can't help but 'see' sexual difference as the most obvious difference and the most pressing theoretical question raised by the body because of the framework she brings to the material (psychoanalytic) and the position of her own body vis a vis social reality.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, I must pose the question that I ask throughout this dissertation; does Grosz' theoretical articulation help her achieve her theoretical goals? Her critical framework, which comes into clearer view in her last chapter, points to morphology as a productive alternative basis for articulating a more corporeally grounded subjectivity. She emerges with theoretical strategies that sound very similar to Foucault's late musings about bodies and pleasures and Freud's early notion of polymorphous perversity: that (male) sexual morphology and what it teaches us about desires and boundaries could also point the way to social transformation-- change the nature and structure of what and how one desires, and you can change the dynamics of sexual difference.<sup>125</sup> Taking up the

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<sup>124</sup> In some ways I see Grosz's book as an object lesson in how using certain frameworks for understanding and articulating difference hopelessly mires us in a process of reinscribing the very theoretical tenets we set out to undo. In this case, I believe that Grosz's reliance on a linguistic form of the psychoanalytic framework and its requirement of sexual difference as the foundational organizing principle of all human experience has greatly undercut her stated theoretical goal of articulating a more inclusive and body-affirming notion of subjectivity.

<sup>125</sup> To be fair, Grosz here does not propose that this is a matter of simple choice or that the body and desire are so plastic as to make such change easy. She uses the example of gay men to make the point that other arrangements of desire, where flow is experienced as both coming in and going out, are possible, and that heterosexual men, to enjoy the same benefits of this reconfiguration of corporeality, would have to radically transform both the sexual practices they engage in and the structures of desire that inform their actions such that they would not see themselves as 'feminized' or weak within these shifted positions vis a vis sexual difference. Still, this example just furthers my claim that Grosz really *IS* making the elision between sexual difference and male and female difference. Note too that this notion of affecting change sounds like a variation of what she critiques

trope of *Desire* as the lead strategy for affecting change and forging new subjectivities moves Grosz further into the frame of psychoanalysis, despite her assertions to the contrary.<sup>126</sup> Her adoption of sexual difference as the guiding critical frame of her inquiry, even as she defines it semiotically as distinct from male and female identity, provokes the misreading and elision of these concepts, and certainly does not make clear by example how this formulation might help better theorize other differences as they are lived in marked bodies. I believe she cannot control, nor does she herself exhibit, a consistent

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her feminist colleagues in the category of *social constructionism* for—i.e. if one changes the content of practices in gender roles, then one can change their meaning. In this case, if heterosexual men were to change the content of their sexual experiences, they could affect the meanings of corporeality and sexual difference by inviting an experience of self that was more ‘flowing’ and inclusive. She also references here the category of *Desire* as a location where such transformation might take place. In the next section of this chapter, I take up Judith Butler’s work within the psychoanalytic model. Known as a queer theorist, Butler and many other queer theorists focus on *Desire* as a potentially ‘unmarked’ transformative force for change. Like many critical projects, feminist and other, the search for a space ‘free from constraint’ or ‘outside’ the realm of the symbolic characterizes the effort to find a space for and to theorize agency. Whether it be the ‘aporea’, ‘desire’, the ‘pre-ontological’ or ‘sexuality’, I feel this struggle is misguided in searching for a ‘free zone’. It may well be the by-product of a loss of foundations in philosophy and theology, which resulted in an apparent absolute relativism for ethical and political claims. I would argue that this is a false and unnecessarily absolutist characterization of the political, social, theological and epistemological situation we are in, and that we have ample theoretical tools for both describing socio-political reality and its mechanisms and making ethico-religious claims about the operations of forces therein.

<sup>126</sup> Grosz writes, “Psychoanalysis has provided a series of insights regarding the ways in which a desire for passivity is constructed and reproduced for women. But... psychoanalysis does not provide a way of transforming the structure of power relations between the sexes, although it has been strategically used by a number of feminists to demonstrate the inherent paradoxes, ironies and tensions associated with the passages to masculinity and femininity expected for men and women respectively.” She goes on to suggest that hers is a different kind of approach, “one not incompatible with psychoanalysis”, one perhaps closer to the kinds of phenomenological approaches she borrows from her explorations of various (men’s) theories of corporeality in the middle of the book—Merleau Ponty et al. I, of course, would suggest her indebtedness to psychoanalysis is more than simply ‘not incompatible’ with, primarily evidenced in her adoption of what I consider the most precarious tenet of psychoanalysis-- that of sexual difference. *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 203.

vigilance in maintaining the theoretical distinction between identity and difference and the consequences are huge given her own caveats about the persistence of binaries that seek to sort all thought and being into oppositional identity categories, *particularly* that of male and female. For this reason, I argue further that she has not theorized *materiality* in a way that effectively addresses the critical problematic she diagnoses at the outset of her argument: the elision that takes place between identity and difference through the mind/body dualism as it is enacted on bodies. If anything, I believe her formulation may indeed contribute to *furthering* such an elision by locating sexual difference at the center of her inquiry and as the foundation of meaning making.<sup>127</sup>

### **ix. Corporeality as Politics**

For all the critical work Grosz has done to articulate the hidden presuppositions and omissions of her white male predecessors and their assumptions about the body, not to mention her feminist colleagues who have, according to her critique, uncritically adopted those frameworks, she seems largely unaware of her own trespasses in this regard. Her last chapter is an in-depth exploration of the specificities of sexual difference with the goal of exploring how a sexually specific body/perspective (positioned to stand in for all and any ‘other’ specific bodies) might “open itself up to, meet with, and be surprised at the (reciprocal) otherness of the other sex(es)”.<sup>128</sup> In terms of a politics of otherness and its implications for talking across difference she states:

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<sup>127</sup> For all the reasons I have elaborated above.

<sup>128</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 192.



Sexual difference entails the existence of a sexual ethics, an ethics of the ongoing negotiations between things whose differences, whose alterities, are left intact but with whom some kind of exchange is nonetheless possible.<sup>129</sup>

If the goal was to address the problem of the erasure of difference produced by the hierarchy of inequalities that dualism maps onto differences, her framework fails on a very basic level to achieve its stated aim. Her final summation of the nature of embodiment and its unique set of quandaries reads like a postmodern terminology sheet, but suggests little in the way of concrete strategies for change:

There are no longer either independent units each with their own internal cohesion; nor are there unbounded relations with no specificity or location. Bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate, certain self-evidences, because embodiment, corporeality, insists on alterity, both that alterity that they carry within themselves (the heart of the psyche lies in the body; the body's principles of functioning are psychological and cultural) and that alterity that gives them their own concreteness and specificity (the alterities constituting race, sex, sexualities, ethnic and cultural specificities). Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment: it conditions but is also a product of the pliability or plasticity of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their "nature", their functions and identities.<sup>130</sup>

In her final assessment, Grosz concludes that this formulation of embodiment, "allows subjectivity to be understood as fully material and consequently for materiality to be extended and to include and explain the operations of language, desire and significance."<sup>131</sup> I am dubious of the power of this formulation of embodiment to make it past the bounds of the individual human body. Though one could accuse me of being hostile or reductive in my understanding of the psychoanalytic framework, I believe I have shown in my analysis above a justification for my skepticism towards this

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<sup>129</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 192.

<sup>130</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 209.

<sup>131</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, pg. 210

framework, and perhaps made further inroads into my broader critique of political projects seated in the body.

In looking more broadly at what to take away from Grosz' body project, there are some basic insights into the feminist 'turn to the body' worth highlighting. First, it seems to me that as white feminists in particular have looked to the body as a source from which to produce critical theory, they have done so in a culture so saturated with male/female dualism that, like Grosz, they literally 'see' this difference as the most immediately readable. It gets uncritically imported into body studies and becomes short hand for representing all difference. When sexual difference becomes primary and feminists don't theorize identity categories as multiply-constituted and intersectional *right from the get-go*, their theorizations of difference are flattened and their inclusion of 'other' differences are either derivative and tokenizing or theorized as add-ons. Without an intersectional or structural analysis of the workings of power and the production of difference relative to structures of domination, critical eyes lose sight of those overarching structures and difference is reinvested *in* individual bodies, rather than seen as *inhabited by* bodies. The focus of analysis is then seated in the *individual* and this only further exacerbates the occlusion of how power operates structurally to produce, police, reproduce, and value different bodies hierarchically. Similarly, as more psychologized frameworks seek to excavate the internal dynamics of othering/difference, feminist theorists get lost in the *subject* as a category for exploration, over against the powers and structures that situate subjects.

In the next section I will take up white queer feminist Judith Butler's work on the politics of bodies and difference. Her work expressly concerns itself with the problem of

situating sexual difference as primary difference and takes up the question of other vectors of identity. Although also invested in the psychoanalytic framework and its categories of analysis, Butler sets out to self-consciously ‘test’ the capacity of the psychoanalytic framework to theorize *racial* difference in her larger articulation of a theory of materialization. For the sake of my own argument, I take up *Bodies That Matter* to further explore my skepticism about the merits of a framework so rooted in the concept of sexual difference, and more generally, to continue an elaboration of the impact critical frameworks, theories of difference, and theories of power have on the outcomes and political possibilities for projects rooted in the body.

## **x. Materialization, Discourse, and Difference**

Like Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*, one of the fundamental assumptions in Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* is that there is good critical reason to take up *the body* as a starting point for doing theory. She too is concerned with the way *different* bodies are treated in reference to a presumed white male norm and takes up the body as a category of analysis in the hopes of elucidating more inclusive theories of difference. Like Grosz, a theorization of materiality and the specificity of different bodies becomes a crucial part of this project, but unlike Grosz, Butler looks beyond sex difference and its materialization on the body to explore how differences *between* women are also relevant to understanding the dynamics of ‘othering’ and the hierarchy of differences that are lived through marked bodies.

In her book *Bodies that Matter*,<sup>132</sup> Butler ostensibly sets out to answer a critique of her previous work, *Gender Trouble*<sup>133</sup>, whereby she got herself in hot water for introducing the terms of linguistic psychoanalytic theory to describe the materialization of bodies through *discursive practice*. Published during a wave of feminist theoretical interest and debate about the meaning and status of female bodies in western culture, the suggestion that the female subject-- only recently supposed as such-- was to be vanished again through the new theoretical terms of postmodern theory's decentering of the subject, was both suspicious and alarming. In contrast to Grosz who, whether successfully or not, maintains a certain notion or feeling of the biological body at the center of her theory of materiality, Butler's immersion in discursive theory leads to a different kind of *materialization*, one which, according to her critics, has the apparent effect of *vanishing* the body into a mere surface for inscription.<sup>134</sup>

In her introduction to *Bodies*, Butler describes being repeatedly heckled by the question: "But what about the *materiality* of bodies?" She had hit a nerve in feminist theory at the intersection of identity politics and body studies where the theoretical struggle to articulate non-dualistic critical frameworks was regularly mired in the very dualisms it sought to undermine: mind/body, nature/culture, male/female, self/other.<sup>135</sup> Identity, understood in this context as a set of inner qualities and essential differences,

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<sup>132</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Bodies*.

<sup>133</sup> *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Press, 1990.

<sup>134</sup> It is interesting to note that in Grosz' taxonomy of feminist approaches to the body she does not place Butler in the social constructionist category, but rather in the sexual difference category. I believe that this has everything to do with Butler's immersion in the psychoanalytic framework, which is deeply entangled with a notion of sexual difference. I understand Butler's arguments in *Bodies That Matter* as in part her own struggle to adapt the unruly framework to the theorization of categories of difference it was not designed to account for.

<sup>135</sup> I see Grosz as a clear example of that struggle.

often left feminist theorists (apparently) trapped by the old dualistic impasse of inner/outer; the psychological and the social, the self and the other.

By contrast, the notion of the self as promulgated by Butler and other postmodern theorists designated a much more fluid and less stable entity characterized and constituted by productive constraints, both social and psychological.<sup>136</sup> In philosophical traditions, this turn was deemed the displacement of the ‘metaphysics of the subject’ and represented the loss of the willing *I* as lone protagonist, as sole arbiter of its destiny, as the knower, as the mind within the body. For Butler, this was the beginning of the end of this philosophical impasse of the self, trapped within an inert, biologically ‘real’ body and one of many theoretical *benefits* present in the psychoanalytic framework and its introduction of the category of the *unconscious*. Lacan’s post-structuralist adaptation of psychoanalysis, part of the ‘linguistic turn’ in critical theory, centered discourse analysis in this new understanding of self which, in its highly abstract terminology and issued largely from elite white men in the academy, was deeply mistrusted and critiqued by many feminist theorists who considered the terms of such theory inherently masculinist<sup>137</sup>.

In this critical context, Butler posits that bodies are indeed still a question of boundaries and almost always experienced as such, but *how* those boundaries are fixed and *through what mechanisms* they are regulated, reiterated, and perhaps radically

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<sup>136</sup> In this context I am using the term ‘postmodern’ very loosely to designate a wide array of theorists from multiple fields of inquiry who share this notion of the self/subject.

<sup>137</sup> Luce Irigaray actually uses the terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis as proof text for her critique that the true Feminine is absent from all language, and that within current grammar, it is impossible to represent or signify the Feminine at all. She argues that the feminine currently employed as the male subject’s other is truly only that, and that the *true* Feminine is as yet unknown and unknowable, repressed and excluded as the condition of existence for the male ego.

reconfigured becomes the locus of theoretical articulation, rather than an assumed starting point.<sup>138</sup> Not unlike Grosz, then, she is really arguing for a theorization of the body *itself*, no longer the given surface to express ‘mere media’ or the fleshy container of the ‘mind’. As I will argue below, however, her adoption of this critical framework both defines and begins to critically unhinge what she sees as the problem with the analytic of the body and the rhetorics surrounding it.

In confronting the criticism leveled at her from feminist theorists with regards to her performative theory of gender, Butler begins by critically deconstructing the sex/gender framework, a staple of much feminist theory and for her the site of some basic theoretical stumbling blocks to articulating feminist agency considering repressive body politics. To those who would still insist that “sex” is *material bodies* and “gender” is *socially constructed*, as well as those who would agree with the insights from *Gender Trouble*-- that both categories are simultaneously produced and interdependent-- Butler contends that this does not explain *how* sex gets gendered in a particular way, how bodies come to be seen as ‘sexed’ at all. The process by which this occurs, according to Butler, is a *discursive practice*, which is not to say counter to her critics, that discourse *causes* sex difference<sup>139</sup>. Rather, within the logic of the psychoanalytic framework, what Butler hopes to elucidate is that sex is a *regulatory ideal*, a norm that *produces* the bodies it governs. Her finessing of this notion in *Bodies* comes when she emphasizes *not* that the

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<sup>138</sup> It is on this point that Grosz identifies with Butler’s work and the reason she does not lump her in with social constructionists: Butler actually assumes the body *needs to be theorized*, not that it is given, or a mere surface whose inscriptions we should be concerned with rather than the nature of that ‘surface’.

<sup>139</sup> Any more than it is to say that one *chooses* one’s gender (a common critique of Butler’s performative theory of gender)—This would be an affront to Butler’s very understanding of self as described above.

discursive nature of sex or gender makes it easy to change or ‘choose’ ones sexed or gendered identity at will. In fact, she argues it is quite the opposite. This norm called sex is indeed *so powerful* in our culture (and many others) that it is capable of producing the *materiality* of bodies<sup>140</sup>. Butler here forces her critics to adopt a more rigorous understanding of social construction wherein the notion of surfaces and interiors that the term ‘discursive’ conjures is replaced with a notion of *materialization* that is historical (material), psychological and political.

### **xi. This Norm Called Sex: Materialization and Agency**

Butler is eager to stress that materialization is a notion that denotes not a static term or incidence, but a *process*. She uses the evidence garnered in *Gender Trouble* to drive this point home, insisting that the performance of gender is not something left for the drag queens on a run way, but is something we all engage in on a constant basis, both in responding to cultural ‘hails’<sup>141</sup>, and in inhabiting our genders in particular ways. That we are so dogged by the cultural regulation of these discrete categories goes to show that we never fully achieve them, that they require work (reiteration) and that the desired identification is never fully achieved. Alas, here is Butler’s agential wedge. She sees this reformulation of the materiality of sex in terms of the effects of power as anything but the *loss* of material bodies, as her critics would contend. Rather, it is our chance to understand the very dynamics by which we end up with the categories of sexed/gendered

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<sup>140</sup> Within the very specific boundaries of heteronormativity, that is.

<sup>141</sup> Butler uses Althusser’s term often to demonstrate contemporary examples of the ways we are culturally hailed and aligned within one gendered identity, the very first of which occurs at birth when it is announced “it’s a girl! /boy!”

identity that we are often constrained by<sup>142</sup>. But she is also not naive about the promise of this critical wedge. She cautions throughout *Bodies* that sex/gender as an identity category is central in our culture, it is the norm by which one becomes viable or intelligible at all. Indeed, it qualifies a body for life within the domain of intelligibility.<sup>143</sup> Her description of the powerful psychological dynamics that root this process of the materialization of bodies (and selves, which for her are not separate) reveals a clearer picture of her reliance on the psychoanalytic framework and its logics.<sup>144</sup>

Butler rejects any presupposition of ‘the real’ in her deconstruction of the sex/gender framework so her theorization of the self is also her theorization of the body. She employs a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework rearticulated as a theory of materialization to destabilize what feminist theorists warn are the inherent dangers of the mind/body dualism and its persistent reinscription within feminist body studies. Focusing her political project on an analysis of the *process* by which meaning is made-- the production, regulation and assumption of the very categories of being which delimit

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<sup>142</sup> The question I will put to Butler’s formulation as we go further is whether this framework and the potential structural ‘wedge’ it provides for the production and interruption of identity categories gets too bogged down within the sphere of sexuality to help articulate other bodily differences in a meaningful way.

<sup>143</sup> The violence visited on trans and non-binary bodies is evidence of the strict regulatory aspects of ‘achieving’ gendered intelligibility. The anxiety produced in heteronormative bodies when confronted with those who cannot be ‘read clearly’ is an epidemic with destructive manifestations across the cultural spectrum. I question, however, given the disproportionate violence visited on trans bodies of *color*, why from the start of her theorization of materialization, she does not include race. My hunch is that it is a combination of queer theory’s focus on gender, and the focus on sexual difference and sexuality that is the foundation of her chosen critical framework, psychoanalysis.

<sup>144</sup> Throughout the rest of my discussion of Butler’s work, I will look in detail at the heart of her vision of the productivity of power within the psychoanalytic framework and through the lens of sexuality in particular. It is at these points where I believe her critical (historicizing) interventions in psychoanalysis pose their greatest critiques and face their greatest critical obstacles in articulating a robust structural critique of powers’ productivity.



struggles over identity-- would seem to map well onto the kind of analysis a structural rhetorical framework is concerned to articulate. The critical questions she brings to the analytic of the body are also well aligned with those a structural rhetorical framework would pose: *how* bodies come to mean, what the intelligible and inhabitable categories of identity are for bodies, how subjects become implicated in this process, and where one can locate agency within this process.

In addition, she allows the question of whether the body *is* actually a productive theoretical starting point for liberative theory to inform her work and the constraints of the psychoanalytic framework. This is in contrast with Grosz' use of the framework, which remains largely unarticulated and intact even as her own theoretical questions strain against its logics. I am encouraged by Butler's adaptations of the psychoanalytic framework, but in delving more deeply into her analysis, I have questions about how much she expands the framework's capacity to answer her questions, and how much the framework may narrow her ability to ask certain questions.

From the point of view of my own critique of the framework's shortcomings, I am again particularly concerned to trace how and whether sexual difference represented as male/female difference is positioned as primary in structuring her understanding of how the dynamics of difference work overall.<sup>145</sup> In keeping with her caveat about the power

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<sup>145</sup> As I have suggested elsewhere and as part of the central argument of this thesis, I claim that using male/female difference as paradigmatic in understanding the ways in which categories of identity structure and produce difference rhetorically and structurally is extremely limited and often dangerous in its occlusions. Whether deliberately – in the case of some feminist theologians who indeed claim femaleness as a founding category of existence, or through misrecognition, as in the case of many feminists who have used the androcentric liberal framework to try and redress gender and other inequalities through a notion of generic citizenship-- there are very few critical frameworks capable, in my opinion, of fully articulating and elucidating the structural dynamics of oppression

of sexed identity for cultural intelligibility, Butler seems to suggest that the materialization of *gendered* selves is basic and foundational.<sup>146</sup> For her, the subject comes into being through the process of assuming a sex, which requires identification with regulatory (heterosexual) sex norms (versus non-normative sex identifications).<sup>147</sup> This process of *becoming sexed*, of sex's materialization of the subject as it were, is very similar to the philosophical description of the dynamics of 'othering':

.... The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation...The

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in the way that a structural rhetorical analysis can. Because, as Judith Butler so astutely observes, sex difference *IS* such a powerful norm of intelligibility in this culture, I believe it is all the more important that the critical frameworks we use to analyze and undermine the more oppressive and reductive constraints of this analytic *DO NOT* reproduce or in any way mask or occlude the contingency of sex difference as primary.

