

FEMINIST SUBJECTS AND FEMINIST ACTION:
A PRAGMATIC POST-STRUCTURALIST ACCOUNT
OF OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

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To J.M and D.

Where You Are,

I am Home.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANZALDÚA

Borderlands/La Frontera (BF)

BEAUVOIR

The Second Sex (SS)

BUTLER

Bodies that Matter (BTM)

“Contingent Foundations” (CF)

Excitable Speech (ES)

“For a Careful Reading” (FCR)

Gender Trouble (GT)

Precarious Life (PL)

Undoing Gender (UG)

DEWEY

Democracy and Education (DE)

Experience and Nature (EN)

Human Nature and Conduct (HNC)

Liberalism and Social Action (LSA)

The Public and its Problems (PP)

The Quest for Certainty (QC)

“The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (RA)

FANON

Black Skin White Masks (BSWM)

FOUCAULT

Discipline and Punish (DP)

“Governmentality” (G)

The History of Sexuality vol. 1 (HS)

Power/Knowledge (PK)

Security, Territory, Population (STP)

“The Subject and Power” (SP)

INTRODUCTION

This project began in 2008, in the few frenzied months prior to the Presidential election that brought the discussion of the politics of gender and race into mainstream American discourse. Like so many other feminists and race theorists, I was jolted to find that the questions and concerns that guided my philosophical work were suddenly headline news, and at times both elated and appalled by the content of those appearances. Beyond the covert racism, misogyny and heterosexism that so frequently characterized the mainstream methods of approaching the candidacies of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, or Sarah Palin—or their respective constituents—I was convinced that there was something decidedly lacking in the popular political discourse at the time. Moreover, I had a hunch that this conceptual lack was at least in part responsible for the problematic features of this discourse: I believed that the (at times unintentional) slippages into racist, sexist, classist or homophobic discourse on the part of frequently well-meaning people was due, at least in part, to a failure to take seriously the extent to which *they themselves* were constitutively involved in the sorts of practices they were discussing. I was, that is, concerned with the ways in which the phenomena we were suddenly all talking about—racism, sexism, etc.—were involved in making us who ‘we’ were.

Since then, I have been concerned to articulate a philosophical feminist account of the relationship between such entrenched patterns of meaning-making as race, gender, sexuality and class, and the subjects who are formed by and contribute to them. This topic, on its own, is not new for feminists—or, for that matter, for philosophers. Feminists influenced by Judith Butler’s now-classic *Gender Trouble* have frequently suggested that sexist discourse shapes the lives and bodies of women, and Foucaultian philosophers (among others) have argued that discursive

regimes produce populations, subjects and objects of desire. Still, it is hardly the case that feminists or philosophers are univocal in their support of such a theory—or that they should be. Feminists have rightly raised concerns about the political implications of a theory that would render women and people of color the passively constituted, necessarily “othered” victims of discursive power, while philosophers have asked how, precisely, it is possible to account for the literal production of subjects by discourse without thereby assenting to a linguistic monism—or remaining willfully ignorant of the bodily organism. Moreover, even if we assume for the sake of argument that the relationship between discourse and subjects is compatible with the world of our experience (which at least appears to be full of material things, ideas, political power and alteration), it is not obvious how the ideality of discourse might reach the material self at all, much less constitute it; nor is it clear how selves (or collections of selves) so constituted might change over time—or how any of this might get off the ground at all, given that we need selves to get “discourse” in the first place. While there is thus, in some quarters, general assent to the notion that subjects and discourses of gender or race are related, it is, I submit, necessary to think more carefully about that relation, and to offer an account of it that can respond *both* to concerns about the political agency of constituted subjects *and*—relatedly—to concerns about the ontological status of subjects, material organisms and their meanings.

This project is just such an account. While it is deeply informed and influenced by the rich history of feminist theory, particularly that which locates itself within the post-structuralist (Foucaultian, Butlerian) tradition, it is not simply post-structuralist. Indeed, I am concerned here to offer an account that draws on the resources of both post-structuralist *and* pragmatic philosophies. This combination, I will argue, can solve the feminist problem of the relationship

between subjectivity and discourse (particularly oppressive discourse¹) without involving itself in the difficulties I sketched above. The addition of a specifically Deweyan pragmatic theory of meaning, I will suggest, dissolves the primary ontological worry about the relationship between the ideality of discourse and the materiality of the bodily organism—and does so in a way that concomitantly offers a potential inroad to the problem of political agency. Dewey’s conceptualization of meaning as interactional and relational, in combination with Foucault’s account of the productive effects of power for populations and subjects and Butler’s articulation of that power as specifically gendered, sexualized and racialized through the citation of previous meanings, can help us to articulate precisely why and how oppressive discourse *matters* for subjects. This articulation, moreover, is crucially dependent upon its relationship to the historical and evolving literature of feminist, race, queer, post-colonial and Marxist theories. As such, it will situate itself within, draw upon, and distinguish itself from some of the most important works in this literature—including those by Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria Anzaldúa and Gayatri Spivak. The account I will offer thus may be understood as functioning similarly to its own description of the emergence of subjects: like a tree whose bark and leaves and specific root system are the products of its interaction with the surrounding environment—and yet which may be distinguished from it.

The project proceeds first by suggesting problems with some of the most historically influential feminist and anti-racist theories of oppression and selfhood, then by offering a

¹ I use the term “oppressive discourse” to refer to patterns of socially-transmitted meaning that have the effect of hierarchically organizing populations and selves as more or less privileged, worthwhile, human, or ethically significant. These include (most prominently in the context of this project) sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism. I use this umbrella term not to indicate that each has identical features, but as a shorthand reference to a variety of phenomena that function similarly—and which we typically conceptualize with reference to their subordinating effects. However, *n.b.*, my use of this term is not intended to suggest that these patterns of meanings are solely or even primarily oppressive, since, as I will argue, their effects are much wider ranging than our everyday notions would suggest.

positive account that is aimed at avoiding these problems, and finally by drawing out the implications of this account for anti-oppressive political action. It is comprised by four chapters and a concluding postscript, which offers a glimpse at an application of this project to tangible feminist activist movements. Because the project is interested particularly in the relationship between the dominant ways of speaking about, understanding and experiencing gendered, racialized, sexualized and classed subjectivity, it focuses its concrete inquiry particularly on the reiterations of these ways of speaking and understanding in mainstream political media—thus deliberately thematizing the discourse that inspired the project. Each chapter is organized by an analysis of the popular political discourse surrounding a single woman political figure in the United States, which serves as its principle example. My choices in this regard should not be read as suggesting that “women” or “women in the United States” are the most important—or even the primary—group affected by oppressive discourse. Indeed, as I will argue, it is crucial to note the extent to which populations beyond those which are the ostensible objects of a discourse are differentially situated by it. Rather, my purpose in focusing the chapters as I do is to make apparent 1) the significant intransigence of particular forms of oppressive discourse, the supposed progress of “women” notwithstanding and 2) the extent to which even those forms of oppressive discourse (e.g. sexism) that we are most accustomed to noticing and discussing have complex and non-negligible effects—for *us*, as subjects—of which we are too often uncritical. Additionally, I focus this analysis specifically on political discourse within the United States with a view to demonstrating the unavoidably local character of the relationship between subjectivity, meaning and its remaking—while at the same time highlighting the dependence of that locality on its relationship with the wider world.

In Chapter 1, I argue that the failure to interrogate the constitution of a constellation of variably privileged and oppressed subjects in and through the dominant discourses of sex, race, class and sexuality is a significant problem for feminist and anti-oppressive philosophies. Through parallel analyses of the works of Beauvoir and Fanon, I argue that traditional feminist and anti-racist approaches to understanding the effects of sexism or racism that treat such discourses as transparently discrete—or as obviously distinct from the subjects who are its victims and perpetrators—must be rethought. Using the popular political discourse around First Lady Michelle Obama as my example, I suggest that such abstracted, single-issue analyses as those offered by Fanon and Beauvoir are insufficient to account for the complexity of that discourse, or its wide-ranging effects. At the same time, however, my argument is not simply that neither Fanon nor Beauvoir has yet achieved the “intersectional” analysis of oppression developed (primarily) by women of color. While intersectional analyses are deeply influential of my account, I argue that even some intersectional analyses fail to interrogate the constitution of situated subjects in a radical way—though they do have the resources to do so. Thus, I suggest that while intersectionality is a necessary step toward overcoming the problems of earlier feminist and anti-racist theorizing, it is not sufficient, on its own, to deal with the problems of subjectivity, discourse and agency that motivate this project.

In Chapter 2, I begin to offer a positive account of the relationship between popular gender discourse and embodied subjects, arguing that a Deweyan account of meaning as a mode of interaction and theory as a type of selective emphasis can effectively resolve the concern that Butler’s notion of gender and performative and citational requires either linguistic monism or untenable dualism. At the same time, I suggest that Butler’s description of the sedimentation of specifically gendered, raced and sexualized meanings functions as a crucial corrective to

Dewey's failure to interrogate the various ways in which the social production of meanings is marked by interactions whose hierarchical character is not reducible to class differences (as he frequently suggests). Through an analysis of the popular discourse around Hillary Clinton and her Presidential campaign's use of the moniker "Hillary," I argue that we can take seriously Butler's suggestion that sexualized discourses constitute bodies and transmit meanings *without* assenting to her problematic distinction between referent and signified. Replacing this distinction with the pragmatic notion that the discursive interactions in question are variously knowable, depending on our purposes, I suggest that my hybrid account of the transmission, production and apprehension of bodily meanings like gender, race and sexuality is better than those that might be suggested by either Butler's or Dewey's accounts alone. However, this discussion on its own is incomplete, as it does not yet offer a description of the geo-political conditions that make the particular emergence of discourse and subjects we see in the Clinton campaign possible, or a full articulation of the possibility of political change.

In Chapter 3, I offer the beginnings of this description by using a Foucaultian analysis of power as it functions both in political discourse and in the governmentality of the neo-liberal state. I suggest that Foucault's account of power is compatible with the Deweyan (and Butlerian) discussion of meaning and subjectivity that precedes it because of Foucault's claim that power inheres in relationships as actions-upon-actions—a description that dovetails nicely with my interactional account of gendered and racialized meanings. With this in mind, and using as my central example the popular discourse around Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, I argue first that Foucault's account of power is not susceptible to the critique (often leveled against post-structuralists) that it precludes the possibility of agency or the self-constitution of subjects. On the contrary, I claim that the Foucaultian position offers an assessment of situated

agency that refuses to let us ignore its constitutive political environment, and that the insights of Latina feminists help to explain why such a complex picture of this agency is crucial. Moreover, I argue that Foucault's later work on governmentality (especially when read in light of post-colonial theory) makes salient the extent to which the political discourse of the United States is bound with the subordination and exploitation of populations beyond its borders, especially in Latin America. Thus, I argue, we must understand the interactions and relations of meaning that give rise to subjectivities as particularly situated within and constituted by these larger global relations of governmentality. Given this picture of the constitutive conditions of variably situated subjectivities, however, it is urgently necessary to account for the possibility of political change.

In Chapter 4, I argue that the account I have offered has room for the possibility of significant political change and/or alteration of dominant patterns of meaning-making, which would enable shifts both at the level of individual subjects and at the level of broader populations (which are, I suggest, connected). I argue that my hybrid pragmatic and post-structuralist discussion of gendered, racialized, sexualized and classed meanings shows why, even though it is correct to suggest that our meanings emerge within particular geo-political locations, the view (held by many traditional political philosophers, whether Marxist or Liberals) that only reforms or revolutions at the level of the state or the law are significant is misguided. Thus, I claim that it is wrong to suppose that efforts to effect shifts in meaning—what Butler has called “resignifications”—are useless from a feminist perspective. This is not to say, however, that all such shifts are valuable. Examining the discourse of and around former Governor Sarah Palin, particularly her redeployment of the language of feminism, I argue that feminists can and must adjudicate between desirable and undesirable resignifications. Moreover, I suggest that Dewey's

interactional account of political meaning and the evaluation of ends according to purposes offers a way of conceptualizing that adjudication that is strongly normative, but does not involve itself in the problems that Butler's own attempt to solve this problem creates (and that Foucault simply avoids). Additionally, I argue that Dewey's discussion of political meaning helps to explain how large-scale discursive change might be possible even in the absence of broad consensus about what can or should be resignified. Ultimately, I claim that it is impossible to offer *a priori* or universalizable rules for the distinction of good from bad resignifications, but suggest that we evaluate such projects through the lens of feminist purposes, which involve the drive to eliminate oppression and the desire to foster of self-criticism. In my conclusion, I offer examples of two such projects, and suggest how they might together be helpfully resignifying, despite a clear lack of consensus on the part of those supporting each.

As we move further away from the election of 2008, public discussion of race and gender ebb, even as much mainstream political discourse remains entrenched in the oppressive and differentially situating patterns of meaning as it has for some time—with, that is, some further complicating developments. Today, the specters of Mexican immigration, Arab Muslim terrorism, and homosexual families are raised to rally support for politicians or initiatives that aim to secure the apparently threatened American way of life. The promise of individual freedom, of home and car ownership, of a return to the heyday of Mayberry-esque local communities unencumbered by outsiders or the intrusive reach of “government” are reiterated as ideals that are at once most truly “us” and what we must strive to become. The stability of “American” identity—and subjectivity—continues to be constituted in its relations to these meanings, whether as repudiated or embraced. As such, the question of subjectivity remains

closely connected to the anti-oppressive projects of feminism, whether those projects are more saliently philosophical or political.

CHAPTER I

RETHINKING INTERSECTIONALITY:

MICHELLE OBAMA, PRESUMED SUBJECTS AND CONSTITUTIVE PRIVILEGE

In February of 2008, Michelle Obama, wife of Democratic Presidential hopeful Barack Obama—the first African-American to win the nomination of a major U.S. political party—said to a gathering of supporters, "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country..."¹ Her remark was swiftly seized upon by journalists and members of rival political campaigns, who used it to portray Mrs. Obama as 'angry' and unpatriotic. In the weeks that followed, Mrs. Obama's undergraduate sociology thesis on Black students at Princeton was cited as further evidence of her supposed racial resentment and lack of patriotism, and there were widespread rumors that there existed an audio tape that captured her using the word "whitey"². Around the same time, Fox News ran a headline referring to Mrs. Obama as "Obama's Baby Mama."³ Subsequently, there was a concerted effort on the part of Mr. Obama's campaign to "soften" her image, including appearances on the shows *The View* and *Paula's Party*, and a speech at the Democratic National Convention that highlighted her motherhood and adoration of her husband, and avoided mention of her own career or political work. Despite such efforts, and perhaps in tension with the Obama family's general popularity following Mr. Obama's election, Mrs. Obama was later characterized by a cable news pundit as being reminiscent of "Stokely

¹ Associated Press 2008.

² Eventually, the Obama campaign made an official response to these rumors on its website, denying that such a tape ever existed.

³ Koppleman 2008.

Carmichael in a designer dress,”⁴ and thus as a potential political liability for the Obama administration.

While some feminists continue to decry the “momification”⁵ of Michelle Obama as an act of appeasement on the part of an administration that would capitulate to the oppressive expectations of a public unwilling to find expressions of independent thought or professional ambitions appropriately First Lady-like, other critics noted that Mrs. Obama was being reviled more for daring to suggest that the U.S.’s racial history was far from being strictly historical, opening her to the charge of being an angry (and perhaps militant) Negro—while, ironically, being accused of “playing the race card.” Others have pointed out that specific formulations like “baby mama” are illustrative of the fact that such representations of Mrs. Obama are not easily classifiable as either sexist *or* racist, but instead draw on both sorts of tropes, as have such nauseatingly familiar representations of black women as promiscuous, or as militant, emasculating mummies. In this chapter, I will consider methodologies for theorizing the function of such oppressions in the public discourses surrounding Michelle Obama, and suggest that a consideration of their manifestations in this particular context illustrates the need for more complex theoretical tools that can problematize the constitutive effects of such discourse for a multiplicity of subjects. In particular, I will argue that while we may indeed isolate oppressive discourses like sexism or racism for certain purposes, this strategic isolation will not in the end be an effective methodology for their criticism or analysis, as it tends to reinforce the very hierarchically-organized binary of normativity and perversity that it would seek to counteract. My argument in this regard will be guided by a consideration of two foundational texts in the

⁴ *The O’Reilly Factor*, January 26, 2009.

⁵ Traister 2008.

philosophical traditions of feminism and critical race theory: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. This is not, of course, to claim that the theorists included in this chapter exhaust the fields of feminist and critical race theories, or even that their work is the most important or representative. Rather, my choices in this regard are concerned with foregrounding the sorts of theoretical pitfalls the isolated or abstracted consideration of sex- or race-based oppressions tend to occasion, and with demonstrating the ways in which feminist philosophy (and other anti-oppressive philosophies) remains for the most part squarely within this tradition. Following theorists of intersectionality, I will suggest that this problem will not be solved merely by the addition of alternative explanatory frameworks (i.e., sexism + racism; Beauvoir + Fanon, Marx or Wittig), since doing so is neither adequately representative of the experience of oppressions nor sufficient to the task of undermining the normative/perverse dichotomy or presumption of generic subjectivity that sustains them. However, I also suggest that the work of intersectionality theorists should be taken further than it has frequently been in the past (which, though given lip service by much of the feminist community, has not always been taken to imply the need for a major methodological shift), extending its insights to offer a critique of foundational subjectivity. Concomitantly, I argue that a failure by feminist philosophers to offer this critique could unintentionally result in the reinscription of the normativity of particular sorts of subjects—which is precisely what theorists of intersectionality have been concerned to call into question. I suggest that an analysis of the discourse surrounding Michelle Obama demonstrates that insofar as the intersectionality paradigm is understood *merely* to require the interrogation of overlapping oppressions on a given subject or subjects, and thus as leaving uninterrogated the *constitutively* privileging and

subjectivizing effects of oppressive discourse, uses of intersectionality will reiterate the same mistakes it seeks to overcome.

Abstracting Perversity: Sex or Race, Beauvoir or Fanon

In her January 2008 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Gloria Steinem declared that, despite the continued prevalence of racism in contemporary America, “Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House.”⁶ This declaration received a variety of rebuttals, many of which sought to stake a claim on the ‘most restricting’ status of some form of oppression or other, such as “poverty” or “race”⁷, and others of which suggested that such an enterprise was fundamentally misguided. Within her own essay, Steinem appears to have reservations about making such a claim, as she writes, “I’m not advocating a competition for who has it toughest. The caste systems of sex and race are interdependent and can only be uprooted together.” This caveat, however, is markedly in tension with the premise of her essay—that a woman with Barack Obama’s background and experience would not be taken seriously—and with her omission of the function of race or racism in the public persona of Hillary Clinton. My purpose in making this claim, however, is not so much to point out the problematic implications of Steinem’s argument—hers is only one of many such arguments in popular circulation—but instead to demonstrate that *even if* we are aware of the importance of considering multiple oppressions in our feminist theorizing, this theorizing may easily be undermined through abstracting methodologies. In what follows, I will use analyses of Beauvoir and Fanon’s most famous works on sexist and racist oppressions to elucidate a common origin of this problem of

⁶Steinem 2008.

⁷ See for example Noah 2008.

abstraction—which, I will argue, depend upon the methodological choice to analyze the effects of a singular oppressive phenomenon on a particular (abstracted) population, despite the fact that each is demonstrably aware of the existence and function of other oppressions—and to point to its counterproductive consequences.

Simone de Beauvoir opens *The Second Sex* with the declaration that women, unlike men, must understand themselves as fundamentally gendered beings. While men have the privilege of a self-definition that does not require the mention of sex, the avowal of femininity functions as a pre-requisite for any identification on the part of women. Men are simply human beings, Beauvoir argues, but women are figured as the females of the species, as beings defined by their relation to men. Thus, she writes, “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.” (SS xxi) While masculinity is taken for granted—just as consistently in the case of scientific discourse on insects and other non-human animals as in ethical or political questions particularly interested in human beings—femininity is remarked, and most often treated as aberrant or ‘other.’ This otherness, for Beauvoir, is so salient that women are understood as “the second sex” not only from the perspective of men (for whom they are incontrovertibly objects), but also for themselves. To be a woman, then, is to be a self who is fundamentally *different* than humanity in general—to feel one’s body, situation, desires, and so on, as abnormal and in need of explanation.

Taken on its own, however, the mere drawing of attention to the otherness or secondary status of women is nothing new. Aristotle did as much thousands of years earlier, as did the Christian church fathers, and the creation myths of various religious traditions, to name only a

few. Beauvoir's crucial point of divergence is her contention that women are not metaphysically or essentially inessential; the positioning of women as other is constructed and contingent, as the product of a sexist social organization that could be otherwise. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Beauvoir famously writes. "No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an *Other*." (SS 267) That is, it is not the case that women are naturally dependent, inferior, passive creatures; they are produced as such through the repetition of myths and histories that give shape *both* to the imaginary or ideal figure of femininity, and to the actual bodies and behaviors of girl children. Beauvoir chronicles the myriad ways in which women are created and maintained as secondary or inessential from infancy onward. "Children's books, mythology, stories, tales, all reflect the myths born of the pride and the desires of men; thus it is that through the eyes of men the little girl discovers the world and reads therein her destiny," she writes. (SS 288) Moreover, the disciplinary restrictions on the type of play, dress and demeanor acceptable for girls further contributes to their constitution as infantile coquettes, dependent on men for their value. While many of Beauvoir's contemporaries—and some of our own—maintain that these characteristically feminine behaviors and desires are somehow innate (and invoke dubious scientific claims as evidence), she vehemently denies such assertions, arguing that the appearance of "femininity" in a very young girl only serves to highlight the fact that "she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years." (SS 268)

Beauvoir is not the first feminist to make the argument that feminine characteristics are socially constructed, however. Mary Wollstonecraft notably argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that the education and socialization of girls has resulted in a genuine

degradation of womanhood, and “has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire—mere propagators of fools!”⁸ Moreover, Wollstonecraft argues, this deliberate cultivation of women to serve as the dependent playthings of men is at the same time admitted and disavowed by those who work to maintain this state of affairs while declaring it to be natural.⁹ Interestingly, Beauvoir appears to part company with Wollstonecraft on the subject of men, whose gender identity Beauvoir understands to be just as constructed and contingent as that of women, but who Wollstonecraft appears to tacitly accept as the standard of normative humanity (a fault, I will argue, that is ironically repeated in Beauvoir’s own work in at least two ways). While Wollstonecraft suggests that women can only become fully human by becoming “more masculine and respectable,”¹⁰ Beauvoir argues that masculinity itself is socially produced, and that to assume it as the standard is already to concede the secondary status of women. The little boy, according to Beauvoir, “is told that ‘a man doesn’t ask to be kissed... a man doesn’t look at himself in mirrors... A man doesn’t cry.’ He is urged to be ‘a little man’; he will obtain adult approval by becoming independent of adults.” (SS 270) Though Beauvoir readily accepts *sexual* difference as biological¹¹, the imposition of the sets of behavioral regulations that constitute gender do not follow from this difference—and their arbitrariness, for Beauvoir, makes their injustice all the more salient.

That the hierarchical organization of gender is arbitrary and culturally produced does not, however, mean that it is unreal for Beauvoir. Her general phenomenological orientation to questions of existence and reality emphasizes the indispensability of experience as a philosophical tool, and *The Second Sex* is itself an extended account of the lived experience of

⁸Wollstonecraft 1998, 93.

⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹¹A caveat that will, I argue, undermine Beauvoir’s own efforts to problematize the situation of women.

becoming a woman in a sexist society (which seems, for Beauvoir, to be the only kind of society that has thus far existed). That experience, she argues, is most centrally the experience of becoming an ‘other’; to be a woman in a sexist world is to be dispossessed of oneself, to exist in a way outside of oneself. She writes, “it is a strange experience for whoever regards himself as the One to be revealed to himself as otherness, alterity. This is what happens to the little girl when, doing her apprenticeship for life in the world, she grasps what it means to be a woman therein.”¹² (SS 297) The lived reality of womanhood, then, is not only to be treated as an ‘other’ by men, but to feel that otherness incorporated into one’s own body. “Woman, like man, *is* her body,” Beauvoir writes, “but her body is something other than herself.” (SS 29) Thus, the social and institutional practices of organization and regulation that constitute hierarchically gendered selves—which is to say, sexism—produce an environment in which women’s self-consciousness, including or especially consciousness of their bodies, is dispossessed or doubled. That is, sexism gives rise to a lived reality in which women are fundamentally ‘other’ for themselves and for men, which has consequences for their cognitive, social, and bodily autonomy. As Beauvoir puts it, “the young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh...” (SS 308) Sexist oppression thus depends upon and reinforces a stratification of (at least two kinds of) subjectivities, in which the privileged group retains autonomous subjectivity and invisibility, in contrast with the dispossessed self-consciousness and hypervisibility of the oppressed.

¹² Interestingly, Beauvoir’s continual use of the masculine pronoun for ostensibly gender-neutral concepts appears to both confirm and undermine her point.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon's analysis of the experience of racial oppression is strikingly similar in its emphasis on hypervisibility and fractured self-consciousness. Though Fanon's work is specifically interested in the analysis of racial oppression in the context of the colonial French Antilles, much of what he says about the constitution of the black man as 'other' could be easily applied to alternative cultural situations of white hegemony—which is suggested by consideration of Fanon's points in common with the narratives of other critical race theorists. "A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world," he writes. (BSWM 142) What makes this 'discovery' of one's abnormality all the more traumatic, Fanon claims, is that the child of color has long ago internalized the norms of the colonizer, and has learned in fact to identify himself *with* the white world, such that he, too, associates blackness with all that is inhuman and dirty. Like Beauvoir, Fanon argues that objects of entertainment and education, such as movies, comic books, and historical narratives, are instrumental in giving shape to the identities and values of young children. Since in the colonial situation, the majority of such materials and narratives are the products of the colonizing country, and as such are made "by white men for little white men," (BSWM 146) the Antillean schoolboy becomes accustomed to representations in which "the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.'" (BSWM 146) Thus, Fanon claims, the Negro boy dis-identifies with blackness and understands himself as European, or often even more specifically as French.¹³ As a consequence, Fanon argues, Antilleans project the inherited negative associations

¹³This identification was similarly confirmed in a 1947 study of black American children's preferences for dolls, in

with blackness onto the Senegalese, such that it remains possible to understand themselves as something other than ‘Negro.’

Upon encounter with the white world, this identification is shattered, and with it, everything about the way the child (or adult) moves in and interacts with the surrounding environment. The recognition of oneself as ‘Other’ radically alters the way in which self-consciousness operates. Fanon describes the experience of that alteration this way: “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.” (BSWM 110) The moment at which I am made to understand myself as ‘Other,’ Fanon claims, is the moment at which it becomes impossible for me to continue in the world as a typically intentional subject. That is, to be confronted with one’s blackness—which is to say (in this context), with one’s abnormality—is to be forced to see oneself as from outside, to relate to oneself in the third person. Fanon’s claim here has deep resonances with DuBois, whose description of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* is likewise interested in foregrounding the self-alienation that results from racist oppression. DuBois describes the situation of the black man in America as “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”¹⁴ The experience of this world, DuBois writes, is a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”¹⁵ Or as Fanon might put it, the subject is caught between two forms of consciousness; he is himself, and yet he is himself-as-seen-by-others. Nothing may go on as it did before. “I am given no chance,” Fanon writes, “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the

which the overwhelming majority of the children studied preferred to play with a white doll than a black one, and additionally responded that the white dolls looked more like them. (Clark 1950)

¹⁴DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.” (BSWM 116) Having internalized the white gaze that refuses his full agency, the black boy comes to see himself *through* that gaze, and eventually begins to police his actions and thoughts so as to accord, as much as possible, with it. “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself,” Fanon writes. “I wait for me. In the interval just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theatre are watching me, examining me, waiting for me.” (BSWM 140) It is not *just* that being surrounded by normative expressions of whiteness is damaging to the black man’s self-esteem, or even that this normativity causes him to value that which is alien to him (though it does do this). Fanon suggests, more importantly, that life in a racist society alters the ways in which members of the oppressed racial group (or groups) are conscious of themselves, especially as embodied subjects in the world.

Both Fanon and Beauvoir’s accounts thus foreground the ways in which sexism and racism depend upon and function as socially-produced, normative standards of selfhood or humanity, such that individuals of non-normative embodiment are figured and treated as ‘other,’ or as abnormal, problematic, inessential, and so on. This other-ing of particularly bodied selves is importantly not limited to consciousness—since it both gives rise to and is reinforced by social and political regulations that limit the possibilities and projects available to the individuals and groups constituted as abnormal. However, that it *is* operative on the level of consciousness is significant, since the shaping of self-consciousness in the context of sexism or racism tends to render these oppressions less obvious and more difficult to eradicate, especially by making oppressed groups complicit in them. That is, the normative force of oppression derives not only from the fact that the norms on which it depends are produced and circulated by groups in power, but also from their being reproduced and re-circulated by those they function to constrain most seriously—sometimes even in instances of ostensible resistance. The normative binary of sexist

and racist oppressions, which requires an oppositional organization of “normal” and “perverse” bodies, tends to be socially entrenched by virtue of its being reiterated by those on the “perverse” end of the binary, either by a straightforward (though tacit) repetition of the hegemonic discourse of perversity, or by a simple inversion that redeploys that discourse in reverse, leaving its structural soundness untouched and unquestioned. This reiteration is especially salient in accounts of sex or sexuality, and I want to suggest that Beauvoir appears to be involved in the former sort, while Fanon clearly participates in the latter. Moreover, as we will see, the objects of these reiterations are not limited to sexualized phenomena in the narrow sense.

In the first chapter of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon claims that he is after something larger than the simple admission that the black man is not inferior to the white man. Such an admission would leave too many hierarchical assumptions intact, and would do nothing to “help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment.” (BSWM 30) What is needed in the struggle against colonial oppression is not admittance to the privilege of the colonizer, but a destruction of the symbolic structures that serve to justify and perpetuate it. Despite Fanon’s recognition of this fact, however, his figuration of the black male subject as autonomous and agential is crucially dependent upon the repetition of a normal-deviant sexual binary, in which black masculinity is held up as normal, over against the ‘perversities’ of black femininity, white femininity, and white masculinity. Specifically, Fanon figures black women as nauseating fetishizers of whiteness (typified by the character of Mayotte Capécia), white women as masochists, and white men as repressed

homosexuals.¹⁶ In so doing, he is able to relocate black masculinity to the position of normative sexuality, from its previously imposed social position of deviance and moral suspicion. That is, where the dominant discourse of racism proliferates accounts of black men as insatiable sexual deviants—which Angela Davis points out in her account of “the myth of the black rapist”¹⁷ and Fanon characterizes as “the image of the biological-sexual-sensual-genital-nigger” (BSWM 201)—Fanon posits the black man as normatively heterosexual in contrast with the various perversities which surround him. This is perhaps most clearly the case in Fanon’s direct theoretical confrontation with Michel Salomon, who makes transparently racist claims regarding the “aura of sensuality” (qtd BSWM 201) surrounding black men. Fanon counters this with the declaration, “I have never been able, without revulsion, to hear a *man* say of another man: ‘He is so sensual!’ I do not know what the sensuality of a man is.” (BSWM 201) Rather than simply exposing Salomon’s claims as racist and without basis, Fanon additionally insinuates that his findings on blackness are infected by a “revolting” homosexual desire, and reiterates of the solidity of his own normative heterosexuality. Thus, his argument amounts not to the destruction of the normal-abnormal sexual binary, but to its inversion. Fanon’s account does not question the normativity of masculine heterosexuality, or the ‘perversity’ of homosexuality.¹⁸ Rather, he maintains this duality in its received form, so as to position “the black man” as the legitimately desiring subject, in opposition to the covert deviance of the white homosexual. Likewise, his repudiation of the trope of the black man as sexual predator relies on the characterization of Negrophobic white women as masochists whose “abnormal sex” (BSWM 158) leads them to

¹⁶ I do not, of course, attempt to make a claim about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of any form of sexual desire here. Rather, my contention throughout will be that Fanon’s account of Black masculinity depends upon his own repudiation of various forms of non-normative or marginalized desire.

¹⁷ Davis 1981, 182. See also Collins 2004, 98ff and Sharpley-Whiting 2003.

¹⁸ For more on homophobia in Fanon, see Goldie 1999.

subconsciously “cry out for rape” (BSWM 156) relies on a similar re-location of sexual deviance.¹⁹ Fanon does not so much destabilize existing racialized norms, then, as he does reinscribe them sexually, drawing on pre-existing tropes of homophobia and misogyny.

Where Fanon’s account of racialized sexual subjectivity inverts the dominant binary of normative and perverse bodies, Beauvoir’s account tacitly reinforces the hegemonic discourse of feminine perversity and passivity, even as she attempts to problematize it. She does, of course, object to the “disgust” with which women’s bodies are historically and habitually figured or avoided by fields as diverse as the biological sciences, psychoanalysis, and theology. (SS 167-169) Moreover, she suggests that at the pubescent stage, the bodies of young women begin to be treated not simply as secondary or ‘other,’ but as deviant or reprehensible. As in the case of racism, Beauvoir suggests, sexual oppression depends upon a figuration of the ‘othered’ subject as sexually perverse. “Her inferiority was sensed at first merely as a deprivation;” she writes of the pubescent girl, “but the lack of a penis has now become defilement and transgression. So she goes on toward the future, wounded, shameful, culpable.” (SS 327) However, while Beauvoir foregrounds the ways in which culturally constructed images of the feminine body as dirty and aberrant give rise to shame and sexual passivity in women, she also problematically suggests that the irreducibility of biological sexual difference entails a ‘natural’ passivity and concomitant need for masculine sexual direction. This is not to claim that Beauvoir is a thoroughgoing essentialist; she argues early in *The Second Sex* that women’s bodies, while obviously biologically different from those of men, are not thereby determined to particular vocations or abilities. It is, however, to suggest that Beauvoir’s concessions regarding biological difference,

¹⁹See also Chow 1999.

especially as they influence her account of feminine sexuality, undermine her attempts to subvert the dominant picture of women's sexualities as passive or abnormal.

Women's sexual possibilities are, for Beauvoir, somewhat limited. We might, of course, expect this to be the case, since Beauvoir is giving an account of the effect of sexism on the development of women—but implicit in her account of this contingent development are a set of assumptions about women's 'natural' sexual states. Her account of lesbianism, for example, while considerably less hostile than other prevailing attitudes of the time, to some extent echoes the Freudian story of the Oedipus complex and the rejection of masculinity—which implies an assumption of primary heterosexuality.²⁰ Homosexuality in women, Beauvoir claims, “is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh,” (407) and “an attitude *chosen in a certain situation*—that is at once motivated and freely adopted.” (424) Though she explicitly rejects the claim that homosexuality is a “perversion deliberately indulged in,” Beauvoir appears to suggest that lesbian desire is fundamentally a by-product of the subjugation of women, less a true sexual longing than a coping mechanism. Moreover, Beauvoir's allusion to the “passivity” of feminine flesh hints that sexuality for women, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is severely constrained. In her discussion of sexual initiation, she writes, “the role of initiator belongs to the young man *anatomically and conventionally*. To be sure, the virgin young man's first mistress also gives him his initiation; but even so he has an erotic independence clearly shown by his erection; his mistress simply provides in its reality the object he already desires: a woman's body.” (SS 380, italics mine) That is to say, heterosexual sexuality is always a passive experience for women, even in cases of differential sexual

²⁰For an account that similarly notes Beauvoir's positioning of lesbian sexuality in relation to a Freudian analysis of femininity (though with rather different motives than mine), see Ward 1999.

experience—a fact Beauvoir attributes *not only* to social convention, but anatomy as well. Thus, Beauvoir seems to suggest that women are almost never sexual subjects in the sense of actively desiring and pursuing sexual pleasure. Or, as she puts it in a rather pointed metaphor, “Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusk” (SS 386).

Even more problematic is Beauvoir’s dismissal of some young women’s carefree flaunting of sexual desire (an apparently regrettable behavior she is most willing to attribute to American women) as a failure to experience “genuine erotic reality.” (SS 390) These “deflowered virgins,” as Beauvoir refers to them, have sexual experiences that are not fully emotionally vulnerable, and thus do not constitute mature eroticism. Moreover, Beauvoir claims, many of these women “never get beyond this stage”—an empirical assertion she dubiously bases on the opinions of American men—and thus “will spend their lives in a state of semifrigidity.” (SS 391) It is not clear why Beauvoir disparages this playful attitude with sex as immature; nor is it readily apparent what she has in mind with the characterization of “semifrigidity.” The young women she describes in this section appear to enjoy sex, and even seem to exert some control over their own sexual agencies. However, it seems that true sexual maturity for women is even more elusive than this, since “full development requires that...woman succeed in overcoming her passivity and in establishing a relation of reciprocity with her partner.” (SS 401) That is to say, it is not merely enough for a woman to overcome sexual passivity—a state that Beauvoir has argued is not only social, but biological—in order to have a “genuine” sexual experience; she must also engage in sexual practices that give rise to “mutual recognition” (SS 401) in order to be an authentic sexual agent. Significantly, Beauvoir notes that this almost never happens.

Thus, this account of sexual initiation, rather than problematizing the dominant discourse of feminine sexuality as fundamentally passive or asexual, reinscribes that passivity as irreducibly biological, yet necessarily immature. In this regard her account again echoes the Freudian portrayal of feminine sexuality, in which women are sexually stunted or immature until they attain a particular form of heterosexual, vaginal pleasure (in contrast with a supposedly inferior clitoral pleasure)—or as Beauvoir herself puts it, “in woman there is a choice of two systems, one of which perpetuates juvenile independence while the other consigns woman to man and childbearing.” (SS 373) The picture we get from *The Second Sex* is, then, the following: women’s bodies are denigrated as perverse in popular discourse, and this contributes to their sexual objectification and feelings of passivity; at the same time, however, women’s bodies just *are* sexually passive; lesbianism and heterosexual experimentation are attempts to deal with this passivity, but they are at best immature; genuine sexual fulfillment is possible, but requires a man willing to enter a relationship of reciprocity. So *even if* one had the fortune to become a woman in a non-sexist society, Beauvoir’s account suggests that the primary sexual passivity of the female body constitutes an obstacle to sexual maturity, *and* that this maturity can only be attained in a particular kind of heterosexual relationship. While Beauvoir has, therefore, questioned the social degradation of the female body as dirty, shameful or perverse, she implies that femininity does, in fact, entail a kind of biologically-based sexual deviance²¹, in the form of immaturity that ought to be struggled against—and in rare cases, overcome.

²¹That Beauvoir is simultaneously able to problematize the cultural construction of gendered femininity while at the same time reiterating such tropes at the ‘biological’ level of sex difference gives credence to the doubt with which the sex/gender distinction is approached by later feminists (notably Judith Butler). Indeed, Beauvoir’s apparent vacillation between explanations that figure feminine behaviors as ‘cultural’ or ‘natural’ may give us reason to think that both the nature/culture and sex/gender distinctions are seriously problematic. I will return to this concern—and the potential use of Butler’s critique for its resolution—in the following chapter.

Thus, while the sexual deviance or perversity of women that Beauvoir tacitly reinforces is not identical to that invoked and inverted by Fanon, the normative-perverse binary with which she implicitly operates still tacitly depends, as does Fanon's, upon the dialectical relation of those practices and desires figured as perverse for the constitution of its normative pole. That is, while Beauvoir's discussion of feminine sexuality relies on a picture of deviance as stunted growth or immaturity (in contrast to Fanon's more overt pathologizing), this too requires for its intelligibility the assumption of a particular normative sexual *telos*. That Beauvoir figures the failure to fulfill such a *telos* biological fate of women, unless they are able—with the complicity of a male partner—to transcend it, reaching a “genuine,” normalized sexual experience²² suggests that she, too, leaves intact the dominant normative-perverse binary. Thus, both Fanon and Beauvoir give accounts of oppression that call attention to the centrality of the “othering” of non-normative subjects and their concomitant representation as sexually perverse, while at the same time *reproducing* that discourse of otherness or perversity within their own accounts. This is by no means to discredit Beauvoir and Fanon's insights regarding the function of the normative-other or normative-perverse binaries in sexist and racist oppression; on the contrary, it seems to me that Beauvoir and Fanon's implicit redeployments of those binaries is evidence for the force with which they operate.²³ However, if we are interested in adequately theorizing oppression(s), it is not enough to note these theoretical problems in passing. In the next section, I will suggest that Fanon and Beauvoir share key methodological assumptions that make these

²² It is worth noting that Beauvoir does not explicitly foreclose the possibility that masculine sexuality might also be immature—but the central role played by the passivity of female anatomy in this account renders this dubious.

