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Towards a Genealogical Feminism: A Reading of Judith Butler's Political Thought

Author: Stone, Alison

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Abstract: Judith Butler's contribution to feminist political thought is usually approached in terms of her concept of performativity, according to which gender exists only insofar as it is ritualistically and repetitively performed, creating permanent possibilities for performing gender in new and transgressive ways. In this paper, I argue that Butler's politics of performativity is more fundamentally grounded in the concept of genealogy, which she adapts from Foucault and, ultimately, Nietzsche. Butler understands women to have a genealogy: to be located within a history of overlapping practices and reinterpretations of femininity. This genealogical understanding of femininity allows Butler to propose a coalitional feminist politics, which requires no unity among women but only loosely overlapping connections. For Butler, feminist coalitions should aim to subvert, not consolidate, entrenched norms concerning femininity. Butler has been criticized, however, for failing to explain either how subversive agency is possible or why the subversion of gender norms is desirable. Reviewing these criticisms, I argue that Butler offers a convincing explanation of the possibility of subversive agency, but that the normative dimension of her political thought remains relatively underdeveloped. I explore how the normative aspect of Butler's thought could be strengthened by recasting her notion of genealogy along more thoroughly Nietzschean and materialist lines, in terms of an idea of active and multiple bodily forces. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

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In writings from *Gender Trouble* onwards, Judith Butler has presented a distinctive and highly influential rethinking of feminism, according to which it should aim to subvert and deconstruct, rather than accept or reaffirm, dualistic gender categories.¹ Against those who have argued that feminism must -- if only strategically -- embrace established gender categories, Butler defends a collective practice of gender subversion that demands no unity among women. She envisages, instead, a coalitional politics requiring only loosely overlapping connections among women. Underlying this antiessentialist rethinking of feminism is Butler's idea that women have a *genealogy*, an idea that opposes the more traditional understanding of women as a group defined by their shared characteristics. Recently, feminist thinkers have shown increasing interest in this possibility of a 'genealogical' feminism, according to which, as M Gatens (1996, 76) puts it, "women" itself is understood to have a history, a genealogy, a "line of descent".² Butler has most consistently explored the significance of the concept of genealogy for feminism. Admittedly, her feminism is more commonly approached (for example, by Disch, 1999; Lloyd, 1999; Jenkins, 2001) via her notion of 'performativity', according to which gender only exists insofar as it is ritualistically and repetitively performed, creating permanent possibilities for performing gender in new and transgressive ways. I suggest, though, that this notion of performativity can be properly appreciated only in relation to the concept of genealogy which organizes Butler's philosophical and political thought at a deeper level.

To assess the potential of Butler's rethinking of feminism, we need to reconstruct her conception of genealogy, which she derives from Foucault's later work. Foucault himself adapts his conception of genealogy from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887).³ We must therefore first examine Nietzsche's genealogical approach in order to understand those of Foucault and, in turn, Butler. I will argue that Foucault accepts the antiessentialism of Nietzsche's approach to historical phenomena, while largely rejecting Nietzsche's ontology of active bodily forces. Correspondingly, Butler's idea that women have a genealogy arises because she applies a Nietzschean antiessentialism to gender (which results in the idea that the meanings of norms concerning

femininity undergo perpetual slippage and 'resignification'), while also rejecting Nietzsche's belief in real bodily forces (stressing, instead, that bodies are culturally constituted). This allows Butler to conclude that all women's experiences of femininity are different, yet also exhibit persistent areas of overlap that make possible a coalitional feminism, one dedicated to subverting femininity's traditionally entrenched meanings. By clarifying these Foucaultian and, ultimately, Nietzschean sources of Butler's approach, we can better appreciate the rigour and originality of her rethinking of feminism. ⁴

My emphasis on Butler's debt to Nietzsche paves the way for my further argument that her genealogical feminism could be productively developed in a more thoroughly Nietzschean and materialist direction. I elaborate this argument by reviewing the well-known criticisms of Butler's political thought by Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, who accuse her of failing to explain either (1) *how* subversive agency is possible or (2) *why* the subversion of gender norms is desirable. In response to the first criticism, Butler plausibly explains subversive agency as deriving from inherent instability and fragmentation within gender norms. Concerning the second criticism, though, I suggest that the normative dimension of Butler's thought is indeed underdeveloped, and could be strengthened were she to base her normative claims on a broadly Nietzschean ontology of active and multiple bodily forces. The final section of this paper explores how Butler's antiessentialist, genealogical, feminism could be recast in this more fully materialist vein.

The Concept of Genealogy in Butler, Foucault, and Nietzsche

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces her rethinking of feminism in response to debates surrounding essentialism, so we should briefly recall some central features of those debates. Generally in philosophy, essentialism is the view that things have essential properties, properties that are necessary to those things being what they are. Resituated within feminist theory, essentialism becomes the view that there are properties essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all. These essential properties must therefore be universally shared by all women. In the 1980s, many feminist thinkers rejected essentialism on the grounds that universal claims about women are invariably false, and privilege particular forms of feminine experience (Spelman, 1988). Yet this rejection of essentialism seemed to threaten feminist politics: if women share no common characteristics, they cannot be mobilized around any common predicament, identity, or set of interests.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler agrees with antiessentialists that universal claims about women are always false, and oppress women who fail to exhibit those characteristics that are supposedly 'universal'. Fortunately, Butler believes, feminist politics does not require unity among women. It can, instead, assume a coalitional form, in which 'variously positioned women articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition ... an emerging and unpredictable assemblage of positions' (Butler, 1990, 14). Within such a politics, Butler continues, merely 'provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity' (15). She envisages collective action in which women cooperate together across irreducible differences.

