

# **Identities in Flux**

**Globalisation, Trauma,  
and Reconciliation**

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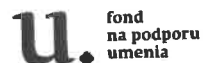
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## ***De Reconciliation: Violence, the Flesh, and Primary Vulnerability***

**James Griffith**

### **Abstract**

This essay compares Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh with Judith Butler's concept of primary vulnerability in terms of their helpfulness for developing an intersubjective ontology. It compares the flesh with Butler's more recent concept of primary vulnerability insofar as she sees both as useful for intersubjective ontology. The hiatus of the flesh is that which spans between self and world and opens Merleau-Ponty's thought onto an intersubjective ontology. While Butler's discussion of vulnerability as a primary condition of human existence also makes this concept intersubjective, her understanding of violence as articulated through vulnerability makes this a more helpful concept for intersubjective ontology than the flesh. While many discussions of an intersubjective way of life focus almost exclusively on its positive possibilities, almost to the exclusion of violence altogether, the understanding of violence Butler presents through primary vulnerability help us to discern whether a violation is benign or malign. In turn, this fuller understanding of violence lets primary vulnerability open onto an ethical imperative of reconciliation, but a reconciliation of what is never whole.

*Keywords:* Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the flesh, Judith Butler, primary vulnerability, intersubjectivity

In an essay from the late 1980s, Judith Butler criticises the early Maurice Merleau-Ponty for taking up sexuality and gender from the perspective of a male or masculine master dominating a female or feminine slave to the point of incorporating her into his subjectivity, despite Merleau-Ponty's claims to opening up sexuality beyond naturalising categories<sup>1</sup>. On her reading, Merleau-Ponty seems valuable for feminist philosophy because he offers an account of sexuality dislodged from naturalising and normalising tendencies because it "is coextensive with existence" and "as a mode of situating oneself in terms of one's intersubjectivity" because no sexual state is without reference to the world nor does it have a predetermined form (Butler, 1990, p. 85/89). However, his account still tacitly maintains heterosexual assumptions about sexuality because he erroneously distinguishes "biological subsistence and the domain of historical and cultural

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-15-0682.

signification," meaning that a historically sedimented sexuality presents itself to the body as natural and normal (Butler, 1990, p. 91). In this historical sedimentation, the normal, natural body becomes male and the female body "an object rather than a subject of perception," meaning the female body becomes an essence without existence—seen and never seeing (Butler, 1990, p. 94). Thus, the female body that exists to be seen is "a body without desire" (Butler, 1990, p. 97). For this body to desire, to have a sexuality coextensive with existence, to exist in a field of intersubjective relations would be to contradict its status as object.

Still, in the same article she suggests that, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty may have finally moved beyond the universalising subjectivity associated with a dominating masculinity, at least insofar as that book's focus on the touch, intertwining, and flesh is not as easily reduced to a subject-object divide that universalises a dominating male or masculine gaze in the form of perception. She says that the focus on the touch allows him to describe a "sensual life which would emphasise the interworld, the shared domain of the flesh which resists categorisation in terms of subjects and objects (Butler, 1990, p. 97). In a footnote to her claims that the early Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception is inherently misogynistic, she says that this shift to the tactile "marks a significant departure" for him (Butler, 1990, pp. 99-100). In this way, she posits the possibility of a phenomenological feminism or feminist phenomenology<sup>2</sup>, an approach to gender and sexuality that takes up the world without reducing that taking up to the subject doing it, without assuming the universality and dominance of the male or masculine gaze at a world of objects subsumed under its subjectivity.

One way Silvia Stoller takes up this possibility of a phenomenological feminism or feminist phenomenology is to argue that, even in his early work, Merleau-Ponty is critical of a phenomenology that begins in, naturalises, and universalises a subject who is almost inevitably male or masculine. For her, it is important to remember that sexuality for the early Merleau-Ponty is an expression of existence and that "the body is responsible for the realisation of existence" (Stoller, 2010, p. 106). In this way, "the body's

2 'Phenomenological feminism' is Butler's term in the title of her concluding section to this essay as that toward which she hopes to see us turn (see Butler 1990, pp. 97-99). 'Feminist phenomenology' is Anna Petronella Foulter's term for what should engage the future development of Merleau-Ponty's account of a gendered body (see Foulter 2013, p. 779). Silvia Stoller characterises feminist phenomenology as understanding phenomenology to be helpful for feminist philosophy (see Stoller 2010, p. 97). While taking account of the differences between these terms as concerns their potentially chiasmic relationship (see note 5 below) would be interesting and worthwhile, I do not have the space for such an account here. For one account of the differences, see Stoller 2017, 328. See also Stoller et al. 2005.