²³ Indeed, it seems worth questioning whether such binaries are even adequate to the task of conceptualizing the experiences of such a complex spectrum of oppressions and privileges, or whether such restricted binary thinking is itself part of the problem. I will return to this question more explicitly in Chapter 3, in conjunction with my discussion of Foucault and problematization of the discourse of a “constitutive outside” so frequently found in theories of oppression influenced by Hegelian thinking (including that of Judith Butler).

mistakes likely, and that these assumptions, moreover, preclude a full theoretical picture of the relationship between sexism, racism and other forms of oppression.

‘The Woman’ and ‘The Negro’

Beauvoir suggests throughout *The Second Sex* that the situation of women in a sexist society is analogous to that of black persons living with institutional racism, especially in the United States. Beginning in the preface, Beauvoir argues that the oppressive regulations and norms advocated by antifeminists are comparable to Jim Crow legislation, and thus that “there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro. Both are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to ‘keep them in their place’—that is, the place chosen for them.” (SS xxix) The comparison Beauvoir makes here is by no means a novel one; John Stuart Mill bases much of his argument in *The Subjection of Women* on a similar analogy with the Atlantic slave trade, as do writers as diverse as Wollstonecraft and Engels. One might even get the sense from the previous section of this paper that the comparison is an apt one—sexism and racism do function analogously in their figuring and regulation of normative and perverse selves, after all. Nevertheless, I want to resist the comparison Beauvoir is making here between “woman” and “the Negro,” because it occludes the dynamic relationship between sexism and racism by making unwarranted universalizing assumptions about the populations or situations it purports to compare, and thereby undermines the attempt to eradicate either.

In her discussion of the ‘other-ing’ of women, Beauvoir writes, “This situation is not unique. The American Negroes know it, being partially integrated in a civilization that nevertheless regards them as constituting an inferior caste.” (SS 297) Still, she argues, the

analogy does not completely hold: “There is this great difference: the Negroes submit with a feeling of revolt, no privileges compensating for their hard lot, whereas woman is offered inducements to complicity.” (SS 298) In analyzing these claims, we might argue that Beauvoir is ignoring important historical realities regarding the differences in material circumstances of women in contrast to the descendents of African slaves, but to do so would miss a more important point. As Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cherrié Moraga, bell hooks and others have pointed out²⁴, the invocation of the “women vs. negroes” comparison ignores the fact of black women’s existence—such that “the woman” and “the Negro” can function as oppositional figures in the first place. That is, Beauvoir’s comparison, made time and again throughout *The Second Sex*, only makes sense if we assume that ‘woman’ as such is a white woman, and that ‘Negroes’ as such are either sexually indistinguishable or entirely masculine. Moreover, Beauvoir’s repeated references to “men,” as in her claim that “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men,” (SS 143) appear to have a certain group of men in mind, since she seems to regard at least *some* men—specifically, American Negroes—as being excluded from or marginalized in the work of representing and creating the world (we are left to wonder about the representational capacities of gay men, whose existence Beauvoir apparently does not recognize). We are thus left with two rather unhappy alternatives for making sense of Beauvoir’s universalizing assertions about “men” and “women” in contrast with “Negroes.” Either Beauvoir’s analysis is truly only interested in white men and women, and mistakenly uses the terms “men” and “white men”, “women” and “white women” interchangeably, or she

²⁴ See, for example, Lorde 1984 and 1984a, Crenshaw 1997, Moraga 1983, hooks 1984, Spelman 1988, Young 1988.

actually believes that only white men and white women are ‘men’ and ‘women’ as such, in which case her implicit universalizing of their racial identities is reasonable (though much more problematic on a number of other levels). I want to argue that the former is in fact the case, but that it implies more than an unfortunate choice of words.

Occasionally, Beauvoir does make reference to women and men of non-European origin, often with the purpose of demonstrating that some particular institution of sexist oppression is discernible in all times and places. She writes of the disciplinary regulations of feminine dress and bodily maintenance, for example, “this is not only in the civilization of ‘permanents,’ of superfluous-hair removal by means of wax, of latex girdles, but also in the land of Negresses with lip disks, in China and everywhere on earth.” (SS 159) Elsewhere she claims that “in all civilizations...woman inspires man with horror,” (SS 148) and that “civilization as a whole produces this creature.” (SS 267) It seems, then, that Beauvoir recognizes the diversity of women as a group, and that the particular forms sexist oppression takes, while structurally similar, are manifested differently (at least in the details) for women of differing national or ethnic identities. However, the fact that her treatment of these women is confined to an analysis that presumes the segregation of national, ethnic, or racial groups—she does not, for example, mention women of color *unless* they are viewed in a socially homogenous context (as in “the land of the Negresses”)—prevents Beauvoir from considering the effects of concurrent sexism and racism, both in the lives of European and non-European women. Moreover, Beauvoir’s remarking of the race or national origins of women when they are not white, combined with her use of the universal “woman” when they are, has the effect of further disavowing that oppressive relation *both* by treating non-whiteness as abnormal (thus reinforcing the necessity of the normative-other binary) *and* by refusing to recognize the function of racial oppression in the lives of white

women as well. That is to say, the invisibility of whiteness in Beauvoir's text not only actively participates in the "other-ing" of blackness; it also forecloses the possibility of recognizing the particularity of the situation of white women in Europe, as contextualized by sexism, racism, and the imperialism. In other words, Beauvoir's exporting (so to speak) of race and racism has the effect of covering over the function of racism in her own cultural context. With this in mind, Beauvoir's invocation of "The Negro" as a victim of specifically American oppression is especially significant. Why not mention the Algerian, the Antillean, the Haitian, or the situation of the French citizens of African ancestry? It is no doubt true that the legal status of African-Americans at the time of Beauvoir's writing was widely publicized and discussed; it is, however, no less true that France's status as a powerful and wealthy nation depended (and depends) on its gains from colonial imperialism, and that white French men and women benefited (and benefit) from racism both economically and socially, as Fanon's writings attest.²⁵ Thus, as Elizabeth Spelman points out, for middle-class white women like Beauvoir, "race and class are not irrelevant to the oppression they face even though they are not oppressed on account of their race and class."²⁶ Beauvoir's treatment of European women as the prototype of the universal "woman" thus functions as a disavowal of the role of racism in that constitution, such that sexism becomes an isolated oppressive phenomenon with neatly discernible victims and perpetrators.

Fanon does not fare much better under close scrutiny. His analysis of racism in the colonial context consistently assumes a masculine subject, such that "The Negro," as bell hooks

²⁵It is, moreover, demonstrable from her own writings the Beauvoir was troubled by France's racist/imperialist actions in Algeria, as Sonia Kruks (2005) suggests. Despite this fact, she does not appear to recognize herself as privileged and locates the problem of racial oppression squarely in America. See also Alfonso 2005.

²⁶ Spelman 1988, 77.

has rightly noted, refers only to the black man.²⁷ From the first page of the introduction, Fanon acknowledges that his interest is in “Understanding among men...Our colored brothers...” (BSWM 7) and “the liberation of the man of color from himself.” (BSWM 8) We might, of course, simply argue that this admission is preferable to the sort of disingenuous universalization found in an account like Beauvoir’s, but it seems to me that this approach would serve to cover over a central problem: namely, *why* it should be acceptable for Fanon to treat the experience of racist oppression as primarily an experience of black *men*. That is, given that Fanon’s project is motivated by “an effort to understand the black-white relation,” (BSWM 9) and to expose the ways in which that relation gives rise to psychologically damaging “complexes” for those victimized by the social and institutional structure of that relation, it is not at all clear why Fanon should narrow his project as he does. Moreover, the contexts in Fanon’s text in which “the woman of color” appears—or fails to appear—seem to suggest a dismissal of her as inauthentically black, insofar as she is excluded from his general claims about the psychical tolls of racism. It appears, then, that Fanon’s analysis of racism may be *both* radically incomplete (in that it fails to consider the function of racist oppression for a significant segment of the population subjected to it) *and* counterproductive in key ways, since this omission requires an appropriation and redeployment of sexist and racist norms.

Fanon’s assumption of the normative status of black masculinity and hostility toward black femininity is most readily visible in the contrast between his analyses of Mayotte Capécia and Jean Veneuse.²⁸ Both are the subjects of interracial desire, but Fanon is markedly more sympathetic to Veneuse than he is to Capécia. Jean Veneuse is certainly psychically affected by

²⁷ hooks 1984, 40.

²⁸ For varying accounts of this contrast, see for example Bergner 1995 and Sharpley-Whiting 1996.

racism, but his desire is not reducible to those effects. He is in love with a white woman, but this love is the understandable outgrowth of his assimilation to French life. Veneuse's desire for Andrée Marielle is *not* the covert desire for whiteness; however contextualized by the history of colonization it may be, it is not denigrated by Fanon. Capécia, on the other hand, is portrayed as an entirely unsympathetic figure. In the end, Fanon claims, "it is legitimate to say that [she] has definitely turned her back on her country... Depart in peace, mudslinging storyteller..." (BSWM 53) Capécia's desire for a white husband is in fact, for Fanon, the clandestine desire for whiteness, which is a refusal not only of black men but of her country. A treasonous, 'perverse' woman, she and all those like her jeopardize the possibility of "honorable" love by their pernicious need for the commodity of upward social mobility. And while one might hope that such a nasty characterization is clearly distinguished as being reserved *only* for Capécia, and not women of color in general, Fanon is not unambiguous on this point. He often equivocates claims regarding Capécia with those of "the woman of color," claiming that "there are two such women: the Negress and the mulatto. The first has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back." (BSWM 55) Thus, while Fanon does not explicitly say as much, his general descriptions give the impression that women of color are a homogenous group—specifically, a group characterized primarily by the treasonous desire for whiteness.

While Fanon clearly recognizes that black women are affected by racist oppression (without which the desire to turn white would not make sense), the contempt with which he describes them indicates that he is more inclined to understand them as actively complicit in the perpetuation of racism than victimized by it. The sexual rejection of black men is tantamount to the rejection of blackness as such, and thus "the Negress" has, for Fanon, sealed her fate. She is

no longer a subject of consideration. In none of this does Fanon consider the sexist implications of making such damning moral judgments on the basis of a woman's being sexually unavailable to men²⁹, nor does he trouble (except in passing) the viability of theorizing women of color in general on the basis of the figure of Mayotte Capécia. Moreover, in his later analysis of negrophobia, Fanon continually uses the terms "women" and "white women" interchangeably, finally remarking of the woman of color: "I know nothing about her." (BSWM 180) Thus, Fanon not only disavows the woman of color as a legitimate victim of racist oppression; he also paradoxically rejects her as a woman as such by virtue of her racial classification. Fanon thus leaves unthematized the role of sexism (and heterosexism)—both as it shapes the lives and bodies of black and white women, and as it functions in his own account to make him the legitimate arbiter of blackness, and to serve as the normative subject.

Both Fanon and Beauvoir thus give accounts of oppression that isolate the phenomenon in question (that is, racism or sexism) by excluding from consideration populations whose experience of oppression is not most saliently affected by that phenomenon. In so doing, they not only assume (explicitly or implicitly) a particular sort of subject who is then figured as the universal or essential 'woman' or 'negro;' they also fail to adequately theorize the constitution of that universalized figure, since she or he is always also shaped by the forms of domination from which these accounts abstract, even if not by virtue of being oppressed by them. What this

²⁹ This move is all the more disturbing in light of Fanon's characterization of the supposed rape fantasy of (many?) "women": "Basically, does this *fear* of rape not itself cry out for rape? Just as there are faces that ask to be slapped, can one not speak of women who ask to be raped?" (BSWM 156) This question comes in the context of an analysis of Negrophobic white women who 'fear' rape by black men. Interestingly, Fanon's argument suggests that this racist complex is only a variation of a fantasy that is "commonplace for women," thus implying that the desire for rape as such is not specific to the colonial situation. This is deeply troubling for a few reasons: the first is that this analysis appears to imply that women quite simply are *not* the victims of rape; the second is that it overlooks the glaring historical reality of sexual violence perpetrated by white men, especially on the bodies of black women. That is, as Rey Chow notes, Fanon here reveals an "implicit assumption that women are fundamentally unrapable." (1999, 44)

suggests, I think, is that sexism and racism, while theoretically abstractable from one another for the purposes of comparison, will not be adequately theorized as isolated phenomena—or, moreover, as phenomena acting on some presumed, pre-existing subject. Indeed, I want to suggest that a better feminist approach to theorizing oppression(s) must avoid such generalized abstraction and assumptions about the givenness of subjectivity, turning instead to concrete analyses of the effects and functions of complex and multiplicitous discourses of oppression in the particular contexts and for the particular subjects it seeks to thematize.

The characterization of Michelle Obama as “Obama’s baby mama,” for example, makes salient the need to re-conceptualize oppressions without the assumption of their status as obviously discrete phenomena. That is, “baby mama” as a moniker is significant not only because it reduces Mrs. Obama to her relation to Mr. Obama as the mother of his children, but perhaps more importantly, because it explicitly invokes that sexual relation abstracted from the sense of kinship or marriage. One’s “baby mama,” in popular usage, is a woman with whom a man has had a previous sexual relationship—now implicitly disavowed through a term that links her not with himself, but solely with the “baby” in question.³⁰ There is a reason such a woman is not one’s wife, girlfriend or partner. “Baby mama,” moreover, is arguably racialized and classed in particular ways as a result of its popularization in the U.S. through its use in Hip-Hop music³¹ and its appearance in countless paternity-test episodes of exploitative daytime talk shows such as *The Maury Povich Show*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *The Montel Williams Show*. So, when Fox News ran the headline, “Outraged Liberals: Stop Picking on Obama’s Baby Mama!”, the imagery it conjured was decidedly in the tradition of cultural tropes of black feminine

³⁰See Oxford English Dictionary, “Baby Mama.”

³¹ See, for example, Outkast’s “Ms. Jackson,” (2000) Holla Point’s “Baby Mama,”(2004) B Rock and the Bizz’s “MyBabyDaddy” (1997) and Anquette’s “My Baby Mama” (1997).

promiscuity and the “trashiness” of non-nuclear (bourgeois) familial arrangements so frequently on display in popular culture, despite the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Obama had been married for years. Indeed, given the typical use of “baby mama,” its application to Michelle Obama is unintelligible *unless* we recognize it as a deliberately racialized, sexualized and classed term—a term which, in the context of its use by a national news organization as a referent to the wife of a powerful politician, serves explicitly to draw attention to her blackness and her status as a (possibly illegitimate) sexual partner.³² Or, perhaps more accurately, the allusion to Mrs. Obama’s blackness through the “baby mama” label *is at the same time* an allusion to sexual transgression or scandal. That is to say, calling forth the “baby mama” specter involves the citation and reiteration of a particular trope that is reducible neither to sexism nor racism nor classism, but instead draws on the oft-cited and complex piece of cultural imaginary that Patricia Hill Collins has referred to as “the promiscuous black woman.”³³ As such, the application of this term to Mrs. Obama is squarely within the tradition of the Moynihan Report³⁴ which paints black women as overbearing, unpredictable, uncontrollably-breeding matriarchs who drive men away through a combination of loud emasculation and whoring (though it should be noted that the Report locates the cause of this “pathology” in the heritage of slavery). It is through this image that all black women’s relationships become suspect, since, as Gerda Lerner puts it, “Every black

³²The presumption of sexual illegitimacy surrounding black familial relations is confirmed even in an interview with a sympathetic biographer of the Obamas’ marriage, who told the USA Today, “What’s *odd* is that our first non-white first family is really the most all-American, down-to-earth couple we’ve ever had in the White House.” (Wilson 2009, emphasis mine) Complicating this picture is Mrs. Obama’s introduction of Mr. Obama as “my baby’s daddy” at a rally in 2004 (see CNN Transcript). In this context, Mrs. Obama’s use of the phrase appears to be a light-hearted attempt to court audience laughter and/or populist identification, and thus does not carry the same negative connotations as Fox’s invocation of the name in the context of a story about Mrs. Obama’s supposed lack of patriotism. Still, like the joke told by Mr. Obama (pg 18) this phrase works as a joke by tacitly acknowledging its own connotations—which become humorous or light-hearted in juxtaposition with the actual identity or situation of the teller, to whom they do not obviously apply.

³³ Collins 2004, 101.

³⁴ Paradoxically, the Report purported to be sympathetic to the plight of black persons in the U.S. and explicitly characterized its aim as providing a groundwork for new public policy that would contribute to “a stable Negro family structure.” (U.S. Department of Labor 1965)

woman [is] by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology.”³⁵ Interestingly, Mr. Obama implicitly acknowledged this contextualizing mythology when he joked later in the campaign, “some of the rumors out there are getting a bit crazy. I mean...Fox News actually accused me of fathering two African-American children in wedlock.”³⁶

As theorists of intersectionality have pointed out, rather than assuming that such discursive phenomena can be adequately conceptualized through the simple *addition* of pre-existing oppressive discourses, we must think of oppression(s) in a way that allows for a constellation of situations and effects, and with a theoretical apparatus that can account for the complex and diverse oppressive phenomena that result from and are constitutive of disparate locations within the intertwining power relations of hierarchically organized societies. Moreover, as has become clear through our considerations of Beauvoir and Fanon, any such theory of oppression(s) must also avoid assuming a ‘universal’ or ‘general’ bare self—which is always a particular sort of self—as its starting point. That is, there is no such thing as a generic human being; selves are always gendered, raced, classed and sexualized in particular ways, and thus the philosophical pretense to universality is always a covert claim about the primacy of a particular type of view or self. It is just as false that there exists a “generic” woman who could be subsequently subjected (or not) to racist oppression as it is that there exists a universal “one,” and thus the expectation that identities or oppressions should be either abstractable from one another or reducible to some singular factor is radically misguided—and is, as I have suggested, connected with the assumption of some particular, foundational subjectivity.

³⁵ Qtd. in Sharpley-Whiting 2003, 410.

³⁶ Tapper 2008.

Intersections, Subjects and Privilege

Many feminists, recognizing the problems of theorizing oppression in such an abstracted model, have sought to correct these problems through the adoption of “intersectional” analyses of oppression. Indeed, since the 1980s, it has become commonplace in feminist theories to suggest that sexism, on its own, is not a sufficient theoretical model for understanding the situation of many women, whose experiences of oppression may at times be more saliently racist, classist, heterosexist, and so on. Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and Patricia Hill Collins (to name only a few) have forcefully argued that many women, especially women of color and working class women, experience ‘intersecting’ oppressions, and are thus subjected to—often even at the hands of white feminists—unique experiences of oppression that are not reducible to the “sexism” that mainstream feminist theory has traditionally taken to be its object. Audre Lorde puts the problem of differential oppression in striking terms. “Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.”³⁷ While Lorde (like Crenshaw, Collins, hooks, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and many others) acknowledges that women of color and poor women are oppressed in virtue of their being women, she does not grant that this oppression is primary, or even that it is the same sort of sexist oppression experienced by white, middle-class women. Indeed, she argues forcefully that many white women, while affected by sexism, are nevertheless privileged at the expense of women of color, and thus will fail to adequately theorize or resist oppressive power relations as

³⁷ Lorde 1984a, 119.

long as they leave this privilege uninterrogated. Lorde offered one of the most famous criticisms of white-dominated academic feminism at a conference in 1979: “If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?”³⁸ Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins argues that antiracist politics has all too often ignored misogyny and homophobia internal to the movement, and that the failure to interrogate these sensibilities undermines the fight against racism by disavowing the suffering of some Black persons at the expense of others. Addressing the concrete consequences of such a disavowal, she writes, “Violence represents a potentially divisive issue if one form of violence is deemed to be more important than others because the segment of Black people who experience it are deemed more worthy of attention and help.”³⁹ For theorists of intersectionality, it is neither possible nor desirable to isolate some primary or fundamental system of oppression; the attempt to do so ignores the complexity of the lived realities of those individuals whose experiences these theories purport to describe *and* serves to guarantee that only those privileged by the dominant modes of conceptualizing will see the fruits of any political action that arises there from.

Intersectionality thus makes an invaluable critical move, one to which I am largely indebted. Indeed, as a positive theory of oppression(s), it seems to me that the theoretical framework of intersectionality is underappreciated for its potential to offer a radical critique of subjectivity, and moreover, that its underutilization could result in the same problematic

³⁸ Lorde 1984, 112.

³⁹ Collins 2004, 48.

assumptions as the additive analyses we earlier rejected. Ironically, these problematic assumptions are encouraged by the theoretical focus on the situation of women of color to the exclusion of other disparately situated subjects. That is *not* to say that intersectionality's strategy (of drawing attention to the different experiences of oppression women of color have with respect to white women) is not a crucial insight of feminist inquiry, which has come at great cost and effort on the part of many women of color working on the margins of academic and political life. It is, rather, to claim that insofar as feminist philosophers are content to understand the implications of intersectionality as *only* problematizing the situations of *these* women, we leave uninterrogated the constitution of normative subjectivities. The impression that the effects of intersecting oppressions are visited primarily or most importantly on women of color is perhaps connected to the focus of intersectionality's pioneers (though as I will suggest, it is not clear that they ought to be understood as advocating this singular focus). Kimberlé Crenshaw's statement of the purpose of intersectionality runs as follows: "The basic function of intersectionality is to frame the following inquiry: How does the fact that women of color are simultaneously situated within at least two groups that are subjected to broad social subordination bear upon problems traditionally viewed as monocausal—that is, gender discrimination or race discrimination?"⁴⁰ While Crenshaw is without a doubt correct to point out the many ways in which women of color are subjected to material oppression that is not reducible to a singular cause (or even multiple causes forming distinct layers), this fact is, on its own, only part of the story. When those of us who would draw on her insights attend solely to the effects of these oppressive phenomena that could be understood as *subordinating*, we encourage a failure to recognize alternate effects, such as those that privilege, normalize and constitute other groups in opposition to those that are

⁴⁰ Crenshaw 1997, 248.

subordinated. In other words, insofar as philosophical feminist uses of intersectionality retain a theoretical methodology that is interested only in showing the ways in which particular populations are oppressed, they fail to ask questions about the productive effects of oppression on other subjectivities *and* on those it purports to take as its object. Conceptualizing racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism as intersectional oppressions that act on individuals differently depending upon their particular assortment of identity categories may lead us to assume—if we are not sufficiently attentive to the radical potential of such claims for a theory of the constitution of subjects—that individuals as such pre-exist the very sorts of discursive functions that are constitutive of the unique subject-positions intersectionality seeks to highlight.

Gloria Anzaldúa's important work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* at times demonstrates exactly this point, in spite of its otherwise indispensable account of the phenomenological experience of life as a Latina lesbian feminist. Anzaldúa characterizes the experience of life for women 'on the borders' of cultures in this way: "Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits." (BF 42-43) While it is no doubt significant that Anzaldúa's experience of oppression is multi-faceted, and by virtue of her unique position as a Latina lesbian woman in the United States, is different than that experienced by, say, Simone de Beauvoir, her characterization of this experience *alone* is insufficient as a basis for a theory of the emergence of subjectivities within oppression—though it is, of course, doubtful that this her primary Anzaldúa's concern. My concern in what follows, then, is not so much to suggest that Anzaldúa ought to have offered a better systematic philosophy of subjectivity instead of writing about her experiences, as it is to call for ongoing feminist work that builds on hers. If, however, feminist

philosophers (particularly white feminist philosophers) content ourselves with reading about the first-person experience of oppression unaccompanied by an interrogation of the ways in which key features of it, such as “white culture” or “dominant culture” are themselves constituted—at least in part, *through* their repudiation of the oppressed—we may effectively reiterate the non-normative status of that experience. Towards the end of her book, Anzaldúa comes close to precisely this interrogation, as she says to white America, “Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche.” (BF 108) Still, it is not clear that this declaration entails a true troubling of the sort of primary subjectivity that was so problematic in both Fanon, Beauvoir and additive analyses, especially in light of her articulation of the experience of queerness and resistance. She writes:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (BF 102-103)

Anzaldúa thus suggests that, while she (and other Latina lesbians) are affected by the experience of multiplicitous oppression(s), it is possible to transcend this experience in resistance of it, since some bit of core self—which, here, appears to be the queer self—is abstractable from that (otherwise seemingly constitutive) experience of oppression.

The problem, then, is not only that Anzaldúa appears to suggest that there is some universal queerness that is not touched by other cultural phenomena. Rather, this suggestion is indicative of a larger difficulty: insofar as her account takes for granted the discrete status of oppressive discourses and individuals, it remains unable to account for the *contingent and*

constitutive effects of those discourses for those differentially oppressed and privileged by them.⁴¹ In this respect, the intersectional analysis offered by Anzaldúa does not effectively overcome the problems we encountered earlier in this chapter. Returning to the complex example of Michelle Obama should make this point more salient.

When Mrs. Obama is characterized in public as Mr. Obama’s “baby mama” or as a woman who is reminiscent of “Stokely Carmichael in a designer dress” complete with “angry eyebrows,”⁴² these representations draw on and contribute to preexisting and ongoing discourses of racism and sexism. Moreover, the “angry black woman” trope they invoke—potentially militant and decidedly off-putting by virtue of an inability to conform to normative standards of femininity—is, as intersectional analyses demonstrate, irreducible to either racism or sexism, or some “layered” combination thereof. Still, it would be a mistake to assume that this trope *only* acts on Mrs. Obama (despite the fact that she is most explicitly its object), or even only on black women in general. That is to say, the invocation of “baby mama” serves to reinforce the representation of black women as promiscuous, unpredictable and angry *while at the same time* tacitly reinforcing the figure of (white, bourgeois, heterosexual) normative femininity and maternity through the contrast it implicitly draws. In other words, the discourse surrounding Michelle Obama must be understood not only as oppressive, but also as constitutively privileging of particular populations, even (or especially) when those populations do not serve as its direct object. Moreover, this privileging function is operative not only in the cultural imaginary of contrasting figures (or in their representative instantiations in the cases of, for example, Cindy McCain or Sarah Palin), but in Mrs. Obama’s public persona as well.

⁴¹ A reading, I argue, that is further confirmed by Anzaldúa’s suggestion that her resistance of oppression constitutes the formation of a new culture that appears to leave the old one behind in a “conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions.” (BF 104)

⁴²Donahue 2009.

Widely revered as a fashion icon even before her husband's election, Mrs. Obama's appearance on the cover of *Vogue* in March of 2009 was eagerly anticipated and heralded as a significant step for Black women, who are often noticeably absent in the 'image-conscious' (which is, of course, to say "racist") fashion industry. Even as her appearance in such a magazine flies in the face of the 'mammy' and 'jezebel' tropes, it—and the valuation of the Obamas as the idealized black family on which it depends—requires the reiteration of the normativity of middle-to-upper class status. We might, of course, make this point by noting that Mrs. Obama is frequently photographed in custom-made designer dresses, that her Ivy League education is hardly populist, or that her off-the-rack ensembles, which were widely reported by the media as an embrace of "affordable" fashion⁴³, were far beyond the financial reach of many people. That her family is demonstrably wealthy, however, is merely a fact; it does not yet explain what (if any) role that privilege may play vis-à-vis blackness or femininity as such.

To get at this question more directly, I want to turn briefly to Cheryl Harris' article, "Whiteness as Property," in which she argues that "American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness,"⁴⁴ such that whiteness is legally figured and supported as *both* the precondition for legitimate property ownership *and* itself a protectable commodity, such that damages could be sought on the basis of its non-recognition.⁴⁵ Harris suggests that white privilege and property rights are inextricably bound to one another not only because the institution of private property in the United States is historically dependent upon the racialized refusal of the property claims of nonwhites (as in the cases of enslavement of black persons and violent appropriation of Native American lands), but also because they both depend upon the

⁴³ See, for example, Celezik 2008, Clifford 2008, Sanchez 2009.

⁴⁴ 1993, 1713.

⁴⁵ As, for example, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

right to exclude—such that racial privilege requires the subordination of non-normative groups and guarantees its bearers rights to their (white or non-white) adjudication. Such rights are maintained in the present, according to Harris, through the legal adoption of the fiction of “colorblindness,” which, through its denial or ignorance of historical context, effectively establishes “white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline.”⁴⁶ What is interesting about Harris’ article for my purposes is the way in which its articulation of the relationship between racial identity and property renders visible the complex and interdependent nature of racial, class-based and sexualized privileges. Specifically, reading Harris’ article in light of the Obamas’ status as a wealthy, popular, idealized heterosexual family suggests that the embodiment of some (indeterminate, unstable) set of normative class—and, I would add, sexual—characteristics may be figured as a kind of honorary whiteness. Interestingly, this is the implicit claim of Karl Rove’s statement in the *New York Times* in an article comparing the Obamas to the fictional Huxtable family of *The Cosby Show*: “We’ve had an African-American first family for many years in different forms. When ‘The Cosby Show’ was on, that was America’s family. It wasn’t a black family. It was America’s family.”⁴⁷ Blackness, in this case, is purported to be mitigated by a normalized, middle-class familial relationship. The Obamas, like the Huxtables, are palatable to the white world by virtue of the fact that they are (as Cosby pointed out) “a two-parent unit with an educated father and mother...[with a] commitment to success and excellence.”⁴⁸ Thus, while Harris is no doubt correct to suggest that whiteness as such functions as property possessed even by working-class white persons, the sorts of privileges she attributes to whiteness are *also* properties of other culturally-relevant identity categories,

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1714

⁴⁷ Arrango 2008.

⁴⁸ Braxton 2008.

such that some black persons who are denied the property of whiteness are concomitantly granted the property of, say, bourgeois heterosexual marriage. And *this* sort of property or privilege, moreover, is (as we saw previously) implicitly granted in both Fanon and Beauvoir's assumptions of a legitimate 'natural baseline' of normative sexual arrangements. Thus, it is not only the case that racialized, sexualized and classed discourse are frequently impossible to untangle (such that we could point to their clear "intersections"); it is also the case that these tangled discourses have simultaneously oppressive and privileging constitutive effects, even for a single individual or population.

The fact that Barack Obama could ridicule the "crazy" rumors of his family's unwitting, farcical appearance in Fox News' paternity-test-esque headline is indicative of the extent to which the Obamas *do* in fact model the ideal of the bourgeois family. In this respect, then, the feminist interest in the "momification" of Mrs. Obama is significant: the carefully-constructed public representations of Michelle Obama that are authorized by the White House *both* function as a reactionary effort to shore up confidence in the Obamas as normative and non-threatening *and* gain traction by virtue of their status as an extension of the tacit repudiation of non-traditional, working-class familial and sexual arrangements. Thus the popular discourse surrounding Mrs. Obama is continuous with currently operative racialized, gendered, classed and sexualized norms—but it would be a mistake to construe these normative discourses as solely or even primarily oppressive. They are, just as significantly, productive of particular representations and selves, and Mrs. Obama's situation within them is, perhaps unsurprisingly, complex.

The problem, however, is not merely that some uses of intersectional analyses fail to account for the ways in which oppressive discourses are simultaneously privileging of particular normative populations. Rather, it seems to me that this omission is indicative of a larger problem: insofar as uses of intersectional analyses conceive the oppressions they take as their objects as phenomena transparently distinct from the selves on which they act (a methodological starting point that may be at least partially encouraged by the “intersection” metaphor), they tacitly make the same sorts of assumptions that proved so damaging to the sorts of abstracting accounts put forth by Fanon and Beauvoir. Specifically, insofar as intersectional analyses conceive the oppressions they take as their objects as phenomena distinct from the selves on which they act, they tacitly make the same sorts of assumptions that proved so damaging to the sorts of abstracting accounts put forth by Fanon and Beauvoir. As long as we conceive Mrs. Obama and other black women as the foci of intersecting racist and sexist oppressions which subsequently give rise to particular sort of experience, while failing to problematize the constitutive features of these oppressions for those subjects and for other populations, we unwittingly involve ourselves in the mistake of Beauvoir—recognizing the other-ing force of oppressive discourse but reproducing it in our own account by problematizing *only* non-normative experiences. Still, even if we expand an intersectional account such that it has room for a discussion of privileging effects of oppressive discourse, we may not avoid the primary problem. Should our analysis include a discussion of the ways in which intersecting discourses of oppression in public representations of Mrs. Obama reinforce dominant images of ideal white femininity, we still, as long as we leave untroubled the tangled histories and constitutive effects of such discourse for both the subjects and norms involved, we may tacitly invoke a normative-perverse binary that reinforces the ideology of normative subjectivity we would like to

undermine. Insofar as feminist philosophers fail to make full use of the insights of intersectionality by asking questions about the constitution of both normative and oppressed subjectivities in and through the discourses of oppression we would analyze and subvert, we undermine those efforts by assuming the transparency and given-ness of selves—which, as Fanon and Beauvoir have inadvertently demonstrated, is a significant mistake. Is it possible to avoid this error? What sort of theoretical methodology would be required? And does problematizing the constitution of selves through the productivity of oppressive discourse undermine feminist efforts to act politically in concretely transformative ways? I have not yet begun to attempt an answer to these pressing questions; the following chapters will move further away from the current critical enterprise and toward the more difficult task of providing affirmative answers.

CHAPTER II

SIGNIFYING ‘HILLARY’:

MAKING POLITICAL SENSE WITH BUTLER AND DEWEY

In the months leading up to the first Democratic primary elections that preceded the Democratic National Convention at which Barack Obama was officially nominated as the party’s candidate for President, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton emerged as the first viable woman candidate for President of the United States. Indeed, for nearly a year prior to the first primary elections, the supposed “inevitability” of then-Senator Clinton’s nomination by the DNC was widely reported on by the mainstream American news media, and given the significant unpopularity of the outgoing Republican leadership, many analysts fully expected 2008 to bring a second Clinton administration to the White House—this time run by “Hillary,” at least in name.¹ Upon Mr. Obama’s success in the Iowa caucuses and “Super Tuesday” elections, however, the certainty of Sen. Clinton’s becoming the first woman President of the United States began to fade, and public discussions of the relationship between sexism and racism began to proliferate and intensify. These public discussions were frequently couched in terms of “the media’s” treatment of Clinton and Mr. and Mrs. Obama, and circulated in a parallel, but not always connected, discourse around sex and race as identity categories, especially as expressed in the general demographic makeup of Sen. Clinton’s supporters as opposed to that of Sen. Obama’s supporters. “Women” supported the woman candidate, and black people would

¹Less optimistic (or kind) voices suggested that “Billary” would be more accurate nomenclature, given former President Bill Clinton’s significant visibility in his wife’s campaign. (Rich 2008)

obviously back the black candidate—so the thinking typically went. As the primary season wore on and it became clear that “women” were far from unified on their support of a single candidate, public discussion became increasingly concerned with clearly demarcating women by type, in order (it seemed) both to facilitate the sort of neatly-compartmentalized demographic analysis of voting trends that networks, pundits and campaigns alike love, and to rejoice in having successfully answered the question of the ‘most important’ aspect of identity and discrimination so easily. The findings went something like this: black people in general, including black women, voted for Obama. White women, as long as they were over 35, backed Clinton. Younger white women, who were widely reported to be *Sex and the City*-loving “post-feminists,” had no allegiance to the women’s movement and thus voted for Mr. Obama. “Hispanics” supposedly backed Sen. Clinton, though we were left to wonder whether this included Latin American women, as public discussion generally omitted any reference to gender in populations beyond the black-white binary. Likewise, white working class voters (to whom Sen. Clinton famously referred as “hardworking Americans, white Americans”²) were generally thought to be a reliable Clinton bloc, either because they were too racist or too suspicious of the “elitist” label that dogged Sen. Obama following his public confession of arugula-eating.

² Kiely and Lawrence 2008.

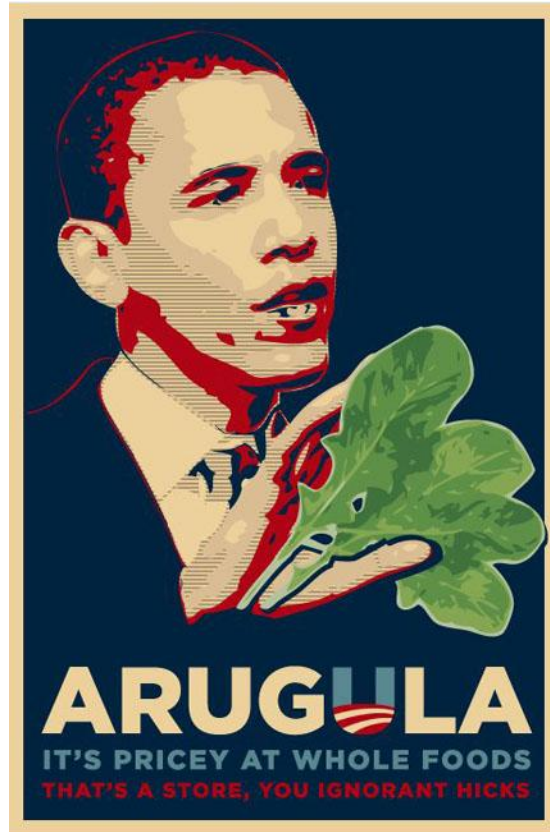


Figure 1: “Introducing Barack ‘Arugula’ Obama,” Michelle Malkin, Apr. 15, 2010

Interestingly, discussion of the existence of gender, age, or sexuality differences among working class white people was practically nonexistent, as was any mention of class or sexuality differences among people of color.

Of interest to me here are the connections—or more often, lack of connections—made in these demographic discussions of identity categories of the voting public to the more pointed question of sexism and racism as phenomena supposedly targeted at Senator Clinton and the Obamas, respectively. That is, while it seems reasonable to suspect that there is some relationship between sex, race, class, and sexuality as identity or demographic categories, and

sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism as social phenomena with negative effects for particular individuals, the status and function of that relationship remains in question, both in the realms of popular political discourse *and* (as I argued in the first chapter) in the theoretical stance of certain articulations of intersectionality. While popular political discourse tends to represent sexism and racism as encapsulated in isolated events with clearly demarcated victims and perpetrators—as in the case of a demonstrator at a Clinton campaign stop who held up a sign reading “Iron My Shirt”—and theories of intersectionality maintain that sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism may be institutional phenomena for which responsibility is less simple to pinpoint, *both* tend to operate on the tacit assumption that such oppressive phenomena are separable from the individuals which are their objects. For even when Beauvoir, Fanon, hooks and Crenshaw maintain that the subjectivities of oppressed peoples are shaped by these phenomena—whether singular or intersecting—the subjectivities thereby problematized are *only* those of non-normatively-bodied subjects. To ask whether and how Clinton’s being referred to as “shrill” or “bitchy” shaped her experience as a gendered subject, or even the gendered experience of “women” as a whole, is thus insufficient. In order to get at a more adequate theory of the effects and functions of oppressive phenomena, it will be necessary to ask how such discourse operates both to dominate and privilege, and so to constitute, a spectrum of differently embodied subjects. My suggestion throughout this chapter, therefore, will be that the problems evident in popular discussion of voter demographics and identity are directly related to the functions of racism and sexism in the election and discourse surrounding its central figures.