Gender Trouble's formulations of this idea of a non-essentialist feminist politics remain vague. We need to trace how this idea emerges from Butler's analysis of women as having a genealogy: as she explains, her '*feminist genealogy* of the category of women' forms the 'prerequisite' for her proposed 'new sort of feminist politics' (Butler, 1990, 5). Although this concept of genealogy figures in all Butler's theoretical writings (see, for example, Butler, 1990, 93; Butler *et al.*, 2000, 37-38), she never precisely explains its meaning. She does state that: *[T]he 'being' of gender is an effect, an object of a genealogical investigation that maps out the political parameters of its construction in the mode of ontology. ... A political genealogy of gender ontologies ... will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by [socio-cultural] ... forces.* (Butler, 1990, 32-33)

Here Butler defines genealogy as a method for critically reconstructing how gendered bodies and modes of

being are constituted and produced culturally. However, this does not clearly distinguish Butler's genealogical method from other approaches to studying the cultural crafting and production of bodies. To understand Butler's concept of genealogy, we must trace it back to Foucault.

As is well known, from *Discipline and Punish* (1977) onwards Foucault adopts a 'genealogical' approach, foregrounding how systems of knowledge (especially in the human sciences) are constitutively related to the particular power relations embedded in modern disciplinary techniques and institutions. For example, *Discipline and Punish* reconstructs how modern practices of punishment act directly upon bodies to produce 'criminals' and 'delinquents' as objects for the human sciences. Foucault's genealogical approach is therefore closely connected with his conception of power relations as effects of complex strategies of control that operate immediately upon bodies. To understand Foucault's genealogical method more precisely, we must look at his foundational articulation of the method through his reading of Nietzsche in the essay 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'. Foucault rereads Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* as pioneering a radically new kind of historical analysis (of morality in particular). Foucault tends, tacitly, to highlight aspects of Nietzsche's approach of which he approves -- above all, Nietzsche's antiessentialism about morality -- while downplaying aspects to which he is less sympathetic, particularly Nietzsche's ontology of will to power. Let me briefly examine the relevant aspects of Nietzsche's approach, before returning to Foucault and then Butler.⁵

Crucially, as Foucault stresses, Nietzsche's approach to morality in the *Genealogy* is antiessentialist: he denies that any common characteristics unite the institutions, practices, and beliefs falling under the rubric of morality (see Foucault, 2001, 343; Geuss, 1999, 13). Specifically, Nietzsche argues that diverse practices and beliefs are all identifiable as 'moral' solely in virtue of belonging within a historical chain in which later forms of these practices successively reinterpret (*neu-auslegen*) earlier ones. Any current moral institution is the reinterpretation of a pre-existing institution, which it has 'redirected [*umgerichtet*] to a new purpose' (Nietzsche, 1994, 55). A genealogical history thus takes shape when a practice (*Brauch*) -- 'a fixed form of action, a "drama" -- becomes subjected to repeated reinterpretations that impact upon its 'meaning [*Sinn*], purpose and expectation' (57). For instance, discussing punishment, Nietzsche claims that the basic practice of inflicting suffering has been continually reinterpreted -- at one point as securing pleasure for the punisher, later as restoring justice after a wrongful act. In each case, reinterpretation is necessarily *agonistic*, for Nietzsche, with new interpretations actively struggling to prevail over their predecessors. As Foucault stresses, for Nietzsche history is made of successive power struggles between these warring interpretations. Foucault (2001, 347-348) also emphasizes that Nietzsche regards the outcomes of these conflictual processes of reinterpretation as contingent, unpredictable results of an unfathomably complex balance of forces.

As new interpretations struggle for mastery, they are 'not in general ... so fully successful that *nothing* ... remains' of the earlier meanings (Geuss, 1999, 11). Some elements of those meanings are inevitably incorporated into new interpretations, although, as far as possible, they are shed -- 'completely obliterated' (Nietzsche, 1994, 55).⁶ Importantly, though, pre-existing meanings that succumb to reinterpretation have already taken shape as reinterpretations of still earlier layers of meaning, from which, in turn, they preserve some elements, while transforming and erasing others. Over time, therefore, a gradual shift takes place in the meaning of a practice, as earlier layers of meaning eventually get eroded away through successive waves of reinterpretation. Consequently, no common core of meaning endures across all these waves of interpretation. As Nietzsche concludes -- in a statement that will become important for Butler -- 'the whole history of a 'thing', an organ, a practice can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs [*Zeichenkette*], continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations' (55).

According to Nietzsche, then, genealogists study and reconstruct historical chains in which different interpretations of a practice supplant one another. Any such chain of reinterpretations establishes a continuous history of some institution -- for instance, punishment -- even though the successive interpretations do not share any common content that provides punishment with an essential meaning. In studying some item

genealogically, one locates it within a group -- for example, the group 'punishment' -- just because this item has emerged as a reinterpretation of one or more of the other items in the group. From Nietzsche's perspective, any set of items related in this overlapping way has a genealogy.⁷

Foucault foregrounds Nietzsche's antiessentialism and his concomitant focus on contingent displacements of power, but shows less sympathy for the way that Nietzsche underpins his genealogical method with his theory of the will to power (*Wille zur Macht*).⁸ In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche (1994, 55) explains the emergence and struggle for mastery of new interpretations by the fact 'that everything that occurs in the organic world consists of *overpowering, dominating*'. All organic bodies strain to dominate other entities, a straining that Nietzsche equates with will to power: 'the essence of life [is] its will to power ... the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, re-interpreting, re-directing ... powers' (56; see also Nietzsche, 1967, 342). Organic bodies are constituted by inherent biological powers -- forces (*Kräfte*) or drives (*Triebe*) -- which are the locus of their urge to dominate. Reinterpretations of pre-existing institutions take place because aggressive drives within organisms encounter existing institutions as positive opportunities to aggrandize their influence by redirecting these institutions to their own ends. Nietzsche's genealogical method is thus underpinned by his theory of bodily drives (as Butler stresses, discussing his account of morality, 1987a, 207, 219, 222).