<sup>146</sup> This, as I have suggested above, raises questions for me about the ability of the psychoanalytic framework to effectively deal with difference that is not grounded in sexual difference. Because Butler is so immersed in queer politics, I wonder the extent to which she is reliant on that aspect of the framework for her political work at the expense of other forms of difference. Psychoanalysis has been an attractive and productive tool for those working in queer and sexuality studies exactly because it is a framework that presumes as foundational the dynamics of sex identification. Whether it can be used to theorize other differences as effectively (or for that matter, whether a framework that best theorizes only one form of difference robustly is adequate at all), is the question that animates the rest of my discussion of Butler.

<sup>147</sup> More specifically, Butler states "identification is the assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges." In an important extension of this idea Butler also suggests, after Freud, that where he describes the ego as 'first and foremost a bodily ego...a projection of a surface', that we might describe it as 'an imaginary morphology', which is not a pre-social or pre-symbolic operation, but is itself orchestrated through regulatory schemas that produce intelligible morphological possibilities. She goes on to suggest that these regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but *historically revisable criteria* of intelligibility that 'produce and vanquish bodies that matter.' In this sense, Butler is radically historicizing the categories of psychoanalysis by suggesting the historical particularity of certain norms, and articulating the process by which norms are established, reproduced, assumed, and hopefully, resisted to some degree. Though the language of morphology sounds similar to Grosz', I would argue that the degree to which Butler seeks to historicize and contextualize certain normative formations contrasts with Grosz' tendency to posit ontological grounds for (sex) difference.

forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex', ...<sup>148</sup>

In this formulation, Butler begins to assert that the primary identification for any self is fundamentally gendered. Though clearly her description of this process of materialization is part and parcel of her theoretical/political strategy-- to show how gendering takes place and to denaturalize it as a means of opening an agential wedge in that process-- the question for me remains whether the psychoanalytic framework *requires* gendered identification at its foundation? Could Butler remake the doctrines of psychoanalysis and make the same claims (in terms of primary identificatory practices) for other kinds of difference that shape identity?<sup>149</sup> As Butler continues her theorization of identificatory and materializing practices, the role that gendered identification plays hardly seems secondary. Indeed, the language she uses as she moves from her point about displacing a volitional I to describing a process of materialization seems to make a very strong case for gendered identity as foundational<sup>150</sup>:

To claim that the subject is produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation. The 'activity' of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly *not* a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition. In this sense, the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the "human".<sup>151</sup>

As I have suggested above, is this prioritizing of gendered relations within Butler's work incidental to her subject matter, specifically the materialization of bodies and the critique

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<sup>148</sup> *Bodies*, pg.7.

<sup>149</sup> As I will address below, she intends from the outset to do this with race as a fundamental innovation of her theory of materialization.

<sup>150</sup> Wittingly or no.

<sup>151</sup> *Bodies*, pg.7.

of heteronormativity through highly normalized and regulated identificatory practice? Or are gender and sex difference so foundational to the psychoanalytic framework's articulation of difference that despite Butler's explicit desire to trouble this binary, she must inevitably end up reproducing it in some fashion?

## xii. Materializing Race

The most telling place to find an answer to this query is in her chapter on race and psychoanalysis<sup>152</sup>. It is in this chapter that she is most explicitly critical of the framework, or at least critical of theorists who use it without troubling its categories of analysis and indeed it is here where she expands its terms to include racial difference. The chapter formally engages a reading of the book *Passing*<sup>153</sup> by Nella Larsen, a Harlem Renaissance novelist whose fiction about black women's sexuality has often been interpreted within the motif of the 'tragic mulatto'<sup>154</sup>. She begins the chapter with a critique of feminists who have theorized sexual difference as a distinct and fundamental set of linguistic and cultural relations:

This privileging of sexual difference implies not only that sexual difference should be understood as more fundamental than other forms of difference, but that other forms of difference might be *derived* from sexual difference. This view also presumes that sexual difference constitutes an autonomous sphere of relations or disjunctions, and is not to be understood as articulated through or *as* other vectors of power<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Chapter 6 in *Bodies*, entitled Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge.

<sup>153</sup> Cited within Butler's *Bodies* from the collection *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fictions of Nella Larsen*, Charles Larson ed. (Anchor Books, New York, 1992).

<sup>154</sup> For more on this trope in African American Literature and film, see Gross, Ariela J., *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America*, Harvard University Press, 2010.

<sup>155</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 167.

I could not agree more with this assessment, though after her theorization of the process of materialization, it is unclear how this critique may apply to her own work, if only in a slightly modified form. Her goal in the chapter, to map the materialization of race along the same lines as her articulation of gendered identity, is presented as such:

What would it mean, on the other hand, to consider the assumption of sexual positions, the disjunctive ordering of the human as “masculine” or “feminine” as taking place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation? <sup>156</sup>

And:

Further, how might we understand homosexuality and miscegenation to converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction? <sup>157</sup>

Butlers’ hopes for the critical acumen of the psychoanalytic framework here are threefold. First, as seems endemic to the framework, she understands and assumes sexuality to be the most powerful lens through which one might map as well as disrupt the materialization of identity, even when racial difference is the topic at hand. As such, she selects the trope (or taboo) of miscegenation as her guide to map power’s productive exclusions. <sup>158</sup> Though clearly Butler hopes that elucidating the co-production and proliferation of different taboo desires within sexuality will break open the rigid binary of male/female that plagues heteronormative regulatory practices, does her articulation of

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<sup>156</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 167.

<sup>157</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 167.

<sup>158</sup> Though the demonization or erasure of black women’s sexuality is a problem endemic to many different critical frameworks (as we will see especially in the work of Dorothy Roberts in chapter 4), a question remains for me as to the probability of getting away from the traps of the sex/gender framework when an analysis is seated in the realm of sexuality.

taboo racial and homosexual desires along the vector of sexuality provide the kind of structural wedge for articulating difference that she contends it does?<sup>159</sup>

Second, Butler hopes that she indeed *can* trace racial identity formation along the same lines she has traced subject formation in terms of sex/gender.<sup>160</sup> She posits racial identity, similarly as she does gendered identity, as structurally located by the psyche in the space of *the abject*. In this case, the ‘constitutive outside’ is the outside of unmarked whiteness. Lastly, as Butler attempts to historicize the categories of psychoanalysis by theorizing and locating the process and regulation of identity formation in the sphere of the social and political, she hopes that the psychoanalytic framework can bear out this ‘exteriorization’ of its terms. For me, this raises a fundamental question about the ability of the psychoanalytic framework, relative to a structural rhetorical analysis, to theorize difference in relation to oppressive power structures. Can a framework whose defining terms turn the eye inward to understand the formation of identity really keep us vigilant and astute in our analysis of the structural and social nature of identity categories?<sup>161</sup>

The three characters in *Passing* are: Irene, a light skinned black woman who can and does ‘pass’ at times as white, but who is married and fully wedded to the racial uplift

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<sup>159</sup> The question I raise here comes in many ways out of a critique of queer theory and its unbridled confidence in the category of *desire* to remap, disrupt and ‘queer’ otherwise rigidly aligned (normative) social and sexual relations of power.

<sup>160</sup> She asks, “Is there a way, then, to read Nella Larsen’s text as engaging psychoanalytic assumptions *not* to affirm the primacy of sexual difference, but to articulate the convergent modalities of power by which sexual difference is articulated and assumed?” *Bodies*, pg. 168. (Italics mine).

<sup>161</sup> Even as Butler explicitly theorizes this process and her articulation of the psyche as being the site of the political and thus the site of potentially radical resignifications, I question in pragmatic terms whether the framework is ultimately helpful in attaining said political goals. I raise this concern particularly in light of Butler’s own very pragmatic observations about the resilience of binary identifications and the ongoing feminist concern about reinscribing those binaries in the process of trying to rearticulate them within such a climate.

movement and all its patriarchal implications for her place within the ‘respectable’ middle class black family;<sup>162</sup> Clare, a very light skinned black woman who passes and lives as white, including being married to a white husband; and Bellew her husband, who does not ‘know’ she is black. Butler traces the identifications and misidentifications that take place between the boundaries of white and black, and desire and the erotic as the story unfolds<sup>163</sup> The focus of her ‘experiment’ with the materialization of race centers on the climactic last scene in the story when Bellew comes upon Clare and Irene associating with other African Americans at a local speakeasy. Irene is ambiguously positioned next to Clare with a hand on her arm, and upon Bellew’s entrance (his anxious cry of her name implies an immediate recognition and exposure of the facade of her whiteness), Clare ‘falls’ out of the window to her death.

Butler reads this story as rife with examples of materializing dynamics: how whiteness is constituted by the exclusion of blackness, how heterosexual desire is constituted and dependent on its exclusion and repression of homosexual desire, and how

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<sup>162</sup> See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent* for a good discussion of the constraints on female sexuality and mobility within the black church and family in this period.

<sup>163</sup> Butler describes Irene’s psychological ambiguities as follows: Is it that Irene cannot bear the identification with Clare, or is it that she cannot bear her desire for Clare; is it that she identifies with Clare’s passing but needs to disavow it not only because she seeks to uphold the “race” that Clare betrays but because her desire for Clare will betray the family that works as the bulwark for that uplifted race? *Bodies*, pg. 177. She also attributes the fetishization and thus eroticization of Clare’s nickname “Nig’ as part and parcel of the foundational repression of blackness and the subsequent emergence of the taboo desire that flirts with the boundaries of that repression/restriction. As she eloquently puts it “...although he (Bellew) claims that he would never associate with African-Americans, he requires the association and its disavowal for an erotic satisfaction that is indistinguishable from his desire to display his own racial purity.” She also identifies and names the unnamed (repressed) homosexual desire of Irene for Clare as connected to this eroticization of the forbidden. Here is a good example where Butler indeed elucidates a practice of materialization in which both racial and sexual identities are co-produced. *Bodies*, pg. 172.

the regulation of sexual and racial identifications propel the actions of her subjects. Similar to her analysis of gendered binaries, Butler describes how whiteness requires blackness (its founding repression) to exist and how the boundaries of whiteness require a constant disavowal in order to be reconstituted.

That the boundaries between black and white are indeed so closely interdependent is demonstrated in the novel most pointedly for Butler when we witness that the mere association of his wife with African Americans brings Bellew's own whiteness into anxious question (through marriage and child rearing). The power of this exposure to underscore the fragility of identity categories-- presumed, guarded, and indeed regulated as if they were hard and fast-- literally propels Clare out the window to her death. In questioning the meaning of this outcome-- did Clare jump? Did Irene push? Or did the force of Bellew's words literally propel her out the window? -- Butler sees a productive source for a psychoanalytic reading of the materialization of race:

...It is this triangulation...that occasions a rethinking of psychoanalysis, in particular, of the social and psychic status of 'killing judgments'. How are we to explain the chain that leads from judgment to exposure to death, as it operates through the interwoven vectors of sexuality and race? <sup>164</sup>

In this triangulation she sees powerful norms of racial purity and sexual taboo materialized and regulated, and proposes that in historicizing the notion of superego, a reworking of Freud's notion,<sup>165</sup> the framework enables us to see the *psychic force of*

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<sup>164</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 173.

<sup>165</sup> Butler describes the superego earlier on as that which 'stands for the measure, the law, the norm, one that is embodied by a fabrication, a figure of a being whose sole feature it is to watch, to watch in order to judge, as a kind of persistent scrutiny, detection, effort to expose, that hounds the ego and reminds it of its failures. *Bodies*, pg. 181.



*social regulation*.<sup>166</sup> This rearticulation of the psyche is *political* for Butler, in that it has consequences for social survival, *material effects* in the political sphere. In addition, the way that the power of whiteness and masculinity figure in the culminating scene to turn Irene and Clare against one another, highlights how the marking and regulating of subjects into rigid identity categories often obscures the shared oppressions among subjects in the service of preserving the structures of class, race, and gender hierarchy.<sup>167</sup>

The analysis of the intersections of race, class and gender in this story are not different than those afforded by structural analysis of power differentials and identity categories and as such, it is where I see Butler as most successful in her reworking of the psychoanalytic framework. She has shown in a very specific way that regulatory norms

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<sup>166</sup> The full passage where Butler elaborates this process reads as follows: If Irene turns on Clare to contain Clare's sexuality, as she has turned on and extinguished her own passion, she does this under the eyes of the bellowing white man (Bellew); his speech, his exposure, his watching divides them against each other. In this sense, Bellew speaks the force of the regulatory norm of whiteness, but Irene identifies with that condemnatory judgment. Clare is the promise of freedom at too high a price, both to Irene and to herself. It is not precisely Clare's race that is "exposed", but blackness itself is produced as marked and marred, a public sign of particularity in service of the dissimulated universality of whiteness. If Clare betrays Bellew, it is in part because she turns the power of dissimulation against her white husband, and her betrayal of him, at once a sexual betrayal, undermines the reproductive aspirations of white racial purity, exposing the tenuous borders that purity requires. If Bellew anxiously reproduces white racial purity, he produces the prohibition against miscegenation by which that purity is guaranteed, a prohibition that requires strictures of heterosexuality, sexual fidelity, and monogamy. And if Irene seeks to sustain the black family at the expense of passion and in the name of uplift, she does it in part to avert the position for black women outside the family, that of being sexually degraded and endangered by the very terms of white masculinity that Bellew represents. *Bodies*, pg.183-84.

<sup>167</sup> See *Bodies* pg. 184: Fearing the loss of her husband and fearing her own desire, Irene is positioned at the social site of contradiction; both options threatened to jettison her into a public sphere in which she might become subject, as it were, to the same bad winds. But Irene fails to realize that Clare is as constrained as she is, that Clare's freedom could not be acquired at the expense of Irene, that they do not ultimately enslave each other, but that they are both caught in the vacillating breath of that symbolic bellowing: "Nig! My God! Nig!"

of race and gender (as well as class, though not specifically theorized here) are co-produced through the process of materialization. Butler very viscerally brings our attention back to the fact that race can never be separated from sexuality for black women.<sup>168</sup> But my questions linger along two fronts: First, does describing this phenomenon in terms of the psyche help us better get at the dynamics of power at work? And secondly, as Butler displaces talk about difference from the sex/gender framework to that of sexuality and desire, is she able to avoid the pitfalls of a field still highly regulated by the heteronormative ideals she critiques, and which are so ensconced in the codes of male/female difference?

On the first front, as I suggested above, the kinds of disruptions that Butler's mapping of vectors of power raise for the materialization of normative identities are critical, and indeed undermine the appearance that such categories of difference inhere IN individuals. In this sense she is successful in exposing both the dynamics of power at work through the process of 'othering', and the underlying structural locations of various identity categories and their interrelation/interdependence. My overall feeling, however, is that mapping these regulatory forces onto the psyche, even as its categories are historicized, still serves to turn our attention inward, and often away from the political and institutional organizations of power that help regulate and enforce such destructive norms outside the individual psyche. Though Butler makes the claim, as I have cited elsewhere, that the political articulation of the psyche can and should have consequences for social survival, I do not feel that Butler has really argued the case for WHY this particular way of articulating the dynamics of power is more effective than a less

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<sup>168</sup> As I will show in the chapter on Intersectionality, Dorothy Roberts, among many other black feminist writers, makes this claim powerfully in her book *Killing the Black Body*.

psychologized framework.<sup>169</sup> I suspect that her reasons for being so attached to the framework may have to do with my second question from above, pertaining to her analytic categories of sexuality and desire, to which I turn now.

### **xiii. Sexuality and the Trope of Desire**

Butler is critical of the psychoanalytic framework and its prioritizing of sexual difference as basic for the same reasons I am. She states:

Many psychoanalytic feminists.... have claimed in various ways that sexual difference is as primary as language...and this has led to a second claim which I want to contest, namely that sexual difference is more primary or more fundamental than other kinds of differences, including racial difference. It is this assertion of the priority of sexual difference over racial difference that has marked so much psychoanalytic feminism as white, for the assumption here is not only that sexual difference is more fundamental, but that there is a relationship called “sexual difference” that is itself unmarked by race.<sup>170</sup>

This is my concern exactly and one which persists, I would argue, because it is a foundational assumption of the psychoanalytic model. For these reasons I would argue against adopting this framework, particularly for the purpose of theorizing the body where, as Butler herself contends, the power of the cultural norms of gendering in the dualistic terms of male and female are immense. Indeed, she is quite forthright in expressing skepticism about the power of her political critique to undermine the hegemonic and regulatory ideals it brings to light:

.... There is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its

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<sup>169</sup> I have made the case elsewhere that a structural rhetorical framework is one which can and does address the same dynamics of ‘othering’ and provides a sound description of the process of subject formation and regulation, while avoiding the common pitfalls of a more individualized/psychologized framework.

<sup>170</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 181.

hegemony *through* its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalized parodies that re-idealize heterosexual norms *without* calling them into question.<sup>171</sup>

Despite this insightful critique, Butler's attachment to the terms of a psychoanalytic framework, I would argue, lead her to a focus on sexuality as the most potent site for mapping the materialization of bodies and the possibility of agency and resistance.<sup>172</sup>

Beginning with a rehearsal of current feminist debate about the relationship between *sexuality* and *gender*, Butler critiques Katherine McKinnon's equation of the two terms as structurally determinist when the position one assumes sexually within heterosexist and patriarchal society determines one's 'gendering' (women = submissive). She turns instead to the work of Gayle Rubin and Eve Sedgwick, both of whom make a critical distinction between the domains of sexuality and gender to posit a space for agency, as does Butler in her theory of materialization.<sup>173</sup> Arguing for a rethinking of the two in dynamic relation to one another, as mutually productive vectors of identity, her critical strategy is to destabilize the relation between sexuality and gender. Articulated in the terms of the psychoanalytic framework she adopts; sex and gender are related through a negotiation of the mechanisms of *identification* and *desire*. She explains:

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<sup>171</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 231.

<sup>172</sup> Though the critical framework in question is quite different, I would argue that the feminist theological argument made by Kathleen Sands in Chapter 1 about the over-reliance on sexuality as a productive space for liberative theory, holds true here as well. Though the trope of Desire within the psychoanalytic framework has a different resonance than does Eros in theologies of sexuality, they serve a similar critical function for their authors in providing a disarticulated space for agency. Though the theorization of the subject in either framework is quite different, and Eros and Desire map accordingly, in both I see some degree of hedge with regard to the theorization of agency. I will bring Sands critique of the sphere of sexuality as a potent political one at the end of this chapter.

<sup>173</sup> See Gayle Rubin's essay "Thinking Sex, Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in Carole S. Vance ed., *Pleasure and Danger*, (Routledge, New York, 1984), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (University of California Press, 1990).

For, if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man, and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexisms psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender.<sup>174</sup>

The critical force of her logic here intends to isolate *desire* as a trope that subverts the lock and step of heterosexist norms within a binary gender system—i.e. if one misidentifies within this codified system of ‘proper’ desire, one exposes and thwarts, at least partially, the appearance of powerful norms as ‘natural’.<sup>175</sup> Butler thus advances the varieties of desire (and identification) outside of the strict binary of gender (male/female) as a disruptive political force within the redundant logic of heteronormativity. However, she has also demonstrated and argued throughout her text exactly how powerful these binary norms are, particularly around the discourses of bodies, the binary of gender, and sexuality. Despite her apparent confidence in the psychoanalytic framework for articulating the dynamics of materializing differences (the consequences of which, for the lived bodies of those marked as ‘other’, extend far beyond the mark of gender), it would seem that by adopting this framework she starts out mired in many of the theoretical hot spots I have shed light on up to this point: 1.) A focus on the interior/individual psyche, 2.) The assumption of sexual difference articulated in the terms of a male/female binary as foundational, and 3.) The questionably disruptive domain of sexuality. Butler, despite her steady articulation of caveats about its potential hazards, has not yet made an

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<sup>174</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 239.