expression is what it signifies" and is not as if from a pre-existing subject (Stoller, 2010, p. 106). Thus, Butler's criticisms of the early Merleau-Ponty may not be as strong as she believes since both are anti-essentialist (Stoller, 2010, pp. 108-109). Similarly, Anna Petronella Foutier argues that Butler's early reading of the early Merleau-Ponty fails to understand his consideration of sexual desire as forming a space between the subject and object rather than being the projection of a naturalised gaze from a universalised and masculinised subject upon a dominated, feminised object. She claims that Butler's assumption that existence and essence are oppositional to and exclusive of each other is only true from the perspective of a naïve rationalism that thinks both objects and perception can be objectively explained, a perspective Merleau-Ponty criticises (Foutier, 2013, p. 776/770). Indeed, the way he gets to his claims of the 'normal' male body is understood here as "offering a 'genealogical' critique" of that perspective by showing how what seems natural is constituted in and through experience, allowing sexual desire "to form a realm precisely *in between* subjectivity and objectivity" (Foutier, 2013, p. 778).

While Stoller focuses on Merleau-Ponty's critique or complication of the subject and Foutier on the space created between subject and object, both are most interested in Butler's early critique of the early Merleau-Ponty. To be sure, Foutier notes that Butler's more recent engagements with Merleau-Ponty acknowledge more similarities than her early essay, but this is not the focus of her engagement, and those she mentions still focus on the early Merleau-Ponty (Foutier, 2013, p. 778). Leonard Lawlor, however, does take up Butler's suggestion of a phenomenological feminism through the late Merleau-Ponty by noting that, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, there is a hiatus whereby the self keeps the other at a distance precisely insofar as that other is kept close, or is kept close precisely insofar as kept at a distance. That is, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "the unity of the seer and the seen is never achieved" (Lawlor, 2008, p. 55). The hiatus between then could be understood as "a folding together" or as a "an unfold..., and not as a gathering together," understandings that themselves might "refer to two forces irreducibly linked to one another around the hiatus," leading Lawlor to suggest in the late Merleau-Ponty a philosophy as a friendship or love of the outside and future (Lawlor, 2008, p. 55). Such a friendship or love "opens the lover to *all* the possible lovers of the beloved, *all* the possible lovers still to come" (Lawlor, 2008, p. 56), an opening Lawlor finds to be a possible connection to the "benign sexual variation" Butler claims the early Merleau-Ponty foreclosed (Butler, 1990, p. 86)<sup>3</sup>. Yet Lawlor also does not take up the more recent Butler, focusing again on her early critique of the early Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>3</sup> Though neither Butler nor Lawlor mention this, "benign sexual variation" is most connected with Rubin 1984, pp. 275-284.

An important example of this more recent Butlerian engagement with Merleau-Ponty seems to take up her own early suggestion concerning *The Visible and the Invisible*, and comes in the form of an article on Luce Irigaray's reading of the late Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.<sup>3</sup> Irigaray claims that, even in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty "has no spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between two. No other or Other to keep the world open," and so is still caught in the problem of a subject subsuming the world to its gaze (Irigaray, 1993, p. 183). Against her, Butler argues that "the subject, as *flesh*, is primarily an intersubjective being, finding itself as Other, finding its primary sociality in a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable" (Butler, 2008, p. 345). It is this point that I want to use to suggest a different node or point of connection between Merleau-Ponty and Butler, one not drawn from the latter's explicit readings of the former. This connection is between the late Merleau-Ponty's thought of the flesh and Butler's more recent thought of primary vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> In this way, without precisely engaging the possibility of a feminist phenomenology or phenomenological feminism, I want to engage what the impact is of others on selves and selves on others for the late Merleau-Ponty and the recent Butler.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty is interested in undermining the solipsism of a concept of subjectivity whereby that which is seen by that subject is absorbed within the original, thus originary, subjectivity. In pursuing this interest, he begins with the body and that which it senses, focusing on sight and the seen, touch and the touched, such that the distance between them is not separate from but equal to the proximity of their relative locations. As he explains it, we see things as being in a place and in their being, "which is indeed more than their being-perceived," while being separated from them by dint of looking with a body from a place precisely because "this distance is not the contrary of this proximity,...it is synonymous with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 135). That is, the body as different and distant from what it senses is not distinct from what it senses but is formed as a body—a sensing body—through and because of this difference and distance. In this way, the body is not precisely a thing as "an interstitial matter, a connective tissue," but is rather simultaneously a being like those beings surrounding it and that which senses them (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 135). As such, it is a being that uses its sensing as "its own ontogenesis" to become a being like other beings, giving it a "double belongingness to the order of the 'object' and to the order of the 'subject'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 136-137). The body is, then, a sensing being insofar as its sensing allows it to become sensed like those beings it itself senses.