In order to make this argument, I will draw on the works of Judith Butler and John Dewey, as thinkers who have forcefully argued for the social—if not discursive—constitution of subjects. I am specifically interested in drawing out the implications of a linkage of Butler’s

notion of performativity and Dewey's discussion of habits, as well as Butler's citational account of discursive power and Dewey's interactional account of meaning and matter. Though it is not altogether common to unite these figures theoretically (even if it is becoming more so, especially in the wake of Shannon Sullivan's excellent work on whiteness³, to which I am indebted), I do so here with the intent of drawing out an account of the relationship between discourse and selves with a robust conception of the materiality of the bodily organism that allows for a conception of the emergence of differently bodied selves in and through (racialized, sexualized, gendered, classed) normalizing discourses. My suggestion will be that an analysis of the discourse surrounding Clinton both illustrates why Butler's citational account is necessary and why it needs to be supplemented by attention to Dewey's interactional understanding of meaning-making. My claim will be that adding Dewey to Butler both circumvents the problems of 'discursification' (with which so-called 'post-modernists' are so frequently charged), and prepares the way for a theory of the constitution of subjects that takes seriously not only their historicity, but relationality as well. Thus, this theoretical linkage will provide the resources for addressing the problem with which this chapter began, as well as laying the groundwork for a more fully articulated account of the spectrum of productive effects of discursive and regulatory power, to which I will turn in the following chapter. For the moment, however, it will be necessary to ask how discourse and bodies are related, and what this might mean for an understanding of the functions of popular discourses surrounding a public figure like Hillary Rodham Clinton, especially as they are conceived in relation to that 'public' of which they are a part.

³Sullivan 2006.

Performativity, Discourse and “Hillary”

By now, the declaration that Hillary Clinton was the subject of sexist language in the mainstream media covering the Presidential election is so commonplace as to be nearly boring. A brief recitation of the sorts of misogyny directed at Clinton would have to include not only the subtle public repetition of the questions regarding her “likeability” and general fashion sense, but more blatant statements as well. In what follows, I want to conduct a brief analysis of a few moments of what most people would recognize as moments of egregious sexism, not so much for the purpose of rehashing the myriad ways in which then-Senator Clinton was personally victimized as for illuminating the ways in which such violations are more complex than they initially appear. This muddying of the waters is intended with a view to showing why an approach such as those offered by Butler and Dewey is necessary for understanding such discourse’s efficacy as *both* sense-making and normalizing.

On his MSNBC show, Tucker Carlson famously said of Clinton, “When she comes on television, I involuntary cross my legs.”⁴ He later repeated a different version of the same remark in conjunction with a segment on Hillary Clinton Nutcracker Dolls being sold online, which featured “stainless steel teeth secured inside upper legs to grip and crack nuts,” according to the company website.⁵ Later, Glenn Beck remarked, “There’s something about her vocal range. There’s something about her voice that just drives me -- it’s not what she says, it’s how she says it. She is like the stereotypical...bitch,”⁶ while Chris Matthews dubbed the political men

⁴Tucker 2007, July 9 and July 16.

⁵*The Official Hillary Nutcracker and Corkscrew Bill Website!* 2009.

⁶*The Glenn Beck Program* 2007, March 15.

endorsing her candidacy “castratos in the eunuch chorus.”⁷ And in a town-hall meeting, Republican candidate John McCain responded to the query, “How do we beat the bitch?” with the little-reported quip, “That’s an excellent question.”⁸ The reiteration of the image of Clinton as a castrating bitch, whose very physical presence evokes fear or repulsion in men, might be partially understood as yet another manifestation of the no-win situation in which women find themselves: be ‘nice’ and appear weak, or be aggressive and be derided as bitchy. And yet, such an explanation on its own is insufficient, for it fails to account for the implicit centrality of the masculinity of the speakers in such rhetorical flourishes that ostensibly take a woman as their object.

How are we to understand such repeated and thinly-veiled references to the penis in conjunction with the repetition of the appellation, “bitch”? A bitch, of course, is technically a canine, and the implicit metaphor drawn whenever this name is invoked functions to liken the woman in question to an animal, specifically an animal with a jarring voice and threatening teeth, which must be caged or restrained rather than reasoned with or loved. This particular evocation is evident in Beck’s description of his reaction to the timbre of Clinton’s ‘bark.’ Interestingly, however, what is not foregrounded in his statement is the middle section in which he cuts himself off: “there is something about her voice that just drives me—.” Before Beck’s own repulsion or anxiety can become the central focus, it is foreclosed in favor of a return to Clinton’s supposed vocal provocation. We are given to understand, though, that Clinton does constitute some form of threat. Her voice connotes biting teeth, she is something that “we” must conspire to “beat,” if “we” are to have any hope of living without the hypervigilance required to

⁷Fortini 2008.

⁸Tapper 2007.

shield “our” genitals with a leg crossed just in time. And lest we have any doubts about the potential threat that bitches such as Clinton pose to the penis, Matthews is ready to hold up those “castratos” for whom it is too late, whose feminized voices rise up as a warning cry for those who would avoid the unthinkable. It is true, of course, that not all references to Clinton as a bitch contain an explicit reference to castration, and neither do all references to castration explicitly use the nominative “bitch.” All of the above statements, however, invoke Clinton as an explicit or implicit threat to the masculine subject(s) in question—a threat which remains, for the most part, inarticulable.

Given the expression of this threat—in language which is alternately evocative of a dangerous animal and potential dis-memberment—it is reasonable to look to the psychoanalytic tradition for an explanatory framework for this particular discourse.⁹ Specifically, Freud’s writings on animal phobias and the castration complex make particularly salient the implications of these connections as containing more than they initially appear to contain. While Freud famously argues for the primacy of a literal fear of castration as the source of much anxiety that appears to be related to something external, more interesting in this case is his analysis of his patient dubbed the ‘Wolf-Man,’ whose fear is less focused on literal castration than sexual anxiety. The Wolf-Man’s animal phobia is analyzed by Freud as a symptom of his repression regarding his relationship with his father, but not on the common Oedipal model. The fear of wolves is not, as in the famous case of ‘Little Hans,’ the displaced fear of an actual castration at the hands of the father; rather, according to Freud, the ‘Wolf-Man’ has maintained the pre-

⁹ The reading that follows is a (feminist) Freudian one, though my intention in rehearsing it is not to argue for a Freudian—or even straightforwardly psychoanalytic—conclusion regarding sexist political discourse. Indeed, as I suggest below, while such a reading may function as a useful tool for making sense of the relations between seemingly disparate meanings in such discourse, it serves, at the same time, to foreground the extent to which standard psychoanalytic accounts themselves are in need of attention to that which is unexpressed: the socio-political practices that make them meaning-full.

Oedipal passive, tender attitude toward his father, which has given way to an “impulse to be loved by him in a genital-erotic sense.”¹⁰ However, this desire by itself does not cause the repression. Freud writes, “he thought that a relation of that sort presupposed a sacrifice of his genitals—the organ which distinguished him from a female.”¹¹ The ‘Wolf-Man’ would thus be symbolically castrated by maintaining this passive sexual attitude, and it is only fear of this fate (which Freud *directly* links with femininity) that leads him to repress his fantasy. Thus, if Freud is correct, the fear of castration may not be the literal fear of the loss of the penis, but a displaced anxiety about being made passive, which Freud rather problematically equates with repressed homosexual desire—an equation that is echoed in the rhetoric around Clinton.

Ironically, then, the discourse of anxiety or repulsion around Clinton can be read not only as an indictment of her public persona, but also as a paranoid concern about the status of the speaker’s masculinity, and concomitantly, his place within normative heterosexuality. The fear of a symbolic castration at the hands of Clinton-the-bitch would thus be an expression of the perceived threat of homosexuality, and the vigilance required to stave off potential effeminizing.¹² This reading gains traction when we recall that the band of “castratos” Matthews references are largely gay men, and that Clinton’s popularity in homosexual communities is well-documented, especially subsequent to her interview with *Philadelphia Gay News*, which both Obama and McCain declined to give.¹³ Interestingly, this implicit homophobia both

¹⁰ Freud 1964, 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹² Following Eve Sedgwick’s account of “homosexual panic” in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), we would thus understand Clinton’s perceived “threat” as a projection of fear about the instability or impurity of one’s own masculine heterosexuality—a feature which is “applicable to the definitional work of an entire gender, hence of an entire culture.” (19) The claim, then, is not that the users of this sexist rhetoric are individually or personally insecure about their masculinity or heterosexuality, but that the *normativity* of normative heterosexuality requires the reiteration of this sort of homosocial public repudiation of homosexuality.

¹³ Associated Press 2008a. See also Carole 2008.

contains the tacit admission of the instability of one's own heterosexual identity *and* the claim that Clinton (or whichever castrating bitch happens to be the current object of ire) bears responsibility for it. Clinton thus takes on the status of a carrier of the contagion of homosexuality in such discourse, whose repudiation is necessary to shore up confidence in one's masculinity—which is to say, one's sure status as a heterosexual agent. What had appeared to be the curious inclusion of irrelevant references to the masculinity of their speakers in insults ostensibly focused on Clinton might in fact be crucial to grasping their full meaning—which speaks not only to gender roles, but to the regulation of sexualities.

None of this is to claim that there is a necessary connection between castration, sexual passivity, and homosexuality; neither is it to suggest that every deployment of the word “bitch” is a covert or unconscious confession of repressed homosexual desire. The presumption of epistemic universality that such a reading as Freud's would require is (I think) untenable, and such a reading will not help us understand the ways in which the discourses around homosexuality, femininity, masculinity, and so on, get off the ground as meaning-full in the first place—apart, that is, from reductively biological claims, which cannot stand up under more pressing questions. As Kelly Oliver has persuasively argued, Freud's restriction of the sociality of psychic formation to the family drama leaves his account seriously lacking in resources to account for the various subject positions and subjectivities within which such hierarchically-organized meanings are intelligible.¹⁴ That is to say, even if Freud's linkage of the return of repressed homosexual desire with anxiety about the security of the penis and concomitant fear of feminization make partial sense of the bitch-discourse surrounding Clinton (a claim which is

¹⁴Oliver 2004, introduction. Sullivan (2006, 22ff) makes a similar point about what she calls Freud's “atomistic unconscious.”

certainly debatable), the enabling conditions of this sense-making are still unclear. What pre-existing significations are necessary, for example, in order to even make sense of the use of canine and castration imagery in connection with particular sorts of persons? And in what respects are those pre-existing significations already involved in racialized and classed contexts that are not foregrounded in their ostensible meanings? To begin answering *these* questions, we need an account of bodily meaning-making that can problematize the rigidly universal one offered by Freud.

The most obvious place to turn for an account of the making of bodily meaning—especially in the context of the significations surrounding gender—is perhaps Judith Butler’s work on performativity. Indeed, Butler’s work might be read as a corrective to the universalizing impulses of Freudian psychoanalysis, concerned as it is to problematize the notion of a paternal law “that works the same way in every possible social and discursive universe,” and instead to interrogate “how the domains of the unconscious are produced”¹⁵ in particular signifying contexts. In what follows, my concern will be with Butler’s articulation of the means of such production, particularly as it is conceived as contributing to the constitution of differently situated subjectivities. In so doing, my concern will *not* primarily be in a detailed engagement with Butler’s particular formulation of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis Freud. Rather, my interest will be in drawing out Butler’s account of the “how” of bodily signification—which, I suggest, *may* be useful for psychoanalytic accounts, but which is equally beneficial for the pragmatic account of meaning I will offer here. My contention, then, is that while Butler’s own work does put discourse analysis and speech-act theory to use in the service of a specifically feminist psychoanalysis, the account it develops of the production of meaning need not be used in exactly

¹⁵ Bell 2010, 132.

this way. In fact, the account I will offer here is not specifically psychoanalytic in its claims—though it does certainly have affinities with some versions of some feminist or anti-racist redeployments of psychoanalysis (such as, for example, those offered by Butler, Fanon, Oliver and Sullivan). This is not to reject the value of such a version of psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework or theoretical tool in particular circumstances; it is, however, to insist that psychoanalysis, like phenomenology or discourse analysis, is one theoretical tool amongst others that may be more or less useful depending on one’s purposes, and not a necessary component of any theoretical account of the formation of subjectivity. I have chosen to pair Butler’s account of signification with a Deweyan pragmatic account of meaning rather than an explicitly psychoanalytic account because I am wary of the potential tendency to foreground sex to the exclusion of other modes of signification (a potential that is, I think, exacerbated by psychoanalysis’ reliance on the family drama, even when the universality of that drama is explicitly questioned) *and* (as I will explain in the following chapter) Butler’s tendency to emphasize rejection, repudiation, and disavowal of the “constitutive outside” in the formation of subjects, to the exclusion of a serious consideration of the various degrees or modes of relation- to that shape identity. In order to explain how Dewey’s account might thus helpfully supplement Butler’s in this regard, however—and why Butler’s discussion of signification remains indispensable for me—it is necessary to recount briefly to her discussion of bodily meaning-making.

Drawing on the claims of speech-act theory, which suggests that particular sorts of signifying speech not only describe or refer, but *enact* the very thing to which they refer (as in the declaration, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”), Butler argues that cultural practices beyond traditional speech function as gendered performances that produce the bodily

significations we understand as femininity, sexuality, and so on. Moreover, these significations are not only external markers that enable us to more easily “read” pre-given (male or female, straight or gay) selves, but are, for Butler, directly involved in the production of those selves. Indeed, Butler argues that there is no foundational ‘self’ of subjectivity, but that this subjectivity “is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (GT 34) That is to say, “subjects” are fabrications posited after the fact to serve as explanations for the reiterations of certain kinds of signifying practices, notably gendered practices. However, this subjectivity is not declared and instituted once-for-all-time, since becoming coherently gendered—which is, for Butler, becoming a coherent subject—is never complete. Rather, because “gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time,” (GT 22) it is necessary to engage in a continual reiteration or reenactment of those practices that suggest the ideal of a core identity. Butler understands these gendered practices as performative because they are engaged in *producing* the selves that they are ostensibly expressing or representing. And while some earlier philosophers (such as those in the existentialist movement) would agree that the self becomes what it is through its actions, Butler is making a larger claim than this. Specifically, she is arguing that the recognition of ‘actions’ and ‘selves’ as discrete entities in the first place requires a prior discursive construction that categorizes them as such. “The enabling conditions for an assertion of an ‘I,’” she writes, “are provided by the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of that pronoun, the practices that establish the terms of intelligibility by which that pronoun can circulate.” (GT 196) In other words, in order for subjects and actions to be what they are in the first place, they must operate according to certain rules of signification—or, as Butler puts it elsewhere, “to become a subject means to be subjected to a set of implicit

and explicit norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject.” (ES 133) Thus, not only are subjects denominated retrospectively to account for certain patterns of action; those patterns of action are themselves regulated, produced, and recognized *as* patterns by virtue of their participation in a particular discursive regime.

What this means is that performances are meaningful—or, in the more traditional parlance of speech-act theory, utterances are felicitous or efficacious—to the extent that they operate within and according to recognized conventions of discourse.¹⁶ It is only the case, for example, that we easily recognize Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama as “women” because particular aspects of their gendered performances, such as hair and clothing style, patterns of walking, talking, etc., run according to fairly typical patterns we have learned to understand as appropriate for women. However, Butler suggests that such repetitive performativity—in which each one of us is involved, consciously or not—is not to be understood on the model of a theatrical performance in which costumes are put on or changed at will. Rather, because this performativity is, as I noted above, the very process of subject-construction, it is more often than not the case that we could not help but participate in particular performative acts. She writes, “it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity.” (BTM 94-95) The constraint to which Butler refers here is, paradoxically, not merely (or even primarily) the constraint of external behavioral regulation—the Law of the Father that corrects or punishes—but a constraint that operates through delimiting the realm of possible acts of sense-making. Importantly, Butler suggests that

¹⁶It is important to note here that Butler’s redeployment of speech-act theory expands the concept of meaning and efficacy beyond literal acts of speech or utterances of language. Indeed, throughout this chapter, my use of the phrases “signification” and “signifying practices” is meant to encompass not only linguistic meanings, but meaningful cultural practices that, while closely linked to literal language-use, are not limited to the speech or writing of words.

this delimitation functions not only through its cognitive effects (that is, giving shape to the ways we ‘read’ or apprehend given phenomena), but as “the power of discourse to *materialize* its effects,” such that what is given, inhabited or performed is itself the result of “the historicity of discourse, and, in particular, the historicity of norms [which] constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names.” (BTM 187, italics mine) Thus, the signifying practices that make up gender become effective as signifiers—and as creating that which they signify—by virtue of their repetition of and participation in already-operative conventions of gender performativity, whose status as conventional or normative is re-secured (at least in part) through that repetition. And, the force with which such gendered significations operate is enough to effectively rule out certain possibilities of performance—or better, to render them (materially, psychically) impossible from the start.

According to this notion of performativity, then, both the intelligibility and the lived experience of something called “femininity” is produced and reinforced through the reenactment of particular practices that work by circumscribing the available bodily possibilities. Moreover, such instances of bodily signification are not limited to gender performativity, but include innumerable and interconnected discursive regimes. Borrowing a term from Derrida, Butler maintains that the regulative force of, say, gender discourse, is its “citationality,” which is to say, its repetition of previous discursive acts which themselves have a history of meaning. My performance of femininity succeeds in constituting me as an intelligible (woman) subject to the extent that it continually participates in recognizably feminine symbolic practices—dressing, speaking, walking, and desiring in ways characterized as feminine. Nevertheless, their authority as recognizable and to some degree constraining does not proceed from their having been instituted as top-down regulations by those in political power (since such power, for Butler, itself

has to be accounted for citationally), but instead because these actions refer laterally to other actions, and do so in such a way as to cultivate the impression of a naturalized femaleness as their cause. Or as Butler puts it, “a performative ‘works’ to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized.” (ES 51) What this means is that I, to the degree that I become a coherent ‘I,’ am at the same time the effect of *and* an implicated participant in the discursive regime of gender. That is, the citational practices of heterosexual desire and bodily manipulation (for example) that constitute me as female *both* depend upon previous iterations of such practices for their normative force *and* contribute, as re-iterations, to their continued normative authority. So, the gender performatives that constitute subjectivity do so not only by conforming to discursive rules of intelligible speech-acts; they also contribute to the fixing and reinforcing of those rules.

In the case of Hillary Clinton, then, we might say that her performative enactment of “woman” (to isolate, for the moment, an artificial abstraction for the purpose of illustration) draws on and reiterates certain conventions that make her intelligible as such—standards of dress, tone of voice, a propensity for smiling, and so on—*and* that her reiterations of these conventions act *both* on her and other subjects constituted as ‘women,’ literally giving shape to the bodies of herself and those others. That is, if Butler is right to claim that discourse acts on and constitutes bodies, that “discourse” as such is not limited to literal talking or writing, but includes all manner of signifying practices, and that repetitions of previous discursive practices reconsolidate the power of those practices to shape others for whom they are constitutive, then it must be the case that Clinton’s participation in the discursive regime of femininity has effects on the bodies of many other individuals than herself. Moreover, these effects may well be more far-reaching in their efficacy by virtue of Clinton’s status as a public figure (a point to which I will

return in chapter 3). Additionally, if Butler is correct in her characterization of the effects of discourse on bodies, it seems that the popular political discourse that proliferates images of bitches and castration in connection with a particular performance (or perhaps, with a failed performance) of femininity has effects on the bodies and possibilities of women far beyond Clinton—and, as I will argue, beyond “women” as such.

That such misogynist language has consequences for all women is perhaps an intuitive feminist point, but it is by no means clear (as yet) how this might happen, or what would have to be the case in order for Butler to be correct in her claims about the effects of discourse on material bodies. That is to say, in order for us to make sense of the claim that discourse ‘materializes its effects,’ or that the formation of feminine bodies is a “discursive” process, we must have in mind a set of tacit ontological claims about the status of bodies and discourse. Making these claims explicit is the project of Butler’s book *Bodies that Matter*, which seeks to refute the objection by other feminist thinkers that conceiving gendered subjectivity as performative and discursive renders physical bodies unimportant, and oppression more textual than material. Her argument in this book is interested in foregrounding the fact that the philosophical appeal to “matter” as undeniably real, especially in the case of the materiality of the body, is at the same time the tacit appeal to a particular discursive history, which “is in part determined by the negotiation of sexual difference.” (BTM 29) The notion of the body or material world as brute, opaque, inert stuff, for example, in contrast with the mind or spirit as active, intelligent, or intentional, is suffused with a philosophical inheritance transmitted at least since Plato and Aristotle’s form-matter distinction, which itself depends upon politically loaded

assumptions regarding ‘male’ and ‘female’ principles.¹⁷ It is hardly the case, then, for Butler, that the materiality of the body should be taken for granted as a starting point, since to do so would “invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should surely be an *object* of feminist inquiry, but which would be quite problematic as a *ground* of feminist theory.” (BTM 49) Still, it is unclear whether Butler’s inquiry into those discursive histories does in fact offer a satisfactory account of their relation, since her reiteration of the claim that discursive or signifying practices shape what we understand as brute “matter” in the first place at times contains the implicit admission that “matter” as such is opposed to discourse, and for that reason able to be shaped or constructed by it. For while Butler rightly points out that the materiality of the body can neither be understood as a bare foundation upon which social construction occurs, nor as “a unilateral or causal *effect* of the psyche in any sense that would reduce that materiality to the psyche or make of the psyche the monistic stuff out of which that materiality is produced and/or derived,” (BTM 66) other moments within her text complicate these claims. My worry here is not that Butler has unwittingly discursified life in the manner of a caricatured postmodernist, in which all is discourse and oppression is merely one other kind of language game. Such a view is radically inattentive to the extent to which the “signifying process...is always already material,” (BTM 68) and it perhaps takes a philosopher to overlook the fact that words and signs are physical things, which we see, hear, speak, write, groan and show. Rather, my concern is with her concurrent suggestion, “but if language is not opposed to materiality, neither can materiality be summarily collapsed into an identity with language...what allows for a signifier to signify will never be its materiality alone; that materiality will be at once an instrumentality and deployment of a set of larger linguistic relations.” (BTM 68) In view of

¹⁷ Butler makes this point using Plato’s *Timaeus*, paying special attention to the figure of the chora; a similar point could also be easily made using Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Parts of Animals*.

the fact that signification as a phenomenon is always conducted physically, Butler's unwillingness to wholeheartedly embrace the coextensiveness of the material and discursive realms looks rather odd, at best rendering these claims needlessly opaque and at worst betraying a significant ambivalence at the heart of her work. Indeed, a closer analysis of the passage in *Bodies that Matter* in which Butler explicitly takes up the question of language and materiality undermines her ability to account for the 'materializing' effects of discursive practices.

The passage in Butler's text containing her most overt discussion of materiality, referent and signifier is worth quoting in full:

The materiality of the signifier will signify only to the extent that it is impure, contaminated by the ideality of differentiating relations, the tacit structurings of a linguistic context that is illimitable in principle. Conversely, the signifier will work to the extent that it is also contaminated constitutively by the very materiality that the ideality of sense purports to overcome. Apart from and yet related to the materiality of the signifier is the materiality of the signified as well as the referent approached through the signified, but which remains irreducible to the signified. This radical difference between *referent* and *signified* is the site where the materiality of language and that of the world which it seeks to signify are perpetually negotiated. This might be usefully compared with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh of the world. Although the referent cannot be said to exist apart from the signified, it nevertheless cannot be reduced to it. That referent, that abiding function of the world, is to persist as the horizon and the "that which" which makes its demand in and to language. Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmatic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different. (BTM 68-69)

Butler thus suggests that signification only works because it is always to a certain extent "contaminated"—that is, it is never purely material (in the traditional sense of inert matter) nor purely ideal (in the sense of conveyed ideas apart from their instantiations). Thus, my writing of the phrase 'I am a woman' only functions as an effective signification (to the extent that it does) by virtue of its physicality as a strategically placed bit of ink on paper *and* its participation in or reiteration of particular ideas, such as subjectivity and womanhood. Still, while the fact that signification certainly operates physically and ideally seems undeniable, it is unclear why we

ought to think of this as a sort of ‘contamination,’ unless we are approaching the question with a dualistic framework from the outset. Moreover, in view of her following discussion of the “radical difference” between referent and signified, dismissing the word choice of ‘contamination’ as a matter of semantics looks to be extremely difficult. Indeed, in suggesting that the referent of language is not only distinct from that which language signifies, but also only “approached” through that signification, Butler paradoxically claims that there is something about the material world—a “that which”—that both escapes discourse and functions as its ground. This is certainly surprising, given her prior claims about the impossibility of positing a materiality outside of discursive action.

Yet, Butler is clear about her position in this passage, especially in her invocation of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh. While the flesh of the world is, for Merleau-Ponty, not strictly brute matter—it is, he says “a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea”¹⁸—it does seem to be a simply given, or as he puts it, “facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. And at the same time, what makes the facts have meaning, makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves about ‘something.’”¹⁹ In other words, the flesh of the world is, for Merleau-Ponty, a way of expressing the always-already meaning-full-ness or thickness of the material world *prior to* human intentionality or involvement. Indeed, it is this fact of the world’s fleshy-ness that makes such involvement possible, since subjects are in truth only “hollows” within that flesh, caught up within it. And though this continuity of human life and the rest of the world might give reason to question the validity of my reading of Merleau-Ponty, his assertions that this ontological fact means that “all the possibilities of language are already given” and that

¹⁸Merleau-Ponty 139.

¹⁹Ibid., 140.

“language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves and the forests”²⁰ suggests that, at best, the ontology of flesh leaves us with a sort of metaphysical foundationalism, in which a universal given—whatever we may call it—underlies all signifying practices, as their physical/ideal guarantor. So, while the analogy to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh may well have the virtue of avoiding a picture of the irreducible “referent” which imports a materiality/ideality dualism, it nevertheless involves a problematic ontology that would posit a “that which” outside of the particularities of (political, gendered, racialized) existence. Thus, while language and materiality may be, according to Butler, “interdependent” and “implicated in each other,” her account of that interdependency implies the very sort of nature/culture or discursive/material dichotomy she elsewhere rightly disavows as untenable.

Let me be clear, however, that my interest is not in arguing for the reducibility of language to biological exchange, or any other form of scientific reductionism. It seems clear that discursive practices, such as the discourse linking Hillary Clinton with castration imagery, are inadequately conceptualized by a framework that would hold that they are most truly, or most fundamentally, an exchange of particular patterns of sound waves. Rather, my contention (to which I will return below, in connection with my discussion of Dewey’s pragmatic approach to meaning) will be that there is a significant distinction to be made between the claim that such discourse is *reducible* to its materiality, and the claim that it is equally *describable* in these terms, given a particular set of (auditory, say) interests.²¹ I want to suggest that Butler’s

²⁰Ibid., 155.

²¹This claim is similar to the one Wilfrid Sellars makes in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” when he suggests that the experience of thoughts as non-physiological “does not preclude the possibility that at a later methodological stage they may, so to speak, ‘turn out’ to be such”, (187) while at the same time holding that even this ‘turning out’ is not a matter of unfiltered access to simply “given” empirical data, since all experiences of them

account can be made more consistent through a denial of the former and an affirmation of the latter—especially since her discussion of signifying practices includes those so tangibly physical as gendered performativity. Thus, I view my purpose in the following not so much as an attempt at a refutation of Butler’s primary point as a suggestion of an alternate vocabulary that avoids the sort of self-refuting metaphor that her explicit discussion of referent and signification tacitly imports.

In order to get at the pragmatic account of meaning I am advocating, I want to return for a moment to Hillary Clinton, this time in conjunction with the question of names—both because it goes to the central question of this chapter (that of the effects of discourse on bodies) and because it dovetails nicely with Butler’s later discussion of patronyms and referentiality that appears to problematize her account of the referent as beyond signification. Throughout the 2008 Presidential contest, then-Senator Clinton’s campaign repeatedly produced and circulated literature (in the form of websites, leaflets, placards, pins and flags) that referred to her as, simply, “Hillary.” The choice to use her first name only was almost certainly a complex strategical move with a variety of desired goals—appearing more ‘likeable’ and avoiding a reminder of the most recent Clinton presidency are both reasonable speculations of intent that have been widely discussed.²² My interest here is less in pinpointing the conscious reasons for this self re-naming than in articulating the ways in which that patronym and its (partial) shedding demonstrate, perhaps in spite of intent to the contrary, the discursified status of its referent. That

“are primarily and essentially inter-subjective, as inter-subjective as the concept of a positron, and that the reporting role of these concepts ... constitutes a dimension of use ... which is built on and presupposes this inter-subjective status.” (189) Sellars thus, like Dewey, links meaningfulness (and hence, the knowability) to functionality within particular socio-linguistic contexts. However, Sellars’ concomitant insistence that “science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (173) would be—both for Dewey and for me—both an overstatement and inconsistent with a larger pragmatic approach to meaning, which would rather entail the qualified revision, ‘science is *a* measure of all things...’

²²See for example Funt 2007.

Sen. Clinton's adoption of the moniker "Hillary" was sufficiently sense-making to 'work' as a signifier—that is, that "Hillary" itself is immediately understandable as a particular person in public life in the United States—indicates its status within pre-existing discursive conventions. In particular, it is effective in virtue of an infantilizing tradition of the addressing of women by their first names (one has only to reflect on the puzzlement that would accompany an advertisement for a political rally held for "John," "Al," "George" or "Barack" in order to note the gendered status of this nominative choice²³), as well as the narrower discourse surrounding Mrs. Clinton during her tenure as First Lady, when she was so commonly referred to (often with less than friendly intent) as "Hillary" that the health care reform proposals advanced by her and the Clinton administration at large were dubbed "HillaryCare" by their political opponents.²⁴ As a signifier, then, "Hillary" works because of the same citational structure Butler mentions as essential for the construction and stability of gender—and what is more, the citational histories it invokes require not only the previous public iteration of a particular name, but broader social conventions of sexuality on which that public naming relies. Ironically, then, it is only because of the implicit citation of the patronymic relation that the single name "Hillary" is effective, even though this relation itself must be explicitly effaced in order for that name to function *as* a name. Butler puts this well when she argues that the feminine name, as changeable in marriage, "can be conceived as referential and *not* descriptive only to the extent that the social pact which confers legitimacy on the name remains uninterrogated for its masculinism and heterosexual privilege... The durability of the subject named is... a function of a patronym, the abbreviated instance of a hierarchical kinship regime." (BTM 154) That is to say, the referential effect of the

²³While it is true that both Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney also made use of first-name-only campaign materials, it is noteworthy that neither man was routinely referred to in the press by their first names, whereas Clinton continues to be referred to as "Hillary," even after her confirmation as Secretary of State. See Warner 2009.

²⁴Blackman and Carney 1994.

signifying name is the product of the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the exchange of women, such that what we understand as the stable, given referent—in this case, Hillary Clinton—is as such by virtue of her complex position within that signifying practice. This is not to say that, were Hillary Clinton to divorce and be known henceforth as Hillary Rodham, she would undergo some sort of sudden ontological transfiguration. Rather, it is to claim that the discursive practices of naming, marriage, and the exchange of women are already involved in the emergence of Hillary Clinton, despite—or perhaps better, concomitantly with—the fact of her material existence. This is both because the taking (or shedding) of a name operate as legal and social functions with tangible consequences for the subject in question, and because the signifying practices that secure their viability (such as the performance of femininity) literally give shape to her. Thus, to borrow a construction from Butler, the referent of “Hillary Clinton” may be shown to have been the signified all along.

Interaction, Meaning and the Relational Emergence of Bodies

How, then, to reconcile this reading of “Hillary” with the fact that she, like the rest of the world, exists not merely textually, but physically, materially, as a particular body? I want to suggest that this reconciliation may be better made by adopting the pragmatic notion of meaning offered by Dewey²⁵—and moreover, that this articulation of the relation between discourse and

²⁵As distinct from the pragmatic accounts of meaning offered by James, Peirce, Rorty, Wittgenstein and Mead. While the Deweyan account I offer here is perhaps closest to the one presented by Mead—in which meaning is a function of the interactions of social use—it is specifically Deweyan in its insistence that the signifying interactions that give rise to meaning and concomitantly to selves are not only cognitive, but bodily. That is, where Mead suggests that the interaction that makes significant symbols meaningful gives rise to “a self only when [the body] has developed a mind within the context of social experience,” (1959, 50) such that the social emergence of mind is primarily cognitive, occurring for a particular pre-given body, Dewey argues that “the body” as such is a similarly socially-emergent phenomenon. While it is true that Mead’s account of the relationship of selfhood and social meaning is not straightforwardly atomistic (he does, after all, develop a rich account of mind in which individual self-consciousness emerges through social and environmental interaction), his description does not offer the sort of

materiality is in keeping with much of Butler's own work, especially in those instances in which she is not concerned to shield herself from charges of linguistic monism. Specifically, Dewey's rejection of nature/culture and mind/body dualisms through his emphasis on interaction and epistemological purposes or selective emphases allows for an account of bodily meaning-making that is consistent with Butler's notion of performativity without falling back onto the positing of a pre-cultural or pre-discursive "that which."

Like Merleau-Ponty²⁶, Dewey tends to approach traditional philosophical problems by dismissing them as dependent upon empirically untenable assumptions. The so-called 'mind-body problem,' for example, can only get off the ground as an interesting philosophical question if we posit the mind and the body as radically distinct kinds of things from the outset. And this positing, Dewey claims, is so out of line with our experience of the world that re-uniting the mind and body becomes a philosophical mystery in urgent need of solving—but which is also "like the mystery that a man cultivating plants should use the soil; or that the soil which grows plants at all should grow those adapted to its own physico-chemical properties and relations." (EN 211-212) That is, to fret about the relation of mind and body is *both* to create for oneself a problem where none existed (it is noteworthy that the man cultivating the soil does not ask this question—a fact which also implies a particular class position on the part of the philosopher), *and* to ask a nonsensical question: to be a plant just *is* to grow in soil, as minds just *are*

interrogation of the concomitant emergence of "the individual organism" that Dewey's does, focusing instead on the ways in which variations in social interaction alter one's responses *to* (which is to say, perception or apprehension of) these organisms. This lack on Mead's part makes Dewey more appropriate to my purpose here, which includes the goal of offering an account of the emergence of bodily meaning that can vitiate the concern that an account of gender such as the one offered by Butler is purely about discourse, perception and performance, without adequate consideration of the biological or bodily nature of gender.

²⁶Who, for example, wrote in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The world is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality." (x-xi)

embodied. Moreover, this being-embodied should not be understood on the model of containment, since bodies and minds are not experienced as metaphysically separate entities in the first place. Rather, Dewey suggests that instead of conceiving human selves as minds and thus as intrinsically distinct from ‘nature,’ we rethink the world as a continuum of organisms in *interactions* of greater and lesser degrees of complexity. That is to say, life in general is characterized by the experience of interaction—which extends from interaction between molecules of oxygen and hydrogen, to the interaction of soil with seeds and water, to the interaction of human beings with their environment, and so on. These multitudinous interactions tend to follow more or less regular patterns, and can be described and understood in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose at hand. Thus, we call some cases of sufficiently complex interaction “dogs,” and some “people”—but we might just as easily have thought of them as “microbes” or “transmitters of parasites,” if we had a different organizing principle in mind. Dewey writes, “Among and within these occurrences, not outside of them nor underlying them, are those events which are denominated selves.” (EN 179) So, it is never the case that selves are metaphysically opposed to nature, because selves just *are* organisms constituted by sufficiently complex environmental interaction to be recognized as selves for some particular purpose. This is not to say that we cannot or do not in fact distinguish subjects from one another or from the world—it is rather to acknowledge that this distinction is always made with some purpose or “selective emphasis” in mind (assigning responsibility, conferring citizenship, etc.), and is not the simple apprehension of, say, differing essences. Human beings, like plants, are constituted by their physical interaction with the world. And, importantly for my purposes, these interactions—and the ways in which we recognize and classify them—are variably describable, depending upon one’s particular operative selective emphasis.

The fact that some selective emphasis or other is always operative in perception (or knowledge, or judgment) is not, for Dewey, a human failing—or even, for that matter, a particularly human phenomenon at all. Plants and non-human animals also discriminate between important and irrelevant stimuli, what is useful for survival and what is not (EN 197). This discriminatory selection of some portion of experience for emphasis over others does not constitute a failure of perception; rather, Dewey suggests, it is the very nature of perception itself—which is, he suggests, an active looking or taking-in, rather than a passive sensation.²⁷ As he explains in “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” this means that we simply cannot assume the pre-existence of discrete “stimuli” to which perception responds: “the motor response [of perception] determines the stimulus, just as truly as sensory stimulus determines movement.” (RA 141) This is not to say that theoretical or practical distinctions between stimulus and response are illegitimate, but instead to insist that these are “teleological distinctions, that is, distinctions of function, or part played, with reference to reaching or maintaining an end.” (RA 143) And the content of such ends, Dewey suggests, is dependent upon the particular interests governing them. The problem, then, is not that we selectively emphasize some features of experience over others—indeed, knowledge of the world depends upon it, both in the advancement of the sciences and in individual experience (EN 123)—but rather, that we fail to recognize those emphases *as* emphases, or as the products of our inter-action with the environment. In such cases, our settled or socially dominant ways of experiencing the world are taken for being simply ‘the way things are.’ Dewey suggests, on the contrary, that because our

²⁷ Indeed, for Dewey as for James, the closest we might get to truly passive sensation would be the undifferentiated “blooming, buzzing confusion” of a newborn infant.

interests or emphases may shift or vary according to our social position or needs, that ‘the way things are’ is never univocal or finally settled.²⁸

This implies, then, that the claim that human beings are complex organisms interacting in an environment is *not* equivalent to the claim that human existence is reducible to its organic makeup, or that it is more truly that organic makeup than it is life as we live it. Rather, Dewey argues that “nature” and “culture” are not oppositional terms, but the same phenomena viewed with differing selective emphases. It is hardly the case, then, that the affirmation of the undeniable materiality of the body (or language, or the world in general) necessitates the belief in a biological reductionism. “Water as an object of science,” Dewey writes, “as H₂O with all the other scientific propositions which can be made about it, is not a rival for position in real being with the water we see and use.” (QC 85) Rather, he suggests that these alternate meanings are resultant from varying linguistic or epistemological purposes (or, as I suggested earlier, selective emphases), neither of which has objective or universal primacy. Thus, he claims, the environment with which organisms interact and by which they are constituted is not *only* the

²⁸It is on the status of this settling that is perhaps Dewey’s greatest divergence from James, who similarly suggests that “the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff...” (1977c, 73) While both Dewey and James suggest that this selective account of experience is socially produced and contingent—though, as I will explain later in the chapter, it is by no means the case that this contingency entails facile reorganization of meanings—James has a generally less positive view of the implications of that contingency than does Dewey, and (perhaps for this reason) does not spend much time on the possibilities it affords for social transformation. When James does discuss the prospect of the alteration of dominant ways of seeing or interacting with the world, he typically does so with reference to extraordinary individuals, as he does in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”: “The *highest* ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burdens—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case.” (1977a, 627) Elsewhere, he suggests that in the interest of social stability, it is generally “well for the world” that habits of seeing, acting and knowing “[keep] the social strata from mixing” (1977, 16). Though Dewey does concur that such habits of experience and selective emphasis do result in a phenomenological stability that is necessary for life to be livable, he is aware of the propensity of such stability to reinforce social conditions that are unjust, particularly for working-class people, and thus emphasizes both continual self-criticism and the deliberate adoption of democratic projects (including educational projects) in order to counter-act them. My own project is thus particularly indebted to Dewey’s, as it follows his linkage of the socio-bodily production of meaning to the project of social transformation (the latter of which will be taken up explicitly in the final chapter).

physical environment as we typically understand it. He writes, “Water is the environment of a fish because it is necessary to the fish’s activities—to its life... a being whose activities are associated with others has a *social* environment.” (DE 12, italics mine) Human selves become selves by virtue of their interaction with a socio-physical environment. Or, as he puts it elsewhere, “living as an empirical affair is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time, and with higher organisms far outside.” (EN 215) So, it is fundamentally mistaken to conceive of subjects as isolated entities that must somehow be brought together in societies, and not only because each individual is temporally preceded by some social community (HNC 56). If organisms are characteristic modes of interactivity, and that of human organisms is variously knowable as social and material, then we ought to understand human organisms as emergent from particular patterns of interaction that are equally describable²⁹ as signifying, signified, and the ‘that which’ of reference.