<sup>175</sup> This trope of Desire as agential wedge is at the heart of most queer theory, of which Butler is considered a prominent theorist.

argument for *WHY* she thinks this framework could do a rigorous job of structurally analyzing relations of power. In acknowledging the newness of this theoretical project, she cedes:

The vocabulary for describing the difficult play, crossing, and destabilization of masculine and feminine identifications within homosexuality has only begun to emerge within theoretical language...the thought of sexual difference *within* homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity.<sup>176</sup>

I would agree and add the caveat that doing so within the terms of a psychoanalytic framework may prove unwise and challenging if a primary concern is with the dangers of reproducing the binary logic of male/female. Even if one accepts such a binary as appropriate for analysis within the sphere of sexuality, it highlights my question for Butler — is her use of sexuality as a lens for analysis required by her subject matter, or does it become central because it is inherent to the framework of psychoanalysis (or a focus on the body)? If it is indeed the latter (which I suspect it is), I would like to see a justification of *why sexuality* makes an especially good lens for doing structural power analysis, even if the ‘topic’ of sexuality is certainly a worthy object *of* structural power analysis? Further, does one require a framework specifically shaped by the topic at hand in order to get at the specifics of that sphere most effectively? I would answer emphatically no and, quite the opposite, that a framework functions most rigorously to expose the interlocking vectors of oppression when its terms are not shaped by one *particular* aspect of identity. Though Butler has, I believe, shown that the framework can account for the materialization of race, and can articulate the co-constitutive production of a raced-gendered subject, is ‘can’ enough to justify its use? I believe Butler’s political

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<sup>176</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 240.

analyses are aimed at exposing the structural dynamics of power, so I am especially curious to hear a justification of why the psychoanalytic framework is particularly well suited to these political goals.

One thing Butler *does* do is lay out the work that she believes the psychoanalytic framework *should* be able to do (at a later time and place?), as follows:

For one deciding issue will be whether social strategies of regulation, abjection, and normalization will continue to relink gender and sexuality such that the oppositional analysis will continue to be under pressure to theorize their interrelations. This will not be the same as reducing gender to prevailing forms of sexual relations such that one “is” the effect of the sexual position one is said to occupy. Resisting such reduction, it *ought to be* possible to assert a set of non-causal and non-reductive relations between gender and sexuality, not only to link feminism and queer theory, as one might link two separate enterprises, but to establish their constitutive interrelationship. Similarly, the inquiry into both homosexuality and gender will need to cede the priority of both terms in the service of a more complex mapping of power that interrogates the formation of each in specified racial regimes and geopolitical spatializations.<sup>177</sup> (Italics mine)

These are Butler’s stated hopes for her theoretical project, and she appears at the very least resigned to the idea that it will take place in the domain of sexuality in oppositional resistance. I would read her primarily as unable to imagine the theorization of the relationship between sex and gender as taking place anywhere else. I would argue and have tried to show in my critique, that an analytic inquiry focused exclusively on sexuality is fertile territory for just the kind of *reinscription* of regulatory norms that

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<sup>177</sup> *Bodies*, pg. 240. In terms of current work in the area of queer and trans studies, one might suggest that even now the ‘thought of sexual difference *within* homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity’. Though clearly the more common expressions of misalignment between gender identity and sexuality (as in object of desire) has broken open the rigidly binary logic of these pairings, currently the most politically challenging articulation in terms of the male/female binary are those persons who identify as non-binary (they, them, theirs). I would suggest that the transformation of physical bodies to match gender identity might represent evidence for the persistent rigidity of binary norms for gender and sexuality.

feminist theorists and theologians are wary of. As they knowingly wade into the heavily laden dualistic territory of the body and, due to the limited terms of the critical frameworks they bear as shields, into the realm of sexuality, their aspirations for the transformative power of disruption are just that, aspirations. The narrowing of critical vision and critical terms undercuts the strategy of disrupting and denaturalizing norms and limits the reach of those disruptions to transform oppressive structures. As I have and will argue throughout, feminist theorists and theologians need to more intentionally consider whether and how the terms of the critical frameworks they adopt can achieve the political ends they set out for them and at least try to show how.

In casting doubt over this strategy, I do not mean to imply that the kinds of political regimes of regulation Butler has described and exposed are wrong – in fact they are ingenious, and I think, true and accurate. Butler does seem to believe, however, that the analytic categories and descriptors provided within psychoanalysis-- of repression, transgression, regulation and constraint—have the *most* potential for the political projects she has at hand. This is what I have sought to question and counter through a close analysis of her theoretical approach and her critical questions.

#### **xiv. The Limits of Sexuality – a Feminist Theological Critique**

It is here that I want to return to theologian Kathleen Sands who, as introduced in Chapter One, advanced an argument critiquing the romanticization of Eros in theologies of sexuality.<sup>178</sup> In a paper presented at the AAR in 2003, Sands responds to feminist theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid's monograph, *Indecent Theology: Theological*

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<sup>178</sup> See Sands, Kathleen, "Uses of the Thea (o) logian: Sex and Theodicy in Religious Feminism" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 8 No.1 (Spring 1992).



*Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*.<sup>179</sup> Locating the sexual sphere as a potent space for articulating divine relation, Reid makes an even stronger argument for the radical potential of sexuality in centering S/M and fetishism. Rejected within most feminist and sexual theologies as distortions of ‘true’ eros (mutuality) or repetitions of patriarchal patterns of domination and submission, Reid is eager to make the sexual, political and the political, theological by highlighting the dynamics of exclusion and transgression in marginalized sexual communities. Drawing on Butler’s theories, which map the radical potential of disrupting sexual norms, Reid argues that S/M and fetishism do not simply repeat, but mimic or parody patterns of domination and in so doing, disrupt, expose, and decenter the rigid norms of patriarchal heterosexuality. Sands does not in theory disagree with this analysis, as I do not take issue with the substance of Butler’s critical insights.

She remarks:

Ironic sexuality, like humour, is a sidelong glance at the interdependence of the norm and the transgression. That can be transgressive; if it were not, why would the open affirmation of these ‘perversions’ be so severely punished?<sup>180</sup>

However, she shares my skepticism about the *political* potential of such transgression to transform broader structures of oppression given that irony, like humor, *depends* on the norms it rubs against. Given the limits of the work sex can do in the political sphere, she also asks why does it have to? And more broadly, with respect to the identification of sex as the expression of a divine relation of healing mutuality, as seen in feminist eros

theology, she asks:

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<sup>179</sup> Althaus-Reid, Marcella. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. Routledge, 2000.

<sup>180</sup> Sands, Kathleen, Response to *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender & Politics*, AAR, Religion and Politics Life section, 2003.

Why does sex have to do so much *good*? In fact, why does sex have to do any good at all? Why is it not enough that it do no serious harm? And why is it not enough, in terms of political ethics, that it do no serious *public* harm?<sup>181</sup>

It is here where Sands makes the argument, applicable to Butler as well, that although sex *is* a vector of oppression and liberation, that liberative change in one area does not necessarily lead to liberative change in another area. In order to make impactful change, we can't count on the transgressive pressure exerted against sexual norms to ripple out through other vectors of oppression. Rather, she argues that what we really need is a *political ethic of sexual freedom*. For Sands, this means looking at how sexuality and sexual identity intersect with other vectors of oppression like race and class as well as the forces of economic globalization – i.e. the sphere of sexuality is not irrelevant, but in order to be politically relevant, it has to be looked at in a much broader political context.<sup>182</sup>

Looking at the forces of economic globalization, Sands argues that the recent advances in LGBTQ rights, though she would like to believe otherwise, have been most rapidly advanced by corporate interests as this community has gained access to more discretionary income and can contribute to political campaigns, and purchase consumer goods. Corporate initiatives like workplace 'diversity trainings' and domestic

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, pg.2.

<sup>182</sup> This analysis begins to look more like the approach of many (black) feminist and Womanist theologians who, in centrally adopting the tool of intersectionality, do not often see spheres as quite so discrete the way that feminists who do not adopt intersectional analysis do. I will look closely at the framework of intersectionality in Chapter 4. Also, to note, I am not denying that Butler, Althaus-Reid, and others do not start off with a broader political context in mind and indeed, broad political goals. What I AM arguing is that the critical frameworks they adopt discourage and limit their critical ability to keep that in view or theorize it robustly given their stated political aims. This is the broader critique I see Sands leveling in her response paper.

partnership policies are largely motivated by *economic* incentives rather than an ethics of sexual liberation. Her point being that liberation can be *ambiguous*, and that while the ends may sometimes justify the means, the cost of not paying close attention to the operative discourses surrounding sexuality in the public sphere can be quite high, especially for the marginalized. A political ethic of sexual freedom encompasses and critiques the structures and conditions that shape the possibilities for liberation at the most common level, and for subjects marked not just by gender, but also by race, and class.

In looking specifically at religious discourses around sexual ethics in the public sphere, Sands exposes what she sees as the sign of an inadequate political ethic in the religious left's support for sexual "freedoms", confined almost entirely to abortion rights and gay rights rather than moral, political, and economic freedoms. The gap between the public language about sexuality versus that used when addressing other areas of social justice is evidence, according to Sands, of a reliance on the liberal framework, where terms like 'privacy' or 'individual freedom' demarcate sexuality as cordoned off from other forces. What is problematic here is not the value of sexual privacy or individual freedom, but how the lack of a more robust discussion of the public and political dimensions of sexuality obscure how sexual and reproductive 'freedoms' conceived only along these lines belong *only to those who can afford them*. As a 'private matter', a social justice lens that would expose how race and class deeply inflect the 'freedom to choose' is not applied in the same way it is taken up when the religious left addresses racism or poverty.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, pg. 3.

On the Right, Sands sees the mirror image of this approach to sexuality, where intervention, even coercion on sexual matters, is the religious ethic and freedom is reserved for unregulated markets. In this worldview, the understanding of the ‘freedoms’ people will have is being driven more than ever by neoliberal global capitalism and this makes abundantly apparent the need for deliberate and reflective articulations of the interconnection of structures that inflect, shape, and constrain sexuality when it is taken up by feminist theorists and theologians. What she sees the Religious Left and Right have in common in these mirror approaches is a reliance by religion on its association with sexual ‘decency’ for its public authority. Given the rhetoric surrounding *decency* at the intersection of sexuality with race, class and gender in the ‘public’ sphere, Sands sees cause for urgency in articulating sexuality in the terms of social justice as a political ethic of sexual freedom.

Sands demonstrates the consequences of leaving ‘freedoms’ to global markets or the private sphere by scrutinizing the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996. In addition to dismantling the federal system of provisions for poor families, the Act’s subtitle-- “an act to reduce illegitimacy”-- and its beginning proclamation: “marriage is the foundation of a successful society”, in essence declares that poverty is caused by the sexual misbehavior of poor women, and ‘poor women’ encodes a special reference to *black* women.<sup>184</sup> Poverty redefined as the product of illegitimacy and solved through patriarchal marriage again becomes the province of religion in this legislative act with the introduction of the ‘Charitable Choice’ provision, designed to facilitate contracts

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, pg. 4. Sand’s cites Traci West for her argument about the encoding of race into the language of poverty and illegitimacy from an anthology she edited entitled, *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, Oxford University Press, 2000. See West’s contribution, “The Policing of Poor Black Women’s Reproduction”, pg.135.

between the government and religious groups for purposes of social provision. Sands describes this provision as commissioning religious groups to:

....“free” people from welfare ‘dependency’, to transition poor mothers from childrearing to (paid) “work”, and most of all, to assimilate poor women into the marriage and family patterns of the middle class.<sup>185</sup>

Though progressive religious groups opposed the interpretation of poverty as personal responsibility in the legislation, Sands points out that they did not denounce or even notice the patriarchalism, racism and classism encoded in the demand for ‘legitimacy’. Here is a clear example, she argues, of the blind spots around sexuality when a political ethic of sexual freedoms is not deliberately and critically developed as part of any liberative political or theological project or movement. In a critique of both the limits of an idealized language of Eros in theology and the uniting standards of ‘decency’ smuggled from secular discourse on sexuality into both progressive and conservative discourses on sexuality, Sands calls out the political fissures and the consequential truths of these frames:

We see no commitment to the ‘eros’ of poor women, women whose lives do not fit the model of middle class decency. We see no passion about their sexual privacy, or their sexual freedom. We see no passion for reproductive freedom when it means freedom to have babies who are black or brown. When it comes to the poor, justice seems to mean “just” enough to survive. And once again, the poor become ‘deserving’ only at the cost of their sexuality, by handing over not only their pleasure, but even their procreativity.<sup>186</sup>

What Sands’ critique brings to my discussion of Butler and others for whom a focus on the body leads to locating sexuality as a ‘special’ site of contestation, is both the basic question ‘why sexuality?’ and an illustration of how sexuality is *not* amenable to a

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, pg. 4.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, pg.5.

liberative political program unless it is articulated in political, not sexual, terms. Again, neither Sands nor I deny the validity of the analyses put forward by Butler or Althaus-Reid: that the transgression of norms can be transformative. The question is, *how* transformative? Does the transformative power of disruption extend beyond the limited scope of an individual sexual act in relation, or the population of a sexual minority? *Should* the reality of its limited scope be measured against one's stated political claims for a critical framework/approach? My argument in this thesis is that *yes*-- if one is making claims for the radical potential to transform structures of oppression, it should be shown or specifically argued how and *why* this critical approach should be adopted as better than others, extending critique further than other approaches, addressing the oppressions of more people than others. If that is not the case, the parameters and limitations of a given framework should be stated clearly, and critical claims should be scaled back accordingly.<sup>187</sup>

From Sands point of view in the U.S. and in Christian theology, we have a long way to go when it comes to articulating and advancing an ethics and politics of sexual freedom, but we will not get there by demanding *more* of sex. Rather, we need to demand less of sex and more of *politics*.<sup>188</sup> It is not that Butler et al do not have a political

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<sup>187</sup> Perhaps this expectation is idealistic given the academic context where 'surpassing' theoretical approaches and/or reproducing and re-articulating old arguments in new terms passes for academic 'progress' and attracts accolades for one's advancement within a given discipline or the academy more broadly. This has so often been the case with feminist scholarship in many disciplines-- it is ignored until a male colleague adopts an idea, with different terms, and claims it as his unique theoretical breakthrough. Even *within* feminist scholarship, however, this practice is common. See my article in the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, "Horizons in Feminist Theology or Reinventing the Wheel?" Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 102-138.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, pg.5.

analysis or come to their body projects without political goals. What I am arguing is that the frameworks within which they try to actualize those goals limit the breadth of their projects. In the case of Butler, I believe it is her attachment to the psychoanalytic model that keeps her tethered to the sphere of sexuality and an analytic of sexual difference, despite efforts to historicize and expand the framework's dynamic of sexual difference to other vectors of identity, namely race. Her observations about the materialization of racial difference are not wrong, but I would argue that because she argues for that process within a framework which keeps her focus on the structures and dynamics of the unconscious, the scope of her analysis is limited.<sup>189</sup> The question I would like to raise and which Sands raises soundly is: In what theoretical territory are these arguments most productively made? Can sexuality or the dynamics of sexual difference, which both Butler and Grosz are tethered to, carry the weight and serve as a solid foundation from which to change currently oppressive normative regimes? *How?* I don't think either Grosz or Butler have really made their case.

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<sup>189</sup> Though the point of her reading of the materialization of race in *Passing* is to show the political (lived) consequences of historicized psychoanalytic dynamics to make the argument that the process of materialization does have political punch, I find it telling that she chooses a literary example to make her argument. Before I am convinced that the psychoanalytic model has the political force she is suggesting, I would like to see more evidence that this is the case.

## Chapter III

### Posthuman Bodies and the New Materialism

I turn now to the material framework, as introduced in the section on critical frameworks, which was largely initiated in response to some of the issues I have addressed in Butler's work. I refer primarily to the anxiety among feminist theorists that discourse theory leads to a certain 'vanishing' of *material* bodies and that a discursive framework does not in fact have the capacity to articulate or theorize the *force* the materiality of bodies might exert on the world. As I observed earlier, this concern and some of the feminist approaches to the body within this framework are not dissimilar from Grosz' project to rearticulate the body's materiality as a means of undermining the destructive dualism of mind/body and, indeed, she has been adopted by new materialists as a rightful foremother. In Grosz' most recent book, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of the Material*,<sup>190</sup> she in fact positions herself as part of this intellectual movement and has fully engaged with the terms of its growing enthusiasts.

Though for Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* the binary she sought to undermine was that of mind/body, the binary in question at the fore of new materialism is that of the discursive/material. 'Material' feminists claim that despite the proliferation of work on the body in the last two decades, such work has primarily been analyses of discourses

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<sup>190</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of the Material*, (Columbia University Press, 2017).



about the body, rather than analyses of the corporeal practices of *lived* bodies or, as Grosz argues, theorizations of the body *itself*. Characterized in the collection *Material Feminisms* as marking a distinctive ‘material turn’ over against the ‘linguistic turn’ of the prior episteme, the boundaries of this framework are not always so distinct.<sup>191</sup> In addition to Grosz, the new materialism has gradually absorbed feminist body theorists from the “Butlerian” tradition who, over time, have found the terms and tools of postmodernism wanting and turned instead to the re-articulation of matter. This includes feminist science thinkers Donna Haraway and Anne Faust-Sterling, sociologist Vicki Kirby, and philosopher Moira Gatens among others.<sup>192</sup> For my purposes here, I will look closely at the work of philosopher and feminist theorist, Rosi Braidotti, and feminist theologian Mayra Rivera.<sup>193</sup> My goal is to critically assess whether the material framework’s rearticulation of bodies can accomplish what its practitioners set out for it.

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<sup>191</sup> I referenced this collection in my introduction to critical frameworks as representative of the current state of the ‘field’, but-- as I have hoped to model in my own use of sources throughout this thesis-- I am not a fan of progressivist taxonomies of intellectual thought that depict theoretical shifts as ‘surpassing’ those that have come before. I adopt their schema only in the sense of showing various positions taken up within the broader debate about body theory. See *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman.

<sup>192</sup> See Donna Haraway’s, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Duke University Press, 2016), Anne Fausto-Sterling’s *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*, (Routledge, 2012), Vicki Kirby’s *What if Culture Was Nature All Along?* (New Materialisms), (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), and Moira Gatens’s *Imaginary Bodies Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, (Taylor and Francis, 2013).

<sup>193</sup> I consider Rosi Braidotti a representative practitioner of body studies and the new materialism as one who has been consistently engaged in this conversation. See her *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Polity Press, 2002), *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, (Columbia Univ. Press, 2011), *The Post-human*, (Polity Press, 2013), and *After Poststructuralism: Transitions and Transformations*, (Routledge, 2014). As for Maya Rivera, I choose to engage with her work as a theologian because she both takes on a “body project” and locates herself in the tradition of new materialism. See her work *Poetics of the Flesh*, (Duke University Press, 2015). A new collection of essays edited by

## **i. Materialism in the Posthuman Age**

For Rosi Braidotti, the critical goal in the rearticulation of bodies and matter is to produce “a different scheme of emancipation and a non-dialectical politics of human liberation.” In her book *The Posthuman*, Braidotti argues that we are living in a post-human age, both materially and epistemologically.<sup>194</sup> This age is characterized by the successful deconstruction of Humanism’s presumptions of universalism, secular individualism, and the vice grip of hierarchical dualism on our capacity to imagine what humans are and what their capacity for acting on/in the world looks like. The deconstruction of old categories, brought about by postmodernism’s unleashing of Humanism’s structural *Others*, has provided the context in which feminists might effectively re-theorize these categories to meet their political ends. Focused as many feminist theorists of the body are on the destructive effects of dualism, Braidotti’s re-articulations are concentrated primarily on *matter* and *agency*. The broad strokes of her proposal develop a ‘monistic philosophy of becomings’ which rests on the idea that matter, and by extension embodiment, is intelligent and self-organizing and as

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Catherine Keller and Mary Jane Rubenstein reflects more broadly across theology and religious studies on how these fields have engaged with the new materialism. See *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, (Fordham University Press, 2017).

<sup>194</sup> This work is a philosophical follow up to her influential work *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Though the title of this book does not explicitly use a body metaphor, its content, like the other theorists we have looked at, positions the body as a central analytic category and metaphor for making her argument.

such *not dialectically opposed* to culture or technological mediation, but continuous with them.<sup>195</sup>

The corollary re-articulation of agency is also conceived in non-oppositional terms and seated in a notion of subjectivity revised within this monistic formulation as “a process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability.” Fundamental to this monistic re-articulation, then, is the idea that dialectical schemas of emancipation, agency, and subject formation reproduce oppositional dualistic categories that lead to an articulation of difference in hierarchical terms. Her critical challenge, from my perspective, is to show how and whether her re-articulation effectively addresses and undermines how difference currently operates within structures of domination.

The broader horizons of Braidotti’s project take on many of the philosophical quandaries we have seen other feminist theorists struggling to address from within the boundaries of their critical frameworks; the relation of subjectivity to the body, the question of identity relative to the decentering of ‘the subject’ in its current form, the crisis of relativism and ethics apparently brought on by a decentering of androcentric categories of knowledge, and the theorization of difference relative to the confrontation of ‘the other’ in its various forms (gendered, raced, colonial). For Braidotti, all these questions hinge on the relationship of her theorization of subjectivity relative to her re-

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<sup>195</sup> This articulation is meant to undermine the gender dualism associated with the nature/culture dualism, as well as the human/non-human binary represented in such works as Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

articulation of materiality. This constitutes her strategic intervention in this post-human moment, to continue the disruption of old categories with her re-articulations.