Notably, Foucault reformulates genealogy in a way that largely eschews this ontology of active bodily forces.⁹ Against this, Foucault draws out a different element of Nietzsche's thought: the idea that power relations act directly on bodies, so as to reconstitute them, physically, in the image of power. Famously, Foucault (2001, 347) claims that on the genealogical view, the body is 'the inscribed surface of events ... totally imprinted by history'. Changing power relations thoroughly infuse the body, instilling it with particular habits and capacities, and reshaping its physiology and rhythms. Bodies are, Foucault writes, 'moulded by a great many distinct regimes; ... broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays ... poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws' (351). This cuts against Nietzsche's ontology of organic drives, which is implicitly realist, insofar as Nietzsche believes that these drives objectively exist and really direct the procession of historical reinterpretations.¹⁰ Nietzsche (1967, 348-349) presumes that it is possible to describe the inherent, pre-cultural, character of bodies, as composed of structured hierarchies of plural forces, all striving for self-aggrandisement. In contrast, Foucault stresses that all drives are culturally constructed through shifting power relations, and do not exist independently of (varying) cultural practices (on this Foucault/Nietzsche contrast, see Butler, 1987a, 219-220; Mahon, 1992, 3, 126-127).¹¹

Schematically, then, Foucault's version of genealogical method emerges from his combining (1) Nietzsche's antiessentialism with (2) a conception of the body as fully historical. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault follows Nietzsche in denying that punishment has an essence. Rather, history reveals successive reinterpretations and transformations of practices of punishment, each installing a different set of power relations that acts directly upon bodies. Similarly, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (1979) traces the reinterpretations and transformations in confessional practices and how these produce power relations that act directly upon bodies to produce sexuality in them. For Foucault, then, bodily drives do not direct historical shifts in power; rather, these shifts emerge from complex strategies of control that directly 'imprint' and reshape bodies. This (schematic) overview of how Foucault's genealogical method builds on and adapts that of Nietzsche enables us to appreciate how Butler further extends and modifies the genealogical approach in applying it to gender.

Butler's Linguistic Redefinition of Genealogy

Butler primarily derives her understanding of genealogy from Foucault, usually considering Nietzsche only as mediated through Foucault. However, Foucault's approach itself reworks Nietzsche's antiessentialist analysis of historical phenomena, shorn of the ontology of will to power. Correspondingly, we can understand Butler's genealogical view of gender to arise from her (1) acceptance of Nietzschean antiessentialism with respect to

gender (resulting in the idea that cultural norms regarding gender are not static but undergo continual, conflictual, *re* interpretation) and (2) denial of real bodily forces -- a denial that Butler claims to carry through more decisively than Foucault. Let us consider, in turn, these aspects of her approach.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999, xxv) maintains that gender always involves both language and bodily activity, activity that has a public, theatrical, quality. Thus, she conceives gender to arise at the intersection of two elements: a non-discursive element, consisting of practices of corporeal behaviour, gesture, and ritual; and a discursive element, consisting of linguistically articulated norms concerning the meaning of those bodily activities. Gender exists insofar as corporeal activity is structured and performed in accordance with normative ideas concerning its meaning, purpose, and proper direction. As Butler stresses, corporeal activity has long been regulated by the particular constellation of norms that she terms the 'heterosexual matrix' (or, more recently, 'heterosexual hegemony'), according to which bodily behaviour should fall into inversely symmetrical masculine and feminine forms, and sexual behaviour should be heterosexual. So, just as Nietzsche and Foucault maintained that practices of punishment become transformed through their successive interpretations, likewise Butler holds that our corporeal activity varies relative to the norms constraining it.

Reciprocally, though, norms regarding gender only subsist through being enacted: 'Norms are not static entities, but incorporated and interpreted features of existence' (Butler *et al.*, 2000, 152). As norms obtain only insofar as they are practised, Butler claims that gender is 'performative': 'Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed' (Butler, 1997b, 411). This performativity requirement makes norms ever vulnerable to reinterpretation, for corporeal activity always enacts norms in variable ways that alter their meanings. As Butler (1989, 131) explains, we always 'interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew'. This ongoing reinterpretation of gender norms occurs at the level of bodily behaviour, as a corporeal process inevitably effected by bodies as they take up inherited meanings. This might make it seem that Butler presupposes some inherent volatility or instability in bodies such that they always enact norms in unprecedented ways (McNay, 1999, 181).

Actually, Butler firmly rejects the idea that real bodily forces direct reinterpretations of gender norms. Following Foucault, she insists that bodies are thoroughly historical artefacts. Indeed, she criticizes him for not opposing inherent bodily forces consistently enough. Infamously, at certain points, Foucault urges resistance to sexualizing and disciplinary regimes in the name of 'bodies and pleasures' (1979, 157), suggesting that bodies inherently consist of a plurality of distinct powers and characteristics -- 'forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures' (155). For Butler (1997c, 91-92), such comments indicate Foucault's wider failure to historicize the body fully, a failing also evidenced when he portrays the body as exterior to power, passively 'imprinted' or virtually destroyed by power. Butler (1990, 96, 101-106) criticizes this Foucaultian belief in natural bodily forces for being 'ontological': that is, attributing to bodies an inherent, pre-cultural, character, which Foucault purports to describe.¹²

Butler argues against any such descriptive project in *Bodies That Matter*. 'The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action' (Butler, 1993, 30). To reconstruct this: bodies are normally held to exist, pre-culturally, with particular characteristics. Yet viewing bodies in this way is itself a cultural act, which positions the relevant characteristics of bodies as unalterable necessities. These claims about bodies then affect how people act, corporeally, which in turn affects the shape their bodies assume over time.¹³ Thus, these claims function, normatively, to constrain action, yet through their own efficacy they come to appear as descriptive truths. Hence, for Butler, every supposed description of bodies' inherent characteristics arises internally to a complex of power relations that effectively shapes bodies and *makes* them be as they are described. All 'descriptions' are disguised norms, so any philosophical attempt to describe the inherent character of bodies is misguided, mistaking the epistemic status of its own claims. Butler (1990, 110) deploys this point against the distinction between biological sex and social

gender, arguing that biological sex classifications already operate within a constellation of social norms -- the heterosexual matrix -- that governs corporeal activity, shaping bodies into dyadic form. Allegedly descriptive claims about sex function within a normative order that effectively *produces* sexually dimorphic bodies. Hence, although these claims about sex appear descriptively true, this is only because their productive efficacy conceals their real character as prescriptive norms.¹⁴