However, this is not to say that a referent’s meaning is arbitrary, or that anything goes.

Indeed, such a misreading would require that we overlook Dewey’s insistence that meanings, as

²⁹Richard Rorty makes a similar point in his reading of Donald Davidson against Quine in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: “...there is no reason *whatever* for thinking that those vocabularies which lend themselves to truth-functional formulations ‘limn the true and ultimate structure of reality’ in a way in which intensional vocabularies do not...Davidson’s distinction gives us a way of seeing that an intentional vocabulary is just one more vocabulary for talking about portions of a world which can, indeed, be completely described without this category.” (1979, 207) The reason for this is, for Rorty, that the warranted assertability of such descriptions depend upon their functionality for particular contexts—which is importantly dependent upon their coherence with the established practices of those contexts (“what society lets us say,” as he puts it (174)). Rorty’s account diverges from Dewey’s in the conclusions he draws from this social-use-function account of the viability of descriptions. While Dewey holds that this sort of account of verification of descriptions or meanings maintains a commitment to the philosophical (and indeed, social) importance of concepts like truth, goodness and empiricism—albeit with definitions that are quite different than those of the philosophical establishment—Rorty suggests that his account entails the end of epistemology and a rejection of Truth as such. My account is interested in maintaining (socio-historical, contextual) Deweyan notions of knowledge and truth as both crucial and revisable. This commitment is, in my view, necessary for responsibly making the “equal describability” claim *and* for evaluating the suitability of such claims for particular sets of purposes (which, as I will argue in the final chapter, is a central desideratum of my feminist project).

modes of interactivity, are never produced in isolation, but are built upon sedimented histories of meaning (anticipating Butler's notion of the citationality of discursive practice) and the surrounding meanings from which they are distinguished, or to which they are related, such that our present purposes or emphases are dependent upon those others whose contextualizing interaction makes them possible. Thus, he argues, even those bodies or referents we regard as most certain and essential "are themselves known in virtue of previous operations of inferential inquiry and test, and...their 'immediacy' as object of reference marks an assured product of reflection." (QC 150) This is the case not only because we make use of the theoretical tools of those around us (learn to "see" things in a particular way), but also because the use of those tools gives shape to the world itself.³⁰

What Dewey's account offers us, then, is a way to conceive the material world—the referent—as thoroughly discursive, and our discursive practices—signifiers, signifieds and the play between them—as thoroughly material. Moreover, conceptualizing signification in this way not only enables the dissolution of the nature/culture dualism implicit in Butler's own accounting of the relationship between discourse and bodies, it also paradoxically leads us back to the indispensability of Butler's work, insofar as it is insistent on the centrality of the hierarchical organization of bodies in that materializing discourse. Where Dewey's discussion of the materialization of meaning through interaction begins to parallel Butler's notion of performativity—specifically, in his account of habits—it falls short of Butler's in its inability to follow out its own implications in recognizing the significance (in the dual sense of import and having-been-signified) of gendered, sexualized and racialized habits. To show why this is the

³⁰It is important here to take seriously Dewey's emphasis on meaning as a kind of cooperative tool or use-function, especially insofar as this makes salient the extent to which his notion of significance stresses *relation*, rather than the primacy of difference (as in the case of Butler and Derrida, to whom her account is in this regard indebted).

case, I want to turn for a moment to Dewey's articulation of the function of habits. Briefly, Dewey understands habits as "characteristic way[s] of interactivity," (EN 222) embodied by both human and non-human organisms, which become more and more likely to be repeated as a result of their physical—and in the case of human beings, social—shaping of those organisms. But it is not the case, for Dewey, that individuals *have* habits; rather, he writes, "We are the habit." (HNC 25) My patterns of behaving in and interacting with the world make me the person that I am, such that it makes as little sense to claim that I could divest myself of my habits as it does to suggest that I could 'take off' my being-human. Such a taking-off is impossible, for Dewey, because there is nothing 'under' the habits to be laid bare. This does not, of course, mean that change is impossible; it does, however, mean that changing a habit requires replacing it with a new one (or perhaps better, transforming the old one), and that the new habit will have a collection of old ones with which to contend. Over time, however, the continuous (yet occasionally shifting) interaction of localized habits can be recognized as a particular way of being, or what we typically call 'character.' "Character," according to Dewey, "is the interpenetration of habits." (HNC 37)

These habits may take a variety of forms, some of which we might be inclined to characterize as bodily, and others of which we might typically view as cognitive. Such habits of thought are organizing features of experience, socially learned and transmitted (since mind is also a social phenomenon), which make us more likely to be sympathetic to some kinds of explanations than others, to "see" certain behaviors or persons as normal or deviant, and so on. Dewey suggests that the particularly solidified habitual thoughts of dualism, for example, have alienated us from primary experience so thoroughly that "we find it easier to make a problem out of the conjunction of two inconsistent premises than to rethink our premises." (EN 218)

Interestingly, it is in this discussion of ‘cognitive’ and ‘physical’ habits that Dewey’s account lends itself best to a specified articulation of the ways in which such hierarchically-organizing signifiers as gender and race constitute a continuum of differently situated bodies—but this potential is left untapped. Habit could, however, be used to account for stable cultural identities such as gender and race in the following way: just as I habitually slouch while reading, I have, through years of repetition, learned to habitually walk, sit, talk and dress in ways characteristically feminine—and because these behaviors literally give shape to my body, I could no more decide to shed my being-a-woman in the morning than I could, by sheer force of the will, suddenly bench-press two hundred pounds. This is not to say, however, that my gender is ‘essential’ to my being in the metaphysical sense of the term, or to argue that change is impossible. Rather, it is to insist that the bodily organism *matters* deeply in the habits of gender, and that its being regulated and constructed in particular ways in and through those habits entails, over time, relative stability that can only be significantly altered through the adoption of a different, contradictory habit. Moreover, cognitive habits of classification lead others to ‘read’ my behaviors and body as satisfactorily feminine (which also typically implies a concomitant heteronormative ‘reading’), and as unproblematically white.³¹ And these habitual ways of ‘seeing’ further result in my being treated and interpellated in particular ways (as non-threatening; as a sex object for heterosexual males; as a potential competitor with other women for resources, men, jobs, or approval; as a ‘normal person,’ and so on)—which in turn tend to reinforce or destabilize these habits and my identification with them. Thus, Dewey’s interactional—or, “transactional,” as he puts it, to emphasize action across selves—notion of

³¹The claim that racial classification is a matter of such ‘reading’ rather than biological fact is common in the literature on race, both in the sciences and humanities. See, for example, McWhorter 2009, Mills 1999, Taylor 2003.

habit could allow him to conceptualize subjectivity as sexed and raced in such a way that both problematizes these phenomena as plainly biological or metaphysical entities *and* acknowledges their experienced reality, which is both ‘cognitive’ (as a classificatory schema) and ‘corporeal’ (as constituting particular kinds of bodies). It is, therefore, not only generic subjectivity—as if such a thing existed—that Deweyan pragmatism could account for as an emergent, intersubjective, organic phenomenon. In fact, because Dewey’s notion of habit insists that embodied selves are always constituted in interaction with a socio-corporeal environment—and because he frequently cites class as a non-negligible factor in that constitution³²--it is all the more surprising that his account omits gendered and racialized habits entirely. This is particularly striking considering his personal historical context of the early 20th century United States, a time and place openly obsessed with race,³³ as well as his own philosophical engagement with the work of John Stuart Mill, whose *The Subjection of Women* was the subject of an essay by his pragmatic forerunner and correspondent, William James.³⁴ Dewey’s universal ‘person,’ moreover, is ubiquitously referred to using the masculine pronoun, and he suggests at least once that, prior to social ‘mixing,’ there are distinguishable “masculine and feminine virtues,” which he lists as follows: “Vigor, courage, energy, enterprise here; submission, patience, charm, personal fidelity there.” (HNC 76) I point this out not for the sake of ‘outing’ Dewey as anti-feminist, but for the purpose of demonstrating that, despite his explicit repudiation of a nature/culture dualism and useful reconceptualization of discursive and material realities, he appears to tacitly accept the truth of discrete, foundational subjectivity—and that such assumed

³² See, for example, Dewey’s critiques of liberalism in *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 280ff, and rationalism in *Experience and Nature*, p. 99ff.

³³ It is noteworthy that Dewey’s later address to a meeting of the NAACP sought to reduce racial discrimination principally to class conflict and a fear of “novelty,” the latter portion of which seems, as Sullivan points out (2004) at odds with the emphasis on interaction found in the rest of his work. For a more sympathetic view of Dewey’s general omission of race-talk, see Taylor 2004.

³⁴For an excellent analysis of James’ extremely problematic review of Mill’s book, see Seigfried 1996.

‘core’ subjectivities are not generic, but specified in particular ways. That is to say, Dewey’s presumption of pre-social masculinity and femininity seems to require the existence of pre-discursively sexed subjects, which makes his continual use of the masculine pronoun even more jarring.

Thus, while Dewey’s claim that differing selective emphases allow for a conceptualization of materialized signification that could make sense of the constitutive effects of gendered and racialized discourses on bodies, his assertion of the reality of pre-discursive sex flies in the face of his own argument’s implications.³⁵ His account of the function of habits and patterns of interaction is, then, seriously lacking, both on its own terms and in virtue of its tacit ontological assumptions. It would be insufficient, for this reason, to attempt to substitute Dewey for Butler in an accounting of the particular ways in which politicized discourse gives shape to a spectrum of bodies and populations, since, as Butler points out, it is essential in any such undertaking to problematize the ways in which our notions of “bodies” and “matter”—and, we might add, “organisms”—are shaped by prior discursive histories. Neither, however, would it be ideal to dismiss the value of Dewey’s work for the current purposes, both because his pragmatic approach to the emergence of meaning as dependent upon purposes and emphases is (as I have argued) necessary for making sense of the signifier-signified-referent relations, and because his discussion of habit as a pattern of material interactivity has the virtue of avoiding some errors of misunderstanding typically encountered by the Butlerian language of performativity in an account of bodily signification. That is, while Butler’s notion of gender as performative is often misread as implying that it is easily “put on” or “taken off,” such that one could simply change

³⁵ However, we might read this failing as a demonstration of the reality of Dewey’s own selective emphases (say, those of gender and race privilege), and the importance of self-critique of such emphases within any pragmatic analysis.

genders at will, Dewey's insistence that habituation gives shape to the bodily organism and occurs within a particular physico-cultural milieu could, if coupled with a Butlerian attentiveness to the gendered character of such interaction, be effective in circumventing such misreadings. Thus, while Dewey and Butler certainly come from differing philosophical traditions and make use of fairly different vocabularies, reading the two of them together has the potential to offer an account of the effects of politicized discourse on the bodies of individuals and populations that avoids the presumptions of foundational subjectivity that (as we saw in the last chapter) derails other historically influential accounts of the effects of oppressive discourse.

Making Sense of Hillary, Making Sense of Relational Selves

With this in mind, I want to return to the popular discourse surrounding Hillary Clinton, especially as it is evocative of the threat of castration, homosexuality and feminization. The repetition of this discursive linkage—or what Butler might call a “chain of signification”—in connection with Clinton is, as I suggested earlier, not merely concerned with Clinton, or even femininity in the abstract. Since the implications of this language include a tacit anxiety around the security of the penis and its symbolic status within the signification of normatively heterosexual masculinity, its materializing effects must be understood within this wider context, and not merely confined to (say) “women,” or “men.” Moreover, if, following the implications of Butler and Dewey's arguments regarding those materializing effects, we conceptualize the reiteration of particular patterns of naming as having a constitutive effect on those interactional bodies with which it is caught up, then we must recognize this discourse as participatory in the constitution and emergence of a range of more or less privileged *and* oppressed bodies. The rhetoric characterizing Clinton as a castrating bitch is (unwittingly) effective in demonstrating

this point. Specifically, the fact that Clinton as a human individual does not pose an immediate threat to the intact state of the speaker's penis (either because of physical distance or because the reality of such a scenario is imaginable only to those endowed with delusional levels of narcissism) suggests that the threat expressed is in some measure allegorical, and that the penis is standing in—perhaps metonymically—for some other perceived threatened object, the content of which is *only* discernible within the materializing structure of normative heterosexuality. That is, where the Freudian picture would have us believe that the threat of castration is a universal fear whose roots lie in a common psychological experience of the bourgeois family drama, the Butlerian account illustrates the ways in which that experience is thoroughly inflected by an ongoing (yet historically contingent) practice of societal organization that constitutes particular bodies, and the parts with which they are identified, as privileged. The penis is thus endowed with a kind of magical significance, as it comes to stand for the power of normative masculinity—and yet, at the same time, it serves as the locus of anxiety around the stability of that power, which is constantly threatened. As Butler points out, this symbolic threat could not *be* a threat at all, were it not the case that the power of normative masculinity is always and only signified and performatively enacted, (BTM 101ff) and is thus, in principle, able to be subverted. So, the expression of the castration threat in connection with Clinton is wrapped up with an anxiety about the security of masculine privilege, and a concomitant need to reiterate (and so to re-secure) the privilege of the penis as the locus of that power and *the* identifying feature of masculinity.

At the same time, however, this anxiety alone is insufficient as an explanatory framework, for it does not adequately account for Clinton's apparent centrality in the discourse of castration. This problem may be remedied, however, if we recall (combining Butler *and*

Dewey) that performative significations are only efficacious by virtue of their *relations with* (not just citations of) other performative significations—or, to put it another way, that signifying practices work *interactionally and relationally*. That is to say, the enactment of normative heterosexual masculinity is made possible by a concomitant performance of normative heterosexual femininity, which means that an insufficiently normative performance of heterosexual femininity (for example) constitutes a symbolic threat to the stability of normative masculine power. Thus, it is by no means surprising that the rhetoric of castration and the nominative “bitch” were so frequently paired with reference to Clinton—for each contains a tacit reference to a normatively heterosexual relation (requiring a sufficiently passive expression of femininity) and simultaneous anxiety around its destabilization. And because the reiteration of this discourse functions through the citation of normative heterosexual relations and the implicit censure of an insufficiently normative performance of those relations, its citation serves in part to reconstitute the power of that normativity, and the sorts of bodies that will be recognized by it.

Still, this is not a complete account of the materializing effects of the discourse surrounding Clinton, for it is not yet able to conceptualize the ways in which the frameworks of normative heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity cited by that discourse are tacitly racialized and classed. In the context of the racialized hierarchization of the United States, which bodies, after all, are capable of performatively interacting in a satisfactorily feminine way? And to what extent did Clinton’s representation of herself as a populist “fighter”—complete with photographic evidence of beer-drinking and burger-eating—serve to undercut her enactment of normative femininity, even as it functioned to reinforce her identification with white working-class Americans nostalgic for a time before the proliferation of Whole Foods and arugula? To point to the ways in which Clinton’s self-representations fall within and draw on

normalizing discourses in some ways analogous to those I have addressed thus far in the chapter is not to claim that these citations in some way ‘cancel out’ other (sexualized, say) discursive effects, as though discourses of oppression were measurable on an abacus; rather, it is to suggest that the relationally constitutive effects of such signifying practices do more than is initially apparent. Indeed, if Dewey’s interactional account of habits and signification is correct, and meaning is made not only by drawing on older meanings, but by “behaving in conjunction and *connection* with other distinctive ways of acting,” (PP 188) then it *must* be the case that discourses of normativity (and gender is only one such discourse) are necessarily efficacious by virtue of some interaction—in the form of repudiation, identification, omission, etc.—with some collection of normative and non-normative significations. That is to say, because the signification of performativity does not and cannot happen in isolation or through the abstracted action of a singular individual or group, every such signification draws on and participates in materializing effects on bodies both within and outside its ostensible domain of meaning. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrable when we return to the consideration with which this chapter began: the relation between discourses of sexism and racism within the presidential campaign and the questions of demographics and identity that, on the face of things, stand outside of it.

The caricaturing of Clinton’s supporters as disgruntled, middle-aged harpies who would undermine their own interests by irrationally voting for John McCain in a hysterical attempt at anti-Obama revenge³⁶, for example, is inextricably bound with the characterization of Clinton as a “monster” or a “witch,” whose “cackle” sends men running for the exits. In the same way that the rhetoric of the castrating bitch draws attention to Clinton’s failure to adequately approximate a normatively feminine performance, the language employed both in descriptions of Clinton and

³⁶See Lithwick 2008 and Caraway2008.

her supporters designates its objects as old, angry and unpredictable—which is to say, both sexually repulsive and dangerous—thus implicitly reiterating both the requirements of heterosexual femininity and the presumption of masculine subjectivity. Moreover, that the differences between Clinton and her supporters are thus effectively elided (such that each can stand in for a de-sexualized, grotesque, threatening version of femininity) depends upon the presumption of their (racial, sexual, class) homogeneity and implicit exclusion of non-conforming bodies as invisible or unintelligible. That is, the sexist discourse through which Clinton and her supporters are constituted as a singular sort of signifying body is of a piece with the normative status of bourgeois whiteness, such that the demographic breakdown with which this chapter began—in which white men and women are thematized as gendered, while working class people, Latino/as, and Black persons are primarily registered as a genderless voting “blocs”—becomes sense-making in the first place. Ironically, then, the reification of Clinton supporters in a non-normative identity category (interestingly, their status as self-proclaimed PUMAs alludes to the contemporaneous colloquialism “cougars” as a moniker for older women ‘on the prowl’ for younger men, again evoking a dangerous animal) depends upon a concomitant white, bourgeois privilege, which is itself inextricable from the constitution of nonwhite bodies as aberrant.

The ostensibly sexist discourse around Hillary Clinton, then, is not *merely* sexist in its related significations—nor is its efficacy traceable solely to its supposed perpetrators. In fact, as Shannon Sullivan and Cynthia Willett have pointed out, conceiving the locus of oppressive discourse in such overt examples of “old-style” sexism or racism tends to obscure the wider ranging effects of more subtle hierarchizing significations, upon which such glaring examples

depend.³⁷ Indeed, the citational structure of such signifying practices and their interactional materializing effects are two sides of the same coin—or, to put it pragmatically, the same phenomena articulated with differing selective emphases or purposes in mind. To make this clearer, I want to consider one final example: a cover article on women voters published by *Newsweek* billed as “What Women Want,” that featured exactly zero references to racial differences among women, and repeatedly cited statistics interested solely in white women³⁸. In order for the signified, “women,” to work—which is to say, in order for it to communicate its meaning by functioning in an ostensibly referential way—it must draw on sedimented histories of meaning *and* distinguish itself from related meanings, while at the same time covering over that explicitly citational and relational character. That is to say, ‘we’ know what “women” means here by virtue of a long history significations that *both* elicit, recognize and privilege particular performances from some bodies, *and* foreclose the possibility that other bodies (notably those racialized non-normatively) will be intelligible in this same way. Thus, the citation of prior signifying practices that makes political discourse sense-making at all is, at the same time, a retrenchment of prior patterns of inter-action—meaning that gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed bodily significations are necessarily affected by *all* such signifying practices, whether or not they take them as their explicit objects. And because such significations do not occur (as I argued previously) over-the-top of pre-given “natural” bodies, such political discourse as has been the topic of this chapter is always necessarily involved in constituting a variety of differently-related bodies (and hence selves) as more or less normative.

³⁷See Sullivan 2006 and Willett 2007.

³⁸Baird, et al., 2008.

CHAPTER III

WHENCE THE (WISE LATINA) SUBJECT?

FOUCAULT, SOTOMAYOR AND THE EFFECTS OF POWER

“I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpents tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

“Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment.”

-Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”

I ended the previous chapter with the suggestion that interactional citationality as a mode of relational subject constitution gives rise to a spectrum of bodies that are constituted as more and less normative. In this chapter, I want to turn to the question of how this “more or less normative” cashes out, how it can be more fully accounted for, and what its implications might be for a theory of subjectivity that would take seriously the concrete political situations of those subjects and populations whose situations it would make clear. However, I want to come to these questions through a somewhat roundabout route, by making salient their significance in the context of Sonia Sotomayor’s nomination to the Supreme Court of the United States. My sense is that the discourse surrounding Justice Sotomayor’s nomination and confirmation to the Court importantly complicates the general question of oppressive discourse, concerning as it does Latina identity. Indeed, in the summer of 2009, the hearings leading up to the decisive congressional vote on her confirmation and the media coverage of those hearings was fraught with racialized and gendered discourse not unlike that of the 2008 Presidential campaign—

though not so limited to the binary signifying couples of white vs. black and male vs. female. In nearly every case, though, whether offered by supporters, who praised her “inspiring” life story of an individual’s overcoming of the challenges inherent in being the daughter of poor immigrants, or her political opponents, whose condemnation invoked the unsettling portrait of a “reverse racist” who was intellectually inadequate to the Supreme Court, the discourse surrounding Sotomayor was striking in its overt thematizing of (racial and gendered) identity. Much of this explicit discourse, of course, was contextualized by the now-famous speech then-Judge Sotomayor made at Berkeley, in which she suggested that her particular personal experiences were both relevant in and helpful to her judicial practice, and added that “I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life.”¹ Interestingly, however, Justice Sotomayor’s explicit identification with and valorization of her Latin American identity was not the sole focus of the racialized and sexualized discourse surrounding her. Rather, while Sotomayor’s own taking up of Latina identity did serve to provoke discussion of race (and perhaps ethnicity) and gender on both the right and the left, it is striking that other racially and sexually coded discourse and signification surrounding her appeared to operate on the premise that there was something about Sotomayor as a person, that elicited this sort of response. Whether in the Obama administration’s directives to avoid wearing hoop earrings or red nail polish to her confirmation hearings, or in *The New Republic*’s anonymous characterization of her as “dumb” and “a bully,” the discourse surrounding Sotomayor continually suggested that there was something about *her*, separate from the infamous “wise Latina” comment, that needed

¹ Zeleney 2009. The speech originally appeared in print as “A Latina Judge’s Voice,” 13 *La Raza* L.J. 87 (Spring 2002).

alteration, covering up, or smoothing out. The perception of non-normativity that is implicit in such responses to Justice Sotomayor is in part what interests me in this chapter—especially as that non-normativity is conceivable as unique, or as irreducible to the sorts of non-normativity we have already encountered in the cases of Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton. My contention will be that Sotomayor’s Latina identity, as both constituted and deliberately taken up, is accounted for well through a Foucaultian articulation of the relationship between discourse, power and subjectivity, and that this articulation adds an important complexity to the account of subject-constitution and meaning-making that I have thus far offered.²

More specifically, my goal in this chapter will be to draw out a Foucaultian account of subjectivity that takes into account the differential situations of subjects with respect to discourses of power. I am concerned to demonstrate the ways in which Foucault’s discussion of subject constitution enables a concrete rethinking of the concomitant emergence of Latina, white, gay, Black, straight and working-class subjects in a way that takes seriously the troubling of normativity in any anti-oppressive philosophy. My argument will proceed as follows: first, I will review briefly Foucault’s account of the constitution of subjects in and through relations of discursive power; second, I will turn to the question of Latina identity as it is articulated by Sotomayor, Linda Martín Alcoff and Gloria Anzaldúa, and suggest that their emphasis on mixture or impurity is important as revealing something significant about subjectivity as such; third, I will suggest (to the contrary of some of his more critical readers) that Foucault’s account of subjectivity is not entirely passive and allows for the sort of agency that is necessary to 1) make his account compatible with the picture of meaning-making I sketched in the previous

² This claim is far from non-controversial, as many Latina feminist philosophers (including Alcoff [2006] and Moya [2001a]) are explicitly suspicious of such “postmodern” theories of the subject, particularly Foucault’s. As I will argue, however, Foucault’s work can answer their most important objections, and is in fact in line with the sort of relational account of subjectivity Alcoff advocates.

chapter and 2) account for the active taking-up of Latina identity as enacted by Sotomayor and others; fourth, I will argue that the addition of Foucault to my account of oppressive discourse and subject-constitution is crucial in light of the development of the concept of “governmentality” in his later works, especially for making sense of the significance of Sotomayor and the other political women who have served as my examples as specifically *political* figures in the neo-liberal United States.

Power, Subjects and Truth

In one of his final interviews, Foucault declares,

My problem has always been, as I said in the beginning, that of the relationship between the subject and truth: how the subject enters into a certain play of truth [...] It is thus that I have brought up the power/knowledge problem, which is for me not the fundamental problem, but an instrument that allows for a manner of analysis that seems most exactly the problem of the relationship between the subject and the play of truth.³

Such a declaration may indeed be a surprising one on Foucault’s part, since, as Yves Zarka points out, it seems less than obvious that one would “recognize the idea of subjectivity in the analysis of social procedures, institutions and politics of subjugation, coercion and training...or in an analysis of knowledges that explode the idea of an author...or in the explicit reprise of the theme of the death of man.”⁴ Indeed, it would be unsurprising if, at first sight, this chapter’s goals—of deriving an account of the (Wise Latina) subject from the work of Foucault—appeared somewhat misguided. Foucault, after all, is frequently described as a “postmodernist” whose deconstruction of the sovereign subject threatens the very notion of subjectivity (or even agency more broadly) as philosophy typically understands it. Still, if we are to take Foucault at his word

³Foucault 2001, 717-718, translation mine.

⁴ 2002, 257, all translations mine.

in this declaration—that is to say, if we are to understand his work as an effort to take seriously the question of the emergence of subjects in relation to truth, rather than taking these subjects for granted as transparent starting-points—it offers significant insights that are helpful for our current purposes. In order to get at these insights, I want to turn briefly to the *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, in which Foucault’s thought begins to take up explicitly the question of the relationship between power, subjects and truth, this time through an analysis of the discursive regime of sexuality.

In *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, Foucault suggests that sex is not merely repressed and prohibited by power, but that complex disciplinary and regulatory forces within the social body function to produce the idea of sex itself. This idea, Foucault claims, “made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and...enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle,” (HS 154) such that sex’s own contingent and constructed status is effaced. However, Foucault is not arguing that sex as such is *only* an idea, or that the material bodies of individuals are inconsequential. Rather, he claims that the disciplinary, discursive practices that produce sex (i.e. the medicalized classification of non-normative sexual practices, or the regulation of familial structures, notably via reproduction and inheritance) do so by their effects on and constitution of bodies. Thus, Foucault is interested in, as he puts it, “a ‘history of bodies’ and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested.” (HS 152) That is, human bodies—as always already manipulated and classifiable in particular ways—are themselves the products of social forces and regulatory practices, and are therefore variable and subject to genealogical inquiry. Moreover, Foucault suggests that the production or constitution of bodies is not a top-down or unidirectional event, but that individuals and groups are

implicated in and resultant from a multiplicity of power relations with diverse histories—which consequently “are always local and unstable.” (HS 93) The ‘hysterical woman’ as a figure, for example, is not simply imposed from on high by the medical establishment; her production is possible only within a particular social position that is both heterosexual and bourgeois (and, we might add, white). For Foucault, then, bodies and selves are the effects of complex and sometimes (apparently) contradictory relationships of organization that are inadequately understood if they are conceptualized as subjected solely to repression.

Indeed, Foucault argues that while power does of course function to exclude or oppress, this is not its sole effect. He writes, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (HS 95) That is, in the very fact of excluding or oppressing, deployments of social (or political, or economic) power also thereby constitute populations whose existence poses a threat to its continued hegemony. This is evident, for example, in the constitution of “the homosexual” as such, since it is in the codification and forbidding of particular practices and desires that this personage is created—ironically rendering him a subject (which is to say, a subject capable of resistance) by subjecting him to repressive regulations. In this way, Foucault argues, oppressive discourse “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.” (HS 101) What this means is not only that oppressive power is also productive of selves with complex and varied social, political and economic positions, but that the resistance those selves offer to that oppressive discourse is necessarily implicated in it. This is not the case because every instance of resistance is necessarily self-defeating or reiterating of the hegemonic discourse, but rather because subjects are constituted within the relations of power they would subvert, and thus cannot stand ‘outside’

of them. Thus, for Foucault, since the power relations that organize our social world⁵ are for the most part regulatory, normalizing, and directed at the management of life (HS 144), the individuals thereby constituted could not help but participate in those relations to some extent, even (or in some cases, especially) as they work to subvert them.

But how does this constitution take place? Foucault suggests that the mechanisms of subjection or subjectivization (the dual senses of the French word *sujet*—being a subject *and* being subjected to something—importantly being maintained here) are by no means universal or univocal, but that the relations of power through which they are deployed are manifold and historically variable. In the contemporary period, however, he locates a particularly salient form of subject-constitution in the Pastoral relationship, which, through its insistence on self-knowledge (and later, as Foucault notes in the *History of Sexuality vol. 3*, the care or cultivation of self), produces a normalized form of self-relation and relation to truth. In the practice of confession, for example, “the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself.”⁶ Beyond the religious practice of confession, however, Foucault argues that varying manifestations of the “deployment of sexuality” (including, for example the codification of ‘perversions’ I previously mentioned, laws against miscegenation, the medicalization of women’s bodies and the bourgeois imperative to keep close watch over children’s sexuality) give rise to an idea of “sex” itself. And the significance of this “sex” is not merely that it functions to incite particular forms of desire—though it does do this—but also that “it is through sex...that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility...to the whole of his body...to his identity.” (HS 155-

⁵ To the extent that the contemporary U.S. and Europe constitute a singular ‘world,’ or at least a more or less common cultural inheritance.

⁶ 1980, 215-216.

156) Thus, when Foucault claims that relations of power give rise to a specific relation to truth, this truth is specifically the truth of the self, of the self's *real identity*, a theme continually observable even in today's discussions of innate "sexual orientation," or in gender-testing cases like those to which runner Caster Semenya was subjected.⁷

Significantly, Foucault notes that such subjection (or subjectivization [*assujettissement*]) isn't limited to simple self-consciousness or *ideas* of self, but that it concomitantly gives shape to bodies and subjectivities. The reason for this is not only that Foucault does not accept a disjunction between the cognitive and the physical; it is that the particular forms that the materialization of bodies take are themselves inextricable from the discursive practices that make them intelligible. That is to say, it is not merely the case that our "ideas" or "perceptions" of self are given shape by power relations, but rather that those selves become the selves that they are by virtue of their involvement within those relations. This is because, as Foucault puts it in "The Subject and Power," a relationship of power "is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult." (SP 341) Like Dewey and Butler, then, Foucault maintains that the variable interactions among selves give rise to particular sorts of subjects, by variably constraining or enabling particular sorts of actions for particular populations or subjects.⁸

Moreover, it is this action-upon-action character of power relations that enables Foucault to claim that his account neither precludes agency, such that all subjects are helplessly passive, nor that it involves the creation of a super-subject—"power"—that is alone agential. Indeed,

⁷ For an incisive articulation of the complexity and internal tensions of such testing and their connections to popular views on sex and identity, see Butler 2009.

⁸ As I will suggest below, however, Foucault's formulation of this constraint or creation of capacities is importantly different from Butler's in his emphasis on the positive production of capacities—in contrast with Butler's emphasis on foreclosure, repudiation, and the delimitation of the intelligible.

Foucault claims, “Power in the substantive sense, ‘*le pouvoir*,’ doesn’t exist...The idea that there is either located at—or emanating from—a given point something which is a ‘power’ seems to me to be based on a misguided analysis...In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations.”⁹ What this means is that although discursive regimes (such as, for example, that of sexuality) contribute to the constitution of subjects, that constitution does not require or presuppose their total passivity. Rather, as Foucault notes in his lecture course, “The Hermeneutics of the Subject,” the sort of pastoral power at work in the discourse of the “care of self” functions by operating on the “practices of subjectivity.”¹⁰ Some of his critics, of course, have noted that Foucault’s characterization of his work in this way is at minimum disingenuous or engaging in a rather short-term memory of his oeuvre, which did become markedly more interested in agency and political resistance toward the end of his life. Zarka, for example, argues that Foucault, in his later works and interviews, engages in an inventive “re-reading” of himself, by “accepting an erasure of the difference [between passive and active subjects] by making the ‘passive subject,’ the mad subject, for example, a particular modality of the self-constitution of the subject according to the particular rules of the production of truth in psychiatric discourse.”¹¹ While Zarka may indeed be correct in his assessment of a shift in Foucault’s general approach to subjects¹², however, his characterization of that shift as an “erasure of difference” that privileges self-constitution appears to me to be misguided. Specifically, if we take seriously Foucault’s claim that the constitutive

⁹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Zarka, 258, translation mine.

¹¹ Zarka 256.

¹² It seems to me that there is undeniably a change in outlook from Foucault’s articulation of madness as created in the process of confinement and in relation to the personage of the physician in *Madness and Civilization* to his later claim that “the mentally ill person constitutes himself as mad subject in comparison with the one who declares him mad,” (2001, 719, translation mine) but in light of his claims regarding the production (and indeed, self-production) of subjects in his intervening works—notably *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, this change can be understood as a gradual shift in emphasis rather than a complete break or self-reversal.

effects of power operate within power *relations*—which is to say, within the discursively-shaped interactions between, say, confessor and priest, prisoner and panopticon, parent and child, and later, population and mechanism of security—then it is difficult to say where the “passive subject” ends and the “active subject” begins. That is, Foucault’s analytics of power relations suggest that their productive effects result *not* from a top-down mechanism, as though the self were cobbled together by completely external forces, but rather that the self is constituted in part by its own actions, which are themselves shaped by the power relations in which it finds itself and to which it necessarily contributes.

Of course, if our objective is to account for the constitution of subjects who are differentially positioned with respect to oppressive discourse, there is still something important left to be said. If, for example, Foucault is correct to suggest that power inheres not in individuals or states as such, but in relationships, can his account speak to the demonstrable fact that some subjects are more severely constrained—or have their actions acted upon in more salient and consequential ways? Or, as a particular feminist volume puts it, “if power is everywhere, why do women have so little of it?”¹³ In order to answer these important questions, it is useful to look to Foucault’s later work, in which he tends to address the problem of political struggle more explicitly. His claim, briefly, is that while it is certainly true that subjects are differentially positioned with respect to power—and that these differential positionings must be considered, if our analyses of power relations are to be accurate—accounts of those positions will necessarily vary with the purposes of their observers. Or, as he puts it in “The Subject and Power,”

A consequence of this instability [of power relations] is the ability to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from the history of struggle or the standpoint of the power relationships. The

¹³ Back matter, Ramazanoglu 1993.

resulting interpretations will not consist in the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, though they refer to the same historical fabric, and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other. In fact, it is precisely the disparities between the two readings that make visible those fundamental phenomena of ‘domination’ that are present in a large number of human societies. (SP 347)

It is hardly the case, then, that Foucault is denying the existence of oppression or domination; his claim, however, is that an analysis of power cannot limit itself to this effect, and indeed, that depending on one’s purposes, thematizing “domination” as such may be unnecessary or even counter-productive. Feminists may well bristle at this final claim, but if we are careful to understand what Foucault does *not* mean by it, there is less reason to view it with suspicion.

To begin, Foucault does not mean that an abstract discussion of “power” without reference to the concrete and variable effects of that power on differently situated subjects or populations is adequate. Despite the claims of some of his less charitable critics, Foucault’s approach to the analysis of particular historical institutions or social phenomena through the medium of power relations—whether in the case of the asylum, the prison, medical practice, sexuality—demonstrates that he takes seriously his own admonition to eschew an abstracted notion of “Power.” Moreover, Foucault’s claim that “power is everywhere” does not entail that subjects experience liberty or effectiveness of agency in equal measure. His discussion, for example, of “the hysterization of women’s bodies” in *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* (104) suggests that the opposite is true. Indeed, in the same lecture as the one quoted above, Foucault claims that any analysis of institutions from the point of view of power relations necessitates the consideration of “*The system of differentiations that permits one to act upon the actions of others: juridical and traditional difference of status or privilege...Every relationship of power puts into operation differences that are, at the same time, its conditions and its results.*” (SP 344) Taking this claim together with the suggestion that the points of view of struggle and power relations

must make reference to one another, makes clear, I think, that Foucault is not here attempting to sneak in the assertion that the domination of sexist or racist oppression is sometimes irrelevant.¹⁴ What Foucault *is* claiming is that the varying positions (with respect to power relations) of subjects—and by extension, their actions and projects—have consequences, and thus that we should expect the varying degrees of constraint or enabling capacities operative for those actions and projects to require and give rise to different hermeneutic frameworks. Moreover, when we pay attention to the differences between those frameworks (for example, when we note the difference between accounts of the power relations that create the personage of the homosexual and accounts of the struggle for gay rights)—which Foucault appears to suggest that we *should do*—domination as such comes more clearly into view than if we simply sought to theorize it on its own.¹⁵

So, conceiving the relationship between truth, subjects and power as Foucault does allows for a picture of subjectivities that are constituted within (and to a certain extent, by) their particular situations within discursive regimes—that is, that accounts for the varying, unstable and contingent positions of subjects and populations with regard to (what we might typically call) power, oppression or domination. Moreover, I want to suggest that Foucault’s particular way of conceptualizing that variable and situated constitution enables a fuller accounting of the spectrum of subject-positions or situations that are relationally constituted than that offered by Butler or Dewey. In particular, it seems to me that Foucault’s account is not only better able to consider the concrete differences between the constitution of differently gendered or racialized

¹⁴ Whether his account takes them adequately into account is, I think, another matter entirely—and one that I will not discuss in detail here. For varying feminist and anti-racist positions on Foucault’s success in this regard, see for example Ramazanoglu 1993, Spivak 1988, Butler 2006, McWhorter 2009 and Alcoff 2006.

¹⁵ We might say, indeed, that this is a different way of articulating the problem I sought to highlight in Chapter 1’s discussion of the perils of addressing *only* the constraining effects of oppressive discourse.

subjects and populations than Dewey¹⁶; his account is also better positioned to avoid the sort of binary oppositions of normative and non-normative subjects (and the concomitant tacit acceptance of the I-versus-not-I dialectical model of subjectivity) that Butler's account so frequently repeats.

In her book, *Visible Identities*, Linda Martín Alcoff articulates well the problem of posing this binary opposition in the way that Butler (among others) does, suggesting that much theorizing of identity and oppression has taken for granted a Hegelian dialectical framework, in which subjects only *appear* to be constituted in relation with others. Alcoff suggests that thinkers as diverse as Ricoeur, Code, Sartre, Butler and Foucault follow a classically Hegelian model in which “the Other” is *figured* as contributing to the constitution of the subject, while in fact “the constituting process is more formal or procedural than substantive. What the Other contributes is the initiation of a process the self engages in essentially alone rather than the substantive recognition of who one is.”¹⁷ The process thus initiated, Alcoff suggests, is the attempt to negate that Otherness. While it is not obvious on first glance that this sort of dialectical negation is operative in post-structuralists like Butler and Foucault (and I will suggest that this assessment is less accurate in the case of Foucault than in Butler), Alcoff argues that the post-structuralist and psychoanalytic location of resistance in the refusal of what comes from the social world involves the tacit assumption that “the social is necessarily constraining and pernicious. And this is simply to say that what comes to the individual from the Other is never to be acknowledged as accurate.”¹⁸ Alcoff suggests, then, that despite appearances and efforts to the contrary, many thinkers who have sought to theorize the subject as socially constituted and

¹⁶ Since I addressed this problem of Dewey's in the previous chapter, I will not reiterate my criticism of it here. My remarks in what follows will be primarily interested in Butler.

¹⁷ 2006, 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

differently situated with respect to power have in fact reiterated an assumption of the autonomous (liberal) subject insofar as they articulate that subject's constitution on a dialectical model that requires for its operation constitutive refusals or negations of otherness. While I am unconvinced that Butler's work relies on this to the extent that Alcoff suggests,¹⁹ I am sympathetic with her doubts regarding the apparently dialectical features she highlights. Looking at a specific example from *Bodies that Matter* should help clarify this.