Her articulation of a newly material subjectivity clearly builds on the insights of many critical theories including feminist ecology, theology, psychology, political theory, and postmodern theory:

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building.<sup>196</sup>

Braidotti characterizes the end of Humanism not as a crisis, but as an opportunity with positive consequences, particularly for those ‘others’ who have been marginalized by its hierarchical categories. She also sees the posthuman condition as messy and complex and in need of a form of subjectivity that has the tools for ethical evaluation, political intervention, and normative action. For this reason, she posits her reformulation as neither postmodern (anti-foundationalist) or deconstructivist (linguistically framed) but as necessarily “materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, and firmly *located* somewhere, according to the feminist politics of location.”

This ‘politics of location’ is Braidotti’s first gesture toward structural forces outside of the material subject that, despite their posthuman theorization in non-oppositional terms, may actually still heavily impact the posthuman body-subject. She borrows from the work of post-colonial feminist Seyla Benhabib to depict how situated and context specific practices of ethical action might work in the posthuman condition

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<sup>196</sup> *Posthuman*, Pg. 53.

where differences are no longer determined through the dynamics of opposition.<sup>197</sup>

Benhabib's *cosmopolitanism* or Braidotti's own *becoming-nomad* provide the social and theoretical model for "by-passing the binary pitfalls" of more dualistic and divisive identity politics in the posthuman era. However, as theoretical models/ideals, these social imaginaries of the radical democratic polis don't seem particularly 'strategic' in their capacity to disrupt structures of domination outside of small like-minded communities of resistance. Braidotti's more specific description of how this political remapping of the meaning and impacts of difference/identity might be accomplished is equally vague and aspirational:

A primary task of posthuman critical theory, therefore, is to draw accurate and precise cartographies for these different subject positions as springboards towards posthuman recompositions of a pan-human cosmopolitan bond.<sup>198</sup>

While this could read as a grand and universalizing gesture, it is Braidotti's reformulation of the material in monistic terms that she feels buoys her theory of difference and provides ballast to the pitfalls of Humanism's dialectical and dualistic articulation of difference.

Monism results in relocating difference *outside* of the dualistic scheme, as a complex *process of differing* which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation of multiple others.<sup>199</sup>

This sounds a lot like Grosz's formulation of difference and, despite Braidotti's claim to the contrary, is very much shaped by the 'linguistic turn' in which 'differing' takes place in a field of signs and in reference to multiple others, but *not* connected to

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<sup>197</sup> See Benhabib's *Another Cosmopolitanism* (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures), (Oxford University Press, 2004), and *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Polity Press, 2007).

<sup>198</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 91.

<sup>199</sup> *Posthuman*, Pg. 56.

external structures of domination. That she seems more focused and articulate about the specificity of the subject/body rather than the external relations between subjects, I would argue is the result of having focused her articulation of the post-human condition through the analytic of the body and its rearticulation in vitalist material terms. What is hard to ascertain in her prose is exactly what theory of difference and what understanding of power are at work in this posthuman materialism?

As Braidotti delves into the specifics of what the materialization of monism looks like, she draws heavily on new scientific articulations of matter that both inform her own ideas and seem to instill a confidence in the rhetorical hegemony such ‘scientific’ articulations have in the culture at large. The power she attributes to the scientific discourse to displace hierarchical dualism is worth noting. She writes:

The current scientific redefinition of ‘matter’ dislocates difference from binaries to rhizomatics; from sex/gender or nature/culture to processes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization that take Life itself, or the vitality of matter as the main target. This system engenders a deliberate blurring of dichotomies of differences...<sup>200</sup>

She goes on to assert how this change in rhetoric about difference emanating from the scientific sphere has quite literally remapped how we ‘see’ difference on bodies, and how and according to what (new) differences bodies are now organized:

Genetic engineering and biotechnologies have seen to it that a qualitative conceptual dislocation has taken place in the contemporary classification of embodied subjects.... bodies are reduced to their informational substrate in terms of materiality and vital capacity...this means that the markers for the organization and distribution of differences are now located in micro instances of vital

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<sup>200</sup> Braidotti does not take this shift at face value and as detached from power relations. In fact, she goes on to state “this blurring does not in itself resolve or improve power differences and in many ways increases them”. Whether and how she adapts science’s reorientations of difference will be important to take note of.

materiality, like the cells of living organisms and the genetic codes of the entire species.<sup>201</sup>

Given the persistent and difficult theoretical struggles feminists have grappled with in trying to overcome the power of hierarchical dualism as a defining and confining rhetoric of western thought, particularly around how differences are marked on bodies, it's surprising that Braidotti suggests they have been dislocated by contemporary scientific ideas about materiality. Given her thesis that we are in the posthuman condition wherein the structural Others of the modern humanistic subject have re-emerged with a vengeance, it is also interesting that she still attributes such hegemonic rhetorical power to the sphere of scientific discourse. The pendulum seems to swing in whichever direction her argument needs it to in terms of where the heaviness of the materiality of things weighs in. She goes on to proclaim with confidence how far we have come in the posthuman era, both with regard to a new dynamic of 'differing' and a new regime of power:

We have come a long way from the gross system that used to mark difference on the basis of visually verifiable anatomical differences between the empirical sexes, the races, and the species. We have moved from the bio-power that Foucault exemplified by comparative anatomy to a society based on the governance of molecular *zoē* power today<sup>202</sup>

I am very skeptical that this shift in systems of marking difference has taken place as she indicates. I am especially so in light of what appears to be Braidotti's replacement of an overt theorization of power with a theorization of subjectivity that she posits as both a source for transforming cultural processes and as capable of transformative formations of self-- apparently free of external forces and sources. She does, however, acknowledge

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<sup>201</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 57.

<sup>202</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 95.

that despite her optimism in this regard, external structures of power ARE fully operational and fully adaptable to the shifts that have taken place in the posthuman era:

The question of difference and power disparity, however, remain as central as ever. The power of contemporary techno-culture to destabilize the categorical axes of difference exacerbates power relations and brings them to new necro-political heights.<sup>203</sup>

Despite her acknowledgement of the adaptability of oppressive power in the late capitalism of the posthuman era, her optimism about the strategic retheorization of subjectivity in vitalist materialist terms wins the day, as does her trust in the shift she has ‘documented’ in how the mechanism of marking difference works:

Advanced capitalism is a post-gender system capable of accommodating a high degree of androgyny and a significant blurring of the divide between the sexes. It is also a post-racial system that no longer classifies people and their cultures on grounds of pigmentation but remains nonetheless profoundly racist. A strong theory of posthuman subjectivity can help us to re-appropriate these processes, both theoretically and politically, not only as analytical tools, but also as alternative grounds for formations of self<sup>204</sup>

I disagree with her characterization of current cultural accommodation of a blurring between the sexes and the classification of persons based on pigmentation.<sup>205</sup> I also take issue with the transformative power she attributes to subjectivity, however re-articulated. In fact, it would seem to harken back to Humanism’s all-knowing, willing, universal structure of the subject. What she actually *argues* is the structure of this

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<sup>203</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 96

<sup>204</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 98.

<sup>205</sup> The fact that the murder rate of black trans women is the highest of any group in this country I think speaks tragic volumes about Braidotti’s assessment of western culture’s tolerance for these differences. Of the 102 transgender murders between 2013 and 2017, 86% of the victims were black, Hispanic or Native American. See [Human Rights Commission Report](#)



powerfully transformative self is something closer to post-structuralism's dispersed and contingent subject. This subject emerges only through the dynamic of othering and gains its disruptive and transformative power through a material realization of the interrelations of the postmodern self's multiple sources. This *almost* sounds like an intersectional analysis, but psychologized as the internal structure of subjectivity:

Sexualized, racialized, and naturalized differences from being categorical boundary markers under Humanism, have become unhinged and act as the forces leading to the elaboration of alternative modes of transversal subjectivity, which extend not only beyond gender and race, but also beyond the human.... [The posthuman framework] functions as an attempt to rethink in a materialist manner the intricate web of interrelations that mark the contemporary subjects' relationship to their multiple ecologies, the natural, the social and the psychic...they [posthuman subjects] do not abolish but profoundly restructure the process of sexualization, racialization, and naturalization<sup>206</sup>

As is often the case with projects seated in the body, a focus on gender inevitably leads to a theorization of sexuality, though the difference between the two is not always articulated or theorized and Braidotti is no exception in this regard. In her assessment of feminist politics, she suggests we need to rethink sexuality *without gender* starting with a vitalist return to the polymorphous and perverse (playful and non-reproductive) *structure of human sexuality*. In addition, we need to reassess the 'generative powers of female embodiment', though she goes on to argue that gender is only one historically contingent mechanism of capture of the multiple potentialities of the body.<sup>207</sup> A feminist articulation of monist power understands it as a "complex strategic flow of effects which call for a pragmatic politics of intervention and the quest for sustainable alternatives'. But because this pragmatic and strategic response is contextual, knowing what this looks like ahead of

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<sup>206</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 99.

<sup>207</sup> The implied critique is of Judith Butler and queer theory when she proclaims about gender "to turn it into a trans-historical matrix of power is quite simply a conceptual error" (*Posthuman*, pg. 99).

time is (conveniently) impossible to articulate. Our only option is to experiment with resistance and intensity in order to “find out what posthuman bodies can do”. Since the body seems to be the equivalent of our sexuality in this formulation, or perhaps because a focus on the gendered body leads Braidotti to that terrain, she returns to sexuality as a source of resistance and self-expression reminiscent of many of the authors we have looked at in earlier chapters:

Because the gender system captures the complexity of human sexuality in a binary machine that privileges heterosexual family formation and literally steals all other bodies from us, we no longer know what sexed bodies can do.<sup>208</sup>

Despite the implied critique of the male/female binary, this mix of bodies, sexuality, difference, and resistance/agency does not ultimately lead us into territory that is all that new. Braidotti’s ‘matter-realist’ or ‘posthuman vitalist’ feminism proposes that as we rediscover the ‘complexity’ of sexuality in bodily matter that is ‘always already sexed’, we find that the body is sexually differentiated along the axes of *multiplicity* and *heterogeneity*. In (apparently) shifting focus away from the sex/gender distinction, and bringing sexuality *as a process* into full focus, we can now understand it as a *force*, or *constitutive element* that is capable of de-territorializing gender identity and institutions. Combined with an understanding of the body as a ‘complex assemblage of virtualities’, this approach posits “the ontological priority of difference and its self-transforming force.” Though rearticulating sexuality along heterogeneous versus binary lines, and as a force or process versus a given may disrupt naturalistic and heterosexual gender identity — we have seen this argued to varying degrees by Grosz and Butler-- it is unclear to me that this ‘force’ is capable of transforming *institutions* and Braidotti certainly does not

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<sup>208</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 100.

*argue* the case. Why she doesn't feel the need to show how this transformation might take place is perplexing, especially given her awareness of and critique of queer theory's claims for the disruptive political potential of queer (non-binary and/or non heterosexual) bodies. That she also proceeds to posit ontological difference as a foundation for the materializing of sexual bodies seems to move dangerously close to some of the reinscriptive tendencies of body focused theory (Elizabeth Grosz being one example).

Braidotti solidifies that this is indeed her position by citing other feminist work that argues 1.) That sexual difference is not a problem that needs a solution but a productive location to start from and 2.) That we need to return to sexuality as a polymorphous and complex visceral force disengaged from identity issues and all dualistic oppositions. As I have argued through other body projects, I do not think sexual difference is a particularly productive place for overcoming the destructive forces of hierarchical dualism. The question remains for me, given her critical framework, is the latter even possible without getting ensnared by the former--exactly *because* of the power of very interested and hegemonic structures of domination? Does her framework even allow for an analysis of the interaction between the transformative force of the material, becoming, multi-vocal, subject and cultural structures of domination? Her articulation of this interaction is awash in the metaphors of post-structuralism by which I mean, vague at best:

Posthuman feminists look for subversion not in counter-identity formations, but rather in pure dislocations of identities via the perversion of standardized patterns of sexualized, racialized and naturalized interaction.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> *Posthuman*, pg.99.

Braidotti does step back at moments to note the powerful and conservative forces outside of the subject that in fact inspire and require this new articulation, but proposes that the Posthuman Era is in fact a moment when those forces that produce and regulate specific understandings of difference, bodies, and selves are up for grabs:

These experiments with what sexed bodies can do does not amount to saying that in the social sphere differences no longer matter or that the traditional power relations have actually improved. On the contrary, on a world scale, extreme forms of polarized sexual difference are stronger than ever...but these reactionary gender dichotomies are only part of the picture. The broader picture indicates that the dislocation of the former system of marking differences makes it all the more urgent to reassert the concept of difference as both central and non-essentialist.<sup>210</sup>

It is in this context that she argues our best hope of establishing this new understanding of difference as non-binary is in the lesson the material constitution of our subjectivity provides us about ontological difference. For Braidotti this turns out to look a lot like Lacan's description of how the self forms in relation to an abject other, with the disruptive addendum that because selves are in relation to *many others*, we come to understand our being in relations in non-dualistic terms:

I have stressed difference as the principle of not-One, that is to say of *differing*...posthuman ethics urges us to endure the principle of not-One at the in-depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations...I want to emphasize the priority of the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of. This humbling experience of not-Oneness anchors the self in an ethical bond to alterity.<sup>211</sup>

This formulation of the ontologically relational-self grounds Braidotti's understanding of the production of difference as seated in the structure of subjectivity and

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<sup>210</sup> *Posthuman*, pg.100.

<sup>211</sup> *Posthuman*, pg.100.

emanating outwards. Our opportunity to disrupt the rhetorics and regulation of external structures' ordering of difference, then, comes in our psychological ruminations and insights into how the self is constituted. Our impetus toward political action also comes from this reflection on the *relation to alterity* when we understand our selves as constitutively interrelated to *others*:

At the beginning, there is always already a relation to an affective, interactive entity endowed with intelligent flesh and an embodied mind: ontological relationality. A materialist politics of posthuman differences works by potential becomings that call for actualization. They are enacted through collectively shared, community-based praxis and are crucial to support the process of vitalist, non-unitarian and yet accountable recomposition of a missing people – the “we” of a new pan-humanity – the ethical dimension of becoming posthuman as a gesture of collective self-styling<sup>212</sup>

This monist-material-vitalist political ontology, I would argue, suffers from many of the shortcomings I have outlined in prior chapters. Having started with a reformulation of the materialist-vitalist body as a rubric for capturing a larger political gesture, Braidotti loses sight of the relation of her newly theorized materialist subjectivity in its concrete relationship to the ‘outside world’. Certainly, she gestures towards external structures of domination, and in fact, has a healthy respect for the weight of their reductive machinations. However, rather than theorize how those machinations work on/in the constitution of the body/self, she seems to bracket *that* constitutive relationship in favor of a focus inward for distilling a truer and more productive understanding of the formation of self, somehow safe from the tendrils of the social.

Her use of post-structuralist theory is selective and inconsistent in ways that confuse her own framework rather than enhance it. Critical of the limits of articulating a

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<sup>212</sup> *Posthuman*, pg. 105.

politics of difference in the linguistic sphere, she borrows the language and the structure of ‘differing’ along with the basic anatomy of the Lacanian unconscious but suggests that her re-articulation gains the *material edge* by grounding it as an ontological structure in a material-vital body. Similarly, she borrows the political implications of post-structuralism’s proliferations of difference as a mechanism for disrupting the powerful structures of hierarchical dualism and repositions them as the lever from self/subjectivity to external ‘others’. By extending her ontological structure of multi-axial relationality into social relations with heterogeneous ‘others’, she claims to undermine the binary at both the subjective, and the external structural level.

Though eclecticism has always been a hallmark and strength of feminist critical frameworks, Braidotti’s critical impulses here at times seem at cross-purposes. She is wedded to a number of criteria for her feminist intervention in this posthuman moment: first and foremost rematerializing the body and its subjectivity as a model of monist-vitalistic ontology, but also decentering dualism and its grip on articulating difference, rearticulating difference in non-hierarchical and heterogeneous terms, establishing a ground for ethical claims, and re-establishing foundations for identity to address group oppression without essentializing differences. I would suggest, however, that her first choice – to use the materiality of the body as her grounding analytic-- short circuits many of these efforts.

As I argued previously, by focusing on the re-articulation of a materialist subjectivity, her critical perspective is immediately circumscribed to internal processes, even when she gestures towards their relationship to external sources. Additionally, as she looks to the body and its representations of difference to disrupt the binary of the

sex/gender framework, she moves immediately to sexuality as the sphere most associated with gender critique and the body. Though she avoids the usual default of those focused on sexuality and the body-- adopting sexual difference as the organizing principle of all difference-- she doesn't get very far. By rearticulating sexuality as a *process* of materialization that takes place along multiple axes – not just gender - she feels she has soundly undercut what she herself critiques as an over-reliance on gendered sexuality as the primary axis for the materialization of bodies/selves. Here is where her framework's lack of any real structural analysis and her reliance on apolitical post-structuralist ideas most seriously undercut her political goals.

She argues that an understanding of the constitution of selves as having multiple sources, internal and external, and an understanding of difference as the co-constitutive process of differing, also internally and externally, has a transformative force to disrupt both identity and *institutions*. Regardless of her argument that we are in a unique moment – the Posthuman – in which such structures and ideas are 'up for grabs', nowhere has she argued *for* this transformative force.<sup>213</sup> Despite the many historical critiques in feminist theory about the power of postmodern disruption vis a vis sexuality, desire, and the proliferation of difference, she *asserts* that this is the case, and that the

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<sup>213</sup> As I alluded to in the last chapter, this search by critical theorists in a post-foundationalist world, for an unmarked category on which to hang their agential hopes – Desire, Eros, Aporia, Force – is a characteristic epistemological move that I feel is not wholly required. It implies a struggle to find grounds to make ethical claims in a radically relativized socio-political sphere. I believe we have the critical tools with which to do so, and it does not involve solving any ontological problems of the subject or Being. The structural rhetorical framework provides the means by which to map and critique structures of oppression, and its inherently intersectional lens also allows for the existential expression of the individual's struggle within that frame, regardless of where they are situated hierarchically. The combined perspective is, I would argue, plenty of grounds and allows for many forms of expression to fill out the story of 'being'.

source of that power is in our reorganized understanding of the structure of subjectivity. If her critical framework had the capacity to analyze the relationship between structural oppression and the subjects who inhabit the differences produced by those structures, her claims about transformation might have more political purchase. As her argument stands, I believe that her focus on bodies, even theorized non-dualistically, still limits her analyses and thus the potential of her political vision of a “collectively shared, community-based praxis that supports the process of vitalist, non-unitarian and yet accountable recomposition of a missing people – the “we” of a new pan-humanity – the ethical dimension of becoming posthuman as a gesture of collective self-styling.”

## ii. Materialist Flesh

I turn now to feminist theologian Mayra Rivera whose book *Poetics of the Flesh*, “explores the intersection between bodies, material elements, and discourse through the concepts of ‘body’ and ‘flesh.’<sup>214</sup> In Rivera’s literary critical frame, *flesh* functions to “unsettle the reifying tendencies of ‘the body’ by evoking carnal interdependence, vulnerability, and exposure.”<sup>215</sup> My attention to her work in this section will unpack just what she seeks to resolve in her mingling of ‘flesh’ and ‘body’, what role ‘new materialism’ plays in her theorization, and why the body is centered in her project.

Rivera introduces her work with a rehearsal of the history of feminist body critique in Christian theology and beyond, but immediately poses the question “so why return to the body again?” She critiques the limitations imposed by a ‘turn to the body’

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<sup>214</sup> *Poetics of the Flesh*, (Duke University Press, 2015), pg. 5. Henceforth I will cite this source as *Poetics*.

