

THE HABITUAL BODY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF BECOMING NEW: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THINKING ABOUT FEMINIST  
TRANSFORMATION

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE HABITUAL BODY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF BECOMING NEW: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THINKING ABOUT FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION**

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The past decade has seen increasing scholarship both on the relations between feminist philosophy and phenomenology, as well as on the role of the body in maintaining and resisting oppressive social conditions. This work brings these areas of study together to consider the role of the habitual body in engendering and inhibiting transformative possibility, particularly the possibility of transforming individuals' relations to gender norms. The habitual body, a phenomenological concept that refers to the body's on-tap ways of being in the world formed through social interaction and repetition, is shown to be a useful framework for theorizing gender without marginalizing or erasing important social distinctions among women. It is further shown that movements between repetition and spontaneity, characteristic of our habitual engagement with the world, constitute the transformative possibility of the habitual body. As the natural feel of these movements are disrupted – as the given quality of our habits and habitudes is reflected upon or otherwise called into question – significant bodily anxiety is generated. It is therefore argued that feminist theorists interested in the possibility of bodily or personal transformation need to theorize more carefully the possibility of working-through this anxiety. In order to concretize these positions, the relations between eating disorders and the habitual body are considered at length.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler identifies three central tasks for the development of a “critical analysis of subjection,” which I find quite useful for thinking about what is necessary for a feminist account of transformative possibility. These tasks are 1) to account for the disciplinary practices that reproduce oppressive social conditions, 2) to recognize the melancholic remainder – i.e., that internalization of prohibition as an unspoken (and often unspeakable) loss that disrupts any totalizing intentions of disciplinary powers, and 3) to account for the possibility of agency in relation to the subject’s reiteration of norms (29). The work of my dissertation is most aligned with this third task in that I have focused on how it is that our habitual being both engenders and inhibits transformative possibility. In these pages, I take up the phenomenological concept of the habitual body in order to explain how it is that freedom or agency is possible given that we are the types of beings that come into the world through repetition. Even so, I would also argue that each of these three tasks could be connected to the work that follows, as it is impossible to make much sense of habitual activity without considering the social norms that constitute our habituality or without understanding the sheer possibility of things being otherwise than dictated by these social norms.

With these thoughts in mind, the central argument of my dissertation is the claim that the habitual body, our orientation in the world established out of previously acquired ways of being, plays a crucial role in both engendering and inhibiting transformative possibility. Through our habituality we come to be in the world in terms of ease and anxiety (what we might think of, for now, as the ability to function smoothly and the disruption of smooth functioning, respectively). These bodily affects relate us both to the familiar and the new – i.e., I can be at-ease or anxious in my repetition just as I can be at-ease or anxious as I come to employ spontaneous ways of

being in the world. Consideration of these affective experiences orients us to thinking about transformative possibility in terms of the individual – however, as will become clear, this focus on the individual rather quickly transforms into a focus on the relations between individuals and social norms. Thus, as I concentrate on, what we might call, personal transformation, I would argue that such transformation is always already, if you will, situated in a broad social context.

While the object of my dissertation is the role of the habitual body in the production of personal transformative action (i.e., the movement of becoming new), the addressees, or the “to whom” of this writing, are most particularly feminist writers interested in theorizing the role of the body in transformation. The desired effects of this work are to open up certain feminist practices to a consideration of the relations between habitual behaviors and social norms as they operate in personal transformative action. This text, like most, does not exhaust its object of study. It neither exhausts the concept of the habitual body in connecting it up with gender and transformation nor exhausts the topic of feminist transformation by connecting it up with the habitual body. It provides a phenomenological frame for thinking about one of the reasons that individuals find themselves incapable of producing desired for changes in their lives (e.g., by describing habitual sedimentation and the bodily anxiety associated with the disruption of this sedimentation). It also provides a counter to certain tendencies in feminist theory whereby women’s behaviors are identified as pathological given their relation to oppressive social norms (this is especially constitutive of Chapter 4), a tendency I criticize given both its limited ability to produce transformative effects as well as its misguided ontological basis.

Personal transformation is a movement into the future that is both structured by external realities and dependent upon an individual’s ability to manage the anxiety associated with doing things differently. This form of transformation, which we can distinguish from the



transformation of social laws, norms, or practices, has been under-theorized in contemporary feminist work (cf. Clara Fisher's "Consciousness and Conscience," where she argues for the value personal transformation).<sup>1</sup> Again, this is not to suggest that the individual is separable from the law, norms, and social practices that often occupy feminist concerns. Neither is it to suggest that it is more important to conceptualize personal transformation than the transformation of these broad social realities. Instead, my point is that both individual and broad social transformation are necessary components of feminist political theory – the former having received less attention than the latter.

At the very least it should be clear that individuals come to be and continue to develop in relation to these realities, which depend upon human activity for their reproduction. Indeed, one reason that I emphasize the role of individuals in transformation is to disrupt the tendency to treat these social realities as so thoroughly determinative of our possibilities. As María Lugones puts forth in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, in order to theorize oppression we need to be able to "portray oppression in its full force, as inescapable, if that is its full force" (55). A great deal of important feminist work has been directed toward such a description of patriarchy and its interrelations with other forms of oppression. At the same time, Lugones argues that theorizing oppression also requires a description of the possibility of liberation. Without such a description, we present a "discouraging, demoralizing" account that is "useless from the point of view of the oppressed person" (55). As these two requirements are in tension, i.e., they cast oppression as simultaneously impossible to escape and escapable, Lugones calls on feminist theorists to adopt ontological pluralism. Such pluralism, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1 in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> Fischer, Clara. 2010. "Consciousness and Conscience: Feminism, Pragmatism, and the Potential for Radical Change," *Studies in Social Justice*. 4(1).

Lugones' theory of "world"-traveling and Elizabeth Grosz's theory of becoming new), shifts us from thinking in terms of either/or (e.g., either oppression is escapable or not) to thinking in terms of both/and (e.g., oppression is both inescapable and escapable).

These concepts will become clearer as one works her or his way through these pages, which I provide a brief synopsis of below. To begin, in chapter 1, "The Possibility of Feminist Transformation," I identify transformation as the central concern of feminist theory, a concern that is quickly troubled by a conflict between the desire to identify the ideal state of affairs for women and the knowledge that women differ from others and from themselves (over time). These differences are shown to trouble approaches to feminist transformation that depend upon certainty or reach out too far into the future, in that they challenge any easy claims as to the ideal feminist political program. Political programs gloss over differences and jump in for individuals (by determining the ideal future). Thus, I argue that feminist theorizing must be attuned to both the wide differences among women, as well as the open-endedness of the future, lest it produce political strategies that fail to radically disrupt the status quo.

After discussing the political effects of attending to differences and futurity, I argue along with Butler that feminists need to think about transformation in terms of the opening up of possibility. The politics that develop out of and constitute our theoretical work cannot be directed toward a utopian or ideal future (e.g., one wherein there are no eating disorders) if we are to take these differences and our futurity seriously. Rather than positing long-term or concrete universal political projects, we need to think about how to make transformation itself possible. In this regard, I argue that we must ask how it is that bodies bring us into relation with freedom. This entails a challenge to theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti who conceive of habits as contrary to free action. Even as Grosz and Braidotti help me to think about the possibilities of

becoming new, and the anxiety that comes up when we are faced with the open-endedness of the future, I demonstrate that they misconstrue the value of our habitual ways of being. I wrap up this chapter with a discussion of the anxiety that comes up in the face of newness, particularly when we try to think about doing feminist theory differently.

In chapter 2, “The Habitual Body and Transformation,” I continue my claims as to the important role that habits play in fostering transformative possibility. Specifically, I argue that the phenomenological concept of the habitual body allows us to think about transformative possibilities in terms of the ease and anxiety engendered by our *habitudes* and habits. As discussed above, the habitual body provides us the very possibility of doing things differently – as such it is a central piece of thinking about feminist transformation. Rather than see habits and *habitudes* (concepts that I spend some time explaining) as solely inhibiting new action (which, of course, at times they do), I describe them as the conditions of the possibility of new action.

What needs to be considered is how habits bring us into the world such that we are capable of newness, which further requires an understanding of the ways in which habits become sedimented and the ways in which this sediment can be disrupted. Along these lines, I argue that both sedimented habits and habits in the process of being disrupted can bring us into the world in terms of ease and anxiety. We are both at-home with our habits and away-from-home with them, depending upon the context within which we employ these ways of being in the world. In order to clarify these points, I turn to a discussion of Freud’s “uncanny” in an attempt to show that the relation between ease and anxiety is much more fluid than we might guess. Throughout these considerations, I reflect upon the way in which Western gender habits provide an opportunity for thinking about both ease and anxiety. I conclude this chapter with some reflections on the

temporal dimensions of habitual being, which help to demonstrate the complex relations to time brought about by our habitual being.

In moving to chapter 3, “Gender as a Style of Being: Habits, Performativity, and the Habitual Body,” I turn to some of the feminist literature on the relations between gender identity and habits in order to characterize gender as a habitude. In particular, I discuss the work of Butler and Shannon Sullivan, whose writings most clearly connect with my view that gender is a complex habitude. After developing the claim that gender is habitual, I detail the specific arguments that Butler and Sullivan put forward – each of which entails a discussion of Butler’s concept of gender performativity (as first developed in her work *Gender Trouble*). In these sections, I highlight the similarities and differences in our approaches, building up to my final section, which champions the phenomenological approach to thinking habituality. After examining their positions, I review a variety of phenomenologically-inclined feminist theorists to argue that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the habitual body presents the most compelling way for thinking about gender as a habitude.

Next, in chapter 4, “The Transformative Possibilities of Eating Disorders,” I take up the issue of eating disorders to demonstrate the value for thinking about feminist transformation in terms of the habitual body. Here, analysis of the habitual body is incorporated into feminist theories of eating disorders in order to disrupt the interpretation of these disorders as *produced by* oppressive cultural norms concerning bodies, weight, and femininity. Specifically, I criticize the feminist cultural account of eating disorders given its inability to attend to the bodily nature and transformative possibilities of eating disordered behaviors. I argue that when we consider the bodily practices of various eating disorders we help individuals give voice to the meanings of these practices, and are better equipped to transform these practices into ways of being that are

less associated with suffering and death. Thus, chapter 4 brings together the work of the first and second chapters to demonstrate the strong relationship between the development of a feminist politics of becoming new and the phenomenological concept of the habitual body. In a sense, then, it is a case study of both what can go wrong in feminist theory and how we might make it better. I conclude chapter 4 with an interesting discussion of the problems of pathologizing habits and push for a movement away from these tendencies.

Lastly, in chapter 5, “Theorizing Transformation,” I return to the broader question of how feminist theory can open up transformative possibility. After considering the relations between my discussion of the habitual body and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s thoughts on intersectional analysis, I argue for the value of theoretical tools that connect us to political possibilities. From this, I continue on to discuss various other theoretical tools or strategies, such as the tasks of description and interpretation, the psychoanalytic process of working-through, and Carole Boyce Davies thoughts about the need to theorize movement and migration. These pieces constitute the types of activities that feminist theorists interested in becoming new need to engage in and consider if we hope to develop truly transformative theory. I conclude this chapter with some reflections on the importance of understanding the various temporal relations that arise out of our habitual orientation to the world, with a view to future work more clearly directed at disrupting contemporary views about addiction and pathology.

These chapters represent the thinking I have been doing on transformation and possibility over the past years. They bring together a number of theorists from various backgrounds, many of whom might not often be found in each other’s company. However, (as I discuss in chapter 5) the differences in their theoretical leanings and objects of study have allowed me to think about transformation without the burden of adhering to a particular philosophical program, while

allowing me to gain insight from a variety of locations. Moreover, in preparing this work, I've been struck by how consistently the central themes of possibility, anxiety, habituality, and disruption have occurred across these disparate thinkers. My sense is that these themes are crucial to any investigation of personal transformation, which leads me to hope that there is value in bringing these voices together.

In closing, I want to remark that the dissertation process has presented me with ample opportunity to contemplate bodily anxiety. I have encountered a variety of forms of paralytic experience – avoidance, writer's block, and so forth. However, it has also presented me with the opportunity to work-through this anxiety toward the development of something new (both the creation of this work, and the more open-ended newness associated with the events that will follow). I hope that these encounters have allowed me to reflect on the possibilities of transformation in an authentic voice, one that can communicate the difficulties and the value of becoming new.

## CHAPTER 1: THE POSSIBILITY OF FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION

*What, for example, would politics be like if it were not directed to the attainment of certain goals, the coming to fruition of ideals or plans, but rather required a certain abandonment of goals?*

Elizabeth Grosz, *Becomings*

*The aim of [Gender Trouble] was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.*

Judith Butler, “Preface 1999,” *Gender Trouble*

### ***Introduction: Feminist Theory and Change***

Feminist theory is constituted by the desire for social change; the desire for increased freedom and joy in women’s lives unifies, albeit loosely, the highly variable work that is designated as feminist. What is interesting is that this tenuous unity – i.e., that there is such a thing as feminist theory – is often undone when the desire for social change is structured by utopian political projects or static relations to theories and practices.<sup>2</sup> For example, feminist unity is undone when theorists prescribe or prohibit social practices or theoretical relations, particularly when they do so with certainty, in advance and contra the objections of dissenting women.<sup>3</sup> The problem for feminist theory is not that it cannot employ universal claims – such a position would undermine the very possibility of a feminism founded by the claims that women

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<sup>2</sup> To be undone is to lose the structure provided by the interweaving of the dissatisfaction with women’s possibilities, the belief that things can and should be otherwise for women, and a sense that theorizing about these issues can engender things being otherwise for women.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, to a degree, all prescribing and prohibiting is in advance; this ‘in advance’ quality is built into the very etymology of these words. What I intend here is to highlight a temporal distinction between prescriptions and prohibitions directed toward the present or immediate future and those universally directed toward all future times, as well as the problems associated with prescribing or prohibiting in ignorance of the differences among women.

are and should not be oppressed. Rather, the problem is in making universal claims about how the future should be with certainty in the face of opposition, differences among women, and without a strong sense of the open-endedness of the future.

While all feminist theory aims toward the achievement of new, better gender relations, it cannot take the differences among women and the open-endedness of the future seriously if it transforms this desire into a singular, universal account of just what such new, better genders relations are.<sup>4</sup> I am critical of the tendency toward utopian political theorizing (e.g., in the form of an ideal set of economic, family, love, and work relations) often at work in feminist analyses of oppression and transformation. However, I take quite seriously the need for particular, local, and generally well-founded political action. An important distinction to make, then, is between feminist work aimed at achieving well-founded political goals and feminist work intent upon achieving utopian political goals. Although Elizabeth Grosz, whose work I take quite seriously throughout my dissertation, often fails to maintain this distinction, it is of central importance.

Political projects become problematic when they erase women's differences, foreclose future possibilities and, thereby, reproduce oppressive contexts – as I argue throughout this chapter, rigid political thinking tends toward the reproductive of oppression. Of note is that the less rigid we keep the boundaries of feminist theory, the greater our ability to respond to women's suffering. One way to make sense of this seeming paradox (that opening up feminist theory tightens its ability to respond to suffering) is found in the distinction Sonia Kruks draws between employing utopian horizons and creating utopias. As Kruks articulates, “feminism still

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<sup>4</sup> There is extensive literature supporting this view that the broad aims of feminist theory are undermined by tendency to treat a particular account of the good or the right as *the* good or *the* right (e.g., Crenshaw's analysis of intersectional subjectivity, the debates over essentialism within feminism, or procedural accounts of autonomy that challenge more substantive views of women's freedom).



presupposes a value-laden, even what one might call a utopian, horizon (even if today it no longer endeavors to construct utopias); it affirms a desire, however inchoate, for that which does not yet exist” (*Retrieving Experience*, 15). The utopian horizon of feminist theory is the belief that women can be freer, can suffer less, and that there are better possible futures than those prescribed by the present. This utopian horizon is shared amongst otherwise greatly disparate feminists, theories, and practices. But whereas a utopian horizon can accommodate various theoretical and political projects without requiring that one identify, for example, the best way to change social relations, one cannot endeavor to construct utopias without a concept of the best way. A feminist utopian horizon differs from the construction of utopias in that it can attend to the differences among women and the role of futurity in human nature.

The image of the horizon is meant to orient us to the opening of the future, to newness and human possibility, and to the fact that we can only predict, know, or see so far into the future. The construction of utopias (i.e., the development of utopian or idealized political projects) reverses this movement such that newness and transformation are defined and the open horizon is foreclosed in favor of predictability and control. I argue in this chapter that such a reversal is ultimately untenable given that it unnecessarily circumscribes women’s freedom and functions to jump in for future generations of women. This suggests the need for theoretical tools and approaches that can account for the differences among women and the open-endedness of the future. I take up these issues in a more concrete fashion in Chapter 4, where I critique the feminist cultural interpretation of eating disorders. However, I present a brief example here to demonstrate how the neglect of women’s differences and futurity inhibit feminist transformations and call for better theoretical tools.

Problems arise when feminist theorists adopt an attitude of certainty about the incompatibility of pornographic sex work with a feminist future. For example, projects associated with the eradication of pornography not only minimize the differences among women in relation to sex work, they also deny or minimize the value in seeing pornography as a dynamic set of social practices that change over time. Over the past 40 years, feminist debates surrounding sex work and pornography have given rise to variety of positions as to their compatibility with a feminist future (cf. MacKinnon 1988, Langton 1995, Butler 1997, Schwartzman 2002, Stark and Whisnant 2005, Brison 2006). Within these debates, we can identify a (problematic) position that pornography is so incompatible with a feminist future that it must be eradicated. In such theorizing, the feminist desire for change manifests in the claim that pornography is necessarily oppressive to women and, therefore, must be eliminated.

Constitutive of this claim are the beliefs that absent sexist oppression women would not choose to act in pornographic films (e.g., MacKinnon), that pornography is harmful to women as a group even if individual performers make free choices to be in pornographic films (e.g., Brison), and that the objectification of women at the root of pornography is contrary to feminist freedom. The utopian horizon of such accounts is a view of the future where women are not forced or coerced into engaging in pornographic work, one wherein the broader negative effects of pornography do not harm other women, as well as one where women escape sexual objectification. The utopian project, which trades in certainty and inhibits understanding of the differences among women, as well as the open-endedness of the future, calls for the elimination of pornography.

Of course, even among those who hope for pornography's elimination, there are numerous differences as to just what it means to be coerced into doing something, as to the

negative social effects of pornography, and concerning the proper methods for eliminating pornography. These differences, however, disrupt neither the shared utopian horizon nor the shared utopian project. Interestingly, disagreements among those who claim a feminist future requires the elimination of pornography – an already troubling view given its narrow and closed understanding of a complex set of social practices – have exacerbated rather than alleviated the quest for certainty. That is, such disagreements have often served to further limit an already limited perspective on pornography. For example, a typical response to these disagreements is to search for the true or best account – to identify once and for all the nature of pornography, its harms, and solutions to these harms. Such a response is founded upon the belief that there is a true or best account; it entails the belief that feminists can arrive at a proper understanding of pornography and then proceed to implement this understanding into concrete practices, thereby achieving a piece of the ideal feminist future.

While I am sympathetic toward this approach given its utopian horizon, it is ultimately insupportable given its utopian project. At first, it might seem that feminist transformation is most likely to be achieved if we identify the precise harms of oppression and then proceed to change the social structures that enable such harms. The thinking here would be that if we can identify institutions and social practices (e.g., pornography) as the immediate cause of (some piece of) sexist oppression, then the elimination or transformation of these same institutions and practices must be our goal. This approach to a transformed feminist future is doubly problematic. First, the complex networks of human interactions that constitute pornography are highly diverse given the sheer number of individuals involved, as well as the significant variation among local laws and policies and the daily practices associated with pornographic production. Thus, an approach to eliminating pornography that strives for certainty is highly unlikely to arrive at an

account that adequately navigates these wide variations. In brief, there are too many differences across pornographic practices for feminists to achieve certainty with regards to its nature, its harms, or in establishing practices to eliminate it.

More importantly, even if feminists could achieve a true or best account of and response to contemporary pornography, a view of which I am highly suspicious, such an account must necessarily neglect the variety of possible futures that could unfold. That is, the future of pornography is undetermined. In working toward pornography's elimination rather than its transformation, one must either deny or dismiss this fact. The logical flaw of denying or dismissing that social practices such as pornography have a history and a future is already troubling. Additionally, I am troubled by the neglect of the future's open-endedness because it is reproductive of a type of thinking (what Elizabeth Grosz identifies as an "ontology of being") that grounds oppressive views of women. By foreclosing our understandings of pornography – by denying this open-endedness – theorists reproduce oppressive hierarchies of knower and known. And, static descriptions of the harms of pornography inhibit adequate understandings of the lived experiences of women (those engaged in pornography and those outside of it). Such descriptions often function, then, to discredit women who disagree (e.g., these women are identified as having false consciousness, internalized oppression, not caring about the needs of other women, etc.).

Feminists must continue to challenge theoretical and political projects that present singular, static, or idealized accounts of what women need. Transformative feminist theorizing requires a deep appreciation of the dynamic quality of social meanings, that the future is not determined by the past, and that the complex relations between individuals and social norms establish a practice as troubling (i.e., related to oppression and suffering) rather than the practice

itself. Such an appreciation further requires our attunement to the dynamic nature of individuals, the differences among women, as well as to the difficulties associated with directing these shifts toward a more thoroughly transformed state of affairs. The differences among and intra- women require a reorientation toward political action, wherein we take feminist politics to be action directed toward opening up the future for women.

The work of this chapter, then, is to demonstrate that differences among women and the open-endedness of the future require us to let go of the goal of theoretical certainty without simultaneously letting go of a loosely unified feminist theory. I argue that feminist theory is strengthened, not undone, as it expands to encompass greater variation (a result of the letting go of certainty). This view leads to an approach to thinking about feminist transformation in terms of possibility. In order to expand women's possibilities, we need to be clear about how bodies change, how they transform, as well as how they inhibit transformation. Before turning to these ideas more directly (Chapters 2-4), I use this chapter to expand upon the ways in which awareness of women's differences and the open-endedness of the future shape feminist political thought and action around the concepts of becoming and becoming new.

Feminist theory on transformation is enriched by phenomenological analysis of the possibilities of becoming new – becoming other than one is in relation to particular ways of being in the world. Transformative feminist politics calls on us to abandon utopian projects (i.e., those mired in singularity, certainty, and false universality) and to think more clearly about how individuals suffering from oppression can have more possibility in their lives. These views entail an account of freedom as embodied and, therefore, situated in a context; that freedom pertains to self-directed action within the world. Thus, I follow up my discussion of differences, futurity, and feminist politics with analysis of the relations among freedom, bodies, and habits. This

analysis sets the stage for a more detailed treatment of the role of the habitual body in transformative action (Chapter 2). The chapter closes by considering the anxiety engendered by letting go of certainty, employing Grosz's discussion of feminists' (seemingly contradictory) fear of the unknown and unknowable. As I will maintain throughout my dissertation, transformation – whether broadly social or more personal – brings with it great bodily anxiety. Indeed, were it not for this anxiety, were it not the case that newness engenders difficulties, there would be no need to theorize about transformation. The difficulties of transforming our practices produce the very need to think about transformation. Feminist transformation is a struggle; it is my hope that the work of this dissertation helps to describe an important piece of this and to shift certain feminist theoretical practices toward a more accommodating approach to the complexities these struggles.

### ***Women of Color on Plurality, Intersectionality, and Racism within Feminist Theory***

Many of the central concepts and ideas at work in this text developed out of my readings of writings by Gloria Anzaldúa, Kimberlé Crenshaw, María Lugones, and Dorothy Roberts. I have particularly benefited from their works that engage (at one level or another) the problems of racism as it manifests in feminist theory. One of the common themes across their works, which I explore in more specificity below, is the problem with a static framing of feminist projects. When feminist theory and practice are constructed out of a static or singular frame, both ontological and concrete problems follow.

The frame of singularity is at work, for example, when gender is taken as the sole salient identity category for theorizing sexism, when the individual is presented as a unified totality whose being can be theorized once and for all, when liberation from oppression is theorized in

terms of a best way, and when theorists take up an account of *the* world. The ontological problem with the singular frame is that it universalizes a partial view of the world. Most basically, it mistakes a part for the whole. Not only does the singular frame tend to misinterpret reality, it severely limits the political effectiveness of feminist theory in that it produces “solutions” to sexism that fail to account for the variety of ways that oppression operates. One of the main nefarious effects of a static framing (e.g., relying upon an ahistorical or falsely universal account of female oppression, championing “sisterhood” without considering the great variations in women’s lives) is the reproduction of oppression in women’s lives. There are a variety of harmful effects that result from a static or singular frame; effects that can be seen in the judicial system, in education, in the erasure or marginalization within discourses of oppression, in access to goods and services, and so forth.

When feminist theory is framed by singularity, it fails to engender deeply liberatory action and tends to reproduce oppressive social environments. As described below, racism shows up in feminist theory that is structured by such a frame. In response to the specific problems of racism and the more general problems of singularity, theorists such as Anzaldúa, Crenshaw, Lugones, and Roberts have developed concepts and arguments that I employ to bring life into the highly abstract notion of becoming at work in Grosz’s writings. Specifically, their writings on plurality, movement, and transformation have allowed me to conceptualize becoming new as an embodied possibility, that arises out of concrete social circumstances, and that can be strengthened by our social relationships (particularly when those relationships develop out of what Lugones identifies as a loving attitude, see below). Below, I trace out several of the particular concepts and arguments to which I am most indebted for helping me to develop an

understanding of the fact that theorizing oppression and resistance demands a rejection of a logic of singularity.

*Anzaldúa on the Borderlands, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Coatlicue State*

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa challenges what I have referred to as the frame of singularity through her discussions of the Borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness, which arises out of one's experiences with living in and of the Borderlands. She describes the Borderlands as coming into existence (or "present") "wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). These "spaces" are physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual states of transition, populated by those who are not welcome into communities of power given their differences from what has been deemed normal, good, or right (19, 25). She explains:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians, or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitant are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger (25-6).

In this passage, we see that the border functions to create or express the distinction between *us* and *them*. It expresses a tension between those who have the power to decide and those who do not. This tension between those in the Borderlands and those in power (e.g., those residing on one or another side of a cultural dividing line) is "like a virus" in that to live in the



Borderlands is (from the perspective of those in power) to not belong, meaning that one who dares to cross over (without becoming “normal”) risks her life. To become “normal,” in this sense, is to give up important aspects of one’s being – to give up one’s complex and multiple being (an activity that is both common and yet impossible). Alternatively, to live in the Borderlands is, in many ways, to embrace multiplicity and ambiguity, which leads to the development of what Anzaldúa calls *mestiza* consciousness.

The *mestiza* is a product of confluence, mixing, and “crossing over;” she is a “hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species” possessing an “alien” consciousness of the Borderlands (99). With her “plural personality,” the *mestiza* disrupts the logic of singularity that constitutes “the normal” – resulting in a “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” (101-2). The *mestiza* consciousness, or third way, functions: “to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (102). Indeed, Anzaldúa remarks upon the splitting (itself a challenge to singularity) required of living in the Borderlands, whereby “people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes” (59). Thus, the *mestiza* is at least dual, most often multiple, and must move between and among organizations of power; she must be able to take up often contradictory modes of thought and action in order to avoid erasure or death (101). These shifts require a “tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (101).

The development of *mestiza* consciousness is troubled by difficulties and this tolerance for ambiguity (the counter of certainty, which I discussed above). For example, Anzaldúa describes the *mestiza* as being in a “state of mental nepantlism” (i.e., she is “torn between ways,” 100). The challenge to singularity – which structures Western consciousness, including

the concept of the normal – at the heart of the *mestiza* “results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (100). These descriptions have helped me to understand both the duality or multiplicity that constitute oppression and resistance, as well as the difficulties entailed in moving back and forth between worlds of sense and shifting one’s practices more generally.

I am further indebted to Anzaldúa’s discussion of the *Coatlicue* state, which she describes as a “powerful image” or “archetype” that “represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective – something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (68). This image or archetype represents rupture, contradiction, and an opening into the soul (68-9). As she writes, to be in the *Coatlicue* state is to be “kept occupied” such that a disruption can occur and make space for reflection and transformation. When she finds herself in a place significant impediment, blocked, or inhibited – e.g., a place wherein one uses “repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay” – the *Coatlicue* state opens up the possibility of transformation (69-70). This “prelude to crossing,” which arise from the oppositions and contradictions experienced by the *mestiza*, she further describes as having the ability to both propel and tear apart (96). This dually textured account of habit and transition (which I discuss more in sections below) is foundational to my understanding of the problems with pathological thinking that I discuss in Chapter 4.

### *Crenshaw and Intersectionality*

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality has been the most influential on my understanding of the problems with the use of a singular frame in feminist theory and practice.

Indeed, the very concept of the singular frame that I employ is most associated with her discussion of the single axis (although her concept has a more particular meaning). In her influential work, Crenshaw describes and challenges the ways in which racial differences are erased when feminists employ a single axis of gender in responding to women's oppression. A singular focus on gender takes most seriously those experiences of oppression that can be identified as occurring *simply because one is gendered female* (i.e., and not because they are Black women, lesbians, disabled women, and so forth).<sup>5</sup> This tendency results both in inaccurate accounts of oppression, as well as the reproduction of sexist oppression for women of color (cf. Crenshaw 1989, 1991). She successfully argues that sexist oppression manifests variously in women's lives, particularly in relation to racial identity, and that the single-axis frame cannot account for this fact. Black women's experiences of sexist oppression are most often multiply determined; they result from complex relations among various oppressive discourses and practices. Given this, their experiences cannot be seen as, named as, or responded to as sexist oppression when it is understood as a result of the single axis of gender.

This is particularly true given the history of gender wherein it has been understood as the thing that distinguishes white women from white men. In other words, gender has been studied as if it were ultimately separable from other social identity categories, which have gone unremarked upon in mainstream gender theory, further troubling the singular focus on gender. There is a theoretical certainty to the view that sexist oppression occurs *simply because one is*

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<sup>5</sup> The single-axis approach excludes women who face multiple oppressions, privileges those who "but for being women" would not face oppression, and compounds the privileges of those women who benefit from racist, classicist, heterosexist and ableist oppression ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140). Moreover, it precludes Black women from "the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group" (140).

*female*. Within such a view, it appears easy to identify when sexist oppression is occurring (i.e., we have women and men; when one's being a woman leads to unnecessarily or unjustified limited possibilities then one is encountering sexist oppression). Of course this is a false appearance – it mistakes the experiences of those women who are otherwise privileged in their social situation as *the* experiences of being a woman. Thus, for example, when gender identity is used as *the* category of analysis in feminist responses to sexist oppression, Black women are less able to achieve legal redress, beneficially engage in political communities, or acquire assistance from social programs meant to address such oppression.

As Crenshaw demonstrates, this single-axis understanding of sexism achieves certainty by excluding women whose experiences demand a more complex analysis of how sexism functions. Consider her discussion of battered women's shelters in the United States in "Mapping the Margins," where she details a variety of difficulties that immigrant women of color have when they engage with shelters organized by the single axis of gender. The single-axis account of domestic violence attunes shelter workers and policy makers to the average white woman's experience of abuse (e.g., their financial, child care, employment, and legal needs serve as the basis for shelters' organizational policies). Given the focus on gender identity, shelters are dangerously unprepared to address the needs of immigrant women of color. They are unable to tend to the complex relations among race, gender, class and nationality that distinguish immigrant women of color's experiences from those of the average white woman.

For example, immigrant women of color's experiences of domestic violence can give rise to Immigration and Naturalization Services involvement, which mainstream shelters are unprepared to navigate. As well, language barriers, inadequate knowledge of the law, well-founded fears of the police, and particular issues concerning children and citizenship come to the

fore when immigrant women of color seek out shelters' assistance (1245-8). The certainty accorded the singular focus results in shelters inability to help many women, particularly when shelter employees are unwilling to shift policies to accommodate these differences.

Political projects structured by certainty – e.g., battered women's shelters focused on the single axis of gender – fail to attend to the great variations in women's experiences. Indeed, many feminist projects of this type are entirely ignorant of the fact that they are excluding the needs of so many other women. One problem with troubling the reliance upon certainty is that requires different ways of thinking about sexist oppression. Crenshaw provides a valuable tool for disrupting single-axis thinking and constructing more accommodating accounts of oppression. Namely, she develops the tool of intersectional analysis, which allows one to move beyond a view of oppression as singular and stable. Thinking in terms of intersectionality (i.e., that subjects are multiply situated in relation to identity categories) disrupts the singular focus on gender. It transforms feminist modes of theorizing oppression to incorporate the experiences of women of color by “disrupt[ing] the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable” (1244-5). And, it opens up transformative possibilities for women of color by expanding our understanding of oppression and challenging certainty as a feminist aim.

Crenshaw's account of intersectionality is important for my project because it challenges the frame of singularity without rendering feminist theory irrelevant. Crenshaw not only uncovers racism within feminist theory (and laws against sexism) and sexism within anti-racist theory (and laws against racism), she further provides a way for responding to multiple oppressions. In other words, she both identifies a problem and provides a practical and theoretical tool for responding to this problem. Moreover, her work helps to clarify why it is that talking about the differences among women does not lead to a relativist quagmire (more on this

point in Chapter 5). In short, the differences that matter are the differences that connect up with real world harms.