In her engagement with the work of Slavoj Žižek, Butler argues that though he is correct to claim that there is a constitutive "outside" to social intelligibility, he mistakenly—and problematically, from the standpoint of a politics interested in countering oppression—locates this constitutive outside in a universal and unvarying "law," which he calls the "rock" or the "kernel" of the "real" that poststructuralists and feminists would prefer to ignore. She writes, "*That there is always an 'outside' and, indeed, a 'constitutive antagonism' seems right, but to supply the character and content to a law that secures the borders between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of symbolic intelligibility is to preempt the specific social and historical analysis that is required...*" (BTM 206, italics in original) My concern here is not so much with Butler's explicit criticism of Žižek (to which, incidentally, I am more than sympathetic), but with her assertion here, as elsewhere, that social intelligibility depends upon constitutive exclusions. That is to say, while Butler is no doubt correct that variable and historical relations of power shape who or what subjects become, it is by no means clear that 1) these effects are limited to their constraining functions, or that 2) these effects draw their force from the repudiation of a constitutive outside or antagonism. Assuming the truth of these two claims tends to result in making the sort of

¹⁹ It is significant, I think, that nearly all of Alcoff's citations of Butler come from *The Psychic Life of Power* and not *Gender Trouble*, *Excitable Speech*, *Undoing Gender* or any other of Butler's works that deal more explicitly with the co-constitutive features of signifying actions.

Hegelian mistake Alcoff rightly highlights, since it appears to make resistance of social constraint or the simple valorization of that “outside” into the goal of anti-oppressive projects, *even when* one is explicitly suspicious of such claims. Moreover, it seems to me that such a dialectical approach to intelligibility in the discussion of racialized, sexualized, gendered and classed subjects would unhelpfully restrict our inquiry, since none of these categories are adequately conceived on such a binary model. That is to say, in order to grasp the complexity of, for example, racialized subjectivity, it would be less than entirely helpful to suggest that the intelligibility of normative whiteness depends upon the constitutive exclusion of non-whiteness. This *is* partially true, of course (as I have suggested in my preliminary discussion of relational constitution)—but it does not tell us much about the ways in which whiteness is differentially positioned with respect to blackness, brownness or yellowness, nor about how the actions and interactions of white, black, brown and yellow subjects enact positive racial identifications *within* those differential positionings. In other words, it seems to me that it is necessary to find a vocabulary with which to move beyond a dialectical model of subject-constitution, both because such a model tends to make us unnecessarily suspicious of the social nature of that constitution (such that, as Alcoff points out, we tacitly invoke an idealized autonomous subject), and because it is inadequate to deal with the complexity of non-binary identity categories.

Foucault’s account, in contrast, in its emphasis on the complexity of the constitution of subjects and the variety of localized and unstable positions with respect to power relations, is better able to deal with the effects of those relations without appeal to a dialectical “constitutive outside.” That is, while Foucault does appeal to the constituting effects of oppositional figures (especially in his earlier works)—such as the mad subject and the sane subject, the delinquent and the “good boy”—his account of power’s effects (including meaning, normativity,

subjectivity) as emanating from a series of contingent historical relationships that *may or may not* conform to such a dialectical picture enable us to think the relational constitution of differentially oppressed or privileged subjects in a way that allows for greater complexity. As Foucault puts it, it is not at all clear that “the logic of contradiction can actually serve as a principle of intelligibility and rule of action in political struggle,”²⁰ since “one is faced with complex phenomena which don’t obey the Hegelian form of the dialectic.”²¹ With this in mind, Foucault’s account of the various effects of the deployment of sexuality (for example)—including the creation of the homosexual as a personage and the hysterization of women’s bodies—is significant in its refusal to reduce the effects of power to a simple spectrum of most-to-least-constrained. In particular, Foucault’s insistence on a range of differently-situating effects, rather than the simple identification of the creation of normative vs. perverse sexual practices, is crucial for demonstrating the complex features of social intelligibility. Thus, it seems to me that Foucault offers a helpful corrective to a Butlerian account of meaning-making or intelligibility that would limit itself to a logic of repudiation. Moreover, given our previous discussion of Foucault’s insistence on the productive effects of power as actions-upon-actions, it is hardly the case that his work (at least in its later instantiations) requires the sort of tacit separation of the active ‘what comes from the subject’ from the passive ‘what comes from the outside’ that Alcoff identifies in Butler. Indeed, as Cressida Heyes has argued²², Foucault’s later work on the care of self and technologies of self emphasizes the extent to which the processes of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) are enabling—not only of self-knowledge, but of skills,

²⁰ 1980b, 143.

²¹ 1980a, 56.

²² She writes, “Foucault argued that as disciplinary practices seep into the minutest habits and strategies of (self-) management proliferate, we do not cease to act, or feel repressed—politically or psychologically. Quite the contrary: with the intensification of power relations comes the increase of capabilities [*capacités*] often interpreted by a liberal political tradition simply as the increase of autonomy.” (Heyes 2006, 128.)

compartments, and ways of interacting with the world. Still, Alcoff does suggest that Foucault's account of the constitution of subjectivity falls into the same trap as Butler—but it is less clear to me that she is correct in this regard. In order to explain more fully why this is the case, however, I want to turn to the concrete examples of Latina identity and Sonia Sotomayor.

Wise Latinas and Mestiza Subjects

Before she was officially nominated as Barack Obama's selection for Supreme Court justice, reports began circulating that then-Judge Sotomayor, a *summa cum laude* graduate of Princeton and the longest-serving appeals court judge ever to be nominated to the Court, was in fact “dumb” and “a bully.”²³ Gaining traction from a *New Republic* article published by Jeffrey Rosen that relied almost exclusively on the testimony of anonymous sources who did not work with Sotomayor, the reports began to suggest that her nomination illustrated the evils of affirmative action programs, since, despite her supposed intellectual and temperamental deficiencies, “being female and Hispanic is all the [sic] matters,” since “an Hispanic Supreme Court justice is an almost mandatory consolation prize for the amnesty folks.”²⁴ While the speculations about her intellectual inferiority were not widely repeated by members of Congress, the furor over her judicial personality—possibly fueled by her role in a finding against white firefighters contesting an affirmative action practice and her own infamous “Wise Latina” comments—grew to such an extent that Sotomayor was forced to answer concerns about her “temperament” at her confirmation hearings, in addition to proving that she was not, in fact, a

²³ Rosen 2009, cited frequently thereafter by *The National Review*, *The Atlantic* and *Fox News*. See for example: Derbyshire 2009, Krikorian 2009, Ambinder 2009, *America's Newsroom* 2009.

²⁴ Krikorian 2009, qtd. in Serwer 2009.

racist.²⁵ Despite her rather uneventful testimony, many members of Congress voted against her confirmation, though at least two of these (John McCain and Orrin Hatch) expressed regret that they found themselves politically unable to support Sotomayor, since voting against the confirmation of a “Hispanic” candidate with a “compelling” life story was enough to produce a “heavy heart.”²⁶ Still, Justice Sotomayor was ultimately confirmed, and her up-by-the-bootstraps biography was hailed repeatedly in the national press as an inspirational and prototypically American tale of the individual overcoming of adversity. Interestingly, however, while her supporters—and a few detractors, as I noted above—trumpeted Sotomayor’s nomination to the Court as a victory for “the Hispanic community,” the Obama administration reportedly attempted to temper her public image as a self-identified “Newyorkrican”²⁷ not only walking back the “Wise Latina” comment, but also explicitly directing her not to wear her favored hoop earrings or red nail polish to the Senate confirmation hearings.²⁸ In what follows, my interest will be both in drawing out the connections between the oppressive discourse surrounding Sotomayor and mainstream public discussion of the so-called “Hispanic community,” and in distinguishing this sort of reductive nominalism from the self-identification as Latino/a, advocated by Sotomayor and other Latin American theorists of race and gender. My purpose in so doing is to draw on the insights of Latina feminists’ accounts of identity in order to suggest that their privileging of *impurity*, or of mixing, when read in conjunction with a Foucaultian approach to subjects and power, offers an important insight to my account of the interactional, citational constitution of selves and populations.

²⁵ A task made somewhat more complicated by the allegations of former Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo on CNN that the National Council of La Raza (a Latin-American civil rights organization of which Sotomayor is a member) was in fact “a Latino KKK without the hoods and the nooses.” See Luning 2009.

²⁶ Hatch 2009.

²⁷ Sotomayor 2002.

²⁸ Accessories that are, as *Latina* magazine puts it, “beloved...among Latinas across America—from the South Bronx to Houston to East Los Angeles.” See Guzman 2009.

As I noted in previous chapters, sexist, racist, heterosexist and classist discourse surrounding or ostensibly aimed at the women with whom I have been concerned have effects that are not simply, or even primarily, limited to those particular public figures. Indeed, because of the citational structure of the effects of such discourse, its repetition has consequences for a variety of subjects and populations far beyond the figures in question. This is, perhaps, most obviously true in the case of Justice Sotomayor—if only because the question of race and racial identity was so persistently and clearly thematized in the very public discourse that served to invoke it. That is to say, the reiteration of Sotomayor’s symbolic status as a victory for “Hispanics”—and the concomitant suggestion that she was selected *because* of that status—serves not only to mark her racialization (either as valuable or suspect), it also simultaneously serves to contribute to the racialization of a great number of people belonging to a variety of geographically and politically distributed populations. Moreover, this racialized drawing-together of disparate selves (who are, of course, diverse not only in their sexualities, genders and class statuses, but also in their cultural and national identities) functions in a unique way not reducible to the racialization of, say, blackness. This uniqueness is partially evident in Senator McCain’s suggestion that the 2003 nomination to the Washington, D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals of Miguel Estrada, a Department of Justice lawyer who emigrated to the U.S. from Honduras as a teenager, was in some way equivalent to the nomination of Sotomayor to the Supreme Court.²⁹ Even more telling, however, was the *National Review*’s claim that Sotomayor’s nomination was connected with the legislative fight over “amnesty” for undocumented immigrants—especially since Puerto Ricans, whether living in the Bronx or San Juan, are American citizens.

Specifically, because the rhetoric and legislation surrounding illegal immigration to the United

²⁹ Though, as McCain was quick to point out (2009), Mr. Estrada’s nomination was not confirmed, having been filibustered by Senate Democrats.

States is, as Natalie Cisneros has noted,³⁰ so distinctly racialized and more often than not, particularly aimed at Mexicans and Mexican-Americans—there is not, for example, a highly visible campaign against immigration from Canada³¹ or a northern border fence under construction—the implication of this claim involves the reduction of Latin Americans to a singular racialized national origin (Mexican) and a singular political concern (immigration). Moreover, Sotomayor’s nomination can *only* be understood as a “consolation prize” for those hoping for immigration reform if we explicitly understand the political issue of immigration as a tacit referendum on the status of “Hispanics,” such that the pain of the official disavowal of tens of thousands of undocumented U.S. residents of Latin American descent could be mitigated by the official recognition of the value of one Latin American citizen. Thus, the discourse surrounding Sotomayor’s nomination, especially as it involves itself in explicit claims about “Hispanics,” contributes to the constitution of a particular population—which is racialized in a way that is not reducible to blackness or whiteness. To understand why this is the case, however, I want to turn to the question of ethnicity, how it might differ from or map onto race, and what this means for a conceptualization of Latino/a identities in particular.

Some philosophers have suggested that because race is not a biological entity, but a socially produced phenomenon, and because the more salient features of identity actually have to do with membership in local communities with common geographical, linguistic and political experiences and traditions, theorists should avoid the use of “race” as a term, opting instead for the more accurate framework of “ethnicity.”³² Indeed, in the case of Latino or Hispanic identity

³⁰ Cisneros 2009.

³¹ Though there are, of course, still immigration patrols along the northern U.S. border. Still, these target primarily non-white travelers, particularly those who appear to be Latino/a or Asian. (Bernstein 2010)

³² See, for example, Zack 1993, Corlett 2003. K. Anthony Appiah (1996) more radically suggests that since “no one has a race” (37) or even a “culture” in the homogeneous-group sense that popular use of such terms would suggest (88), and since such uses have the tendency to “go imperial” (103) in their effects for individuals, we ought to be

in particular, the extremely diverse group of people referenced by each term (including residents of Latin America; Americans who trace their descent from the colonial encounters between residents of the Iberian Peninsula and indigenous Americans, Africans, or some combination of the three; persons descended from encounters between these groups and later immigrants from Asia; and in the case of “Hispanic” specifically, European natives of the Iberian Peninsula³³) do not obviously constitute a monolithic race, either in terms of physical appearance or cultural experience. This is evident not only in many Latino/a’s self-identification using national categories such as “Puerto Rican” or “Mexican-American,” but also in designations such as *mestizo*, *mulatto* or White Hispanic, which seek to make explicit racial claims distinct from the label “Latino.”

Still, as Linda Martín Alcoff has noted, in the context of the United States, Latino/a ethnicities tend to be racialized in a particular way, such that “Latinas who don’t look like ‘Maria’ from Sesame Street or who don’t eat spicy food often encounter Anglo skepticism about our identity,”³⁴ and “race and ethnicity are all but equated”³⁵ in contexts as diverse as EEOC questionnaires and the supermarket hair-care aisle. That is to say, while it is true that (for example) Sonia Sotomayor and Miguel Estrada may not have many cultural practices or traditions in common, in the context of the United States (and possibly beyond this), their common racialization occurs “through visible markers on the body which trump dress, speech and cultural practices.”³⁶ In other words, while populations within single racial categories may

equally suspicious of efforts to preserve or valorize racial, ethnic or cultural identities. Appiah’s claim, then, is a more directly-stated version of the one that Alcoff accuses Foucault, Butler and other post-structuralists of making tacitly: that socially-transmitted discursive categories like race and gender constrain the agency of individuals who ought to be liberated from them.

³³ See Moya 2001, Alcoff 2006 and Gracia 2000.

³⁴ Alcoff 2006, 236.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

be varied to the point of having little or nothing in common, the habits of ‘reading’ or categorizing the bodies of those individuals within a particular context give rise to a significant racialized experience that is, for many, undeniable. Thus, as Fanon’s work demonstrates, despite their differences, Congolese and Antillean people share a general phenomenological experience of racialization (though the details may, of course, differ) that arises, at least in part, from common patterns of social interaction. Such patterns are often linked to the sorts of contextual bodily markers Alcoff identifies, such that, as Paul C. Taylor puts it in rather stark terms, two people with virtually nothing in common will be seen and treated the same way by the NYPD.³⁷ Yet, while there is an unavoidable racial component to Latino/a experiences, the reduction of those experiences entirely to race is insufficient. Borrowing a term from David Theo Goldberg, Alcoff allows this tension to be maintained by referring to Latino/a identity as a kind of “ethnorace.”³⁸ What is interesting about this tension for my purposes is the way in which they might actually be productively *maintained and positively invoked* in such deliberate Latino/a self-identifications as that of Sotomayor.

I am specifically interested in the ways in which the use of Goldberg’s term makes salient the complexity of Latino/a identity as neither wholly active nor wholly passive—as at once socially constituted and subjectively lived. Goldberg coins the term in order to account for socio-historical designations of group membership that confound strict categorization. While “race” as a social category tends to refer to biological heredity or descent and “ethnicity” tends to pick out webs of cultural practices, “these are rhetorical tendencies, not fixed conceptualizations. Like race, ethnicity may be cast and managed as much in terms of inherent as deeply historical identities, either of which may be claimed as the basis of sedimented and immutable differences.

³⁷ 2005, 562-3.

³⁸ Alcoff 2006, 246.

And again, like race, ethnicity may serve to veil domination and exclusion via population disaggregation.”³⁹ Moreover, Goldberg suggests, in particular historical contexts, ethnicities may be racialized, such that they are recognized and codified *as* ethnicities in virtue of their particular racialization—as, for example, Latino/as and Native Americans are in the United States, in contrast to Anglos among white people.⁴⁰ In such contexts—and, as Alcoff argues, it certainly appears that the situation of Latino/a identity in North America is one—it is more helpful to use the category of “ethnorace” to mark this overlap. That is, it is important to take seriously the extent to which the markers or features of ethnicity—including familial relations, shared traditions, or self-identifications⁴¹—function in unavoidably racialized ways in specific settings (such that, for example, racial markers are ‘discovered’ on the body subsequent to the revelation of ethnicity). It is crucial to note, then, that referring to Latino/a identities as ethnoracial serves to highlight *both* a troubling of the common philosophical impulse to insist upon the clear demarcation of categories *and* the worry that foregrounding socially produced and transmitted identity categories entails a repudiation of agency within those categories.

What, then, is the difference between the tacit racialized reduction of claims about “Hispanics” and the assertion of oneself as Latino/a, or the reference to a pan-Latino/a identity? Does it matter that Sonia Sotomayor refers to herself not as a “Wise Hispanic Woman,” but rather as a “Wise Latina?” As both Paula Moya and Alcoff have pointed out, the usage of one or

³⁹ 1993, 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ While Jorge Gracia has famously argued for a strictly familial-historical view of ethnicity that rules out both the possibility of this overlap and the inclusion of self-identification as a necessary or sufficient condition for ethnic identity (2005, 73), I agree with José Medina’s suggestion (2003) that this view is insufficiently attentive to the extent to which ethnic identity is a matter of social practice rather than simply one’s relation to objective historical events. Moreover, as I will suggest below, it is important to conceive the act of self-identification—particularly in political contexts in which that identity is devalued—as a social practice with non-negligible significance for one’s identity.

the other of these terms tends to signal a particular political affiliation⁴² (since users of the term “Hispanic” tend to be more conservative, and users of “Latino/a” more left-leaning)—though this linguistic linkage hardly appears arbitrary. Indeed, when adopted self-referentially—at least in the specific context of North America--“Hispanic” has often explicitly functioned to emphasize European heritage while diminishing the Indian, *mestizo* or black.⁴³ Interestingly, however, when invoked as a referent for others, “Hispanic” suggests (as I argued earlier) an equally homogeneous racial category—though one which is decidedly non-white. Moya puts this paradox well: “It is precisely because racists in the southwest (and elsewhere) have long exploited the ideology of hispanidad in order to distance themselves from their darker-skinned brethren that the term Hispanic carries connotations of racial purity in the U.S. context.”⁴⁴ That is, in many cases of the invocation of the name “Hispanic,” the effort is to constitute a racially consistent population—the major difference being in the relation that population bears to normative (American) whiteness. In contrast with this tacitly homogenizing move—which Gloria Anzaldúa has referred to rather strikingly as “copping out”⁴⁵—the identification of oneself as Latino/a invokes a more complex acknowledgement of the heterogeneous reality of this ethno-racialization. It acknowledges, for example, the unavoidably contextual nature of this ethno-racialization, locating its referent(s) in the United States,⁴⁶ since different geo-political settings are conducive to different sorts of experiences and ways of seeing, and one may find oneself differently racialized depending on where one’s present geographical location. Moreover, while the term “Latino/a” does involve the unification of disparate experiences that some have

⁴² Moya 2001, Alcoff 2005.

⁴³ It is noteworthy as well that the U.S. government’s adoption of “Hispanic” as a demographic term dates from the federal Office of Management and Budget’s Directive #15, which was made on the recommendation of the King of Spain (Toro 1998).

⁴⁴ Moya 2001, 6.

⁴⁵ Anzaldúa 2007, 84-85.

⁴⁶ Moya 2001, 5.

understood as problematically homogenizing as the term “Hispanic,” it does have the benefit of naming the experiences of those persons of mixed Latin American/Indian/African/Asian heritage who do not identify with a singular national origin (as in more specific terms like Dominican, Puerto Rican-American, etc.)—and do so while marking the specifically American context of that experience.⁴⁷ It is significant that those who invoke the term “Latino/a” tend to do so with the aim of referencing a shared experience while *maintaining* the sense that this experience is not uniform or pure. When Sotomayor identifies herself as a Wise Latina, then, she signals her involvement in a shared contextual experience of ethno-racialization: one that acknowledges simultaneously its contingency, reality *and* heterogeneity.

This willingness to proclaim one’s own *impurity* as a positive identification is important, since, as Alcoff puts it, such an identity “challenges the shibboleths of U.S. race ideology, [and] we have a better chance to affect that ideology by acknowledging our racialization than in trying to escape it.”⁴⁸ That is to say, while the production of race in the United States tends to operate on the assumption of the transparency of the black-white binary and the “one-drop rule,” such that there is a pure ‘reality’ to one’s race that is simply given, the affirmation of one’s status as Latino/a in this context serves to undermine these assumptions and expose their artificiality. Because Latino/as in the United States are inescapably racialized—though in a way that is irreducible to the racialization of the other supposedly ‘pure’ groups they are simultaneously distinguished from and connected to—the deliberate taking up of “Latino/a” as an identity valorizes (and potentially foregrounds) the complexity and contingency of that racialization.

⁴⁷ Alcoff points out (2005) that the genealogy of the term “Latino” marks the transition from the colonialism of Spain to the neo-colonial domination of Latin America by the United States.

⁴⁸ Alcoff 2006, 246.

Gloria Anzaldúa has called one such identification the creation of a *mestiza* consciousness. She writes:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.

This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm. (BF 101-102)

Thus, the affirmation of oneself as *mestiza*, or indeed, as Latina, involves *not merely* the recognition that one's genetic and cultural heritage has European, Native American, Caribbean or African roots; it amounts to the affirmation of that plurality or ambiguity *as a mixture*.⁴⁹ By extension, this exposure of and identification with ethno-racial mixture functions to trouble the assumption of the "purity" of its component parts. That is, because to be Latina is to be situated in a particular mode of (cultural, familial, political, economic) interaction with the white and Native American worlds of the United States, the multicolored worlds of Latin America and Spain, the black worlds of the Caribbean and Africa (and so on), the valorization of this interaction—which is, as María Lugones puts it, "a matter of necessity and survival...part and parcel of our experience and our situation"⁵⁰—calls into question the stability or impermeability of these very "worlds." This is not to suggest that a flattening of all cultures or that a culture or race's "impurity" indicates its nonexistence. Rather, as Gregory Pappas points out, the problem is not with the concept of culture or race as such, but with the (metaphysically dubious)

⁴⁹ Gracia makes a very similar point in his (2000) *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (see especially chapter 5)—though his account is concerned, contra Alcoff, to maintain a clear distinction between the categories of race and ethnicity, and to present an account of ethnicity that is grounded more in an objectively shared history (49) than overlapping clusters of shared practices. For the reasons I outline above, I find Alcoff's account (and its preservation of the ambiguity of such experiences) more compelling.

⁵⁰ 1987, 11.

assumption that their phenomenological existence entails strictly delimited, given boundaries.⁵¹ Identifying as *mestiza* or as Latina involves the tacit rejection of what María Lugones calls the “logic of purity”⁵² that insists on the either/or, normative/perverse view of the racialized subject that has dominated the United States’ cultural imaginary—and indeed, much of its theoretical work on race, insofar as it has redeployed this dialectical model.

In this context, then, Justice Sotomayor’s self-identification as a “Wise Latina,” as well as the discourse surrounding that identification, is crucial. The claim that she “would hope” that her own experiences—including an awareness of the particularity of those experiences, their situation in a specifically racialized and gendered political context, the artificiality and ambiguity of that context, and the dominant discourse’s explanatory inadequacy for it—might lead her to make better rulings than those white men whose privileged perspectives have never been questioned certainly appears reasonable.⁵³ And with this in mind, the suggestions that such a claim was either a rhetorical misstep or an expression of covert anti-white racism are equally disappointing: each involves the claim that even *hoping* that a perspective that exposes the cracks in the U.S. ideology of racial purity might be of epistemic value goes too far. One might say, then, that it was not enough for Sotomayor to merely and repeatedly disavow such a hope in her confirmation hearings; it was necessary to, as far as possible, erase the trace of the markings of it from her body: away with the hoop earrings, the red nail polish and lipstick, and on with the government-approved suits.⁵⁴

⁵¹ 2001, 157.

⁵² 1994.

⁵³ As feminist standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock (1998) and Sandra Harding (1991) have been pointing out for some time.

⁵⁴ Associated Press 2009.

On the cover of *Latina* magazine, however, it was another story. Sotomayor posed, in her judge's robes, her red-painted fingernails displayed for the camera.



Figure 2: Justice Sotomayor on the cover of *Latina* magazine

More than the simple choice of nail polish, however, Sotomayor's *Latina* appearance is significant in its reiteration of her affirmation of herself as Latina, despite the apparent attempt to 'neutralize' or temper that identification prior to her confirmation. This affirmation, moreover, was repeated far beyond Sotomayor herself, as Latina women throughout the United took on "Wise Latina" as a personal moniker, sometimes printing it on t-shirts and coffee mugs.



Figure 3: Women in home-made ‘wise latina’ t-shirts. Photo via the *New York Times*

What is interesting about both of these acts, for my purposes, is that they serve to demonstrate that Latina identity—like *mestiza* consciousness—is not merely conferred upon one, as a passively constituted subject, but something that may be deliberately taken up and cultivated, within one’s historico-cultural situation.⁵⁵ That is to say, it is not merely the case that “because white people will tend to see person A as having X identity, then person A *has* X identity.”⁵⁶ It is, of course, true that white people’s seeing person A as having X identity will be a constitutive factor in person A’s identity, since (as we saw in the previous chapter) such habitual modes of seeing tend to be accompanied by other habitual modes of interaction whose effects are non-

⁵⁵ Of course, this situation may well render such modes of taking-up simultaneously problematic: subsequent to the *Times*’ article on home-made t-shirts bearing the “Wise Latina” slogan, *Latina* magazine began a marketing campaign to sell its own mass-produced version of the shirts, which were featured in a subsequent *Times* holiday gift-guide piece on what to buy for one’s friends of color (see Fig. 4). The affirmation of identity is thus reduced, in the capitalist marketplace, to the affirmation of savvy shopping—or as the *Times* puns/puts it, “Wise shoppers can commemorate the moment in history when Sonia Sotomayor was sworn in as the first Hispanic justice to the Supreme Court...” (S. Oliver 2009)

⁵⁶ Alcoff 2006, 284.

negligible. Moreover, as Foucault suggests⁵⁷ in the context of a racially hierarchized society in which whiteness is privileged, white people's position *vis-à-vis* relations of power will frequently result in actions with greater effects on the actions of non-white persons. But this is *not* to say that being Latina is solely a matter of being called or seen as Latina, both because many Latinas are not 'seen' as such (partially as a result of the racial ideology of the United States, in which one is either black or white), and because becoming a racialized (or ethno-racialized, or gendered, or sexualized) subject is in part a matter of patterns of action, of the cultivation of consciousness—of which the defiant act of self-identification in the face of denigration may be a part.



Figure 4: Manufactured 'wise latina' t-shirts featured in *New York Times*' "Of Color" Gift Guide

Gloria Anzaldúa's work on the valorization of *mestiza* consciousness as a particular version of Latina identity, on the idea of being mixed, offers a crucial example of what this cultivation might mean. *Mestizo/a* itself does not typically mean just "mixed," of course, but a

⁵⁷ When he includes in "*The system of differentiations* that permits one to act upon the actions of others" the following: "juridical and traditional difference of status or privilege; economic differences in the appropriation of wealth and goods, differing positions within the processes of production, linguistic or cultural differences, differences in know-how and competence, and so forth." (SP 344) See pg 99 of this chapter.

particular mix: Native American and Spanish. Anzaldúa's invocation of "the new *mestiza*" draws on this particular meaning, but additionally suggests her own complex mix—which also includes black ancestry, Chicano Texan specificity, lesbian desire, and a working-class upbringing—as a unique phenomenological experience, which is in certain respects multiple and fragmented, but in others is singular, and "greater than the sum of its parts." Indeed, Anzaldúa suggests that the new *mestiza*'s advantage lies in her familiarity with this paradox, her "plurality...anchored in the borders, in that space where critique, rupture, and hybridization take place."⁵⁸ The new *mestiza* subject is multiply constituted within a variety of overlapping, interwoven and sometimes contradictory cultural practices (or, to put it in Foucaultian language, discursive regimes), to which she contributes and from which she emerges as a potential agent. She is inter-active, and her inter-actions are mixed.

This mixed-ness that Anzaldúa describes and that Alcoff hints at with her use of the hybrid term "ethnorace" is made salient by virtue of the fact that the experiences, bodies, and personhood of Latino/as do not conform to the standards of purity assumed by the dominant culture. But what of that dominant culture? As we saw previously, Latina identity and *mestiza* consciousness expose the fiction of that purity, and our Foucaultian analysis of such ostensibly stable and uniform concepts⁵⁹ offers reason to think that the conceptual purity (of race, gender, sexuality and so on) thus assumed is a fiction, the drawing-together of disparate phenomena and the disavowal of that which does not 'fit.' The *mestiza* subject is thus simultaneously unique and paradigmatic: she is unique in her experience of oppression and agency, in her troubling of the dominant norms of thinking and experiencing identity and subjectivity, and in her particular resistance of those norms; she is paradigmatic in her constitution as mixed, as emergent from the

⁵⁸ Lugones 1992, 35.

⁵⁹ Such as, for example, the one offered by Dell McWhorter (2009).

mixture of conflicting and interwoven patterns of interaction and signification *which are themselves mixed*. This is not to say that all subjects are *mestizo/a*, nor that all subjects are mixed in directly comparable ways. It *is*, however, to claim the account of identity offered by Latina feminists offers a challenge to our culture's (and, if Alcoff is correct, philosophical establishment's) dominant ways of conceiving the unity, stability and agency of the subject. As Pappas writes, "this atomistic way of thinking about cultures [or, we might add, genders or selves] is a consequence of...a philosophical tradition that regards ambiguities, vagueness, and continuities as not part of reality."⁶⁰ To follow in the footsteps of the new *mestiza*, then, would be to reject this tradition, to ask after the complex mixtures of which we are a part and to which we contribute, to wonder about the patterns of (political, economic, sexual and so on) interaction or mixing that make those mixtures intelligible *as* mixtures in the first place. In what follows, I will argue that Foucault's work offers a way to begin thinking through these mixtures and the emergence of relationally constituted, mixed situated subjects in the particular context of the United States.

Moreover, reading Latina feminists' accounts of the positive assertion of Latina identity as mixture offers a concrete way of thinking about Foucault's description of subject-constitution as action-upon-action that circumvents Alcoff's concerns. That is, it is only within the context of the racial ideology of purity that the particular phenomenological experience of 'mixed-ness' can be what it is for *mestiza* subjects—and at the same time, this experience is real and identifiable only in virtue of its being lived and taken up by those same subjects.⁶¹ Thus, while it is correct

⁶⁰ Pappas 2001, 157.

⁶¹ We might also, as Heyes (2006) has done so effectively in another context, understand such situated capacities for knowing and living as the sort of enabling (as opposed to merely) constraining consequences of power that Foucault discusses at length in his later work on technologies and care of self. For example, Foucault (1986, 52ff) insists that, in many contexts, power functions to proliferate our modes of self-knowledge and capabilities, and that these developments occur not only through institutions like the school or the confessional, but in "the whole bundle of

to say that actions are constrained on Foucault's account, because the self is constituted in part by those actions, which are themselves acted upon by the power relations in which it finds itself and to which it necessarily contributes, it is impossible to claim that that which the subject does or is, is somehow separate from or more primary than what constrains or shapes it.

Situation, Governmentality and First-World Subjects

At the end of the first section of this chapter, I indicated that it would be necessary to think through the concrete example of Latina identity in the political context of the discourse surrounding Sonia Sotomayor in order to begin answering the questions about the adequacy of Foucault's work for providing an account of the relational constitution of differentially privileged subjects in a way that avoids the problems of dialectical accounts--*viz.*, the tacit repudiation of all that comes to the subject from the outside and the sense that relational constitution always occurs via some normative/perverse binary. My purpose in turning to this concrete example has been to draw on the resources of others' articulations of Latina and *mestiza* identity in order 1) to suggest a way of thinking about relational constitution that begins to address the latter problem and 2) to find an example that makes salient Foucault's claim that the effects of power on the constitution of subjects do *not* entail that subjects are entirely passive, thereby beginning to address the former problem. However, in order to explain these points more fully—and to do so in a way that addresses them in the context of this dissertation's larger project of analyzing the effects of oppressive discourse—I want to turn now to specific questions

customary relations of kinship” such that practices of the care of self appear “as an intensification of social relations.” Such intensifications are *not*, for Foucault, instances of false consciousness. Rather, as Heyes reminds us, Foucault conceives the cultivation of self—enmeshed in and incited by particular relations of power—as “a practice of freedom” *even as* it is a “politicized activity.” (2006, 141)

of context and political representation, and their importance for the constitution of populations. In particular, my interest in this section will be in addressing the discourse around Sotomayor (and Obama, Clinton and Palin) as a specifically first world and American political representation with localized effects and contexts that can be understood within Foucault's discussion of governmentality. I will suggest that such a reading will *both* further support my contention that Foucault's work is an appropriate theoretical model to use in order to avoid the problems that Alcoff articulates *and* that in fact, reading his work in conjunction with Dewey and Butler's suggests a way to begin thinking through the subversion of oppressive discourses and relations of power.

Before coming to this, however, I want to clarify some terminological choices that I have been making: specifically, what I have in mind with my varied references to populations and subjects. My choices in this regard are, to my mind, consistent with Foucault's—but admittedly with a rather narrow intent, which I do not pretend to share with him. I (and Foucault) use “subjects” to refer to the results of power relations at the individual level, the first-person bodily/cognitive experiences of self that arise in and through particular relations of power, and which (as I have indicated) are differently privileged or oppressed by virtue of their particular situations with respect to those relations. “Populations,” on the other hand, refers to broad collections of individuals conceived and acted on *as a collective or collectives*. Thus, Sotomayor may conceive and experience herself as a Latina subject, while the discourse surrounding her (at least that aimed specifically at her *qua* Latina) acts upon larger populations—such as “Latinas,” “women,” as well as (as I have argued in the previous chapter) “men” or “bourgeois white men.” Foucault's later work (from *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* onward) becomes much more focused on the effects of power at the level of populations than individual subjects, and thus his analytics

of power tend to focus more on what he terms “bio-politics,” “mechanisms of security” and “governmentality.”⁶² In each of these cases, Foucault suggests that his earlier work’s emphasis on juridical and disciplinary power was insufficient to the task of articulating the effects of the power-knowledge-truth relation, since they failed to address the overarching technique of power exercised in the modern liberal state, which is concerned less with the regulation and control of individual behaviors than with the management of patterns of behavior or orderliness of life at the level of populations. (STP 48) One may have the impression, then, that Foucault’s thinking at this point has made a major break with that which has come before, and thus that my own use of these two terms within the same general theoretical framework poses something of a problem—or at least that I ought to pick a level and stick with it, so to speak. However, while Foucault’s thinking does indeed undergo an important shift in emphasis during this later period, this shift does not entail an incompatibility of this later emphasis on population with his earlier discussion of power and the subject.

There are three main reasons for my contention here. The first is that Foucault’s claim that his work has always been principally concerned with the subject comes in an interview quite late in his career, once the lectures on bio-politics and security had already begun.⁶³ The second is his claim offered at the end of the *Collège de France* course, *Security, Territory, Population*, that “there is not a sort of break between the level of micro-power and the level of macro-power, and...talking about one [does not] exclude talking about the other.” (STP 358) That is, a discussion of the sort of disciplinary power Foucault identifies as at work in the imperative to know oneself is in no way in contradiction with a broader discussion of the functions of the state

⁶² See for example the following lectures at the College de France: “Security, Territory, Population,” “The Birth of Biopolitics” and “Society Must Be Defended.”

⁶³ “The Subject and Power,” for example, appears in 1982, while the “Security, Territory, Population” lectures occurred from 1977-1978, followed by “The Birth of Biopolitics” from 1978-79.

in managing life at the level of the population.⁶⁴ This claim is bolstered by a consideration of an example of such a mechanism of security, which is my third reason: Foucault points to the adoption of a *laissez-faire* grain market (as opposed to the regulation of production and selling) in the 18th century France as illustrative of his point regarding the contrast between governmental concerns with individuals or collections of individuals and populations. Briefly, his claim is that by standing back and allowing the price of grain to rise in years of decreased production, the effect is that there is a kind of “self-curbing” at the level of population, such that less grain is bought, but the population as a whole remains stable. However, he says, this succeeds in eliminating scarcity or famine for the population

on the condition that for a whole series of people...there was some scarcity, some dearness, some difficulty in buying wheat, and consequently some hunger, and it may well be that some people die of hunger after all. But by letting *these* people die of hunger one will be able to make scarcity a chimera and prevent it occurring in this massive form of the scourge typical of previous systems. Thus, the scarcity-event is split. The scarcity-scurge disappears, but scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear. (STP, 42 my emphasis)

Thus, it is not only the case that a consideration of power operative at the level of the population (through such mechanisms of security) does not preclude an analysis of its effects at the level of individual subjects; it is also the case that while the objects of those mechanisms of security are populations and not collections of subjects, subjects are *nevertheless* affected by them. My operating assumption throughout this section, then, will be that while it may well be the case for Foucault that phenomena constitutive of populations are not directly aimed at individual subjects (except insofar as those subjects function as its instruments), those population-effects are not without consequence for individual subjects, either within or outside those broader populations.

⁶⁴ In “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault additionally claims that disciplinary and governmentalizing or regulatory power may work simultaneously: “The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation. To say that power took possession of life in the nineteenth century, or to say that power at least takes life under its care in the nineteenth century, is to say that it has, thanks to the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and technologies of regulation on the other, succeeded in covering the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population.” (253)

It is possible, then—and indeed, for my purposes, crucial—to ask not only what the public discourse surrounding Sotomayor contributes to the constitution of Latino/a or normatively white populations in the United States, but also how those contributions affect relationally constituted subjects within and beyond those populations, particularly in their particular geo-political situations. What does it mean, after all, that the public discourse around Sotomayor is not *merely* the proliferation of discourse surrounding a highly visible Latina woman, but is indeed the discourse surrounding a Latina woman nominated to serve on the highest-ranking Court of the Judicial Branch of one of the wealthiest and most powerful governments in the world? For that matter, what does it mean that the discourses surrounding Michelle Obama, or Hillary Clinton, or Sarah Palin are not simply reiterations of pre-existing discourses of sexism, racism, homophobia or classism, but are in fact reiterations of these discourses *within a particular political context*—a context that appears both to assume and insistently reiterate their status as free and equal citizens of the liberal state? By extension, if it is true, as I have argued, that the effects of these discourses are not limited to the women who serve as their supposed objects, how are the effects of such explicitly political discourse different from those of the representations of women in film, fashion, literature or other discursive contexts? In order to answer these questions, I want to turn to a specific consideration of the United State's first-world position within the global economy of politics and concomitantly, to its participation in what Foucault calls the governmentality of the liberal state.

A frequent theme in the rhetoric of Sotomayor's supporters (and indeed, in the virtually all of the explicitly political rhetoric I have treated in this project) is that of the exceptional individual's overcoming of the obstacles of luck (whether these be the difficulties associated with being born poor, a woman, or a person of color). Interestingly, this rhetoric is frequently

accompanied by the assertion that such personal narratives are quintessentially American, or even more strongly, that they would *only* be possible in America.⁶⁵ This reiteration of American exceptionalism—that there is something about the United States’ history, identity, or mission that makes it fundamentally different from *and* morally superior to the rest of the world—is significant, for it highlights both the extent to which such discourse is bound with its political context, and its role in contributing to or maintaining the status quo of that context. Particularly noteworthy is the paradoxical centrality of individual freedom in this rhetoric (which one would certainly expect in the reiteration of the justification of the liberal state in general) that also *concurrently* insists upon the uniqueness—indeed, the indispensable uniqueness—of the United States as its specific enabling historical or political situation. This paradox—that individual agents, as free, are uniquely responsible for their fates, and that such freedom and responsibility is simultaneously impossible elsewhere—offers a way into analyzing the situated specificity of the complex discourse surrounding the public figures I address here, and, as I will suggest, is at least in part ironically perceptive, though not in the (morally authorizing) way it suggests.