<sup>215</sup> *Poetics*, pg.7



in theology, questioning the social objectification and standardization of bodies. Even more starkly, she posits that the body *itself* might be part of the problem in this regard:

As a theoretical category “the body” fosters an illusion of completeness and wholeness easily naturalized, normalized, and deployed as part of cultural systems of representation. Indeed, the body tends to function just as nature does, as a transcendental term in a materialist mask...It represents the unattainable stability that social norms demands, but that corporeality cannot mirror.”<sup>216</sup>

Rather than abandon the troubled site of the body, however, Rivera takes up the body ‘anew’ with the hopes that the framework of materiality will provide some ballast against the pitfalls of centering the body while also resolving some of the theoretical quandaries we have seen played out in previous chapters: hierarchical dualisms, the inside/outside quandary, spirit/matter and the two substance problem, male/female difference read as primary difference, and the erasures of discursivity. She quickly identifies the reifying tendencies of the body as her critical focus and claims as central to her project 1.) an examination of the social hierarchies that depend on that reification, 2.) an accounting of social identities--particularly race and gender-- that influence how social norms affect *particular* bodies, and 3.) an exploration of how those hierarchies affect even the most intimate elements of life and shape the materiality of flesh. From a feminist theological perspective, these critical commitments are a solid foundation on which to build. However, in further articulating the impetus for her concern with the reified body she stakes her ‘materialist’ claim in these terms:

Part of the critical task of this book is thus to unsettle the assumed separation between social ideal and materiality, between social constructs and

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<sup>216</sup> *Poetics*, pg.7. I agree wholeheartedly and see this insight as the central critique from which this dissertation arises. As I have argued throughout, if one’s feminist project is to produce critique that contributes to dismantling oppressive hierarchies, there are critical frameworks available to do so that are far less susceptible to cooptation and reinscription.

carnal vitality. The distinctions between cultural and material dimensions of corporeality are established discursively and they have material consequences. Between body and flesh there are always words.<sup>217</sup>

Here we get a better sense of where the ‘new materialist’ framework fits into Rivera’s critical perspective. Much like those feminists who reacted strongly to Butler’s theorization of discursive materialization, Rivera is interested in engaging ‘other dimensions of corporeality’ lost within the critical limits of discursive practice. She characterizes our age as one in which developments in science and technology makes us more capable of affecting the bodies of others and the material conditions of the earth. This in turn presents *new* ethical and religious challenges that require more robust understandings of the *material effects* of social relations.<sup>218</sup> She quotes Butler to argue: “if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a *new bodily ontology*.”<sup>219</sup> In Rivera’s project, ‘the poetics of the flesh’ may provide just that.

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<sup>217</sup> Poetics, pg.8.

<sup>218</sup> As I will argue further on, why the insights born of this framework are characterized as prompting ‘new’ ethical and religious challenges, or whether and how this critical lens is more effective at discerning these realities (versus, say, the structural critiques of feminist materialism) is not really *argued*. These assumptions within the ‘new materialist’ framework have been advanced by the thinkers, in many fields, who have adopted both its terms and its characterization as ‘surpassing’ older critical methods, in particular postmodern theory. I have only seen reductive arguments about the shortcomings of the feminist structural analysis that emerges from Marxist thought (materialism). Certainly, the new materialism has not engaged in any comparative critical analysis. Most commonly, feminist materialism is only taken up to set it in an historical trajectory of the evolution of theory. For a discussion of the (apparent) difference between Marxist and materialist feminism see Martha E. Gimenez’s article “Marxist Feminism/Materialist Feminism” on the Feminist Theory Website <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/mar.html> (1998).

<sup>219</sup> From “On This Occasion...” in *Butler on Whitehead*, eds. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Deena Lin (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), pg.12. This represents later Butler, which according to Rivera, includes a turn away from the

By critically engaging the carnal Johanine Christian conception of flesh as material, vulnerable, and changeable, she seeks to reintroduce a crucial aspect of corporeality to an otherwise reifying conceptualization of bodies.<sup>220</sup>

Rivera proposes that understanding embodied identities as engagements with society implies rethinking the role of corporeal materiality and to do so, she actually adopts Judith Butler's articulation of materialization.<sup>221</sup> In Butler's formulation, the materialization of bodies is a *process* that stabilizes over time to produce the *effect* of boundaries, fixity, and surface that we call matter. This formulation helps with Rivera's

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discursive and an acknowledgement of the body's 'excess', incommensurability with language, and unsignified/signifiable aspects. I would read these shifts in Butler's theory differently, but that is a topic for another dissertation.

<sup>220</sup> Rivera's source for this carnal conception of 'flesh' emerges from what she identifies as two Christian corporeal imaginaries of flesh in the biblical tradition. The first is *Somatic* (which she locates as part of a Pauline tradition), which understands flesh as inessential and rejects what Rivera thinks are important traits of corporeality—its earthly origins, relations to other flesh and the material world, malleability, and feebleness. These rejections in the somatic conception of flesh lead to the projection of despised traits onto 'others' and flesh becomes abjection. Sinful flesh replaces *vital corporeality* and malleability becomes a liability. Rivera contrasts this somatic Pauline understanding with what she describes as the more *carnal* understanding of flesh represented in the Johanine tradition. In this corporeal imaginary, flesh is characterized by those abject qualities of the somatic conception - by materiality, vulnerability, and malleability. Though this 'carnal' conception of the materiality of flesh often gets compromised in the Johanine tradition by its attachment to a god of the heavens as a reservoir of truth, knowledge, and stability unaffected by carnality, the overall structure of Rivera's 'materialist' argument is that we must reevaluate the rejected traits of carnality and embrace our own flesh. We must "trust a poetics that empties itself into the world, accepting the limits of the knowledge it seeks, as no knowledge is ever absolute, unmediated, or final." *Poetics*, pg. 154.

<sup>221</sup> Rivera's use of Butler counters many feminist theologians and theorists who have either deliberately or reductively misarticulated her theory of materialization to characterize their own theoretical critiques as 'advances'. Rivera is one of only a few feminist thinkers who have not taken this aspect of Butler's analysis as problematic and adopted/adapted it appropriately. Her critique of Butler is on other grounds that I will address further on, but it's worth pointing out that she accepts and utilizes what I think is a very helpful theoretical tool for talking about how bodies inhabit, resist, and materialize externally produced social meaning.

concern to undermine the notion of a reified body. But to this articulation she also adds her articulation of *flesh* as *incarnated* to mark that transformation that happens *materially*, ‘shaped by the unique textures and rhythms of each body’. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Butler (whose work is also influenced by him), Rivera describes the body’s becoming as dependent on and bound to other bodies, emerging from its relation to the sensible world where “flesh is not something one has, but rather, the web in which one lives.”<sup>222</sup>

In many ways this language and these metaphors are reminiscent of the matrices and webs of relation described in both Theology and Eros theology, but in this case, the concern is less to do with articulating the human experience, and more focused on the articulation of ‘matter’, however one defines it.<sup>223</sup> Rivera’s *critique* of Butler is very instructive in this regard, as it seeks to further her ‘material’ frame over against Butler’s ‘discursive’ frame, and in so doing reveals much about the critical capacities of this ‘new materialism’.

Drawing from Amy Hollywood’s critique of Butler, Rivera argues that her reliance on linguistic metaphors for inscribing performativity come at the expense of *other types* of human practices of corporeal becoming: “Subjects are formed not only through the linguistic citation of norms but also by the body subject’s encounters with other bodies in the world and by its practical or bodily citation.”<sup>224</sup> She also critiques

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<sup>222</sup> *Poetics*, pgs. 144-45.

<sup>223</sup> I will return to this point a bit further on and mean mainly to draw attention to the fact that the focus of the ‘new materialism’, despite claims to the contrary, seems to draw attention away from material human relations within hierarchical structures of oppression, and here I mean material in the feminist-Marxist sense.

<sup>224</sup> I see nothing in this critique put forward by Amy Hollywood and by extension Rivera, that contradicts what Butler has argued and would suggest that this is a distinction born

Butler's notion of agency as limited-- emerging only in the gaps between repetitions, and through strategic co-optations-- and suggests that when Butler theorizes resistance as mobilized by the law, she is depicting *all* power as deriving from social norms. She also highlights the fact that all the forces of which Butler speaks are negative: pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threat of violence, violence and criminalization.<sup>225</sup> When Butler describes the context of her own materialization she invokes a political context in which oppressive forces deeply inflected that process, "I wasn't sure that either my own gender or my own sexuality...were going to allow me to be immune from social violence of various forms."<sup>226</sup> After noting that survival could not be taken for granted in Butler's experience of the materialization of her gender and sexuality, Rivera characterizes Butler's 'orientation' as giving a tragic aura to her work. She continues:

Matters of survival take precedence. There is no substitute for basic social structures of protection and economics sustenance. *But* inasmuch as corporeal constitution is also influenced by the encounter with others in the world, *affirmative social relations* can be crucial for long-term survival.<sup>227</sup> (Italics mine)

These affirmative social relations of which Rivera speaks are the 'other types of human practices of corporeal becoming' that Hollywood harkens to. In addition to "meeting eyes that react with love and respect to my presence, hearing words of approval, being surrounded by images that represent my body as beautiful," Rivera offers poetic

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of a reductive reading of Butler, rather than a valid critique. Rivera cites this from Hollywood's essay "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization", in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, eds. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St, Ville, 252-275, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>225</sup> When asked about this negativity in her theory, Butler replied, quite tellingly I would suggest, "I tend to think that this is just what happens when a Jewish girl with a Holocaustal psychic inheritance sits down to read philosophy at an early age" from *Undoing Gender*, (Routledge, 2004), pg. 195.

<sup>226</sup> *Undoing Gender*, (Routledge, 2004), pg. 195.

<sup>227</sup> *Poetics*, pg.147.

writing as an example of a practice of creating imaginative spaces --from "shattered histories", "shards of vocabularies," ambiguous words, and reassembled rituals—for the affirmation of corporeal possibilities.<sup>228</sup> Her argument is that Butler's theories of performativity and materialization are too inward-focused and reflect a materialization of the structures and processes of the unconscious at the expense of thoroughly theorizing *social relation*.<sup>229</sup> From within her materialist frame, she is concerned that while representing social norms as *constraining* forces illuminates how societies delimit corporeal flourishing (ala Butler), it understates the *productive* forces of materiality and flesh.<sup>230</sup> In her words,

Materiality does not yield passively to human demands....The exclusive focus on human actions limits our understanding of the mechanisms by which power affects human bodies. Addressing the principals that govern material productivity at its most fundamental levels is beyond the scope of this discussion, BUT it is crucial for this project to point to some of the ways in which the human and the nonhuman are implicated in the constitution of flesh.<sup>231</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Though I would not agree that Butler only describes forces as constraining versus productive, what is brought into focus here specifically is a distillation of the 'material'

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<sup>228</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 148-9.

<sup>229</sup> This critique is not dissimilar to the one I make about how Butler's attachment to the psychoanalytic model leads her to continually focus inward/individually despite the social orientation of her theories. Though Rivera would probably say our motivating concern for this critique was similar—that social relations are the more productive object of theorizing/theologizing-- because of Rivera's adoption of the material framework, she ends up in a very different place than I do politically. This difference informs my overall critique of the material framework for critical feminist theory/theology: that it in fact ultimately does NOT take social relation as its subject when orienting analysis to the role of matter in constituting human bodies. In much the same way that the psychoanalytic framework and those focused on sexuality have oriented attention inward or toward the 'subject' and AWAY from overarching structures of domination, the material framework, despite gestures to the contrary, leaves those structures largely intact in favor of theorizing the revolutionary impact of *matter* on our bodies.

<sup>230</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 149.

<sup>231</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 150.

concerns of Rivera's project and just what role they may play in her theological inquiry. As I suggested earlier, the concern of the new materialism and those who position themselves within its frame seems to be with the status of *matter* first and foremost: its nature, its vitality, its agency, its constitutive role in shaping human bodies. Though ostensibly this concern emerges from a longer feminist debate about the status of marginalized bodies that this dissertation has to some degree mapped, the emphasis on marginalized populations and the forces that marginalize their bodies seems to fall to the wayside. In her argument about why we should return to the body given its inherent conservatism and its potential to reify social norms, Rivera commits early on to concern herself with social hierarchies that depend on that reification, an accounting of social identities--particularly race and gender-- that influence how social norms affect *particular* bodies, and an exploration of how those hierarchies affect even the most intimate elements of life and shape the materiality of flesh. I would argue that she succeeds primarily only in her last claim – in depicting instances of the process of materialization. Moreover, I would argue that it is in fact her adaptation of the new materialist frame that hinders and redirects her analysis away from social hierarchies and their affects for particular bodies.

As Rivera begins to sew up the strands of her theological inquiry – newly theorizing corporeality with an appreciation for its more malleable aspects, exploring instances of materialization where we witness the co-constitutive nature of individual bodies and their 'material' surroundings, and describing the implications that living in marked bodies has for those who must navigate the material world in them – it is clear

that she has a grasp on the power of social hierarchies and their ‘constraints’ for marginalized bodies:

The possibilities that the world opens and forecloses for me depend on how my body is seen in society. The visibility of bodies exposes them to specific rules and expectations, different risks, unequal access to the world....The visible traits of my body affect whether the world recognizes me and receives me or ignores me and wounds me.<sup>232</sup>

What is less clear is how exactly the ‘poetics of the flesh’ she is weaving within this web of ‘new materialism’ addresses those hierarchies outside of describing them and the process of how norms are materialized in bodies in a more ‘material’ way. As I suggested above, the real ‘achievement’ of this project seems more focused on re-theorizing a conception of matter than it is a prescription for dismantling the structures of oppression that operate to marginalize bodies through its hierarchical categories of abjection. The focus of Rivera’s materialization of bodies through a rearticulation of ‘flesh’ is so immersed in matter that the political motivations on which the project was based become secondary, if they were ever there at all.

Does her new articulation of materiality as flesh undermine the reifying potential a focus on the body portends? This is another primary focus of her project that she and I approach skeptically. In her conclusion, however, she contends:

Reclaiming terms that carry with them sediments of colonial representation—‘flesh’, ‘race’, ‘spirit’—is dangerous. But we risk taking up the words and conjuring other images and other bodies. Never forgetting injustice, suffering, or failure, such a poetics seeks to participate in earthy relations, to become flesh. There is nothing less at stake in this commitment than the possibilities of becoming for those who have been condemned by the depreciation of flesh.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> *Poetics*, Pg. 152 and 156.

<sup>233</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 157.



This ‘poetics of flesh’, which seems to contain equal parts new materialism, theology, and literary theory, makes large claims for an earthy ethics of risk, but does little, I would argue, to address the real material (in the Marxist sense) consequences of living in marginalized bodies that Rivera critiques in Butler’s work as ‘tragic.’<sup>234</sup> Her turn to the healing potential found in positive ‘social relations’ reformulated in material terms as co-constitutive, appears to be her primary critical tool for undermining those structures, along with the assumption of responsibility for our co-creatures that comes with ‘becoming flesh’:

Consenting to be flesh implies accepting the social obligations that emerge from our coexistence in the flesh of the world, analyzing social structures not as debates about ideas, positions, or power conceived in abstraction, but rather as the mechanism by which societies promote the flourishing of some bodies and stifle that of others, distribute life and death. Descriptions of bodies, worlds, and their co-constitutions are creative renderings with material effects.<sup>235</sup>

Though I would not disagree that there are material effects to our articulations, I would argue that the interdependence of speech acts, ‘creative renderings’, and those structures that distribute life and death might require an analysis of forces beyond an ‘implied social obligation’. There is also something troubling about the role of the word ‘consenting’ in her formulation. Her descriptions of social hierarchies and marked bodies throughout the text indicate a reality quite different than a consensual one when it comes to ‘inhabiting flesh’. If she is arguing that ‘becoming flesh’ is a new material-ethical stance that one can theologically take up, even as it implies risk, I am even more skeptical. What has structurally changed about the operations of marginalization through

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<sup>234</sup> It certainly looks nothing like the feminist liberation theology of Sharon Welch’s well-known work, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, (Fortress Press, 1990), which included an analysis of structural power relations as central to its constructive proposals for risk.

<sup>235</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 157.

a theorization of the materiality of bodies that might make that risk different for marginalized populations whose bodies are always already at risk, per her own analysis? It is claims such as this, abstracted from the political realities that new materialists *claim* as the motivation for their re-articulations, that give me pause about the framework's critical potential. Is it even critical? And if so, critical of what? It seems largely a-political to me, even as many of its practitioners take it up from within feminist political territory.

### **iii. Feminist Materialism vs. the New Materialism**

It is at this critical juncture that materialist feminism – that critical approach rooted in Marxist analysis of capitalist patriarchy and not accidentally eclipsed in name by the current manifestation of materialism – might make the more effective intervention. Rosemary Hennessey articulates materialist feminism as ideology critique that explains the complex ways social reality is shaped—through the over-determined relations among mechanisms for making sense, distributing resources, dividing labor and sharing or wielding power. Though Hennessey is not a theologian, her feminist political concerns appear to map onto those ostensibly of concern to Rivera. In an example of body politics, Hennessey lays it out as follows:

If we acknowledge that discursive struggles over women's reproductive body in the U.S. now have less to do with women's 'choice' than with the maintenance of a social order in which the few still benefit from the work of many, where power and resources are distributed on the basis of wealth not human worth or need, and women are generally devalued, we can begin to make sense of the contest over abortion from the standpoint of those who are already most affected by the legislation of women's bodies—the thousands of poor women who are also disproportionately women of color.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Hennessey, Rosemary, *Materialist Feminist and the Politics of Discourse*, (Routledge, 1992), pg. xvi.

As she argues and I would agree, we need critical frameworks that can address these issues and explain the complex ways in which the social marks of difference serve as guarantors of inequity (not indices of plurality). The ‘old’ materialist feminist framework and its theory of discourse as ideology makes it possible to acknowledge the systematic operation of social totalities like patriarchy and racism across a range of interrelated material practices: divisions of labor, dimensions of state intervention and civil rights, the mobility of sites for production and consumption, the re-imagination of colonial conquest, and the colonization of the imagination.<sup>237</sup> If feminisms, whether they be theological, political or theoretical are to confront the highly differentiated positioning of bodies marginalized by gender, race, class, nationality, religion, and immigration status among other markers of identity, it cannot relinquish systemic analysis. The new materialism exemplified in the work of Braidotti, Rivera and many others who assume this framework, may articulate the reality of structural inequality, but their focus on re-theorizing matter does nothing to address the material impact of those realities in structural terms. The terms of its critical frame were not devised to do so. That the framework has assumed and convoluted the meaning of *materialism* in critical theory and has quite literally staged its theoretical supersession of the ‘old’ feminist materialism which has its foundation in the structural analysis of power, is particularly troubling. That so many feminist thinkers who claim to be interested in addressing structural inequality have adopted its terms without truly analyzing its capacity for critique, calls for some close critical reading of feminist projects advanced in its name.

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid, pg.xvii

Rivera's concluding paragraph confirms my suspicion that her 'poetics of flesh' is not the political redress of Butler's internalized and discursive omissions she claims it to be, nor perhaps not truly critical in the feminist political sense at all:

A turn to corporeal materiality would turn flesh into dust if it fully dispelled ineffability, the irreducible otherness in all bodies, the indeterminacy of becoming flesh. Writing flesh requires language attuned to silences, disruptions, opacity, and to the complex qualities of sensation. Since flesh is always becoming, since it envelops and exceeds each one of our bodies, since our expressions emerge from it, writing flesh should be a poetics. This implies not only a style of writing, but also a recognition of the limits of our knowledge and appreciation for the imaginative dimensions of thought....We pray that our bodies may keep us open to others, to sense the entanglements of our carnal relations.<sup>238</sup>

As I ceded in my analysis of Butler's work, I don't think describing this push and pull of the process of materialization is *wrong* in the sense of it not being 'true', but I am critical of calling it feminist or political in any sense, as those terms imply there is critique involved. As for the re-theorization of materialism in this work, where has it led us in this regard? Much like the ebbs and flows of Grosz' reformulations of boundaries, what does the exertion of materiality achieve critically? What I see as its central focus of critique is the 'old' struggle to undo the harms of dualisms for marginalized bodies who serve to carry the abject terms of that binary. What I don't see are any *new* problems calling for *new* ethics and *new* methods after making arguments for why other existing critical frameworks have been surpassed. Perhaps, despite positioning it otherwise, this is not a critical project and, as I proposed at the start, it is merely a descriptive project seeking to philosophize how to describe humans in the world. From the standpoint of my thesis, this framework lacks the capacity to critique structural power relations, even as it can describe them and the process by which they mark and marginalize bodies as

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<sup>238</sup> *Poetics*, pg. 158.

different and emphasize the real material consequences of doing so. Its locus in rearticulations of materiality and the materialization of bodies-- for Rivera in the terms of carnality, flesh, and the co-constitutive--reorients the very axes of its query from one of concern about how bodies are located to how we might think about matter. There is no real critical focus on challenging oppressive structures and liberating oppressed people. There is only the rhetoric of that implied feminist concern, restated, inserted, referred to, but unanswered.