*Lugones on Multiplicity, “Worlds,” and In-Between Spaces*

Whereas Crenshaw’s work has been the most influential on my thinking about feminist theory, the writings of María Lugones are in many ways the most similar to my own (e.g., in terms of the central ideas she considers). Throughout *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, Lugones describes and analyzes the troubles with singular thinking, the necessity of traveling between “worlds” in order to develop coalitions against oppression, and the spaces in-between “worlds.” In terms of her criticism of the frame of singularity, Lugones writes:

I give up the claim that the subject is unified. Instead, I understand each person as many. In giving up the unified self, I am guided by the experiences of bicultural people who are also victims of ethnocentric racism in a society that has one of those cultures as subordinate and the other as dominant. These cases provide me with examples of people who are very familiar with experiencing themselves as more than one: having desires, character, and personality traits that are different in one reality than in the other, and acting, enacting, and animating their bodies, having thoughts, feeling the emotions, in ways that are different in one reality than in the other (57).

In this passage, she presents a strong challenge to singularity by describing the ways in which bicultural people find themselves are both having and not having the same characteristics dependent upon which “world” is under consideration. The experience of bicultural people demonstrates that neither reality nor identity is singular, that there are multiple “worlds” and multiple and often conflicting experiences of the self.<sup>6</sup> Her concept of a “world” – which is

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<sup>6</sup> She strengthens this point in positing: “if we think of people who are oppressed as not consumed or exhausted by oppression, but also as resisting or sabotaging a system aimed at

distinct from the phenomenological concept of a world discussed in Chapter 2 – refers to actual spaces, populated with at least one person (they are “lived”) (20). There are multiple, intersubjectively constructed spaces, that are “intertwined semantically and materially, with a logic that is sufficiently self-coherent and sufficiently in contradiction with others to constitute an alternative construction of the social” (20). In other words, “worlds” are both distinct and intertwined – one moves in and across “worlds” that are neither atomic nor autonomous (20-1).<sup>7</sup>

It is also the case that one can be between “worlds” – one can be in the limen, which she describes as “the place in between realities, a gap ‘between and betwixt’ universes of sense that construe social life and persons differently, an interstice from where one can most clearly stand critically toward different structures” (59). Just as distinct “worlds” allow one to experience her multiplicity and to adopt a critical understanding, the limen expands one’s understanding of herself given that it is “place where one becomes most fully aware of one’s multiplicity” (59).

Given her take on multiplicity, Lugones’ work is not troubled by the seeming contradiction between a description of oppression as inescapable and a description of resistant possibilities to this oppression. Nor is it the case that, from her perspective, the possibility of theorizing “the escape from inescapable oppression” requires a faulty notion of the transcendental ego. In order to understand this, she argues that we need to first understand that 1) there are structures (worlds) and anti-structures (liminal spaces), all of which are social, 2) that

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molding, reducing, violating, or erasing them, then we also see at least two realities: one of them has the logic of resistance and transformation; the other has the logic of oppression. But, indeed, these two logics multiply and encounter each other over and over in many guises” (12).

<sup>7</sup> We can further see her criticism of the frame of singularity when she writes: “categorical understandings of oppressions; unilinear, univocal, unillogical understandings of history; and abstract understandings of space are all mechanisms that produce atomic understandings of social groups and block interworld and intraworld communication. I use worlds against the grain of atomic, homogeneous, and monistic understandings of the social in any of its dimensions” (26).

structures construe “real persons and not just the masks of persons,” 3) that we live in multiple structures even as they construe us differently, and 4) that we move between structures and can be outside of structures (i.e., in a liminal space) (61). These points help to clarify for me the ontological components entailed in the possibility of transformation.

Moreover, Lugones’ discussions of playfulness, “world”-traveling, and fear have helped me to think about how it is that individuals get stuck in ways of being that bring about suffering and block connection. Specifically, I am struck by her lines: “fear is called for by crossing, because there is an impending sense of loss: loss of competence and loss of a clear sense of oneself and one’s relation to others. A playful attitude is a good companion to fear; it keeps one focused on the crossing, on the process of metamorphosis” (27). The connection between fear and transformation is significant to my thinking about the relation between anxiety and becoming new. As well, an understanding of how fear arises in relation to a loss of competence and clarity helps to explain some of the problems white women have, myself included, in authentically engaging with the writings of women of color (as well as in interpersonal relations). Transformation and openness require a willingness to let go and be wrong that conflict with what we might call rules of whiteness (an idea I discuss in more detail below). These ideas are also useful for understanding why it is that individuals are oftentimes unwilling to give up practices that cause great suffering, in that we can think about the loss of competence entailed in most transformative activity.

### *Roberts and the Erasure of Racial Differences in Feminist Projects*

Lastly, I need to discuss my indebtedness to Dorothy Roberts, whose work highlights the real world harms that result from the use of a shortsighted, singular framework. Her work is



particularly meaningful in that it adds to the concreteness of Crenshaw's analyses of the material effects of racism in the United States. For example, in her text, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Roberts presents a chilling analysis of the ways in which racist policies and laws, institutions and academic discourses establish and maintain untenable circumstances surrounding Black women and reproduction. Among her arguments is the claim that misguided mainstream feminist practices marginalized and often simply erased Black women's reproductive rights concerns:

Race completely changes the significance of birth control to the story of women's reproductive freedom. For privileged white women in America, birth control has been an emblem of reproductive liberty. Organizations such as Planned Parenthood have long championed birth control as the key to women's liberation from compulsory motherhood and gender stereotypes. But the movement to expand women's reproductive options was marked by racism from its very inception in the early part of this century. The spread of contraceptives to American women hinged partly on its appeal to eugenicists bent on curtailing the birthrates of the "unfit," including Negroes. For several decades, peaking in the 1970s, government-sponsored family-planning programs not only encouraged Black women to use birth control but coerced them into being sterilized. While slave masters forced Black women to bear children for profit, more recent policies have sought to reduce Black women's fertility. Both share a common theme – that Black women's childbearing should be regulated to achieve social objectives (56).

Here, we see what happens when feminist theoretical and political projects – in this instance, those dealing with reproductive rights – fail to consider how Black women are multiply oppressed in terms of race, gender, and class. For Black women and other women of color in the 1970s (and, indeed, still today as recent reports on the California penal system suggest), there were far more complex issues surrounding the Pill than those affecting most white women. Whereas mainstream white feminist theory and practice was focused upon gaining access to the Pill, Black women and other women of color were having to fight for the ability to have children in the face of racist policies. Not only did mainstream efforts ignore the needs of Black women

and other women of color, they additionally benefited from racist discourses wherein the Pill, sterilization, and other means were used to prevent these women from having children.

Later, in “Race, Gender, and the Political Conflation of Biological and Social Issues,” Roberts reiterates the complex interconnections among race, class, and gender as they arise in political efforts to transform reproduction laws and policies in the United States.<sup>8</sup> She remarks: “white middle-class women in the 1970s confronted medical attitudes that were diametrically opposed to the sterilization abuse of Latinas ... the disparate experiences of women of color and white women resulted in clashing agendas concerning the sterilization in other parts of the country as well” (241). Indeed, as Roberts makes clear, mainstream women’s rights groups (NARAL and Planned Parenthood) organized against the efforts of the Committee to End Sterilization (241).

Lastly, Roberts’ critiques of mainstream theory and practice concerning adoption demonstrate yet another social issue in which the needs of white middle-class women trumped those of Black women, further demonstrating the racism associated with falsely universalizing one group of women’s needs over all others. In her text, *Shattered Bonds*, she argues that even as “the new politics of child welfare threatens to intensify state supervision of Black children” critics fail to consider the importance of race in these politics (vii). She remarks, “scholars who deal with Black children in the child welfare system tend to focus on social work practice – how children should be treated – rather than the politics of child protection – how political relationships affect which children become involved in the system” (vii). Even when race is deemed important for thinking about child welfare, critics fail “to question the fundamental

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<sup>8</sup> Roberts, Dorothy. 2012. “Race, Gender, and the Political Conflation of Biological and Social Issues,” *Du Boise Review*, 9(1).

conflict between the child welfare system and the integrity of the Black family and community” (vii). In “Feminism, Race, and Adoption Policy,” she challenges tendencies in the discourse on adoption that focus upon the experiences of white families adopting Black children given that “too little attention has been paid to why so many Black children are available for adoption in the first place” (234).<sup>9</sup> In this article, she explains a variety of racist policies and beliefs at work in state agencies that lead to the removal of Black children from their families (at twice the rate as found in agency interactions with white families) (235). Again, her work shows that by ignoring racial differences mainstream feminist theory reproduces racism and fails to provide relief for Black women.

In order to be truly liberatory for women, racial differences and racism need to be incorporated into our theory and practice. These ideas are equally important for thinking about eating disorders given that most theorists employ a faulty understanding of who suffers from these disorders, which leads to a lack of work on the issues of race, racism, and class as they function in mainstream and feminist responses to eating disorders (see Chapter 5). Moreover, the concepts of plurality/multiplicity and intersectionality are central for thinking about how it is that individuals can transform, how social circumstances block or inhibit transformation, and why it is that various mainstream feminist tendencies fail to produce liberatory effects.

### ***Difference and Politics***

In the quotation that opens this chapter, Grosz asks us to consider what politics might be if it were not constituted by ideals and plans; indeed, she suggests that politics is the abandoning

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<sup>9</sup> Roberts, Dorothy. 2005. “Feminism, Race, and Adoption Policy,” in *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays*. Cornell University Press.

of such goals (i.e., the construction of ideals and plans). She presents a politics of uncertainty or a politics of becoming that, when connected with an understanding of the vast differences among women, challenges what I have been referring to (along with Kruks) as utopian political projects. Utopian politics are those that trade in certainty, e.g., those that believe there is a best way to theorize and resist sexist oppression. Feminist projects grounded by the quest for certainty or an ideal feminist future are at odds with what we know about the differences among women. They require strict boundaries and are static; thus, they encounter difference as a threat to feminism. Crenshaw's analysis of battered women's shelters is useful here. She demonstrates that shelters employing a single-axis view of domestic violence are often unwilling to shift organizational policies to respond to the needs of Black women and immigrant women of color. The policies had developed out of a limited view of domestic violence, one grounded by the quest for certainty (i.e., that domestic violence can be adequately theorized such that best practices can be identified once and for all). Black women and immigrant women of color, whose needs differ from those of the average white woman, were encountered as threatening to the very existence of these shelters. When shelter policy was at odd with the needs of women of color, employees identified the women's needs and not the policies as a problem. Thus, difference was met as a threat rather than as an urgent call to rethink policy to account for the needs of various women.

These views develop out of my reading of Lugones' discussion of one of the tricks that racism plays on white women whereby we take up "the problem of difference" (71). She claims that white women theorists have "worried more passionately about the harm the claim [that women are not the same, that there are important differences that undermine any simple use of the assumed feminist 'we'] does to theorizing than about the harm the theorizing did to women of color" (71-2). Further, she remarks, "the focus of the solutions is on how to generalize without

being guilty of false inclusion” (72). Overcoming this trick, eliminating or significantly minimizing the effects of this manifestation of racism, is complicated by at least two fears that it gives rise to in white women. The first, which I find myself least in the grip of, is a fear that if one cannot explicitly and universally account for women, then there can be no feminist theory. As mentioned above, this fear develops out of ontological commitments that are at odds with a desire to eradicate oppression; i.e., it arises from within an ontology of being rather than one of becoming. The second fear, which is subjectively more troubling, is a fear of being wrong, which connects with her discussion of the “infantilization of judgment” (48-50).

Lugones describes this phenomenon as “a dulling of the ability to read critically, and with maturity of judgment, those texts and situations in which race and ethnicity are salient”; it is a “flight into a state in which one cannot be critical or responsible” (48). Such a flight develops out of a complex relationship between white privilege and sexism. Often enough to merit discussion, white women fear “being wrong” and would rather sit silent than risk it. We fear being wrong because we desire to maintain a dominant position in relation to certainty, because we fear losing the gains in the academy that we have made, and because we fear that acknowledging and attending to our racism will eradicate our ability to see ourselves as good (i.e., we often maintain a view, despite our best efforts, of purity, whereby any badness equates to total badness).<sup>10</sup> Even

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<sup>10</sup> Thus, whereas Frye has focused upon white people’s “staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness” – a position that I would not dispute – I am pointing to one of the effects of sexism in the lives of white women that undermines, without eradicating, this faith (cf. Lugones p. 72 or Frye’s “White Woman Feminist”). Particularly in white families where sexism manifests in significant aggression toward the female child, there is a complex admixture of white privilege and self-hatred or the fear of *being* bad. These circumstances can result in a phobia of addressing one’s flaws – even flaws as profound and contradictory to one’s political aims as racism – such that avoidance becomes one of one’s central “solutions.” These factors contribute to my interest in the possibilities of personal transformation given that they often require a significant degree of self-work before one is able to clearly, directly, and adequately confront her racism.

as these fears manifest in my work, and as I perpetuate problems that Lugones identifies in white women theorists' practices, my aim is to continue moving away from the need for certainty and the fear of being wrong.

This is particularly the case given that the treatment of difference as a threat to feminist projects (and feminist unity, more broadly) represents one of the most troubling aspects of feminist theory.<sup>11</sup> The differences among women's situations and desires do not present a problem that feminist theorists must work to overcome; we need not develop a static account of female subjectivity, oppression, nor a plan for a feminist future that addresses or captures all the differences among women. Nor is it the case that a feminist response to the fact that women differ demands a rejection of all ontological thinking, the use of universal claims or generalizations, or for us to abandon feminist theory altogether. Instead, inter- and intra-female difference is a problematic for feminists in that it requires a reevaluation of or return to the questions of what is wrong with oppression, how can we respond to these wrongs without erasing differences, and what unifies feminist theory if it is not the unity of its subjects nor its political program.

*Differences among women are foundational for feminist theory.* When we truly recognize the great variety of ways of being a woman in the world, we are better equipped to argue against social practices that homogenize female experience. When we criticize theoretical work for

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<sup>11</sup> While a number of similar responses to difference can be found in feminist theory, it is certainly not my position that feminists universally meet difference as a threat. Such a view would be ignorant of the fact that certain feminists are highly critical of this movement, of the vast differences among feminist theorists and activists, as well as the shifting grounds of feminist praxis. My point is that utopian projects and other certainty-based feminist responses to oppression will necessarily encounter some set of differences among women as threatening. That is, difference is at odds with projects grounded by certainty in terms of who is a woman, what it means to suffer sexist oppression, and what is required for a feminist future.

essentializing women, falsely generalizing sexist oppression, or marginalizing women whose experiences are complicated by multiple oppressions, we demonstrate the need for feminist theory to expand rather than to collapse. And, when we envision a future wherein women are not prohibited from action because we are women, we see that such a future would give rise to ever expanding differences among women. Differences among women are essential for feminism in that they produce our resistance to a status quo that would erase these differences. They provide guidance for immediate political intervention when social policy (patriarchal or feminist) functions to oppress women given their differences; they broaden feminist theory both in terms of the meaning of 'woman' as well as in the scope of its political action; and they demonstrate the need for an open-ended approach to the future wherein feminist theory continues to expand to account for and engender increasing differences among women.

Grosz's politics of becoming, the view that political action must remain open-ended, attuned to the dynamic nature of subjectivity, and more carefully aware of the future, is useful for attending to and engendering differences among women. Her view, which developed out of her readings of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Bergson, rejects the possibility of certainty and challenges the notion of a best response to oppression. Thinking about feminist transformative efforts in terms of her politics of becoming helps us to avoid falsely speaking for all women or encountering differences as threatening (and, therefore, reproducing the very oppression feminist work is meant to alleviate). In this regard, her work is quite useful for thinking about feminist transformation.

Unfortunately, Grosz seems unwilling to wrestle with the actual suffering of individuals; her work tends to focus on theoretical relations rather than women's experiences of oppression. We can note that it is quite often the case that her writing remains in the confines of what some

might call ivory tower philosophy given her choice of interlocutors, the language of her writing, and her distance from the lives of everyday women. I am unwilling to fault her for “being too abstract” or disconnected from the everyday given that her reflections on time and becoming have allowed me to connect to the everyday experiences of certain women in new and valuable ways. And, I would argue that it is unreasonable to expect every feminist theorist to critically engage with women’s lived experience in her writing, as such a view unnecessarily limits the intellectual pursuits of feminist thinkers. However, Grosz’s work requires more grounding in women’s lived experiences to be useful in thinking about transformative experience.

Here, Judith Butler’s remarks about possibility in the epigraph are enlightening, wherein she describes her desire to “open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.” In her view, oppression functions by way of making ways of being in the world impossible. And, being impossible engenders suffering; to find oneself in a social context that marks you as abject or monstrous, to have your identity erased or marginalized, to not be able to pursue life projects given your perceived illegitimacy is to suffer the fate of being impossible. Accordingly, feminist projects that seek to represent and respond to the suffering of women with certainty are troubling (and in need of troubling) because such certainty forecloses possibility. Projects that dictate the kind of possibilities in need of realization for women limit the very thing (i.e., possibility) that anti-sexist projects should be opening up. Thus, Butler’s political approach of opening up fields of possibility calls on us to abandon such projects and to think about how individuals suffering from oppression can have more possibility in their lives.

In her preface to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, she responds to those who criticized her work on the grounds that it failed to offer concrete solutions noting, “one



might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is.” I understand her response, that an appropriate understanding of the suffering of being impossible would keep one from even asking this question, as much more powerful than it first appears. Of course, her response appears avoidant; she does not actually explain why feminists should engage in opening up possibility itself. However, her position (which connects with Crenshaw’s discussion of intersectionality) is that there is no single experience of oppression – there are multiple and conflicting experiences of oppression. Given this variation, and that theories and political projects ignorant of this variation cause harm for women whose experiences fail to map neatly onto definitions of ‘woman’ or ‘sexist oppression’, there is good reason to reject static accounts of just what possibilities need to be open for women. Women’s differences and the ways in which sexist oppression erases these differences and limits women’s possibilities call for feminism to expand women’s possibilities of being different (different from each other and different than they currently are).

Thus, Butler’s response to her critics demonstrates the need to think about feminist transformation in terms of its very possibility rather than in terms of its particular achievements. One cannot identify a set of feminist possibilities in need of opening up, because to do so would additionally inhibit women’s freedom. There are far too many differences as to what needs to be changed to believe that an idealized set of concrete possibilities would be of value. And, these differences matter given the suffering associated with being on the wrong end of a proposed solution to the oppression of women. In short, thinking about what makes change possible avoids the harms of erasing women’s different needs and desires. I argue that to do so disrupts the tendency to elevate particular visions of the good or the right by employing the broader value of freedom in action.

Reading Grosz with Butler supports the position that theorizing feminist transformation requires tools that positively engage women's differences, rather than those aimed at determining once and for all *how things should be*. I bring these two approaches to feminist politics together because Grosz's account provides an ontological basis (which I discuss in more detail in the following section) for the more practical or lived approach to politics we find in Butler's work. Bringing these theorists together, then, helps us to move from a politics of uncertainty or a politics of becoming to a politics of becoming new.

### ***Futurity and Politics/Becoming and Becoming New***

One of the more significant disruptions engendered by Grosz's politics of becoming has to do with its orientation toward the future. She describes this disruption as a shift from thinking about ontology statically (what she calls an ontology of being) toward an understanding of ontology as dynamic and temporal (what she calls an ontology of becoming). Just as the differences among women challenge static understandings of woman, femininity, and oppression the open-endedness of the future challenges static conceptions of freedom, the good, and the right.

In *The Nick of Time*, Grosz extends her critique of utopian and certainty-based feminist politics to challenge political action solely focused on redressing past injustices. She notes:

Political and cultural struggles are all, in some sense, directed to bringing into existence futures that dislocate themselves from the dominant tendencies and forces of the present. They are all about making the future different from the past and present, in rupturing the continuity of processes through the upheaval posed by events. They are about inducing the untimely. ... Political activism has addressed itself primarily to a reconfiguring of the past and a form of justice in the present that redresses or rectifies the harms of the past. It needs to be augmented with those dreams of the future that make its projects endless, unattainable, ongoing experiments rather than solutions (14).

In this passage, she highlights the future orientation of all political action – that political projects are directed toward a future wherein things are different from the present. We can note that even conservative politics entail this future orientation in that they seek to reproduce social relations that have fallen out of favor or are threatened by progressive political action. Grosz describes this future orientation in terms of its disruptive and untimely qualities; struggles for new possibilities are disruptive and untimely in that they shift the flow of the present in unpredictable ways. In describing the future-directedness, disruption, and unpredictability of political action, she strengthens her challenge to both utopian and other certainty-based feminist projects. Moreover, she uses this view of politics to challenge projects that are primarily directed toward remedying past injustices through present action. Of course feminist politics require both an orientation toward the past (a position I take up in Chapter 5) and the drive to remedy injustice. Grosz's point, which I take up throughout my work, is that it is not enough to identify and try to remedy past harms. Feminism must also work to open up possibility itself, which requires a future-orientation and a willingness to experiment (as well as the letting go of certainty and deep awareness of women's differences as discussed above). We might describe a feminist politics based upon these qualities as employing a utopian horizon wherein freedom is understood as broad and ever expanding differences.

Grosz's politics of becoming attends to the fact that subjects both come to be who they are and change across time (i.e., that subjectivity is constituted by difference). That all things, including humans, change over time is apparent. Among the variety of temporal relations that humans have, we are most familiar with the movement from the present into the future. This relation, often referred to as linear or chronological time, shows up, for example, when we check the clock to ensure we won't be late, when we employ causal reasoning, and when we organize

our schedules. We are quite familiar with this piece of our temporal structure wherein human subjectivity is directed toward the future. We know that the date will change, our locations will change, our bodies will change – e.g., one will walk into the next room, grow older, perhaps lose her taste for bad horror films, possibly take up gardening or yoga, return to smoking cigarettes. Such shifts in location or identity are constitutive of subjective becoming; one becomes as she participates in her life's activities.

Our futurity or open-endedness, i.e., *that one will be otherwise than she is now or has been in the past*, is a necessary piece of what it means to be human. To be in time is to be a subject who is always becoming different than she currently is (even as we repeat ourselves, fail to move forward, regress, and so forth – these seemingly unbecoming activities are at the very least moving us into a future time). The essence of the human is its non-static essence; we are the types of beings that become. And, that we are the types of beings that become entails that feminist projects mired in certainty and predictability will unlikely produce truly transformative thinking or action. Grosz challenges our reliance upon predictability in her text *Becomings*, where she asks:

Is the concept of revolution so tied to a set of weary discourses that, within their terms, it can now mean only predictable transformation, transformation that follows a predesignated path, innovation within legitimized parameters, that is, controlled and regulated progress (whether the rule of the proletariat, the equalization of relations between the sexes, or racial integration)? Or does it involve the more disconcerting idea of *unpredictable* transformation – mutation, metamorphosis – upheaval in directions and arenas with implications or consequences that cannot be known in advance? (17).

Predictability is weary for Grosz because it limits from the start what freedom could be.

The desire to predict is a desire to control what comes out of feminist transformative theorizing – and, in Grosz's view, such desires are themselves in need of transformation. She employs the images of mutation and metamorphosis to suggest the value of evolutionary theory for thinking

about feminist transformation (an idea she takes up in her readings of Darwin and Deleuze). Rosi Braidotti's work on nomadic subjectivity, found in her *Metamorphoses*, helps to connect these ontological claims to feminist political work. Whereas Grosz turns to evolutionary theory to expand her ontological position, Braidotti employs the concept of metamorphosis to think more carefully about women's experiences of movement, transformation, and oppression. Her work helps us to think about the open-endedness of the future and human becoming in relation to human activity, including movement across the world, the negotiations of power relations, and shifts in identity.<sup>12</sup>

For Braidotti, similarly to Grosz, there is a particular feminist value in developing the ability to think through the processes of subjectivity in terms of "mutations, changes and transformation, rather than Being in its classical modes" (2). Her figuration of the nomadic subject, characterized by mutation and movement, is a useful theoretical tool for feminists because it challenges static views of human nature that have been used to limit women's possibilities of being in the world.<sup>13</sup> The nomadic subject is dynamic, always moving, always challenging static views of the human; to be nomadic is to shift the boundaries set in place by western ontology, both spatial and temporal boundaries, as well as the boundaries between individuals. Thus, she argues that the nomadic subject provides an "affirmative deconstruction of

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<sup>12</sup> The becoming of a nomadic subject is characterized as "a transformation in terms of a qualitative increase (in speed, intensity, perception or colour) that allows one to break into new fields of perception, affectivity ... nothing short of a metamorphosis" (147).

<sup>13</sup> Braidotti identifies a figuration as "a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective. A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentered and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity" (2). It is a "living map, a transformative account of the self – it is no metaphor" (3). Her resistance to metaphors comes from her view of them as static and concept-bound. I'm not convinced by her position, though I am most interested in her focus on movement and complex temporal relations.

the dominant subject position” (i.e., the view of humans as always becoming disrupts the view of human nature as fixed) (118). What I hope to add to her position is a more detailed account of how human becoming differs from becoming new.

The possibility of becoming new arises from the fact that we are the type of beings that are continuously changing. I use the concept of becoming new to capture a more substantial, particular, and self-directed shift in one’s ways of being in the world than intended by the concept of becoming. That one is becoming or changing is necessarily true of humans; we cannot stop our body’s movement forward in time. But becoming new – or transforming – differs from what we might call mere becoming. A subject is always becoming; in those moments when she is freely and purposely becoming, she is becoming new. Despite the constancy of change, in fact, actual transformation is rare. We can find countless examples of individuals who, given complex social and psychological circumstances, find themselves incapable of moving into truly new ways of being in the world. Indeed, western medical, legal, psychological, and sociological discourses are often directed at understanding, managing, and treating those individuals who appear to be stuck in harmful repetitive action (often identified as pathological or addictive behavior, which I examine in Chapter 4).

A feminist politics of becoming new incorporates the beliefs that oppression exists and should not, that significant differences in women’s lived experiences cannot be ignored, and that becoming new or transformation requires a conditioned ability to alter one’s lived experiences toward the realization of personal goals. For example, the distinction between becoming and becoming new attunes us to the problem of women wanting to change but continuing to repeat behaviors that function in part to reproduce the suffering brought about by oppressive social relations. And, it does so without insisting upon the type of certainty employed, for example, by

feminists seeking to eradicate pornography. Thinking about feminist change in terms of becoming new allows for a focus upon the very possibility of transformation: how is it possible, what blocks it, and what enables it. What we will find is that transformation (both feminist and beyond) is first and foremost a bodily possibility, one that resides in the habitual body.

### ***Freedom, Bodies, and Habits***

Approaching social change through the language of becoming reorients feminist understandings of freedom, the body, and habits. Such an approach attunes us to humans' dynamic nature and allows us to attend to both the differences among women, as well as differences within ourselves. Importantly, while a politics of becoming new is about possibility it does not entail a voluntaristic view of human action, wherein the future is viewed as *entirely* open-ended. As Grosz remarks, "in seeking an open-ended future, one is not required to affirm that misnomer, 'free will', but to acknowledge the capacity of any future eruption, any event, any reading, to rewrite, resignify, reframe the present, to accept the role that the accidental, chance, or the undetermined plays in the unfolding of time" (*Becomings*, 18). Historical processes, cultural norms, family dynamics, and physical laws all circumscribe human activity and, therefore, limit the possibilities of both becoming and becoming new. It is clear that any feminist account of transformation must wrestle with these structuring limits on human behavior. One cannot explore the future possibilities of humans without such an understanding of how we have come to be who we are and of what blocks transformation.

To think about feminist transformation through the concept of becoming new is to pay particular attention to the ways in which human life is structured by social norms and the institutions that impart these norms. Indeed, a significant value in understanding transformation

or becoming new in relation to self-directed, future-oriented action is that such an understanding requires us to address individual's relations to social norms (i.e., it forces us to attend to the relations between individuals and societies). The degree to which one sees her future as open – which is not to demand she see any particular or every particular piece as open, but to refer to the degree to which she sees possibility in her future – stems from her relation to social norms. Thinking about feminist change through this concept of becoming new allows for an understanding of both the sedimented (i.e., habitual) and dynamic components of social existence. Thus, the language of becoming new – when employed in analysis of the embodied nature of transformational possibilities – allows us to consider freedom without opposing it to determinism.

Situating the body as the center of transformative possibility allows for a more balanced account of the social limits on action. Freedom, as considered through the concept of becoming new, is one's ability to transform her relation to social norms in thought and action (without insisting that thought and action are decisively split). In "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom," Grosz describes this form of freedom as *autonomous action* (140). Autonomous actions (what I identify as transformative actions or becoming new) are not independent of external constraint, social norms, nor do they necessarily attend to one's long-term goals or plans. Grosz is valuable here because she demonstrates theoretical and practical problems associated with opposing freedom to external constraint. She notes that oppressive external constraint cannot be understood to significantly limit women's freedom (as possibility) unless we further posit that under contemporary conditions women are not free. Opposing freedom to external constraint results in the inability to understand how women could work through and out of patriarchal relations. Contemporary social relations significantly constrain women's actions, views of their



possibilities, and self-concepts. If freedom is taken as a state free from external constraint, women cannot be identified as free (cf. debates surrounding Frye's "birdcage" analysis of oppression). If women are not free, then it is unclear how women could make things otherwise than they currently are.

Grosz rejects this opposition given her view that there is no outside to patriarchy as well as her belief that feminist theory requires that woman can be otherwise. I follow her here; oppression is not the absence of freedom nor is freedom the absence of oppression. When this point is kept clear, we can return to a view of freedom as becoming new without fearing the loss of one's ability to think about the ways in which troubling social norms, laws, and policies shape our lives and possibilities. What must be remembered is that accounting for these forms of constraint cannot provide us with a vision of the ideal feminist future. There is no single account of oppressive constraint given our differences and there is no ideal feminist future given that the future is open. Rather than focusing theoretical efforts on the development of an ideal future, we need to identify those areas where possibility arises given the understanding that a transformative feminist future is one in which women's possibilities of being otherwise are kept open. This returns us Grosz's question that began this chapter: what might happen if feminists let go of the project of determining specific goals or defining freedom substantively? Could it be that in letting go of these projects, we become that much more able to creatively respond to the limits on transformation without foreclosing the future?

In Grosz's politics of becoming, freedom is understood as the capacity to transform one's habits so that the seemingly totalizing force of social norms is no longer so totalizing. Freedom, then, is possibility, what she refers to as "the condition of, or capacity for, action in life" (140). One is free through her acting in the world, which requires "the struggle with matter, the struggle

of bodies to become more than they are, a struggle that occurs not only on the level of the individual but also of the species” (152). This struggle is not directed at the expansion of women’s choice sets; as Grosz remarks, feminist freedom is not about choice or the “freedom of selection, of consumption, [nor] a freedom linked to the acquisition of objects” (147). Instead, feminist struggle to become new pertains to the embodied possibilities of acting in the world such that one’s actions are “connected to an active self” who is able “to make (or refuse to make) activities (including language and systems of representation and value) one’s own, that is to integrate the activities one undertakes into one’s history, one’s becoming” (151-2).

Her characterization of the relation among bodies, matter, and social transformation informs my understanding of the value of becoming and becoming new for feminist theory. Within this view, freedom arises in bodies – it comes from “the body’s capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action” (152). It is our body’s ability to act that manifests freedom, what Grosz calls the “ability to harness and utilize matter for one’s own purposes and interests” (148). In the passage below, we can find a sense of the bodily relation to transformation:

Acts are free insofar as they express and resemble the subject, not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts ... free acts come from or even through us (it is not clear if it matters where the impetus of the act originates – what matters is how it is retroactively integrated into the subject’s history and continuity). More significantly, if this subject from which acts spring is never the same, never self-identical, always and imperceptibly becoming other than what it once was and is now, then free acts, having been undertaken, are those which transform us, which we can incorporate into our becomings in the very process of their changing us. Free acts are those which both express us and which transform us, which express our transforming (146).

Here, the body is the site of expression and transformation – even if it is not the impetus of transformative action. We become new as our bodily actions allow for a dynamic integration

of what has been, what is, and what will be (dynamic in that these relations to our past, present, and future continually shift). This is what Grosz alludes to in saying that free acts express and resemble the subject. The body is both the actor and acted upon; the body produces and incorporates transformative acts. Thus, as it acts in new ways, it becomes new itself. When Grosz remarks that free acts express us and transform us – that they express our transformations – she is identifying freedom as the very possibility of doing something otherwise that one wishes to do otherwise.

That one would wish to do something otherwise is deeply connected to where one is – our desires to transform arise from our place in the world. To perform a free act (to become new) is take up or employ your current ways of being in the world toward the creation of newness in your life. Here, we can think of Jean-Paul Sartre's or Simone de Beauvoir's discussions (among others) of imminence and transcendence, wherein one's facticity is ultimately neither a block on who one can become nor meaningless in terms of our possibilities. To act freely is to transform one's being or facticity, to do things differently without denying the meaning or value of who or where one is. Thus, free acts are able to both express and transform us because they disrupt our being without disconnecting us from our former selves (i.e., they resemble us).

The importance of embodiment for my project comes from the need to understand the possibilities of becoming new in relation to habitual bodily practices. As expanded upon in chapters 2 and 3, one of the challenges of theorizing transformation in terms of bodily becoming pertains to the operations of habit, which both engender and inhibit free action. Given the importance of habits in the consideration of freedom and transformation, it is surprising that both Grosz and Braidotti employ views of habit that oppose habits to free action. For Grosz, habits are distinct from autonomous and free action, which requires that "one acts with all of one's being,

and in the process those acts become capable of transforming that being” (147-8). In contrast to free action, then, is one’s “background of routinized or habituated activity. It is only insofar as most of everyday life is accommodated through automatism, by a kind of reflex or habit, that free acts have their energetic and aesthetico-moral force and their effects on their author or agent” (148).

