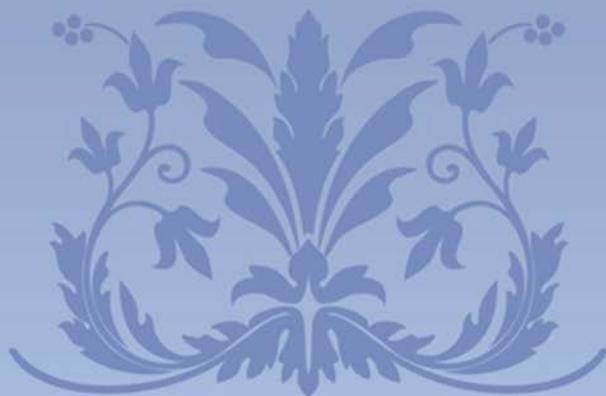


DAVID ROSS FRYER

THINKING QUEERLY

Race, Sex, Gender, and the Ethics of Identity



ROUTLEDGE


Thinking Queerly

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Race, Sex, Gender, and the Ethics of Identity

David Ross Fryer

with a foreword by Riki Wilchins

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To Lewis Gordon, in friendship

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FOREWORD

A Question of Language

“‘Everyday language’ is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries within it... presuppositions of all types.”

—John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*

“For [Foucault] Western thought since Descartes has assumed the innocence of reason.”

—Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism*

“The art of appropriating the universal was the main business of the Enlightenment.”

—Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism*

“The philosophical tradition, at least from Plato on, has always favored the concept of the same; i.e., the aim of philosophical thought has been to reveal the essential characteristics that two things hold in common.”

—John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics*

What are we to make of experience? Clearly we experience a sense of self, and we all experience sensations in the world. And yet, if we are to believe the postmodernists like Foucault and Butler, these selves, these particular subjects we become, are not “us” in any private and authentic way. Rather, these selves we occupy are the product of very specific social regimes. These regimes determine which selves are authorized and which are not, and then compel us to inhabit them. All the while, these effects are largely hidden behind discourses of naturalness, inevitability, and universality. For instance, the system of binary gender regulation has 4 main rules:

- 1) Everyone must be in a box.
- 2) There are only two boxes.
- 3) No one can change boxes and no one can be in the middle.
- 4) You can not pick your box.

There is nothing essential about these rules. In fact, they are surprisingly arbitrary and could have been organized quite differently. But we are taught from birth that we are boys or girls. That designation tells us which colors to like, what interests to have, which emotional displays are authorized and which are frowned upon, differential ways of standing, crossing our legs, inflecting our

voice, buttoning our clothes, shaving our bodies, and styling our hair. In fact the list of social traits we are called to recognize is fairly endless.

None of this is inevitable or even natural. Much of it is not even universal. Yet through this “micropolitics of power,” through a thousand small daily interactions and communications of knowledge we learn to be and experience ourselves as very particular kinds of masculine or feminine subjects. This is a kind of power we on the left are still not good at seeing. It is one reason Foucault and Butler demand us to not assume the innocence of the self, that we look upstream to see how we came to inhabit these specific selves, how they arose and whose interests this kind of self-hood serves. They ask us, in short, to give the subjective experience of self its own history.

With gender, this is difficult, since there are few alternatives to which it might be compared. One of the most compelling aspects of the gender system is that it is so widespread and effective that, until now, most of us have never seen anything else. Moreover, most of us could not recognize it if we saw it. We would simply try to categorize any new gender into one of the two available boxes.

There is a story of an anthropologist who went looking for a third gender. He went to a remote island where rumor had it there were five different genders. Yet he soon left disappointed. When asked what had happened, he replied, “When I got there, I found that just like every other culture we’ve studied, they had only two genders after all.” We cannot see what we cannot name, and what may not exist. Thus does knowledge itself become coercive, forcing us to see some things and marginalize others.

And yet, although most of us believe that our gender is both inevitable and natural, still there is a tremendous amount of social anxiety about it. We worry that we will not be perceived as masculine enough or feminine enough. We are embarrassed if someone accidentally uses the wrong pronoun on the phone—a mistake that would be utterly humiliating should it happen face-to-face. We even worry that if our kids don’t appear gender-normative, people will blame us for not raising them properly. So we butch it up. We try to look more feminine. We make sure our daughters look distinctively feminine, and that our boys don’t cry or play with dolls. We conform to the kinds of subjectivity that are expected, even demanded of us. For a “natural” fact, society invests a lot of energy in assuring gender normativity, and we pay a lot of attention to it.