#### **iv. The Materiality of Violence**

An alternative to a new materialist approach in feminist theological work centered on the body comes from Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite in her recent work *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*.<sup>239</sup> In her critique of western theories of war and peace, Thistlethwaite's motivating concern is not with the nature of the materiality of bodies, but with the material consequences of endless war on the bodies of women. In response to other body focused theologies, she argues that the nature of embodiment and the body/soul dualism is not the problem.<sup>240</sup> Rather, the existential crisis of the human condition is violence and her particular concern in this book is the unequal exposure to violence that women's bodies of all classes, races, nationalities and religions experience.

Thistlethwaite argues that the legacies of western philosophy – the desire for power, hierarchical authority structures, and contempt for the body-- provide a model for war and that war is a model for violence against women and that the two are mutually

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<sup>239</sup> Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks. *Women's Bodies as Battlefield. Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015). Henceforth I will refer to this citation as *Battlefield*.

<sup>240</sup> *Battlefield*, pg.3.

reinforcing. Though she claims the body “as injured, in pain, and killed” as a starting place, she also insists that physicality cannot be the *only* starting point;

There is a real risk that if we witness to all these forms of violence equally, we will not actually see the very different forces that act so that certain bodies are made available to certain forms of violence in certain ways and at certain times.<sup>241</sup>

While staying with ‘the injuring of bodies’ as the focus for an analysis of how violence operates through structures of domination, Thistlethwaite does not want to collapse ‘the body’ or “women’s bodies” into one abstraction. To insure that this ballast against reifying the category of body does not fall away, she introduces the term ‘critical physicality’ where ‘critical’ represents the centrality of critical theory for insuring different women’s contexts are never ignored even as physicality itself is the focus.

There must always be a dynamic tension between the particulars of the social construction of bodies in western culture and the sustained analysis of what this construction means in terms of the widespread acceptance, even valoration, of forms of violence.<sup>242</sup>

While I will not take on the entirety of Thistlethwaite’s argument or her rearticulation of a theory of Just Peace in this section, I do want to highlight the critical framework she crafts to make her argument, which specifically addresses the kinds of critical lapses I have pointed to in the frameworks adopted by other feminist theorists and theologians’ work on body. First and foremost, Thistlethwaite critiques the Just Peace frame in its liberal Christian form as lacking a sustained analysis of power and hierarchy that then obscures its complicity in structural forms of violence, and understands violence

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<sup>241</sup> *Battlefield*, pg.4.

<sup>242</sup> *Battlefield*, pg.6.

as aberrant to its traditions rather than foundational.<sup>243</sup> She proposes the centering of ‘critical physicality’ as a theological intervention, one that shifts the focus of the

Christian theological and ethical task to ending war and specifically the war on women:

A critical physicality approach to Christian theology can help construct theologies of peacemaking that are more fully engaged with what actually drives violence. This is a method anchored in the reality of the pain inflicted on the body while this reality is constantly subject to the reflection of critical theory and an engaged practice to prevent or reduce violence. It is a circular movement that starts with the body and returns to the body but asks critical questions regarding the contexts of specific bodies in specific social arrangements and continuously digs down to make crucial connections and to work for change.<sup>244</sup>

The ‘circular movement’ of Thistlethwaite’s critical physicality performs a host of critical services in 1.) Highlighting the operations of structures of domination and oppression, 2.) Addressing the specific context within which persons are differently impacted by the violence enacted through these structures, 3.) Emphasizing the reality of very specific forms of oppression against women without collapsing the breadth of experiences in that category into one specified only by gender and 4.) Keeping the material violence visited on marginalized bodies at the center of theology’s concern. Thistlethwaite is not naïve about ‘the body’ getting in the way of keeping some of these critical insights front and center and is very deliberate about guarding against it:

It is thus not enough to ‘put the body’ at the center of peace-making approaches. Reclaiming the centrality of the physical is only one correction needed. The deeply embedded mechanisms of hierarchy – especially hierarchies of gender and race – facilitate power inequalities and subordination. These need to be constantly exposed through critical reflection and rejected through changed practice. In this way *a more complex notion of embodiment can emerge*.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *Battlefield*, pg. 168.

<sup>244</sup> *Battlefield*, pg. 169.

<sup>245</sup> *Battlefield*, pg. 170

Among (white) feminist theologians of the body, Thistlethwaite is unique for both positing the body at the center of her theological project, maintaining awareness of its seductive qualities as a rubric for containing theory, and specifically building her critical framework out of this awareness. In this way she is able to focus on the materiality of bodies and their vulnerability to violence within structures of domination in a quite different way than her “new materialist” colleagues. Thistlethwaite’s rationale for centering the body in Christian theology in essence stems from her belief that in doing so, and exposing the violence that we see visited there, we keep ourselves honest about structures of domination – the material reality of their concentrations of power, the force of the rhetorics they produce which normalize violence against certain kinds of bodies, and the physical and psychological injury and death exacted by their force. In this formulation ‘the body’ as a category of analysis functions more as a critical tool which hones our focus, but does not contain that focus. A tool is less prone to being essentialized as it implies an active state of critique. As such her approach is more in keeping with the kind of analysis emerging from (the old) feminist materialism, the heuristic of intersectionality, and structural rhetorical analysis, which I turn to in the next and last chapter.

As introduced at various junctures in this dissertation, my own proposed critical framework is structural rhetorical analysis that has the capacity to take account of both individual experiences of oppression based on how one’s body is marked as different, group oppression based on difference, and the interaction of those marked bodies with the structures of domination which produce, hierarchically organize, police, and reproduce the categories of difference which mark bodies. Central to this critical framework is an



understanding of *intersectionality* – the mutual and co-constitution of identities that mark bodies like race, gender, class, and sexuality. Though Rivera’s work gestures to the dynamic of co-constitutive materialization, it does not seem to impact the parameters or direction of her body project in political terms. In my next chapter, I will explore the power of intersectionality as a critical political approach, particularly as it reorients feminist body projects into the terms of structural oppression rather than seated in individual bodies.

## Chapter IV

### The Difference Intersectionality Makes

#### i. Intersectional Analysis as Structural Analysis

Having looked at the limitations of using gender, sexual difference, or materiality as a critical framework for articulating a politics of the body, I will now take up an important analytic tool first articulated within black feminist thought-- the concept of Intersectionality<sup>246</sup>. In the corporeal works I have attended to thus far, the motivation for using the body as a starting place for political programs has had much to do with redressing harm done to specific kinds of bodies deemed less valuable within hierarchically dualistic and patriarchal structures of domination. In each case, feminist theorists and theologians have (ostensibly) sought to theorize the body in ways that open up the possibility for agency, resistance, critique of hegemonic structures, and reimaginings of a more just and equal society. However, as I have tried to show, it has mattered a great deal which critical frameworks have been brought to this task as to whether the political goals of these projects seated in the body have been realized in a meaningful way.

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<sup>246</sup> This term was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, a black feminist legal scholar, and entails “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually multiplicative vectors of race, gender, class, sexuality and imperialism,” in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, p. 1241. In this chapter I will mostly be relying on Patricia Hill Collins articulation of it, however, in her works *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Routledge, 2008) and *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

What I have suggested thus far about *why* this is the case hinges on the argument that a focus on the body very often directs attention *away* from structures of domination-- the structures which both produce the content of categories of difference that mark bodies, and organizes their hierarchical and marginalized relations relative to an unmarked 'norm' and to one another. I have advocated instead for a framework which can more readily identify the operations of structural power and expose how the differences that marginalize bodies do not inhere 'in' bodies as essential qualities and identities, but are rhetorically produced, materialized through the interaction of individual subjects with these rhetorical and material structures, and always negotiated within this kyriarchal structural frame. I have referred to this alternative as a structural rhetorical method of analysis after feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza.<sup>247</sup>

The critiques I have brought to the sex/gender, psychoanalytic and to some extent postmodern, and new materialist frameworks thus far have suggested to me that starting *with* the body has not turned out to be as productive and liberating a strategy as feminists across the disciplinary spectrum have proposed. Central to my argument about critical frameworks as they work through the body is an attention to both the theories of

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<sup>247</sup> This framework is forged in her feminist theology, an endeavor she defines by its commitment to unmasking structures of domination within Kyriarchy. Kyriarchy is a term she uses instead of Patriarchy to signal that within the structures of domination there are many intersecting vectors of oppression (not just gender) – and oppression is thus experienced intersectionally by subjects who have multiple identities. How subjects get located rhetorically according to those identities within kyriarchal structures of domination is what the work of a structural rhetorical analysis unmasks and denaturalizes. This denaturalization of hegemonic power is accomplished structurally and linguistically in this method and as such goes a long way towards disrupting more essentialist notions of identity as inhering 'in' subjects. A conception of identity categories as inhering 'in' individuals deploys a theorization of the autonomous liberal individual that relocates responsibility for marginalization in an individual's failings. The structural aspect of this framework insures that structures of domination are always kept in view as part of any analysis.

difference that are proposed or implied as part of those frameworks, and the theorization of power that animates them. Both, I argue, are critical and interdependent components to understanding and articulating the structural rhetorical operations of power. It is with that in mind, then, that I turn to the notion of *intersectionality* in this chapter to explore how it impacts the political potential of the body as a potent site for liberative feminist praxis.

Though intersectionality may be employed as a theory of marginalized subjects, a theory of identity, or a theory of the matrix of oppressions, I draw from Patricia Hill Collins articulations of it as primarily a critical *practice*. She describes it as follows:

When examining structural power relations, intersectionality functions better as a conceptual framework or heuristic device describing what kinds of things to consider than as one describing any actual patterns of social organization...intersectionality provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group's experience across specific social contexts.

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I also want to attend to it in this chapter specifically to address Black feminist and Womanist thinkers who work on the body, not because white feminists don't employ intersectionality--Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza being a case in point--but because white feminists haven't used it in their works *on the body*. In my immersion in an interdisciplinary study of feminist work on the body it has, in fact, been a theoretically telling aspect of that work and a point at which I would like to introduce a critique and later advance an argument about the larger endeavor to produce political critique out of the body.

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<sup>248</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pg. 208. Henceforth, I will refer to this book as *Fighting Words*.

The introduction of intersectionality may also be understood as a Black feminist critique of the structural racism of the Academy. As more marginalized voices have come to the table, intersectional analysis has proved to be an impactful interruption to both the focus and critical approaches taken up within ongoing theoretical conversations, feminist and otherwise. Like feminist theory and theology, Black feminist critique has sought to unmask structures of domination by identifying and denaturalizing the center of power as white and male and by redefining the terms of knowledge production to include Black women's' experience. But where many white feminist theorists and theologians struggled to center "women's' experience" as a basis for knowledge in their new epistemologies, black women struggled with the choice of having to identify race OR gender as their most salient experience of oppression.

The sex/gender framework and its critique of patriarchal domination lacked the nuance to theorize the experience of multiple and co-constitutive oppressions with its primary focus on gender. And as we have seen in the critiques I have advanced in previous chapters, other dominant frameworks in the academy also lacked the means to account for the experience of the dual oppression of race and gender or the dynamic relationship of structural racism and the racialized subject or group. The psychoanalytic framework with its focus on the productive site of sexual difference as paradigmatic of all difference and its focus on the structures of the unconscious as its domain of analysis lacked the terminology or power analysis to articulate the specific nature of racial oppression in social and structural terms. The more deconstructionist (postmodern) manifestations of psychoanalysis tended toward a decoupling of difference from its moorings in hierarchical power relations, rendering it largely ineffectual as a tool for

unmasking structural racism. The new materialist frame in contradistinction to feminist materialist critique decoupled material relations entirely from structural power analysis (despite lip service to the contrary) and instead turned to ruminations on the status of matter itself and human relation to *it*. None of these critical frameworks proved suitable for articulating the specificity of Black women's experiences of oppression.

As neither authored by nor intended to include black women, despite some gestures to the contrary, they reflect only the experience and interests of their origins. As Black women scholars began and continue to theorize their *own* epistemologies, they are characterized not only by an insistence on centering their own experience and wisdom, but by a vigilant focus on structures of domination and the forms of activism generated by and in response to both. Angela Davis, bell hooks, Katie Canon, and Patricia Hill Collins, among others, have articulated versions of this *matrix of domination* and profoundly changed the landscape of theory and praxis in feminist theory and theology. In response to both liberation theologies' privileging of the oppressed and feminist theory's ranking of oppressions, Collins describes the structure and function of intersectionality as follows:

Embracing a both/and conceptual stance moves us from additive, separate system approaches to oppression and toward what I now see as the more fundamental issues of the social relations of domination. Race, class and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize Black women's experience within a more generalized matrix of domination. Other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix such as sexual orientation, religion, and age, but the overarching relationship is one of domination and the types of activism it generates.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Routledge, 2008), pg. 226. Henceforth I will site this reference as *Black Feminist Thought*.

This is one of very few critical frameworks to explicitly connect operations of difference and the operations of power through attention to structures of domination in relation to both group and individual identity<sup>250</sup>. As such it provides critical insight and tools for addressing some of the common blind spots of feminist politics that develop theory from the standpoint of subjugated knowledges.

The charge of a reductionist, totalizing and/or flattening essentialism of group identity politics has troubled feminist theory and theologies, critical race studies, post-colonial studies and other group-based oppositional politics that identify as the marginalized ‘others’ of the liberal male subject/citizen.<sup>251</sup> Social groups as theorized in the framework of intersectionality are forged out of the dynamic and contextual interaction of structures of domination with individuals located within and by those structures, producing the critical benefit of simultaneously particularizing the subject, and showing how that subject is constrained by outside forces. In so doing, intersectional analysis demonstrates that group identity is not ‘real’ in the sense of determined by qualities that inhere ‘in’ its members, but rather shaped by relations of domination. In the example of race, Collins illustrates this as follows:

For example, for the vast majority of the population in the United States, race creates immutable group identities. Individuals cannot simply opt in or out of

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<sup>250</sup> As I described above, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s structural rhetorical analysis also self-consciously does this and it is that framework I have in mind as I advance my critiques throughout the thesis.

<sup>251</sup> In terms of charges of essentialism in theologies, this has come not only in the forms I outlined earlier in my discussion of Eros and Goddess Theology, but also in the abstract oppressed ‘other’ of Liberation Theology and Black Liberation Theology. In feminist theory, biological essentialism shows up in work that attempts to theorize ‘women’ as a class of persons, in arguments for women as a source for special knowledges that arise from their unique biologies or psychologies, as well as in postcolonial articulations of the subaltern.

racial groups, because race is constructed by assigning bodies meaningful racial classifications.<sup>252</sup>

The experience of the *individual* Black woman can also be accounted for and exhibit agency to enact a specific identity *within* that group:

Within the framework provided by their historically constituted group identity, how individual Black women construct their identities varies tremendously. However, it also occurs in response to the shared challenges that all Black women encounter.<sup>253</sup>

Because within the framework of intersectionality all categories of analysis are historicized, particular, contextual and most importantly, *always articulated in relationship to structures of domination*, what remains in view is the dynamic, interdependent, and co-constitutive nature of the interactions of power and difference:

Within unjust power relations, groups remain unequal in the powers of self-definition and self-determination. Race, class, gender, and other markers of power intersect to produce social institutions that, in turn, construct groups that become defined by these characteristics. Since some groups define and rule others, groups are hierarchically related to one another. Within this overarching hierarchical structure, the ways in which individuals find themselves to be members of groups in group-based power relations matters.<sup>254</sup>

In this articulation, we see explicitly *how* the tool of intersectional analysis in its most robust form does A LOT of critical work to de-essentialize categories of analysis (of individual experience, group identity, the nature of power, race, gender, class, and even

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<sup>252</sup> Collins notes that gender marks the body in a similar fashion and uses the example of racial and gender “passing” (when blacks pass as white and women pass as men) to note that this kind of transgressing of boundaries and the strength of those performances reveals how classification are not *rooted in nature* but rather in *power relations*. However, she is not particularly hopeful that such acts, theorized as a new transgressive politics, are all that effective as a program for change (one may think of Butler’s theory of performativity or Grosz’ optimism about the disruptive role of non-binary articulations of the body). See *Fighting Words*, pg, 269.

<sup>253</sup> *Fighting Words*,pg. 204.

<sup>254</sup> *Fighting Words*, pg. 204.



*bodies*). This is important especially because these categories of analysis are required by many of the critical strategies that have enabled subjugated knowledges to disrupt hegemonic power and knowledge in the first place. Intersectionality, viewed as a practice rather than a theory with a specific content, is in its very nature *strategic* and *non-essentialist*. It is adaptable and amenable to deploying the parts of other critical frameworks with the most utility for its own critical ends.

## ii. Intersectional Adaptations

From postmodern theory, intersectionality adapts its main rubrics of Decentering, Deconstruction and Difference, understood as *orienting strategies* whose practices have different uses given an individuals' location in hierarchical power relations. Deployed from the center of power, *Decentering's* center/margin metaphor combined with a more dispersed and non-hierarchical understanding of power relations, flattens the geography of centers and margins and, decontextualized in this way, becomes an abstract concept immersed in representations, texts, and intertextuality.<sup>255</sup> From within an *intersectional* framework, Decentering operates as a strategy for unseating those who occupy centers of power as well as the knowledge that defends that power and marginality operates as an important site of resistance for decentering unjust power relations and generating powerful oppositional knowledges.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> In her chapter entitled "What's Going on? Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Postmodernism" Collins provides a thoroughgoing critique of postmodern thought, *Fighting Words*, pgs. 124-154.

<sup>256</sup> See Collins' chapter "Towards an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology" in *Black Feminist Thought*, pgs.201-220.

*Deconstruction* and its methodologies dislodge and denaturalize hegemonic knowledge and the rules used to justify knowledge. Dismantling notions of subjectivity, tradition and authority, this method of critique displaces hegemony's binary terms of logic with more fluid conceptual organizations of terms as its form of political resistance in the hopes that by disallowing the illusion of the fixity of *any* of our categories of knowledge, we might evoke new ways of being. From within an intersectional framework, a deconstruction of the (academic) canon opens up space for subjugated knowledge to be legitimated *as* knowledge where they have previously been excluded.<sup>257</sup>

The politics of difference as articulated within postmodern theory disrupts the logic of binaries and celebrates a proliferation of difference produced along a flattened plain of socially constructed representations or as an internalized play within individual identity. Deployed within the frame of Intersectionality, differences organized along the binary to produce a series of oppositional others are moored in hierarchical power structures of race, sex, and gender and (different) subjects are constituted by the fusion of these multiple identities to determines one's overall place in a hierarchy.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Beyond this opening, however, deconstruction as a set of methodologies leaves much to be desired as a means of disrupting oppressive power structures from the point of view of marginalized subjects/groups located by those structures. For one, since deconstruction rejects the fixity required to make any concrete knowledge claims of consequence outside of a strategy of continual disruption, it undermines the possibility for advancing grander theories of oppression such as institutionalized racism, feminist theories of gender subjugation, or Marxist theories of class exploitation. As a method of critique rather than a program of politics, it is unable to construct alternative explanations for social phenomena suitable for guiding political action. Finally, in dismantling notions of authority, tradition and subjectivity, deconstruction undermines the very grounds upon which marginalized groups have staked a claim to their (historically marginalized) subjectivity, their authority as subjects to speak, and the foundation upon which they might stake any concrete knowledge claims about the nature of oppression in history and culture.

<sup>258</sup> Admittedly, these characterizations of postmodernisms' positions on decentering,

The simultaneous critique of postmodern theory's limitations for the analysis of hierarchical power structures and the adaption of useful elements of the framework within an intersectional heuristic, make clear how potentially radical critiques can easily be depoliticized as they are decontextualized and wielded by those at the center of power. With regards to postmodernism in particular, its identity as an academic theory, articulated in highly specialized language, and devoid of any structural analyses of power, undercuts its usefulness or effectiveness as a radically disruptive hermeneutic. In the words of Cornel West:

...The Academy feeds on critiques of its own paradigms. These critiques simultaneously legitimate the Academy and empty out the more political and worldly substance of radical critiques.<sup>259</sup>

Intersectionality also selectively borrows from Liberal and Marxist critical frameworks in its construction of a more historicized, situated, but embedded concept of the individual, and a historicized and more complex notion of class. In Collins' intersectional articulation of class, she extends the concept beyond approaches that attribute economic outcomes to economic causes and argues that understanding classes

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deconstruction, and difference are to some degree reductive. Since I am not writing a thesis about postmodern thought, I do not have the luxury of charting the full range of its auteurs here. As a critical framework, however, I would argue that with regard to each of these concepts in postmodern thought, given the current context, they are not likely to pose any significant threat to centers of power, which speaks volumes about postmodernity's usefulness to marginalized groups whose goal is to contest those powers. As put by Patricia Hill Collins, "Despite the surface validity of constructionist approaches to identity that emphasize not only individual differences, but also differences within individuals, this approach erases structural power" (*Fighting Words*, 149). In other words, the theory isn't WRONG per se, it's just not helpful given how humans actually live on the daily and considering the role those structures of power play in our locations as individuals.