Here, Grosz describes habit in opposition to becoming (a move I am unwilling to make with her). I find it odd that she provides such a shallow account of habit given her arguments surrounding the need to incorporate understanding of the body in our social and political theories (cf. *Volatile Bodies* and *The Nick of Time*). For example, she maintains: “we need to understand [the body’s] open-ended connections with space and time, its place in dynamic natural and cultural systems, and its mutating, self-changing relations within natural and social networks” (*Nick of Time*, 3). In opposing habits and free action, rather than understanding them as co-constitutive of transformative possibilities, she undermines the value of her politics of becoming.

Braidotti’s view of habit is even more pessimistic than Grosz’s account; she describes habits as “the in-built temporality of the obvious, the regular, the same” (269). Habits are “patterns of repetitions that consolidate modes of relation and forces of interaction” (“The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” 213). According to her view, then, habits are the “frame” within which subjects are temporarily “reterritorialized” (213). Here, she means that habits function to freeze you into a more substantive identity; they keep one from doing otherwise. In her view, a habit is a “micro-addiction” because through habitual actions the past dominates over the present and future, blocking innovation and free action:

The solemn preservation of experiences from the past, as expressed in the authoritative voice of the self, the nation, the family, masculinity in its hegemonic mode, his master’s voice perpetuating the sound-bites of the same. Habits – even sensory habits – are micro-addictions applied to everyday life: ‘we’ve always

done it this way ... it's always been like this'. One grows dependent on them: habits, customs, traditions become addictive. They are just your average legal drugs, life-support systems which are naturalized out of convenience (269).

Her criticism of habit and convention goes too far; to identify habituality as a “solemn preservation of the past” is to ignore that being habitual is not merely being repetitive. Indeed, there are few solemn preservations of the past given the constancy of change as we move forward in time and the great variation in ways of being we can find in relations to the “master’s voice” of social norms. Her account fails to understand habits in all their complexity. Habits are those actions that bring us into the world; they are necessary for our existence and action. And, her emphasis on the convenience of habits (another view I criticize in later chapters) both covers over the pain and suffering associated with certain habitudes, as well as the positive meaning or value that develops out of our habitual relation to the world (e.g., the pleasure of running a familiar path or a joyous family ritual). However, her negative view on habit functions to highlight important ways in which our being habitual inhibits the possibilities of becoming new. Bringing the positive and negative effects of habit into one view will allow us to consider habit as an essential piece of transformative possibilities.

Habits are not in opposition to human freedom; they are the very possibility of free action. Thus, both Grosz and Braidotti are mistaken to cast habits as merely inhibitive of transformative action. In the following chapter, I incorporate phenomenological analysis – particularly analysis of the habitual body’s role in transformation – given my belief that it locates the politics of becoming new in lived experience and overcomes some of the limitations found in Grosz and Braidotti. A phenomenological approach allows us to consider transformation in a highly practical fashion, without requiring a singular account of feminist political goals or strategies (a requirement that tends toward the erasure of differences and futurity). Thinking

about transformation through analysis of the habitual body leads us to consider the practical or lived conditions of the possibility of things being otherwise. Namely, it leads us to ask how people can do things differently while acknowledging the ways in which social norms and structures inhibit transformative action. And, thinking about transformation in terms of a bodily becoming new (e.g., in relation to the habitual body) helps us to understand how individuals can achieve the changes they desire without thereby establishing these particular desires as universal feminist goals.

Here, it is necessary to return to Anzaldúa's writing on the *Coatlicue* state, which she also discusses in relation to habits and addictions. The description she provides is far more helpful in thinking about the dual nature of habits than found in either Grosz or Braidotti. For Anzaldúa, particular habits that get labeled as addictions (a word she employs, though with a very different meaning than the standard reading), are meaningful, useful, and have the potentiality to get one stuck. As she writes:

An addiction (a repetitious act) is a ritual to help one through a trying time; its repetition safeguards the passage, it becomes one's talisman, one's touchstone. If it sticks around after having outlived its usefulness, we become 'stuck' in it and it takes possession of us. But we need not be arrested. Some past experience or condition has created this need. This stopping is a survival mechanism, but one which must vanish when it's no longer needed if growth is to occur.

We need *Coatlicue* to slow us up so that they psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes. If we don't take the time, she'll lay us low with an illness, forcing us to "rest." ... Those activities or *Coatlicue* states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences – if we can make meaning out of them – can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life" (68).

In this description, we are presented with a more compelling account of what it means to be engaged in repetition. Repetition, habitual activity, can function to protect us, to give us space

for reflection on otherwise important considerations; it is both a “survival mechanism” and a potential block to our growth and freedom. It is necessary and necessary to overcome. This description is far more useful for thinking about blocks to transformation such as eating disorders given that it avoids the either/or reading whereby a behavior is either pathological or not. She notes, “it is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (95). This view helps to make sense of what it means to be able to live and work through the anxiety that arise when one is attempting to become new. Transformation requires the ability to live and work through ambiguity and the anxiety it brings – concepts that receive more attention in Chapter 2.

### ***Concluding Remarks: Anxiety and Transformation***

Throughout this chapter, I’ve argued along with Grosz, Butler, and Braidotti that we need to move away from controlling measures to those that enable a type of self-realization that freedom demands. I have also argued that feminist theory is enriched by an understanding of transformation focused upon the bodily experiences of doing things differently (bodily possibility). The benefits of thinking about transformation in this way come from its ability to accommodate wide variations without erasing differences among women, its awareness of the open-endedness of the future, and its ability to account for external constraint and free action within contexts of external constraint. However, the open-ended approach to thinking about feminist possibilities entails certain troubling or anxiety-producing aspects.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of anxiety is given more thorough consideration in the following chapters; for now it is important to note that one way to open up possibilities is to work with the body’s relations to norms and to engender more ability to manage the bodily anxiety that arises when

Grosz is well aware of the resistance facing her politics of becoming. It is disconcerting to let go of concrete goals, particularly when one fears that to do so is to lose the possibility of achieving an ideal feminist future. Such work is disconcerting in that it gives rise to what she calls the surprise of the new; the surprise of the new is “the inherent capacity for time to link, in extraordinarily complex ways, the past and present to a future that is uncontained by them and has the capacity to rewrite and transform them” (*Becomings*, 7). In other words, the new is surprising because we were unable to predict and control it. The surprise of the new gives rise to anxiety in that, “we cannot know what the new will bring, what the promise of the future is for us: to know the future is to deny it as future, to place it as a given, as past” (6). That is, the absolutely new is the unknown and the uncontrollable and in being unknown and uncontrollable it raises anxiety (given the theoretical desire to know with certainty that has traditionally arisen for philosophers). Here, I turn to a longer passage from her work to give voice to her thoughts about the surprise of the new:

The concept of the absolutely new raises many anxieties. While it is clear that *newness*, *creativity*, *innovation*, and *progress* are all terms deemed social positives, the more disconcerting notion of unpredictable, disordered, or uncontainable change - the idea of chance, of indeterminacy, of unforeseeability - that lurks within the very concept of change or newness, seems to unsettle scientific, philosophical, political, and cultural ideals of stability and control. Predictable, measures, regulated transformation, change under specifiable conditions and with determinate effects seems a readily presumed social prerequisite; upheaval, the eruption of the event, the emergence of new alignments unpredicted within old networks, threatens to reverse all gains, to position progress on the edge of an abyss, to place chaos at the heart of regulation and orderly development. How is it possible to revel and delight in the indeterminacy of the future without raising the kind of panic and defensive counteractions that surround the attempts of the old to contain the new, to predict, anticipate, and incorporate the new within its already existing frameworks? (*Becomings*, 16).

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trying to do things differently (whether as feminist theorists or in more particular or individual ways).



What does it mean to let go? In part, it means allowing individuals to determine the paths that their lives will take. Feminist freedom requires that we let go of a belief that we could ever be right – if being right is to be able to determine in advance how social relations should function. Letting go produces anxiety because it eliminates certainty and disrupts the theoretical and practical projects many of us have been raised on. Abandoning these projects can cause anxiety by opening up possibilities that may often strike us in the present as untenable (more on this in Chapter 4). And, such letting go produces anxiety as we try to accept that our desires to end suffering and abjection can never be fully realized. While, say, perpetual peace à la Kant is a valuable ideal, it is not a potential goal within a politics of becoming new – i.e., even as feminist desire is utopian, feminist politics cannot be.<sup>15</sup>

A feminist analysis of transformation, then, requires us to open ourselves to the unpredictable and the untimely despite the anxieties associated with either doing something otherwise or theorizing a future un-foreclosed by the specification of feminist goals. An open-ended approach to feminist politics also allows for a critique of institution responses to, for example, eating disorders and drug dependency, which could highlight how these institutions inhibit transformation through the reproduction of problematic social norms (see chapter 4). And, still practically speaking, a good understanding of blocks to change can be taken up by individuals and communities and used in resistance to those particular blocks to change they identify as significant. In other words, if we understand some of the ways that change and transformation are inhibited, we can apply this knowledge in our theories and in our lives.

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<sup>15</sup> Again, the use of a utopian model to ground explicit feminist transformative goals leads theorists to misrepresent the needs of a subset of women for all women. While partial change may well be better than no change at all, feminist theorists cannot in good conscience “endeavor to construct utopias” without understanding the troubled history of feminist praxis attuned towards one group of women’s concerns.

## CHAPTER 2: THE HABITUAL BODY AND TRANSFORMATION

### *Introduction: Transformation and Habituality*

In the last chapter I touched upon the body's role in transformation through a discussion of free action, wherein I challenged both Grosz's and Braidotti's understanding of the role of habits in becoming. There, I argued that it is a mistake to conceive of habits in opposition to free action. In this chapter, I expand this argument in order to show that being habitual is the very possibility of transformative action. Given its central role in our transformative possibilities, our habitual being needs to be theorized beyond the limited view that habits are stale ways of being in the world, tied to oppression, and blocking us from newness. In the following pages, then, I set out to explain how habits function to open up and close off our worlds.

One valuable way of thinking about oppression pertains to its limiting role, as discussed, for example, in Marilyn Frye's celebrated analysis of oppression (cf. *The Politics of Reality*). The limits that constitute sexist oppression are multiple and various; they come from outside and are found within ourselves; and they bring us into a world that they simultaneously constrict. By addressing the habitual component of sexist oppression, e.g., the ways in which gendered habits bring us into the world with both ease and anxiety, I hope to resist these limits in a way that is respectful of women's differences and open to futures that I could not predict. My sense is that being respectful in this regard means understanding my own limits, as well as those of my theoretical contributions. Of course the transformation of feminist theory – both its thoughts about women's possibilities of transformation and its own transformed relation to oppression – cannot be achieved simply by including this understanding of the role of habits in free action. However, an understanding of habitual being can help to shift feminist theoretical and political practices such that we are better able to think about and respond to the effects of oppression on

women's lives. Even as women's habits and ways of being habitual differ, and though humans' seemingly necessary habituality may prove arbitrary over time, the fact that we are habitual creatures matters – especially for feminists given the role of habits in transformative possibility and that gender is habitual (see chapter 3).

I take up this first notion – that our habits and habituality have a significant role in our transformative possibilities – by exploring the phenomenological concept of the habitual body. In what follows I argue that the habitual body – particularly as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edward Casey – is important for a feminist theory of becoming new. The concept of the habitual body is valuable because it allows us to analyze the interrelations among bodies, minds, and social norms; it provides for such an analysis without imposing an ideal or universal account of being in the world; it allows us to discuss gender identity and the difficulties of transforming one's relation to gender norms with respect for the myriad differences among women; and it highlights the problems with thinking about transformation as improvement rather than in a more open-ended fashion.

The habitual body allows us to think about the relations between the physical and the psychical and the social and the individual. A focus on the genesis, everydayness, and transformation of bodily habitudes provides a framework for considering the interactions intra- and among individuals, communities, and institutions. And, the phenomenological approach allows us to navigate the difficult terrain encountered when analyzing the relations among body, mind, and society given its understanding of the body in the world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Casey supports these claims in noting that the concept of the habitual body is valuable given its ability to overcome “the Cartesian alternatives of matter *or* mind” (*Remembering*, 280). What is habitual, he argues, is both thoroughly mental and physical at the same time and cannot be reduced to either the mental or the physical: “in habit, character, virtue, and style alike, we

For example, the concept of the habitual body might suggest that individuals are the central or singular players in achieving transformation. However, when we recognize that habitual ways of being in the world are social relations developing out of the interactions of bodies, people, and social norms, it becomes clear that talk of habits, habitudes, and habituality is not, strictly speaking, talk of individuals. And, my position is that feminist theorists should articulate the role of habits in transformation. Thus, not only am I suggesting a social component for engendering possibility, I am suggesting a theoretical social component (i.e., thinking about our habituality involves individuals and communities, as well as bodily and theoretical work). The task of theorizing a politics of becoming new can and should result in ideas and political action that help individuals effect transformation in their own lives. However, this work is directed toward expanding feminist approaches and shifting institutional practices such that it is more possible for individuals to change.

Specifically, I am working toward a critique of pathologizing tendencies in feminist theory – an approach that must be challenged within a politics of becoming new. I develop this critique in chapter 4, however, it is useful to sketch out my position to clarify my goals. The tendency toward pathologizing found in certain feminist work, e.g., in the cultural analysis of eating disorders, limits transformative possibility. Pathological discourses, given their faulty understanding of habitual activity, inhibit both individual and broader social transformation. Thus, my analysis of the habitual body is offered as a corrective for the ways in which the discourses on and treatment of pathologies, particularly eating disorders, misunderstand and mis-treat that which they intend to understand and treat. If successful, this intervention will provide

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find an inextricable commixture of intention and behavior, of animation by mind and enactment by body” (280).

transformational thrust at both the institution and community levels (e.g., it will help to shift the ways in which theorists, practitioners, and families respond to eating disorders), as well as at the individual level (e.g., how the anorexic relates to her eating practices).

This chapter begins, then, with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's account of the habitual body from *The Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter, *PP*), which I expand upon with Edward Casey's important text, *Remembering*. Following this description, I characterize the habitual body, and our relations to habits, in terms of the processes of habitual sedimentation and disruption. I argue that both the development of habits (sedimentation) and their disruption are constituted by bodily experiences of ease and anxiety, that gender habits are particularly demonstrative of this dual affective nature, and that an understanding of the anxiety associated with habit sedimentation and disruption is necessary for feminist work on transformation (this is both because the habitual body has most often been theorized solely in terms of bodily ease and because bodily anxiety is a necessary yet inhibitive piece of becoming new). The aim is to demonstrate that thinking about transformation through the concept of the habitual body is valuable for feminist theory even as it produces certain theoretical difficulties that one might avoid by identifying certain habits as feminist-friendly and others as anti-feminist, anti-freedom, addictive or pathological.

### ***The Habitual Body, Habits, and Habitudes***

In the following pages, I describe the ways in which we come to be in the world through the habitual body, how bodies come to have ways of acting, how these ways of acting develop out of social interactions with others and institutions, as well as how our habituality engenders and inhibits changes in our ways of being and, therefore, the possibility of social transformation.

This requires me to clarify the relations among the lived body, the habitual body, habits and habitudes. The lived body is our way of being in the world and can be contrasted with the body as an object of scientific research. This concept highlights the first-person experiential encounter with the world. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, “I cannot conceive of myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological, or sociological investigation” (*PP*, ix). To be in the world is to be oriented toward the world from your body – what some refer to as the “zero perspective” on the world. Iris Marion Young describes the lived body as “a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is a body-in-situation” (*On Female Body Experience*, 16). The notion of body-in-situation helps us to understand, as Johanna Oksala reminds us, “the fundamental interrelatedness of consciousness and embodiment” that constitutes the lived body (*Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, 188-9). Oksala further reminds us that the lived body “is our basic framework of meaning and truth” given that it is the “totality of external and internal perceptions, intelligence, affectivity, motility, and sexuality” (189). This provides us one way to explain how the lived body differs from the scientific body – the lived body provides the ground from which scientific study can develop; it is our primary experience of the world.

In his work, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the lived body as one’s “mediator of a world” and tells us that habit – “knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made” – exists “neither in thought nor in the objective body, but in the body as mediator of a world” (*PP*, 166-7). Thus, the habitual body, in that it constitutes a part of our lived body, can be contrasted with the body as an object of scientific investigation and with the body as an object of reflection. The habitual body is that organization and functioning of our corporeality through which we come to have ways of acting in the world; it engages us in the physicality of our

worlds by establishing *how* we are in it. It, therefore, brings us into immediate relation with the world; indeed, it is the very possibility of our having a worldly orientation (*PP*, 164).

For Casey, habitual body memory (that which constitutes the habitual body) is “not just something we merely have; it is something we *are*: that constitutes us as we exist humanly in the world” (*Remembering*, 163). The habitual body is that which makes acting within a world possible because it “establishes just *how* we are in the world” and constitutes our experiences (149). Through habitual action, I know how to (i.e., am able to) stand, move, direct my sensory attention, make sense of spatial and temporal organization, speak, etc. This know-how is thoroughly of the body in that it is distinct from a second order reflection upon, say, how and why we move or speak as we do.

Habits constitute our habitual body as “the vehicle of being in the world” such that being embodied allows us “to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them” (94). They are in many ways the building blocks of our habitual body, which is a part of the lived body. The lived body is comprised, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, of “two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at this moment” (*PP*, 95). And, habits are “manipulatory movements which have disappeared from the second” (95). In other words, habits provide those ways of being in the body that are no longer visible to us in our body “at this moment.”

Even as habits ultimately constitute our habituality, it is important to note that a *habitude* is much more substantial than a habit. It is more akin to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* in that a *habitude* is a style of being in the world, a disposition that comes to be out of complex relations with sociocultural, community, and family norms. Thus, it is important to remember that the habitual body is not fully constituted by, what Casey refers to as, skilled actions. Skilled

actions – e.g., knowing how to change a tire – may be the most useful and “practically valuable subset” of habitual actions. However, our habitual being also includes “slouching in a certain way, gesturing excessively when speaking, drooling unselfconsciously, or grimacing at insects. The list could go on almost indefinitely: until, finally, one's entire personal being, one's character or style, would be reached” (282). That is, the habitual body is not merely made up of highly valuable know-how (distinct habits) but includes all of our ways of being in the world (our styles of bodily being). Thus, to be habitual is to be, as Casey says, “oriented in a given situation by having become familiar with its particular structure” such that all our actions “contribute to habituation as knowing-your-way-around-somewhere” (283).

Let's consider an example of habitual being in the world. I walk into the coffee shop and move toward the counter to purchase a latte. As I walked into the coffee shop (where I now find myself writing) I was able to perform the actions of opening the door, moving inside, and looking about for a free seat without actively contemplating any of these activities. My body understands how to be efficacious in this space – i.e., how to get me to a spot from which I can begin writing – not only because I have frequented this shop throughout my graduate program, but further because I was raised in social settings wherein commercial spaces share basic structural principles (four walls, a ceiling, entry points, outward opening doors), social norms require that one most often sits where no others are currently sitting, and so forth. My actions in this space are mimetic in that it is through watching and imitating others that I come to understand how to function in this space; my actions are repetitive because I perform them on a semi-daily basis (I come to this shop about three times a week), as well as because I enter into similarly structured spaces multiple times per day. Given my embodied familiarity with walking, this particular coffee shop, the general way in which shops are arranged in the United States, etc.,



I do not need to think about how I am moving in order to do so. Indeed, were I to actively take up consideration of my movements, my habitual body would cease to keep me at ease in the world, i.e., it is only when habits and habituality (or, having a style of being) recede from mental awareness that they open up our worlds.

Of note today, is that my walking into and through the coffee shop was troubled by the fact that it is snowy out, the floor was slippery in parts, and that I am wearing slightly heeled boots. These facts demanded I be careful about the movement of my legs and placement of my feet so as not to slip and fall. This is not to say that my walking was not habitual – indeed I have walked under such circumstances many times before having grown up in Michigan. Instead, we should notice that the repetition of this type of walking is far less frequent for me, and that it is so because I am less likely to need to watch my steps so carefully. Given that I less frequently walk in the mode of being-careful-not-to-fall, my pace was considerably slowed. In having to direct my attention toward not-falling, I inhibit the more-so habitual style of simply walking in the world. Even with this inhibition of my steps, it is still the case that my habitual body enables movement forward in time. My past experiences, themselves a complex result of various mimetic and repetitive actions, give rise to my present actions, which make possible my future actions (e.g., the writing of these words). My project – the completion of my dissertation proposal – is made possible because of the order and ease engendered by habitual sedimentation. In order to better understand how the repetition and sedimentation of my habits and habitudes engenders new action (e.g., the writing of my dissertation), it is useful to explain the process of sedimentation.

### ***Habitual Sedimentation and Becoming New: Repetition and Spontaneity***

Habitual sedimentation is, most basically, the process through which we come to have our ways of being in the world “on tap” – ready to use in an instant. It is the process through which new activities become part of the stockpile of behaviors that we can employ without explicit mental reflection. Sedimentation is the concept used to express how it is that I come to have “knowledge in the hands.” For example, at twelve I wanted to know how to riffle shuffle cards. I spent about a month practicing the proper technique for getting the cards to lay atop each other in such a way that I could finish my shuffle with what is called the bridge technique. As I repeated and repeated these techniques, I developed a bodily know-how – the process of shuffling sedimented itself in my habitual body via my repetitions such that today I can pick up a deck of cards and riffle shuffle them without having to think at all about the procedure for doing so. Indeed, I can shuffle as I chat with friends about how I plan to beat them in a game of euchre. My body comes to know how to shuffle through repetition, which imbues my hands with this knowledge and frees me up to accomplish other, often new, tasks.

That habits sediment is of concern for two central reasons. The first being that sedimentation is a necessary feature of being in the world: without the actions of the habitual body, there is no world within which we can act. Such actions provide the structure (i.e., the positioning of the body, the abilities to move, perceive, and interact in space, and so forth) of our world. It is in this sense that it can be said that the habitual body makes possible our being otherwise because they bring us into a world in which we can then act non-habitually. Secondly, sedimentation is an important concern because those ways of being in the world that have sedimented into our habitual body are highly resistant to change. In other words, our habits engender and inhibit our acting differently in the world.

Habituality is a state of being in the world that, while open to radical differences among individuals in content, is generally descriptive of most humans in terms of its structure. In short, most humans are habitual beings.<sup>17</sup> While habituality is a necessary piece of being human, our particular habitual being – our individual bodily know-how and styles of being in the world – is acquired and not given to us. From birth we learn how to hold our bodies, direct our attention and appendages, how to address others and objects, how to move, and so forth. We learn these ways of being from observing others, as well as from more explicit teachings from our parents, extended families, communities, media, etc. These early teachings establish a basic relationality – i.e., the very possibility of being in relation with the world and others – and are necessary for the development from infancy to adulthood. This is not to suggest that we acquire all of our habits in childhood, although we can note that many of our most fundamental habitual acquirements (e.g., how we move, speak, and basically relate) are deeply conditioned by this period of development. What we learn in our infancy shapes, in powerful ways, how we will perform these activities throughout our lives.<sup>18</sup> Given how early and often oppressive gender norms are passed on to us, and given the ways in which early teachings shape our future relations

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<sup>17</sup> The question of the necessity of being habitual for being human is well beyond the scope of my concerns. However, it is true that my work treats habituality as a central piece of human existence for those humans capable of doing things otherwise – while acknowledging there are humans for whom the set of possible actions is so limited as to make my remarks less than valuable for thinking about the status of individuals in vegetative states, for example.

<sup>18</sup> As Casey notes, “the early stages in the creation of anything habitual – whether it be character or virtue, or body memories themselves – are definitive for establishing the form that will be continually re-enacted” (150). While I believe Casey might overstate the case in identifying the early stages as definitive, he is right to point out the ways in which early teachings construct habits that are highly resistant to change, which gives us pause given that what most western women are exposed to as infants, children, and teenagers concerning gender norms is far from radical.

to these norms, we should not be surprised that there are so many difficulties in transforming our relations to these norms.

Thinking about habitual being is important for feminists given that it constitutes that part of human existence wherein past experiences manifest in action without the need of conscious or reflective awareness as to what or how we are acting. The habitual body allows us to act in and of the world by bringing our past to life in action and not thought. This engagement is primarily and for the most part non-cognitive, which is to say the habitual body most effectively engages us in the world when we are not considering its actions.<sup>19</sup> These actions structure the background of our experiences such that one need not think about those actions that situate her in space. Casey describes being habitual as having “deeply ingrained” ways of being that do not depend upon mental recall (163). Indeed, he notes, in our ordinary experience, explicit mental recall could “become intrusive and disorienting – whereas, precisely as marginal, [the habitual body] is the immediate basis for all becoming-oriented in the world as well as for all stabilization there” (164). In other words, sedimentation often functions to keep us unaware of how we are in the world, which inhibits our transformative possibilities. This tension between the ease of being in the world provided by habits and habitudes and the difficulty of doing things otherwise given our habits and habitudes is a central concern for my work.

While our ways of being often arise from explicit training that engages our reflective capacities (i.e., in time we come to think about the steps of a process in order to embody this

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<sup>19</sup> Casey helps to clarify this quality of the habitual body through a discussion of the peripheral quality of habits: “Body memories tend to situate themselves on the periphery of our lives so as not to preoccupy us in the present. By ‘periphery’ I do not mean to imply that such memories are of peripheral importance; on the contrary, they are of quite central significance: we could not be who we are, nor do what we do, without them. ... A body memory works most forcefully and thoroughly when, rather than dominating, it recedes from the clamor of the present” (163).

process), it would be erroneous to confuse the acquisition of a habit with its performance. In other words, the acquisition of habit can be a highly reflective and consciousness-dependent activity but the performance of a habit (i.e., our being habitual) is most assuredly not reflective. Before explaining this more carefully, let us consider a representative example. When I was learning how to drive a car, not only did I need to read and attend courses wherein I learned basic automotive knowledge and the rules of the road, I additionally had to direct my mind to how and where to place my hands and feet, how to adjust the mirrors, and so forth. In learning how to drive I had to explicitly think about driving and had to acquire knowledge toward this end (of course, both these tasks were themselves made possible by a host of other habitual acts). Over time, however, this knowledge became more and more a part of my habitual body. No longer did I need to think about ‘where to place my hands’, ‘how to merge’, or so forth. Instead, this knowledge became a part of my bodily know-how, i.e., I was capable of driving a car. And, this ability is most pronounced the less I contemplate the steps of driving.

Though habits often require conscious awareness in their acquisition, continued awareness is mostly disruptive to their performance. When I am considering why and how I do a certain activity, I lose the ability to have that same activity flow from my body. For example, when I am thinking about how to drive a car, I cannot simultaneously be habitually engaged in driving a car. If I attempt to both reflect upon and drive the car, my performance becomes choppy and disjointed and I become clumsy in relation to the gears, the break, and so forth. I am best able to drive a car (now that I have acquired the habit) when I am not thinking about how to drive a car.

However, this lack of reflection should not lead us to conclude that the habitual body is separable from all mental functions. Even as the habitual is contrasted with an active awareness

of what one is doing in the world, our habitual being is not purely physical. For one thing, the bodily act of the habitual body is mental in that it is a part of our perceptual encounters with the world (as Merleau-Ponty notes, the habitual body brings motor and perceptual activities together). It enables our thinking by bringing us into the world and facilitating future action and it calls upon mental apparatuses in order to exist (i.e., we must at some point learn the actions that are now a part of our habitual reserves). For another, certain habits and habitudes allow us the space – or bring us into a place from which – reflection is possible. The example of my walking into the coffee shop is useful here; through habitual activity I came into a space within which I can write about the role of habits in our transformative possibilities. Moreover, there is no firm line dividing body and mind or habits and reflection from interaction. This is important because it is often the case that the disruption of habitual sedimentation (a key piece of the possibility of transformation) requires reflection. For example, the disruption of the given quality of our ways of being in the world can depend upon our having imagined things being otherwise than they are. Given this, it would be a mistake to think that habits and habitudes are prohibitive of newness and differences in our ways of being in the world because the former can be distinct from mental practices that are more often associated with newness and creativity (e.g., the imagination – whose relation to habits and habitudes is deserving of future study).

Sedimentation does not prevent us from acquiring new ways of being in the world (becoming new); indeed, were we not to have habits and habitudes we would not be in the world in the phenomenological sense. Even as we are governed by habitual action, this establishes the space within which we can have agency. Habituating (which Casey distinguished from the fact of having a routine, a concept more suggestive of inertia) is the inhabiting of the world; it is one's "active insertion into space and time" (284). To inhabit the world is to tow a line between

what Casey calls the “implied passivity of enclosure” (i.e., that our actions are limited by the external realities of space and time) and “the activity of getting to know our way around” (i.e., having the ability to act in the world) (284-5). Through our habits, we inhabit the world of space and time, which enable and constrict our action, which engender and complicate our agency.

Thus, habitual sedimentation is a condition of the possibility of our ability to become new. As Casey discusses below, sedimentation is an “active precipitation” of the past. The past is not dead in us, nor are we simply miming that which has come before:

Only thus too can we develop those patterns of behavior that identify us as continuous persons over time and make meaning possible in our lives. All of this happens inasmuch as in sedimentation - as in habit memory for Bergson - the past is fully immanent in the present, "dovetailed" into it (cf. PP, 140). But the past is not immanent there as an inert mass of accumulated items. The process of sedimentation is ever at work: intentional threads go back and forth between the body and its everchanging phases, which are continually reanimated by current experience (cf. PP, 130). If sedimentation is to be conceived as a precipitation of the past into the present, it is an active precipitation actively maintained (284).

The process of sedimentation provides us with a sense of the temporal structure of habituality, i.e., how it is that habits relate us to the past, present, and future; because of sedimentation the past lives on through our body's present actions. This is to say that the past returns through habits – past actions rise up again as we repeat that which we have learned or acquired (150). This active immanence means that even as we make differences in the world (e.g., act), we stay the same – this is what Casey calls the habitual body's ability to maintain internal sameness in the face of external difference (152). This ability is related to the possibility of becoming new, particularly in that as one becomes new she also remains the same (she is the same person although different in regards to some selection of her ways of being in the world).

Again, then, adopting a habit is not the same as perfectly repeating (or miming) those ways of being in the world that our teachers have. There are degrees to which one's ways of

beings can deviate from what was taught, both in terms of differing from the teacher or teachers, as well as differing from our earlier ways of having taken up a habit. On one end of the spectrum is an individual who almost perfectly mimes what was taught while on the other is an individual whose basic behaviors are so distinct from the norm as to make them unknowable, abject, or threatening (as Butler discusses throughout *Undoing Gender* and *Bodies that Matter*). Being habitual is not comprehensively adopting another person's or an entire society's ways of being in the world. There is great variation in the relation between what one has learned and how they manifest these acquisitions in their bodily action. The core, here, is that one comes to have ways of being in the world – they are not given at birth – and that these ways of being are habitual rather than uniquely generated. The value in discussing the variations between initial sources of habitual acquisition (the way our “teachers” perform a habit) and one's habitual activity is that it demonstrates that difference or distinctness is constitutive of habits from the very beginning.

This brings us to the complex relationship between regularity (or repetition) and spontaneity (or newness) as they manifest in the habitual body. In his article, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty” (1984), Casey characterizes the habitual body as cumulative, gradual, and dependent upon repetition (280). And, in *Remembering*, he claims that the habitual body “represents the continuing triumph of the early-established: not just its survival but its active continuance at later stages” and that its “thorough establishment will help to guarantee its ongoing power” (150). Habitual actions gain their effectiveness – their ability to orient us in the world – given the degree to which the past has sedimented in our bodies. The more established our habits become, the more effective they are as ways of being in the world. Casey further remarks that the repetition of habitual action “constitute[s] us as reliable actors within the world” (150). Habits allow us to be consistent and to stay the same; they make us knowable to others



and ourselves and grant us ease in the world. As repetition sediments into habituality, we come to have styles of being that allow us to effectively and predictably act in the world.<sup>20</sup> From these comments, we see that one of the most salient characteristics of the habitual body is its repetitive nature. Habits trade in repetitive action; they bring the past into life by acting out that which we've acquired over time.

However, Casey is also careful to note that habitual actions “establish a base of assurance and ease *upon which more complicated, or more spontaneous, activities can freely arise*” (151, emphasis added). Because habits are regular and predictable, they provide us with a sense of being-at-home in the world, a “felt familiarity” or ease, from which spontaneity and transformation becomes possible (150-2). That is, habitual actions establish a sense of being at home in the world, which allows us to initiate new actions (150-4). Habits allow us to get about the world without having to reflect upon this knowledge (i.e., we have knowledge in the body, on-tap and ready to use) (149). But they also allow us to act in new or non-habituated styles because they grant us this ease; we feel comfortable and capable, thus, we are often willing to encounter new spaces and experiences with a sense that we know what we are doing even though we've never been there (or done that) before. Thus, sedimentation is not simply the ability to

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<sup>20</sup> Through repetition and its byproduct, sedimentation, habits give us the know-how to act in the world. This helps to explain Casey's definition of habitual body memory as “an active immanence of the past in the body that informs present bodily actions in an efficacious, orienting, and regular manner” (*Remembering*, 149). The habitual body is an “active immanence of the past” in that through the habitual body the past is reenacted in the present. This reenactment of the past “informs present bodily actions” in that the repetition of habits gives us ways of doing things in the world. And, habitual action is “efficacious, orienting, and regular” given that such ways of being in the world bring about changes in the world while maintaining a certain sameness (they are effective and predictable ways of acting).

repeat that which one has learned in the past because the ease it grants engenders spontaneous action.