<sup>4</sup> References are to Butler 2008, where it appeared as an appendix to a special anniversary issue of *Chiasmi International*. It was also published as Butler 2006.

Thus, the body that senses things always senses itself in those things, but this means that it is itself sensed, even if only by itself, in the being-sensed of those things, in the distance between itself and them. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty says the body "incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a 'Sensible in itself'" without the world being in the body or body in world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 138). This sensible in itself he calls the flesh, which "is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139).

The body's sensing of itself makes the flesh "an unlimited notion" in that touching one's own hand makes of each of them both a sensing and sensed being, although the state of sensing and being sensed is reversible between them (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 140). To avoid the solipsism at work in this reversibility, it must be understood that the moment of one's own hand touching the other is not a synthesis of sensing and being sensed. Rather, each hand "has its own tactile experience," each remains, in itself, built from out of the distance of each from the other whereby that other hand is translated into the first (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 141). The generality of the flesh at work here opens my body onto others' as mutual translations of sensing and being sensed, meaning each is inhabited, even formed by an ability to be sensed. The other's sensing me makes me sensible to myself, translatable to myself, thereby undermining the thought that knowing or sensing the other is a task accomplished by a self upon that other: "There is here no problem of the *alter ego* because it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us,...in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142).

Indeed, the very unity of self that a solipsism of domination or self-aggrandisement requires is impossible with this flesh because the coincidence of sensing and being sensed even in the case of one touching one's own hand "eclipses at the moment of realisation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147).

What dominates is the flesh over the body "as touching" through "dehiscence or fission of its own mass" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 146). These hands are of the same body as a body in and formed by the world as a world of the flesh as an unlimited notion, leaving a "hiatus" that is without void since "spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 148).<sup>5</sup> This non-coincidence of the unlimited concept

<sup>5</sup> I will focus on primary vulnerability as discussed in Butler 2004 over and above its discussion in Butler 2009 because the former seems to me to give a more helpful definition of violence as in explicit connection to vulnerability than does the latter. For her discussion of vulnerability and violence in the latter, however, see Butler 2009, pp. 33-62 and pp. 165-184.

of the flesh, this hiatus spanned by body and world is the proximal distance or distant proximity of which Lawlor speaks.<sup>6</sup>

This hiatus is why Lawlor suggests that the late Merleau-Ponty may be more amenable to Butler than his early work suggests. If the underside of a subject is the other as forming the subject in its subjectivity, if subject and other are reversible in terms of the non-synthetic hiatus of a unity that disappears in its occurrence, then it is possible for lover and beloved to be the underside of each other, open to each other's future loves and perhaps open to the benign sexual variation that the early Butler claims the early Merleau-Ponty forecloses with his dominating subjective gaze upon the other. For her part, the more recent Butler will say, "One might well conclude that for Merleau-Ponty as well, to be implicated in the world of flesh of which he is a part is to realise precisely that he cannot disavow such a world without disavowing himself" since the subject is insofar as it is in the world, this world being the underside of the subject in the generality of the flesh (Butler, 2008, p. 345). Hence, the subject is necessarily intersubjective. The subject is the other without the other being reduced to that subject, but the subject discovers itself as itself in and through the other.

It is this question of the intersubjective subject that leads me to consider another link between Merleau-Ponty and Butler, though from a different register, and with a different possible underside. It may be that neither Merleau-Ponty nor Lawlor, nor even this more recent Butler acknowledge an aspect of intersubjectivity that another recent Butler does acknowledge: primary vulnerability. Here, I will focus on her discussion of this concept in *Precarious Life*.