Like Foucault, then, Butler rejects the realism presupposed in Nietzsche's initial account of organic drives, but she also holds that Foucault does not repudiate Nietzsche's realism consistently enough. She reformulates the genealogical method, again, to relieve it of any vestiges of realism. For this, she draws on post-Saussurean accounts of language. Whereas Saussure holds that signs have meaning through their differences from all the other signs within a linguistic system, post-Saussureans (principally, Derrida) have argued that the meanings of signs become differentially defined through a process that only ever occurs over time. The 'system' of language is always in process of composition. Consequently, meanings of linguistic terms are never fixed, but undergo modification with every event of speech. Each occasion of using a term places it in new differential relations to other terms, redefining its meaning. This alters the meanings of those other terms too, by changing their places in the network of differential relations. So, as Butler puts it, all linguistic terms continuously undergo 'resignification'. Butler's central concept of resignification provides a linguistic reformulation of the notion of genealogical reinterpretation. As Butler (1997c, 94) says, 'the possibility of resignification [is that of] mobilising ... what Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, called the 'sign chain". The resignification of a term alters and redirects the meaning that was sedimented within that term through its pre-existing relationships. But whereas Nietzsche grounded reinterpretations in bodily forces, Butler identifies resignification as the inevitable consequence of the temporality and endemic instability of linguistic meaning.

Butler especially foregrounds the unstable meanings of terms that articulate norms concerning gender. This does not mean that she focuses narrowly on symbolic and linguistic aspects of gender (as Benhabib alleges, 1995, 109). For Butler, linguistic norms concerning gender organize and constrain our corporeal life -- which means, moreover, that the resignification of gender norms invariably occurs corporeally. Each act of re-using a normative term redefines its meaning, but each such act is a *bodily* enactment of the norm (Butler, 1999, xxv), so that all redefinition takes place corporeally. In this way, Butler explains corporeal reinterpretation of norms solely through instability in meaning, without postulating inherent bodily volatility or drives.

We can now see how Butler's revision of genealogy enables her to formulate a nonessentialist analysis of gender. According to Butler, norms concerning femininity (and masculinity) obtain insofar as they are continually re-enacted through corporeal activities. One takes on a gender, over time, insofar as one acquires 'a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, ... an active style of living one's body in the world' (Butler, 1989, 131). Over time, these corporeal 'styles' or re-enactments shift the meaning of norms concerning gender in relation to changing socio-historical circumstances and constellations of power relations. The meaning of gender norms is therefore considerably less unified than it might superficially appear (see Webster, 2000, 15-16). For Butler (1995a, 50), women's ways of understanding and enacting femininity are indefinitely diverse: "women' designates an undesignatable field of differences ... [so that] the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability'. Moreover, since women's ways of enacting femininity shape the contours of their bodies, their physiologies, women cannot rightly be said to share any physical characteristics either.

Despite insisting on women's multiplicity, Butler presupposes that women remain identifiable as women. This reflects her view that women have a genealogy. For Butler, each woman can be identified as a woman because her corporeal activity reworks inherited norms regarding femininity: thus, 'gender identity [can] be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices' (1990, 138). Through this 'imitative' -- or reinterpretive -- activity, each woman becomes located within a historical chain composed of all those (women) who have effected successive reinterpretations of femininity. Moreover, through this relation

to a pre-existing history, each woman's corporeal reinterpretation of femininity comes to overlap in content with reinterpretations that other women are simultaneously effecting: 'imitative practices ... refer laterally to other imitations' (138). Although there is no unity among women (either within or across generations), they are nevertheless brought into complex filiations through their location within the chain of overlapping reinterpretations of femininity. This idea that women have a genealogy underpins Butler's proposal for a coalitional feminist politics, which we can now reappraise.

Butler's Political Thought

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler leaves largely open-ended the nature of the non-essentialist feminist politics that she envisages, although she speaks of 'variously positioned women articulat[ing] separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition' (1990, 14). But we can see that, for Butler, women are 'variously positioned' in that they occupy different locations within the feminine genealogy. Given these different locations, coalitions among such women must be premised on their 'acceptance of divergence' (14). Feminist thinkers have often worried that acknowledging the depth of women's differences would deprive them of motivation to act together. Butler's idea that women have a genealogy averts this problem, because it entails that different reinterpretations of femininity always partly overlap in content -- both historically, since reinterpretations always build upon and rework pre-existing meanings, and intragenerationally, since different reinterpretations of femininity share a relationship to those pre-existing meanings. This suggests that women could be more or less motivated to act together with other women depending on the extent of overlap in their historically shaped experience. Coalitional collectives could thereby emerge, which interconnect very different women through complex chains of overlap.

Butler's genealogical approach, then, opens up an antiessentialist politics that requires that women share not common characteristics but, more weakly, series of partially overlapping characteristics and experiences. However, Butler herself has not fully elaborated this promising concept of coalition politics that her approach implies. Instead, pressed on the political implications of her thought, she has clarified (Butler, 1995a) what she sees as the overarching *goal* of feminist activism: the subversion of entrenched gender norms. To understand Butler's proposal for a coalitional feminism, then, we should clarify how it relates to her idea of gender subversion.