<sup>259</sup> West, Cornel, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pg. 41.

whose economic ‘conditions of existence’ distinguish them from other groups requires situating those groups in the specific history of their society:

Rather than starting with a theory of how capitalist economies predetermine economic classes, analysis *begins* with how social groupings are actually organized within historically specific capitalist political economies. Class categories are constructed from the actual cultural material of historically specific societies.<sup>260</sup>

Within an intersectional frame, there is no way to understand class in the U.S. context without accounting for the fundamental role that slavery played in the development of American capitalism. Class is a complex, cultural phenomena determined by historical context and shaped by social hierarchies that produce pronounced economic inequalities among groups. Though the hierarchical structural relations of a given historical period or nation-state may shift the specific parameters that define a group, the one constant that class describes is relationships among social groups unequal in power and set in opposition to one another. In the U.S. context, examining class through an intersectional lens in which it is mutually constituted with race reveals that, despite the strong rhetoric of individualism associated with American classical liberalism, it turns out to be a profoundly group-oriented society.<sup>261</sup>

This brings us to the theorization of the individual in intersectional analysis and its adaptations of the liberal framework. This is particularly important overall to my thesis argument about the relative usefulness of the body as an analytic category within

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<sup>260</sup> *Fighting Words*, pg. 213.

<sup>261</sup> Iris Marion Young does a thorough analysis and critique of how the liberal paradigm of distributive justice occludes the possibility of theorizing oppression as structural, of groups as oppressed, or of individuals as having unequal power. See her path-breaking book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton University Press, 1990).

which to articulate and advance a liberatory politics. As I suggested at the start of this chapter, intersectionality and the way it is deployed in Black feminist writing *about* the body provides an alternative strategy for addressing the harm done to marginalized bodies without getting mired in some of the theoretical traps inherent in theorizing *out of* the body. In articulating an analysis of individual agency within structures of domination that locate bodies hierarchically, we are given a glimpse of a politics of resistance that comprehensively lays out 1.) A concern for the preservation and valuation of different bodies, 2.) Challenges to structures of dualism, and 3.) An accounting of the weight of the cultural-political formations of oppressive structural power. I will return to this argument when I delve into the specific texts I treat later in this chapter.

With respect to an intersectional understanding of the individual, I again turn to Collins as a guide. She suggests that there is an easy affinity between the intersectional construct and issues of individual agency and subjectivity since individuals can more readily see intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality in how they construct their identities *as individuals* than in how social institutions rely on these same ideas in reproducing group identities. In the American context where liberal individualism in the social sphere reigns supreme, this compatibility can run the danger of elevating individualism above group analyses, losing sight of how structures of domination shape and delimit the individual. I find Iris Marion Young's demystifying of the liberal ideal of the impartial individual helpful here:

The ideal of impartiality in (liberal) moral theory expresses a logic of identity that seeks to reduce difference to unity. The stance of detachment and dispassion that supposedly produce impartiality are obtained only by abstracting from the particularities of situation, feeling, affiliation, and point of view...and serves ideological functions. It masks the ways in which the particular

perspectives of dominant groups claim universality and help justify hierarchal decision-making structures.<sup>262</sup>

Liberal individualistic models define freedom as “the absence of constraints” even in the case of mandatory group memberships (like race, gender, class). This notion of the individual includes an assumption of mobility, self-definition, and self-determination inconsistent with the kinds of constraints structurally defined group identities impose in the public sphere brought to light as part of an intersectional analysis. When identity markers are defined as ‘personal attributes’ and participation in them is construed as a free ‘choice’, difference is seen as inhering ‘in’ persons and as a result those who suffer from oppression and exclusion are seen as responsible for their own condition (and location) in society. What intersectionality brings to this analysis is an attention to relations of domination and an understanding that overarching structures of oppression are *in fact* the forces that hierarchically locate persons relative to one another, not inherent attributes or choice. The differences that separate us and bring us together are characterized by *relationships of power*.

### **iii. Black Feminism and the Black Body**

I want to turn now to the work of black feminist Dorothy Roberts, author of *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*.<sup>263</sup> Though her work in critical race studies has impacted many fields, I am using her work here as one

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<sup>262</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pg.39.

<sup>263</sup> Roberts, Dorothy E., *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (Vintage Books, 2017). See also her related works: *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, (Civitas Books, 2002), and most recently *Fatal Interventions: How Science, Politics and Big Business Reproduce Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New Press, 2012).

focused specifically on black female bodies. As a trailblazer in critical race studies for her focus on Black *women* specifically, 20 years since the publication of *Killing the Black Body* her analysis and approach has become paradigmatic in a field now (happily) populated by many black feminist scholars and scholar-activists.<sup>264</sup> I look to her book *Killing the Black Body* in the analysis that follows<sup>265</sup>.

Recently reissued on its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and with a new preface by Roberts, her update to this path-breaking work is to report that, sadly, conditions she described about

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<sup>264</sup> To name just a few from across many genres and disciplines: Keeanga-Yamahtta-Taylor, Bettye Collier Thomas, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Brittney Cooper, Tamara Lomax, Roxanne Gay, Morgan Jerkins, Charlene Carruthers, and Sonya Renee Taylor.

<sup>265</sup> My rationale for focusing on this work rather than her more recent works, beyond the fact that the historical content and analysis is still very relevant, has to do with her specific use of the rubric of ‘the body’ to focus this project. I want to use this example to make an argument within the broader critique of my thesis about how a focus on the body, when taken up within the heuristic of intersectionality, yields different political analyses and conclusions and, in fact, ends up decentering “the body” as a necessarily productive ‘site’ for addressing the harms lived by marginalized bodies. Though not exclusive to Black feminist analysis, I would argue that particularly in contra-distinction to frameworks often used to focus the body in such projects (sex/gender and theories of sexuality, psychoanalytic, postmodern and materialist), Black feminist articulations of ‘body studies’ within the intersectional framework help to demonstrate how profoundly the inclusion of race and class alters the entire rationale and endeavor of ‘rearticulating’ the body as a means of challenging structures of oppression. I point this out to explain the rationale in structuring my thesis argument and its sources in this way and to convey that I am not arguing that “all white feminists” do it wrong and that Black feminists provide ‘the answer’ to the problem I have articulated about using the body to produce liberatory theory. Rather, having been immersed in ‘body studies’ for so long, I have found that it is *more likely* that Black feminists who specifically take up ‘the body’ in their analyses and critique will apply an intersectional lens where white feminists *tend* to adopt other more gender-focused frameworks. The key to this softer argument is that those white feminists who use intersectionality and structural analysis also tend NOT to see the body as a useful or productive place from which to articulate a politics of resistance to structures of oppression and are thus not the focus of my analysis in this thesis. I DO adopt the rhetorical critical analyses of feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza who uses the intersectional heuristic in all of her feminist analysis of structures of oppression and re-imaginings of the Ekklesia and Kosmopolis of Wo/men. She does not, however, consider the rubric of the body a helpful focus for that analysis. I am deeply indebted to her work and that of Roberts specifically for helping me articulate my unease with feminist work on the body in productive critical terms.

black women's bodies and reproductive health in American society have actually gotten *worse* in the intervening years. The dynamics of social control, degradation, and oppression Roberts traced from the history of slavery to present day struggles in the (largely white) reproductive rights movement, have actually taken on more pernicious forms of controlling the bodies of black women. In the new edition of her book, she connects a history of criminalizing pregnant black women to new legislative developments cast in the terms of protecting the rights of the fetus.<sup>266</sup> Though these laws affect all women's access to reproductive healthcare on the surface, Robert's intersectional analysis of the differential impact class and race add to black women's persecution under these laws and her argument for the expansion of the notion of reproductive *rights* to reproductive *justice*, guide her analysis of the particular plight of the black female body in US culture.

The question that animates the work of *Killing the Black Body* is posed by Roberts as follows:

If Americans' reproductive decisions are protected by the Constitution, how is it possible that Black women's reproduction has been subjected to so much degradation and intrusion?

Her question immediately locates the problematic erasure of black women in the liberal framework where the notion of reproductive 'freedom' is superimposed on an already unjust social structure. As I argued in the comparison of intersectionality to the liberal framework above, in a liberal formulation, liberty ostensibly guards its citizens, in this

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<sup>266</sup> Further, Roberts reflects in her new preface that since publishing her work on the assault on black women's childbearing and how it has shaped the meaning of reproductive freedom in America, her new works on welfare, prison, and the foster care systems connect seamlessly in a larger critique of the entire white supremacist, patriarchal and capitalist U.S. political order in a neoliberal age.



case, from government intrusion, but it does not guarantee social justice. Rather, *who* is centered as ‘citizen’ has everything to do with a differential application of those ‘protections’ (and rights) within the public sphere. In the liberal framework, government ‘neutrality’ conceals the racist origins of social practices that do not ‘overtly’ discriminate on the basis of race, but ignore the impact on public policy of a long history of degrading mythology about black women’s motherhood and reproduction. In fact, the liberal framework outside of the intersectional heuristic is not capable of taking into account the background social conditions that constrain the decision-making of black women, *in particular* when it comes to reproduction.

Roberts brings the heuristic of intersectionality to her systematic documentation of the history of Black women’s marginalization to uncover the presumptions and omissions of the liberal framework in relation to that history. What she exposes in the process leads to her argument that the foundational structure of racism in American history has corrupted the very conception of procreative liberty in contemporary feminist movements. By *not* approaching reproductive history with an intersectional lens, feminists in the ‘pro-choice’ movement (predominately white middle-class women) have articulated procreative liberty in terms of reproductive “rights” (within a liberal framework) and as a universal ‘*women’s*’ issue (within the sex/gender framework). On both fronts, they have not taken into account the social hierarchies that deny Black women and poor women the ability to be self-determining, and as a result, have not included a challenge to those structures and conditions as part of a movement for reproductive freedom.

Bringing the intersections of race and class to the center of an analysis of reproduction exposes the poverty of a conception of liberty in negative terms (free from constraints) in the absence of an analysis of oppressive structures. As Black women's struggle against the most degrading repression has been left out of the official story of reproductive rights in America, so too has a more radical vision of reproductive *justice*. The effect of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women in American society demands a rearticulation of liberty through a lens of social justice, which includes the impetus to eradicate oppressive structures. By reorienting power analysis to one that remains focused on the operations of power within structures of domination, we understand that "reproductive freedom is a matter of social justice, not individual choice."

#### **iv. Abortion Rights vs. Reproductive Justice**

Roberts begins her inquiry into the particular history of black female bodies with slavery and the story of how this profoundly dehumanizing experience of reproduction in bondage marked the understanding and position of black women's bodies and humanity in American culture henceforth. Deliberately including the brutality and dehumanizing effect of slavery not only on Black women's self-understanding, but as the source of powerful cultural ideas that circulate about their humanity, sexuality, womanhood, and motherhood is a hallmark in Black feminist writing and critical to understanding the omission of theorizing racial difference in feminist critical work that does not attend to intersectionality.<sup>267</sup> As Roberts centers the history of racism and racial ideology in her

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<sup>267</sup> I have at times wondered whether women's white privilege that locates us *within* the liberal framework, even if subjugated there, has made it easier for us to gloss over this fundamental contradiction at the foundation of a liberal conception of the human/human

story of reproductive freedom in the U.S., she explodes the liberal framework, which cannot contain the wound of slavery.<sup>268</sup> In documenting the relationship between house slaves and their white mistresses, she also exposes how inextricably bound up race and gender are in the U.S context, *particularly* as it relates to an understanding of bodies.

As I suggested in my discussion of both Eros theology and Goddess Theology in Chapter 1, the focus on the body as a source for recovering and redeeming aspects of the Feminine and femaleness is fraught for black women because of this history.<sup>269</sup> I understand Roberts' focus on the black female body, theorized through an intersectional lens, as representing a shift in the role 'the body' plays within her critical framework-- from serving as an analytic category, to enfleshing a specific form of oppressions.<sup>270</sup> Within the larger frame of my thesis, this shift demonstrates a critical path for addressing the harms done to marginalized bodies, which does not require one to theorize from *within* the body. In so doing, many of the dangers inherent to such body projects are avoided.

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rights. Many of the frameworks favored among white feminist theorists tend towards the ahistorical, the psychological, the linguistic, and the essentialist, which might be considered a luxury given the experience of black women in U.S. history.

<sup>268</sup> The specificity of racial history in the United States is such a foundational part of black criticality that, I would argue, it disallows omission of the consequences for black humanity which are profoundly disorienting to many frameworks of critical thought.

<sup>269</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite makes this poignant argument in her book *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White*, (Crossroad 1989). As I argued in chapter 3, Thistlethwaite's most recent work, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* is also a good example of alternative uses of critical frameworks for addressing marginalized bodies that do not occlude the structures of domination which put certain bodies in harms way.

<sup>270</sup> In a discussion of Shawn Copeland's work *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Fortress Press, 2010) further on in this chapter, I will map how her theological rubric of 'enfleshing' freedom differs in important ways from Maya Rivera's use of the 'poetics of flesh'.

Black women's bodies in slavery were not only deprived of any sexual autonomy, but their reproductive capacity, rather than having a relationship to maternity and motherhood, was valued as an economic boon to slave-owners who had the means to multiply their property and expand their economic undertakings. This tragic violation of black women's procreative lives is at the heart of a long history of exploitation, devaluation and social control that Roberts traces to the Emancipation Era, when birth control advocates and eugenicists targeted black women for what was conceived of within racist tropes of the black female body as their *hyper fertility*. Roberts asserts that contrary to the emblem of reproductive liberty that birth control has been for privileged white women, a consideration of race as part of an intersectional analysis completely changes its significance. She identifies the racism embedded at the inception of organizations like Planned Parenthood, whose dissemination of birth control was hinged partly in its appeal to Eugenicists' bent on curtailing the birthrates of the 'unfit', among whom black women were included. For almost a third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, government sponsored family planning programs encourage black women to use birth control and coerced them into being sterilized.<sup>271</sup>

These policies take place in the context of an ideology about black women's bodies that emerged during slavery in conjunction with efforts to contain (privileged) white women in the private sphere of the home as 'angels of the hearth'. White women, figured as the pure, chaste, and civilizing mothers of the upper class, rely on this stereotype to maintain their privilege and distance themselves from the 'other' women on

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<sup>271</sup> Roberts sees the eugenicist impulse to curb black women's fertility as the flip side of slave owners' exploitation of that fertility for their own economic gain. In both cases, black women's childbearing was regulated to achieve social objectives. *Killing the Black Body*, pg.56.

the plantation, their *abject* other.<sup>272</sup> Black slave women were depicted as immoral, animalistic, and sexually licentious, their motherhood, by default, construed as aberrant. Black slave mothers were often blamed for the mortality of their own infants whose deaths were attributed to the inattention, laziness, and general disregard born of that aberrance – all in contrast to the doting, chaste, and civilizing white lady of the house. In reality, black slave women’s children died as a result of the inhumane conditions of slavery. As Roberts goes on to document, it is this cultural strategy deployed relentlessly and unequivocally through the ideology of Black women’s perverse sexuality and maternity that insures the preservation of class and race privilege in the history of the U.S. Within the powerfully normalizing framework of Liberal Individualism is crafted a long historical tactic of identifying the source of black women’s inferiority as a *character flaw*, placing blame for their oppression and marginalization in society squarely on their backs, foreclosing through redirection an analysis of racist, sexist, and classist structures of domination. Though the content of these racist stereotypes are flexible enough to accommodate changing historical and material conditions, the strategy is consistent – Black women do not meet the criteria of citizenship and thus do not deserve or receive the kind of liberty, dignity, protection, or respect imagined by the authors of the Constitution.

With her intersectional critique in hand, Roberts painstakingly traces the panoply of constraining and controlling policies that continue to degrade Black women’s reproductive choices through the lens of historical stereotypes like the Jezebel and the

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<sup>272</sup> Within industrializing cities in Europe, the same ideology of the Victorian Lady is played out most readily through class tropes and the degradation of working women who, by their participation in the public sphere, are de facto considered ‘available’ for sex outside of marital relation.

Immoral Black Mother, the Mammy and the Negligent Black Mother, the Castrating Matriarch and the Black Unwed Mother, the Welfare Queen and the Devious Black Mother – all of whose black female bodies transmit degeneracy, dependency, and poverty. The policies that enlist them take various forms: from the distribution of Norplant in black communities as a means of ‘addressing’ poverty, to law enforcement practices that penalize Black women for bearing a child, and welfare reform measures that cut off assistance for children born to welfare mothers. With the development of new reproductive technologies focused on the promotion of white middle and upper-class women’s fertility, Black women’s access is limited to surrogacy roles, which scarily resemble the structural circumstances of slavery<sup>273</sup>.

In the current day, the legal apparatus developed to criminalize pregnant Black women in the 80s has set the stage for a new and more widespread surge of *fetal harm* prosecutions, disproportionately imposed on black women. The extension of all these arms of the racist structures of domination takes place alongside a relentless passage of laws restricting access to abortion and, through the closure and defunding of free clinics,

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<sup>273</sup> As these technologies have continued to develop, Roberts has added a few more critiques to their deployment. One characterizes an apparent shift of responsibility for fertility and genetic health to the private sphere and onto women’s plates. In this scenario, those (white) women who do not maximize their fertility are being selfish, and poorer women who are already excluded from accessing fertility services are blamed if they do not responsibly abort fetus’ who exhibit genetic defects with the new technologies available. This arm of the state acts invisibly through what has (falsely) been constructed as the ‘private’ sphere of personal ‘choice’. In this case, there are BAD choices, and she suspects given the current climate of criminalization, that at some point these choices may have consequences meted out through more state sponsored regulation and control of black women’s bodies. She also argues that as middle class blacks have gained some access to IVF, the commodification of black sex cells has exhibited a new segregation of black and white donors and the marketing of black ‘traits’ has been commercialized in ways that mimic old hierarchies of identity. Jordan Peele’s film *Get Out* is a telling example of the kind of white fantasies about the desirability of selective black traits that Roberts sees playing out in the selection of donor material for IVF.

access to basic healthcare. The population disproportionately affected is poor Black women who are cash poor, face a host of structural barriers to accessing reproductive health services, and suffer from the highest rates of maternal mortality despite representing only 13% of the national population. Roberts' analysis of the pernicious operation of these structures of domination shows exactly how the black mother in U.S. culture is consistently cast as a problem to be solved due to her inherent degeneracy. Though that degeneracy is defined variously through different historical periods, the constant of this racist and sexist ideology is that *blame is placed on black mothers* for structural inequities, obscuring the need for radical social change to address the racist source of inequities at work.

As I introduced at the start of her work, the fruits of Roberts' intersectional analysis of the treatment of black female bodies in white supremacist U.S. culture calls for a broader *social justice* oriented framework for articulating the struggle for procreative freedom going forward. She concludes:

A Social Justice focus provides a concrete basis for building radical coalitions between reproductive rights activists and organizations fighting for racial, economic, and environmental justice, for immigrant, queer, and disabled people, and for systemic change in law enforcement, healthcare and education. True reproductive freedom requires a living wage, universal healthcare, and the abolition of prisons.<sup>274</sup>

She puts forward as a model of the connection between black feminist theory and black feminist activism the *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective*, who first gathered as a black caucus during a pro-choice conference in 1994.<sup>275</sup> It was there that the term “reproductive justice” was coined to describe a framework that

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<sup>274</sup> *Killing the Black Body*, 2017 edition, pg. xxi.

<sup>275</sup> For more detail on this see <http://www.sistersong.net>.

positions reproductive rights in a political context of intersecting race, gender and class oppressions. The caucus advanced that *only* through using such an intersectional frame could they recognize that their activism has to be linked to social justice organizing in order to gain the power, resources, and structural changes needed for improving the wellbeing of all women. *SisterSong* was founded in 1997 and pulled together a national coalition of 16 women of color health organizations to put the reproductive justice framework into action.

Roberts' work and those of many Black feminist scholars before and since, shows very clearly the difference an intersectional heuristic makes in projects concerned with the body and marks an important departure from the theoretical endeavors I have critiqued thus far in the thesis.<sup>276</sup> The most immediately observable shift is that nowhere in Roberts' analysis does she find herself stuck 'in' the body-- whether it be on its surfaces, through its flows, through the connection of the erotic energies of our deepest selves to another's deepest self, as part of an ontological ground, or as dispersed and fragmented within our body-selves. While these may only be metaphors generated within body-focused theory, as I have argued throughout this thesis, *metaphors can matter a great deal*. How the subject is characterized and situated to 'solve' a political problem and propose an alternative has a large impact on the parameters of any critical endeavor. As I proposed in my broader frame for critiquing body theory, discerning how the theorists and theologians I explore understand *difference* and how they understand the

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<sup>276</sup> A partial list of Black feminist and feminist theological work that has contributed to recovering and analyzing this history includes Patricia Hill Collins, Shawn Copeland, Katie Geneva Canon, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Beverly Harrison, Patricia Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, Emily Townes, bell hooks, Roxanne Gay and many others. Their relevant published works can be found in my bibliography, but are too numerous to be included here.