Threaded through all this anxiety and effort is a discourse of realness: “Real Men” and “Real Women.” And those of us who don’t fit—genderqueers and drag queens and transpeople—are seen as unreal. Because boxes are Real—people are not.

The more you look at it, normative gender subjectivity looks less like an inevitability than a kind of accomplishment, something we must achieve anew every day, something we are in constant danger of losing. If, as Butler has observed, one of the gender system’s most compelling illusions is that since there are no exceptions, it looks like an unavoidable and natural fact. That is slowly changing. Since the maturing of gay rights, the emergence of a small but signifi-

cant population of genderqueers is slowly revealing how the gender system regulates and maintains itself. While we have always had drag queens, these individuals cannot be so easily written off as entertainment for those lucky enough to inhabit normative genders. As such, they are a serious affront to the gender system. They demonstrate alternatives to the binary. The anger and confusion they arouse show gender regulation at work. The discrimination they inspire provides an object lesson in the steep costs for difference or defiance. They show that boxes are not so real after all.

However, since gender is the universal, by definition there can be no exceptions. Such individuals are seen as noise in the system, mistakes to be rectified. Yet gender rights is still in its infancy. There was a time when the Homosexual was seen the same way.

Now, through one of those amazing and largely unconscious shifts in perception that happen with repeated exposure over time, gay people are increasingly perceived as acceptable members of society—not “avowed” or “out” homosexuals—but just other people, and not so specially different. Today, gender is now the new gay. We are the new queers. The time may yet come when we too cause that shifting and stretching of what is considered acceptable and routine. Perhaps at that time, we will no longer be able to consider ourselves queer. If so, it is much to be hoped for, and it will herald a profound shift in our own subjectivity as well. Because gender is that most private and subjective of experiences.

What a shame, therefore, that post-modernism, which has provided so many of the tools that genderqueers have used to clear epistemologic space for themselves, is so incapable of coming to grips with individual experience. It is as if our theorists, having decoded the systems of power and discourse that create us as specific kinds of subjects, are then unwilling to look at us thinking and feeling subjects. Presumably those who write consider themselves to be possessed of full agency and capable of standing—if not outside the systems they critique—then at least sufficiently aside from them to theorize effectively. Yet the power of discursive systems to form us seems to render any inquiry into our lived experience under that system suspect for them. It “poisons the well,” so to speak, or if you prefer, it “queers the game.” More important, it binds them into a catch-22 situation: the more powerful and all-determining the system, the more powerful their critique. The more individuals can be shown to escape the systems effects, the less persuasive—and important—their arguments. This is at its heart quietly contradictory. For why would any theorist bother to theorize, except that they hope that someone will read them and use their work to improve their lived experience?

Until post-modernism (or post-structuralism) can grapple successfully with subjective experience, with how systems of discourse make us *feel*, it will remain an incredibly rich filling, delicious donut with an enormous hole at its center. Comprehending queerness and difference means understanding not only how they are produced and maintained, but how they feel from the inside. What

is the point of undoing the gender system if it does not enable us to feel different?

None of us is just a produced subject; we are thinking, feeling subjects. At some point post-modernism must come to grips with that. A few works are beginning to fill in this hole in the donut, by weaving theories of subjectivity into the web of post-modern theory.

This is one of them. I hope you enjoy it.

—Riki Wilchins

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David Ross Fryer
Philadelphia, 2010

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Preface

I am an ethicist and I am a queer theorist. This is a work in ethics and this is a work in queer theory. As I see it, each of these statements is redundant.

I have spent all of my time in academia working in a field that others would recognize as ethics, with moves into fields that others would recognize as psychology, gender and queer theory, and Africana thought. This collection of essays brings together some of my works from all of these fields in an attempt both to present a new theory and to call forth a new field of study.

As an academic, I undertake most of my research in cold isolation. However, I have been fortunate enough to also have a space where I engage and theorize with others. For the last several years, I have been part of a community of like-minded thinkers who meet often to do our work together. This group is called the Phenomenology Roundtable. At our meetings, I have presented works that span the fields of ethics, psychoanalysis, queer theory, gender theory, and Africana thought. Over the course of presenting my work in this forum to my colleagues, I started to glean that my work in these seemingly disparate areas was not as disparate as I'd thought.