Butler (1990, 147) understands subversion, more precisely, as 'subversive resignification', which differs importantly from resignification *per se* (see Salih, 2002, 66).¹⁵ For Butler, resignification *per se* occurs, incessantly, through linguistic instability. Resignification may take a specifically subversive form -- where subversive forms of resignification are ways of corporeally re-enacting norms that undermine the meanings traditionally entrenched within them. Subversive resignifications do this by *openly displaying* their status as re-enactments of norms, thereby revealing that these norms require perpetual re-enactment and hence are unstable in meaning. This strips the authority out of entrenched meanings. Famously, Butler (1990, 137) adduces drag to illustrate this process: drag re-enacts established gender norms, but openly displays itself as a reworking of those norms, exposing their instability.

Butler emphasizes (drawing on speech act theory) that the ongoing process of resignification makes possible, but does not *necessitate*, subversive resignification. 'The reiterative speech act ... offers the possibility -- though not the necessity -- of depriving the past of the established discourse of its exclusive control over defining the parameters' of action (Butler *et al.*, 2000, 41). Resignification *per se* is not necessarily subversive, and can take conservative forms. For example, Butler suggests that demands for rights to lesbian and gay marriage re-enact marital norms in a conservative way. 'Those who seek marriage identify not only with those who have gained the blessing of the state, but with the state itself' (176-177). These demands are still resignifications, for they modify marriage's traditional meaning; but, conservatively, they conceal their innovative status, pretending that the new meaning they propose is already contained within the traditional marital norm. This strengthens the authority of marriage's traditional meaning. So, within the general view that linguistic

meaning is subject to ongoing resignification, Butler distinguishes several possible *forms* of resignification -- including subversion, which undermines hitherto accepted meanings, and conservative resignification, which projects its novelty back into accepted meanings to amplify their authority (on this distinction, see Disch, 1999, 550; Vasterling, 1999, 30).

Butler's rethinking of feminist activism in terms of subversion may appear individualistic -- as with her example of drag -- and so unrelated to her proposal for a coalitional feminism (for the charge of individualism, see McNay, 1998, 148). However, Butler's own philosophical framework entails that effective subversions can only be carried out collectively. The linguistic instability that enables subversion also ensures that subversions can effectively undermine established meanings only when they are *repeated*, frequently and insistently enough to prevent conservative forces from reinstating tradition. As Butler notes, 'parodic displacement ... depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered' (1990, 139; see also Salih, 2002, 114-115). Butler's account of subversion presupposes the possibility of collectively subversive action, a possibility that she has established through her understanding of coalitions. Her account of subversion, then, is not narrowly individualistic but belongs within her broader rethinking of collective action in relation to genealogy. Butler's politics may not be individualistic, but other, potentially more damaging, criticisms have been levied against it, notably by Benhabib and Fraser in *Feminist Contentions*. They focus on (1) whether Butler can adequately explain *how* subversion is possible, and (2) whether she can satisfactorily explain *why* subversion is desirable, or ought to be practised. With respect to the first criticism, Benhabib (1995, 110) challenges Butler to explain how individuals can vary inherited gender norms transgressively, if they are -- as Butler believes -- thoroughly constituted by those norms. Butler (1995b, 135) replies that the norms that constitute us are unstable and so constantly 'open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within'. The ongoing instability of language makes agency possible, in the form of the capacity to resignify norms. Fraser (1995, 67-68) objects that this does not show that we have any capacity to vary norms in specifically *subversive* ways. Butler (1995b, 138) replies that the capacity for subversion needs no special explanation, being one among a range of 'agentic possibilities' that arise within the field of resignification. Her discussions around this issue suggest that a range of factors conditions which particular 'agentic possibilities' subjects take up.

The first of these factors is context: for example, whether, and to what extent, one can subvert norms surrounding the family or marriage depends on one's inhabiting a context in which others are engaged in similar subversions.¹⁶ Secondly, Butler suggests in *The Psychic Life of Power* that whether one acts subversively often depends on whether doing so is necessary to one's survival. Butler does not mean survival in any metaphysical sense, but just persistence in the socially constituted identity to which one has become attached (1997c, 27).¹⁷ For instance, if one is constituted through existing norms in ways that make one's existence intolerably marginal and unhappy, then one can be expected to re-enact those norms in ways that undermine their authority or transmute their meaning, thereby making one's identity more intelligible and inhabitable. Thirdly, Butler draws on psychoanalysis (again, especially in *The Psychic Life of Power*) to expand her account of agency. Drawing upon certain strands within psychoanalysis that identify the unconscious as the site where social identities fail and become confused, and so from which power relations can be resisted, Butler traces how instabilities endemic to social power relations become refracted into instabilities within the psyche. Consequently, how capable one is of subverting norms always depends, at least in part, on the play of one's unconscious forces and identifications. Both in response to Benhabib's and Fraser's criticisms and in subsequent texts, then, Butler outlines a multifaceted account of agency in terms of the capacity for resignification, a capacity that subjects may exercise to subversive effect as circumstance, context, and psychical needs and forces permit.

Fraser's (1995, 68) second criticism of Butler's framework is that it is 'incapable of providing satisfactory answers to the normative questions it unfailingly solicits'. Butler presupposes that subversion is desirable and that an acceptable feminist politics should subvert, not conserve, the established meanings of gender norms. But *why*, Fraser asks, is subversion desirable? In response, Butler (1995b, 138) stresses that her philosophy

attempts to explain how subversion is possible (in terms of resignification), not to provide a general account of whether, or why, it is good. Butler denies that philosophers can properly furnish general answers to those normative questions. Rather, she suggests, for those specific individuals who need to act subversively to improve their lives, subversion is good, insofar as it helps them to achieve that end. This implies, though, that for those whose lives are improved by activities that perpetuate traditional exclusive norms, this conservative behaviour will be equally good. But Butler denies that conservative and subversive practices have equal worth; she supports 'practices, institutions, and forms of life in which the empowerment of some does not entail the disempowerment of others' (139). This commitment, as she states, depends on her normative judgement that some ways of identifying and differentiating oneself are worse than others: 'there are better and worse forms of [self-]differentiation' (140). Identities which depend on others' exclusion and oppression, and can be sustained only by perpetuating exclusive norms, are worse than identities and ways of behaving that 'lead to ... more capacious, generous, and 'unthreatened' bearings of the self'.