In his article, “‘Inhabiting’ in the *Phenomenology of Perception*,” Scott Weiner helps to clarify this point by returning to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that sedimentation and spontaneity are the “two stages of the world-structure” (344). Weiner reminds us that simply because sedimentation does not require us to reflect upon our actions (in order to act), this does not mean that sedimented habits are inert, non-changing, or forever divorced from awareness. Rather, habitual actions allow for spontaneous action, which is a condition of the possibility of new action (344). Here, it is important to recall that the newness of becoming new is not radically new in the sense of never having come before.<sup>21</sup>

Weiner remarks: “it is this relationship between sedimentation and spontaneity, which we may call the dovetailing of renewal and newness, that allows Merleau-Ponty to give the habitual aspect of being-in-the-world a positive meaning” (344). By ‘positive meaning’, he is alluding to the tendency to interpret sedimentation and habituation as precluding the possibility of transformation, as negative aspects of our transformative possibilities (e.g., both Grosz and Braidotti adopt such a negative view on habituality). His argument, along with my own, is that

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<sup>21</sup> While becoming new does not refer to the utterly new, it is valuable to note that for Casey, there is such a possibility of the utterly new. In his text, “Imagination and Repetition,” he discusses two ways of understanding newness: as temporal individuation and as the “active re-creation of possibilities” (254). The first understanding of newness, i.e., as that which is distinct given its temporal distinctness, is less useful than the second. This being because the second understanding allows us to think about the imagination as a source of the utterly new. He notes: the imagination allows one to make “the mind a witness to genuinely *new* aspects or types of experience, to which nothing actual or historical has to correspond” (235). Interestingly, such newness calls for repetition (e.g., Casey remarks it is the “ephemerality of imaginings” that call for repetition, 255). Here, his discussion of newness helps us to see that repetition is not opposed to newness.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the habitual body allows us to see how repetition produces originality – how our being habitual is a central piece of our freedom and ability to transform.

The habitual body is characterized by a complex relation between regularity (sameness) and spontaneity (newness). Indeed, Casey claims that sedimentation is the “necessary compliment of spontaneity” (“Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” 284).

Furthermore, he argues that “an element of agency is at work” even in those moments most constituted by sedimentation (285). In other words, habituality is connected up with agency (e.g., our ways of being do not simply mime what we've learned, they allow for spontaneous action, they can be affected by imaginings and reflection, and they can provide us with enough security or know-how such that we are willing and able to alter other ways of being in the world).

Becoming new refers to the disruption of sedimented ways of being in the world. One becomes new in relation to habits and habitudes – not by transforming all of her ways of being in the world or by acting in ways that are utterly or radically new. It is through the disruption of our sedimented ways of being – disruptions that are variously achieved through spontaneous action, reflection upon one's ways of being, imaging things otherwise, repetition of a habit that differs significantly enough from a prior repetition to bring about something distinct, and so forth – that we can acquire the possibility of becoming new.

Both our habituality and external realities limit the possibilities of free action. As Merleau-Ponty remarks in his discussion of freedom in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, our location in the social world circumscribes our freedom: “I am situated in a social environment, and my freedom, though it may have the power to commit me elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantaneously into what I decide to be ... my decision draws together a spontaneous meaning of my life which it may confirm or repudiate, but not annul” (520). The

concept of becoming new that I have been working with is not at odds with his claim that the social environment limits the scope of our freedom. Given my focus upon the individual's possibility of doing things otherwise, I have not detailed in this work the ways in which the social environment structures our possibilities. Rather, my interest has been to describe how the habitual body contributes to and constricts our ability to do things differently. However, I take this point about the social environment to be foundational to most all, and certainly my own, feminist theorizing.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Merleau-Ponty also is clear that the social environment does not foreclose the possibility of agency: "the world is already constituted, but also never completed constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities" (527). In fact, from his phenomenological perspective, we are "at once" acted upon and open to possibility, which is why he criticizes both determinist accounts of freedom as well as those based upon absolute choice (527).

Equally important are Merleau-Ponty's remarks about the necessity of commitment and the value of existential relationships (528-9). The possibility of becoming new, even as it is in

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<sup>22</sup> I am under no illusion that individuals possess the power to instantaneously transform their lives, nor do I mean to suggest that becoming new is a magical trick of radically altering one's situation. Individuals do not have the power to eliminate oppression from their lives. We do, however, often enough have the power to disrupt certain ways of our being in the world that cause us to suffer (though this power is far from total and brings with it associated difficulties, which I discuss below). For example, one of the main reasons I consider eating disorders in the following chapter pertains to the suffering that such ways of being in the world both produce and exhibit/reflect. Eating disorders come to exist given particular social environments (though it is important to note that the stereotypical account of the well-off white girl with anorexia does not at all capture the reality of the various social environments at play in eating disorders). And, one's ability to transform her eating practices is indeed circumscribed by her social environment (this is particularly evident when we consider various treatment center practices). Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that the suffering associated with eating disorders can be transformed as individuals come into awareness of their practices (i.e., as they disrupt the sediment surrounding these practices) and their meanings (see Chapter 4).

realm of personal transformation (which, to recall, is meant to distinguish broad social changes from changes in individuals' ways of being), requires an investment in the world. We do not disrupt habitual sedimentation *ex nihilo*, rather disruption becomes possible within a world (e.g., through books, conversations, reflections, psychoanalysis). He expands on this by noting that even coming to awareness (a particularly fruitful form of disruption) requires a new commitment to make it "real" (529). What we can take from Merleau-Ponty's reflections on freedom is that freedom is "embodied action in the world" that is conditioned or relative to one's social environment (*Understanding Phenomenology*, 236-8).<sup>23</sup>

The authors of *Understanding Phenomenology* describe Merleau-Ponty's relation to the topic of freedom in terms of a description of being in the world. They remark: he "would be concerned to describe, for example, the life of a person who seemingly was not able to change; and through this description one would see how this person lives, how difficult it is for them to change, how nevertheless they have some choices, and how even the most deeply rooted habitual patterns express some basic sense of freedom" (259). I am similarly interested in describing these circumstances of freedom, a task I take up most explicitly in Chapter 4. The question is not are we determined or are we free, rather there are various questions about how certain ways of being in the world are open and closed to transformation (to becoming new), as well as how feminist theorists who consider personal transformation can account for these openings and closings of possibility.

In summary, habituality brings us into the world and opens it up for us; it is a regularity that engenders the ability to handle the newness that the constancy of change provides, as well as

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<sup>23</sup> Hammond, Michael, Jane Howarth, and Russel Keat. 1991. *Understanding Phenomenology*. Basil Blackwell, Inc.

the disruption of other ways of being that allow us to become new. Merleau-Ponty writes, “it is by giving up part of his spontaneity by becoming involved in the world through stable organs and pre-established circuits that man can acquire the mental and practical space which will theoretically free him from his environment and allow him to *see* it” (87). As discussed above in relation to reflection and imagining, coming to see the environment is a crucial piece of the disruption of habits and habitudes and, therefore, a crucial piece of our becoming new. In order to transform, in the sense with which I am concerned, we need to be able to both shake off the given quality of some of our ways of being and enact new behaviors that more so align with our desires. However, this should not be read as a claim that it is either easy to shake off the given quality or to act differently in the world. The disruption of habits and the enacting of new ways of being in the world (remembering that the new ways of being I’m interested in are not radically new but rather new in relation to one’s current habits) are particularly troubled by the anxiety that arises when one tries to do things differently. Thus, below I take up the issue of the role that bodily anxiety plays in relation to the possibilities of becoming new.

### ***Habitual Disruption: Newness and Anxiety***

As we have seen, our habitudes allow us to move about the world with ease; however, they also limit or inhibit our movements, newness, and transformation. In the process of adopting habitudes and habits the history of their acquisition fades as does our flexibility (as to the *in what way* we perform an action) and awareness (of, at times, the fact that we even have a certain habitude or habit). When we adopt ways of being in the world they sediment into our bodies such that one might mistake them for a second nature. Characteristic of habitual sedimentation, then, is its tendency toward depersonalization and generalization (cf. *PP*, 137, 142). Whereas we can

recall an event in an instant and often without intent, through sedimentation the origins of habits and habitudes get buried and, thus, they become less personal over time. Though we often have access to the origin of a recollection – indeed, to recall is frequently to identify the time and place of the event in question – this is less true of habitual memory.<sup>24</sup> For example, while I can recall when I first began to smoke (who I was with, my age, where I was, etc.), when I am engaged in the act of smoking my body remembers how to do so without awareness of when, where, or how I learned to smoke. I identify this as a problem because sedimentation, therefore, blocks our ability to actively contemplate why or how we've come to have this habit, as well as to think of doing things differently. In addition to understanding how habits bring us into the world, we must also consider the ways in which our habits and habitudes close off the world by inhibiting other ways of being as well as reflection upon the meanings and origins of our habits.

Significant to sedimentation is the role of forgetting. Actions are sedimented into habits when I forget them as steps in a process and take them up as an activity (e.g., shuffling). So, I employ habits with ease when the steps have sedimented into an aptitude. I no longer actively remember the steps needed to properly riffle shuffle because I am adept at shuffling. As Casey has shown, when I am engaged in active remembering of the steps, I am not going to be able to shuffle as easily. If I break a habitual process back into the particular steps that constitute it, it is as if I am back in the position of acquiring the habit.

As habits become sedimented and reified they further entrench social norms making transformation appear impossible. We forget that things can be done differently and we forget how we came to do things the way we do. For example, the ease of habitual action leads us to

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<sup>24</sup> This comes from Casey's *Remembering*, indeed it is arguably one of his central claims that habitual body memory is distinct from recollective memory given the ways the former recedes from mental recall the more it enables worldly action.

experience our styles of being as natural and given. The forgetting entailed in being habitual is even more important when we consider gender identity. In order to be gendered, I must bodily engage some set of gender norms as if they were expressive of what is true or natural of me. If I reflect upon these norms or the particular history through which I came to acquire habits that arise from these norms, I cannot be simultaneously habitually engaged with them. For example, if I have adopted the feminine norms of smiling and positioning my body so as to make those around me feel comfortable and welcome in my presence, I will experience this style of being in the world as if it is reflective of my authentic or natural identity. Furthermore, if I am in the world in this style of making-others-comfortable, I cannot simultaneously reflect upon where I learned to be this way, how it functions to reproduce disturbing social norms about women, nor how such a style of being might inhibit my professional advancement.

To adopt this style of being in the world is to forget its origins and to inhibit my consideration of whether it is an effective way of acting or whether I would prefer to do things otherwise. If I were to consider these factors, I would lose much of the ease associated with having this way of being in the world. In short, consideration of these factors is disruptive to my being in the world. I become anxious as I find myself within a world wherein I am lacking a way of being. This is not to suggest that I am better off continuing to orient and move my body in order to make others comfortable. Rather, the point is that once I disrupt my style of being gendered, I disrupt my worldly relation and, therefore, feel ill at ease.

Merleau-Ponty remarks, “history is neither a perpetual novelty, nor a perpetual repetition, but the *unique* movement which creates stable forms and breaks them up” (*PP*, 101). While I discussed above the dialectic relation between sedimentation and spontaneity, the value of this remark here is that it directs us to thinking about the breaking up – or disruption – of habitual



sedimentation. Through disruption we upset that which has sedimented into habits, creating new possibilities for our ways of being in the world. However, when we “take fate in our hands” through reflection upon our ways of being, when we attempt to disrupt sedimentation, we are faced with what Merleau-Ponty calls a “violent act” (*PP*, xxiii). In other words, one does not achieve the disruption of habitual sedimentation without encountering significant difficulties.

The bodily anxiety that arises when we attempt to disrupt our habits tends toward our tacit acceptance of how things are, as well as our explicit resistance to doing things differently. Grosz’s work on disruption and anxiety is useful for thinking about these problems – even as her thoughts about habits are at odds with the phenomenological account.<sup>25</sup> Through an analysis of the habitual components of being in the world, including the affective experiences of ease and anxiety that habits bring, we can adapt Grosz’s open-ended, ambiguous, and highly theoretical frame of the politics of becoming into a more concrete account of feminist transformation.

Throughout her more recent work, she discusses the role of anxiety in ordering our experience of the new. As discussed in the concluding remarks to chapter 1, she takes up the issue of how newness gives rise to certain fears and anxieties associated with loss of control. Her work on newness and the fear it engenders (what she identifies as a fear of the uncontrollable in

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<sup>25</sup> Grosz is not the only feminist to take up the issues of anxiety and transformation. Indeed, throughout her work, most particularly in *Undoing Gender*, Butler attends to the anxieties of doing things differently. For example, she asks, “what might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge [of being open to differences], to feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing ... to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?” (35). Later, she notes, “the desire to foreclose an open future can be a strong one, threatening one with loss, loss of a sense of certainty about how things are (and must be). It is important, however, not to underestimate the force of the desire to foreclose futurity and the political potential of anxiety” (180). While I find her remarks extremely productive for my thinking about habits and anxiety, Grosz has been more valuable to me in this regard given her more sustained analysis of the fear of the new.

the new) helps to establish one of the major problems associated with becoming new. For example, in *The Nick of Time*, Grosz highlights the difficulties of being open to newness:

We can think [of time] only when we are jarred out of our immersion in its continuity, when something untimely disrupts our expectations. It is almost as if it overwhelms us with its pervasive force to such an extent that we cannot bear to think it, we prefer that it evaporates into what we can comprehend or more directly control. ... We can think it only in passing moments, through ruptures, nicks, cuts, in instances of dislocation, though it contains no moments or ruptures and has no being or presence, functioning only as continuous becoming. It is to the exploration of those nicks, disruptions or upheavals – events that disrupt our immersion in and provoke our conceptualization of temporal continuity, events that also make up the unpredictable emergences of our material universe – that this book is directed (5).

In this passage, she attunes us to the highly disruptive nature of transformation – that change is not easily won. Our ability to think about the possibilities of becoming new and our ability to do things differently in the world are both premised upon the jarring nature of the disruption each entails. That is, one cannot avoid the anxiety – the jarring quality – that arises when we disrupt sedimented ways of being, given that it is the very sedimentation of ways of being that provides us with ease (in the form of feeling at-home). The disruption of sedimentation holds the greatest possibility for opening up future possibilities because such disruption lets us see that things are a certain way and that they could be otherwise. More accurately, sedimentation is disrupted as we see that things are a certain way and could be otherwise. We disrupt the given quality of our habits and the forgetting that sedimentation entails. While this is equally disruptive to our ease of being in the world (i.e., it shakes up our know-how), the bodily anxiety that it produces is a necessary part of transformation. When we come to terms with the unavoidability of this anxiety, we can direct our efforts toward the consideration and implementation of better ways of facilitating individuals through this anxiety.

Grosz identifies a tension between the desire for progress and newness and the fear that progress engenders. Rather than offering a resolution for this tension, I suggest that we must learn to live within it, or work through it, in order to open up transformative possibilities. As I discussed above, the ease of knowing how to act in the world is the ground from which we can do something new. Furthermore, when we are better able to work through the anxiety that habitual disruption produces, habituality can allow for a transformative newness. Not only does the ease of being habitual allow us to use habits in new and spontaneous ways, the ease of habits can allow us to use some habits to disrupt others (more on this below). Our habits structure the spaces within which we can then challenge those same or other habits – if we can manage the sometimes traumatic discomfort associated with the disruption of habitual sedimentation the possibility of being otherwise can manifest as an actual change in our ways of being. It is in the liminal space that we can make use of reason, reflection, desire, etc. in an effort to do otherwise.

Transformation frequently results from and requires one's reorientation toward the world. The disruption of habitual sedimentation, namely, the disruption of a set of habits, causes anxiety because it upsets our worldly know-how. Thus, the transformation of habits entails learning to become more comfortable with and/or employ the discomfort that arises when we disrupt habits and, as theorists, this requires that we refrain from judging certain behaviors associated with gender as pathological not only because this is contrary to a politics of becoming new but also because it keeps us from responding to the more nuanced or complicated ways of doing gender that tend to get pathologized or linked up with cultural pathology (e.g., Bordo's analysis of eating disorders as discussed in chapter 4). We can identify within the concept of pathology a position on the relative value of ease and anxiety. Ease is preferable to anxiety – so much so that arguing against this position appears baseless. Indeed, on the psychological level it may well be

baseless, at the very least pointless, to disagree. However, affects are not psychological constructs – they are the bodily conditions for the possibility of psychic life (cf. Donn Welton’s, “Affectivity, Eros, and the Body”). Ease and anxiety arise first and foremost in the habitual body; these concepts characterize bodily know-how and sensation in the world. While psychological ease might be, more often than not, preferable to its counterpoint anxiety, bodily ease and anxiety are equally necessary for our spatial-temporal existence.

An understanding of sedimentation and the affective experiences associated with it allows us to make sense of the historical nature of gender habits and helps us to develop a better understanding of why it is that certain habits are more likely to take on an ahistorical or essential appearance. Feminists must continue to think about gender through our habituality in order to address the continued natural feeling granted to gender in society, as well as to disrupt feminist theoretical practices that pathologize feminine behavior. In order to consider and adopt alternative ways of being in the world, particularly ways of being gendered, we must identify both gender norms and their effects (work carried out through consciousness raising, feminist theorizing, and self-reflection), as well as the difficulties associated with shifting our bodily relations to these norms. The “given” quality or feel of gender norms must be revealed not merely as an illusion, but rather as an orientation to the world that tends toward its reproduction. In other words, it is not enough to see that gender norms are arbitrary and could be different. We must also see that their fictive givenness functions to keep things the same and requires the disruption of our bodily relations to these givens.

A politics of becoming new, as well as other approaches to thinking about feminist transformation, requires an understanding of how things have come to be and how they can be different. When we consider the ways in which new and resistant bodily action develops, we will

see that the possibility of feminist transformation is significantly associated with the habitual body. And, as I argue, for our bodies to act differently – for us to be able to resist the givens that constitute social understandings of women – we must withstand the difficulties (e.g., bodily anxiety) that arise when we disrupt our habitual ways of being gendered in the world. I take these concerns to be relevant for feminist philosophy for the following reasons: 1) gender is habitual (see chapter 3), 2) the habits associated with gender identity are often the most resistant to change – i.e., are deeply sedimented ways of being in the world, 3) given how sedimented gender habits can be it should not surprise us to see such a gap between theory and practice (roughly, a gap between how we discuss and theorize gender and how women generally relate to gender norms), 4) this gap is nonetheless concerning in terms of women's freedom to be and do otherwise than prescribed within sexist societies, and 5) feminist practice in various disciplines needs to be expanded to incorporate deeper understanding of and response to the habitual body's role in maintaining oppressive norms (e.g., eating disordered practices as discussed in chapter 4).

### ***Gendered Habits and the Uncanny: Homelessness and Timelessness in Habitual Being***

In modern Western societies, habits bring us into the world most consistently in terms of two prominent primary affects, ease and anxiety. Ease and anxiety are considered primary affects in that they establish a basis for having other affective experiences. Even as an event gives rise to, say, exhilaration, this sensation is most often premised upon or secondary to the more general feeling of ease or its lack (anxiety). These affects are prominent in that ease and anxiety tend to over-determine other affective experiences. For example, while the experience of bodily anxiety in the face of riding a zip line might give rise to exhilaration, unless my body becomes more at

ease in this task such exhilaration will be impossible (i.e., my being exhilarated is dependent upon a certain play between ease and anxiety and, therefore, it cannot outstrip either pole).

The central affective experience associated with the traditional reading of habituality and habitual sedimentation is that of ease. In this reading, once a habit or *habitude* has been acquired we are at ease when we tap into it and this ease often engenders ease in the face of new situations (e.g., habits give us ways of being in the world that are useful in multiple contexts and also let us feel comfortable enough to withstand the anxiety of trying something new). Even as such a reading allows us to consider the bodily anxiety of acquiring and disrupting habits, as well as the anxiety of radical newness, it fails to consider the ways in which habituality in and of itself causes anxiety. In this section, I argue that women's gendered habits demonstrate that simply being habitual (i.e., not only in acquiring or disrupting, but also in the "on-tap" mode of being habitual) gives rise to bodily anxiety. Habits and *habitudes* are constituted not only by the ease they provide us with but also by the anxiety they engender in us. While this is characteristic of much habitual being, gendered habits are particularly revealing of this dual quality of ease and anxiety.

Anxiety arises when our *habitudes* are disrupted, when they engage us in traumatic repetition, when they fail to function as 'expected', and, as gendered *habitudes* well illuminate, when our *habitudes* bring us into the world *as* bodily anxiety. Furthermore, ease and anxiety are not exclusive to each other; one can find herself both at-ease with her discomfort, as well as ill-at-ease with her comfort. This dual quality is important for our consideration of habitual being because it gives us a more complex understanding of the ways in which habits and *habitudes* relate us to the world and transformative possibilities within it. We need to understand how being habitual opens the world – i.e., how it is necessary for our being in the world and how it gives us

ease, which was discussed in some detail above. As well, we also need to have a clear understanding of how habits and habitudes close off the world – not only in that one way of being in the world often precludes other ways of being, and not only because the repetitive nature of habits and their relations to oppressive social norms tend to reproduce those norms, but also because certain habits function to keep us ill at ease in the world. That is, certain habits and habitudes bring us into the world in the state of bodily anxiety; such habits, therefore, simultaneous engender ease and anxiety.

We can come to understand that anxiety is a basic affective experience of the habitual body when we acknowledge that many western women are both at-home (at ease) and not-at-home (anxious) in their habitual relations to gender norms. A great deal of what it means to be a woman in the contemporary western world is to be ill at ease with one's habituality. This is not to say that women do not get about their worlds with ease, of course they do. But part of what it means to get around the world with ease as a woman is to live anxiously, to never quite feel at home. For example, we can consider those whose gendered habits stray "too far" from social norms. Butler consistently reminds us of the suffering and anxiety that arise when one acts in ways that are deemed abject, abnormal, and pathological. In these cases, the ease produced through habitual activity is disturbed by the bodily anxiety of having habits that are socially marginalized. However, this dual relationship between ease and anxiety is not only present in the lives of those individuals whose habits radically challenge gendered norms. Here, we can consider Young's "Throwing Like a Girl," wherein she makes a strong case for western women's inhibited embodiment.<sup>26</sup> She argues that even as women's bodily habits open up the world, they do so in a highly limited way given that these habits are produced by oppressive

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<sup>26</sup> Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

gender norms. And while Young is focused upon the fact that women are not raised to “summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing,” I believe it is useful to consider these limitations as productive of a bodily anxiety (33). In other words, the limitations inculcated by norms of feminine movement block up the body such that as one is acting habitually, and therefore with ease, she is simultaneously encountering the tension of inhibited movement. Her “three modalities of feminine motility” – namely, ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity – can be well described as forms or manifestations of the bodily anxiety of enacting feminine norms of movement (35). When one “throws like a girl,” she is simultaneously at home given her relationship to traditional gender norms and not at home given the limitations such norms place on her movement.<sup>27</sup>

In their writings, Braidotti and Grosz characterize becoming as nomadic and nonlinear human activity. One becomes as her body moves through space and time. The flexibility of one’s orientation toward space and time (e.g., the openness to transforming one’s habits) constitutes her possibilities of becoming new. And, while Braidotti’s nomad and Grosz’s time traveler are extreme in their relations to space and time, this imagery communicates a connection between homelessness and timelessness that is central for an understanding of how things could become new.

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<sup>27</sup> While some have interpreted Young to be, therefore, arguing that there is a free and uninhibited motility underneath these gender norms, I would argue that a careful reading of her text, along with an understanding of her relation to Merleau-Ponty’s work on the body rejects such an interpretation. It is not that there is an uninhibited form of embodiment that gender oppression limits. Rather, her position is that there are freer ways of being embodied that we can identify in men’s movement, which allow us to challenge the norms that prevent women’s movements from being as free. Thus, the tension arises given that other ways of moving, which are more conducive to the completion of certain tasks exist, but women are prohibited from so moving. Thus, her “I-can” is simultaneously an “I-cannot.”



To be at home and to be timely are both states conditioned by what we might call “the given.” We are at home and of our time when our actions flow from our bodies in such a way as to re-establish the natural feel of our reality, as well as the given quality of social norms. These are states wherein things feel the same and are recognizable, wherein we have bodily know-how and, as I will discuss below, wherein the habitual body manifests itself the most seamlessly. The more at home and timely one is with social norms, the less these norms arise as problems requiring reflection and resistance. In this context, to be homeless or timeless is to be in a more explicit and reflective relation to the arbitrary or non-given quality of experience, e.g., to become aware of the genealogy of a family practice such that it is no longer understood as ‘just how we do things’, to historicize larger social and political trends, or to look toward the future as the opening up of possibility.

Homelessness and timelessness are important concepts for feminists writing about transformation because we can use them to describe resistant change as a possibility that arises out of the body’s relation to the social norms governing identity. For example, to be at home with norms about gender identity is to implicitly accept their truth. So, a woman at home with these norms will live them as truth rather than as norms, which is to say that she will not investigate their historical genesis, reflect upon how and why things could and should be otherwise, nor direct her actions toward overcoming the hold such norms have on our broad understandings of men and women, as well as how they shape her own actions and understandings. Of course, it is rarely (if ever) the case that individuals accept or, better, live all gendered norms as truth; there is much more nuance in our relations to these norms. However, even as individuals reject particular gendered norms, untold others construct and constrict their possibilities of being otherwise.

Despite the relations between reflection and being at-home and in-time, it is indeed the case that one can be homeless and timeless even as the relations between her habits and social norms remain in the background. In other words, being homeless and timeless is not conditioned upon one's having a reflective stance on her habits and habitudes. In such moments, one tends to be both in and out of space and time – that is, she is both at ease and anxious in the world. In order to better understand this seemingly paradoxical claim, we can turn to Freud's discussion of the uncanny to clarify how it is possible for one to simultaneously experience ease and anxiety.

In his text on the uncanny, Freud describes this concept as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220).<sup>28</sup> Although the uncanny had traditionally been associated with the surprising and unexpected, Freud's text argues that it is, contrarily, that with which we are most familiar – though consciously unaware of – that arouses in us the uncanny feeling. I might mention that while the uncanny feeling is not identical to the bodily anxiety I've been discussing, there are strong similarities. Both are bodily experiences often of disgust, uncertainty, and fear that come into being in relation to disruption (of the repressed for Freud and of habitual sediment for my purposes). As well, and more so related to this section, these affects are aroused by a disruption that is not quite complete – for Freud, were the repressed utterly disrupted, one would no longer feel uncanny in the face of that which had initially aroused the sensation. In terms of habitual sedimentation, were one to have their habit more thoroughly upended, we would be dealing with the anxiety of habitual disruption (and not that of the anxiety of being habitual).

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<sup>28</sup> Freud, Sigmund. “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Volume XVII), James Strachey (trans. & ed.). The Hogarth Press Limited, London, 1955.

Here, it is helpful to explore more carefully Freud's thoughts on the uncanny. In order to support his criticism of the view that it is the novel and unpredictable that leads to the uncanny feeling, he embarks on a lengthy analysis of the etymology of the German word '*heimlich*'. Along the way, Freud discovers an interesting relation between the two central meanings of this word – interesting in that the two meanings appear to contradict each other. The first meaning is that which belongs to the home, is “familiar, tame, intimate, and friendly” (223). The second meaning is that which is “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others” (223). He demonstrates how these two meanings conflict each other – the first entails comfort and familiarity while the second suggests a thing that is secret and untrustworthy. Freud also notes that in adding '*un*' to create the word '*unheimlich*' (that which is most often translated in English as 'uncanny'), one only opposes the first meaning and not the second (225). As Freud remarks, then, “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (226). I would argue there is a similar relation between ease and anxiety (not linguistic, of course, but conceptually). That which makes us feel most at home is often the most capable of producing anxiety – for example, one can have the feeling of being in a loop or experience a loss of meaning when repeating that which is most familiar).

Freud's analysis helps to explain the roles of infantile learning, habitual sedimentation and repetition, and conflict function to keep one feeling both at home and not at home. I note that gendered habits are particularly demonstrative of the dual ease/anxiety of being habitual because, in western patriarchal culture, gender habits are inculcated at a very young age; they are still quite rigid (leading to a circumscribed set of potential ways of being in the world); they often conflict with other social norms in terms of, say, kindness, assertion, or individuality; and so

forth. It's as if we have a sense that are gendered styles of being are produced (and not natural), but that we cannot tolerate the anxiety of fully disrupting them to consider more explicitly how we want to be in the world (keeping in mind that I am not suggesting it is even possible for one to "in one swoop" totally disrupt her gendered habits). Thus, there is a residual anxiety that is preferable to the disruptive anxiety that arises when we more explicitly think about our ways of being in the world. This residual anxiety develops out of the tension between wanting to be at ease and wanting to do things differently, as well as the bodily sense that one is not one's own (i.e., that our behaviors are not indicative of a core self).

### ***Concluding Remarks: Temporality and Pathology***

I've argued that the habitual body is not fully captured when our analysis is limited to thinking how it provides us with ease because it additionally engenders bodily anxiety. Such anxiety arises when our habitudes are disrupted, when they engage us in traumatic repetition, when they fail to function as 'expected', and, as gendered habits illuminate, when our habitudes bring us into the world *as* bodily anxiety. Furthermore, I've argued that ease and anxiety are not exclusive to each other; one can find herself both at-ease with her discomfort, as well as ill at ease with her comfort (being sure to remember that neither the ease, the anxiety, nor the comfort map onto psychological categories). I have discussed the habitual body given my position that feminist theory requires tools for thinking about transformation that do not employ preemptive standards of the ideal feminist future. Through a description of this concept, I tried to clarify how it is that the habitual body provides both the very possibilities for transformation, as well as some of the most significant resistances to such transformation – particularly, I argued that an understanding of the habitual body can help feminists respond to these resistances.

Revealing the historical nature of a central way of our being can have an unsettling effect. So, we need to understand what it means to develop our ability to transform in the face of this anxiety – i.e., learning how to tolerate the bodily anxiety associated with transformative opportunities and loosening our broad social expectations for sameness. My sense is that the more comfortable one becomes with the anxiety of disruption, the more frequently will be her experiences of being at-ease with discomfort and ill at ease with her comfort. When one is differently related to transformative possibilities, the tension between ease and anxiety is more manageable – indeed, we might say one can develop habits and habitudes associated with managing this tension without seeking to eliminate it. For example, by managing this tension we can establish theoretical practices necessary for thinking about transformation without relying upon concrete definitions of woman, oppression, or freedom.

In conclusion, I'd like to consider the temporal relations engendered by the habitual body in order to open a path for future work on the temporality of gender identity. What we've seen so far is that the habitual body unfolds our world as situation, but it does so doubly or has a dual temporal structure. Habituality holds us in the past *and* makes way for our projections into the future. On one order, the habitual body eases us into the new; repetition and mimesis make way for novel experience (i.e., projection into the future). On another, this body impedes our projects, new experience is circumscribed as the past takes over. These characteristics describe what I call the twofold temporal structure of the habitual body, its continuity and disruption that both immobilize and propel us.

Unfortunately, as I've discussed, the habitual body has most consistently been theorized in terms of the ease it provides us in the world. Moreover, it has been described as that which orients us in space and time in an orderly fashion; habitual action structures the background of

our experiences such that one need not think about those actions that situate her. Within this understanding, to recall, the habitual body orders our worlds and enables movement forward in time (my past experiences, the complex results of various mimetic and repetitive actions, give rise to my present actions, which make possible my future actions). Thus, the flow of the past is seen as fluid or blocked, depending upon the orderliness of one's habitual actions/attitudes.

Gendered habits provide the opportunity to think these flows together – gender performance as that which simultaneously orders and dis-orders us in time – which is one of the reasons that I strenuously argue against feminist discourses on pathology and addiction.

Discussion of the interplays of ease and anxiety characteristic of the habitual body leads to an analysis of its temporal structure. Traditionally, the habitual body has been interpreted as a “living past” – our present experience is brought into existence via, what Casey calls, an active immanence of the past. What we have learned or otherwise acquired as habituality in the past flows into the present, and further makes way for the passing of present into future; the habitual body is understood to move one forward in time by granting an ease of bodily understanding. Additionally, however, the habitual body can keep us from moving forward by continually re-enacting the past. The same ease of movement and productivity that is granted by the absence of a need for conscious mental reflection prohibits easy transitions into new ways of doing things. Indeed, the habitual body gives us this ease by reproducing the past in our present – this is a limit on possibility in the sense that newness and originality can be blocked by these repetitions. Further, the bodily remembering that constitutes the habitual body allows for a mental forgetting that can function to inhibit newness.

Similarly to the problems associated with thinking the habitual body only in terms of ease, an understanding of habituality's temporal structure flowing from past, through present,

into future needs to be expanded. Being habitual directs us variously in time and space. And, if I may get a bit ahead of myself, I imagine it is this very characteristic that provides the habitual body with its considerable role in becoming new. For example, at times habitudes structure our lives as seemingly endless loops; at others, a newly acquired ease prepares us to break out of such loops. In exploring these claims, I will be setting a path for the transition into chapter four, wherein their veracity will help to establish the theoretical and practical problems associated with a certain type of normative critique (e.g., one that attempts to establish in advance precisely what gender relations should be).