*workings of power* in their diagnosis of a problem and what is proposed for a path forward, is central to analyzing the capacity of any given framework. My critique has been animated by my own dissatisfaction with many body theorists who, despite having argued for the importance and relevance of starting in the body to address a particular problem, do not then meet the constructive goals of their own critique. It is my suspicion that this is due not only to the limitations of certain critical frameworks, but to make a stronger claim, I submit that a focus on the body as theoretical starting point is counter-productive to addressing the devaluation, violence, and marginalization visited on particular bodies.<sup>277</sup>

Dorothy Roberts' framework is representative of much of the work by Black feminists who take up 'the body' and is an instructive example of why it is not necessary to center 'the body' as an analytic category in order to address/redress the consequences of living in marginalized bodies. Though her book is titled *Killing the Black Body*, and she does deal very explicitly with the lived reality of Black women's bodies, her use of an intersectional analysis thoroughly invested in uncovering and challenging the structures of domination successfully accomplishes many of the critical goals identified (but perhaps not effectively addressed) by body studies/theorists: 1.) Critiques dualism and its *othering* dynamic, 2.) Unmasks the operation of power through hierarchical structures of domination, which create and enforce categories of difference, and 3.) Provides an avenue through which to theorize individual agency within those structures. Roberts denaturalizes the content of differences, while simultaneously unmasking the powerful interests that generate and deploy pervasive essentializing rhetorics of

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<sup>277</sup> The analysis I have made throughout this thesis based in a critique of frameworks is intended to buttress this argument.

difference that would have us believe their basis is seated *in* bodies. Her intersectional heuristic enables us to see *how* the production and deployment of dehumanizing rhetoric operates through racist, sexist and classist structures of domination. In so doing, her work achieves the political goals it sets for itself: it shows clearly how the foundational structure of racism in American history has corrupted the very conception of procreative liberty in contemporary feminist movements; it reveals how structures of domination operate to marginalize and essentialize different others; and it proposes a program of reproductive *justice* focused on transforming those structures through coalitional politics.

#### **v. The Intersectional Body in Theological Context**

The work of Black feminist theologian M. Shawn Copeland is another example of Black feminist writing drawn to the body as analytic, this time to do theology in her book *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being*.<sup>278</sup> Employing an intersectional lens in the sphere of theology around the trope of the body provides an interesting contrast to some of the feminist theological works explored in other chapters. Though Copeland does not use the language of intersectionality specifically, the structure of her critical and constructive theological anthropology reflects a commitment to its ‘terms’; attention to structures of domination, the importance of contextual specificity, and the centering of the racialized female body. I will consider in her work, as I have in other body projects, her understanding of the production of difference (not just its results) and how this connects to her understanding of power. My overarching goal is to determine whether the

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<sup>278</sup> Copeland, M. Shawn. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Fortress Press, 2010). Henceforth this citation will be referred to as *Enfleshing Freedom*.

terms of her theological framework and her choice to focus on the body help or hinder achieving the stated goals of her constructive theological project.

*Enfleshing Freedom* is introduced by beloved womanist theologian Katie Canon, who identifies the central question of Copeland's work of theological enfleshment as "What becomes of theology, how is it enriched, if the body, specifically the black female body, is placed at the center of its inquiry?"<sup>279</sup> Copeland's own answer to that charge is that centering the black body better enables us to interrogate the impact of their (bodies) demonization in history, religion, culture, and society. However, and central to that endeavor, she claims that before we move toward social transformation to address the contemporary impacts of that history, we must first "account for the past and present damage done to *living black bodies*." This takes the form in her theological project of a careful presentation, not unlike that we saw in Roberts' work, of the trauma encountered by these bodies on a "colossal scale and on a continual basis". Canon, in fact, describes

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<sup>279</sup> Katie Geneva Canon, who died this past August (2018), is a founding foremother of womanist theology and was the first Black woman ordained in the United Presbyterian Church. Her now almost canonical works include *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Scholars Press, 1988) and *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, (Continuum, 2002), as well as several edited volumes including *God's Fierce Whimsey: The Implication of Feminism for Theological Education*, (Pilgrim Press, 1988) and *Womanist Theological Ethics*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) with Emilie Townes. She was an avid proponent of intersectional analysis and her essay "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prison house of Anatomical Authority" from the edited volume *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) documents the detailed history of black women's bodily suffering in slavery, Emancipation, and the period between the world wars. She argues that the black church needs to address its dualistic conception of sexuality as either sinful or for procreative purposes only and open up to accept black lesbians and sexuality more broadly as a gift from God. I do not feature her work specifically in this thesis because she did not conceptualize her theology in terms of the body, though she does address black women's sexuality and the erotic within the church. In terms of my argument in this thesis, I am specifically interested in looking at why and how 'the body' as category of analysis is taken up by different theorists and theologians.

this focus as the “hallmark of the volume” and further characterizes it as a work that “turns to the physical body as a primary symbol and source for theological reflection, thought through the critical lens of embodiment.” But what exactly does that look like in Copeland’s theology? We get some sense of her frame of reference when she, again like Roberts, very intentionally locates her theology amidst the historical reality of slavery:

We Christian theologians in the United States work in a house haunted by the ghosts of slavery...the political memory of the nation suppresses our deep entanglement in slavery.<sup>280</sup>

Paying homage to the intellectual courage required in the painstaking and thorough documentation of slavery by historians, and literary, visual and musical artists, she unveils liberal society’s disavowal of the wound of slavery:

The nation might have gone on overlooking the bodies piled up outside the door, gone on concealing slavery behind narratives of innocence or masks of pretense.<sup>281</sup>

And declares,

From the perspective of a *contextual theology of social transformation*, the full meaning of human freedom (religious, existential, social, eschatological) can be clarified only in grappling strenuously with the dangerous memory of slavery<sup>282</sup> (*italics mine*)

Copeland posits that this interrogation of the ‘aching memory of slavery’ is advanced on behalf of freedom and towards the constructive theological goal of challenging her readers to respect the dignity and suffering that has accumulated in history and to translate that respect into compassionate practices of *solidarity*.

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<sup>280</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 2.

<sup>281</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 3.

<sup>282</sup> *Enfleshin Freedom*, pg. 3.

Specifically, to critical, healing practices that address the “crusted residue of slavery in contemporary and global reenactments of violence against black bodies.”<sup>283</sup>

Having thrust the brutality of slavery’s impact on black bodies center stage, it is the suffering body of Christ that Copeland turns to in her contextual theology of social transformation. It is the specificity of Jesus’ suffering in the context of his persecution in the face of structures of domination that helps to conceptualize what she means by a compassionate solidarity that does not rush to deny historical wounds, but acknowledges the need to heal and the willingness to take part in that healing process.

The idea of centering suffering as in any way salvific is extremely problematic in Christianity and Copeland is well aware of the critiques of the praxis of suffering by both black male theologians and feminist and Womanist theologians.<sup>284</sup> The idea of suffering as salvific for *women*, and particularly Black women given the history of slavery, poses quite particular problems given their social location within structures of domination, and critiques come from across the field to protest how women in particular have been harmed by such theology. Delores Williams, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Kwok Pui-lan among others have all underscored the impact of the distorted preaching and theologizing about the cross and suffering on the bodies and psyches of women. Given this history of critique, Copeland’s theological choice to center the suffering body of Jesus calls for close analysis, but it is exactly at this juncture that I

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<sup>283</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 4.

<sup>284</sup> The works she sites for this critique includes William R Jones’ *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology*, Joanna Carlson Brown and Carol R Bohn’s excellent collection *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, (Pilgrim Press, 1989), Anthony Pinn’s *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, and Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. (Orbis Books, 2013).

see her understanding of intersectional identity and her analysis of power hard at work to avoid some of the traps such a choice could lead to.

Her theological frame includes the articulation of the workings of *Empire* and the productive power of its structures of domination to mark and hierarchically organize bodies. This is the context in which she situates her suffering Jesus, with an emphasis on his embodied suffering *not* as trans-historical symbol of the cross or as a model of salvific *suffering*, but as an *outsider* of Empire himself, and as a model of the welcome embrace of those ‘others’ rejected and marginalized within the polis. Adopting anthropologist Mary Douglas’ terminology of the ‘physical’ and the ‘social’ body to describe the structural production and inscription of difference on bodies, Copeland elaborates:

...The social body’s assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender, sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the trajectories of concrete human lives. Thus a social body determined by the arbitrary privileged position and power of one group may enact subtle and grotesque brutality upon different ‘others’.<sup>285</sup>

She further elaborates this structural understanding in the terms of her own project:

Taking black women’s bodies as a prism, this work considers the theological anthropological relation between the social body and the physical body. By doing so, it avoids the trap of detaching the embodied subject from historical or social or religious contexts, which would render the subject eternal, universal, absolute. Rather, it opts for the concrete and aims to do so without absolutizing or essentializing particularity or jeopardizing a notion of personhood as immanent self-transcendence in act.<sup>286</sup>

Describing Jesus’ fellowship as those marked by Empire as outcasts – tax collectors, sinners, lepers, prostitutes-- Copeland argues that through his solidarity with ‘other’

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<sup>285</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 8.

<sup>286</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 8.

bodies, he shows what solidarity really looks like and offers a theological signpost to how we, now located in the *New Imperialism*, might do the same:

The body of Jesus provokes our interrogation of the new imperial deployment and debasement of bodies...we too seek to imitate his incarnation of love of the Other, love of others. The body of Jesus of Nazareth impels us to place the bodies of the victims of history at the center of theological anthropology, to turn to 'other' subjects.<sup>287</sup>

Finally, Copeland posits this moral praxis of solidarity as the means by which we can truly engage the other without *erasing* the others who suffered and died before us. "Our recognition and regard for the victims of history and our shouldering responsibility for that history form the moral basis of Christian solidarity." This understanding of solidarity is formed in direct response to the effects, both past and present, of oppression which she describes as 'materially assaulting our connectedness to one another by setting up dominative structural relations between social and cultural groups as well as between persons.'

Despite its theologically based language, this sounds a lot like Roberts' insistence that we *know* and take into consideration the history of the violence – both physical and rhetorical – that has shaped the way black bodies are positioned in society whenever we articulate a political program for liberation. In both works, I see the hallmark of an intersectional heuristic at work making the connections between structural domination, the production and maintenance of hierarchical social locations, and the impacts for individual and group identity. The context of slavery in the U.S. compels any politics of the gendered body to include an analysis of how race fundamentally interpellates that identity. It is in this sense that the history Roberts and Copeland utilize in their work,

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<sup>287</sup> *Enfleshing Freedom*, pg. 84.

lives in and through the black bodies of the present. Copeland's characterization of solidarity as including 'the shouldering of responsibility' for that history and its effects obliges us in the here-and-now to "stand between poor women of color and the powers of oppression and do all that we can to end their marginalization, exploitation, abuse, and murder."

Her theology, though rooted in the example of the suffering Christ, is a struggle for justice *in the concrete* and 'admits of particular tasks for each of us by virtue of our differing social locations'. This depiction of the operations of power reflects the more three-dimensional perspective intersectionality provides on how persons are located within structures of domination as both oppressors and oppressed. Her 'new' subject of anthropology of religion – poor black women- breaks open new assessments and responsibilities for those who would call themselves 'good' Christians, much the same way that including black women in the movement for reproductive rights shifted that articulation to one of reproductive *justice*. The injustices suffered by black bodies refocuses theology's praxis to one requiring a solidarity that makes that history central to its articulation of human liberation. Copeland's articulation begins with the intersecting vectors that maintain the rigid hierarchy of humanity within Empire, and insists on including the perspective of those bodies most marginalized within those structures of domination.

Perhaps the most visceral aspect of Copeland's work is her insistence on centering descriptions of the brutalities of the slave trade and its associated practices and the domestic terrorism of lynching during the Emancipation era<sup>288</sup>. She does not get to her

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<sup>288</sup> I have not repeated or excerpted the acts of terror she documents in the book even as I



articulation of Solidarity without this careful presentation of and theological attention to the trauma encountered by these bodies “on a colossal scale and on a continual basis.” Like Roberts’ work on the black body, the centrality of the history of slavery fundamentally shapes the inquiry, and for both projects the impetus for centering the bodies of black women is the same – they have been torn asunder. Similarly to all of the body projects I have looked at, the urge to revalue and recover that which has been so denigrated and harmed is urgent and at times visceral. As I have proposed at the start and have shown throughout my analysis, there is a clear difference in the breadth of analysis, critique, and political possibility of projects that include structural and intersectional analysis, and those that do not. Similarly to Roberts, we see the very specific experiences of black women highlighted in Copeland’s theology, but her frame of Empire always contextualizes those experiences in reference to oppressive structures. Within her theological frame, she asserts the similarity between the Empire that persecuted Jesus as he violated the norms of social privilege his identity might otherwise have granted him, and the ‘New Imperialism’ of contemporary times, whose structures of domination function in the same way to include or exclude, especially along lines of racial identity. Copeland’s insistence on keeping the specificities of that oppression in plain sight as a requirement for Christian fellowship and solidarity is a call to expose and contest the contemporary structures of domination that keep us separated within their divisive hierarchies.

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understand the irony that by not doing so I am bypassing the means by which, according to Copeland, I might best be able to embody Christian fellowship. Confronting and embracing the truly ‘other’ is a lifelong practice, I believe, and one that given my privilege as a well educated white middle class woman in academia, I am able to bypass when I choose. Choosing to truly engage is definitely a theological enterprise to my mind.

Copeland's theology of the body/embodiment – even in its focus on very specific bodies – does not get trapped in the psychological or interpersonal as we have seen in other body projects. Her theology benefits, I would argue, from the use of an intersectional heuristic, which can accommodate both a structural analysis of oppression and the specificity of Black women's particular experiences of oppression within those structures. She is able to account for what happens to Black women's bodies in those contexts, but in so doing does not end up *delving into* the body in the same way that some of the other critical frameworks used in body projects have inspired. In fact, the meaning of Copeland's "enfleshing" comes to refer not so much to the *materiality of bodies* as we saw in Rivera's theology, or in response to a mind/body dualism articulated as motivating many of the other feminists body projects taken up here. Rather, enfleshing is a theological description of how we become full human beings by striving for a freedom that comes only when Christians center black history as part of their articulation of fellowship. Her title *Enfleshing Freedom* describes an active and constant *practice* of a solidarity that acknowledges the specific histories of black bodies, specificities largely occluded by the critical frameworks I have addressed in my dissertation – sex/gender, psychoanalytic, liberal, postmodernist/structuralist, and (new) materialist. Her theology exemplifies what I suggested might be the case at the outset of this dissertation: that 'the body' as an analytic category is not a prerequisite for addressing the harms done to 'different' bodies. There are critical frameworks that achieve this theological, liberationist, political goal without getting trapped in or reinscribing the persistent and damaging hierarchical categories of difference generated by structures of domination.

Copeland concludes her theological work by likening it to a meditation on the blues as described by Ralph Ellison: *the blues* is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. She concludes that for the theologian of the black experience, writing may evoke the deepest sorrow, but also the deepest gratitude and the deepest love. It is at once an excavation, preservation, meditation, and an act of defiance. It is a call for and to justice. And it is always a practice of solidarity.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> *Enfleshign Freedom*, pg. 130.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I set out to investigate why feminist theorists and theologians are so drawn to using the body as a central analytic for articulating their political projects, and whether a focus on the body indeed facilitates achieving those goals given the critical frameworks employed in the process. In all cases, a primary underlying concern for such feminist endeavors has been to address the violence, marginalization, and dehumanization that bodies marked by difference suffer within structures of domination and a focus on the body has seemed the appropriate place to recover, revalue, and re-humanize those marginalized subjects. My own critical instincts have led me to question the efficacy of the body as a lens through which to articulate politics of any kind, even as I recognize and identify with the need to address the relationship between hierarchical power structures, difference, and the material effects of marginalization.

Through the adoption of a variety of critical frameworks—sex/gender, psychoanalytic, new materialist, and intersectional-- feminist theorists and theologians have produced a spectrum of theoretical elaborations proposed as interventions to resist and dismantle oppressive structures and hegemonic thought. As a skeptic, I set out to critically discern the capacity of each framework to advance the arguments claimed for it by its feminist protagonists. My critique, grounded in my own adoption of a structural rhetorical framework, focuses primarily on elucidating both the theory of difference and the theory of power operating in any given project. This approach is motivated by my strong belief that the critical interaction of these two tenets is a reliable determinate of a framework's ultimate capacity for challenging structures of domination.

My analysis indeed uncovered a common set of outcomes within a broad spectrum of different body projects that span intellectual debates within and between ideology critique, feminist materialism, sex/gender feminism, sexuality studies, post-structuralism, linguistic psychoanalysis, new materialism and intersectionality. Discerned from the perspective of a structural rhetorical analysis, the common critical stumbling blocks I exposed were as follows: the assumption and reinscription of powerful dualisms concealed within attempts to undermine hierarchical dualism - notably male/female difference cloaked within the rubrics of gender and sexuality, the over-reliance on sexuality and desire as privileged loci for re-articulating non-hierarchical relations or disrupting naturalized social hierarchies, an inward-facing 'psychologistic' focus on the productive structures of the unconscious as determinative of social relation over against the productive powers of structures of domination, an understanding of difference as residing 'in' individuals (essentialized) as identity, an understanding of differences as proliferating and dispersed through multiple sites of power where social *contradiction* is replaced by social *difference*, and more broadly, a consistent detachment of the critical terms of analysis from the structures of domination and oppression ostensibly motivating the feminist inquiry.

Despite ongoing and outstanding debates within feminist theory and theology, the critical arc that animates my inquiry across the last two decades uncovers what I would deem an unrecognized move AWAY from the political in the neoliberal age. This is most markedly apparent in the epistemic shift towards 'new materialism' taking place not only in feminist theory and theology but across multiple disciplines, including the hard sciences. In physics, chemistry, and biology, this is hailed as the triumph of feminist

scientific studies as models of (non-dualistic) interdependence between the mind and the body and nature and culture gain salience under the mantle of materialism. However, as I have shown in Chapter 3, how that materialism plays out in what are ostensibly political feminist projects do not, in fact, look very political at all. When measured in the critical terms of feminist materialism, intersectional analysis, or a structural rhetorical framework, a concern to discern the pressure that matter exerts on bodies as a means of undermining rigid hierarchies of power and difference does not seem to have the capacity to dismantle oppressive structures.

I understand this as in part a power effect of the academy as scholars seek to advance their careers through the publication of ‘original’ ideas, and theoretical ‘advances’, or need to appear ‘current’ in their analyses and approach. But in feminist theology especially, a field of scholarship whose hallmark has been critical and political from its very inception, this move toward the ‘new’ materialism seems antithetical to its premises. That the material framework is not subject to the same scrutiny applied to postmodern and discursive frameworks of the ‘last’ epistemic shift implies a depoliticization of the field. Despite the apparent critical potential of the framework –its monistic destabilization of rigid and oppressive dualisms, a less discursive theorization of the body, an appeal to nature/the natural without a claim of essence - at what critical price does this animation of matter come?

All of my critiques of the frameworks in this thesis play an important role in my endeavor to challenge the necessity of theorizing out of the body as an effective means of addressing harm done to marginalized bodies. I have made a useful critical argument for scholars in many fields as/if they endeavor to ‘take up the body again’. In terms of the

capacities of different critical frameworks to serve feminist political purposes, the most significant revelation in my study of feminist body projects is a critique of the new materialist frame. The embrace of this approach, I feel, is the product of a neo-liberal refusal to materially grapple with the marginalized ‘others’ of global capitalism. The dualisms it ‘resolves’ feel like the deep sighs of relief that come from detaching analysis from a political critique of inequality in any robust sense. The focus on *matter* feels like a ruse to avoid confronting the violence wrought by and visited upon humanity. The immersion of the body in monistic harmony with nature/the natural feels like a romantic embrace with a devastated environment we refuse to face. More than I even imagined, the intersectional heuristic and a structural rhetorical analysis are two critical defenses we can use to keep theorists and theologians accountable. Feminist theory and especially feminist theology are at their best when their critical tools are matched to their critical and political objectives. Feminist theology has always had as its subject the dismantling of oppressive structures, the liberation of marginalized people, the fostering of equity and equality of all people. If we lose sight of that aspiration, what can we say is feminist about our theology at all?

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