At this point, Fraser would surely press Butler to explain why it is better to act and identify oneself in ways that subvert and contest, rather than perpetuate, exclusive norms. Butler (1995b, 140) replies to this hypothetical question: 'whatever ground one might offer would have to be communicated and, hence, become subject to ... [a] labour of cultural translation'. In other words, for Butler there can be no transhistorical reasons to judge subversion better -- only culturally specific reasons that, *qua* specific, can always be contested with respect to their own location within particular clusters of power relations. More broadly, she holds that the grounds or foundations for any normative judgements are always culturally situated, and so liable to challenge. Given this, Butler believes it best that the theorist or philosopher always acknowledge their specificity. Yet Butler's very antipathy to offering transhistorical grounds *presupposes* a normative judgement that it is better to demystify the authority of normative claims and open them up to contestation (including by exposing their historicity), rather than attempting to entrench them and render them exclusive. This means, however, that Butler continues to need an account of why, in general, it is better to subvert and democratize entrenched and exclusive norms. That this account must be cast in a culturally specific lexicon, and must be fallible and contestable, does not affect the fact that Butler needs some such (fallible, specific) account to justify her normative claims -- claims that recur whichever level of theoretical analysis she operates at. Without endorsing Fraser's verdict that Butler cannot answer normative questions at all, it seems fair to conclude that her answers to those questions remain incomplete, and need further development. I will now argue that Butler could provide this development by deepening the Nietzschean components of her framework, and reintroducing a notion of active corporeal forces as the basis for normative judgement.

A Realist Adaptation of Butler's Genealogical Feminism

Nietzsche's version of genealogy, as articulated in his *Genealogy of Morality*, rests on an ontology upon which bodies are composed of active forces or drives that continually reinterpret institutions. In Nietzsche's view, drives do this because they generally evince will to power, which means that they each seek to extend their own typical mode of activity. For example, the sex-drive seeks to dominate other drives by extending the sphere of its sexual activity, harnessing other drives towards its own tendency to pursue sexual satisfaction (see Richardson, 2001, 165-166). Bodies themselves take shape as structured hierarchies of forces through the processes by which some drives succeed in establishing a stable dominion over others (Nietzsche, 1967, 348-349). Likewise, these various drives strain to reinterpret institutions so as to extend their own characteristic modes of activity, by harnessing and incorporating the institutions into those patterns of activity.

Nietzsche's ontology opens up the possibility of criticizing existing institutions on the grounds that they constrict or diminish the level of power open to bodily forces. In turn, the activity of reinterpreting institutions can be justified insofar as it enhances the power of hitherto constricted forces. Thus, Nietzsche's genealogical approach, with its underpinning in his ontology of will to power, allows him to appraise the 'value' (1994, 5-8) of traditional institutions such as morality in terms of their capacity to enhance the vitality and abundance of bodily

drives. The widespread fear that Nietzsche's philosophy has no normative content is therefore misplaced: he does retain an expanded ethical standpoint from which to criticize traditional morality.¹⁸ More generally, Nietzsche understands any drive to gain in power and vitality insofar as it prevails over *other* drives, redirecting them to its own purposes. He therefore cannot coherently advocate expanded power for all bodily drives, but only for those that he deems inherently suited for mastery -- 'vital', 'courageous' drives (5). This commits Nietzsche to an aristocratic ethics and politics, in which those individuals with a predominance of vital, masterful, drives are suited to dominate and direct those in whom the 'weak' drives are ascendant. Nietzsche's aristocratic ethos can hardly appeal to Butler as a radical democrat. Nevertheless, a *broadly* Nietzschean notion of inherent bodily forces can fruitfully be reintroduced into Butler's framework, to provide the normative underpinning that she needs to support her judgement that the subversion of entrenched norms is better than their conservation. If there are real bodily forces, then Butler has a basis for criticizing entrenched norms and meanings insofar as they constrict these forces. She can also justify the subversion of such norms on the grounds that it will bring previously constricted forces greater power. Insofar as Butler rejects Nietzsche's aristocratic ethos, though, any materialist recasting of her thought must advocate full flowering for *all* bodily forces. On such a recasting, drives must be reconceived to gain in power not by dominating and harnessing other drives, but by participating in a process of active engagement, struggle, and contention with those other drives. Whereas Nietzsche in the *Genealogy* envisages drives to gain power by channelling other forces into their own characteristic patterns of activity, a more democratic ontology could rethink drives as gaining power by contesting and battling with other drives, even if they never prevail. A process of ongoing conflict and competition might, precisely, *enhance* the vitality of all the contending drives, by sharpening each of their identities in contradistinction to those of the others.