To explain why this is the case, it will be helpful to consider Alcoff’s suggestion that the U.S. functions as a sort of “neo-colonial” power, and Gayatri Spivak’s claim that the “global division of labor” enacted by Western imperialism is itself partly constitutive of the Western subject.⁶⁶ As Alcoff points out, since the end of the 19th century, the United States has effectively taken over the colonial role of previous Iberian peninsula governments with regard to Latin America, “either through annexation, colonization or a more diffuse but still very powerful control exerted through territorial treaties, military occupation, and neo-colonial relations of

⁶⁵ It was frequently suggested that Sotomayor’s life story had this in common with Barack Obama’s, and moreover, that this was a reason for her appointment to the Court. See Stolberg 2009.

⁶⁶ 1988, 291 ff.

economic subordination.”⁶⁷ From the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, to the engineering of the Panamanian coup and subsequent control of the Panama Canal, to the annexation of Puerto Rico, to the coupling of economic sanctions with maintained military bases on the island of Cuba, U.S. policy on Latin America tends to follow standard colonial routes, profiting from natural resources and cheap labor while seeking to maintain its situation of economic dominance indefinitely. This would suggest, then, that despite most Americans’ unawareness of the historical, political and economic relations at work, the United States’ identity (as a liberal state, as the quintessential bearer of freedom, as a military and economic superpower) is inextricably bound with its neo-colonial relationship with Latin America (and, we might add with Charles Mills and others, with the trans-Atlantic slave trade⁶⁸). Likewise, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues that much post-structuralist work on the constitution of subjects ignores the fact that this constitution occurs within the specific context of Western imperialism, in which European countries (and, as Enrique Dussel has suggested, the U.S. as well⁶⁹) enrich themselves through the colonization and subsequent economic exploitation of the third world—and then cover over that exploitation through the use of national narratives that present the West as the autonomous bringer of opportunity and moral development. Indeed, Spivak writes, the failure of philosophers to interrogate their own global context, or “to buy a self-contained version of the West is to ignore its production by the imperialist project,”⁷⁰ and in so doing, to *contribute* to the ongoing hegemony of that project.⁷¹ Thus, insofar as the United States’ status as a liberal state

⁶⁷ Alcoff 2005, 401.

⁶⁸ Mills 1999.

⁶⁹ Dussel 2006.

⁷⁰ Spivak 1988, 291.

⁷¹ Space does not permit me to attempt a full accounting of the ways in which feminist, post-structuralist, pragmatist or other philosophical discourses have unwittingly participated in this imperialist project. Beyond Spivak’s invaluable critical contribution, see Mohanty 2003, hooks 1984, Moraga and Anzaldúa’s 1983, Davis 1981 and Narayan 1997.

depends upon its exploitation of Latin American and the third world, the constitution of “free and equal” citizen-subjects within its own political context *depends upon* a particular relation to and difference from third-world populations and subjects, *and* the concomitant covering over or disavowal of that relation.

The sense that American identity is in fact “self-contained” is clearly visible in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, both in its insistence that the U.S. is unique among the nations of the world in its protection or valuing of freedom, and in its paradoxical emphasis on the autonomy of individual citizen-subjects. Moreover, as Spivak points out, even when the rhetoric of exceptionalism is not explicitly present, the failure to interrogate the specificity of the American political context *and* the relations of domination and exploitation that make this context possible amount to a tacit re-assertion of that exceptionalism. It would appear, then, that the content of the popular discourse surrounding Sotomayor (as well as Obama, Clinton and Palin) is in some ways more specified than it initially appeared. On first glance, this additional layer of complication may seem to pose a problem for the Foucaultian analysis I have been sketching—Foucault’s work is almost exclusively concerned with Europe, and Spivak (among others) suggests that this political context is insufficiently interrogated in his work⁷²--but I would argue that on further inspection, an adoption of the Foucaultian framework is both compatible with and helpful for just such concerns.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault argues that the contemporary organization and governance of states is historically located within an evolution in the exercise of political power, in which the state “was gradually ‘governmentalized.’” (STP 109) This “governmentality,” for Foucault, amounts to a shift in the techniques of power—as, for example,

⁷² Spivak 1988, 272-274.

we noted in the adoption of a *laissez-faire* approach to the grain trade—such that the vicissitudes of the economy and the population may be managed and known, rather than strictly controlled. Indeed, the techniques of power unique to the governmentality of the liberal state, which Foucault refers to as “apparatuses of security,” (STP 48) are concerned “to arouse, to facilitate, and to *laissez faire*, in other words to manage” (STP 353) what are understood as the ‘natural’ processes of society. What is crucial, however, is that this naturalness—the *faire* of the *laissez faire*, if you like—is only possible, or is only what it is, *within* this particular technique of power unique to the liberal state. Or in Foucault’s words, “this freedom, both ideology and technique of government, should in fact be understood within the mutations and transformation of technologies of power...freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security.” (STP 48) Thus, Foucault claims, the natural movements that the liberal state seeks to manage—the capitalist marketplace, the fluctuations of population—are in fact part of “a naturalness that basically did not exist” (STP 349) prior to this form of governmentality, and which is the unique product of the historically, economically and politically specific exercise of power. This domain of ‘naturalness’ that is both the liberal state’s invention and responsibility is known as “civil society,” (STP 349-350) and is conceptualized—much as the individual subject—as a pre-existing object subsequently subjected to the regulations of the state (an idea whose salience gives rise to the suggestion, still visible today, that society could or should rid itself of the obstructive influence of government⁷³). Still, Foucault’s point is not quite that “civil society” as such is an illusion, but rather that it is a contingent production of the governmentalization of the state. Civil society’s freedom, he claims, “is not an ideology; it is not exactly, fundamentally, or primarily an ideology. First of all and above all it is a technology of

⁷³ e.g. Ronald Regan’s famous inaugural address declaration that “government is the problem,” still widely cited on the American Right.

power, or at any rate can be read in this sense.” (STP 49) It is not, then, that liberal apologists are deluded with regard to the existence of freedom in the liberal state. “A condition of governing well,” Foucault says, “is that freedom, or *certain forms of freedom*, are really respected.” (STP 353, emphasis mine) The point, rather, is that *the form of freedom* thus respected is the product of the exercise of mechanisms of security that characterize the governmentality of the liberal state.

With this in mind, we are in a better position to articulate the implications of American political discourse. In particular, it seems that what I have called the “paradox” of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism is understandable as a species of the ideology or practice of liberal governmentality that Foucault identifies. That is, it appears that the simultaneous assertion of the autonomy of the citizen-subject who overcomes adversity and the uniquely enabling structure of life in the United States might in fact be nearer to the truth than was initially apparent. Specifically, it seems that the *sort* of freedom or autonomy that this political rhetoric prizes is indeed only possible within this particular governmental arrangement—though not in the way one might have thought. This is not because the U.S. government (or indeed, any neo-liberal state) is better equipped to protect the “natural” freedoms of autonomous agents or markets, but rather because those agents and markets are themselves resultant from the sort of security mechanisms deployed by the American state. Moreover, because the United States’ particular form of liberalism is dependent upon the sort of neo-colonial or imperialist exploitation Alcott, Dussel and Spivak highlight (whether in the form of the seizure of lands and resources, the sale, purchase and enslavement of human beings, or the use of off-shore sweatshops), the particular form of civil society, and, by extension, citizen-subjects, thus constituted will be unavoidably American in situation, by virtue of their concurrent status as the effects and beneficiaries of that

exploitation. The same U.S. policies that permitted (and currently permit, or sponsor) the stealing of land, the appropriation of natural resources, the slaughter of Indigenous North Americans, and the exploitation of labor—those crucial mechanisms of security—concomitantly produce and enable the forms of free movement and free exchange that characterize life for vast populations of U.S. citizens. And *these* forms of freedom at the level of populations have concurrent consequences at the level of subjects: selves possessed of the importance of an autonomy that refuses to acknowledge its constitutive conditions— what Anzaldúa calls “the doppelganger in your psyche.” (BF 108) For as Foucault points out, in order to ensure the security of such a governmentalized society, the sacrifice of some individuals “not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.” (STP 42)

This is not to say, of course, that all Americans are equally privileged—nor, on the other hand, is it to suggest that the effects of governmentalized power ought to be conceived as a continuum of greatest to least freedom from constraint. As I have suggested, within the United States, subjects are differently constituted and situated with respect to power, particularly within the discourses of race, gender, sexuality and class. And it appears, moreover, that at least some of these discourses are inextricably bound with the sustaining liberal rhetoric of the American state: the racialization particular to the U.S. is unthinkable apart from the ongoing and historical realities of colonialism and the slave trade; the vilification of working-class subjects is inconceivable apart from the ideology of individual freedom, in which only the lazy are poor. Indeed, as Alcoff has pointed out, because American identity has been so dependent upon the historical and present realities of the domination of the third world and non-whites, people of color in the U.S. may constitute a threat to the stability of that identity by functioning as visible

reminders of its origins.⁷⁴ Perhaps in contrast with Alcoff, however, I would suggest that, at least in the popular imagination, such reminders are confined strictly to the realm of historical origins, responsibility for which is conveniently disavow-able. The political ascendancy of public figures of color like Sotomayor or the Obamas, for example, has functioned *not* primarily to undermine the dominant discourse of freedom and American exceptionalism, but rather to reinforce it through the suggestion that, for those who work hard, anything really *is* possible. Because the American dream is attainable *even* for those who were ‘previously’ oppressed (though not by ‘us,’ of course), and because that attainment is ostensibly facilitated by the particular uniqueness of the U.S., those who remain demonstrably oppressed may be conceived as responsible for their own failure to overcome oppression—and thus, ironically, the justifiable objects of discrimination.

What is significant about this for my present purpose is that it is demonstrable of the extent to which Foucault’s account is useful for conceptualizing the specificity of subject-constitution within the particular political context of the United States. While Foucault does not, of course, address his specific inquiries to the American context, combining his discussion of the governmentality of the liberal state with Alcoff and Spivak’s analyses of the global context of that specifically American or Western liberal state enables a fuller picture of the complexity of contemporary political discourse in the U.S. and its effects. Moreover, because Foucault does not purport to offer a universally applicable or totalizing account of the effects of power, but instead grounds his analyses within local and historically contingent institutions and states, such a specified re-appropriation of his thinking is justifiable—and, indeed, crucial.

⁷⁴ Alcoff 2006, 243

Thus, Alcoff's criticism of Foucault—that his account of subjectivity involves the tacit repudiation of that which comes to the subject from the outside as inaccurate or obstructive—is unjustified. While Foucault does of course suggest that the governmentality of the liberal state gives rise to a misleading sense of the naturalness and autonomy of civil society and the citizen-subject, this does not entail that either society or the subject are illusory, but rather that they are “fabrications,” in the contingent and constructed sense of the term. Moreover, Foucault's suggestion that these fabrications are the result of particular patterns of subjection to relations of power (in the case of the U.S., mechanisms of security) does not necessarily imply that social relations are necessarily obstructing or oppressive, or “that social categories of identity are always the product of normalization,” as Alcoff puts it.⁷⁵ It is certainly true that Foucault often strongly suggests that dominant patterns of subjection are indeed oppressive and normalizing—as, for example, ideologies of racial purity are—but this hardly suggests that subjection (in the dual sense of becoming-a-subject and being-subject-to-power-relations) is necessarily and unilaterally oppressive or normalizing. In fact, in the context of our discussion of governmentality and civil society, the passage Alcoff quotes to support her claim looks rather different. In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault writes, “the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries.” (SP 336) Though the language Foucault here uses (of liberation and imposition) does connote the sort of assumptions that concern Alcoff, his suggestions elsewhere that these forms of freedom, of civil

⁷⁵ Alcoff 2006, 73.

society—and by extension, of subjectivity—are themselves the products of particular arrangements of governmentalization, undermine their straightforwardly liberatory tone. Indeed, it seems that a consistently Foucaultian reading would argue *not* that forms of subjectivization are necessarily illusory or deceptive, but that they are unavoidably contextualized by their particular political situation. While it seems clear that Foucault *is* concerned that presently operative mechanisms of the governmentality of the liberal state are in fact detrimental or oppressive, as, by implication, are the forms of subjectivization to which they give rise, it is not at all clear that this entails a general suspicion of processes of subjectivization or the socio-politically constitutedness of the subject as such. In fact, Foucault’s call for the promotion of “new forms of subjectivity” suggests that it may indeed be possible to participate in strategies of political resistance that undermine the oppressiveness of dominant forms of subjection. And because Foucault has suggested that the constitution of subjects as such always happens within a particular situation vis-à-vis relations of power (which exist, as we previously noted, only within the social world), it is doubtful that he intends these “new forms of subjectivity” to be understood as less oppressive or more accurate by virtue of being untouched by the social. Rather, it would appear that Foucault’s call here is for strategies of resistance that promote new forms of relation, a subversion of the dominant patterns of interaction, and thus, new contexts in which subjects might become subjects.

I will turn to a more detailed discussion of such strategies of resistance in the final chapter. For now, however, I want to conclude by recalling what I have suggested Foucault can offer the present account of the effects of discourse and the constitution of differently situated subjects, especially in light of the question of Latina identity. Because Foucault’s account of subject-constitution, especially in his later work, is concerned to highlight the ways in which the

subject is constituted and constitutes itself (*se constituer*) within particular patterns of relations of power, the account we get from him is able to account for the situated agency of subjects—and is thus compatible with the contributions of Dewey and Butler. What we would have, then, is an account of interactional, citational bodily meaning-making that conceives particularities of meaning-making as 1) productive of subjects who may be more or less constrained with respect to their possible actions in virtue of those (racialized, sexualized, classed) meanings, and 2) understands such subject-production to be contributed to by the subjects in question, rather than unilaterally imposed. Moreover, because Foucault's account suggests that populations and subjects are variably situated with respect to localized relations of power, it offers a way to conceptualize the complex situations of a spectrum of differently privileged and oppressed subjects *without* having recourse to a rigidly binary framework that would both efface the experiences of subjects who do not fit into it and oversimplify our account such that it could not accommodate concurrently constitutive discourses. Understanding this constitution, moreover, as characterized by the sort of mixing or impurity highlighted by Latina feminists is crucial for re-articulating the relationship between variable discourses and populations in a way that troubles the tacit assumptions of 'pure' subjectivity or 'pure' racism or sexism I discussed in chapter 1. That is, reading Foucault—for whom the deployment of sexuality is productive not only of the "truth" of perversion and normative sex, but also of the "truth" of "blood" or racialization, among other things—in light of the valorization of impurity offered by Anzaldúa has the effect of demonstrating the extent to which all subjects are mixed, emergent within meaning-full interactions that are themselves never pure. Finally, since Foucault's account is both unavoidably local and situated in its scope, and mindful of the effects of state power and other political institutions on that account, drawing on it for the present purposes is ideal, since it

situates my inquiry in a particularly American political context, and stands as a reminder that all such inquiries are necessarily historically, politically and economically context-specific. That is, while the present project does attempt an articulation of the effects of oppressive discourse for a great number of populations and subjects, it does not and cannot offer a universal or timeless account of subjectivity as such.

Who, then, is the Wise Latina subject, and from what does she proceed? The better question would perhaps be: what relations do Wise Latina subjects bear to white masculine subjects, to black heterosexual subjects, to lesbian working-class subjects, or to third-world women subjects? In what respects are such relations dependent upon their particular situation within the American state? In the case of Sotomayor—as in all cases—the answers are clearly complex and unanswerable with a simple declaration. What Foucault, especially in connection with Dewey and Butler, helps to make clear, however, is that these relations (describable equally as discursive, political and bodily) give rise to subjects which are contingent and continually evolving, such that neither the subject as such, nor the relations of power or signification in which it is caught up, may ever be completely articulated.

CHAPTER IV

RESISTING, RESIGNIFYING, RECONSTRUCTING: THE CHALLENGE OF PALIN FOR FEMINIST POLITICS

The movement to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* and end legal abortion in the United States is, according to former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, “pro-woman” and “pro-family.” Despite the feminist movement’s historical ties to political initiatives diametrically opposed to such a view and its nearly univocal assertion of the importance of reproductive rights for women, Palin persistently claims that the elimination of legal abortion is in fact a feminist position, going so far as to accuse the National Organization for Women of a “double-standard,” and suggesting that her position offers greater respect for women’s abilities to do the seemingly impossible. Indeed, from the time of her nomination as John McCain’s running mate in the 2008 Presidential election, Palin has consistently deployed the rhetoric of the women’s movement in the service of political aims that are decidedly outside its typical goals, if not counter to them entirely. From rhetorically connecting her nomination to the “18 million cracks in the glass ceiling” effected by Hillary Clinton’s historic candidacy to calling herself a feminist for believing that women both can and have every opportunity to do anything men can do, Palin routinely suggests that her brand of up-by-the-bootstraps populist individualism is not only good for women, but more authentically feminist than whatever is peddled by “liberals,” with their consistently dour focus on oppression.¹

¹ Palin 2010.

Feminists in the United States continue to be enraged and transfixed by Palin², suggesting that hers is a false or disingenuous “feminism,” a strategic re-deployment of our own rhetoric against us. Ironically, some feminists appear to have been so undone by Palin’s cooptation of their own language that they fail to note when she, like most public women, is the object of sexist discourse, and even occasionally contribute to such discourse themselves.³ Palin thus appears to have, in some respects and for some quarters, altered the meaning of the word “feminism”—not only in its connotations and public faces, but perhaps in what it signifies as a set of political practices and commitments.

In chapter 2, I suggested that an interactional, citational theory of signification informed by the work of Dewey and Butler could explain both the contingency and relative stability of culturally-produced instances of meaning like gender and race. Such meanings, I suggested, give rise to identities, which are produced and reproduced within a complex, particular context, which is—as I claimed in the following chapter—both enabled and affected by its larger geo-political situation. Of course, the fact of their contingency implies that the meanings of such localized significations might in principle be altered, and indeed, in this chapter, I want to address the possibility of such alteration. “Alteration” in general, however, is not obviously desirable from a feminist perspective, as Palin’s redeployment of the rhetoric of feminism makes all too clear. Moreover, if it is indeed the case that practices of meaning-making are so deeply and unavoidably situated within and produced by entrenched relations of power (whether we

² See for example Valenti (2008 and 2009), Power (2009), Alcoff and Miraglia (2008), Traister (2010).

³ Susan Douglass, for example, managed, while critiquing Palin’s use and repudiation of feminism, to simultaneously question Palin’s parenting choices as insufficiently maternal: “If she were really a product of the New Momism she would not be running for Vice President. Because she would not be leaving a 4-month-old special needs baby at home. I who critiqued the new momism would never leave a 4-month-old special needs baby at home to go on a campaign trail 24 hours a day. I think she’s one cold customer.” (Lee & Win 2009)

understand these as economic, gendered, or otherwise), it is not at all clear how—or even *if*—such alteration as would be required for meaningful change to be possible. Indeed, the works of both Foucault and Butler have been widely criticized by feminists for rendering significant social change seemingly impossible. Still, as I have noted, both Foucault and Butler have rejected such characterizations of their work, and the addition of Deweyan pragmatism, with its emphasis on inter-action, has the potential to make explicit (or perhaps viable) a reading of such a Foucaultian or Butlerian account of hierarchically-organized meanings as susceptible to significant resistance. The effects of such resistance are far from transparent, however, and in order to get clearer on what it might mean to effect feminist change in a world of subjects and populations such as the one I have depicted, it will be necessary to spend more time with the notions of social change and individual change, alterations in signification and alterations in material circumstances.

In this chapter, then, I will not only address the most common feminist objections about agency and social change brought against the sort of account I have offered; I will also suggest that this account is particularly well situated to conceptualize the complex relationship between individual and collective action, signification, and broader political realities. Indeed, I suggest that a feminist approach to politics (especially in the United States) can and should be attuned *both* to the tangible effects of the discursive constitution of individuals and populations through the sorts of signifying practices I have articulated—and the ways in which such practices might be subverted—*as well as* to coalition-based political movements and policy initiatives whose aims are more obviously material. My contention throughout, however, will be that such practices will not be well understood (or indeed, engaged in) from a point of view that insists upon their disjunction. That is, my claim—which is both pragmatic and Butlerian—is that

feminist involvements in practices of resignification and practices of social reform should *not* be conceived as competing strategies, or even as fundamentally different in kind. This is not to say, however, that all instances of resignification are equally helpful for anti-oppressive purposes, nor that every effort to change the concrete particulars of hierarchically-organized lives is equally effective. Rather, my aim in this chapter will be to suggest 1) why strategies of resignification or alteration in practices of meaning-making matter, 2) what my previous claims about the mixed and locally situated character of such practices and populations imply for the viability of coalitional attempts at resignification and 3) the necessity, in light of a figure like Palin, of articulating a means of normatively evaluating such attempts, such that effectively anti-oppressive efforts might be distinguished from shifts in meaning that seek to reconsolidate hegemonic social arrangements. In the end, I argue for an experimental approach to anti-oppressive politics that would seek to reshape the prevailing discourses and patterns of interaction characteristic of the current social situation. In so doing, my claim will *not* be that feminists may overcome racism, sexism, homophobia or classism in one fell swoop, or that our efforts (even those subjected to pragmatic adjudication) are guaranteed to be helpful, as opposed to participating in the reconsolidation of privilege. Rather, my purpose throughout the chapter will be to suggest ways in which our inter-actions might be changed, despite their apparent intransigence.

Situating the Subject and Reconstructing the Social

In 2000, Martha Nussbaum published a scathing article in *The New Republic*, in which she condemned the “postmodern” turn in feminism influenced by Butler and Foucault as a position advocating political quietism and flippant parody, seductive of young feminists and thus

“more insidious than provincialism.”⁴ In addition to accusing Butler of cultivating a following through the deliberate use of mystifying and obfuscating language, Nussbaum suggested that Butler’s philosophical project (like Foucault’s) in fact thrived on the sort of domination feminists ought to rail against, going so far as to claim that “for Butler, the act of subversion is so riveting, so sexy, that it is a bad dream to think that the world will actually get better. What a bore equality is! No bondage, no delight.”⁵ Whatever such a philosophy might advocate in terms of resistance or subversion (and she does grant that these are at least mentioned), it will of necessity be minimal, individually-based, and require little actual effort. Such a feminism, she writes,

is in many ways easier than the old feminism. It tells scores of talented young women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics. They can do politics in safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture. This, the theory says, is pretty much all that is available to us anyway, by way of political action, and isn't it exciting and sexy?⁶

Nussbaum ends by noting that such subversion, while sexy⁷, does nothing to actually help women who are legally disenfranchised or systematically raped—and thus that whatever a Butlerian or Foucaultian feminism might have to offer would only be of use to bourgeois academics who have the luxury to avoid real political engagement.

My purpose in mentioning Nussbaum’s criticisms here is not to offer a point-by-point refutation of her reading of Butler—and as I shall explain later, I believe that *one* of her claims (that Butler’s framing of resignification is problematic in its normative commitments) is on

⁴ Nussbaum 2000.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nussbaum’s reiteration of the supposed “sex” appeal of Butler’s thought is a bit odd, especially given her alarmist opening claim that young feminists are being taken in by the charm of Butler’s writing. A full articulation of the function of erotic language in Nussbaum’s piece is beyond the scope of my engagement here, but it is worth noting for the present that nearly all of her references to sex in Butler’s work carry a disparaging allusion to sadomasochism, as in the suggestion that “the hope for a world of real justice... has been banished, even perhaps mocked as sexually tedious.” Butler, Nussbaum suggests in not-so-veiled phrases, is luring in our young feminists with her perverse ideas about kinky sex!

target, though not in the way Nussbaum suggests.⁸ Butler herself has authored careful replies to just such broad critiques—of which Nussbaum’s is only one extreme example—already.⁹

Instead, my interest in what follows is in articulating the ways in which the pragmatic, post-structuralist account of subject-constitution that I am offering—despite, or perhaps in virtue of, its indebtedness to Butler and Foucault—is equipped to address the problem of situated agency and the possibility of (what Nussbaum and others would conceive as) real change. To address this adequately, however, it will be necessary to review some ground already partially covered, returning to the notions of habitual interaction, citationality and governmentality.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the governmentality of the liberal American state, in which an ostensibly gender- and race-neutral legal system functions to contribute to the production and management of differently situated populations and subjects, depends upon and reproduces a *laissez-faire* approach to the distribution of economic and political power which simultaneously fabricates a *particular kind of freedom* for some subjects while relying upon the oppression and exploitation of others. Because the political identity of the liberal state is wrapped up with the presumption of citizens who are free and equal, the real differences in material conditions for differently embodied populations within (and, even more so, outside of) the United States are excluded from juridical discourse,¹⁰ and often only mentioned in popular discourse as evidence of the inferiority (whether ‘inherent’ or ‘learned’) of the disadvantaged groups. Moreover, the governmentalized exclusion of such considerations gives rise to such

⁸ Specifically, I will argue that while Butler’s general approach to evaluating the desirability of particular resignifications with reference to their consequences is helpful, her personal adherence to strict norms of non-violence and anti-exclusionary practice is question-begging and anti-pragmatic. This claim, of course, is very different than Nussbaum’s, which amounts to the assertion that on Butler’s view, anything goes, normatively speaking.

⁹ See, for example Butler 1992 and Butler 1995.

¹⁰ And, indeed, from much philosophical discourse on justice, as the significant popularity of Rawls’ (2005) notion of pure procedural justice makes clear.

political practices as those that, for example, disallow *any* consideration of race in university admissions practices—such that affirmative action programs are rendered illegally discriminatory—or require the free speech rights of corporations to be respected as equally protected as those of individual citizens.¹¹ In such cases, the presumption of state neutrality that enables *both* the broad management of populations within the United States (such that they largely fall within acceptable parameters of behavior, here concerning the maintenance of ‘impartiality’ and ‘liberty’) *and* the constitution of new legally protected classes (white people and corporations) requires that a whole series of populations and individuals remain exploited. This is both because, as Foucault points out (and I discussed in the previous chapter), governmentalized manipulation at the level of populations *depends upon* the exclusion of particular individuals for its effectiveness, and because, as Charles Mills notes,¹² the liberalism of the United States government is *only* tenable as fair or neutral from an idealized perspective in which vast power disparities between particular individuals and groups do not already exist. Insofar as the United States’ practice of liberalism requires a (false) neutrality with respect to distribution of economic and political resources (of which things like university admission and free political speech would only be two examples), then, it continues to contribute to the constitution of both oppressed and privileged populations and subjects.

With this in mind, it might appear that critics such as Nussbaum—who would suggest that a failure to act in tangible ways against the political organization that both oppresses and renders redress impossible amounts to a failure to do anything useful at all—are correct. If, after all, it is the case (as I have suggested) that geo-political context significantly situates subjects as

¹¹ See *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. Harris (1993) speaks eloquently on the subject of *Gratz v. Bollinger* and the flaws of the liberal ideology that underpins it.

¹² Mills 2005.

variably privileged, and if, moreover, the United States' particular context depends upon the exclusion or oppression of whole groups of people whose constitution as oppressed it thus implicitly contributes to, it would appear that the *only* option for meaningful resistance is one whose goal is the toppling of U.S. liberalism, at least in its current configuration.¹³ We might conclude as much through adopting (1) Nussbaum's point that only those acts that physically or politically resist specific structural injustices constitute actual resistance and (2) a reading of Foucault's claim that the liberal state is predicated on major structural injustices that figures the liberal state as the *backdrop* against which subjects are produced and oppressed. Indeed, some Marxists—albeit through a rather different theoretical route—would suggest that such a conclusion about the form of political resistance is exactly right.¹⁴ However, I would suggest on the contrary that such a view would rely both on an untenable reductionism of oppressions and on dubious metaphysical claims. That is to say, in order to accept the claim that true resistance is only achieved in the form of revolution or serious restructuring of the liberal state, we would have to assent to the claim that the variably (dis)empowering effects of governmentality are foundational to the production of subjects in ways not common to the patterns of hierarchized interaction and signification characteristic of, say, sexualization or racialization. Moreover, assenting to such a claim requires the assumption that the effects of governmentality (and by extension, resistance to its effects) are fundamentally different in kind from the effects of significations such as sexuality or race. While this might initially appear to be true, further investigation—especially in light of Dewey's pragmatic approach to inter-action, as I will explain below—demonstrates that the assumption of such a difference requires that we ignore

¹³ From this point of view, in fact, even changing the sorts of laws Nussbaum targets (such as those permitting marital rape) fails to effect meaningful resistance, as it would amount only to a sort of rearranging of the imperialist, patriarchal furniture.

¹⁴ See for example Žižek 2000.

the reality of the simultaneous materiality and ideality of each set of practices. Moreover, taking seriously Dewey's anti-dualistic claims with regard to inter-action makes clear why we ought *not* to understand Foucault's important claims about governmentality (and their implications for the American liberal state) to imply their foundationality to all other forms of oppression.

Before coming to the place of governmentality within a Deweyan pragmatic framework, however, I want to turn to the first problematic assumption I mentioned: that the political effects of governmentality are different in kind from the effects of hierarchized significations like race and gender. In fact, let us consider this claim at the more general level of a suggestion like Nussbaum's (a version of which is contained in (1) above): that there is a sort of activity that counts as a legitimate act of resistance, which is opposed to the kind of pseudo-activity of changes in signification. On such a view, rewriting laws to expand the definition of rape to include marital rape, for example, would count as an actual act of resistance, while calling attention to the social construction of marriage that constitutes women as objects of masculine sexual exchange, and thus as simultaneously vulnerable to rape and theoretically unrapeable, would not. Indeed, it seems that the former sort of action "does" something, while the latter merely says something, or perhaps only pontificates on something. However, as I noted in chapter 2, Dewey points out that conceiving actions in this way depends upon assumptions about the dualism of action and ideas that lead us to ignore the extent to which, here, the alteration of law is describable as much as a change in the idea of legality as an act with material consequences.¹⁵ Likewise, the implicit suggestion that theoretical work does not "do" anything

¹⁵ Butler's discussion of the legal constitution of proscribed hate speech and pornography in *Excitable Speech* draws this point out vividly, as she suggests that the Supreme Court's ruling delimiting harmful speech-acts effectively constitute that which they purport merely to reference—meaning that this exchange and adoption of ideas is already a form of action, and action whose consequences are materially significant for many people beyond the Court and its present litigants. Nussbaum, unsurprisingly, is not persuaded by her reading.

depends upon the false assumption (found too frequently in the history of philosophy) that ideas are divorced from material reality and that philosophers are conveniently dis-embodied. (EN 324) Moreover, on a Deweyan reading, what such theoretical actions *do* is not limited to their describability as physical processes. That is, it is not the case that the *doing* of the person who draws out the historical significations of marriage is limited to her physical articulation of these ideas (which we might describe at the level of her interaction with a computer, her vocal chords' interaction with the surrounding air, the interaction of firing of neurons within her brain, and so on). Rather, because her theoretical actions take place within a particular *social* environment (which, to reiterate, is at once a physical environment as well), these actions necessarily constitute a kind of inter-action that alters that environment.

The reason for this is well stated by Shannon Sullivan, who also argues that white privilege, as an unconscious habit of many white people, is not merely contained within the psyches of a few individuals, but is perpetuated and transmitted through a particular sort of racist environment.¹⁶ If human beings were isolated, autonomous entities contained in an environment like papers in an envelope, she writes, “environment would influence and shape habit, but only secondarily, from without. By contrast, the concept of environment that I use in my account of habit is no mere container. Habits are not ‘in’ the world like water is in a plastic cup. Because humans are habituated beings, the world inhabits us as much as we inhabit it.”¹⁷ Since, as Dewey points out, human beings simply *are* habits—which are themselves only patterns of interaction with the world that are always both physical and meaning-full—to change the world, “We must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of men.” (HNC 24) And while such

¹⁶ For a similar account of the transmission of unconscious racism/colonialism on the social level that does not make use of the pragmatic language of habit, see Kelly Oliver’s excellent *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (2004).

¹⁷ Sullivan 2006, 2.

a declaration might be read to suggest that no change is possible unless changes are made at the institutional or legal level,¹⁸ I would argue that this is an unnecessarily (and misleadingly) restrictive understanding of what constitutes one's environment. Sullivan suggests, for example, "The books that a person reads, the films that she sees, the histories that she studies, the people with whom she socializes, the neighborhoods in which she lives, the social and political work to which she contributes—all of these things are environments that help shape a person's habits and on which a person can have some impact."¹⁹ Though it may seem counter-intuitive that relatively innocuous components of our interactional lives like films or choice of neighborhood could have as tangible an effect on our habits as institutions like marriage, the examples of Fanon and Beauvoir that I examined in the first chapter give reason to doubt this. Seemingly minor differences in play and dress produce patterns of signification around femininity that literally give shape to the phenomenological experience of a female body, according to Beauvoir. Likewise, the dominance of the literature of colonizing France in the Antilles is, as Fanon suggests, enough to alter one's own self-consciousness. As Sullivan explains, such a habituated exposure to an alienating environment is not merely externally damaging (like an envelope that crushes its contents), but contributes to the constitution of persons who are both physically and psychically oppressed. She writes, "If this happened infrequently, it might not make much of an impact, but the constant onslaught of French/Western European values by means of these media make them a formidable conduit for those values into the Antillean unconscious."²⁰ Moreover, as Fanon's description of double-consciousness—in which he is simultaneously aware of his

¹⁸ Indeed, Dewey's wording at times appears to suggest as much. He writes, "But no amount of preaching good will or the golden rule or cultivation of sentiments of love and equity will accomplish the results. There must be change in objective arrangements and institutions." (HNC 23-24) However, given his larger commitment to inter-action rather than uni-directional change as the mode of political alteration, it seems wise to construe 'objective arrangements' more broadly than simply legal.

¹⁹ Sullivan 2006, 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

body in the first and third person, particularly while under the eyes of white people on a train— suggests, this shaping of the “unconscious” literally transforms one’s embodiment in the world. And, as Sullivan points out, “The same historico-racial schema both disrupts the black person’s and enables the white person’s composition of their bodily schemas.”²¹ That is to say, it is not only the case that environments—including the elements of those environments that appear to be ‘merely’ signifying—contribute to the restriction or alienation of some subjects; it is also true that the freedom, agency, and variable privilege of all subjects is contributed to inter-actionally by those environments.

What patterns of signification *do*, then, is not merely a matter of the transmission of ideas. The idea that an alteration or subversion of those entrenched patterns amounts to nothing—or even something absolutely different in kind than the alteration of legal or institutional features of an environment—is misguided. While it is certainly the case that the effects of different forms of anti-oppressive action will necessarily be varied and not entirely predictable (a problem to which I will return later in the chapter), it is hardly the case that it therefore follows that, say, the institution of laws proscribing marital rape have real effects while academic or activist work that seeks to problematize (or, as Butler might have it, resignify) marriage would not. To be sure, one carries the teeth of legal penalties (even if these are meted out only for a fraction of the violations²²), while the other does not. But both have the potential

²¹ Ibid., 103.

²² As the U.S. Department of Justice reports, “Only 36 percent of completed rapes were reported to the police during the years 1992 to 2000. Thirty-four percent of the attempted rapes, and 26 percent of the completed and attempted sexual assaults were reported....A recently published eight-year study indicates that when perpetrators of completed rape are current or former husbands or boyfriends, the crimes go unreported to the police 77 percent of the time. When the perpetrators are friends or acquaintances, the rapes go unreported 61 percent of the time. When the perpetrators are strangers, the rapes go unreported 54 percent of the time.” (US DOJ 2005) Moreover, only a fraction of these reported assaults result in convictions or legal penalties.

consequence, over time, of a transformation of environments, both physically and ideally: while rape laws carry the potential obviously physical consequence of punishment, they also constitute new realms of proscribed behavior, new subjects under law (married women as rights-bearing individuals), a consolidation of varieties of sexual violence as a single entity (“rape”), and an alteration in the definition of marriage (as a state of sexual ownership). Likewise, while work that seeks to subversively draw out the harmful significations of marriage-as-exchange-of-women most obviously has the apparently non-physical effect of exposing “marriage” as a contingent concept whose implications are misogynist, heterosexist or inconsistent with ‘our’ purported social or legal norms, that exposure itself effects an alteration of environment, which, as Fanon and Sullivan’s work suggests, may have wide-ranging effects. These effects, moreover, are not just effects of “consciousness,” but effects of bodily schema and comportment in the world, such that women might experience their embodiment differently—whether this be in an alteration in the sort of ‘double-consciousness’ described by Fanon and Beauvoir, or in the ability to experience such violations as those proscribed by marital rape laws *as* rape. So while it is certainly the case that the varieties of feminist action one might take are not identical in their effects, it does not follow from this that the effects they *do* have are obviously distinct in kind. And because, as Dewey’s interactional model of meaning and embodied experience suggests, these effects necessarily shape (even as they are shaped by) the surrounding environment, it is misguided to suggest that any set of feminist actions—however we might categorize them—does nothing.

Of course, it remains to be seen how *much* different actions might ‘do,’ or even whether such ‘doings’ might always be beneficial. This question, crucial to the direction of anti-oppressive political action, remains open—and it is one to which I will return later in the chapter.

For the moment, however, I want to bracket it in order to return to the other pressing question of this section: whether we must read Foucault's notion of the governmentality of the liberal state as a kind of foundation or background on which or against which other patterns of hierarchically-organized interactions or relations of power are deployed. If this reading is accurate, it would seem that even if various forms of action constitute alterations of environment, none of these would be significant in the way necessary to be effectively anti-oppressive *unless* they constituted a legitimate threat to the liberal state as such. Indeed, given Foucault's suggestions that governmentality gives rise to a particular form of subjectivity, and that "the techniques of government have become the only political issue, the only real space for political struggle and contestation," (G 221) this conclusion appears to be unavoidable. However, given Foucault's discussion of governmentality as a set of diffuse techniques of population management, such a reading is ultimately untenable.

It is important to recall, in the first place, that while most of Foucault's examples of governmentality within *Security, Territory, Population* are concerned with regulations that fall within the purview of the state (the grain trade, etc.), his claim about governmentality as an apparatus of security depends upon distinguishing such management from deployments of *sovereign* power, in which the state's authority is its own justification. Indeed, while Foucault suggests that there are elements of both sovereignty and disciplinary power within the modern liberal state, a rough chronological analysis demonstrates that the state has become progressively "governmentalized." (G 220) Moreover, according to Foucault, because the state is no longer sovereign in the earlier sense (in which, for example, the monarch's power was not bounded by rule of law), it would be a mistake to understand this governmentalization as proceeding univocally from the state, as a set of functions traceable to a particular source. "The state," he

argues, “does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality, nor, to speak frankly, this importance.” (G 220) On the contrary, he claims,

It is possible to suppose that if the state is what it is today, this is so precisely thanks to this governmentality, which is at once internal and external to the state—since it is the tactics of government that make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on. Thus, the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of general tactics of governmentality. (G 221)

To make sense of the claim that diffuse tactics of management in fact contribute to the constitution and delimitation of the state, it is useful to turn to Butler’s analysis of the United States’ practice of “indefinite detention” of “enemy combatants” in her book, *Precarious Life*. Butler argues that the Bush administration’s policy²³ of declaring prisoners of war—and, indeed, some U.S. citizens—“enemy combatants” and imprisoning them indefinitely without trial, charge or access to any other legal protection afforded under the Constitution was both continuous with and enabled by discourses and practices that grouped and marked particular populations as legal non-subjects. This was accomplished in part through Executive-Branch-fiat, but just as importantly, in part through “non-state institutions and discourses that are legitimated neither by direct elections nor through established authority...[and function] to dispose and order populations, and to produce and reproduce subjects, their practices and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims.” (PL 52) Through discourses as diverse as the Geneva Convention’s distinction between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ combatants (PL 87) and the ethno-racialized surveillance of Muslim persons in the U.S. (or even those simply perceived to “look” Muslim (PL 76-77)) touched off by post-9/11 terror “alerts,” whole populations are re-constituted as outside the law, or as necessitating the law’s suspension.