Against the belief that grief is a private, even privatising affair, she claims that the experience of disorientation after losing someone indicates a relationality at the heart of the experience of the self, that losing the other is not like losing a possession but closer to losing oneself. In mourning, as she puts it, "I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself" and the loss of the other as someone with whom I was in relation "is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms ['myself' and 'you'] are to be differentiated and related" (Butler, 2004, p. 22). In this way, the subject is insofar as it is vulnerable, subject to loss or violation and violence, which is why "grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am" (Butler, 2004, p. 28). To learn to live in and

6 The hiatus at work here is an effect or element of the chiasm. As Butler 2008 describes it, 'chiasm' is a term for the grammatico-rhetorical technique of reversing parallel phrases where the meaning of the phrase changes in their reversal. Thus, there is "a formal symmetry" between the phrases that allows for their reversibility, but the very act of reversing them changes the meaning at work (Butler 2008, 346). Her example is "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," where the reversal of 'going' and 'tough' changes their respective meanings and linguistic classes.



with this vulnerability, a vulnerability which precedes the construction of the subject, is to learn to live in and with the need we have of others, not only of the need to be protected but also of the need to be nourished, to be brought to flourishing. And it is to learn to live in and with the possibility that this need can be deprived, ignored, or violated. While this vulnerability is not to be understood "as a deprivation," it is necessary to understand it as a condition for being "exploited and exploitable," an exploitation that includes abandonment (Butler, 2004, p. 31).<sup>7</sup> We are "given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there" (Butler, 2004, p. 32). As a result, violence for Butler is to be understood as a particular and "most terrifying" mode of exposure to this primary vulnerability, "a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another" (Butler, 2004, pp. 28-29).

Violence understood in this way is not precisely, however, the violation of the rights of a subject who precedes the encounter with violence or is somehow distinct and different from that which violates. Since the body is public to some necessary degree, it "is and is not mine" and others imprint themselves on the body such that "only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do" (Butler, 2004, p. 26). Thus, I am in relation with others prior to having a will to be abandoned, exploited, or nourished. Instead, violence is to be understood as a violation of my primary need of others, at the bodily level and at the group or class level, that itself constitutes subjects in their subjectivity.

Nonetheless, this understanding of violence and violation does not preclude invoking rights at the individual and group levels insofar as our understanding of them is built out of a legal tradition of a subject distinct and different from that which violates, or even the violation itself. Indeed, the invocation of such rights, the demand that they be enforced, would seem

7 I will not enter deeply into the question of language beyond this note because I want to keep focus on trauma and violence, but it is important to remember that sensing a being for Merleau-Ponty opens onto the dimension of the idea. The idea is the invisible of the world of appearances, rendering visible the world as the mutual translation of sensing and being sensed. In this way, the things of the world become the linguistic signs of a second world of a second flesh that is not posterior to the first, but is its underside. There is then an ideality of the (first) flesh and a fleshiness to the idea, each the underside of the other. For this reason, the mute world of appearances is already the possibility of language and language is the hollow within which appearances are experienced, though their reversibility does not constitute a synthesis but is rather another non-coincidental hiatus of a unity that disappears as it occurs (see Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 150-155). In that the (first) flesh is not prior to the second, it may be that Merleau-Ponty is acknowledging the kind of historico-cultural sedimentation at work in the construction that the early Butler criticises the early Merleau-Ponty for ignoring (see Butler 1990, p. 91). Foultier, for her part, argues that the early Butler misconstrues Merleau-Ponty on this point because the distinction between the historico-cultural and the biological is merely analytic (see Foultier 2013, p. 777).

to be one of the ways in which we live with and in primary vulnerability. For instance, the claim to a right to bodily autonomy is important "for intersex claims to be free of coerced medical and psychiatric interventions" because this claim is necessarily one of vulnerability to such interventions, to "unwanted violence against their bodies in the name of...a normative notion of what the body of a human must be" (Butler, 2004, p. 25/33). The problem is that in mourning, in loss, in violence and the feeling of having been violated, there is "passion and grief and rage" and the legal tradition by which we invoke these rights fails to take account of the experience of loss and violation at the emotional level, an experience which at least possibly opens onto an ontological awareness (Butler, 2004, p. 25).