Ironically, this idea that drives gain power through competition is suggested by Nietzsche in his early essay 'Homer on Competition'. Here he explores the ancient Greeks' 'agonistic' education and culture, which fostered individuals' powers by encouraging them to strive to excel in competition. This required that there always be 'several' geniuses to incite each other to action [and to] keep each other within certain limits' (Nietzsche, 1994, 192). Consequently, anyone who established a position of domination had to be ostracized -- the Greek ethos 'loathes a monopoly of predominance'. Although in this essay Nietzsche recognizes the possibility of bodily forces growing through competition, in later works, such as the *Genealogy*, he abandons this insight in favour of an aristocratic ethos. However, we can draw on his early insight in articulating a materialist recasting of Butler, according to which corporeal forces grow in power just when they do not prevail over the others, but remain continually challenged and provoked by those others. Butler's normative standpoint could thus be based upon the premise that growth in power and vitality of all bodily forces is desirable. On this basis, Butler could explain why it is desirable to break down authoritatively entrenched norms. These norms exclude alternative possibilities of meaning, and this prevents the majority of corporeal drives from engaging in processes of contesting and struggling to redefine these norms. Authoritatively entrenched norms thus crush and stymie the potential for growth of most drives. The subversion of those norms is therefore desirable because it opens up alternative possibilities for engagement, allowing the multiplicity of bodily forces to grow in power and vitality. Interestingly, despite Butler's usual rejection of any ontological claims, she herself at times predicates her political and critical claims upon an ontology that closely resembles the materialist, broadly Nietzschean, view that I have just sketched. Already in *Subjects of Desire*, Butler (1987a, 232) sympathizes with Julia Kristeva's notion of the body as not a singular entity but 'a heterogeneous assemblage of drives and needs'. Later, in a little noticed subsection of *Gender Trouble* -- 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript' (Butler, 1990, 106-111) -- Butler discusses intersexed people (with bodies that are anatomically, hormonally, or chromosomally ambiguous with respect to conventional sex classifications). In their cases, Butler contends: *The component parts of sex do not add up to the recognizable coherence or unity that is usually designated by the category of sex ... sex, as a category that comprises a variety of elements, functions, and chromosomal and hormonal*

dimensions, no longer operates within the binary framework that we take for granted. (108-110)

Thus, the widespread occurrence of intersexuality suggests to Butler the broader conclusion that all bodies inherently consist of a proliferation of drives and characteristics, being carved into sexual duality only through cultural operations grounded in a heterosexual imperative. Butler's conclusion in this section has been reinforced by researchers such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, who argues that around 1.7% of all births display one or more of the various intersexual conditions (2000, 51). Fausto-Sterling also documents how the medical profession has standardly intervened, surgically, to carve these bodies into dimorphism literally. One might object that the vast majority of people remain either male or female, so that intersexuality need not support the idea that *all* bodies are structured from plural, non-dimorphic, drives. However, Butler's (1990, 110) argument in *Gender Trouble* is that the conventional medical and scientific treatment of intersexual people exposes the *imposed*, culturally constraining, character of dualistic sex classifications -- classifications that are imposed so effectively as to constrain and stymie bodily forces that could otherwise be expected to exhibit much greater diversity and profusion, in *all* individuals.

The implication of Butler's (brief, but significant) discussion of intersexuality is that norms prescribing sexual duality are illegitimate because they truncate, stultify, and compress the inherent diversity and internal multiplicity of corporeal forces, forces whose growth and vitality are to be desired. This critical implication becomes apparent in *Gender Trouble*'s 1999 preface, in which Butler advocates a politics that seeks to 'transcend the simple categories of identity ... [and] that will counter and dissipate the violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms' (Butler, 1999, xxvi). Here, Butler suggests that entrenched gender norms are violent in that they restrict the non-simplicity -- the plurality and complexity -- of bodily forces: 'gender operates as a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality' (xxiii). Here, Butler can be seen to go back on her usual antirealism, appealing instead to the reality of inherent corporeal multiplicity to criticize entrenched norms that prescribe gender duality. This materialist turn need not be altogether unexpected -- it enables Butler to strengthen her normative claims by arguing that the subversion of gender norms is desirable because it increases the abundance of bodily forces.

One might protest that these -- and any other -- materialist passages in Butler are aberrations. After all, in general, she *is* committed to antirealism: she regards any realist account of inherent bodily forces as epistemically confused, mistakenly regarding its normative and productive claims as neutrally descriptive. One might therefore object that my realist revision of Butler is actually more an alternative to her framework than a mere adaptation of it. Certainly, my materialist revision of Butler is a significant revision, insofar as it abandons her general commitment to antirealism. Nonetheless, it remains a revision and not a rejection of Butler in that it preserves her other core ideas: her antiessentialist understanding of women (and men) as having a genealogy, and her account of how gender norms are linguistic, unstable, and shape our bodily life. Admittedly, norms must (on Butler's revised position) be rethought as shaping bodies that have inherent drives, drives that can be weakened or strengthened by this shaping and might therefore benefit from subverting those norms. Whether particular subjects need to subvert norms will therefore depend on not only their psychical but also their somatic needs. As this shows, though, the introduction of a materialist dimension serves to amplify, rather than displace, Butler's original analyses of gender norms and of how subjects come to subvert them.

This materialist adaptation of Butler also remains an adaptation, rather than a rejection, because it preserves her political reconceptualization of feminism as a coalitional and subversive movement. However, one might wonder whether the political advocacy of growth in multiple bodily forces retains any specifically *feminist* dimension. This advocacy appears, instead, more closely allied with the politics of the intersex, trans sexual, and transgender movements. Yet, although not an exclusively feminist concern, the advocacy of growth in bodily forces does create a novel basis for feminist politics in the specifically antiessentialist and coalitional form that Butler envisages. Butler's feminist politics could be recast on a materialist basis to suggest that those who

have been historically constituted as women should act together to subvert the feminine norms that have curtailed their corporeal plurality. Since these norms have already been reinterpreted in innumerable ways, different women will occupy different relations to those norms, being constricted by them in correspondingly diverse ways. Nonetheless, enough overlaps will remain between the patterns of their constriction to motivate women to enter into collectively subversive coalitions.

Recasting Butler's genealogical framework in terms of an ontology of corporeal activity and plurality could allow us to develop the normative aspect of her thought more fully, thereby strengthening her novel and important conception of a coalitional feminism that aspires to subvert gender norms. Evidently, I cannot claim to have comprehensively explained what Butler's amended theoretical and political framework would look like.¹⁹ I hope, though, that this concluding section has at least opened up the possibility that Butler's thought could fruitfully be revised in this realist direction so as to yield a more robust articulation of the distinctively 'genealogical' feminism which she derives from her engagement with Foucault and Nietzsche.