### CHAPTER 3: GENDER AS A STYLE OF BEING: HABITS, PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE HABITUAL BODY

#### *Introduction: Gender as Habitual Activity*

The understanding of gender as a socially constructed way of being in the world is not new – indeed, one could argue that, within feminist theory, this is the only widely accepted and acceptable way to conceive of gender. The basic idea of this understanding is that what we call gender are ways of being masculine or feminine in the world, that develop within a context that functions to reproduce sociocultural norms as if they were natural truths of our being either male or female, and, therefore, hide the arbitrary and dynamic qualities of these same norms (i.e., our contexts tend toward producing in us a sense that we *are* our gender identity, that it is natural and cannot change, and that social norms follow from these facts, rather than produce them).<sup>29</sup> There are various reasons that this characterization of gender is useful for feminist analysis, as well as many difficult questions that come up when one tries to employ it. While I will work with many of these in this chapter, my central concerns are the value that comes from understanding gender identity as a relation between norms and our ways of being in the world and the difficulty that arises when considering how to disrupt this relation.

Given these concerns, I engage with feminist phenomenologists (particularly Johanna Oksala and Linda Fisher), Judith Butler, and Shannon Sullivan. Their work helps to establish an understanding of the bodily nature of the relation between norms and gender identity, therefore, allowing me to think about how it is that oppressive norms of femininity continue to be

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, there will be others who dispute some piece of this description. However, my point here is not to define gender, but rather to offer a very basic starting point from which we can discuss the similarities and differences among Sullivan, Butler, and myself in terms of our understandings of gender as habitual.



reproduced despite decades of feminist resistance to these same norms. Each of these theorists takes up gender identity in terms of its bodily existence and constructed qualities, and employs the language of habits, *habitudes*, or habituality in describing these qualities. Of note, also, are the differences in theoretical alliances among these feminists. For Oksala and Fisher, Merleau-Ponty's work on the body is seen to provide the most useful resources for feminists. As for Sullivan, she aligns herself most frequently with Dewey's pragmatism. While Butler's theoretical interests are broad, her strongest (or at least most well known) relation is to Foucault and his work on the relation between knowledge and power, the functions of disciplinary power, and his notion of the "always already" constructed subject. Even though Sullivan and Butler are open to Merleau-Ponty's general ways of thinking about the body, each criticizes his work as not adequately enough situating the body in a historical context (more on this below). I hope to demonstrate that, even as Merleau-Ponty's work fails to attend to differences in gendered embodiment, his work is still extremely useful for thinking about the ways in which gender norms are taken up and resisted by the body. His work on the body allows us to consider how one's gender identity, or gendered relation to the world, is habitual (and, therefore, productive and inhibitive of transformative possibility).

To claim that gender identity (which I often refer to simply as gender) is habitual is to say it accrues meaning and substantiality over time by way of repetition, sedimentation, and disruption rather than out of one's very being. Gender arises from our habitual body's relation to social understandings – it is a style of being or form of embodiment that develops in relation to cultural norms concerning sexuality, marriage, family life, reproduction, and so forth. It is one of the most salient characterizations of our identity; our actions, dispositions, and ways of communicating are deeply characterized according to conventional interpretations of what it

means to be masculine or feminine. The relation between our ways of being and these conventions is measured – often, in an instant – to provide a seemingly irrefutable impression of one’s gender identity (i.e., the dynamic relation between gendered norms and acts is crystallized as one’s gender identity). The value of understanding the habitual body’s role in providing this impression is that it helps to explain how it is that gender is historical and dynamic, while also so resistant to change.

Linda Fisher uses Merleau-Ponty’s writing about the body to show that gender identity is an “embodied habitual practice” (what I would call a *habitude*) that establishes a relation between the body and the world.<sup>30</sup> In “Gendering Embodied Memory,” Fisher describes gender as an “acculturated corporeality *and* embodied and naturalized social ontology” that serves as the “fundamental conditioning feature of lived experience (92-4, 107). In other words, gender is a significant style of being in the world, that organizes our understandings of the world, and that comes from one’s sociocultural experiences, rather than one’s nature. Her view, which is strongly related to the basic idea of gender described above, is that gender is not a simple personality trait; rather it is a modality of our subjectivity (94). Being gendered brings our bodies into the world, gives their movements shape and purpose, helps us to understand the world around us, as well as deeply conditions our ways of being in that world.

Even as the past 40 years has seen a tremendous amount of literature written on the historical, arbitrary, and oppressive nature of western gender norms, the “truth” of gender identity persists. More troubling, even when individuals challenge the naturalness of this identity, even when they have a thick understanding of the history of gender, they continue to act

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<sup>30</sup> Fisher, Linda. “Gendering Embodied Memory,” in *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*. Schües, Olkowski, and Fielding (eds.). Indiana University Press, 2011.

out larger social beliefs about women. Thus, certain basic presumptions about femininity and masculinity persist to this day despite an overwhelming amount of psychological, sociological, and philosophical work that demonstrates the falsity of such presumptions (cf. Cordelia Fine's thorough critique of the ways in which faulty presumptions about the natural differences between men and women persist in mainstream culture and the academy in her *Delusions of Gender*). Moreover, a great deal has been written about the oppressive nature of western gender norms. For example, much has been said about the way that women's body images or senses of self have been limited (here, we can think of false consciousness or internalized oppression, cf. Sandra Bartky's revealing *Femininity and Domination*). Of additional import for feminism is an analysis of the embodied and habitual qualities of gender identity (a project that has gained traction since Young's early work, though still requires much work).

Given the value of Sullivan's and Butler's work on the relations between bodily practices and gender, below I consider the similarities and differences of their approaches to my own. As will become clear, there are strong relations across our work. Indeed, my engagement with their texts has shaped my project in a number of ways. And, despite significant differences in their projects, there is a significant affiliation between Sullivan and Butler. Thus, my aim is neither to undermine their claims about gendered embodiment nor to reject their particular thoughts about feminist transformative possibilities. Instead, I hope establish connections across our writing, while challenging some of their criticisms of phenomenology and, more particularly, Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body. In many ways, this chapter functions as a limited, though critical review of the central feminist scholarship on gender and habituality. It will also clarify some of my thoughts on the value of phenomenological research for feminist theory, as well as firm up my claim that a politics of becoming new requires an understanding of women's habitual

relation to gender norms (even as theorists such as Grosz and Braidotti might deny or challenge such a claim).

### ***Sullivan and Gender as Habit***

In her article, “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change,” Sullivan employs Dewey’s pragmatist account of habit to argue for an understanding of gender as a series of habits arising from the body’s relation to gendered norms.<sup>31</sup> She describes gender as a “constitutive structure of bodily existence” that is currently governed by “rigid binary configurations” that require shifts on the levels of individual practice and social norms if these configurations are to be overcome (23). While there is a strong relation between her position and my own – particularly given her use of Butler’s notion of performativity – Sullivan challenges the usefulness of a phenomenological account given her view that Dewey’s pragmatism allows us to more carefully consider the social construction of gender. Below, I challenge this position, which requires some discussion of her relation to Dewey.

For Sullivan, Dewey’s writings on habit are useful given his focus on the relations between habits and social norms, his claim that habits both produce and limit experience, as well as his take on the plasticity of habits. Habits, in this view, are socially produced and serve to both open up and close off our possibilities of being. Thus, Sullivan argues that feminists should focus on transforming particular habits of gender, rather than seeking to eliminate gender norms in their entirety, if we are interested in transformative possibilities. She writes:

Significantly, the constitutive role of habit means that our response to the problem of rigid gender categories should *not* be a pronouncement that all cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Sullivan, Shannon. “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change,” *Hypatia*. 15(1), 2000.

structure is oppressive and thus in need of elimination so that we can be ‘free’ ... release from all structure of identity – if such a thing were possible – would not free us then to be whatever we want. Rather, it would dissolve us into beings with no capacity for agency to effect transformation and change, effectively eliminating – not increasing – our freedom (29).

Habits bring us into the world; without them we would be incapable of any action. Our habituality is constant – and the transformation of a set of habits requires the development of new habits, new ways of being in the world. Sullivan concludes, therefore, that we must identify potential avenues for shifting and transforming the social norms that craft our gender identities and abandon any thought that gender itself could be done away with (30). Thus far, her position is quite amenable to my own – although we should notice (and I will discuss below) that she is more so focused upon identifying troublesome habits and norms than I am.<sup>32</sup>

Sullivan also notes that even as “habits are formed under conditions set by cultural configurations that precede the individual” – i.e., gender identity is constructed by norms we had no say in – there are still various resistant possibilities given the plasticity of habits (28). It appears that there is a pernicious circular relation between social norms and habits (i.e., norms produce habits and habits reproduce those same norms). The circularity of norms and habits suggests a foreclosure of the possibility of things being otherwise – that we are stuck in a loop. However, we are not stuck in a loop because our habits are plastic; they shift and change just as our norms shift and change. In this sense, plasticity refers to the fact that individuals neither take up social norms in their entirety nor replicate these norms in the exact same ways every time; our habits are plastic because they can be reconfigured. And, because our habits are plastic, it would

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<sup>32</sup> This difference puts her work at odds with that of Grosz and Braidotti, and less so with Merleau-Ponty.

be just as wrong to think of individuals as fully or finally constituted by social norms as it is to think that all gender norms must be eradicated.

Sullivan employs a reading of Butler's account of gender performativity, noting: it "furthers the description, which Dewey's notion of plasticity begins, of the (seemingly) mutual faithful mirroring of individual gender habits and cultural gendered norms" (24). Butler's notion of performativity (which I discuss in more detail below) is useful for Sullivan because it allows us to think about how habits that are produced by social norms can be transformed. In other words, Butler's concept of performativity challenges the vicious circularity of norms and habits, providing a theoretical space within which we can consider how individuals resist being fully determined by social norms. The concept of performativity, as Sullivan remarks:

... transforms agency from a voluntaristic willing to a reiterative practice, one that is embedded in, not external to the cultural situations and conditions in which it finds itself ... change of the prevailing cultural norms that inform our bodily habits and gender performativity can come only through the transformation of those norms that takes place through their reiteration (32).

In relating Dewey's view on the plasticity of habits and Butler's view on the repetitive and spontaneous, Sullivan is attempting to answer the question of how transformation is possible if our identities are socially constructed and if there is no pure self beneath the social norms that we could work to uncover and set free.<sup>33</sup> Here, we can identify a strong tie between Merleau-Ponty's account of sedimentation and spontaneity and Sullivan's pragmatist account of sedimentation and plasticity. The sedimented quality of gender can lead to the reproduction of the gendered norms that produced such ways of being in the first place, thereby appearing to

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<sup>33</sup> As she notes, "gender is not some external, accidental characteristic overlaying the (allegedly) internal, essential, non-gendered core of ourselves. ... [it] constitutes a (but not the only) key arrangement of the changing events that are one's self" (26). We can note a strong similarity here between these remarks and Butler's work in *Gender Trouble*.

foreclose transformative possibility. For Sullivan, the plasticity in our ways of taking up gender habits provides the possibility of doing things differently (24). For Merleau-Ponty, the relation between habitual repetition and the spontaneous action such repetition engenders helps us to make our way out of the seemingly vicious circle.

This relation is further revealed in Sullivan's discussion of the sedimentation of gender practices as providing our very possibility of being in the world. She writes:

While habits are the effect of sedimentation in our lives, and habit-forming wears grooves that are part of our selves and that can run very deep, such sedimentation constitutes the very styles, patterns, and ways in which we engage our world. We are our habits; they are our very structure as corporeal, bodily selves; thus there is no thinking of who we are apart from the habits that we embody. For this reason, the sedimentation of habit is not to be construed (simply) as negative (although some particular habits may indeed be ones that we do and should deplore). Our habits constitute our knowledge of the world and, as such, provide us with efficacy and agency in it (26-7).

In this passage, we see a strong relation between Sullivan's account and that of Merleau-Ponty. Habitual sediment both limits and makes possible our ability to live gender differently than our social norms of gender provide for. Which is not to suggest that habitual spontaneity or plasticity provides a strong enough response to oppressive gender norms. If this were the case, given that spontaneity and plasticity are essential qualities of our habituality, gender norms would have far more radically transformed over the centuries. Here, Sullivan is right to point out that even as historical analysis demonstrates the "contingency of contemporary western configurations of gender," this does not mean that the contemporary norms surrounding gender are easily resisted (25). Gender in its productive roles structures our identity in ways that are profound for our lives. While these norms can, have, and will continue to shift over time, gender stills plays a crucial structuring role, not just for how we see and are seen, who we love and desire, but also in the very possibility of being in the world. The very point of working on feminist transformational

theory is to disrupt these effects by engendering much more difference than habituality unchecked allows.

Another connection between Sullivan's claims and my own is her view that habits produce agency because the habitual act provides the ground for both reflection and newness (27). By bringing us into the world, habits provide spaces for reflecting upon other habits, as well as doing things differently. As just mentioned, this is not to say that one can easily change her gender identity or relation to gender norms. Sullivan's position, similar to my view, is that challenging the seemingly fixed nature of gender is a difficult and often dangerous task. In fact, she refers to the disruption of "the rigid confines of one's gender" as "gender treachery" (25). Such disruption is treacherous because challenging the naturalness of gender disrupts western relations among sex, heterosexuality, and gender. One cannot significantly disrupt her relation to gender norms without therefore disrupting social understandings of how gender, sex, and sexuality work together. The danger in disrupting this relationship is profound as it risks "all the (psychological, physical, emotional, financial, etc.) punishments that are meted out to gender traitors in society" (25). That is, when we challenge the naturalness of gender identity, we are often met with backlash from those who insist upon the naturalness of these categories. This backlash, along with the disruption of ease effected by shifting one's relation to gender norms, engenders significant bodily anxiety in the face of transformation.

Thus far, Sullivan's pragmatist account of habits has seemed quite similar to the phenomenological account developed out of Merleau-Ponty's work. However, there are important distinctions between our views concerning her focus on habits rather than the relation between habits and norms, her sense of where transformative possibility arises, and her thoughts about age and sedimentation. As well, Sullivan's critique of Merleau-Ponty's work, which I



challenge more carefully below, creates a divide between her work and my own. While I find her writing useful for thinking about feminist transformative possibility, I ultimately find the phenomenological approach to thinking about habit more useful – a view that I support by sketching out the problems with certain aspects of her pragmatist account.

Sullivan supports her claim that we need to abandon any attempts to achieve a wholesale rejection of gender norms with the counter that we can instead concentrate on transforming particular gender habits and norms. I agree with her that it is both impossible and unnecessary to eradicate all gender norms or gender identities. However, rather than focusing upon particular gender habits, I focus on the possibility of disrupting the natural relation between gender norms and one's gendered style of being. As we saw in the passage above, Sullivan believes that "some particular habits may indeed be ones that we do and should deplore." Given my work in chapter 1, it shouldn't be a surprise that I would take issue with her view here. While certain habits may well inspire me to deplore them personally, as a theorist who is well aware of the problems of erasing differences, over-generalizing, marking the other as abject, etc., such theoretical deploping is insupportable. This focus (on particular habits or norms as the sources of oppression) most often results in claims that particular habits are pathological and addictive. And, not only are criticisms of particular habits frequently over-simplified or faulty, they also fail to provide much transformative effect (these claims find stronger support in chapter 4 in my criticisms of the pathologizing of eating disorders).

Her focus on particular, deplorable habits is interesting given that, by her account, transformative possibility arises out of the contradictory relations among certain habits and certain norms. Though Sullivan identifies particular gender habits as the object of transformative analysis, she looks to the relation between and among habits and norms to think about

transformative possibility. For example, she reminds us that both social norms and individuals' habits can be in conflict with other norms and other habits. For her, such conflict produces disruption in the seeming naturalness of our ways of being gendered – i.e., it engenders the transformation of habits (24). To strengthen her point, she describes the conflicts in being a woman and being a philosopher – noting that the norms of being a woman in the west produce behaviors that are incongruous with the norms of being a philosopher, particularly in relation to assertiveness and argumentativeness. This conflict gave her the opportunity to consider how she came to adopt these norms of being woman and being philosopher, further enabling her to reconsider her relation to these norms. She was able to transform her ways of being, then, because of the conflict in these two ways of being. What I appreciate in this part of her work is exactly what I find lacking in her position that we can (at least in part) identify problematic habits and work to transform them. In her discussion of conflict, she helps us to think about transformation without affirming some way of being a woman or a philosopher over others. Rather than stepping in for women and telling them how to be, she shows us the value in thinking through our relations to norms – the value in deciding for ourselves (which is certainly not to deny the very social nature of such reflection) how we will relate to social norms.

Much of the value established through an understanding of gender as habitual (timely, historical, and affective) comes from the fact that it provides for a rich analysis of the possibility of transformation. Given this, I am attuned less to the ways in which particular habitudes or habits manifest in women or men (which, at times, appears to be Sullivan's focus). Rather, my focus is upon how gender identity itself arises from the relations between our habitual bodies and gender norms and how these relations can be disrupted.

Furthermore, while I find value in her discussion of the conflicting relations between and among norms and habits, I would challenge the assumption that uncovering the history of and our own relation to social norms is enough for producing transformative action. Though conflict is a necessary piece of transformation, and though understanding the history of our habits helps to produce this conflict, understanding the history of our habits does not necessarily lead us to transform our habits. This is often the case even when we claim to want to transform them. Quite frequently one is able to grasp that things could be otherwise and her own desire for things to be otherwise without establishing the bodily ability to actually do things otherwise. The practical use of our considering how things have come to be and how things could differ is already premised upon a more fundamental piece, which I have identified as the ability to withstand the bodily anxiety that arises when we try to do things otherwise. While one can encounter such anxiety whilst considering the social construction of our ways of being, it is much easier to think about these things than to do them. The thought of doing things differently does not have the same ability to disrupt those habitual practices that bring us into the world. In other words, it is often the case that very little is disrupted in our day-to-day lives by considering alternative possibilities. True disruption (of the kind necessary to overcome habitual sedimentation) only results when we attempt to live in the world in ways that challenge those very habitudes and habits that bring us into the world.

Of course, my disagreement with Sullivan's focus is not a suggestion that she is entirely unaware of the bodily difficulty entailed in doing things differently. Indeed, she takes up this point in writing: "because of the constitutive role in my self of habit, to try to stylize my bodily gestures and comportment in a way other than that to which I am accustomed requires a deliberate, conscious effort that feels uncomfortable and produces results that look 'unnatural'"

(29). Here, she demonstrates her understanding that thinking about change is not enough – that one must be prepared to act differently, which produces great difficulties. Thus, the problem is that Sullivan minimizes the effects of this anxiety – its ability to freeze us in place – and fails to seriously consider how one can work through it.

Lastly, I want to address Sullivan's claim that Merleau-Ponty's account of habit does not allow us to reflect upon or understand the social component of habit formation or the possibilities of improving one's habits. Sullivan distinguishes her work from his in a lengthy footnote where she writes:

The explicit and strong emphasis on transformation in Dewey's account of habit suggests an important difference between it and the account of the habit body provided in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (perhaps) better-known phenomenology of the body. Unlike Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Dewey's pragmatism has as its explicit goal the improvement, rather than the mere description of our corporeal existence. In my opinion, this goal enables Dewey's pragmatism to attend in a more detailed and effective way to the transaction between body and world in the formation of habit than does Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (40, note 2).

In this passage, Sullivan criticizes Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment given that he does not attend to the precise ways in which individuals can improve their lives. She finds his work to be merely descriptive, whereas she finds Dewey's account of habits proscriptive. Moreover, she argues that, because Merleau-Ponty avoids telling us how to improve our lives, he offers us a less effective account of the body in the world. Given the many similarities between Sullivan's account of habit and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the habitual body, I am somewhat surprised by these claims. However, when we consider the ways in which her account differs, along with my criticisms of these differences, a more compelling response than surprise can be offered. My general criticism of Sullivan's work pertains to her beliefs that we can identify bad and good

habits. I also take issue with her belief that we could effectively theorize about habitual improvements by addressing ourselves to the badness or goodness of certain habits.

Not only do I think she is wrong to criticize Merleau-Ponty for not providing an account of improvement, she is also wrong in thinking that such an account would improve his analysis of the relation between body and world. If we rely upon a notion of the good (which, I would point out Sullivan fails to provide in any thoroughgoing fashion) for our description of the body in the world, we would end up with an account of this relation that would be entirely incompatible with a politics of becoming new. Rather than allowing for differences and the open-endedness of the future, such an account would function to close off transformative possibility, suggesting that there is a best way to be in the world. While I understand that this is not Sullivan's intention, I am arguing that this would be the result of her work (if she actually did follow through and provide a strong account of habitual improvement, which she does not). My sense is that the loss of control engendered by an account of gendered habituality that eschews the positing of the good, Sullivan is looking for a way to firmly establish a positive account of how women should relate to gender norms – yet, her other theoretical leanings prevent her from offering such an account. I would identify this tension as the main source of my dissatisfaction with her view, despite our many similarities.

### ***Butler and Gender Performativity***

Having explored Sullivan's pragmatist account of gender as habit, I turn to the work of Judith Butler – which I find more valuable in establishing the habituality of gender identity, without insisting upon a notion of the best way to be gendered. Butler's approach to thinking about gender, bodies, and agency has been central for my thinking about habitual being and the

possibilities of transformation. Her explorations of embodiment and habit have offered me valuable resources for thinking through gender identity, the persistence of gender norms, and the possibilities of doing gender differently. I would maintain that there is a close relation between her work and Merleau-Ponty's – even as she rarely writes about his account of the body (indeed, I could only locate one text that is explicitly about his work, and in it she takes him to task – more on this below). Thinking about the habitual body in relation to her account of gender performativity enriches the former by expanding its understanding of the gendered stylizations of habitude, while providing the latter with a more dynamic description of agency. While it is not my intention to identify Butler as a secret phenomenologist, the following pages will help to establish this relation between herself and Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, I will develop the relationship between her positions on the body and my own.

Butler's account of gender performativity is valuable for thinking about the possibilities of becoming new because it accounts for the historical, dynamic, and yet persistent character of gender identity. Her argument begins with the premise that there is no such thing as a core or essential gender identity – we might say that gender identity is a performance of gendered norms. One has a gender identity only in so far as she consistently enough get about the world in a style that is well characterized by the norms ordering a gender category.<sup>34</sup> Our belief in the essential truth of gender identity is a result of our repetitive engagement with gender norms: “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts,

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<sup>34</sup> She remarks, “performativity is thus not a singular ‘act’, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity)” (*Bodies that Matter*, 12-13).

positioned through the gendered stylization of the body” (*Gender Trouble*, xv). Though it appears that one has a natural gender identity, such identity is merely a “truth effect” brought about through discourses on identity, which is to say that its substantiality is garnered in relation to medical, political, philosophical, and legal discourses ((“Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” 327-8). Her account of performativity explains this truth effect as the result of “processes of iterability” whereby our actions engage in a “regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (*Bodies that Matter*, from here *BM*, 94-5).

The public nature of gendered acts reproduces the norms that concurrently underlie these acts; repeated performances of gender reproduce established social meanings, as well as re-legitimize these social meanings:

Consider that there is a sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex, or a real woman, or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 5).

In this passage, Butler makes use of phenomenological ideas to argue that gender appears to be natural and given because, through the processes of sedimentation, gender norms manifest in bodily styles (what I refer to as *habitudes*) that resist analysis or reflection. Here, then, we can see some of the connections between her account of performativity and Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment. Our habitual or performative action is the result of repetition and sedimentation, which serves to mask the origins, meanings, and transformative possibilities associated with our ways of being in the world. We can also note how Butler’s view helps to expand upon Merleau-Ponty’s by addressing itself to gendered embodiment and considering more explicitly the possibilities of doing things otherwise.

Another piece of Butler's work that is useful pertains to her rejection of feminist attempts to "idealize certain expressions of gender" (*Gender Trouble*, vi-vii). For Butler, when feminist theorists identify specific gendered behaviors as "false or derivative" and others as "true and original" they end up excluding those who do not live out these new, feminist gender norms (vii). As discussed in chapter 1, she believes that feminist theory should be concerned with the opening up possibilities rather than with determining a set of appropriate feminist changes (vii). She describes her project as one that seeks to challenge "any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimize minority gendered and sexual practices" (viii). However, her aim is not to celebrate celebrating all such practices, but more-so to maintain or establish the ability to think about such practices before determining their worth. More specifically, her aim is to maintain the ability to criticize oppression and engender transformation without requiring a foundational notion of gender. The relation to my view should be clear, given the fact that Butler's work helped to shape my thoughts about a politics of becoming new, as well as from my criticisms of Sullivan's position. In short, the task is to open up possibility, not to foreclose by jumping in for women with a ready-made account of the good life.

Here, then, it is useful to consider some of the criticisms Butler's account has been met with, given the likelihood that similar criticisms could be lodged at me. As there has been such a sizable response to her view – both positive and highly critical – I cannot attend to all of her critics. Instead, I want to highlight those criticisms that pertain to her rejection of a certain type of concrete feminist normativity. In her piece, "Material Bodies," Susan Hekman notes that detractors of Butler's account in *Gender Trouble*, "identified it as the epitome of the 'stylish



nihilism' that characterizes the allegedly subversive approach of postmodern feminism" (67).<sup>35</sup>

According to this view, by disrupting the grounds of feminist theory (e.g., by questioning the categories of sex, gender, and woman), Butler was guilty of inhibiting feminist politics.<sup>36</sup> In

short, this criticism suggests that feminist theory and politics requires a foundation based upon some characteristic shared by all women and Butler was dismantling such a possibility. The problem with this criticism, even some of its more nuanced variations that criticize Butler for neglecting the effects of suffering produced by oppression, is that it ignores the possibility of a loosely united feminism based upon a shared (though not equivalent) desire for freedom, which is attuned to the variety of experiences of bodily suffering women encounter, as well as to the untold differences among women, and the open-endedness of our lives. In other words, it is wrong to assume that feminism requires a solid and static foundation in order to proceed.

Butler's own response to this criticism has most often been that rather than identifying the body as the ground of feminist theory and politics, we should think about the female body as the object of feminist theory and politics – a claim with which I agree.

The most consistent, though often contradictory, criticism against Butler has to do with the role of agency in her account of performativity. Hekman and Ann V. Murphy, in her chapter on sexuality in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*), both point to this criticism of Butler's work. Interestingly, as Murphy notes, Butler has been accused of having both too open of an account of agency, as well as too closed of an account (496-8). I imagine this problem arises from a misinterpretation of Butler's well-known discussions of drag and gender parody. In

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<sup>35</sup> *Body and Flesh: A Reader*, Donn Welton (ed.). Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> Hekman identifies Bordo as a feminist who held this position (which is supported by Bordo's own claims about Butler, also in *Body and Flesh*, 91-3).

this discussion, which can be found in the last two chapters of *Gender Trouble*. Some critics seem to read Butler as suggesting that gender identity is something one has almost total control over – e.g., they seem to think her focus on drag comes from the belief that drag performers were more free because they played around with gender norms. These folks accuse Butler of having too open an account of agency. Others read these discussions, along with her view that there is no outside to gender, as a claim that one is fully determined by gendered norms and has little to no opportunity to resist. Clearly, these folks accuse Butler of having too closed of an account of agency.<sup>37</sup> Of course, there are those who challenge her view on agency without falling into either of these more extreme positions. Indeed, I would identify my self as a critic of her account of agency – with the view that her account is a bit more closed than it need be. However, in exploring Butler’s responses to this challenge, we might come to find that her view is quite compatible with the take on agency supported by the phenomenological investigation of habit.

One of Butler’s responses to the criticism that her work fails to account for women’s agency can be found in her claim that “the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency” (xxiv). I take her to mean that it is from one’s habitual worldly engagement that she has agency – though norms structure our ways of being, they bring us into the world and open it up for us, and our habitual action itself establishes the space within which we can be different. As well, we never perfectly take up these norms, which allows us a certain freedom of style or agency. In this

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<sup>37</sup> Butler remarks that one of her reasons for employing psychoanalytic theory is to “curb the occasional voluntarism of [her] view of performativity without thereby undermining a more general theory of agency” and that “*Gender Trouble* sometimes reads as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered presentation might be read directly off its surface. Both of those postulates have had to be refined over time” (xxv).

response to her critics, then, Butler's view is quite amendable to my own. The take on agency we find here is supported in her later text, *Undoing Gender*. She remarks:

If I am someone who cannot *be* without *doing*, then the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence. If my doing is dependent on what is done to me or, rather, the ways in which I am done by norms, then the possibility of my persistence as an 'I' depends upon my being able to do something with what is done with me. This does not mean that I can remake the world so that I become its maker. That fantasy of godlike power only refuses the ways we are constituted, invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside of us. My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility (3).

Agency, as we see in this passage, is constructed, which means it is both limited and constricted, as well as made possible, by the social field. Given this, the criticism that Butler provides an overly voluntaristic account of agency or that criticism that identifies her view as opposed to the very possibility of agency does not address itself to her actual view. Agency exists within her work; it is simply not a view of agency that locates this power solely within the individual. Agency arises within the contexts that we find ourselves in – we can do something with what is “done to us,” which is to say that we can respond to social norms through our actions, but that our response cannot overstep the fact that we are socially produced. Thus, the paradox of agency, that the very norms that produce us as limited subjects also provide the opportunity for us to do things otherwise, does not oppose the possibility of agency, it clarifies how such agency can arise. This take on agency is quite akin to my understanding of the phenomenological account of agency via the habitual body. While our habits construct our being in the world, they also provide a ground from which we can resist, reaffirm, or otherwise respond to them.

In her view, then, the individual (what she calls “the ‘I’ that I am) is brought into being through social norms, depends upon these norms for its continued existence, and yet is capable of and strives to “live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation” to these norms (3). Again, the ability to critique and transform one’s relation to these norms is difficult and anxiety-filled given that when we resist norms we become “to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable” (3-4). In other words, when we challenge the norms that bring us into and sustain our social being, we risk this very being. Again, there is a strong relation between our views – so much so that my initial criticism of her account of agency seems to require some fine-tuning. Still, my sense is that habituality provides a more valuable account of both how we come to be gendered, as well as how one can transform her relations to these norms. If individuals have agency or transformational energy, it is only because our habitual bodies open up a world within which we could be an agent. Because it is a condition for the possibility of having a world, thinking the habitual body can overcome this criticism that a performative account of gender fails to properly explain agency or oppression.

In closing this section, we can look at some of Butler’s critiques of Merleau-Ponty, particularly those that arise in her analysis of his writing on the sexual body.<sup>38</sup> Butler begins her piece noting the apparent feminist-friendly nature of his account of the sexual body and sexuality, noting it appears “freed of naturalistic ideology” and open to new, more diverse understandings of sexual being (85). These are mere appearances for Butler given her claim that Merleau-Ponty employs “tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of

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<sup>38</sup> Butler, J. 1989. “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,” in *The Thinking Muse*, Allen and Young (eds.). Indiana University Press.

sexuality,” that he “conceptualizes the sexual relationship between men and women on the model of master and slave,” that he “reify[ies] cultural relations between the sexes ... by calling them ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysical’,” and that his account “at once liberates and forecloses the cultural possibility of benign sexual variation” (86). While each of these claims is interesting in its own right, her main issue is that Merleau-Ponty is unable or unwilling to extend his views on the cultural formation of bodily existence into his analysis of sexuality (91). For Butler, Merleau-Ponty doesn’t fully situate the sexual body in history; he fails to appreciate (his own claims) that history in “the very condition for the constitution of the subject, not only a set of external possibilities” (90).

I offer a critical response to these concerns below (employing Oksala’s understanding of historical situatedness versus historical constitution). Here, it is valuable to note that despite her criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s heterosexist and sexist assumptions about the sexual body – and her belief that this calls his anonymous body into question for feminists – Butler ends her work with a call for feminist “appropriation” of his work (98). She notes the relationship between his work and feminist desires for “expression, analysis, and change” – that he describes extremely important aspects of lived reality – while simultaneously maintaining that his work cannot be useful unless feminist theorists are willing to expand it. These remarks, along with the clear connection between many of her central claims and those of Merleau-Ponty, demonstrate that Butler sees value in the phenomenological account of embodiment for feminists thinking about transformation. In the next section, I take up the work of several theorists who have adopted this task of appropriating Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment for feminist theory.

### ***Can the Habitual Body Account for Gender?***

Phenomenological analysis, including Merleau-Ponty's account of the body, has often been criticized because of the failure to attend to and account for the ways in which women's bodily experiences differ from those of men. For example, as we've seen, both Sullivan and Butler critique Merleau-Ponty's work for these failures. In her article, "Female Freedom: Can the Lived Body be Emancipated," Oksala provides a response to this view that can help clarify that, despite his failures to discuss gender embodiment, Merleau-Ponty's work on the body is very useful for feminist analysis of transformative possibility. Her basic point is that Butler (and, I argue, by proxy Sullivan) is mistaken in her claim that Merleau-Ponty employs an ahistorical (or under-situated) account of the body. Oksala argues that for Merleau-Ponty, even the anonymous body is "historically constituted" (rather than merely historically situated) (187-8).