What is more, that same tradition can make it easier to extend a process by which violence operates. In the mode of invoking rights whereby the subject is distinct and different from that which violates or from the violation, involved in the invocation is a claim, demand, or expectation that such violation ought not happen, neither before nor again. To separate oneself from the violence is to attempt to flee living with and in primary vulnerability, but of course that attempt only highlights this vulnerability as an ontological state. In such an invocation of a violated right, the living with and in vulnerability is banished, foreclosed "in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly" (Butler, 2004, pp. 29-30). Especially at the political level (though hardly exclusively there), and perhaps even more especially when invoked by the politically powerful (though hardly exclusively when invoked by them), this demand and this action begin to appear closer to vengeance than justice or reparation, a violence directed at a supposed or known perpetrator of violence who either lost the right to invoke the right to protection from violence or who never had it in the first place, if only by retrospective dint of the supposedly initiatory violence to which the subject would supposedly have been otherwise invulnerable. The logic of this movement of violence building on violence is what Butler questions when she asks, "[I]n what ways has a chain of violence formed in which the aggression the United States has wrought returns to it in different forms? Can we think of the history of violence here without exonerating those who engage it against the United States in the present?" (Butler, 2004, p. 42).

In addition, the legal tradition of invoking rights by a subject considered distinct and different from what violates or from the violation can also extend violence when there is no hope or a lost hope in justice to be found for the violation. That is, the lack of hope for justice in and from a tradition of rights understood as invoked by a subject distinct and different from that which violates can lead to "the other age-old option, the possibility of wishing for death or becoming dead, as a vain effort to pre-empt or deflect

the next blow" (Butler, 2004, p. 42). This option is a violence to the violated subject by that same subject, a flight from vulnerability by feeling oneself to be or by becoming dead, immune to violation and violence by disappearing entirely, becoming invulnerable because non-existent, not subject to violation because not subject at all.

To learn to live with and in primary vulnerability, then, is to learn to live with and in the need we have of each other, the fundamental non-wholeness that itself completes the wholeness of what we are. It is to learn to live with and in an intersubjectivity and relationality that is not precisely formulated or constructed from out of an interlocking web of otherwise separate nodes or meeting points, but one whereby the mutual non-wholeness of our being fulfils the always possibly violated promise of what we already are. To deny this vulnerability in the name of a subjectivity that is whole unto itself—whether by way of feeling that wholeness violated or by way of denying the reality of a violence to the vulnerability—is, in the end, to do violence to ourselves as vulnerable.

There is nothing in Butler's account of primary vulnerability that precludes the possibility of violence, to another or to ourselves. Nor does it mean that the reaction to violence within the scope of primary vulnerability will not itself result in a foreclosing subjectivity that itself can result in a continuation of violence. Rather, primary vulnerability opens up a different way of considering violence, trauma, and violation insofar as that which is traumatised and violated is what it is: vulnerable to these experiences as much as opening up a different way of considering community.

In this way, primary vulnerability seems to me to offer a fuller account of intersubjectivity than Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh, Lawlor's furthering of that notion in reference to Butler, or even a certain strand of feminist philosophical discourse on similar questions. In that the late Merleau-Ponty attempts to break from the tradition that understands the subject as formulated in a fashion radically distinct from others, the flesh as the non-synthetic unity of perception and its underside can take on an exclusively positive, romantic, and even Romantic register. The flesh as a unity without domination or self-aggrandisement would seem to preclude the possibility of violations of that unity, especially insofar as it is unlimited. Lawlor makes this preclusion more or less explicit in his connection of the late Merleau-Ponty to Butler's appeal to a benign sexual variation.<sup>8</sup> While hedging with a "Perhaps," the openness to all the future loves and

8 At this point in the text, Butler's image for this primary vulnerability is the infant. In Butler 1990, she uses this same image as part of her argument against Merleau-Ponty's erroneous distinction between the biological and the historico-cultural: "the very birth of the child is already a human relation, one of radical *dependence*, which takes place within a set of institutional regulations and norms" (Butler 1990, p. 91; my emph.).

the love of the future he invokes as emerging from the late Merleau-Ponty nevertheless mentions nothing other than the benign (Lawlor, 2008, p. 56). The feminist phenomenological or phenomenological feminist tradition of taking up intersubjectivity as that which can leave hope for an understanding of performativity of gender and sexuality without reducing the world to a world of my own would also seem to think intersubjectivity as a life that, if it is violated, is only violated in its betrayal. In connecting Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression to Butler's understanding of performativity in that they can both be "free of gender essentialism," Stoller at least implies that such freedom will be free of the dominance and violence of the male or masculine look that reduces the other to an object without subjectivity (Stoller, 2010, p. 98). In calling for a critique of the "heterosexual and sexist" matrix at work in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of sexuality that better accounts for the 'in between' status of his analysis, Foultier calls for a critique that would allow for the intersubjectivity at work in that status to be free of sexist violence (Foultier, 2013, p. 779). In wondering whether philosophy can function without "the hypothesis that reversibility is the final truth," Irigaray wonders if philosophy is possible without the violence of reducing the other to the self, or if some other language would become necessary to live without this violence (Irigaray, 1993, p. 184).