I decided to publish a collection of essays in an attempt to articulate more broadly what my work is all about. As I began to do so, I found that, even outside of my more narrowly defined work in queer theory, my approach to my work has for some time been a "queer" one. Continuing to collect, edit, and organize these essays, I realized that I was in the process of articulating my "queer" approach *as* an approach, as a perspective, as a method—and that in doing so I had the opportunity to offer something bigger than I had first imagined. This book, then, is no longer simply a collection of writings on these seemingly disparate studies but rather an attempt to articulate a full-blown theory in its own right.

But what kind of theory? As I said, a queer theory. But what does that mean? What makes a theory queer, and what is it a theory of, anyway?

In September 2005, over a barbecue dinner celebrating his daughter's sixth birthday, Lewis Gordon suggested to me that what makes my work unique is that it is, in its very structure, queer theory. Normally those doing queer theory do one of two things. One, they take a straight theory (psychoanalysis, for instance) and apply it to particular themes that they deem queer (queer-themed films, for example). Two, they take any number of straight texts (films, novels, television, philosophical treatises) and examine them from a queer (which, in these cases, usually means lesbian, gay, or bisexual) perspective. My work in queer theory doesn't quite do either of these. It is, instead, queer in a different way, constituting a theory of a different sort.

My work is queer in that it calls upon us to examine, suspend, and transcend our belief in what I call both normative and antinormative thought in order to engage in what I call postnormative thinking. I call this kind of thinking “thinking queerly.” My theory is queer, then, in the sense that it asks us to engage in a new kind of critical reflection. Moreover, in addition to being a theory of what it is to think, this theory is a theory of what it is to live—for thinking, like feeling, like acting, like dreaming, like touching, like doing, is but one aspect of the multisided experience we call living. Thus, thinking queerly calls upon us to confront not only how we think but also how we *do* and *ought to* live in the world.

But as I have mentioned, this book is also an attempt to call forth a new field of study. I didn’t originally set out to do this, but in pulling these essays together, I realized that, in addition to this new theory that I had been developing, a new field of study was emerging in the essays that I had written—a field that connects the kind of questions I ask when I wear my different academic hats.

On first glance, this book is motivated by a series of questions grouped into two constellations. The first constellation of questions groups around the word *queer*. What is the value of the concept? What is its use and what can it offer us? What are the dangers that come along with this concept and what should we do in the face of those dangers? Is it a useful category of identity? Is it useful in the political arena? Does it offer us new ways of thinking/acting/being in the world? The second constellation groups around the idea of ethics. What is it to be an ethical human being? How should we act in a world of increasing hatred, intolerance, injustice, fear, loathing, and war? Who should we be in such a world?

But it is where these two constellations merge that the new field emerges. I call this field *the ethics of identity*. Here the motivating question is not primarily the traditional question of ethics, what ought we to do? Instead, the motivating question becomes, in this unethical world, this world of hatred and injustice, *who ought we to be?*

The first chapter in this volume, “On the Possibilities of Posthumanism, or How to Think Queerly in an Anti-black World,” lays out the theory of thinking queerly. The remaining chapters are enactments of thinking queerly in various regional ontological studies: African-American studies and queer studies (Chapter 2); gender theory (Chapter 3); psychoanalysis (Chapter 4); and ethics (Chapter 5). All explore the various questions of the ethics of identity that constitute my work. It is my hope that through this book, the concept of thinking queerly will have been illuminated and that I will have begun to answer some of the questions posed in this preface. More so, however, I hope that I will have prompted the reader to take these questions on as her own. For if I am right, part of what makes thinking queer is its refusal ever to close, to finish, to end. I hope that the reader takes this book, then, as an opening, as a beginning, as an invitation. I believe it will take you places that I have not yet thought of, and, if it does, I will call it a success.

On the Possibilities of Posthumanism, or How to Think Queerly in an Anti-black World

THE PROBLEM

We live in an anti-black world.¹ We live in an anti-queer world. An anti-poor world, an anti-woman world, an anti-Semitic world, an anti-community world.

An anti-black world takes blackness as inferior.² An anti-black world takes all things it stands against as black and takes blackness as including all things it stands against.

The black man is effeminate. The black man is poor. The black man is a criminal. The black man is infiltrating our communities. The black man is taking the white man's job. The black woman is a welfare mother. The black woman is a crack addict. Addiction is a black problem. Poverty is a black problem. Crime only happens in the black ghetto. The gay man is spreading AIDS. AIDS is the gay man's disease. AIDS comes from Africa. AIDS is an African disease. AIDS is a black disease. The gay man isn't a real man. Neither is the black man. The lesbian hates men. The black lesbian hates them even more than the white lesbian. No one is lower than the black whore.