She remarks: "the structures of the anonymous body come into being only as historically sedimented structures derived from our cultural environment. Subjectivity, even on the level of the anonymous body, is always dynamic" (198). This distinction between historical constitution and historical situation is meaningful given that the former concept entails far more openness and possibility than the latter. To be constituted is to be shaped or formed by historical forces (not to a degree that one is not free, mind you). To be situated is to have a general shape or form that is placed within a historical context that effects the meanings and possibilities of this shape or form. The former is more open-ended in that it is not based upon a view of the human body as composed of certain natural or long-enduring form. The latter is less open in that it does so depend, and that in doing so, fails to account for women's embodiment.

The point of clarifying that Merleau-Ponty's view of the body is as always historically constituted is to demonstrate the compatibility of his account with poststructuralist feminism

(188). Specifically, Oksala wants to show that his account of the body should not lead one to imagine women's freedom as "outside sexist oppression" – i.e., there is no ahistorical realm of women's bodily freedom according to his account (188). Freedom thought through Merleau-Ponty's body-subject is historical and contextual, not out of time; a view she then uses to challenge Young's account of inhibited female embodiment. She remarks, "there is no inhibited female corporeality and free and normal male corporeality in societies of sexist oppression, but rather two differently gendered and historically constituted experiences and modalities of embodiment" (198-9). While I've already mentioned that this reading of Young seems a bit hasty, we can find value in Oksala's remarks as they respond to Sullivan and Butler. She demonstrates in these remarks that it is a mistake to interpret Merleau-Ponty as championing a set of ahistorical ways of being in the body and, helps to clear up the value of his not having a normative account.

She demonstrates that even as there isn't a free – as in outside of social norms – mode of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty's account allows us to think about resistance to and transgression of norms (201). In this view, freedom is "the freeing or opening of new possibilities for living our bodies, sexualities, our lives" (201). And, this freedom is more valuable for feminism than an account of habitual improvement because it forces us to think through just what forms of political action feminism needs to take (at this moment) to engender more resistance to social norms. As she concludes: "the undefined freedom of the lived body opens up a space where defined political freedoms can be sought" (204). Our job as feminists interested in opening up transformational possibilities is to understand how these spaces come in to existence, as well as to listen to what women are saying about the ways in which their lives are being limited (an issue I take up more carefully in the following chapter).

Sonia Kruks is also helpful in establishing the value of phenomenological analysis for feminism, which is particularly clear in her critique of Shannon Sullivan's interpretations of Merleau-Ponty. Kruks notes that, for Sullivan, Merleau-Ponty's "account of the anonymous body is not merely tacitly masculinist but is, moreover, solipsistic and dominating in import" (10). I agree with Kruks in her rejection of this view. Even while Merleau-Ponty's account of the prepersonal body ignores important social classifications, his work can be employed by those of us who are deeply committed to theorizing the body in relation to these classifications. And, for Kruks, Merleau-Ponty's work on the body allows us to identify central ways in which the human body differs from other animal bodies (12). She challenges Sullivan's criticism of Merleau-Ponty because "in spite of his own sexism the import of Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied existence is not to obscure or deny differences. Rather, it is to point to the tensions of difference and commonality and to suggest that embodiment offers a site of *potential* communications and affirmative intersubjectivity" (18).

In other words, while Merleau-Ponty significantly fails to discuss gender and the differences among men and women, his work is useful in identifying embodiment as something that we share, even as our particular experiences differ. Kruks further believes that his account of embodiment can help us to bridge the divides among feminists because it does not depend upon shared common interests (18). As she notes, the bonds that can develop from the "indeterminate constancies of feminine embodiment" (our differing, though certainly related experiences of being in the world) can produce the necessary passion to sustain feminist politics: "feminine embodiment is, we could say, general or generic *enough* to enable intersubjectivity to arise among women, irrespective of our different social identities" (18-20). This is to say, feminine



embodiment is similar enough that, despite our many differences, we can communicate and work together (indeed, without needing to identify a shared foundation for our political commitments).

Lastly, we can more carefully consider Sullivan's criticism of the lack of a theory of habitual improvement in Merleau-Ponty's work. While Sullivan (and others) is right to note that Merleau-Ponty does not teach us how to transform gender relations, it is uncharitable to conclude that his work is not useful for thinking about transformation. My view is supported in the work of Gail Weiss who, while also noting the bodily (as opposed to social) focus in Merleau-Ponty's account of habit, identifies his work as helping us to consider transformation (82).<sup>39</sup> For Weiss, Merleau-Ponty's bodily focus is "precisely what enables an understanding of how individual and cultural innovation can occur within the context of the habitual horizons that human beings appeal to in order to make sense of their lives" (82). In other words, his thorough descriptions of embodiment allow us to make sense of human action in such a way as to be able to conceive of newness and transformation. As well, Weiss reminds us that his account of habit lets us consider how it is that spontaneity can arise out of repetition (87). Indeed, she notes that Merleau-Ponty's account demonstrates that individuals take up habits in unique ways that require a more particular analysis of habituality than a broad social analysis of styles of being can do. Here, she is claiming that not only does his view of embodiment help us think about transformational possibility, it does so in a way that more broad-based or structural accounts of being in the world (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu's habitus or William James' view on social habit) (87).

Weiss notes that Merleau-Ponty characterizes habit in such a way as to highlight the fact that habits both expand (and not only constrict) our worlds, but also are the very things that "enable people to engage the world in new and different ways" (89). Thus, his view engenders an

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<sup>39</sup> Weiss, Gail. 2008. *Refiguring the Ordinary*. Indiana University Press.

understanding of habit – particularly the acquisition of habit – as “a primary means of establishing the *relationality* of the body-subject, that is, its process of defining itself through the reversible relationships it sustains with its world” (90). Again, this understanding of the relation between body and world is central to the development of ways of transforming the particular relationships between individuals and social norms. Weiss also remarks, in emphasizing “the singularity of each and every body-subject makes it clear that each person will find her own habitual ways of negotiating and thereby extending the parameters of his or her world” (90). That is, through the work of Merleau-Ponty, we become better able to discuss habituality without denying the significant differences in ways that individuals take up social norms. The value for me in this is that we can employ Merleau-Ponty’s description of embodiment – particularly his discussion of habituality – without erasing differences or foreclosing the future.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

While it may at times seem preferable to have a concrete and explicit account of just how to overcome sexist oppression, history suggests that our attempts to craft such an account will inevitably ignore and marginalize significant numbers of women. Thus, we are better off if we can think about and develop political strategies that overcome these problems. Phenomenological analysis of the body is an important piece of this, for example, because knowledge of habitual sedimentation and disruption counteracts reifying tendencies and stimulates gender trouble. A phenomenological account of the habitual body allows for an account of gender identity unencumbered by the problems of essentialism, volunteerism, and social determinism. It allows us to understand how gender identity is both highly circumscribed and yet not beyond the reach of resistant and transformative practices. Most basically, an understanding of gender as habitual (developed out of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the habitual body) can lead us to think about

transformation in relation to the bodily possibilities of doing gender otherwise. For example, seeing gender as habitual highlights the need to facilitate bodily transformation, without further requiring the positing of an ideal feminist future (i.e., one that would significantly disregard differences in ways of being gendered, as well as differences in individuals' hopes of being otherwise).

Thus, theory focused upon transcribing and transforming our responses to the bodily anxiety associated with doing things differently is necessary for feminism. The habitual body is an important concept for feminists both in that it offers a useful way to conceptualize gender and that it allows us to understand the real world possibilities of transforming our relations to oppressive gender norms. Norms of social identity inhabit our world through our actions, which suggests that the habitual body, as that which manifests our relation to these norms, must be understood if we want to reduce their effectiveness. And, an individual's ability to disrupt her relation to gender norms – to take up different styles of being in the world that more-so express and produce her freedom – is an important object of study for feminist theory.

When we understand both how gender identity comes to be, as well as how it comes to appear natural and given, we are equipped with ways of disrupting those ways of being gendered that conflict with individuals' desires. Such an understanding, as developed out of Merleau-Ponty's account of the habitual body, directs us to think about how relations to gender norms can be disrupted such that they have less control over one's ways of being in the world. Specifically, we need to think about how micro-shifts in habitual practices and the corresponding shifts in gender norms can produce broader social changes and not merely changes in certain individuals' lives. As I argued in chapter 1, we need to think about transformation in terms of these shifts rather than as the replacement of oppressive gender norms with a set of idealized gender norms.

Thus, thinking about feminist transformation through the habitual body can be contrasted with an approach to overcoming gender oppression through the wholesale rejection of contemporary gender norms and practices, the quest to eliminate gender entirely from our social understandings of individuals, and the replacement of current norms with another, seemingly more liberatory set of norms. Oppression cannot be overthrown all at once and that micro-shifts hold the true possibility of things being otherwise.

Using the concept of the habitual body in relation to the writings of Butler and Sullivan has helped to explain how change is possible given our constructed ways of being. In the next chapter, I focus on how thinking in terms of the habitual body helps to undermine the tendency to pathologize women's habits and habitudes and demonstrates that developing skills to help individuals work through the bodily anxiety of doing things differently should be a central concern for feminist theorists. This work will bring together the first three chapters into a more tangible discussion of where feminist theory goes wrong and how analysis of the habitual body can help steer it in the right direction. We might say that what follows is itself a micro-shift in feminist practices, away from pathologizing discourses (even when those discourses identify the culture, and not the individual, as pathological) and toward a more phenomenological analysis of, in this instance, eating disorders.

## CHAPTER 4: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITY OF EATING DISORDERS

### *Introduction*

In the first chapter, I argued that the differences among women and the open-endedness of the future call for a feminist approach to transformation focused upon the opening up of possibility. In the second chapter, I discussed how thinking about transformation through the phenomenological concept of the habitual body strengthens our abilities to understand what makes transformation possible. At this point, I take up these positions in a more concrete fashion through an analysis of the feminist cultural account of eating disorders, which I criticize given its failure to attend to the significant variations across eating disordered practices, as well as its inability to open up new possibilities for those suffering from these practices. While the cultural approach helps us to identify oppressive norms concerning bodies, weight, food intake, and individuality – especially as they construct Western femininity – it fails to address the actual transformation of eating disordered practices. Indeed, I argue that the foundational claim of the cultural approach – that eating disorders demonstrate that our culture is pathological – forecloses any transformative understanding of these practices.

Following my criticisms of the cultural model, I describe feminist responses to eating disorders that I find more valuable given their increased attention to the bodily experience of having an eating disorder, their willingness to analyze the suffering of these practices, as well as their understanding that it is in unfolding complex relations among individuals and society, communities, and families that we can open up transformative possibilities. Within these responses, which weave together phenomenological and psychoanalytic insight concerning eating disorders, we find support for techniques that begin from the perspective of the individual and branch out to incorporate social analysis (e.g., narrative therapy and Daseinsanalysis – each

of which I discuss below). As I will argue, these techniques present the opportunity for considering the highly particular communications that constitute eating disorders within a broader social analysis of the meanings of femininity, weight, food, and so forth. These techniques, therefore, present the opportunity for thinking about eating disordered behavior as a way of being in the world, where the individual's behavior is a unique yet meaningful response to her social possibilities. By bringing together explicit consideration of the individual's experiences and feminist social analysis, such techniques improve upon the feminist cultural approach (which remains at the level of social analysis). After these considerations, I argue that an understanding of the habitual body's role in eating disordered behavior will allow for a more transformative response to these practices. Not only does such an understanding further improve our ability to connect the individual and social components of eating disorders, it also opens up transformative possibilities by emphasizing the importance of disrupting eating practices.

Before beginning this work, it is valuable to consider the ways in which my analysis might reproduce a problematic split across different feminist approaches. In her article, "Bodies as (Im)material?: Bulimia and Body Image Discourse," Maree Burns discusses the divide between poststructural and phenomenological responses to eating disorders. She notes, "there has been an ideological division of sorts between feminists who are interpreted as emphasising the inscriptive nature of cultural imagery and those who emphasize embodiment of the body as experienced" (124).<sup>40</sup> The value of thinking about this divide is that it forces us to consider the need to disrupt the split amongst medical, cultural, and bodily interpretations of eating disorders. Such a divide shows up quite frequently in feminist theory and in the works it criticizes; indeed,

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<sup>40</sup> Burns, Maree. 2009. "Bodies as (Im)material?," in *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*. Malson and Burns (eds.). Routledge.

it will show up in the pages that follow (even as I might ultimately want to disrupt this divide). This is problematic in that it limits our ability to understand and respond to eating disorders. For example, the suffering of eating disorders will often require medical intervention – it is most certainly not the purview of social scientists and philosophers to attend to the bodily deficits associated with these illnesses. And, given the variety of problems associated with medical interventions – particularly, the silencing of patients associated with pathologizing – feminist analyses of the social meanings at play in eating disorders are necessary if we are to develop effective responses. In other words, we need to think about the relations among medical, cultural, and phenomenological responses to eating disorders if we want to provide truly transformative possibilities for these women. That said, however, it is my hope that in thinking through the habitual body, we can overcome (at least to a degree) the sharp distinction between medical and social interventions, as well as the problems with situating eating disorders as either individual or social problems.

### *A Brief Note on Language*

One of the difficulties of discussing eating disorders is that the word ‘disorder’ appears to foreclose adequate consideration of differences and futurity; to identify practices as disordered suggests an opposition between normal, orderly eating behaviors and abnormal, disorderly eating behaviors. Indeed, this opposition is foundational to mainstream medical responses to eating disorders – foundational in that it structures definitions of eating disorders, as well as treatment practices (i.e., the aim of treatment is to return individuals to normalcy).

However, one can theorize about eating disorders without necessitating this oppositional view. To say that a woman is suffering from an eating disorder or to say that she is ill, is bulimic,

or must gain weight in order to stay alive is not to ascribe to this woman a fixed way of being in relation to food, eating, or bodies. This language *as taken up in a politics of becoming new* is used to draw together a variety of related eating practices often associated with great suffering and mortality; with the aim of engendering disruptive relations to these practices; such that social and individual relations to food, eating, and bodies have the possibility of transforming.

As should be clear, individuals with eating disorders differ. They differ from themselves and from each other. The courses of their illness differ. Institutional responses and the more particular responses of individuals within these institutions differ. Differences abound, which is unsurprising given how many people and places we are taking about when discussing eating disorders. And, the ways in which these practices orient one toward the future differ. These differences should give us pause when considering totalizing or absolute interpretations or responses to eating disorders. However, acknowledgement of differences should expand our understanding of the suffering of eating disorders, not undermine our ability to discuss this suffering.

We need responses that are able to navigate through these variations without losing the ability to help people. To discuss eating disorders with these facts in mind is to make possible the discovery of similarities. The identification of a disorder, in this view, has to do with the suffering associated with certain eating behaviors and not a static (or straightforward) identity developed out of one's eating practices. Therefore, I maintain this language can be employed without the implication that women suffering from eating disorders must be re-ordered to eat "normally." That is, one can discuss eating disorders without insisting upon (or implying) that there is a correct way to engage with food and eating.



### ***The Feminist Cultural Account of Eating Disorders***

Since the 1970s, feminist theorists have challenged mainstream responses to eating disorders – i.e., those employed in large-scale treatment centers, hospitals, psychiatric wards, and psychological practices. Even as treatment centers and practitioners vary in their precise approaches to managing eating disorders, they overwhelmingly identify family and individual psychopathologies as the causal factor.<sup>41</sup> The *Comprehensive Handbook of Personality and Psychopathology* entry on eating disorders presents a variety of causal explanations as to how individual pathology leads to these conditions.<sup>42</sup> For example, the authors identify perfectionism, obsessionality, and impulsivity as key personal pathological factors, and note that eating disorder patients tend toward obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and neuroticism (390-3). Anorexics are viewed as both neurotic and obsessional, with personality traits such as being “anxious, fearful, and harm avoidant,” while bulimics (whose presentations vary more so) are viewed as either similar to anorexics or as “more extraverted, impulsive, novelty-seeking, and reward dependent” (392). And, as noted, these traits are identified as productive of eating disorders (not as their effects).

This focus on individual (and, occasionally, family) pathology has troubled feminists as it tends to blame women (e.g., even when family pathologies are identified, they emphasize the mother’s role in producing disordered eating). Moreover, as proponents of the feminist cultural account have argued, the focus on the individual inhibits larger cultural analysis that is necessary

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<sup>41</sup> One of the more interesting experiences in reviewing literature on eating disorders is that despite great reliance on the notions of pathology and psychopathology, of all the texts I engaged with not one provided an account of just what amounts to psychopathology.

<sup>42</sup> Stice, E. et al. “Eating Disorders,” in *Comprehensive Handbook of Personality and Psychopathology*. Andrasik, F. (ed.); John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.

for an accurate understanding of these behaviors. The general criticism put forward by these proponents is that treatment providers locate the origins of eating disorders in individual and family pathologies and, in so doing, fail to adequately consider the role of cultural norms in shaping women's attitudes and practices concerning food, weight, bodies, and individuality. Susan Bordo, one of the most prominent theorists of the cultural account, identifies three basic aims or tasks of this account: 1) to disrupt the "individual as pathological" classification by emphasizing the "learned, addictive dimension" of having an eating disorder, 2) to demonstrate that cultural dynamics are "primary and productive" of eating disorders, rather than "triggering or contributory," and 3) to demonstrate that what has been identified as individual pathology is actually social pathology and that eating disorders are merely an extreme set of behaviors otherwise "prevalent among women in our culture" (54).<sup>43</sup>

These three aims can be generalized as a move to, as Bordo claims, challenge "the clinical value of the normative/pathological duality itself," or the view that those with eating disorders have failed to adopt normal and healthy ways of eating and relating to food (54). In challenging mainstream providers' desire to distinguish between eating disorders and normal eating, she remarks, "feminist analysts see ... only varying degrees of disorder, some more 'functional' than others, but all undermining women's full potential" (61). In this view, eating disorders are the extreme result of problematic and contradictory norms surrounding gender that effect all Western women's attitudes on food, eating, and body image. For example, Bordo argues that eating disorders show us, "how powerful, ubiquitous, and invasive the demands of cultural are on our bodies and souls" (xix). And, she identifies them "as the logical (if extreme)

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<sup>43</sup> Bordo, Susan. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (10<sup>th</sup> Edition). University of California Press.

manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture” (15). Later in the text, she connects eating disorders to “less extreme” measures of dieting and weight management, which she identifies as prevalent among Western women (58-9). For Bordo, then, eating disorders are attempts to fall in line with cultural norms of femininity (the *true* producer of eating disordered behavior).

Moreover, Bordo believes that the only clear unifying element in eating disorders is “in the cultural context, and especially in the ideology and imagery that mediate the construction of gender” (49). While she acknowledges that cultural factors are not sufficient causes of eating disorders, she warns against mistaking this as a claim that culture is therefore not the ground “for the historical flourishing of the disorders” (52). Thus, she challenges the belief that “culture [merely] provokes, exacerbates, and gives distinctive form to an existing pathological condition” because this ignores the fact that women account for almost 90% of eating disorder cases, as well as the fact that it is only in the last century that these disorders occur with any frequency (49-50). For her, these facts demonstrate that culture, “working not only through ideology and images but through the organization of the family, the construction of personality, the training of perception,” produces women with eating disorders, just as it produces most other Western women as (in some sense) troubled in their relations to bodies and food (50).

Thus, Bordo argues against mainstream treatment approaches given that they are unable to account for the relations between those with eating disorders and Western women otherwise constructed by oppressive norms about the body. Specifically, she notes that they obscure:

An adequate understanding of the ubiquitous and thoroughly *routine* grip that culture has had and continues to have on the female body, how *commonplace* experiences of depreciation, shame, and self-hatred are, and why this situation has gotten worse, not better, in the culture of the eighties. In this historical era, when the parameters of defining women’s ‘place’ have indeed been challenged, it is disturbing that we are spending so much of our time and energy obsessed,

depressed, and engaging in attempts at anxious transformation (most frequently, reduction) of our bodies. It is hard to escape the recognition ... that a political battle is being waged over the energies and resources of the female body (66).

It is unsurprising, then, to find that throughout *Unbearable Weight* Bordo repeatedly describes anorexia as *the crystallization of a pathological culture* (a pathology evidenced in cultural messages about gender, thinness, health, etc.). Indeed, she remarks, “virtually every proposed hallmark of ‘underlying psychopathology’ in eating disorders has been deconstructed to reveal a more widespread *cultural* disorder” (55). Here, again, we see that the problem is not *in* the women with eating disorders, but rather in the culture that produces these styles of eating. Western culture is pathological in its demands on women and eating disorders show us this in their extreme relation to these demands.

Given that cultural norms are taken as productive of eating disorders (as well as a variety of other feminine styles of relating to food and bodies), and given that media images are a significant source of our access to these norms, proponents of the cultural account frequently engage in deconstructive analysis of media images. As Bordo remarks, “interpreting anorexia requires, not technical or professional expertise, but awareness of the many layers of cultural signification that are crystallized in the disorder” (67). Thus, a great deal of her energies are spent analyzing and deconstructing ads and other cultural images that present women with oppressive and often contradictory messages about how to be feminine in the Western world.

The goal here is to make eating disorders more intelligible in relation to cultural images, a task that is taken up by Helen Malson in *The Thin Woman*. In this text, Malson provides a genealogy of medical, psychological, and popular discourses on anorexia with a significant goal of connecting dieting practices up with eating disorders. For example, she remarks, “there is clearly some relationship between the cultural idealization of female thinness and the prevalence

of dieting and the recent increases in eating disorders” (5). And later, she claims, “‘anorexia’ is saying something about what it means to be a woman in late twentieth-century Western culture”

(6). She adopts Bordo’s cultural approach, remarking:

We need to develop new theoretical and methodological frameworks which enable us to ‘deconstruct’ our current knowledges of ‘anorexia’ (and other ‘disorders’), to go beyond the concept of ‘anorexia’ as an *individual pathology*, and to explore critically the ways in which the discourses and discursive practices of our society constitute and regulate our own and others’ experiences (xi).

Similarly to Bordo, we see that Malson wants to disrupt the mainstream medical view that anorexia is an individual pathology, a task she attempts by demonstrating the cultural dynamics that are productive of these behaviors. She also notes that empirical data demonstrates that cultural norms and ideologies function to produce anorexia (5).

From this review, we can identify three central claims of the feminist cultural account of eating disorders (which are related, though distinct from Bordo’s earlier cited remarks). These are: 1) eating disorders are not the results of individual pathology, 2) eating disorders represent an extreme version of otherwise highly prevalent Western eating practices among women, and 3) that eating disorders are best understood through deconstructive analysis of media images and other cultural scripts associated with femininity, food, and bodies.

### ***Troubling the Cultural Account***

The cultural account shifts analyses of eating disorders away from a focus on individuals and toward a focus on gendered norms. This shift is not without its merits; e.g., it increases awareness of the effects of gendered norms on our behaviors, it challenges the view that individuals are pathological, and it disrupts practices that have been shown ineffective in the treatment of eating disorders. However, the claim that eating disorders are caused (in great part)

by pathological gendered norms and ideologies fails to provide truly transformation effects for those with eating disorders (or those who treat eating disorders). In the following pages I outline a variety of problems with the cultural model, each of which connects up with a failure to consider the significant differences across eating disorder practices, the ways in which individuals both take up and reject social norms through disordered eating practices, as well as the transformative possibilities contained within these practices.

### *Anorexia as a “Case Study”*

One of the most disturbing problems with the cultural approach is that, in its attempts to show the continuity across eating disordered practices and other Western feminine styles of eating and relating to food, it ends up treating anorexia as a case study. The discussion of anorexia is used to develop a broad understanding of social norms and practices concerning women’s weight and bodies. Anorexia is, therefore, not studied on its own terms, but with an eye to demonstrating what is wrong with Western norms concerning femininity. For example, both Malson and Bordo locate anorexia at the extreme end of feminine dieting practices; they see eating disorders as similar enough to other feminine ways of eating and relating to the body to claim that analysis of anorexia will tell us something important about how most women come to relate to their bodies. Malson employs anorexia to describe both “what it means to be a woman in late twentieth-century Western society” (188). And, Bordo identifies it as a representation of “the central ills of our culture – from our historical heritage of disdain for the body, to our modern fear of loss of control over our future, to the disquieting meaning of contemporary beauty ideals” (139-40). Indeed, Bordo oddly remarks that her analysis of eating disorders is “the

core of the critique of normalizing practices” (32). That is, her actual task is to critique normalizing practices, not to help theorize and transform anorexia in its particularities.

This movement from bodily symptom to social cause is interesting in that through it the authors demonstrate that their interests lie in criticizing culture rather than accounting for the particularities of eating disorders. The objects of critique are, we might say, broad ideological and disciplinary structures within which eating disordered behavior becomes possible. There is, of course, value in criticizing cultural norms regarding feminine bodies, ways of eating, and so forth. And, in fairness, the incorporation of the feminist cultural model has to some degree expanded medical responses to eating disorders to include consideration of the social factors that contribute to eating disorders (e.g., narrative therapy as discussed by both Megan Warin and Helen Gremillion).

In *Feeding Anorexia: Gender and Power at a Treatment Center*, Helen Gremillion helps to clarify just why the cultural approach fails when she describes it as an approach that takes up anorexia as a “case study” for making sense of “cultural expectations about ideal femininity” (1). When anorexia, or any eating disorder, is employed as a case study there is a risk of glossing over the particular experiences of individuals in the pursuit of a larger cultural critique. By not starting from the lived experiences of those with anorexia, theorists fail to understand the meanings of disordered eating practices. In other words, the failure to take up the body as an actor in the world prevents one from really getting at what it means to have an eating disorder, how eating disordered behaviors differ in terms of bodily suffering, the susceptibility to institutionalization or death associated with eating disorders, how these practices manifest relations to desire, and so forth. In these ways, the use of anorexia as a case study inhibits a transformative understanding or response to these behaviors.

### *Anorexia as a “Reading Disorder”*

An additionally troubling aspect of the cultural account is that it emphasizes images over practices, inhibiting analysis of the everyday realities of having an eating disorder. Thus, rather than exploring what those with eating disorders are actually doing, Bordo and Malson hope to make sense of these practices by studying ads and discourses that they view as productive of these practices. In *Abject Relations*, Megan Warin argues that the focus on the media’s role in producing eating disorders actually casts these practices as “reading disorders” – basically, that it is one’s failure to critically engage with oppressive (and contradictory) images of ideal femininity that leads to the having of an eating disorder. There are several problems with this interpretation of eating disorders.

Firstly, it leads us to ask, and then fails to answer, what it could be that makes some women so much more susceptible to these images than others. Secondly, this interpretation tends to produce resistance from individuals with eating disorders, who are offended by the suggestion that they exemplify the extreme end of those duped by oppressive imagery. For example, we can look to a passage from Paula Saukko’s *The Anorexic Self*, wherein she challenges:

I acknowledge the need to critique discourses that invite women to keep their bodies slender, beautiful, and in control. But I have not been mainly frustrated with discourses on thinness. Rather, I have been intellectually troubled and personally insulted by discourses on anorexia, which diagnose anorexic women as having an insufficient self, lacking in autonomy and self-determination, and being vulnerable to outside influences, such as the media and peer pressure to be thin (1-2).

In this passage, Saukko exhibits frustration with the cultural account and suggests that we must listen to those with eating disorders if we hope to prove useful for helping women transition into less damaging practices. In her view, the focus on cultural images of thinness and femininity



inhibits our ability to hear what women with eating disorders have to say about their behavior. Indeed, and as Warin points out, the desire to identify a cultural origin prevents investigators from doing fieldwork and interviews, practices that give voice to these women.

Maree Burns provides a more rigorous challenge to the “reading disorder” view when she argues that the deconstructive techniques of the cultural account lead to a problematic focus on the surface of the bodies (which connects to another criticism discussed below). She remarks:

By interpreting varied body management practices as the outcome of the consumption of representations of the thin ideal, such approaches miss an important opportunity to theorise other meanings that might be (re)produced by the performance and experience of various bodily practices. Such analyses render persons as passive and docile rather than (also as) engaging with, resisting and potentially transforming the discourses embedded within those images (125).

Thus, a third problem with the “reading disorder” view comes from its failure to account for the embodied experiences of these practices, particularly in terms of the bodily experience of agency. That is, the body is cast as an object rather than as a subject, which is reproductive of many of the problems that have been identified as causing eating disorders. Warin points out that this view of the body as passive results from:

The way in which these writers locate discourse and its operations of power and knowledge solely in specific institutional practices – in hegemonic and dualist structures that allow little space for agency, embodiment, and the everyday. ... While not denying the use of power within medicine or the profound influences of Foucault’s work, such an explanation cannot account for the transformative, empowering, and ambiguous experiences of anorexia – in short, for the very centrality of relatedness (11).

In this passage, Warin highlights the importance of maintaining a critical relationship to the cultural approach; it is beneficial for challenging mainstream treatment practices and for identifying problematic gendered norms, yet it does not go far enough into the lived experiences of having an eating disorder. The strength of the cultural approach is that it allows us to describe, for example, the competing norms of independence and relatedness as they manifest in eating

disorders. However, it misinterprets its strength by identifying these norms as the immediate causes of eating disorders. Moreover, it fails to attend to the transformative possibilities latent in eating disordered practices. Indeed, it often crushes these possibilities by refusing to engage with the women as subjects at all. When we listen to women with eating disorders, we hear, for example, that it is misguided to treat eating disorders as an extreme form of dieting, that eating disorders are not primarily the result of a quest to be thin, pure, or to reject femininity, and that eating disorder practices are a symptom that tends to cover over their causes (Warin and Gremillion, who each conduct interviews with anorexic women, help to establish these rejections of the cultural account).

### *The Spectacle of Thinness and the Focus on Anorexia*

While traditional accounts identified white, middle- and upper class women as those most likely to develop eating disorders, contemporary studies have proven this data to poorly reflect reality. Eating disorders occur across gender, racial, and class lines. For example, Bordo and Gremillion present evidence that women of color and women from all class backgrounds are significantly susceptible to eating disorders. They argue that racist and classist assumptions, along with differences among communities in relation to healthcare access and trust in mental health providers, are responsible for the faulty belief that eating disorders mainly occurred among well-to-do white women. However, even as these theorists challenge such stereotypes and misconceptions, they continue to reproduce another faulty understanding of eating disorders by focusing upon anorexia (as most of the feminist texts on eating disorders do).

The cultural model, as well as most other feminist approaches to eating disorders, focuses upon anorexia at the expense of more detailed examination of bulimia, binge eating disorder, and

other eating disorders that do not easily fit under the rubric of these three designations (what the medical community refers to as eating disorders not otherwise specified – EDNOS). This tendency is concerning as it fails to map onto the reality of eating disorder distribution – i.e., anorexia is the least common disorder.<sup>44</sup> The discrepancy between what gets theorized and what occurs provides an opportunity for thinking about one of the underlying problems with the cultural approach. That is, this discrepancy is meaningful because it shows up a particularly problematic assumption within the cultural approach; namely, that it mistakes the critique of discourses of thinness for analysis of the meanings or origins of eating disorders.

For example, even as she denies the objection that she is reducing eating disorders “to a simple pursuit of slenderness,” Bordo routinely identifies a quest for thinness and purity as central to anorexic (and other eating disorder practices). She remarks upon the “tyranny of slenderness” noting, “the ‘relentless pursuit of excessive thinness’ is an attempt to embody certain values, to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way” (67, 154). And, she often connects up eating disorders to her own struggles for weight loss, noting that her analysis is “deeply informed by my experiences as a woman who has herself struggled with weight and body-image issues all her life” (32). Warin highlights the importance of challenging the focus on weight exhibited in almost all responses to anorexia in her discussion of the “spectacle of thinness”:<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Susan J. Paxton, in “Labeling ED,” notes: “the eating disorder that attracts the most media attention is anorexia nervosa, although in fact it is the least common disorder” (*Restoring our Bodies, Reclaiming our Lives*, 19). Paxton highlights that most diagnosed with eating disorders best fit into the EDNOS category and that the death rate for bulimia is roughly the same as that of anorexia (20).

<sup>45</sup> Oddly, Warin argues, “people who are underweight or pregnant draw particular attention in ways that people who are equally visible (disabled or overweight) do not” (67). Of course she’s

Despite the differing frameworks (of feminism, medicine, psychology, history, and religion), there were common taken-for-granted representations that underpinned and limited each analysis. Each viewed the person who self-starved or who had a diagnosis of anorexia as striving toward the attainment of thinness. *It was the thin body that was the focus of attention, the marker of illness or of succumbing to patriarchal ideals.* The thin body was the extreme body, and one that provided simultaneous horror and fascination in popular imaginings. ... Focusing on thinness creates a number of problems. It is first a privileging of the visual, of the outsider's, the colonizer's, gaze. ... Focusing solely on this visual spectacle of anorexia continues to position and reproduce the female body as public, as an object to be examined, beholden and always visible ... these representations were too simplistic and did not allow for an understanding of anorexia that included the complexities of gendered, embodied experiences, of the power at work, or of the sense of distinction that came from such a posturing (8-9, emphasis added).

The spectacle of thinness can be seen in the variety of documentaries and news stories that employ images of emaciated women in order to, as Warin notes, engage and horrify the viewer. These representations, which seemingly should have been analyzed by Bordo and Malson, present a partial view of reality. Not all women with eating disorders fit this expectation of extreme thinness. Moreover, even for women who are tremendously thin, the surface reading of their illness fails to get at deeper meanings at work in their eating practices. And, as Warin points out, using thinness to entice viewers merely reproduces objectifying tendencies, which many feminists have taken great pains to identify. I argue that the spectacle of thinness can lead us to focus our studies of eating disorders on the anorexic body in a way that blocks deeper

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right to note the differences in ways that people respond to 'visible' bodies. However, the implication from the passage I took this quotation from is that it is socially acceptable to scrutinize underweight and pregnant women and unacceptable to scrutinize disabled or overweight women. This claim is simply false. Perhaps her lack of these experiences has led her to this claim. Or, perhaps she is subtly reinforcing the notion that there is something more exalted in having an underweight or pregnant body. In the paragraphs following this claim, Warin suggests that it is because anorexia and pregnancy are so close to death and life, respectively, that allow strangers to comment on women with such bodies.

understandings, that fails to get beneath the surface in order to understand the meanings and motivations of disordered eating practices.