Primary vulnerability, even though opening up a hope for a less (self-)destructive engagement with the world and the world's others, is not so exclusively positive or hopeful. Insofar as it opens different ways of considering the subject and its violence, violation, and trauma, rather than at least implicitly prescribing a mode of behaviour, it is an ontological concept whereby human action and activity can be understood and less an ethical imperative or a demand for action. If we remain vulnerable even in our attempts to flee vulnerability, whether by violating the vulnerability of others (even if only in reactive violation) or by violating our own vulnerability by denying the reality of the violence done to ourselves, then there is nothing in the life lived in and with this vulnerability ensuring that the variations of our life activities, sexual or otherwise, be benign. They can just as easily be malign. What primary vulnerability does help us with, because of the way it helps us understand trauma, violence, and violation, is how to discern these variations as benign or malign.

Thus, if there is an ethical imperative at work in or under this ontological category, it would seem to be in the understanding of the possibility of reconciliation, in what is to be reconciled and how. What meaning is sedimented in this word? What historico-cultural sense does it bring to primary vulnerability, or how does or could primary vulnerability engage this sediment? 'Reconciliation'—a restoration to friendship or harmony, a making consistent, or an acceptance of the unpleasant (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.), 2003)—from *reconcilio*, is bringing together again, reuniting, re-establishing, restoring, recovering, or regaining.

*Concilio* is bringing different objects together into a whole, uniting in thought or feeling, representing as pleasant, obtaining or purchasing, even producing. A *conciliatus* is a connection among bodies, while a *concilium* is a human assembly or council, a conjunction, or coition. What is brought together in conciliation and what is repeated in reconciliation is sedimented deeply in the word *calo* as calling out, proclaiming, calling together, or summoning (Lewis and Short, 1879). Reconciliation then summons, calls for bodies or humans to come together or to produce themselves as whole in their differentiation, and to do so as a repetition. It recalls what had been called forth insofar as it was called to be a collection or conjunction, restores or re-establishes a collective that itself had to be formed and called.

If what are reconciled are radically individuated subjectivities which happened to interlock in a particular place and at a particular time and which interlocking was ruptured, a reconciliation of such subjectivities would always be temporary, always awaiting and even perhaps expecting, anticipating, and acting in prediction of its violation. Such would be a reconciliation, a bringing back together, that does not deserve the name because what is gathered is predicated on not needing its togetherness. However, if what is reconciled is that which was never whole, or that which is whole precisely in its non-wholeness, in its vulnerability to deprivation or violation of the mutual need that constitutes each of those subjectivities in their subjectivity, then the reconciliation, understood as a recognition of a fuller sense of intersubjectivity, is predicated on a wholeness that is necessarily non-whole, on a gathering of what cannot be gathered because it is, in itself, a perpetual gathering. Such would be an impossible reconciliation, a reconciliation of what was never conciliatory, an impossible reconciliation understood as the condition for the possibility of both re-conciliation and con-ciliation, a reconciliation of what can only be reconciled insofar as it was never together from the first.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This is to say nothing of the analysis Lawlor gives of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust in Merleau-Ponty 2010, an analysis that is the source of his link to Butler's suggestion of benign sexual variations. Lawlor says that "the male lover imagines himself in the female beloved's position of making love with other men. But since Albertine is homosexual we have a different situation, and it does not matter...whether this character is really a man or a woman" (Lawlor 2008, p. 56). If a man, Marcel imagines himself loving the beloved's female, and so heterosexual lovers, making Marcel heterosexual. If a woman, he imagines himself loving the beloved's female, and so homosexual lovers, making Marcel homosexual. The substitution and reversibility at work here still seems to me to be at least potentially the reduction of the beloved, whether male or female, to the imagination, the fantasy, the gaze of the male or masculine. In other words, in his attempt to link his analysis of Merleau-Ponty to the early Butler's suggestion, Lawlor may have repeated the universalising dominance by the male or masculine over the other, the very tendency in the early Merleau-Ponty that Butler critiques. However, I do not have the space to engage this possibility more here, being focused on the exclusively benignancy of the sexual variations that could follow from this substitution and reversibility.

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