²³ Now continued under the Obama administration.

While these circumstances would appear to suggest that in some cases, the state uses governmentality to strengthen or reassert its own sovereignty (such that it suspends the rule of law at will), Butler cautions that such a view would, again, presume too much causal efficacy on the part of a unified power. Still, she argues, such instances do imply that the “loss [of sovereignty] is compensated through the resurgence of sovereignty within the field of governmentality,” (PL 56) since “the rule of law, in the act of being suspended, produces sovereignty *in its action and as its effect*.” (PL 66) Thus, Butler argues, it is not quite right to say, as Foucault has, that the state owes its continued existence to governmentality exclusively, since there is still some element of sovereignty at work. However, sovereignty in this instance is itself a *tactic* of governmentality, “a tactic that produces its own effectivity as its aim.” (PL 97) That is, sovereignty here becomes both an instrument of governmentality and its (sovereignty’s) own justification and effectiveness, such that populations may be managed in part through their constitution as either rights-bearing or subject to unmitigated sovereignty.

Still, given that both Foucault and Butler’s formulations have rested on the claims that these arrays of tactics, managements and constitutions are not limited to those deployed exclusively by the state, and that, concomitantly, the totality of these deployments (whether they are conceived as primarily characterized by governmentalization or sovereignty) somehow strengthen or lend legitimacy to the state’s acts, the picture as we currently have it appears incomplete. Another way of posing the problem would be to suggest that here, as in other Foucaultian formulations of power relations, we look to be missing a “who” of political action. Who is it that exercises these deployments, tactics, or strategies of management? Or, if there is no “who” in the traditional (autonomous, sovereign) sense, in what respect can we maintain that “management” as such occurs? My sense is that we have a hint to answer to this question in

Butler's evocation of "non-state institutions and discourses," and that we might view the function of such institutions and discourses in the ongoing American media discourse around terrorism and the Constitutional rights (or lack thereof) of "terrorists."

In 2010, the tactics of localized suspension of the rule of law that Butler highlights in her discussion of indefinite detention continue, both in the maintenance of the majority of those original acts of detention (which, at nearly ten years, certainly appear to be indefinite) and in the ongoing suspension of legal rights for individuals deemed "terrorists." Indeed, in early 2010, political discourse was fraught with controversy over the impending trial of Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who, after many years of detention without charge, was to be officially tried for his role in the planning of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Specifically, while the trial was originally scheduled to take place in New York City (as per jurisdiction regulations), significant public hand-wringing by both politicians and the American news media gave rise to a political environment in which the "KSM trial" was portrayed as dangerous, risky, and necessary to move out of New York—for fear of additional terrorist attacks. Moreover, the insistence by the Department of Justice that the trials go forward as planned was met with the suggestion that such "dangerous" fealty to the rule of law in such cases was symptomatic of liberal weakness, which would laughably (and irresponsibly) extend the same Constitutional legal protections to "terrorists" as American citizens. Public outcry became so great that Attorney General Eric Holder was required to justify trying Mohammed in a civilian court at all and was pressured to consider at minimum a change of venue away from New York.²⁴ The question of whether "terrorists" deserved to be tried in criminal courts or to be afforded the sorts of legal protections such a trial might offer became highly politicized, and the claim that the Constitution simply did

²⁴ At the date of this writing, the specifics of Mohammed's trial have yet to be determined.

not cover terrorists—and, later, that it did not even cover non-citizens—became so frequently repeated that it began to appear plausibly true.

Around the same time, a white American man named Joe Stack intentionally flew his private plane into the IRS office building in Austin, Texas, killing himself and one worker²⁵ in an attack reminiscent of the much bloodier ones of September 11. While a suicide note was discovered in which Stack claimed that his attacks were made in response to U.S. tax policy, the American news media was hesitant to label him a “terrorist,” with the *Washington Post* referring to him as a “tax protestor,” while other outlets suggesting that while his *actions* might count as terrorism, he himself could certainly not be classified as a terrorist “in that capital T way.”²⁶ In the context of the national debate on legal rights for “terrorists,” it was thus suggested that, had Stack survived his attack, his legal status would have been in line with those of typical criminal proceedings, in direct distinction from Mohammed, as well as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called “Underpants Bomber,” whose attempted Christmas 2009 attack injured no one but himself.²⁷ That is to say, as legal analyst Glenn Greenwald has pointed out²⁸, that Stack’s non-terrorist status was a matter of who he was, not what he did—and “who he was” was precisely “not Muslim.” Moreover, because “Muslim” as a category has, as previously noted, become an ethno-racialized category in the United States—such that people of Arab, Middle-Eastern, or Indian sub-continent descent may be accused of or mistaken for “looking” Muslim—the constitution of the “Capital-T Terrorist” category is both inextricably tied to racialized discourse and (thus) impossible to trace to a singular causal origin. In other words, because the “terrorist”

²⁵ Who was, incidentally, a Vietnam War veteran.

²⁶ As described by anchor Catherine Herridge on Fox News. See Stelter 2010 and *Newsweek*’s publication of an internal discussion in which it is generally agreed that Americans cannot be terrorists, unless they sympathize with foreign enemies (Newsweek Editorial Board 2010).

²⁷ Hosenball 2009.

²⁸ Greenwald 2010.

label is emergent from (and, over time, contributes to) a particular set of hierarchized, racialized meanings—in which particular sorts of bodies “protest” while others are merely “evil”—which are themselves produced in interactions that are not reducible to state power, the declaration that one *is* a terrorist decidedly reaches into what Butler has referred to as “non-state institutions and discourses.” (PL 52) And when we consider that the consequences of this declaration are not limited to the totalizing power of the U.S. Executive Branch, but enable the press and/or public to exercise political influence on decisions regarding the treatment of such persons (as, for example, is the case in Mohammed’s trial), it appears increasingly doubtful that the governmentalization of particular populations is effected solely by the liberal state as such. Thus, the suspension of law in this case, even if understood as an instance of the exercise of sovereignty as a tactic of governmentality, is precisely *not* sovereign in the sense of being autonomously caused or enacted. It seems clear, then, that at least in the case of U.S. neo-liberalism (and probably in more cases than this, considering the global context of the U.S.’s political position I discussed in the preceding chapter), conceptualizing governmentalization as the ‘ground’ on which other inter-actions are projected or performed is extremely problematic. Not only is such a reading out of line with Foucault’s (and Butler’s) own statements about the governmentalization of the state; it is also ill-suited to the complex realities of the interaction between state power and discourses of racialization (for example) whose reach and efficacy is not reducible to stipulated legal definitions.

I would suggest, then, that the sorts of extra-legal resistance of received meanings that Butler advocates and that Nussbaum claims are useless are, at minimum, not nothing. Shifts in social meanings have the potential to alter environments, and because these alterations are not obviously *either* material *or* ideal, they are no more *prima facie* ineffective than other feminist

efforts to change laws. Moreover, because we cannot reasonably conceptualize the governmentality of the liberal (or neo-liberal) state as the abstracted ground upon which subsequent discursive practices are built, it is by no means obvious that efforts to alter particular discursive practices within such states are doomed to do nothing so long as the basic structure of the state remains intact. Of course, none of this guarantees that such feminist efforts to alter entrenched patterns of signification *will* be effective in desirable ways, or to the extent we might hope. To begin thinking about how we might conceive these problems, I want to turn again to Sarah Palin.

Pit Bulls, Lipstick and the Limits of Resignification

Despite resigning from the Governorship of Alaska after two years in office and being the subject of various damaging interviews²⁹ about her supposed role in the destruction of John McCain's 2008 campaign for the U.S. Presidency, Sarah Palin remains an undeniable political force in the United States. Hired as an on-air political analyst for Fox News and featured as the Keynote Speaker at the Nashville convention of the conservative movement known as the Tea Party, Palin's reputation as an unshakably popular and tough politician—at least on the American Right—remains strong. While many Democrats and others on the political left profess to be nothing less than fearful of the prospects of Palin's political resurgence,³⁰ a great many of her supporters, especially her women supporters, suggest that her rise to fame and willingness to

²⁹ The most influential of these include Thomas 2008 and Purdum 2009.

³⁰ Nina Power (2009) interestingly documents this public profession of fear and cites Jacques-Alain Miller's Lacanian explanation for it in *One Dimensional Woman* (9-10). While I am dubious about Power's suggestion that such fear is ultimately reducible to "fear of a vast female plenitude," her concomitant claim that Palin's ability to reverse the implications of or resignify her maternal femininity is crucial, as I will explain shortly.

fight for conservative values is both pioneering and inspiring.³¹ Indeed, Palin herself explicitly draws attention to the significance of her status as a political *woman*, characterizing herself by turns as a “hockey mom” whose pitbull-in-lipstick persona fitted her well for her role as Vice Presidential candidate, a “PTA mom” whose rise to political power was the purely accidental by-product of a desire to make better schools and less-intrusive governments for her children, a “momma grizzly” who would fiercely defend her children, and, as I previously noted, a feminist, since (as she noted in her interview with Katie Couric), “women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has to succeed.”³² Palin thus functions as a particularly interesting figure in American politics, explicitly thematizing her femininity and maternity in a way that few before her—and moreover, even fewer Republicans—have dared. Moreover, her effusively maternal (and for a time, pregnant) body occupying the office of a government executive (despite many of her anti-feminist political commitments, to which I will return later) appeared to effect a kind of disruption of the normative image of political power, and interestingly appeared to open new meanings and possibilities for women and girls in conservative evangelical circles. In some respects, then, the claim by progressives that Sarah Palin is “disastrous for women”³³ seems counter-intuitive. In some respects, that is, it would appear that Sarah Palin’s political ascent functions precisely as an example of the sort of shift in sedimented meanings of gender and power that I pointed to earlier in the chapter as having important positive effects from a feminist perspective.

While it is true that Palin’s status as a highly visible figure in American politics does function to make a particular set of new possibilities available to some women, I will argue that

³¹ See for example Vlahos 2010 and Baird et al., 2008.

³² CBS Evening News 2008.

³³ Valenti 2008.

whatever shift in meaning she does effect (and, as it will become clear, it is not obvious that the shift is a significant one), is less than what is necessary for a truly anti-oppressive politics. To see why this is the case, I want to review briefly what Butler calls “resignification,” and its relation to the previous theory of meaning-making that I sketched in chapter 2.

The citational character (that is, the character of being intelligible and effective by virtue of the repetition, or “citation” of other signifying practices) of a discursive regime like gender implies, for Butler, that performative significations are never fully completed and thus that the possibilities for transformation are always open. This is not to say that each new performative utterance marks a complete rupture with received histories of meaning; rather, Butler maintains that because speech acts depend on continual reiterations for their success, their “contexts are never fully determined in advance, and...the possibility for the speech act to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged, is precisely the promise of the performative...” (ES 161) Thus, while Butler acknowledges that getting ‘outside’ of currently dominant discursive regimes is an impossibility, she does not thereby admit that the meanings of those discourses are absolutely fixed. Because being a subject, and particularly a gendered subject, is a *doing* that requires “an incessant and repeated action of some sort,” (GT 152) Butler maintains that the possibility for transformation is in that very doing or repetition. Specifically, she argues that reiterations of signifying practices and terms in contexts and by individuals not sanctioned by the rules of the discourse in question can function to subvert it from within, resulting in a shift in meaning—or resignification of those terms or practices. Her famous drag example illustrates such subversion: drag draws attention to the fact of gender as a repetition, such that the performative is revealed *as a performative*, rather than as an ontological reality giving rise to gendered ‘effects.’ Analogously, she suggests that the appropriation of

politically loaded terms by marginalized groups, especially terms used as abusive epithets, “in order to deplete the term of its degradation or to derive an affirmation from that degradation,” (ES 157) can function similarly to deprive performatives of their power, or to redeploy that power for subversive purposes.³⁴ In each case, Butler suggests that transformative action is enabled by the structure of signification, which, as citational, is necessarily incomplete, yet part of (multiple) ongoing discursive histories—as both an effect and constitutive cause. And because such signifying practices function not only to constrain behaviors, but to *produce subjects of a certain sort*, resignification as a political strategy would be interested not merely in changing or improving *representations* (of women, non-white or queer persons, for example), but in reshaping what it means to *be* subjects of that sort.

It is for this reason, Butler claims, that the charge³⁵ that her account of gendered meanings as performative in fact rules out the possibility of agency is misguided. She writes,

if the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then ‘agency’ is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse...performativity is to be rethought as resignification. There is no ‘bidding farewell’ to the doer, but only to the placement of that doer ‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ the deed. For the deed will be itself and the legacy of conventions which it reengages, but also the future possibilities that it opens up; the ‘doer’ will be the uncertain working of the discursive possibilities by which it itself is worked. (CF 135)

That is, the fact that the meanings that surround and constitute us, and to which we contribute—femininity, whiteness, or heterosexuality, say—are not merely given once-for-all-time, but require a continual reiterative citation of previous meanings for their stability suggests that our ability to act—or, better, to inter-act—differently is the point (according to Butler) at which agency is situated. While I find Butler’s assertion that this moment of resistance is *the* context in

³⁴E.g., “queer,” “nigga,” “bitch.”

³⁵ Leveled by Benhabib (1995) and Fraser (1995), as well as Nussbaum, etc.

which agency happens problematic,³⁶ the claim that such moments of resistance *make salient* the extent to which the social constitution of subjects does *not* necessarily entail a lack of agency is worth taking seriously. It is true that her account does not entail a radical freedom, but, as we have seen in considering both Dewey and Foucault, as well as Anzaldúa, Fanon and Beauvoir, a claim to such freedom is disingenuous at best.

Moreover, given the foregoing discussion of the geo-politically situated character of “freedom,” one would hardly expect any account aware of its own context to presume the sort of agency one might encounter on a typical liberal model—and yet, this particular political consideration is not quite the one with which Butler’s model of constraint and resignification is concerned. While she is in fact critical of a liberal, “juridical” notion of power that conceives political force as constraining of some unproblematically assumed notion of freedom, Butler’s articulation of the potential political functioning of resignification does not explicitly thematize its specific location or enabling political context. This is *not* to claim that Butler is insufficiently attentive to, say, the political “background” of American liberalism—such a claim would presume the sort of political foundationalism I argued against in the first section of this chapter—but rather, to suggest that when Butler does move into direct discussion of the ways in which resignification is or might be deliberately deployed, her account, especially in *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*, drops into a kind of non-specificity that renders it problematic by *obscuring the conditions under which particular instances of resignification become more effective than others*. This lack of specificity necessarily entails the sort of open-ended pronouncements that characterize much of her work on the future of politics: “How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification—with all the weight and difficulty of that

³⁶ As I suggested in my discussion of Alcoff’s criticism of her in Chapter 3.

labor—and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition?” (BTM 240) While Butler is indeed correct to note the difficulty of definitively adjudicating instances of resignification, such that we “know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose,” (BTM 241) given her suggestion that resignification might, in some cases, “work in the service of a radical democratic politics,” (UG 223) it seems crucial to be able to do more than ask the question. I want to suggest, then, that reading Butler’s notion of resignification within a the particular political context of the American liberal state (which is to situate the theory of meaning-making I drew out in chapter 2 in the geo-political location of American governmentalization I addressed in chapter 3) makes provisional answers to these questions possible—while also illuminating what appears to be missing in Butler’s account.

In considering Palin, for example, a holistic view of the overall context of meaning-making (which, as I have claimed, is thoroughgoingly hierarchical and involved with entrenched relations of power and subordination) is necessary to make sense of the potential alteration in the signification of femininity. If, after all, it is the case that Palin’s occupation of the office of government executive or Vice-Presidential candidate alters the available meanings of femininity, it does this by virtue of Palin’s close approximation of the dominant norm. That is, to the extent that Palin’s embodiment of Executive Femininity is subversive or even marginally effective in recasting the meaning of femininity, it is also a performance or embodiment of femininity ‘good enough’ (so to speak) to be *effectively citational*. Or, to put it another way, it is only possible to conceive of Palin as changing what it means to ‘be’ feminine because we recognize her as sufficiently normatively feminine in the first place. Feminist theorist Susan J. Douglas suggests

(in a problematic way³⁷) that this is precisely what Palin's public persona enables: "in her personal display she has advanced the most retrograde sexist ways of evaluating women. She's a beauty-pageant contestant, in her debates she winks at the audience, all girly-girly."³⁸ Moreover, Palin's approximation of the feminine norm was effective enough in its citation to be received with constant reminders of her status as a sex object, both in the production of "V.I.L.F." t-shirts and blow-up dolls, and in the Mrs. Robinson-esque between-the-legs-from-behind photo shot by a Reuters photographer, which was later reprinted in *Newsweek*.³⁹ There is more to be said about the implications of such treatment of Palin, but for the moment, what concerns me is the extent to which it, too, is dependent upon her performative citation of the dominant norm of femininity. In particular, I am concerned with the ways in which this citation is unavoidably racialized (white), sexualized (heterosexual), and classed (bourgeois)—as well as located within a particular geo-political context.

Even in the face of political setbacks, Palin is, according to *Vanity Fair*, "the sexiest brand in Republican politics," since

she is by far the best-looking woman ever to rise to such heights...the first indisputably fertile female to dare to dance with the big dogs. This pheromonal reality has been a blessing and a curse. It has captivated people who would never have given someone with Palin's record a second glance if Palin had looked like Susan Boyle. And it has made others reluctant to give her a second chance because she looks like a beauty queen.⁴⁰

Whether Palin is or is not 'objectively' attractive (as if such a thing existed) or beauty-queen material does not interest me. What does, however, is the wide-ranging consensus that she is,

³⁷ While I am sympathetic with Douglas' implicit suggestion that the norm of "hyperfemininity" that Palin embodies tends to be constraining (and, as I will explain momentarily, racist and homophobic), her claim that this embodiment itself is "retrograde" or promotes sexism is troubling. The impulse to criticize Palin's embodiment as *too* feminine (to be taken seriously) is disturbingly akin to the impulse to criticize her for neglecting her maternal duties: each is rooted in unacknowledged sexism.

³⁸ Lee & Wen 2009, 96.

³⁹ Carlin & Winfrey 2009.

⁴⁰ Purdum 2009.

and the fact that this is consistently cited in public discussions—by journalists and respected political commentators, no less—as she is variously described in the national press as a “babe,” “heartthrob,” and “Barbie.”⁴¹ Specifically, it is worth considering the extent to which Palin’s ability to effect a potential shift in the meaning of femininity is connected with her ability to embody normative femininity, in its exacting standards of beauty and maternity. This is *in no way* to claim that Palin’s political successes come as a result of that embodiment (such a claim is certainly debatable, but would require a different sort of inquiry than that of the current project), but instead to suggest the conditions under which the resignification of femininity might become a possibility for her. It is worth noting, for example, that the standard by which Palin is judged to be conventionally beautiful is the same that made Michelle Obama’s *Vogue* appearance significant: to exhibit attractiveness as a woman is not only to be thin (lest one be perceived as matronly, sloppy or unfeminine), but also to be white. There are hints of this in the characterization of Palin as “all-American” or appealing to “real America,”⁴² in contrast with the suggestion that Michelle Obama appeared to be a man in drag.⁴³ Moreover, this feminine attractiveness is clearly (though often implicitly) linked to her heterosexuality: she is both “fertile” and “pheromonal” drawing in men with a “siren song”⁴⁴ that inspires them to put her on the national ticket, market blow-up dolls in her likeness, or create porn featuring a look-alike.⁴⁵ In each case, her performance of normative white femininity is figured as an unquestionable call to male (sexual) attention; the feminine is reiterated as intrinsically dependent upon its relationship to masculine desire. Finally, Palin’s embodiment of femininity, while deliberately

⁴¹ Rush Limbaugh 2008, Mayer 2008, Dowd 2009.

⁴² Layton 2008, Palin 2009.

⁴³ See Chapter 1 pg 11, footnote 4. We might also look for verification of this claim to the many studies conducted suggesting that white women are viewed and portrayed both as more attractive and more feminine than black women in the U.S.

⁴⁴ Purdum 2009.

⁴⁵ *Nailin’ Paylin* 2008.

folksy, is decidedly middle-class. While her biography is certainly less “elite” than most other figures in the American political aristocracy who almost uniformly come from families with multi-generational wealth, Palin herself is hardly working-class.⁴⁶ Beyond the much-publicized \$175,000 makeover that was apparently necessary to render her physically acceptable for the national spotlight, Palin is a professional woman with a college degree, a significant exercise regimen that includes competitive running, and a lucrative public-speaking career. Her citation of the feminine ideal, from her hair to her hobbies, is dependent upon her constitution as racialized, sexualized and classed in ways that, at minimum, are close approximations of the norm.

What this appears to suggest, then, is that the efficacy of resignification efforts is at least partially dependent upon the particular situation of privilege in which it takes place, or (to put it another way) the reiteration of the norm by those deemed abnormal. Ofelia Schutte has referred to this phenomenon on the imperialist level as a kind of faux diversity, through which globalized capital embraces the rhetoric of diversity while it “homogenizes meanings pretending at the same time to be an organ for maximizing pluralism as it incorporates those global others into the North’s schemata of representations... As this model attains popularity and becomes acceptable to the public, it acts as a cover-up for those transgressive alterities that social conventions find unmentionable.”⁴⁷ In each case, the appearance of difference is made tolerable by the fact that it

⁴⁶ There is, of course, a complicated discussion to be had about the extent to which Palin’s public persona is evocative of or received as working-class or *déclassé* (depending on the audience in question). It is, for example, worth wondering whether American progressives’ frequent citations of her “trashy” familial relations, preference for “huntin’ and fishin,’” or inability to finish her B.A. with a sufficiently small number of transfers as points of ridicule suggest a kind of class-constitutedness that is more dependent upon the valorization of certain cultural markers than one’s material circumstances. For the present purposes, though, it is crucial to note that, while such discourse on the part of “progressives” contributes to the sedimentation of something like class hierarchy, this does not undermine the tangible features of class privilege that permit Palin the public platform from which to render her resignification of feminism efficacious in ways not accessible to others with non-comparable financial means.

⁴⁷ Schutte 2008, 410.

isn't *that* different after all; we congratulate ourselves for shifting the meaning of the word "executive" or "politician" by subsuming a few more individuals into our pre-existing hegemonies of meaning.

Interestingly, Butler acknowledges this as a potential problem when, while discussing the role of resignification in queer politics, she asks the question, "for whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal 'outness'? Who is represented by *which* use of the term [queer], and who is excluded?" (BTM 227) Analogously, we might ask, *for whom is the resignification of femininity an easily available option, and for whom is it much more complex?*



Figure 5: Young white girls emulate Sarah Palin in a photo from *Newsweek*

Still, if we are to make progress toward an account of resignification that is politically helpful, it is important to do more than ask this particular question. That is, while Butler is no doubt

correct to suggest that we must take such questions seriously in order to create “a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force” (BTM 227) of such resignifications, it seems crucial to be able to articulate concrete suggestions for evaluation of our efforts, or the conditions under which resignifications might be said to have effected a tangible shift in meanings, rather than the sort of retrenchment that Schutte describes.

If it is true, however, that Palin not only comes close to approximating the feminine norm, but *must* do so to be effectively citational, and that she, like Sotomayor and the other political figures I have been considering, functions to reiterate the legitimacy of the American state’s mode of governmentalization, it might appear that we are at an impasse, in terms of the ability to effect any real change in (gendered, racialized, or otherwise hierarchized) meanings. It would seem, that is, that if the citational structure on which resignification depends requires as close an approximation of the normative as possible in order to maintain any semblance of intelligibility, that resignification would be at best piecemeal, and at worst impossible. And yet, Schutte suggests that we *may* in some instances recognize truly transgressive alterities (if only they are not deliberately covered over), and it seems clear that, for example, the sort of being-mixed that Anzaldúa valorizes constitutes just such a transgression, refusing as it does to move beyond the borderlands—and in so doing, calling attention to the contingency and failure of the very sorts of meanings that here seem to be incontrovertible. In order to make sense of these transgressions in meaning, it is necessary to remember that the account of meaning-making I am here advocating is not merely citational, as Butler would have it, but interactional as well.

Interactions, Shared Meanings and Problems of “The Public”

As Dewey reminds us, meanings are not formed merely ideally, but through embodied inter-actions which are themselves inter-active with a particular surrounding environment, which is always both social and physical. He writes, “Language, signs and significance, come into existence not by intent and mind but by overflow, by-products, in gestures and sound. The story of language is the story of the *use* made of these occurrences; a use that is eventual, as well as eventful.” (EN 139) Elsewhere, Dewey explains that by “eventual” he has in mind the status of being “an outcome of directed experimental operations, instead of something in sufficient existence before the act of knowing.” (QC 136) This is not to say, however, that meanings are directly imposed by their users (since significance exceeds the intentions of individual speakers as a sort of “overflow” or excess beyond their objects). Rather, the point is that signification is produced in a milieu of interactions that have as their aims a multiplicity of purposes and use-functions. Or, as José Medina puts it, “the meaning of words and sentences becomes contextually determinate through the *tacit agreement in action* of the participants in communicative practices.”⁴⁸ Thus, for Dewey, 1) meanings are produced and transmitted by virtue of their effectiveness for achieving a particular purpose or enabling a particular action, although 2) this purpose or action is of necessity not located in the mind or initiative of an isolated self; and 3) meanings thus produced are also necessarily localized (spatially, geographically, culturally), since they are dependent upon some set of shared aims, which are 4) contingent and potentially revisable by virtue of that dependence. A pragmatic account of meaning, then, diverges from a *purely* citational account of signification to the extent that such

⁴⁸ Medina 2004, 344.

an account is dependent upon the presumption of a singular dominant meaning (or perhaps, a singular set of dominant meanings that might undergo some slight variations in citation over time), or the dropping-out of the larger politico-physical milieu in which citation *might function as citational*. To explain why this is the case and what Dewey's account might have to offer, it will be necessary to turn to the account of "publics" and shared symbols he offers in *The Public and Its Problems*.

In this work, Dewey offers an account of the formation of political affiliations that grows directly out of his model of experience and nature as interactional. Rejecting the idea that an account of The State as such is possible or desirable, Dewey suggests that political associations are the situated products of increasingly complex patterns of interaction, which tend to emerge when the consequences of those interactions "involve others beyond those directly engaged in them. When these consequences are in turn realized in thought and sentiment, recognition of them reacts to remake the conditions out of which they arose. Consequences have to be taken care of, looked out for." (PP 27) When consequences are extensive enough to warrant an organized effort to manage them, Dewey suggests that a "public" has emerged, which "consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for." (PP 13) Frequently, those charged with such systematic care are government officials, but Dewey is careful to note that "the public" and "The State" are not reducible to one another: while States may be formed to manage the transactions of a public, the State is not the public, and not all publics give rise to States. Central to the emergence of a public, however, is the perception of the consequences (both direct and indirect) of localized patterns of interaction, and the concomitant possibility of "project[ing] agencies which order their occurrence." (PP 131) That is to say: a public only

becomes a public in virtue of its consciousness or apprehension of shared meanings—which are, as Dewey notes both here and in *Experience and Nature*, meaning-full to the extent that they result in “the establishment of cooperation in an *activity* in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by the partnership.” (EN 141, emphasis mine) The point here is not that publics as such (or the processes of communication as such) are cooperative in the strong sense of a harmonious endeavor for an agreed-upon telos; instead, it is to stress the extent to which both publics and the shared meanings on which they depend are fundamentally matters of situated—yet alterable—interaction. As Medina puts it, “they emerge from our concerted interactions and pragmatic engagements with the environment,”⁴⁹ such that signification may be conceived as at once active or use-driven *and* contextually (socially, environmentally, politically) dependent.

And yet, Dewey’s descriptions of publics—or, often, *the* public—appear at times to forget the heterogeneity by which such shared meanings (which are, again, meanings insofar as they enable coordinated or ordered⁵⁰ actions) are constituted. That is, given that public meanings result from complex and indirect consequences of inter-action that are not reducible to a singular set of concerns, it is curious that Dewey would suggest, as he ultimately does, that a true public (or perhaps a truly effective public) requires not merely shared meanings, but unified concerns. Lamenting the state of political discourse in the United States at the time of his writing, he claims:

It is not that there is no public, no large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions. There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect, serious and enduring consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison, and each one of them crosses the others and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 350.

⁵⁰ “Ordered” here in the sense of classification-*qua*-fabrication, to which the English title of Foucault’s *Les Mots et Les Choses*, *The Order of Things*, alludes.

generates its own group of persons especially affected with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole. (PP 137)

Moreover, in a move that appears to pre-figure a Habermasian faith in the potential for adequately communicative deliberation to produce democratic justice for all, Dewey goes on to suggest that the fundamental task of such an “integrated whole” is “the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public.” (PP 208) Such improved communicative conditions are crucial, Dewey suggests, for the transmission of the knowledge necessary to make informed democratic decisions: “what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of knowledge supplied by others *upon common concerns.*” (PP 209, emphasis mine)

While improved communication and wider democratic participation are certainly worthwhile goals, the leveling that Dewey appears to require here—in his shift to emphasizing unified rather than diffuse publics, and concerns held in common rather than shared by virtue of their indirect effects—is worrisome, even if, as Vincent Colapietro puts it, Dewey’s public “is ever a problem unto itself, first and foremost, the problem of identifying itself.”⁵¹ The implications of such a common-denominator approach to identifying *the* public are expressed (approvingly, no less) in education theorist John Covalleskie’s discussion of publics, which suggests that while the divergent concerns of various advocacy groups (for LGBT people, people of color, women, and so on) may constitute “something like Deweyan publics in search of common solutions to shared problems, these groups are *defined as much by who is not included as who is*, which is quite different from what Dewey had in mind.”⁵² Such an observation depends upon the sort of covered-over privileging of dominant groups I discussed in previous

⁵¹ Colapietro 1998, 347, footnote.

⁵² Covalleskie 2007, 30 (emphasis mine).

chapters, of course (such that “common solutions” and “shared problems” are understood as transparently universal, while concerns felt directly by marginalized groups are deemed exclusive or specific to them), but it also highlights the extent to which this particular way of conceiving a public is inconsistent with Dewey’s foregoing account of meaning. Looking closer at Covalleskie will help make this inconsistency clear.

While it is legitimate, Covalleskie claims, for groups such as the NAACP and the AARP to have and advocate for specialized interests, “To the extent that the AARP is not concerned about school funding, to the extent that the Children’s Defense Fund is not concerned about funding Social Security, to that extent they are not functioning as a public. This requires, of course, a willingness on all parts to be open to others’ points of view.”⁵³ This seems on its face to be a reasonable claim, but Covalleskie’s elaboration of the point gives reason to doubt his prior formulation. While it may appear that such specialized interests as those advocated for by the AARP and children’s advocacy groups are specific to the individuals belonging to such groups, Covalleskie suggests that the opposite is true: “because everyone is part of the same society, their problems are all common ones. That is, the problems of American children are problems everyone must solve because all children are society’s children. The same is true for the problems of parents and grandparents.”⁵⁴ Such statements have the sound of inclusiveness, but on further inspection, offer only a retrenchment of pre-existing ideas of what concerns are “common” and which are not—it is worrisome, for example, that Covalleskie does not list the problems of GLAAD, the AFL-CIO, or the National Council of La Raza in his discussion of problems that are “society’s.” Conceiving the concerns of parents, children and grandparents as transparently

⁵³ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 33.

shared while dismissing the concerns of groups motivated by “identity politics” as exclusionary ignores *both* the practical exclusions of oppression and privilege (that result in some voices being rendered silent or unintelligible, our theoretical efforts to provide for idealized democratic deliberation notwithstanding) *and* the constitutive rhetorical exclusion of this framing of the concept of a “public.” This latter exclusion, moreover, makes clear the major problem of conceiving a “shared problem” or “shared meaning” as such. If by “shared problem” we have in mind simply a set of circumstances whose non-address would negatively affect everyone involved, then it seems clear that our shared problems will be quite few (though they would *possibly* include “taking care of children” and “taking care of elderly people”). Other (non-shared) problems, on this view, would be conceivable as a set of circumstances whose non-address would only affect a select group negatively, and thus, while perhaps unfortunate, do not constitute shared problems. But the problem with such a conception of such “exclusive” problems is that it is insufficiently attentive to the relationality—or, indeed, the inter-actional character—of such problems. That is, “special” concerns such as those of the NAACP or GLAAD are not merely a matter of the negative effects suffered by particular individuals, but of the constitutively privileging effects of those same circumstances for many other populations (who may or may not recognize their direct or indirect implication in or benefit from them). While it might thus appear on this conception of a “public” that the effects of globalization on Latin America or the classification of trans-gendered identity as a pathology by the DSM-IV⁵⁵ are necessarily non-shared problems, and that groups existing for the purpose of advocating for changes in these arenas are necessarily non-publics, or fail to function as part of a larger unified

⁵⁵ American Psychiatric Association 2000, 585-592.

“public,” this is misguided—and it is misguided precisely because, as Dewey points out, concerns and actions are relational.

Indeed, because Dewey has suggested that publics are formed by the indirect consequences of interactions, which *necessarily* exceed the individuals who appear to be directly involved, it is odd to suggest that the “shared concerns” or shared meanings that constitute publics should be uniform. Given that the apprehension of meanings has been conceived as enabling coordinated action, and that such action is always inter-active (meaning that it is of necessity *not* uni-directional), the meanings and concomitant concerns that give rise to publics could *never be* isolated bodies with homogeneous concerns. Or, to put it in a different way, ‘we’ have never been The Public, nor could The Public exist, if by this we mean the sort of transparently unified and autonomous body that an account like Covalleskie’s supposes. On the contrary, insofar as we can conceive publics as existing political relations or entities, they must be exactly this: publics, plural—which is to say that Dewey’s lament about “too much” and “too diffuse” publics is misguided on his own terms, since every public’s multiplicitous and divergent concerns and meanings are necessarily involved with various overlapping and nebulous publics, both within and “outside” of them. That is, because the interactional character of meanings is dependent *not* upon the unity of thought or intent, but upon the further enabling of coordinated inter-action, neither the concerns resulting from such interactions *nor* the subsequent management of those concerns will be univocal or reducible to a single set of localized actions. And *this* is crucial not only for conceiving the origins and functions of shared significations, but for (as I will elaborate in the final section of this chapter) addressing the question of their resignification as well.

Moreover, while Dewey's account of the formation of 'the' Public appears at times as an abstracted origination story of such common concerns and meanings (bearing a more than passing resemblance to the very myths of the State he rightly critiques), it is crucial to recognize that the interactional or relational character of these concerns and meanings is simultaneously geo-politically situated, as our previous discussion of Foucault suggested. Indeed, Dewey implicitly acknowledges this point in his passing critiques of liberalism. He writes, for example, "The belief that thought and its communication are now free simply because legal restrictions which once obtained have been done away with is absurd," (PP 168) and suggests that laissez-faire approaches to the market rely upon the untenable assumption of a transparent divide between the supposedly "natural" movements of unregulated economic activity and the supposedly "artificial" interference of government action. (PP 90-91) This is not to say that meanings and concerns are never isolatable for some particular purpose, or that because interactions are part of a larger global situation, they are all universal or indistinguishable on the local level. Rather, as Dewey puts it, while a public is "local, it will not be isolated. Its larger relationships will provide an exhaustible and flowing fund of meanings upon which to draw, with assurance that its drafts will be honored." (PP 216-217) While Dewey's metaphor here is not without problems (the use of banking imagery not only naturalizes the same capitalist view he seeks to problematize, but also implies that the "fund" of meanings is an owned and discrete reserve existing apart from the public that would access it) his point is crucial: variations in meanings and recognition of shared (in the broader sense) meanings *do* happen locally, but the relevant locales are 1) inextricably linked with larger geo-political patterns of interaction and 2) themselves the contingent products of prior actions and political arrangements (a feature that the use of capitalistic imagery does, for all its faults, effectively highlight). It seems, then, that while

Dewey's explicit articulation of the formation of "The Public" is problematic, his general theoretical approach to meanings, their production and functions within complex and mixed patterns of political interaction is both consistent with and helpful for the account of signification and change that I am concerned to articulate.

Such an account is necessary since, as I mentioned in the previous section, while Butler's account of the citational structure of meaning is important for understanding the transmission and stability of meanings over time, it does not, on its own, offer (1) a direct discussion of the conditions under which resignification becomes more or less easily effected or (2) an explanation of the possibility of radical shifts in meanings. When we read Dewey's discussion of publics in light of his interactional theory of signification (rather than, say, in the proto-Habermasian way that Dewey himself suggests and readers like Covalleskie advocate), it becomes clear that while an answer to (1) is possible, it will not (and should not) presume that political meanings are univocal, nor that "signification" as such (or, by extension, "resignification") functions to evoke or produce a singular idea across a population, but instead to enable more or less coordinated actions across and within variable, interacting and overlapping populations. Thus, for example, "woman" is meaningful *not* to the extent that it produces a unified idea among, say, all residents of North America, but to the extent that communication involving "woman" enables coordinated interactions—whether these take the form of legal reforms or contestations of the status of the category itself.⁵⁶ Additionally, combining this version of Dewey's discussion of interactionally produced political meanings with Foucault's account of the governmentality of the liberal state

⁵⁶ We might think of this development as a way of responding to the Derridean objection (which informs Butler's apparent unwillingness to offer further articulation of the conditions of resignification) that the "context" that makes meaning communicable is not so easily delimitable as Austin's account of performative utterances requires (Derrida 1972). That is, conceiving meaning as enabling more or less coordinated action allows for the possibility that contexts are open in the way Derrida suggests, but does not thereby admit to its radical undecidability.

enables us to understand why any answer to (1) can be neither politically abstracted (such that it brackets concerns about political structure) nor presume liberalism as a foundational “background.” Indeed, as I suggested in the first section of this chapter, because governmentality is not a political foundation upon which further acts occur, but instead one other mode of interaction that operates in connection with other patterns of meaning-making interaction, any account of resignification must take seriously the political relations that function—along with other conventions of meaning-making—to constitute particular events of signification as meaningful. In the next section, I will offer the beginnings of just such an account resignification amongst feminist publics, in conjunction with a call for a pragmatic reformulation of Butler’s approach to adjudicating better and worse instances of resignification.

‘Pro-Life’ ‘Feminism,’ Resignification and Adjudication

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Sarah Palin was not passively portrayed as an instrumental figure in the transformation of femininity, but deliberately deployed the language of the feminist movement. In fact, Palin does not provide the lone instance of an attempt to transform the meaning of “feminism,” belonging as she does to the group Feminists for Life—itsself part of a tradition of anti-abortion activism by women who repudiate mainstream feminism’s valuation of reproductive freedom but identify themselves with (what they understand as) feminism’s goals of gender equality. Palin’s position within such discourse—and moreover, as its most visible proponent, whose citations of the term take on additional force by virtue of their repetition and political position—thus does appear to suggest (at least) a partial resignification of the meaning of feminism as such, the protests of mainstream American

feminists notwithstanding.⁵⁷ And yet, the extent or success of such a resignification remains unclear, as Palin supporters such as Rush Limbaugh continue to vilify “feminism” as the provenance of anti-family liberals, and academics like Nina Power display a marked ambivalence, suggesting that Palin at once demonstrates “a fundamental crisis in the meaning of the word” and an example of “How Not to be a Feminist.”⁵⁸ In what follows, my efforts will not be to resolve the ambiguity of Palin’s effectiveness, but instead to suggest that this contestation around the status of “feminism” is illustrative of the contingency of resignification as such—*even* if we maintain, as I will argue we should, that particular forms of resignification are both desirable and crucial to pursue (while others are undesirable and crucial to work against).