Other theorists have challenged the connection between thinness and anorexia (and thinness and eating disorders more broadly), with the central claim that anorexia is not about being thin, that such a view takes anorexics to be cultural dupes, that it fails to account for who will respond to cultural messages with anorexia, and, therefore, that connecting discourses of thinness with the development of anorexia is insulting to anorexic women. And, as Burns argues, the focus on the anorexia and the spectacle of thinness (particularly as structured by the cultural approach) leads us to think of the body as “already produced” rather than thinking through the bodily practices “whose ‘purposes’ might not be to alter the surface of the body, its appearance or shape” (124-5). She notes that the focus on media and discourse analysis, then, fails to consider what it’s like to have an eating disorder, particularly when it focuses on the anorexic’s thin body (125).

Even as certain feminists challenge the “spectacle of thinness,” there is an odd, yet frequent, sense of author’s respect for the “true” anorexic as one who is able to exert an extra-human strength against her appetites through her restricting behavior. This respect is troubling in that it also confuses eating disorders with various Western feminine approaches to food and bodies. Furthermore, there is an implicit ranking (often made explicit in diagnostic material and in the focus on anorexia at the expense of these other eating disorders), wherein anorexia is the purest form, bulimia as the next purest, and EDNOS and binge eating alternating as the least pure forms of eating disorders. There is a relationship here between pathological discourses, the desire to identify the origins and perfect treatments responses to eating disorders, and the focus upon anorexia. Without presuming to be able to identify a single source of these problems, I argue

along with Michael Gard that these seemingly irrational trends arise from a moralizing stance.<sup>46</sup>

That is, the moral repugnance at overweight and obese bodies and the moral concern for underweight and anorexic bodies is not supported by empirical data, but connect up with oppressive norms on weight and food intake.<sup>47</sup>

### *Bulimia as the Crystallization of Consumer Culture*

In a related vein, it is also troubling that many discussions of bulimia, binge-purge anorexia, and binge eating characterize these behaviors as gluttonous, impure, uncontrolled, pleasure seeking, and impulsive. For example, the notion that bulimia is self-indulgent is highly problematic and often repeated in feminist analyses. One example of this tendency is found in Sheila Lintott's claim that "the bulimic devises a plan by which she can enjoy the pleasure without satisfying the actual physical need related to eating" ("Sublime Hunger: Considerations of Eating Disorders Beyond Beauty," 63). Here, Lintott confuses binge eating and purging with unlimited pleasure, seeming to ignore the fact that, over time, these behaviors can lead to serious health deficits and death. Furthermore, she suggests that the bulimic has adopted her practices as a "plan" to provide herself with this unlimited pleasure.

Another example of this trend is found in the article "Feeding the Body," wherein Janet Sayers takes up Bordo's account to describe bulimia as a solution to the mixed messages of Western consumer culture and Western beauty ideals. She remarks: "capitalist expansion also

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<sup>46</sup> Gard, Michael. 2009. "Understanding Obesity by Understanding Desire," in *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/orders*.

<sup>47</sup> Gard has well argued that scientific understandings of weight and obesity more specifically are decidedly unscientific; he points out that obesity "is a category that rests on arbitrary normative judgments about not only what a person should look like but also how they should conduct themselves" (42).

enjoins women and men of all classes to increase its profits by indulging themselves as much as they can as consumers. This arguably contributes to the prevalence of ‘self-indulging’ bulimic bingeing and the remedying of its effects through vomiting” (31). In other words, the bulimic or otherwise non-anorexic woman with an eating disorder is taken to be the extreme consumer; she wants to have her cake, eat it, and then not suffer the fattening consequences of having done so. Even as she places the word ‘self-indulging’ in quotation marks, she cannot escape the criticism that her account fails to make any sense of bulimic practices. The concept of indulgence suggests pleasure, which is far from the experience of bingeing. There is little joy in a terribly stuffed stomach, cramming food into your mouth, inducing vomiting, over-exercising, etc. Indeed, the only way to think about bulimia or binge eating in this way is to employ out-dated, unsupported, non-scientific, and non-experiential analyses of these behaviors. And, lastly, these remarks are even more problematic when we consider the associations of white well-off women with anorexia, and women of color and economically disadvantaged women with bulimia (even as these associations cover over the fact that bulimia and EDNOS are far more prevalent than anorexia). That is, there are racist and classist undertones to the negative remarks about bulimia, which (as far as my readings have gone) remain completely un-interrogated.

Such misinterpretations, akin to the misinterpretation of anorexia as “about” thinness, are more than simply mistakes. They reproduce a context of guilt and shame, wherein the eating disordered woman is cast, by feminists no less, as the most extremely troubled Western woman. She is either utterly duped by conflicting cultural messages, or gluttonous and indulgent in her attempts to satisfy her every desire. These interpretations confuse the surface level for the real meaning, and, actually is confused about the surface level or experience because it is the covering over of the known experience of pain and suffering, which itself covers over what lies

beneath. Burns claims, “this tendency to decipher the *surface* of women’s (‘eating disordered’) bodies in order to unravel their discursive production is one reason for bulimia’s (relative to anorexia) absence within feminist discourse” (127). She argues instead that we need to connect discourse and image analysis with phenomenological investigation, particularly if we want to make sense of bulimia (127).

### *The Aims of Treatment*

A woman with an eating disorder lives in complex relation to the various social norms governing bodies in her culture; she is reproducing, reinterpreting, and rejecting/refusing beliefs about femininity, size, and sexuality, as well as those more particular familial and cultural norms and prohibitions. Multiple, large-scale western institutions (e.g., insurance companies, in-patient treatment centers, 12-step programs, and the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry) respond to her behavior in a manner that generally aims to reorder her relation to these beliefs such that her continued resistance is quite literally futile. Her failure to properly embody the norms, which includes the development of quasi-resistance via individualization (i.e., if she doesn’t stand up to her family and the treatment center, she cannot be well), is chronically labeled. Either she gains weight, follows the rules, and flourishes or she is not well. Within such approaches, the goal of treatment is to restore or recover healthy eating habits, weights, and relationships to food. This has a limiting effect upon the possibilities of transforming one’s relationship to food, bodies, and eating.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Gremillion identifies institutional responses as problematic for women with eating disorders given that they “participate unwittingly in historically specific, dominant cultural discourses of gender, individualism, physical fitness, and family life that help constitute anorexia’s conditions of possibility” (xv). For example, she identifies the belief that “people who are healthy have



Feminists employing the cultural approach have criticized these treatment aims because they reproduce the social conditions that produce eating disorders in the first place. For example, they argue that institutional practices reproduce naturalized accounts of fitness, good mothering, and health – thereby covering over the contentious histories of these ideals of well being and, moreover, re-instilling these ideals into the patient, family, and staff as if they were eternal. In other words, mainstream treatment fails to disrupt or provide new modes of being for women with eating disorders. Interestingly, the aims of the cultural approach – which Sayers describes as the task of “combating the social inequalities” produced by oppressive cultural messages (32) – has its own reproductive role.

Identifying Western beauty norms as the problem of eating disorders is problematic both in that it misidentifies the problem, and in that this misidentification sets up the political goal of eradicating or transforming beauty norms as an ideal solution to eliminating eating disorders. In other words, the cultural approach (given many of the criticisms I’ve addressed in this section) tends to reproduce eating disordered conditions in its responses to these problems. For example, Saukko argues that the cultural model is productive of the same problems it seeks to remedy because it is based upon, “similar normative ideals of strength, independence, and control over the female body that often informed the anorexic’s starving in the first place” (5). She sees this circularity as reproductive of the types of tensions that contribute to one’s adoption of eating disordered practices:

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‘separated and individuated’ from their families of origin (particularly from their mothers), and that autonomous individualism is the linchpin of psychological maturity” (xx). She also remarks, “...elaborate methods of surveillance; its meticulous accounting of patients’ ‘progress’ in terms of body weight, calories consumed, et cetera; its professional sexual politics of caretaking; and even its attention to patients’ psychological ‘development’, family lives, and interpersonal skills all participate in contemporary cultural discourses that help constitute what I am calling anorexia’s conditions of possibility” (22).

Clinical, popular, and even feminist discourses on anorexia seem to ‘help’ anorexics by enabling them to regain weight and health and addressing the underlying psychological and familial issues, harmful discourses, and gendered inequalities. The trouble with this ‘helping’ is that it masks the sheer violence and disrespect embedded in the way in which anorexics are treated in psychiatric environments (33).

In these lines, Saukko alerts the reader to the significant difficulties that women with eating disorders encounter in treatment – even in treatment centers and programs that have been shaped by the cultural account. Women in these centers are frequently silenced, prevented from resisting treatment modalities, and threatened with a variety of punishments if they fail to comply with expectations. These failures are not remedied by the cultural approach, particularly in that it fails to treat these women as active subjects. Instead, Saukko argues that we need to develop responses that much more carefully “listen to anorexic women’s views of the discourses and practices that are allegedly helping them” (34). This need relates us to the last criticism I offer against the cultural approach, which is that it fails to open up transformative possibilities for women with eating disorders.

### *The Failure to Open up Transformative Possibilities*

My overall complaint is that the cultural account is not disruptive enough of eating disordered practices given its focus upon images and discourses at the expense of considering women’s practices. Although it is valuable in its critiques of the medical model and in expanding our understandings of the cultural components of eating disorders, it fails to consider the transformative possibilities of living with an eating disorder. The central failure of the cultural account – the reasons it fails to engender transformation – is that it reproduces a theoretical split between culture and individuals in its failure to consider the body in the world. Whereas mainstream treatment is premised upon the values of independence and autonomy, the cultural

approach is premised upon the belief that individuals are thoroughly constructed by social norms. Neither of these views – that we are ultimately free or ultimately determined – is helpful when we are focused on helping individuals to transform their lives.

We can see this problem more carefully in reflecting on Bordo's claims that eating disorders are, at best, self-defeating protests and, at worst, full-scale capitulations to oppressive social norms (175). She says, "female pathology reveals itself here as an extremely interesting social formation through which one source of potential for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining the established order" (177). This is a strange reading. Setting aside her apparent slip of referring to eating disorders as a female pathology, we can identify in her remark the view that these disorders present a failure to resist oppressive cultural norms. Not only this, as she identifies them as reproductive of these same norms. Perhaps she means to refer here to the institutional responses to eating disorders. However, even in this charitable light, Bordo's remarks are troubling in that she fails to see that even in problematic treatment centers, women with eating disorders are resisting. They are resisting cultural norms about health and beauty, family norms, and the institutional norms. The problem is not that these women are reproducing "the established order," but that Bordo is. In part, her failure arises because she resists engaging with the bodily practices of eating disorders, which provide a much more useful key (than media images) as to the meanings of these behaviors.

Burns discusses the criticism that the techniques of discourse and image analysis fail to consider the "body-as-experienced" (125-8). As she notes, these techniques have been criticized for failing to uncover the eating disordered self; for pathologizing certain women's relations to cultural images and, therefore, as describing women with eating disorders as victims; for overemphasizing the visual body and reinforcing a split between inside and outside; for

privileging representation over experience; and for failing to attend to the differences among those with eating disorders (126-7). The failure to attend to the phenomenological situation – to the body-as-experienced or the body in the world – inhibits our ability to understand the meanings of eating disordered behaviors, as well as how to transform the suffering associated with these behaviors.

To conclude this section, I want to highlight the fact that given that the feminist cultural account is meant to disrupt pathologizing tendencies in the treatment of anorexia, it is surprising to find within it the notion that eating disorders are the result of a pathological culture. In part, we can say that the cultural account misidentifies the problems with mainstream treatment. Rather than identifying the use of pathologizing discourse as the problem, or the split between individuals and society, it challenges the focus upon individuals found within mainstream approaches. Moreover, in identifying anorexia as a failed resistance to social norms of femininity, in reading struggles with eating disorders as demonstrative of the problems of media and discourses on femininity, and in focusing upon the similarities between eating disorders and Western women's typical relations to food and the body, the cultural approach fails to meet the anorexic in her space. As Butler remarks, "the critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death" (*Undoing Gender*, 8). I reproduce her lines here because they help to establish what's wrong with the cultural account, namely, that it fails to situate the cultural reading within the actual lives of those with eating disorders.

### ***Feminist Phenomenological Accounts of Eating Disorders***

One way to conceptualize these problems with the cultural approach is as a general failure to consider the body's role in the production of eating disorders. For example, in response to the concerns about the cultural approach, Burns asks us to consider the value of understanding eating disorders as habitual practices – as bodily activities in the world shaped by (though not determined by) the cultural scripts that serve as the object of analysis for the cultural model (128-9). Taking up eating disorders as practices first and foremost can help to strengthen the cultural account by engendering an understanding of eating disorders as ways of being in the world (129).<sup>49</sup> Feminist theorists have increasingly relied upon phenomenological interpretations of eating disorders, including Courtney Corrado and Megan Warin, who emphasize the lived experience of having an eating disorder and employ phenomenological (or phenomenologically-related) concepts to make sense of these practices. Whereas Corrado thinks about anorexia through the phenomenological concepts of being-there (her interpretation of Heidegger's *Dasein*) and thrownness; Warin employs Julia Kristeva's account of abjection along with Heidegger's concept of the ready-to-hand. I sketch out their positions below, in a movement toward a more phenomenologically-based interpretation of eating disordered behavior.

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<sup>49</sup> The theorists that Burns discusses (e.g., Bray and Colebrook, Squire, and Probyn) still view eating disorders as activities of interests for feminists because they have something to tell us about women in the Western world (129-30). Burns remarks, "I believe that critical feminist work in the field of dis/ordered eating might usefully turn its attention to issues of practice, experience and embodiment, finding ways to research the body as simultaneously 'experienced' and as 'discursively produced', thus providing fruitful avenues for theorising women's (and indeed men's) 'experiences' of their bodies and body management" (130).

### *Corrado and the Daseinsanalysis of Anorexia*

In her dissertation, Corrado takes up an existential and phenomenological approach to theorizing anorexia, one that looks to the “unique and meaningful ways of expressing oneself” at work in anorexic practices (2). She challenges mainstream and feminist approaches to anorexia given her view that they fail to attend to the clients’ experiences, “preferring to leap in” and eliminate anorexic practices (4). She counters this more general approach to anorexia (the “let’s get rid of anorexia” approach) with a highly individualized response that focuses upon uncovering meaning and enhancing agency. In her perspective, phenomenological descriptions of individuals’ lived experiences are more useful than either mainstream or cultural accounts of anorexia because they “give voice” to its suffering and allow for shifts in its practices. She remarks:

The enactment of significance (an individual’s meaning as it is lived out) that anorexia holds for those individuals who choose to express themselves in such a way is powerful yet greatly underrepresented in the literature. This underrepresentation is in part due to the dearth of research that has focused on existential descriptions and understandings of ‘disorders’ (especially of AN). Little attention seems to be paid to the importance of one’s lived experience, or in acknowledging the co-construction of the relationships involved (1-2).

Her approach, identified as Daseinsanalysis, is aimed at “expanding understanding and attunement,” rather than curing, anorexia (3,13).<sup>50</sup> The method of Daseinsanalysis moves away from the notions of individual (or cultural) pathology, and toward a more client-centered

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<sup>50</sup> She notes these pieces given that “the current overall shift in the mental health field is towards embracing an expert mentality and ‘fixing’ rather than appreciating difference. Many of the current ‘best practice’ therapies for eating disorders aim to change thoughts, behaviors, and relationships, rather than understand them. When we leap to pathologize, we essentially de-humanize individuals by reducing them down to a diagnosis, a problem, a ‘patient’, something to be fixed; we should not wonder why we receive resistance” (13-4).

understanding of transformative goals.<sup>51</sup> It allows us to understand eating disorders as ways of making meaning in one's life and not as a pathology that must be eliminated (149). Thus, one's lived experience is the central concern for therapists employing Daseinsanalysis (4-5, 16).<sup>52</sup> The therapeutic aim of exploring one's lived experience is to increase authentic activity and awareness of one's experiences (18). Included in this approach is the belief that clients must "acknowledge, accept and learn from such discomforting experiences as anxiety, guilty, despair and a sense of tragedy" (18).

Corrado posits that eating disorder symptoms "arise out of feeling constricted within the way one has chosen to take up the existential givens" (27). Thus, Daseinsanalysis approaches the individual as a unique being who is thrown into a limited world, and who must struggle with themselves, death, and others in order to make an authentic way in the world (16, 34). The goal of this approach, as Corrado remarks, "is to create space, maintain an open mind, and allow the unfolding of the phenomena to take place" (35). In other words, the aim is to open up possibilities for those suffering from eating disorders rather than to focus on symptom reduction, which is frequently ineffective. In failing to address the patient's particular meanings about food

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<sup>51</sup> Corrado accounts for the origin of Daseinsanalysis as arising from the relationships among Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss (both Swiss psychiatrists), and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's work on human existence provided for Binswanger and Boss an alternative understanding of what is meant to be a human in the world, and was found to be more valuable than traditional psychiatry or Freudian theory in its ability to make sense of the situated human being (19-20). Interestingly, Heidegger was himself engaged in the training of Binswanger's and Boss' students through seminars he gave on the human condition (20).

<sup>52</sup> These givens, or ontological limits, arise from Boss' interpretation of Heidegger's work and are identified as the limits of "temporality, spatiality, coexistence, attunement/mood, mortality, historicity, and bodyhood" (20-1). Corrado takes up Boss's work to demonstrate the ways in which each of these non-negotiables is responded to within eating disordered behavior (21-7).

and eating, symptoms can be reduced without an overall transformation of one's relations to food and eating (87). Thus, symptom reduction fails to address the deeper aspects of eating disorders.

The way out of an eating disorder (if one wants it), is to come to terms with the meanings underlying eating behaviors, to face that one has chosen to live with an eating disorder, and to consider alternative ways of relating to being-in-the-world. Corrado argues that hearing the communication in anorexic practices allows us to identify the meanings associated with eating behaviors (25). As she notes, "one's body is often utilized as a means of expression, for those situations in which words fail to be sufficient. Restricting one's food consumption can be a powerful means of communicating to others that the individual is: compliant, willing to please, destructive, lonely, in pain, depressed, etc." (26-7).<sup>53</sup>

An approach based on the lived experiences of people with eating disorders, counters the cultural approach's inability to make sense of the role of personal history in the development of eating disorders. However, this approach is also productive of anxiety for the practitioner in that it does not offer easy solutions to the problems posed by anorexia (though we can note that there are similar problems with most other therapeutic models). Corrado points out that psychology "seeks to understand, unfold meaning, expand possibilities, and explore alternative ways of *being-in-the-world*" (15). I would note that feminist philosophy has very similar tasks. And, I therefore find it quite interesting that she notes that therapists would need to become "okay without a set structure" (i.e., a manual for treatment) which is difficult in that it "can be incredibly anxiety provoking and may involve taking large risks" (143). I believe that as

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<sup>53</sup> Her view would be aided with an understanding that it is not simply that words fail to communicate, at least not always, often it is the case that there are no words as what is being communicated is not symbolized so that the person suffering from eating disorders is not yet able to communicate what she is experiencing through language – this connects up with Kelly Oliver's thoughts on witnessing, which I touch upon in the next chapter.



clinicians or theorists we do need to become more okay with being ill at ease, especially as the desire for certainty and control has neither brought about a definitive understanding of eating disorders nor has it led to better outcomes for patients. It seems that these fears, associated with a loss of control or predictability, are a necessary piece of working with someone attempting to transform her life – whether as a therapeutic partner or as a more detached theorist of these illnesses.

### *Warin and the Everydayness of Anorexia*

Warin employs an even more rigorously phenomenological method for thinking about the everydayness of being an anorexic. Her aim is to develop a more complex understanding of the origins and operations of anorexic practices than provided by the feminist cultural account. She wants to “reimagine anorexia” given her view that:

If we start to understand anorexia as an issue primarily concerned with local idioms of relatedness and abjection, then a broader conceptualization can occur. Anorexia, as the people in this study repeatedly argues, is not solely concerned with food and weight but is fundamentally concerned with issues of relatedness: of relationships with oneself, people, and objects in the world. Anorexia allowed participants to reformulate these relationships. Through a range of cleansing and ritualized practices, anorexia offers a way of managing abject relations, while simultaneously providing new and powerful forms of relatedness. It is when we take this broader approach that we can see how experiences and treatments don’t match up (187).

In this passage, Warin reminds us that when we view anorexia as primarily pertaining to one’s weight and desire to be thin, we are ill prepared to respond to it in any transformative fashion. From her perspective, anorexia is a complex set of practices that allowed “users” to manage the interactions with the outside world (or, perhaps we might say, with distinctions between the inside and outside of bodies). The anorexic manages her relations with others and objects by creating various boundaries – e.g., not allowing certain foods in, performing rituals

that ease interactions with family members, and so forth. Her interviews produce a deeply embodied description of anorexia, which casts it as a set of practices related to the management of individuals' relatedness, feelings of disgust and abjection, and lack of ease with being-in-the-world. For example, she demonstrates the significance of relatedness in anorexia by describing the ways in which anorexics refuse, revile, long for, and go after particular relations with self and others, as well as how many of the relations taken for granted by others were encountered as "dirty and disgusting and feared for their threatening, yet desired, potentialities" (3).<sup>54</sup>

Here, we can relate these ideas back to Burns' position that we need to get beyond the surface view that the cultural approach engenders. Warin's argument expands and incorporates the cultural approach. She is in search of a cultural understanding of anorexia that takes seriously the relations among bodies, norms, and academic discourses without reproducing the view that anorexia is "the epitome of a Western obsession with individualism, self-control, and autonomy and offers an alternative understanding" (2).<sup>55</sup>

From her interviews, Warin came to find that anorexia was "more than a medical diagnosis; it was, among many things, an empowering state of being, a friend, an enemy, and a

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<sup>54</sup> She notes that her book "explores what was considered abject (objects, spaces, and bodies); the embodied, visceral responses to this (simultaneous horror and fascination); and the practices by which people desired, cast out, and removed the abject. Things considered abject, including fats, bodily processes, public spaces, and relationships, were distanced, negated, cleansed, and purged in an attempt to remove their threat. While clinicians saw these practices as symptomatic of a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa, those who practices them understood them as entitlements to anorexia, a process interwoven with revulsion and desire" (5).

<sup>55</sup> In her review of Warin's text, Gremillion claims that "Warin shows that the privileging of texts and discourse in analyses of anorexia has resulted in narrow and misleading understandings that miss key lived and felt corporeal practices and meanings ... rather than reading anorexia as a fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, as so-called regression from adult femininity, or as an exaggeration of commonsense nutritional advice, Warin shows that the properties and visceral experiences of foods, fluids, sexuality, and digestion are meaningfully engaged through abject relations" (252-4).

way of life” (7). Thus, she was able to identify anorexic practices as complex methods for negotiating one’s way through a variety of social relations. And, her interviews allowed her to account for the creation of new social relations (what she calls “new forms of relatedness”) associated with anorexic practices, including “concealment of anorexic practices from family, medical staff, and friends), secrecy and competitiveness with other in-patients, friendships forged through sharing a common diagnosis, and the personification of anorexia as a friend, an abusive lover, a parent, a child, the devil in disguise, or an enemy” (4).

In her work, Warin identifies the detailed behaviors surrounding food preparation and eating for people with anorexia (58-9). For example, she identifies various practices and effects, such as a preoccupation with “the characteristics and effects of food, with the exact caloric and fat content of every fluid and food,” the meticulous recording of all that was ingested, and the ways in which foods served as “a powerful trigger for painful emotions, memories, and sensations” (53). And, she remarks upon the ways in which individuals: “agonized over every detail of food: the thought of eating, when and where to eat, what to eat, how to avoid sharing food, and what to eat first, second, and last on their plate,” as well as the ways in which they failed to “feel at home in their own bodies, characterizing their bodies as alien, strange, and unfamiliar, yet intimately known” (56, 58). These descriptions are invaluable for developing an account of the everyday practices, the difficulties in shifting these practices, and the characteristic affects associated with these difficulties.

Another of Warin’s important insights has to do with her use of Heidegger’s notion of the ready-to-hand to characterize the differences between typical, taken for granted relations to food and eating and those of individuals with eating disorders (51-8). Whereas individuals without eating disorders become aware of their eating behaviors only in the face of a breakdown or

disruption, those with eating disorders were in a constant reflective attitude toward their behaviors (even as they were most often unreflective of what we might call the underlying reasons for these behaviors). She takes from this that, “as long as the ‘ready-to-hand’ piece of equipment works properly, it is hidden from view and unthematized” (55). As well, she notes that once we become aware of one of our ways of being-in-the-world, we are able to uncover “the meaning that is made intelligible through the linguistic and cultural skills and practices supplied by the world” (55). This connects up with my discussion of the role of disruption in opening up transformative possibility – disruption allows for us to make sense of our ways of being in the world that have otherwise gone unremarked.

### ***The Habitual Body and Eating Disorders***

Warin and Corrado expand our understandings of anorexia through their use of phenomenological analysis, which disrupts the tendencies to identify anorexia as either an individual or social pathology. However, each stays within the confines of anorexia, failing to take account of the ways in which this tendency undermines transformative efforts (i.e., they fail to think about the most common eating disorders). Moreover, it is necessary to expand upon their works to clarify the ways in which phenomenological analysis can attune us to the embodied nature of eating disorders without foreclosing examination of how these behaviors relate to larger social meanings and processes. Therefore, I argue that we need to incorporate understanding of the habitual nature of the bodily practices that constitute eating disorders, along with the difficulties of disrupting these practices.

Eating disorders are first and foremost bodily practices. Whereas the cultural account over-generalizes these practices (frequently by solely attending to anorexia), a phenomenological

account directs us to the unique ways in which individuals with eating disorders behave. Among those with eating disorders, there is great variation in how and what one eats, whether and how purging activities factor into the disorder, and so forth. Given that these behaviors or practices constitute the disorder, it is necessary to attend to the variations if we hope to provide relief. For example, what we come to learn about anorexia is useful for thinking about bulimia – but it is not tailored enough to the particularities of bulimia to negate the need for distinct study. In other words, the differences among those with eating disorders matter.

As discussed in chapter 2, repetitive actions sediment into habits and habitudes. As they sediment, individuals lose access to the meanings behind their practices (if, indeed, the meanings were clear in the beginning). Of course, this alerts us to the central value of the cultural account that I have been criticizing – that it identifies a variety of the social norms at play in eating disordered behavior. However, many of the meanings at work cannot be easily teased out of social norms; the ways in which individuals take up social meaning are complicated by the specificities of their family relations, personality traits, social locations, and so forth. In other words, the individual's uniqueness matters. And, this is not only true of the meanings, origins, or reasons for one's eating disordered practices. It is equally true of the actual practices; as discussed above, these practices can vary greatly across individuals. Therefore, while Warin's insights are extremely useful in constructing a more phenomenological response to eating disorders, they are not enough (a view with which I believe she would agree).

Attunement to individual's practices and the meanings at play (which can be uncovered through various disruptive activities) is necessary for the development of transformative responses to eating disorders. As is consideration of these various disruptive techniques, which include slowing down habitual activity, getting individual's to talk at length about their practices,

encouraging individual's to reflect upon their behavior (even if they initially need to follow this reflection with the habitual repetition), techniques of mindfulness, practices of witnessing and working-through (as discussed by Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing*), encouraging one to fantasize about the history and meaning of her practices. These techniques are connected in that they function to create what we might call a transitional space – one that opens up the possibility of doing things otherwise. They are also related in that none entails a view of transformation as an all-or-nothing process. One does not become new in overnight; if this were the case there would be little philosophical interest in the questions of freedom and agency. These techniques help to disrupt the sedimented quality of eating disorder practices. While they can, therefore, give rise to tremendous anxiety, this anxiety is far more manageable than the type associated with the all-or-nothing approach employed in many treatment centers.

Phenomenological theories on the habitual body help us to think about the nature of repetition in terms of its lived experience. In this regard, the value of incorporating knowledge of the habitual body is multiple. It allows us to think about the bodily and practice-based aspects of living with an eating disorder. It helps us to identify ways of disrupting these habits, without radically eliminating one's way of being in the world. It can help us to establish or reestablish one's desire for the future by allowing us to demonstrate the transformative possibilities entailed in eating disordered behavior. By incorporating analysis of the habitual body into feminist theories of eating disorders, we disrupt the interpretation of these disorders as *produced by* oppressive cultural norms concerning bodies, weight, and femininity.

When we consider the bodily practices of various eating disorders, and help individuals give voice to the meanings of these practices, we are better equipped to transform these practices into ways of being that are less associated with suffering and death. Julia Kristeva identifies

anorexia as a malady of the soul associated with one's not having found their desire, remarking on the need for analysts to "restor[e] access to the patient's desires in order to free him from his symptoms" (8-9).<sup>56</sup> These techniques of disrupting habitual activity are foundational to such a restoration of desire in that they open up the question of just what is it that the patient hopes to achieve through her eating disorder. And, as I've argued, a focus on the genesis, everydayness, and transformation of bodily habitudes allows us to consider the interactions between and among individuals, communities, and institutions. In turning toward its habitual nature, we are even better prepared to negotiate the relations between individuals and social norms as they manifest in eating disorders.

Phenomenological investigation of eating disorders, when grounded by the concept of the habitual body, is multiply beneficial. Such investigation allows us to: 1) listen to patients, 2) help those who find themselves stuck, 3) avoid speaking for those who do not want to shift their behaviors, while still providing resources that might just transform their attitudes toward food, bodies, and eating, 4) negotiate the individual and social aspects of eating disorders, 5) accommodate great differences without giving up the possibility of responding to eating disorders, 6) address the suffering, both physical and mental, associated with eating disorders, 7) to open up transformative possibilities without insisting upon a totalizing view of health, normality, etc., and 8) employ a more sophisticated response to medical interventions.

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<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, Julia. 1998. "Psychoanalysis and Freedom" (Trans. Charles Levin), *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis/Revue canadienne de psychanalyse*; 7(1).

### ***Concluding Remarks: Pathology, Suffering, and the Future***

In conclusion, I want to reflect upon the problems with the concept of pathology as employed by both mainstream treatment providers and proponents of the feminist cultural account of eating disorders. As Georges Canguilhem argues in his text, *The Normal and the Pathological*, the concepts of normality and pathology make sense only when situated as a relation between an individual and its environment (broadly construed).<sup>57</sup> Thus, where both mainstream and cultural accounts of eating disorders go wrong is that they take up either the individual or the environment – and not both. For Canguilhem, an individual is normal in an environment “insofar as it is the morphological and functional solution found by life as a response to the demands of the environment” (144). In this view, a woman with an eating disorder can most certainly be understood as normal – dependent upon her ability to persist in the world.

Importantly, Canguilhem does not offer these claims in support of “a relativity of health and disease so confusing that one does not know where health ends and disease begins” (182). Rather, he remarks that the individual must be the “judge” between the normal and the pathological, “because it is he who suffers from it from the very moment he feels inferior to the tasks which the new situation imposes on him” (182). In other words, identifying an individual’s behavior as pathological from the outside, particularly doing so without attending to her environment, fails to understand what’s at stake in these judgments. He notes, “the sick person must always be judged in terms of the situation to which he is reacting and the instruments of

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<sup>57</sup> He remarks, “taken separately, the living being and his environment are not normal: it is their relationship that makes them such” (143). And, “there is no fact which is normal or pathological in itself” because “the pathological is not the absence of a biological norm: it is another norm but one which is comparatively speaking, pushed aside by life” (144).



action which the environment itself offer him” (188). What renders someone sick, in this view, is the loss of her “capacity to establish other norms in other conditions” (183). I take this to mean that when one loses the ability to act and react to the environment (e.g., when one cannot transform), that the concept of pathology makes some sense of her situation. Here, we might we say that he is presenting a view of pathology or disorder highly attuned to suffering that arises when one finds oneself incapable of transformation.

Interestingly, Canguilhem goes on to discuss sickness as a valuable aspect of transformative possibility, remarking:

Disease is a positive, innovative experience in the living being and not just a fact of decrease or increase. ... The more or less large reduction of these innovation possibilities is a measure of the seriousness of the disease. As far as health in the absolute sense is concerned, it is nothing other than the initial boundless capacity to institute new biological norms. ... What characterizes health is the possibility of transcending the norms, which defines the momentary normal, the possibility of tolerating infractions of the habitual norm and instituting new norms in new situations (196-7).