In an anti-black world, anything that stands in opposition to the norm is feared, denigrated, held down, cast out. In an anti-black world, slavery is not a distant memory; rather, it haunts us as the very notion of freedom comes under attack in our day.

Our world hates Jews, Muslims, women, queers, criminals, the poor, and blacks. We live in an anti-black world.

THE PRELIMINARIES

The overarching issues that we ethicists explore in our work can be summed up with a single question: what are the ethical imperatives of being human?

Changing (healing, mending) the world is, as I see it, *the* ethical imperative. Among the particulars that concern me in this regard are questions such as: What is the value of identity and how should we comport ourselves to identities in the world? How do cultural and linguistic norms shape and constrain us in our efforts to engage in meaningful living? What does the fulfillment of one's possibilities entail? Issues of racial, gender, and sexual identity and their origins, meanings, and usefulness are central for me in studying these questions and thus for the project of ethics itself.

Contrary to the way most academics go about studying ethics in the predominantly analytical worlds of philosophy and religious studies, I argue that questions of the *ought* are not enough; rather, questions of the *ought* are fundamentally bound up with questions of the *is*. In fact, I would say that it is precisely in the *is* that we find the *ought*; that is, it is precisely in describing human reality as we live it that we not only see the origin of the ethical imperative but also learn how we ought to act in particular situations. Because I argue from a phenomenological perspective, this claim is all the more potent, since from a phenomenological perspective every act of description is at the same time an act of constitution. That is, whenever we describe the world, we are, in a very real sense, remaking it.

While I do offer answers to some of my questions, I by no means want to suggest that they are final answers. Or, at the very least, to the extent that they are, I hope that they are final in the Hegelian sense—finalities that do not foreclose the task of thinking but rather open it up again.

We live in an anti-black world. We live in an anti-queer world. An anti-poor world, an anti-woman world, an anti-Semitic world, an anti-community world.

Some of us want to change it.

We draw upon various histories when we attempt to change things—histories of the oppressor and of the oppressed, of the self and of the other, of the good and of the bad, of universalism and of particularism, of transcendence and of immanence, and, perhaps most poignantly, of the master and of the slave. Drawing upon these histories is no simple task, for it is all too easy simply to take sides, one against the other, losing sight of the value of the other or falling prey to the myopia of the one.

Is there another way to draw upon these histories? Is there a way to answer the call of resistance and social change? Is there another way to think of the human other than through the not-so-useful categories of humanism and anti-humanism? Is there another way to be humane? In short, what are the possibilities of posthumanism in an anti-human(e) world?

THE OPENING GAMBIT

Let us begin by posing a deceptively simple question: is phenomenology queer? The question is not mine. It was asked to me by another.

The first meeting of the Phenomenology Roundtable was held in June 2001, in Providence, Rhode Island. In response to a presentation I had just made on gender identity and phenomenology, Lewis Gordon asked me, “Is phenomenology inherently queer?”³ In my presentation, I had suggested that a turn to phenomenology was the best—indeed the only—way to theorize gender identity in non-normative ways without falling into the trap of the positivism latent in the anti-normative critiques of poststructuralism. I had discussed the early work of Judith Butler and more recent work in transgender theory—specifically, photography by Loren Cameron (1996) and theory by Riki Wilchins (1997). I had argued that Butler’s poststructuralist account of performativity, though subversive, was ultimately inadequate for the task of thinking gender beyond a binary construction, and I had found in Cameron’s photography and Wilchins’s writing clear manifestations of a queerness that moved beyond the gender binary in ways foreclosed by Butler’s arguments. Gender theory was stuck, I then argued, when it came to the issue of queer identity. I postulated that Husserlian transcendental phenomenology might be the way out of this impasse and called for a return to it as a method (if not *the* method) of thinking gender and sexual identity beyond positivism, in both its constructive and negative forms.

Gordon’s question arose out of this presentation. While I was suggesting that phenomenology might help us think gender beyond normative conceptions (that is, queerly), Gordon asked me if I thought phenomenology was itself inherently queer. In other words, while I was taking up what I saw as a practical issue (Q: How do we move gender theory forward? A: Through a return to phenomenology), Gordon pushed me to take up a theoretical issue (what is the nature of phenomenology itself?). From out of Gordon’s question, an entire series of new questions arose.