It is necessary, first, to note that the sort of resignification of feminism to which Palin might contribute would not, simply by virtue of its apparently negative consequences (constraining the possible actions of particular women), be disqualified from the name. Butler explicitly admits that oppressive resignifications can and do occur, from the resignification of “Germany” by the Third Reich (UG 225) to the resignification of “homosexual conduct” by the United States military (ES 115). Keeping in mind Butler’s suggestion that signification, as performative and necessarily incomplete, is always open to subversion—and concomitantly, Dewey’s insight that interactionally-produced meanings are meaningful to the extent that they enable coordinated action—it should not be surprising that the meaning of “feminism” is not delimitable *a priori*. The question, then, is not whether such a redeployment of the language of feminism could amount to a resignification at all, but whether—or to what extent—such a resignification might be effective; might effectively re-signify. This question is important

⁵⁷ See Valenti 2009, Pollitt 2008.

⁵⁸ Power 2009, 8.

because, as Dewey suggests, meaning is built socially (not by isolated individuals)—or as Butler puts it, “No ‘act’ apart from a regularized and sanctioned practice can wield the power to produce that which it declares. Indeed, a performative act apart from a reiterated, and, hence, sanctioned set of conventions can appear only as a vain effort to produce effects that it cannot possibly produce.” (BTM 107) Still, it is clear that *some* performative resignifications do ‘work’: “Black” becomes constituted as a racial identity (and is further codified by the U.S. Census bureau), “the homosexual” becomes a personage (as Foucault documents), and the Third Reich manages to re-define national identity such that millions of Germans are rendered nation-less. To the extent that such resignifications mark events (however extended in duration) of shifts in meaning, they constitute performatives that have somehow gained traction or efficacy that render them more than vain efforts—and this *without* precisely the same citation of a sedimented history of meaning invoked by the simple reiteration of entrenched significations. How is such a transformation possible?

The answer, of course, is in part that even transformed meanings are not disconnected ones: as Butler points out, it is never the case that we escape our prior histories of meaning entirely—and indeed, as we saw in chapter 2, the prior significations with which we operate give shape to our world such that we are able to conceive of a disjunction between “meaning” and “world” in the first place. It is not, then, that we must account for the emergence of entirely new meanings abstracted from prior contexts, but for the shifts that the incompleteness and contingency of dominant meanings necessarily make possible. If, as Butler suggests, “the power of discourse to materialize its effects is...consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility,” (BTM 187) then we might put the question as follows: how is the domain of the intelligible re-shaped, expanded or contracted? It is helpful at this point to think in

pragmatic terms, to recall with Dewey that meanings are meaning-full to the extent that they make possible the direction of additional action, since “any meaning had, is had *in and for use*.” (EN 220, italics mine) Moreover, the uses that constitute meanings are produced and transmitted not in isolation, but are formed, entrenched and re-formed in groups and publics. It seems, then, that a re-circumscription of the domain of intelligibility would become possible to the extent that new patterns of action or possible uses are established. “Feminism” would thus change in its meaning to the extent that its generally coordinated uses (the possible actions to which it gives rise) are transformed—though this coordination, as we saw in the previous section, need not be teleologically uniform, but may involve contestation as well. That is, the deployments of “feminism” as a self-identifying political term for abortion rights advocates, as an object of a constative claim, or as a contested concept *each* contribute to the sedimentation of the meaning of feminism, insofar as they enable action around this meaning. Though, as the element of contestation suggests, this sedimentation likewise *makes possible its own remaking*.

Attention to the multiple uses of “feminism,” moreover, suggests that we must take seriously the extent to which meanings, while shared, are not uniform throughout cultures or social organizations. This means, in part, that that which is signified by “feminism” has indeterminate boundaries—though this is not to say that every claim about the placement of such boundaries is equally valid or effective. As Dewey argues, the inter-actional character of meaning entails that it “is the act of *taking*...and taking is fallible, it is often mis-taking.” (EN 219) Such mis-takings occur *not* because our mental representations of things do not mirror a mind-independent reality, but because our takings do not *work*—either they fail to be substantiated by evidence (which is, itself, *produced* through coordinated involvement with the world), or they fail to result in further coordinated interactions. In order to know whether or to

what extent “feminism” as it is used by Palin and her supporters in Feminists for Life constitutes a resignification of the term (rather than, say, a mistaken use of it), it would be necessary to determine whether and to what extent it works to signify in a new way. The answer is perhaps not as simple as it might appear: the signifier “feminism” *does* in fact mean differently for some populations, insofar as it makes possible a political movement on the part of women who identify with some gender-equality initiatives like equal pay for equal work, but repudiate the goal of access to legal abortion (often on self-identified feminist grounds of a commitment to non-violence⁵⁹); at the same time, “feminism” does not, for the most part, function in this new way within wider discourses—figures as diverse as N.O.W. and Rush Limbaugh explicitly or implicitly deny the reality of such a resignification, and even its proponents display an ambivalence regarding its meaning.⁶⁰ It seems most correct, then, to suggest that while the dominant meaning of “feminism” remains in patterns of political action contrary to (or outside of) those of Feminists for Life, these patterns themselves enable the sort of insurrectionary attempts at shifting meanings that Palin and others render partially (at least in particular locales) effective. And while resignifications such as the one Palin offers of “feminism” may not be initially (or indeed, finally) successful on the levels they might seek—such that they become the dominant meaning of the word “feminism” among English-speakers, for example—they are not, for that reason, outright failures of signification either. The new patterns of interaction they make possible (such that particular populations are brought together in the service of some

⁵⁹ Feminists For Life’s self-description reads, “*Like the early American feminists who opposed abortion, Feminists for Life works to systematically eliminate the root causes that drive women to abortion by facilitating practical solutions. FFL has emerged as a link between the pro-life and pro-choice worlds, working on legislative efforts such as child support enforcement, the Violence Against Women Act and opposing the child exclusion provisions in welfare reform. FFL is a non-sectarian, grassroots organization dedicated to empowering women through progressive, non-violent choices for themselves and their children.*” (Feminists for Life 1999)

⁶⁰ Palin, for example, has variously claimed and rejected the “feminist” label. See CBS 2008.

gendered concern that is specifically opposed to abortion) do constitute, however limited in scope, a resignification of this signifier.⁶¹

In view of the close correlation between shifts in meanings and shifts in patterns of interactions, it is crucial to situate our discussion of resignification in the context of wider political interactions. Given that, as I suggested in the previous chapter, subjects and populations are differentially situated with respect to power—which is to say, as Foucault puts it, that they are more or less “permit[ted] to act upon the actions of others,” (SP 344) it is hardly the case that every subject—or even every population—is equally well-positioned to effect the sort of shift in patterns of interaction that would constitute resignifications on a broad scale. This is not to say that comparatively marginalized populations are incapable of remaking meanings, such that any meaningful shift is granted by those with tangible political power. It is, however, to suggest that the differential situations of various populations and subjects will necessarily make certain efforts of resignification easier or more difficult, more empowering or more costly. In this respect, both the privileged position Palin occupies, and the highly visible (and politically legitimated) contexts in which her discourse of “pro-life” feminism is re-circulated, are indispensable for her particular resignification’s efficacy.⁶²

Additionally, however, if, as Foucault has suggested, no such changes are occasioned by individuals who are transparently free or autonomous in the way that liberalism presumes—since “power is co-extensive with the social body; [and] there are no spaces of primal liberty between

⁶¹ A resignification that is, as I will suggest below, precisely the sort of shift in meaning that an anti-oppressive politics ought *not* to valorize or support.

⁶² It is worth noting, for example, that this particular resignification of feminism appears to be more widely recognizable than movements to redefine feminism as necessitating a reevaluation the lives and experiences of transgendered persons (a fact perhaps most clearly demonstrable in the lack of discussion of the concept of “cis privilege” or even the existence of transgendered persons in the majority of feminist philosophy), or even as a necessarily anti-racist movement.

the meshes of its network” (PS 141)—it is hardly the case that an effective resignification is purely a matter of being liberated to organize oneself differently. That is, since even those subjects and populations constituted as privileged are just that—constituted and produced in and through the same signifying practices that are relationally constitutive of a variety of other less privileged subjects and populations—it is fundamentally mistaken to assume that the (or even ‘a’) condition for the possibility of efficacious resignification is sufficient liberation from the dominant discursive regimes. This is especially important to keep in mind in the American context, in which the rhetoric of liberalism *both* obscures the extent to which one’s relative freedom to act (to shop, to redefine oneself, to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps) is dependent upon the exploitation of subordinated others both within and beyond one’s national boundaries, *and* the extent to which the form such ‘freedom’ takes reiterates the normativity of the supposedly repressive dominant discourse. It is important to take seriously, for example, the centrality of individual free choice in both mainstream feminist groups like N.O.W. and Feminists for Life. In each case, the rhetoric is primarily interested in freeing women from coercion, whether it comes from the state’s prohibitions of abortion or a defeatist mindset that claims it is impossible to give birth and support oneself at the same time. While each thus recognizes that there are material realities (or, to put it another way, patterns of interaction) that constrain women’s choices, the overarching presumption is that if these realities were merely changed such that the constraints were removed, women would be *really* free to choose. Such a view, as I have argued previously, relies upon the covert presumption of the primacy of a particular sort of subject. Moreover, it is inattentive to the extent to which, as Foucault puts it, “freedom is nothing else but the correlative deployment of apparatuses of security.” (STP 48) This is not to say that women’s bodies and choices are *not* importantly constrained by lack of

access to reproductive technologies; it is, however, to say that the reproductive choices women are able to make in the context of American neo-liberalism are never independent of contextualizing and constitutive signifying practices, which are variously describable in their economic, sexual and racializing effects. Altering the prevailing patterns of such practices is thus extremely difficult, and not merely a matter of throwing off the shackles of abortion law—or even of the liberal state.

Of course, the force with which such dominant patterns of signification as liberalism operate crucially makes some resignifications more likely to be successful than others. It is thus not surprising that conceptualizations of feminism that prioritize goals like “equal pay for equal work” tend to be more effective as significations than those that would question the status of the autonomous subject, nor that Palin’s self-reliant “pro-life” “feminism” should have an easier time of resignifying “feminism” as such than more subversive approaches, despite being repudiated by most self-identified feminists. Still, the fact that many substantive resignifications are difficult to render (even partly) efficacious does not entail their impossibility. Since, as Dewey suggests, meaning is a function of localized coordinated inter-actions, significations may be transformed to the extent that inter-actions may be coordinated differently. And while the sort of large-scale shift in coordination that would be necessary for resignification to be effective for the kind of anti-oppressive political goals this project has advocated is no doubt something of a fantasy at the moment (requiring, as it would, greater efficacy than even Palin’s Feminists for Life, which was not an unmitigated success), the contingency of meaning—and its concomitant social hierarchizing—suggests that it is not, finally, impervious to change.

I want to suggest, on the contrary, that significant changes in our practices of signification might be possible through the alteration of the shared meanings of various and interconnected Deweyan publics. This is not to say that such change would require a prior consensus in the goals of these practices, since, as I have argued, it is not necessary to conceive publics as sharing singular values or even a common telos. Rather, such alterations might amount to divergent restructurings of former patterns of interactions—and *could* even result in conflicting goals among those new restructurings. Multiple efforts or sites of such restructuring could (and do) over time destabilize dominant patterns of meaning, at least within particular local contexts. Movements such as Black separatism and queer campaigns against upholding the ideal of marriage, for example, do not necessarily share many of the same goals—but their efforts *can*, as Shannon Sullivan has pointed out, result in a marked alteration in dominant ways of interacting or transacting with the social world.⁶³ Additionally, they both function to valorize ways of being in the world that have been socially constituted as aberrant, and thereby destabilize the normative status of the white, bourgeois, nuclear (which is to say, heterosexual) family. Such a destabilization amounts to a partial shift in the meanings of such hierarchizing concepts as kinship, community and identity (which, as I have tried to suggest throughout this project, are involved in multiple mixed and interacting discourses), and might, over time, result in resignifications of the dominant iterations of such meanings within broader (national, say) contexts. Thinking of resignification in this way is admittedly not entirely Butlerian, but it does have the virtues of accounting for major shifts in meanings that Butler’s articulation at times appears to render unthinkable, *and* offers a way to conceive of coalitional resignifying action that does not require the sort of common-denominator consensus (of which post-structuralists are

⁶³ Sullivan 2006, 177.

rightly suspicious) to get off the ground. Thus, the interactional and citational theory of meaning I have argued for here not only offers an account of how meanings *do* change over time; it also suggests a way of thinking about a way forward, the possibility of changing the very hierarchizing and oppressive meanings that have been the focus of this project.

Of course, as Palin's resignification of "feminism" demonstrates, there is no guarantee that such changes in meanings will be the sort of changes that serve anti-oppressive political goals, a fact of which Butler is acutely aware. "How will we know the difference," she asks, "between the power we promote and the power we oppose? Is it, one might rejoin, a matter of 'knowing'? For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself." (BTM 241) Indeed, given that even oppositional discourses are not outside of power, or liberatory *from* power in the sense that the repressive hypothesis would suggest, it would appear both crucial and impossible to find a way to make judgments between varying patterns of interaction and meaning.

Butler ultimately suggests that because judgments such as these are both necessary and necessarily normative, it is crucial to "develop a way of adjudicating political norms without forgetting that such adjudication will also always be a struggle of power." (FCR 141) Even with this self-critical caveat, however, Butler acknowledges that we both can and must appeal to norms in our adjudication that are external to the project of resignification—and which are, for her, not argued for, but "derived from a radical democratic theory and practice." (UG 224) Though she does not offer significant explanation of what such theory and practice involves, Butler does claim that the norms derived there from—which she would then use to adjudicate

between better and worse forms of resignification—are those that make life more livable: the promotion of non-violence and more inclusive practices. She writes, “it is crucial to ask: what forms of community have been created, and through what violences and exclusions have they been created?” (UG 225) However, her citation of a norm here is more deeply interested in non-violence than anti-exclusion—at least insofar as that norm of anti-exclusion is considered universally. Specifically, because she has previously considered identity as such (whether of groups or individual subjects) as formed through a move of exclusion or repudiation, and because she later suggests that the goal of anti-exclusionary practice is “to extend the norms that sustain viable life to *previously disenfranchised communities*” (UG 225, italics mine), it seems that Butler’s operative norm here is not a suspicion of exclusion as such, but a suspicion of exclusionary practices that further disenfranchise marginalized populations. Elsewhere, she puts the concern slightly differently: “there are better and worse forms of differentiations, and...the worse kinds tend to abject and degrade those from whom the ‘I’ is distinguished.” (FCR 139) In either case, however, Butler’s general claim is that we can—and indeed, must—judge between better and worse forms of resignification on the basis of their effects: more desirable resignifications give rise to meanings that are less violent and invidiously exclusionary, while less desirable resignifications give rise to meanings that result in more violence and exclusions.

On the face of things, this seems a legitimate way of making the distinction, and it does helpfully allow Butler to differentiate between the resignifications of anti-Apartheid movements in South Africa and the National Socialist Movement in Germany. But it is hardly clear that Butler’s explanation for the norms she adopts here is satisfactory—or even that these norms are necessarily the right ones. For while commitments to non-violence and anti-exclusionary political practices appear nicely democratic, Butler’s presumption of their obvious validity is

(ironically) both at odds with her post-structuralist suspicions of universalized moral imperatives *and* the general philosophical directive to avoid begging the question. Moreover, it is by no means clear—from a feminist or anti-oppressive perspective—that there are not situations in which violence is called for, or populations (or individuals) whom one ought to exclude. It seems clear, for example, that feminists concerned to advance projects of resignification that would work *against* the patterns of meaning that currently constitute populations as more or less privileged or oppressed would be right to exclude—and, indeed, repudiate—those who would define feminism as concerned primarily with the well-being of white women, or with the denial of reproductive choices like abortion. Moreover, it seems ill-advised to hold to a strict norm of non-violence, and not only because such a plainly deontological approach to adjudicating right and wrong is insufficiently attentive to the relevant circumstances in which violence might prevent further wrongs or be the only viable option for escaping an intolerable situation. In such cases, the advocacy of a strict norm of non-violence seems to be both misguided and a clear expression of privilege.⁶⁴

If Butler's assertions of the norms of non-violence and (mitigated) anti-exclusion are insufficient for the purposes of adjudicating better and worse resignifications, then, it is crucial to address the form such adjudication might properly take. The pragmatic notion of meaning I have been developing using Dewey's thought does suggest a way of thinking about normativity that is similar to the account offered by Butler—in that it is generally concerned with consequences—but takes that account to its reasonable conclusions, rather than insisting on question-begging universal norms. This pragmatic approach to normativity has the benefit of enabling the sort of

⁶⁴ Fanon (1963) makes what is perhaps the most famous defense of violence on the part of colonized persons in *The Wretched of the Earth*. And, as Ann Murphy (2008) has pointed out, the advocacy of non-violence as a feminist position is almost exclusively the provenance of white feminists.

strong normative claims that an anti-oppressive political project would require, while still eschewing the kind of universalizing approach to morality of which post-structuralists are (typically) suspicious. To see why, it is necessary to turn briefly to Dewey's discussion of value and truth.

In light of his interactional account of subjectivity, it is not surprising that for Dewey, the particularities of social context significantly shape morality. "All morality is social," he writes "not because we *ought* to take into account the effect of our acts upon the welfare of others, but because of the facts...Our conduct *is* socially conditioned whether we perceive the fact or not." (HNC 289)⁶⁵ Additionally, Dewey suggests that beyond the material and social conditions that contextualize goods, there is the additional factor of purposes. That is, any value is a *value-for* something or some goal. There is no such thing as an end-in-itself for Dewey, or a universal good, since to be "good" means to fulfill some particular, specified purpose. It is important to note, however, that this does *not* mean that goodness is arbitrary, or that there is no "truth" to the question of whether something *is good*. It is, instead, to insist upon the involvement of inquirers in making something good—not by decree, but by the process of adjudication that would come to know it as good for particular aims and in a particular context. And the process of such knowing, because it is always, again, an inter-action, is not dependent upon the whims of an

⁶⁵ This is not only to claim that political or historical context influences my normative judgments (though this is the case), but also that the economic and social facts of my life shape what kinds of actions and valuing (which are themselves a kind of action) are most possible for me in the first place. It is for this reason that Dewey critiques both political liberalism and philosophical rationalism as effects of and maintaining factors in rigid class stratification. Each requires a considerable degree of privilege to appear even marginally viable, and each is theorized in such a way as to make that privilege both theoretically invisible, and at the same time, justifiable or glorified outright. Ideals are then 'loaded' (politically, socially) from both ends: traditional liberalism (as opposed to "renascent liberalism" (LSA 56)) is made possible by privileged class position (HNC 280) and that class privilege is justified retrospectively by the ostensibly free equality of opportunity that liberalism provides. Rationalism, for its part, requires enough wealth to enable idle reflection, and then glorifies that reflection as the highest and most human of all pursuits. Thus, Dewey warns, "Consistent as well as humane thought will be aware of the hateful irony of a philosophy which is indifferent to the conditions that determine the occurrence of reason while it asserts the ultimacy and universality of reason." (EN 99)

isolated individual: “meaning is objective,” (EN 148) as Dewey says, insofar as it is produced and understood socially (i.e., beyond the individual subject). Thus, the process by which something comes to be known as good entails an understanding of goodness that is at the same time limited and fallible (insofar as it insists upon the contextualized, produced and revisable nature of its meaning) *and* a strong normative claim (insofar as it constitutes a claim about the truth of that goodness).

Dewey’s pragmatic forerunner William James’ account of the making of that truth is helpful in articulating the strength of this claim: “*Ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.*”⁶⁶ As such, James claims, an idea “*becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of verifying itself, its veri-fication.*”⁶⁷ This veri-fication, moreover, is an *ongoing* social process, which means that it is impossible to claim that truth shifts with historical context. As James puts it, because experience is cumulative and interactional, “Using the past tense, what these judgments utter *was* true, even though no past thinker had been led there. We live forwards . . . but we understand backwards.”⁶⁸ That is, according to this pragmatic notion of truth, the discovery of new information that contradicts our old ways of thinking not only remakes truth in the present circumstance, but shows what *was* true, despite our failure to know it previously—not because there is a universally accessible abstract capital-T truth available to those who have ears to hear, but because our inter-actional inquiry into or making of truth is a legitimate making-true. The truth of something’s goodness is

⁶⁶ James 1975, 34. I have elsewhere written further about the import of James’ pragmatic approach to truth and verification for feminist theory (Tarver 2008).

⁶⁷ James 1975, 97.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

thus, to borrow a construction from Charles Mills, social rather than biological or metaphysical, but it is nonetheless real.⁶⁹

The flip side of this conception of truth is the need to recognize the intrinsic fallibility of one's truth-claims: as a member of the social whole whose values are being analyzed, the inquirer is implicated in those values. "If man is within nature, not a little god outside," Dewey writes, "and is within as a mode of energy inseparably connected with other modes, interaction is the one unescapable trait of every human concern; thinking, even philosophic thinking, is not exempt." (EN 324) As interactional social beings, humans are always communicating some set of values or other—and this communication is crucial, both as the basis of education, and as creating the possibility of radical transformation. Whether or not we recognize it, we are always in the process of maintaining or transforming the conditions that constitute values (and their concomitant institutions, practices, and so on) socially. There are two important implications of this fact for my present purposes. The first is that we must admit the extent to which our inquiries may be missing key information as a result of our particular purposes or emphases, which are in part shaped by our social situation. That is, while normative pragmatic claims are strong in that they do claim to articulate an actual state of affairs in the world, they *do not* thereby claim the sort of abstracted epistemic authority that deontological claims would, since new information might arise to refute them. The second crucial implication of this account of truth is that it requires attention to the patterns of interaction that make meanings (and by extension, truths) possible in the first place. Thus, Dewey's pragmatism *not only* requires that we theorize truths as fundamentally interactive, it *also* requires us to ask questions about the particulars of the patterns of interaction that allow us to understand and use those truths, to

⁶⁹ Mills 1997, 126.

confront our own implication in them, and where necessary, to contemplate the possibilities of their transformation.

This “where necessary” is not *prima facie* clear, of course, since such a pragmatic view of truth and value has no truck with universal moral imperatives. In spite of this, however, Dewey does make moral claims, especially regarding the injustice of class stratification, implying that the genealogical project of philosophical criticism, by exposing widespread ethical and political values as founded in class privilege, should occasion reform of those values—and by implication, the institutions that make them possible. But why should the privileged care that their political values and institutions are instrumental in keeping the less fortunate in their current positions? Why concern ourselves with subordination or oppression at all? Dewey answers that posing this question is somewhat like asking “Why not put your hand in the fire?” (HNC 297) We are obliged to consider others “because they are living beings [and] they make demands upon us for certain things from us.” This is not to say that we cannot resist, or that we do not deny others their demands on a regular basis; it is simply to claim that the social nature of life and morality means that we are *always* forced to consider others—our interaction with them, and thus, our continued life, requires it. Beyond this minimal consideration, however, because truth is (as James puts it) “built out” socially⁷⁰, it is *also* the case that we must be suspicious of those patterns of interaction that require a ‘knowing’ of the world built on the systematic disregard of the experiences and valuings of whole populations. This is not to say that good judgments of the truth of something’s value require a perfect consensus. It is, however, to point out that taking seriously the interactional character of meaning and knowledge requires attention to the ways in which some patterns of meaning-making interaction that involve the repudiation and denigration

⁷⁰ James 1975, 102.

of particular subjects both limit the realm of the knowable *and* render themselves incapable of the sort of self-criticism that (as Dewey points out) is crucial for the production of new knowledge. Thus, while this account of the knowledge of the truth of something's value would stop short of the sort of claims Butler makes (i.e., that it is always wrong to engage in violence or politically exclude disenfranchised populations), it would suggest that 1) there are identifiable situations in which it *is* wrong to do such things, given certain feminist aims and that 2) when adjudicating those identifiable situations, it is crucial to determine whether the interactions in question result in practices that would undermine the self-criticism necessary for such adjudication.

With this in mind, it is clear that Butler is right to suggest that there are better and worse ways of resignifying, and indeed, better and worse ways of asserting the identity of some meaning—which, as she suggests, always involves a move of differentiation or relation. However, following Dewey, I would claim that the criteria for adjudicating that “better and worse” of resignification should not be its consequent fostering of non-violence or anti-exclusionary practices (for which we have no viable argument, and from which there could still result immensely negative consequences), but the degree to which such resignifications are helpful or useful for particular purposes *and* maintain a sense of their own limitation and consequent openness to critique. The “particular purposes” that are relevant here (that is, from a feminist perspective⁷¹) are precisely those that promote the “new forms of subjectivity” Foucault calls for--specifically, those that disrupt the patterns of interaction that depend upon and reiterate

⁷¹ I have not offered an explicit argument in this project for the validity of such a perspective, as I do not conceive this project as an apology for feminism, but a set of ideas about how to ‘do’ feminism better. Still, as Dewey’s interactional account of meaning demonstrates, the general aims of feminism as I have articulated them here are generally desirable philosophically, as they stress the importance of subordinated knowledges and the openness to critique that is crucial for improving our engagement with and knowledge of the surrounding world.

the sexual, racial, or class-based hierarchical organization of populations and subjects. They would, moreover, be aware of their own limitation and situation (or indeed, production) within the very hierarchizing patterns of interaction they would seek to alter—both because thematizing such limitation and political situation is central to the feminist project I have been sketching, and because it is a consequence of the interactional account of meaning Dewey articulates.

These guidelines for the contextual adjudication of better and worse resignifications entail a few important points. First, they suggest that resignifications that purport to valorize and/or revalue one identity category by reiterating the normativity of others can be understood as undesirable for the purposes of feminist or anti-oppressive resignification. This is the case because, as I have suggested, the narrowness of such a resignification belies its purported goal—and thus does little if anything to disrupt settled patterns of meaning-making. Second, because they take place within specific contexts and political situations, these guidelines suggest that desirable feminist resignifications will be both aware of their own limitations and fallibilities *and* by extension, of the need for further resignifications—both because signification itself is ongoing, and because the situation of our significations means that they need to be combined with others to move closer to their anti-oppressive political goals. Additionally, they suggest that desirable feminist or anti-oppressive resignifications may in fact exclude or repudiate particular subjects or views, but that such exclusions should be limited to those subjects or views that either undermine the anti-oppressive goals of feminism or deny their own fallibility. As such, it is not the case that desirable feminist resignifications be more inclusive *per se*, but that they repudiate the kinds of exclusions that stabilize the dominant hierarchizing patterns of interaction.

Thus, it is clear that the resignification of “feminism” resulting from the discourse around Sarah Palin and Feminists for Life is decidedly *not* desirable from an anti-oppressive perspective: it is not helpful for the particular purposes of that perspective; nor does it take seriously its own limitations, such that it would or could be allied with other movements to destabilize settled patterns of interaction. In fact, the resignification of “feminism” fostered by such discourses reiterates the transparent autonomy of individual subjects, even as it seeks to constrict the realm of possible actions for entire populations. Such a resignification, then, amounts to the same sort of movement of double disavowal as that of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism⁷²: it denies the extent to which the “freedom” to choose to give birth or raise children is dependent upon relationships of subordination with others (whether those others are third world workers whose exploitation stabilizes the finances of Americans, or other American citizens whose oppressions make possible the comparative freedom of privilege), while at the same time disavowing those “free choices” that do not support its vision of the transparently autonomous individual (who is not burdened by external concerns, and is thus “free” to “have it all”).

What movements of resignification ought feminists to support, then? The answer is, of course, not final or particularly simple. As Dewey, Foucault and Butler each suggest, because the process of political change and contestation is ongoing, there will be no final or universal declaration on what “counts” as good or bad. Because the interactions and consequent further interactions that are concomitant with, and indeed, constitutive of, all instances of resignification or alteration of dominant patterns of action are both localized in a specific historical, social, geopolitical context, and connected with (and dependent upon) interactions beyond that context, our

⁷² See chapter 3, page 125ff.

evaluations and adjudications of them will necessarily be local and partial. That is, the nature of our significations—as material and biological, yet ideal and political, constituted and constituting—entails that there cannot be a universally applicable criterion for declaring some of them desirable and some detrimental. Whether they are or are not desirable is ultimately, as Dewey suggests, an empirical question—not in the sense of being objectively observable by abstracted viewers, but as a matter of critically directed inquiry with a specific purpose. Such critical inquiry seeks to understand life in its interactions and consequences, rather than as a series of isolated events, in order to more effectively intervene in those interactions, to make them more effective for our purposes. Criticism, then, is a task undertaken in a variety of forms, from the scientist who conducts experiments in order to understand and better interact with the material environment, to the activist who conducts political experiments in order to understand and reshape the social world. Philosophy is thus not unique in its critical stance, and neither does it have privileged access to knowledge of goodness or truth.

What I would suggest, then, is that philosophers, activists, populations and subjects—as members of multiple overlapping and interacting publics—who seek to take part in anti-oppressive projects of resignification ask after and analyze the conditions and consequences of our various modes of experimental interaction, making the self-critical move of questioning the extent to which our experiments in change are informed by the very interactions we would critique. To what extent do the resignifications attempted by our localized publics contribute to the creation of new patterns of interaction between and within those publics, and to what extent do they make salient their own revisability? In what respects are our shifts in practices and meanings contingent upon our particular political situations, and in what respects do they open the way for new possible political arrangements? Finally, to what extent do these new possible

arrangements constitute new ways of meaning that are *not* simply dependent upon the reiteration or reformulation of a normative-perverse binary? Because every such criticism is unavoidably local and contextual, the answer to the question “what should feminists do?” will not and cannot be finally or universally declared—though this does not entail that it cannot be answered in particular contexts or for particular purposes. The resignification of received meanings, as a mode of the remaking of action—or of action upon action—is crucial for those publics that would oppose oppressions, both from within and from without. And it is thus the work of feminist publics to advance specific resignifications or reconstructions insofar as they contribute to that self-critical, anti-oppressive project.

CONCLUSION

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE MOVEMENTS AND FEMINIST FUTURES

Though it is, as I have argued, impossible to declare in advance what initiatives feminists ought to support or work against, it is nonetheless possible and crucial to make positive claims about the desirability of particular political initiatives for feminist purposes. We can and do make judgments about resignifications, just as we can and must make judgments about other interactions in the world in order to live in it. To conclude, I want to suggest two examples of movements that anti-oppressive feminists ought to support, on the grounds that they are effective for the particular purposes I outlined in chapter 4. Specifically, I want to advocate for feminist involvement in the movement to repeal the United States' military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy (which, in addition to promoting homophobia, has been shown to affect Black women soldiers disproportionately¹), and the movement against Quebec's anti-*niqab* Bill 94 in Canada, which aims to punish Muslim women for wearing a facial covering in the name of liberating them from patriarchy. My claim, finally, will be that these movements constitute resignifications through which more feminist futures might be realized—not because they are united in their aims or scope, but because their disparate goals and interactions make the destabilization of dominant oppressive meanings possible. My claim is not that victory for these movements would "fix" oppression or offer a perfect counterpoint to oppressive discourse. As I have argued previously, such a totalizing ant-oppressive action is impossible, given the complexity and mixture of discourses that constitute more and less privileged and oppressed subjects. Rather, my point here is to suggest an example of a discursive shift that has the potential for the sort of interactive, non-

¹ Rivas 2010.

consensus-based coalition-building I alluded to previously, while at the same time performing well under the general pragmatic guidelines of adjudication I previously sketched.

The movement to repeal the so-called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy of the U.S. Armed Forces, while achieving some success in the courts at the date of this writing, is far from assured victory.² “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT), which prohibits both homosexual conduct by soldiers and classifies openly admitting one’s non-heterosexuality *as* homosexual ‘conduct’³ (and thus as grounds for discharge) is, of course, a policy with unavoidably economic and bodily effects—particularly for those soldiers who lose their jobs or are subjected to violence. But it is no less an instance of political meaning-making, which serves to retrench the notion of homosexuality as aberrant and unspeakable, and homosexuals as perverts who do not deserve to be treated as other persons are. The movement against DADT, then, while clearly interested in the immediate consequences of job and bodily security, simultaneously seeks to achieve its own form of resignification. Repealing DADT would have the effect of widening the meaning of the signification “soldier” and—at least in one circumstance—revaluing homosexuality as one form of sexuality among others, rather than as an aberrant practice to be “tolerated” and consigned to the realm of the unspoken.

This resignification, moreover, does *not* come at the expense of the tacit repudiation of other non-normative significations—as in, for example, the movement to legalize same-sex marriage, which depends upon the reiteration of the legitimacy of monogamous sexual

² Indeed, lawyers for the Department of Justice have recently been granted a stay of a previously imposed injunction against the enforcement of DADT, pending their appeal of a Federal judge’s finding that the policy violated the Speech and Equal Protection clauses of the U.S. Bill of Rights. While the injunction effectively lifted the ban for a matter of days—during which some previously-discharged openly gay soldiers re-enlisted—it was re-instated pending appeal shortly thereafter. (Tavernise and Schwartz)

³ Judith Butler’s analysis of this sexualization of self-identifying speech in *Excitable Speech* is particularly insightful, both for its articulation of the unusual nature of the prohibition on such speech, and for its suggestion that the law’s prohibition makes salient the extent to which regulation of discourse constitutes regulation of material realities.

arrangements and the bourgeois family over against alternate forms of kinship.⁴ That is, the repeal of DADT would amount to a partial shift in the meaning of homosexuality that is built *not* on the implicit reiteration of the validity of heterosexual conventions (i.e., “Gays are just like us!”), but instead on the discursive dissolving of the regulative power of normative heterosexuality—in one particular social context, at least. This is not, of course, to suggest that a repeal of DADT would amount to the end of the normalizing force of heterosexuality, either in the United States or the military specifically.⁵ It is, rather, to claim that the resignification that the repeal of DADT would effect could contribute to the sort of destabilization and denaturalization of normative heterosexuality that would be beneficial from an anti-oppressive, feminist political perspective. Moreover, given that the enforcement of DADT has resulted in the disproportionate discharge of black women soldiers over any other group, its continued existence contributes to the reiteration of the dominant modes of constitution of more or less privileged and oppressed subjects, crafting legitimate (heterosexual, white, masculine, middle-class) soldier-subjects through the variable subordination of others, who are rendered perverse, politically disavowed, and unemployed. Thus, while the repeal of DADT would certainly not result in the sudden end of heterosexism (or racism, or classism, or sexism), it *would* amount to a shift in signification with important consequences that would be particularly desirable from a feminist perspective. And if it is true, as I have argued, that such (admittedly piecemeal) shifts in

⁴ For fuller articulations of the problems that the movement for same-sex marriage poses for feminists, see Ferguson 2007 and Vernalis 2004. Ferguson crucially points out the extent to which the desire for state sanction of non-normative arrangements of kinship is also connected with liberal valorization of property rights, inheritance and the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate ownership, while Vernalis notes that the uncritical privileging of marriage as it is currently known tacitly de-legitimizes kinship arrangements involving more than two people (what she calls “bisexual marriages,” but which might be more widely construed as polyamorous relationships).

⁵ At the date of this writing, there is speculation that the U.S. military will need time to “transition” and address “thorny practical questions,” such as whether openly gay and lesbian soldiers will be allowed to live in the same barracks as heterosexual soldiers (Dao 2010). This also, of course, leaves untouched the question of the effects of homophobic or heterosexist discourses or practices reiterated at the level of individuals or groups, which (as I have suggested previously) are undoubtedly non-negligible.

signification do have non-negligible effects, it must be the case that they would constitute moments of resistance to or reshaping of dominant discourses of meaning—or, as Foucault might have it, dominant forms of subjectivity.

Still, as I suggested in the final chapter, because no one form of resistance stands complete on its own, it is crucial for feminist political efforts of resignification to be ongoing, and to strive to address a multiplicity of meanings. Since the production of more and less subordinated subjects occurs through a mixture of discourses and geo-political locations, it is crucial to support and contribute to a variety of such efforts worldwide—particularly since, as I have argued, the hegemony of dominant discourses and practices in the United States is dependent upon the subordination of populations beyond its borders. Moreover, because those dominant discourses and practices make it possible for many American feminists (especially white feminists, as I suggested in chapter 1) to ignore the situations of subjects and populations unlike ourselves—or to actively contribute to it, even unknowingly—I want to suggest an additional activist movement that lies mostly outside the United States. In the Canadian province of Quebec, the 2010 Bill 94 proposes to require anyone receiving assistance at a government agency to appear with their faces uncovered, thereby banning the wearing of the *niqab*⁶ by Muslim women who work in or enter government offices. While proponents of the Bill have declared it to be in the interests of women’s liberation⁷ (and, “security,” drawing on and reiterating the connection between Muslim populations and the threat of violence), those involved in the movement against it suggest that such a claim is wrongheaded. In particular, the ban is misguided both because it would result in greater exclusion from public life for women

⁶ A veil that covers the face from just below the eyes and falls to the chest.

⁷ Immigration Minister Kathleen Weil explicitly suggests that passing the Bill is important because of the imperative to achieve equality between women and men. (White 2010)

who wear the *niqab* (since the probable outcome is not that such women will go about in public with their faces uncovered, but that they will be forced to avoid locations in which their attire is disallowed), and because it reinforces the existing Orientalist discourse of Western enlightenment and Muslim backwardness. This discourse, moreover, (as I argued in Chapter 3) serves to shore up confidence in the “freedom” of non-Muslim women, despite the legion of social restrictions on dress and disciplinary practices of bodily maintenance to which they, too, are subjected.

Many of those opposing Bill 94, then, have very few political aims in common with those working to overturn DADT. Nevertheless, work supporting each group could effectively contribute to the resistance and reconstruction of entrenched oppressive patterns of interaction. Indeed, the non-consensus-based coalition of groups like those opposing DADT and the *niqab* ban in Quebec, as well as those supporting the gender equality movement in Iran, and the campaign to include protection for transgendered persons in the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity act has potential for a future feminist politics that would resist and remake the oppressive meanings that shape our worlds and ourselves. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of causes feminists ought to support—indeed, such a list is necessarily impossible to produce. I mention such movements, instead, with the intent of drawing attention to the extent to which feminist action *must* be both continuous with and attentive to local movements, taking seriously their effects of their potential resignifications both in their ostensible aims and meaning-re-making effects beyond those aims. Still, since—as my Deweyan account of the remaking of meanings through the coordinated interactions of multiplicitous (and sometimes conflicting) publics suggests—it is *not* necessary for all such local movements to subscribe to a particular agreed-upon telos in order for their efforts at resignification to function coalitionally; it is not the

case that each such movement must ally itself with all others in order to be effective. Rather, the interactions of such movements all function to enable new modes of coordinated interaction: the campaigns against Quebec's *niqab* ban and for the protection of transgendered persons, for example, both seek to produce new patterns of meaning-making around womanhood, rights, and citizenship that disrupt dominant liberal ideologies, despite the radical difference in their aims and supporters. This means that while feminists can and must adjudicate between better and worse instances of resignification, such adjudication is not a matter of adopting a unified party-line strategy any more than it is a matter of deciding a priori and finally on the definition of "good" and "bad."

This will not, of course, be satisfying for those who would hope for a programmatic approach to political action, or even a set of universalizable maxims of feminism. It does not intend to be so. Rather, if, as I have argued, the mixed and localized patterns of interaction that produce the meanings that contribute to the constitution of our selves are not externally imposed and univocal, but productive of a constellation of relational subjects and populations that are not static or knowable in the abstract, the quest for a programmatic or universalizable approach to feminist action would be especially counter-productive. It would be counter-productive not only because the formation of such a program is always and only undertaken by subjects who are immersed in and shaped by the discourses they would reconstruct (often in ways of which they are not conscious), but also because the interactional character of that discourse and those subjects entails that its constellation of effects is variable and context-dependent. The complexity of our situations and interactions thwarts the kind of principled, a priori rule-making that philosophers find so frequently appealing. This is not, however, cause for dismay—though neither is it cause for unmitigated optimism. There is no guarantee that our efforts will bring

about a truly feminist future, and it is hardly certain that the arc of the universe really does bend toward justice. For those who would make the attempt, however, there is the knowledge that even the most seemingly mundane features of our lives—the ways we talk, write and understand, the images we view and project, the laws we pass, the commodities we sell and buy, the modes of our dress, desire and education—have consequences more far-reaching than we might ever imagine. This is, at once, their terror and their promise.

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