AuthorAffiliation

[a] Centre for Philosophy, Furness College, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK. E-mail: a.stone@lancaster.ac.uk

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Footnote

¹ Of course, Butler rethinks not only feminism but also queer politics and the relations between feminism, antiracism, and radical democracy (Butler, 1997a; Butler *et al.*, 2000). By reconceiving feminism as coalitional, Butler opens it up to internal relations with these other political movements. She also opens up the possibility that feminism need not be a movement exclusively of women, since overlapping experiences might bring women to act in concert with men. I will largely ignore these complex issues here.

² Others exploring a 'genealogical' feminism include Bell (1999) and Riley (1988).

³ Butler (1987a, 179-181; 1990, 150), among others, has stressed the centrality of Foucault's reading of Nietzsche to his later thought.

⁴ As I aim to clarify Butler's indebtedness to Foucault's and Nietzsche's concepts of genealogy, I must largely ignore other important influences on her thinking, notably psychoanalysis. I shall, though, briefly consider some psychoanalytic components of her account of subversive agency below.

⁵ My interpretation of Nietzsche is itself strongly influenced by Foucault (and by Geuss (1999), who explicates Foucault's reading). The aspects of Nietzsche that I highlight are therefore those that become significant for Foucault (whether because he accepts or eschews them).

⁶ Geuss (1999, 13) notes that Nietzsche's agonistic model implies that no reinterpretation will ever 'encounter ... just a tabula rasa, but a set of actively structured forces, practices, etc. which will be capable of active resistance', elements of which must, therefore, tend to persist. These older elements of meaning must persist if historically 'late' institutions are to contain, as Nietzsche (1994, 57) says, an indecipherably complex 'synthesis of 'meanings''.

⁷ One might argue (as does Leiter, 2002, 170) that Nietzsche surreptitiously presupposes that institutions such as punishment *do* have essences, consisting in the underlying practices onto which successive interpretations get grafted. However, Nietzsche (1994, 56) says that these practices are only *relatively* permanent, but do still get gradually 'adapted' (*zurechtgemacht*) in line with their changing interpretations. Moreover, Nietzsche (1994, 57) denies that the bare practice of inflicting suffering suffices for punishment: this practice becomes specifically punitive only when inscribed with meaning - as he says, the practice itself predates its use/interpretation as punishment. Any essence of punishment could exist only at the level of its meaning -- where Nietzsche detects only multiple interpretations.

⁸ It might be objected that Nietzsche does not really endorse an ontology of will to power, which figures most prominently in only his unpublished notebooks. However, Nietzsche's published works also can be reconstructed in terms of this ontology (see Richardson, 2001). Moreover, the *Genealogy of Morality* contains clear passages (Nietzsche, 1994, 54-56) deriving genealogical reinterpretations from bodily forces.

⁹ I say 'largely' because Foucault is not wholly unambiguous on this: as Butler notes in *Subjects of Desire*, he occasionally suggests that we should oppose regimes of power because they are 'antienergy' (Foucault, 1979, 155). Relatedly, he regularly portrays the body as exterior to power (see below).

¹⁰ Nietzsche is often regarded as an antirealist, a 'perspectivist' who denies that there is any univocal 'reality' to be known. Importantly, though, his theory of bodily forces is (at least implicitly) realist, as Butler notes (1987a, 207, 222).

¹¹ Butler (1987a, 215) also remarks that Foucault 'disavows any appeal to a desire that has a natural or metaphysical structure said to exist either prior or posterior to linguistic and cultural laws'.

¹² Similarly, Butler (1987a, 214) criticizes Deleuze's 'postulation of a natural multiplicity' as 'an insupportable metaphysical speculation'.

¹³ Butler (1997b, 406) presupposes a phenomenological view of bodies as not fixed objects but 'legac[ies] of sedimented acts', precipitates of past actions that are always in process of materialization, never achieving finally finished shape (see Heinämaa, 1997).

¹⁴ Butler is therefore an antirealist in that she thinks that attempts to 'describe' reality are always productive. As such, this does not preclude the possibility of real energies and forces in the world to which we have no epistemic access. That would make Butler a kind of Kantian, for whom we have no cognitive access to things-in-themselves. Butler, though, sympathizes with Hegel's criticism of Kant, according to which even the idea of an independent reality is a construction with productive effects (on Butler's epistemological proximity to Hegel, see Colebrook, 2000). This commits Butler to a strong antirealism on which reality only acquires determinate character at all through its discursive production.

¹⁵ Butler does not always uphold this distinction clearly (Lloyd, 1999, 210; Salih, 2002, 95), sometimes speaking of 'resignification' when she means specifically *subversive* resignification. Still, the distinction is clearly implied by her view that resignification *per se* only makes subversion possible (not necessary) and that some resignifications can be non-subversive; for example, she claims that the political task is 'not whether to repeat, but how to repeat' (Butler, 1993, 148).

¹⁶ As Lloyd (1999) shows, though, Butler does not always attend sufficiently to cultural contexts in distinguishing subversive from conservative forms of resignification.

¹⁷ Butler (1997b, 27) says that we should 'redescribe the desire to persist in being' (which Spinoza postulated as a metaphysical *conatus*) as the desire for 'a more pliable notion of social being ... the possibility of continuing as a recognizable social being'.

¹⁸ Bell (1999, 32-34), for example, worries that Nietzsche believes in 'a world without normativity, one that results in an individual quest of struggle ... [which] cannot guard against the most insidious of politics'. Butler's readers sometimes blame Nietzsche's influence for the underdevelopment of her normative claims. My suggestion is that these concerns are misplaced and that Butler could actually *strengthen* her normative claims by appealing to Nietzsche's corporeal ontology.

¹⁹ A further advantage of recasting Butler's thought through a notion of active bodily forces is that this would eliminate her much-criticized tendency to construe corporeal matter as a passive slate on which cultural norms write unhindered (on this, see Hull, 1997).

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