These lines relate to my position of the transformative possibilities latent in eating disordered practices. The serious health problems associated with eating disorders can cause tremendous difficulties for individuals. In this sense, medical intervention can be a necessity. However, within these practices there is the possibility for one to become new, a possibility that requires enough of a disruption of these practices that their meanings come to light. The possibility for health – or a renewed ability to experience joy, bring about desired outcomes, create new relationships, and direct oneself into the future – requires that the resistance contained in eating disordered practices be brought out. While Bordo is right to be worried about an overly optimistic reading of these behaviors, with help there is great potential for resistance within them. And, the ability to tolerate the anxiety that arises when one’s habitual practices are disrupted is a necessary piece of bringing out this potential. From the ashes of her disordered

practices, one can develop more authentic ways of being in the world – and these possibilities are lost when we respond to eating disorders with a recovery model (one that attempts to reinstate oppressive norms of femininity).<sup>58</sup>

Despite his tendency to engage in discourse on pathology, Merleau-Ponty's account of (what I refer to as) "hiding away" is quite useful in opening up new approaches to eating disorders. In his discussion of sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he rejects the interpretation that anorexia constitutes a "refusal of life" noting, such practices are more accurately a "refusal of others or refusal of the future, torn from the transitive nature of 'inner phenomena', generalized, consummated, transformed into *de facto* situations" (190). Certain habitus suggest a "discarding" of our existence – a "making [oneself] anonymous and passive" – but they still connect one to the world and others as it is impossible to cut all social ties ("the body never quite falls back on to itself") (190).<sup>59</sup> Through these activities we manifest our anxieties concerning connectedness and our future-directedness in the bodily symptom in which we intend to hide away (190). Thus, the bodily symptom is less a pathology, a more a historically based and habitual way of being in the world.

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<sup>58</sup> In relation to prior discussions concerning the need to withstand anxiety, Canguilhem remarks: "the morbid concern to avoid situations which might eventually generate catastrophic reactions expresses the conservation instinct. According to [Goldstein], this instinct is not the general law of life but the law of a withdrawn life. The healthy organism tries less to maintain itself in its present state and environment than to realize its nature. This requires that the organism, in facing risks, accepts the eventuality of catastrophic reactions. The healthy man does not flee before the problems posed by sometimes sudden disruptions of his habits, even physiologically speaking; he measures his health in terms of his capacity to overcome organic crises in order to establish a new order" (200).

<sup>59</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, "for the patient, nothing further happens, nothing assumes meaning and form in life, or more precisely there occurs only a recurrent and always identical 'now', life flows back on itself and history is dissolved in natural time" (191). It is only once we re-open ourselves to our temporality and connectedness that this meaning returns.

## CHAPTER 5: THEORIZING TRANSFORMATION

### *Introduction: The Politics of Theory*

The analysis of theories on eating disorders presented in the last chapter demonstrates the value of thinking about transformation in terms of its bodily possibilities – particularly I argued that an incorporation of the concept of the habitual body allows us to connect social critique with the individual's difficulties of becoming new. For example, thinking through the habitual body allows us to disrupt the given quality of social norms surrounding food, eating, and bodies *and* to consider the difficulties that such disruptions give rise to. The value of thinking in terms of the habitual body is that it brings us back into awareness of our practices – their origins, meanings, and so forth – and helps us to understand how difficult it is to do things differently. Thus, the analysis of eating disorder theories connects up with my larger point that a feminist thinking about transformation requires the ability to understand how it is that bodies both engender and inhibit the possibility of newness.

In the first part of the chapter, I demonstrated how the feminist cultural approach to eating disorders failed to provide transformative possibility given that it foreclosed discussion of the differences among those with these disorders, as well in that it neglected any future-directed reading of their practices. From the cultural perspective, eating disorders can only be encountered as the results of pathological norms and ideologies surrounding femininity. With such a view, feminists are left with the task of eliminating pathological elements of culture and replacing them with, dare we say, healthy norms about women's bodies and the like. However, proponents of this view neglect to tell us just what types of norms would be ideal for women; the cultural approach is stuck at the level of critique – it can tell us what is wrong with culture, but not how to right it (beyond insisting upon the already well-founded feminist position that

patriarchal cultural norms need to be eradicated). In this regard, the politics associated with the cultural account are rather emaciated for my taste.

Although description and interpretation are significant feminist tasks (a position I take up below), they must leave room for thinking about how to become new given the constraints of external reality. Thus, I focused upon how an approach to eating disorders grounded in the habitual body allows us to think very carefully about how individuals can become new in relation to their eating practices. In this sense, analysis of the habitual body serves as a tool, one that opens up space for thinking about alternative ways of being (given that it allows us to disrupt the given quality of our habits), as well as the serious difficulties that bringing these alternative ways of being into existence engenders (in that it forces us to think about the ways that habits situate us in terms of ease and anxiety).

And, while I have emphasized the importance of thinking about transformation through the concept of the habitual body, this is not the only tool I support for the development of feminist political activity. Indeed, as I discussed in the first chapter, I understand intersectional analysis as a tool for thinking about multiple oppressions – and, more importantly, as a tool for responding to these oppressions. Intersectional analysis is another feminist tool for engendering transformation, which takes the differences among women and the open-endedness of the future seriously (in that it directs itself toward specific political problems and not a broader program of social transformation). The most significant difference between habitual body analysis and intersectional analysis, as I see it, is that the former pertains most closely to (what I called in the introduction) personal transformation while the latter is most often associated with larger social transformation. Both of these aspects of feminist transformation are necessary – and, indeed, we might note that both of these aspects show up in intersectional analysis and habitual body

analysis (i.e., the differences surrounding individual *vs.* social transformation pertain more to the emphasis that each approach takes). These remarks lead me to consider a set of criticisms that would challenge these theoretical tools for not being broad enough to respond to all feminist problems (an aim, it should be clear, that I would hope to disrupt).

At the “Thinking Intersectionality” Symposium, held this April at Michigan State University (2013), Kimberlé Crenshaw responded to several of the criticisms directed at intersectional analyses. Among her remarks, I was most struck by her response to the criticism that while intersectional analysis might be of some service to Black women, it cannot service women as a group. Crenshaw connects this criticism to the very same problem that motivated her work in the first place, i.e., she notes that it functions to treat Black women’s experiences of oppression as so distinct from feminist concerns as to constitute these experiences as unrelated to the general interests of feminist analysis and politics.

Underlying this criticism is a confusion concerning the intent of intersectional analyses, as well as the differences between identity and subjectivity.<sup>60</sup> An intersectional approach is not meant to attend to all the various pieces that constitute an individual’s identity; instead, it allows us to consider the complex interworking of multiple systems of oppression such that the ways in which, for example, sexism and racism combine to produce injustices that singular accounts of sexism or racism cannot account for. And, whereas identity is decidedly unique given

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<sup>60</sup> Crenshaw’s intersectionality allows us to employ social categories of identity without erasing intra-group difference; positing these categories as universal, ahistorical, or fixed; barring from the start an analysis of the relation between power, privilege and these categories; or ignoring that these social categories often have oppressive *and* non-oppressive qualities (1294-9). Because intersectionality functions to bring differences into view without positing any absolute criteria for group identity, it allows us to identify and theorize people’s real life experiences of oppression without having to marginalize those whose experiences fail to map neatly onto a singular identity category.

individual's particular and complex experiences, our subjectivity can be theorized in more general terms without thereby denying this uniqueness. There are important shared experiences of injustice that require generalization in order to facilitate social responses. If feminism is to continue as a set of theoretical and political practices, the ability to distinguish between the uniqueness of individuals and the shared experiences of oppression is of central importance.

I want to clarify that the politics of becoming new that I have considered throughout this writing does not rely upon this confusion (between identity and subjectivity). In fact, I would argue that the criticism that intersectional analysis prevents us from considering the multiple ways in which women are situated in the world is itself symptomatic of the very problems that a politics of becoming new is meant to address. For example, this criticism is grounded in a quest for certainty – it devalues intersectional analysis because it cannot account for every woman's unique experiences. In this regard, a politics of becoming new responds that no theory, theoretical tool, or political strategy could account for this uniqueness. Indeed, it is absurd to think that theory or politics should attend to each and every person's singularity (which is not to suggest that singularity itself cannot be thought about). Nor could our theoretical or political approaches establish a foundational commonality across women's differences such that we could know with any degree of certainty what is needed to eliminate oppression.

While certain universal claims – e.g., that women are oppressed and should not be – have a place in feminist practices (in that they establish the utopian horizon discussed in the first chapter), we cannot universalize our responses to sexism (lest we repeat troubling political strategies that function to marginalize). The relations among women, the functions of sexism, its interrelationship with other modes of oppression, and the political demands established by these realities are historical and dynamic. I see great value in intersectional analysis because it arises

out of a deep understanding of the history of oppression, attends to concrete experiences of oppression and injustice, and does so with a narrow (which is not to say insignificant) political scope. And, because of this, it allows us to make sense of experiences of oppression such that we can communicate them (e.g., to legal institutions) and strategize our responses. In my view, it provides concrete possibilities of becoming new without suggesting that these are the possibilities all women need to have opened up. Because of this, even if intersectional analysis was only useful in clarifying the relations among racism and sexism – a claim I do not hold – it would still constitute a highly important piece of feminist transformative work.

Throughout these chapters, I have sought to demonstrate the value of understanding feminist transformation as the opening up of possibilities in time. The limits established by oppressive social relations, as well as their effects on individual freedom, vary widely depending upon one's position in complex social networks. That is, as Butler argues throughout *Gender Trouble*, there is no one central experience of sexism. Various, oppression functions to limit access to material goods, career prospects, self-respect and self-esteem, socially sanctioned love relations, and so forth. A theory-wide focus on any one of these limits at the expense of others fails to bring about widespread feminist transformation. In other words, no one of these limits is more important than another for feminism as a whole – even if some of our tools and political strategies are suited better to addressing one over others. And, as theories of intersectionality have shown, a singular focus on sexist oppression minimizes understanding of the ways in which the experiences of being a woman are multiply determined by one's location in other social categories. Feminism cannot be just about gender, just as it cannot be just about material equality or legal equality.

What is called for is an understanding of how oppressive limits come to take hold of individuals in such a way that resistance is highly circumscribed. Without implying that the habitual body is the only or most important aspect of blocked resistance, I have argued that thinking about feminist transformation through the habitual body opens up new feminist theoretical and political possibilities. Such thinking about transformation identifies as a central goal the opening up of possibilities in the face of oppression (particularly in the face of oppressive social norms as they are taken up by individuals). In the following pages, I explore certain related pieces (or tools, strategies, so forth) that strengthen analysis of the habitual body, with the hope that these discussions will clarify the deeply social components of thinking about transformation in terms of our habituality.

### ***Description and Interpretation as Politics***

Although I have criticized the cultural approach to eating disorders for its failure to open up transformative possibilities, it is important to understand the significance of description and interpretation (which is, in many ways, at the heart of Bordo's work). Feminist theory and politics require an understanding of how things have been and what that means for our present and future possibilities. Thus, I have repeatedly noted that there is value in the cultural approach in that it clarifies important pieces of social reality. Transformation becomes possible in relation to our understanding of history – both broad social history and personal history – an understanding that is premised upon our abilities to describe and interpret the past. One of the future directions of this work, then, is to consider how phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and feminist social theory work together to provide for a rich understanding of our history.



All of which is to say, historicizing is a significant piece of the work of thinking about transformation through the habitual body. Our habituality functions by sedimenting the various social, cultural, and familial norms and ideologies that gave rise to these practices in the first place. And, given that we are habitual creatures, we will continue to sediment these views. In this regard, our work is cyclical or never-ending. There is a constant (perhaps continuous) need to disrupt that which has become sedimented, particularly the sediment that inhibits our abilities to do things differently. One of the most significant lessons we learn from feminist philosophy is that we must foster the ability to return and return to the past, in the hopes of developing greater understanding (which is greater in that it is more fitting for a particular time, not because it has achieved the status of “Truth”).

We can turn, here, to Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the paradox of doxa for an interesting account of the type of work that is necessary to break the spell of the given – to open up transformative possibilities. Toward the end of *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu relates the paradox of doxa, the curious fact that oppressive social beliefs are met with very little resistance despite the fact that they significantly limit possibility, to what he calls the historical labor of dehistoricization (82). This concept of the historical labor of dehistoricization refers to labor that erases historical marks from social practices such that relations of domination persist as seemingly natural human relations. Bourdieu explains the operations of dehistoricization in some detail in the following passage:

In fact, it is clear that the eternal, in history, cannot be anything other than the product of a historical labour of eternalization. It follows that, in order to escape completely from essentialism, one should not try to deny the permanences and the invariants, which are indisputably part of historical reality; but, rather, one must *reconstruct the history of the historical labour of dehistoricization*, or, to put it another way, the history of the continuous (re)creation of the objective and subjective structures of masculine domination, which has gone on permanently so long as there have been men and women, and through which the masculine order

has been continuously reproduced from age to age. In other words, a ‘history of women’ which brings to light, albeit despite itself, a large degree of constancy, permanence, must, if it wants to be consistent with itself, give a place, and no doubt, the central place, to the *history of the agents and institutions, which permanently contribute to the maintenance of these permanences* (82-3).

Bourdieu is arguing that a social practice can only appear eternal or essential in the case that human activity has produced this eternal quality. Social labor is the source of our beliefs in the naturalness of certain practices; without this labor such practices would be much more readily available for critique, historicization, and resistance (i.e., their historical marks would be identifiable). And, he makes an interesting point that rather than try to demonstrate that masculine domination has not always functioned as it does now, feminists need to write the history of the ways in which certain forms of labor are constantly at work dehistoricizing. In other words, feminists need to identify the social practices that produce the sense that women and men are naturally different and that social distinctions between the two merely follow from these natural differences. There is a history behind the belief in men and women’s natural differences. Not only must this be uncovered, but we must also uncover the contemporary work that functions to keep this history alive even in the face of significant feminist disruption. Though Bourdieu is too quick to cast off conscious raising projects as a part of this historical work, his views are important given that they serve to remind us of the continuous need for historicizing work.

Additionally, we can think of his remarks in relation to what I’ve been saying about the habitual body, particularly about its sedimentation and disruption. Habits function given their disconnection from our conscious awareness. Bringing our actions back into awareness – uncovering their history, challenging their naturalness – is necessary. In this sense, consciousness raising remains a significant piece of feminist transformation. However, the

movement from conscious awareness into action has not received enough attention. It is my hope that thinking about transformation in relation to habits and the habitual body aids in bringing this movement into the forefront of feminist concerns.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler troubles our ability to make sense of where we are while also conceiving of ourselves as open-ended subjects. She comments, “the temporal paradox of the subject is such that, of necessity, we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming” (30). I find this interesting given her next line, which describes becoming as “an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete” (30). In the first line, Butler distinguishes between two temporal conceptions of the subject, the subject at present (“already formed”) and the subject toward the future (the subject as becoming). Of course, this distinction is far from original – e.g., we can map it onto the existentialist’s immanence and transcendence. What is interesting is her assertion that we must necessarily lose the former if we are to understand the latter, a position that seems at odds with her understanding of becoming as the compelled yet open-ended repetition of the already formed subjectivity.

In other words, as I have argued throughout, one becomes through her habitual reenactments that imperfectly reproduce the social norms that constituted her as a subject in the first place. Thus, there is no thinking about becoming or becoming new without the perspective of the subject already formed. In order to think about our becoming, we must be able to account for our present, which itself requires an account of the past. We cannot theorize transformational possibilities without this perspective, even as transformative efforts seek to disrupt it to some degree. An account of becoming require us to give up the perspective of a subject as unformed or finally formed, while the practices of becoming new require us to disrupt the naturalness of

ourselves at present (e.g., the sense that we are static or stable, that there is a true or core self, etc.). In this regard, Butler is mistaken to suggest that we cannot make sense of ourselves as transformative beings while we keep hold of the view of ourselves at this moment (we might note her work does not seem to take up this faulty account of the subject's temporal paradox).

The value of noting this mistake is that it gives rise to consideration of the ways in which theoretical reflection, in the forms of description and interpretation, connect up with the future-oriented work on becoming. We do not need to separate the historical work of description and interpretation from the future-directed work of thinking about transformative possibility. Indeed, to do so would suggest that one could not think about the habitual body at all (given its interesting temporality whereby the past lives on in the present and opens up the future). As Grosz argues in the conclusion to *The Nick of Time*: “history remains a political force” because it is “the site for the unraveling of the givenness of the present” (253). History shows up the naturalness of the present, that what we take as natural is temporal and temporary. It also presents alternative ways of being in the world, that what we take as natural has been and, therefore, could be otherwise. And, I would add that history allows us to think about otherness itself, or freedom as the possibility of doing things otherwise (where the exact nature of this otherwise activity is left open).

In *Retrieving Experience*, Kruks identifies the phenomenological approach to theorizing as one constituted by an “open-ended attempt to describe our experiences, while as far as possible ‘bracketing’ our prior preconceptions” – it is an activity often constituted by the tasks of description and interpretation (8). She notes the value of this approach for feminist theory is that it “enables us to destabilize commonly held or naturalized attitudes and assumptions that are constitutive of gender relations, and it opens up valuable spaces for new ways of seeing and

understanding” (8). I’ve championed the phenomenological concept of the habitual body in that it not only allows us to disrupt the given, but also in that analysis of the habitual body helps us to see how the given tends to get sedimented in the first place. In other words, this concept is valuable for thinking about transformation because it disrupts temporal distinctions (or, paradoxes). If we want to think about future possibilities, we need to understand present possibilities, limits on possible ways of being, and the historical movements that gave rise to these circumstances. Just as we unnecessarily limit ourselves if we only think of the habitual body in terms of the ease with which it opens up the future for us, we do so if we think that transformational theory requires us to reject the historicizing project that helps to constitute feminist theory.

Kruks raises an important question of how to move beyond mere critique (one of my concerns with the feminist cultural account of eating disorders) – asking if feminist theory and practice “can sustain those ethical, indeed utopian, impulses that are integral to a politics of social transformation such as feminism” without falling back onto formal or universal principles (14). Rather than relying upon formal principles, she notes that feminism:

Affirms ‘lived’ values: values that are submerged and tacit yet ‘disclosed’ in its practices. But these still inform its ethical horizon, its utopian impulses. They imply that – however complex and difficult they may be in practice to untangle – oppression, injustice, and subordination are still morally unacceptable. Thus feminism is still necessary today, as a politics committed to a range of practical struggles in which such values as justice, respect, recognition, and freedom are implicit. There can be a peculiar purism to a postmodernism that prefers to avoid ‘dirty hands’ by taking the high ground of critique, disclosing the power effects of utopias, emancipatory narratives, and practical projects, instead of accepting their risks and ambiguity. We need to distinguish better between those grand ideological utopian projects that, in the name of dogmatic claims about the future, have tried violently to force the world to conform to their goals, and those horizons of possibility, or longings for the ‘wholly other’, that can guide more open projects of emancipation (Kruks, 15-6).

The value of these remarks is that they help us to think about how to theorize in politically relevant manners; at the very least her words remind us that critique in and of itself is not transformative. And, while I am not sure that the image of “dirty hands” is the most useful description of how to construct truly political theory, it is understandable given Kruks’ fear that the threat of being labeled essentialist has led many feminists away from real political thinking.

We can challenge feminist transformative projects that aim to overhaul broad social realities (e.g., the legal, economic, or education systems) without further insisting that feminist theory abandon the task of making sense of these realities. Indeed, descriptions of these larger realities is fundamental given both that we must understand the present if we hope to change it and, to adopt Kruks’ language, that utopian horizons (entailed in these descriptions) help us to understand how present social relations inhibit a freedom that is not yet. Rather than criticizing theories that focus upon broad social realities, I challenge the movement from this type of theorizing to the development of a feminist political program. In contrast to such political strategizing, I have argued along with Grosz in support of a politics of uncertainty, which I have thought about in terms of opening up the possibilities for becoming new.

### ***Working-Through and Transformation***

In the last chapter, I argued that to identify behaviors such as anorexia as the crystallization of pathological culture is to misinterpret their functions particularly in relation to the future-directedness of these practices. More generally, I take issue with such explanations in that they fail to open up new ways of being for those suffering. In part, this is because feminist theories aimed at identifying and establishing treatment modalities for so-called gendered pathologies – particularly theories allied with addiction studies – do not adequately address the

importance of fostering our ability to withstand and work through bodily anxiety. These abilities are central to feminist theoretical work on transformation (just as they are for individuals trying to become new). When we reflect upon relations to gender norms and our anxiety at breaking up the sedimented ways we have, we are better situated to identify central problems in our becoming new. However, my concerns extend beyond an individual's ability to transform her relation to gender norms, as I am interested in understanding the ways in which our theoretical practices participate in engendering and blocking such transformation.

One of the theoretical fields that most carefully thinks about anxiety in the context of transformative action is psychoanalysis, which Julia Kristeva describes as work that allows for an “*elaborating and working through the psyche*, to allow a self-renewal at each internal or external challenge” (8-9, emphasis added).<sup>61</sup> For Kristeva, the techniques of psychoanalysis are valuable for engendering transformation because they aim at the opening up of possibility (in the broad sense I have been discussing throughout this work). She remarks:

Let us say it without false modesty: no other modern experience, apart from psychoanalysis, offers such a prospect for recommencing psychic life, and thus, in a sense, life as such—in the opening up of choices that secures the manifold capacity for relationships (*liens*). This version of freedom is perhaps the most precious, and most serious, gift that psychoanalysis has given to humanity. [It] alone is willing to take on—and sometimes even to win—this wager on the possibility of a new beginning (12).

She continues on to describe analytic discourse as:

A constant process of questioning. I have had occasion to describe elsewhere how *questioning*, or *putting into question* (which have nothing to do with posing questions or answering them) is the method par excellence of expression in psychoanalysis, the logical equivalent of castration—if this fantasy is understood as the realization of lack, uncertainty, and infinite regress, which constitute the fundamental split in the psyche (15).

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<sup>61</sup> Kristeva, Julia. 1998. “Psychoanalysis and Freedom” (Trans. Charles Levin), *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis/Revue canadienne de psychanalyse*; 7(1).

In these passages, I understand Kristeva to be saying that in disrupting our sense of the given, by taking away 'it's natural' as a response to any meaningful inquiry into our ways of being, psychoanalysis opens a path for transformation (as possibility itself). These disruptions bring us into relation with possibility – through them we can come to understand that things can be otherwise because they could have been otherwise, that there is such a thing as the otherwise. Putting things into question is disruption and causes anxiety given the fact that questioning, as Kristeva puts it, allows for “the realization of lack, uncertainty, and infinite regress.” Despite the discomfort, such anxiety is sought out in analysis because it is the condition of the possibility of sensing possibility. Or, it is at least *a* condition of this possibility. In order to see yourself as capable of transformation, you must overcome the sense of yourself or certain of your practices as fixed. As I have argued, you need to de-sediment or disrupt that which allows habitudes and habits to reproduce even in the face of the expressed desire for transformation.

And, as Kristeva is correct to point out, there is tremendous “political significance” to the activities of disruption, symbolization, and working-through (as they occur in the analytic setting). The analysand becomes more flexible in her thinking, better related to that which she represses, able to redirect her energies into more creative pursuits, and capable of new relationships (15). The subject who has worked through her anxiety (about the past, present, or future) still encounters anxiety – however, she is better able to continue on in the face of it. These skills connect up with political action in that, as she says, “the analyzed subject is an irreconcilable subject, a subject necessarily in revolt” (15). In other words, the analyzed subject is one capable of becoming new, disruption, and one who refuses to allow oppressive social norms to structure her sense of herself. Indeed, she is renewed in her ability and willingness to engage in political struggles against oppression as she no longer takes her body or soul to be the



source of the limits on her world (i.e., she sees reality in a renewed sense and is willing to challenge it). A successful analysis allows one to be in a more flexible relation with what Kristeva calls repression and what I have discussed as sedimentation, which itself boosts one's creative powers and opens up the task of being in the world in terms of possibility. And, as she points out, these individual transformations, by placing the subject in a particular relation to social and familial norms, can establish larger social transformations. The questioning subject – the irreconcilable subject – is “in revolt” and her questioning stance spreads out beyond her individual experiences – perhaps particularly when she writes from her own experience toward something new.

In Kelly Oliver's text, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, she describes working-through in opposition to acting-out (what we might think of as repetitive action that resists becoming new), emphasizing the value of symbolizing traumatic experiences such that one is able to integrate them, grieve, and move forward. Throughout this text, Oliver argues that the Freudian concept of working-through is a necessary piece for social theory on transformation (10). She remarks, “for Freud, the goal of analysis is to turn acting-out into memory by providing interpretations and allowing the patient to ‘work-through’ his or her resistances to interpretation” (77). Through interpretation the compulsion to repeat is transformed into, what she calls, “more open possibilities” (78).

As I've argued throughout my work, when we disrupt the given and reveal the historical nature of a central way of our being (which are significant pieces of the practices of working-through) there can be an unsettling effect. In response to this bodily anxiety, we need to understand what it means to develop our ability to work through not against it – i.e., we need to learn how to tolerate the bodily anxiety associated with transformative opportunities and

loosening our broad social expectations for sameness (the desire for the same discussed by Casey and Grosz). Rather than offering a resolution for the tension associated with becoming new, I suggest that we must learn to live and work within it in order to be open to transformation.

These ideas connect up with my description of the habitual body as that which relates us to newness through sedimentation and disruption. Working-through the anxiety associated with disrupting our sedimented ways of being in the world helps to counteract the reifying qualities of being habitual creatures. We might say that understanding the habitual body, then, is an important piece of working-through, one that facilitates what Butler has referred to as gender trouble. Gender trouble, or better the causing of gender trouble, disrupts sedimented beliefs and practices associated with gender oppression. To cause gender trouble is challenge the status quo and to open up new possible ways of being – and these disruptive activities can also trouble our own understandings of where we fit in the world. This form of trouble, which is akin to the bodily anxiety I've discussed, is a necessary but highly disturbing piece of becoming new. As Butler remarks:

What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued 'social existence'? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life's persistence? The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm 'in the right way', one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. And yet, without a repetition that risks life – in its current organization – how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life? (*The Psychic Life of Power*, 28-9).

In these lines, Butler asks us to consider the risks we must face in order to become new, up to an including social death (or, utter lack of recognition). And this risk arises out of our habituality, out of our repetitive action that consistently fails to exactly repeat that which has

come before. In other words, habituality presents us with our only opportunity for doing things otherwise, even as it ties us in to oppressive social norms. We must be willing to risk repetitions that more explicitly demonstrate the arbitrary nature of our supposed givens if we hope to become new. As Braidotti remarks, “processes of change and transformation, however difficult and at times painful, are also empowering and highly desirable events” (*Metamorphoses*, 143). It is difficult to become new (of course, it is often difficult to stay the same). And part of this difficulty is that we cannot know in advance what will come of our efforts, whether they are theoretical or more concrete bodily attempts at newness.

The beauty of propelling oneself forward, of making pathways through the construction and disruption of our ways of being, this is becoming new. One must move energy about to produce such pathways, which incurs great bodily agitation. The danger of the pathological response to action is that in its attempts to remove or reduce this agitation it inhibits transformative becoming. By stripping feminist politics of its belief that the ability to criticize the present demands, what Jean-Luc Nancy has called, the promise of social theory, we reveal a core feminist project of opening up possibilities. That is, social theory which is most promising is social theory which eschews the tendency to make promises.

### ***Movement and Transformation***

Associated with the tasks of working-through, disruption, and risky repetition are the concepts of movement and migration that constitute an interesting selection of writings by women of color feminists, including Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones (whose work I considered in Chapter 1), as well as Carole Boyce Davies. Movement across physical borders and boundaries, as well as movement across psychological, sexual, and spiritual Borderlands is

akin to the types of disruptions necessary for transformative possibility. And, I would argue that in order to properly think about opening up possibilities, we need to develop more dynamic relations to time and place, as well as more dynamic relations to our theoretical resources. Indeed, we might think that new forms of feminist philosophy could be directed toward the construction of pathways of movement (rather than the construction of arguments and political programs). Either way, the themes of travel, migration, and nomadism help us to conceive of the movement of our becoming new. They engender thought about what it means to move among communities, how to become different, as well as to what our ethical obligations to those with whom we differ are.

For example, Davies' politics of location, with its focus on movement, partiality, and relationality, and in its central concept of migrating subjectivities, is valuable for thinking about the subject as becoming, non-linear, and non-identical.<sup>62</sup> Her work, especially as presented in her text *Black Women's Writing*, engenders a rich analysis of the multidimensional, multi-locational, and ever fluctuating characteristics of subjectivity, which I believe is highly compatible with the politics of becoming found in the work of Grosz and Braidotti (even as we could identify great differences among their work). In her work, Davies contrasts the circular image of marginality with the more open-formed image of the borderland (cf. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* for a more comprehensive description of this image).

For Davies, this image conjures "a sense of myriad possibilities and conflicted spaces" wherein "multiple identities collide and/or renegotiate space" (66). The image of borderlands is valuable because it forces us to think about and, hopefully produce, freer movement, more

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<sup>62</sup> Her work entails a politics of location given that she is in search of concepts and theories that give voice to those women of color whose "positionality" is such that they are limited in their abilities to reposition themselves in relation to oppressive discourses (153).

dynamic identities, and a more radical re-visioning of spatial arrangements and locations of women of color. This connects up with my view that feminist theory should be engendering ever-greater differences among women – helping women to become new in their relations to social norms such that they have a more directed role in the course of their lives.

Another example of her value for thinking about transformation is seen in Davies' approach of "going a piece of the way with," which she also refers to as critical relationality. This critical relationality allows for a more careful consideration of how feminist theory requires multiple and shifting theoretical models. Critical relationality develops out of her attunement to the significances of movement, migration, and location for analyzing the experiences of women of color; she identifies a practice within African and African-based cultures wherein a host offers to go a piece of the way home with a visitor (46). Going a piece of the way is described as a courtesy – one that arises out of the relation between host and visitor. Just how far the "piece of the way" will be is determined by the quality of the relationship between the host and visitor (46-8). Davies transposes the practices of going a piece of the way with into her own engagement with theory: theories are encountered as visitors and the extent of one's engagement with a theory is the distance she is willing to walk with the other theorists. Theory, then, loses its (often assumed) totalizing nature; it no longer presents the reader with an "all or nothing" decision (e.g., we could think back to the last chapter and note that I am willing to walk, say, half of the way home with Bordo). When theories provide valuable tools for thinking about transformative possibility, we should walk along with them. As a theoretical approach begins to reproduce structures of oppression and domination, when it ignores differences or futurity or when it forecloses transformative possibility, we end our shared journey and return to those theories that avoid these tendencies.

These pieces from Davies' work have helped me to navigate otherwise disconnected theorists throughout my dissertation. As well, I sense that her discussions of movement and migration present the next part of my own theoretical work. I hope to return to these discussions in order to think better about both what is at stake in becoming new, as well as some of the concrete bodily practices of movement that constitute one's becoming new. For now, I will simply point out that I see strong connections between her work and my own and that I look forward to the opportunity to make these more explicit in the future.

### ***Concluding Remarks: The Value of Time***

As I come to the end of my dissertation, I am struck by the value of time – the time spent writing this work, the time that is opening up to work on other topics, and the time that is my future possibilities in the economically troubled field of academic philosophy. I also see, from this perspective, the significance that time and temporality have played in this very writing. Transformation requires time, or better still, transformation is deeply temporal. In order to become new, one must negotiate relations to her past, her present, and her future. And these relations overlap. For example, thinking about the future is valuable not only because we are becoming in time, but also because the future helps to determine the meaning of past events. As Grosz notes, the future “plays a structuring role in the value and effectivity of the past and present” (*Becomings*, 11). She reminds us, “how we understand the past, and our links to it through reminiscence, melancholy, or nostalgia, prefigures and contains corresponding concepts about the present and the future” (18). Just as “the substantiality or privilege we grant to the present has implications for the retrievability of the past and the predictability of the future” (18).

Our temporal relations are, in fact, so interconnected that it can appear impossible to truly distinguish between past, present, and future.

However, these interrelations are rarely experienced outside of the reflective mode; even as I write about them I cannot deny the overwhelming sense that my time in graduate school has flown by. There is a sense that the past is gone, that the future is utterly open, and that the present itself will soon disappear. I remark upon these experiences less for you to understand where I am at as I conclude my dissertation, and more so because they suggest the importance of doing theoretical work on time and temporality. In reflecting upon habituality as it relates us to transformation, I have been continually intrigued by the differences in our experiences of time (which so often suggest a linear movement into the future) and what we might call the actual workings of time (those inter-relations across temporal modes). What has been most interesting about considering eating disorders, arguments about pathology, and theories of addiction (though these latter concerns have gone un-discussed in this work), is that so-called negative habitual activity is frequently the only mode of being habitual that is thought about in terms of its temporal relations (however, even these discussions have left me cold). Of course, all habitual action brings us into the world through complex temporal relations, but “bad habits” (addictions, pathological behaviors, acting-out, and the like) have seemed to present the best opportunities for thinking about these complex relations.

Perhaps this is because such activity appears to (and often does) close off the future (at least in terms of our possibility of becoming new). One gets stuck in a cycle of behavior from which she cannot seem to escape, one that is almost exclusively constituted by repetitive action. However, as should be clear by now, I find such a reading to be deeply lacking – it refuses to engage with the potential for transformative action that exists in these behaviors. Eating

disorders are not suicide, nor is substance abuse (or any other set of so-called pathological behavior). These bodily practices keep one in time and we must pay attention to this important fact. Although we might shudder at the thought of the physical and mental suffering brought about by these behaviors, even as they suggest a life we might not be willing to live, people engaging in these practices are still here, which suggests that there is transformative possibility yet! And, while these thoughts require further argument than is suited for a concluding section, I am confident in claiming that it is unacceptable for feminists to engage in theoretical practices that identify these behaviors as pathological, addictive, and so forth. An alternative to these discourses entails working through the bodily anxiety that arises in relation to becoming new, a task I have attempted in these pages.



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