THE QUEER ISSUE

The question of the human manifests itself in several regional ontologies (studies of modes of being), the most interesting ones for me being queer theory, race theory, and feminist theory. As we explore the question of whether or not phenomenology is queer, we must first enter into one of these regional ontologies and inquire into its constituting term. So we ask the question: what does it mean for something/someone to be “queer”?

Queer is a relatively new term in the academy. Teresa de Lauretis introduced it into academic discourse as a technical term in 1991 for an issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. She used it to describe gay and lesbian studies, but it has since grown to take on several different meanings. Today, *queer* tends to have at least two primary uses. As an umbrella term, it signifies gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and questioning communities; as a descriptive term, it signals an identity or stance that opposes the essentialism and normativity that is implied in the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and

bisexual. It is the second meaning that holds the most interest for our purposes in this chapter, and it is this meaning that must be interrogated here.⁴

In short, we are considering *queer* as an adjective that describes non-normative gendered and sexual identities, actions, stances, practices, subject positions, linguistic operations, and theoretical stances, both within and beyond the academy. Those of us who use the term *queer* this way and who call ourselves queer in this way are making a statement that our goal in our work and in our lives is not primarily (or perhaps even at all) to be included in the discourses and practices from which we have historically and personally been excluded, though the emancipatory goal of gay and lesbian liberation movements is still on our minds. We are not primarily seeking access to mainstream culture and acceptable society; we are not asking that the concentric circles of identity-based movements for inclusion be expanded one last time to allow us room at the table of the American dream. Rather, we are taking a stance against normative thinking, against being “normalized” at the sake of our own identities and the rights of others who have not yet gained access to the table. We are making a statement that—contrary to the commonly heard position of the gay and lesbian couples seeking the right to marry, who invariably get interviewed on television shows such as *20/20*—we are *not* “just like everyone else.” The desire to be like everyone else, we say, is a desire to be accepted not for who we are but rather for whom others want us to be. The desire to be like everyone else is the death knell of a radical politics, the signal of assimilation, and the end of the struggle for the true emancipation of human possibilities. No, we are not like everyone else, nor do we wish to be seen that way. Rather, we are a challenge to much of what straight society holds dear.⁵ We are, in fact, a *danger*.⁶

As I have pondered the question “is phenomenology queer?” over the past few years, I have struggled with what I mean by *queer* when I use it to refer to a non-normative stance. More to the point, I have struggled with how I can reconcile this non-normative stance with my philosophical inclination toward phenomenology, the main tenet of which is that we suspend all presuppositions and agendas in our search for the truth and engage in a truly critical exploration in which nothing is sacred—neither the normative nor the non-normative. So I have thought more about those of us who use the term *queer* in the aforementioned second sense. And I have asked the following questions: In what sense are we queers not “just like everyone else”? In what sense are we a danger? Are all of us queers polyamorous communists engaging in sadomasochistic threesomes? Are we all tattooed, pierced, shaven (or hairy), and decked out in leather or drag? Many of us are some or all of these things and proud of it. But none of us is all of these things, and even when we make the same choices, none of us makes them for quite the same reasons.

Upon further reflection, it seems to me that the second, non-normative, sense of the term *queer* needs to be broken down into two subcategories: anti-normative thought and post-normative thinking. The desire to fight the norm manifests itself in both of these.

In the first subcategory, the norm is seen as a substantive enemy by virtue of its opposition to those of us who stand outside of it; it is a set of beliefs—thoughts—that need to be undermined by positing directly challenging beliefs. Here polyamory (loving many people) challenges monogamy; sado-masochism challenges vanilla (i.e., “plain”) sex; threesomes challenge the couple; and polysexuality (sexual desire for many sexualities/genders) challenges monosexuality (sexual desire for one sexuality/gender). But it doesn’t stop there, for being queer is about challenging more than how we have sex. It is also about how we relate to our own bodies and identities and the meanings we attach to them. So the modified body challenges the unadorned one; the transsexual body challenges the unaltered one; and the transgendered identity (that of people who fall into neither transsexual or transvestite categories nor single-gendered ones) challenges the traditional one. Genderqueer and genderfuck challenge gender normativity. Asexuality challenges our most basic assumptions about sexual and gender identities themselves.⁷

This is a powerful stance, advocating this sense of the term *queer*. But is it phenomenologically sound? Is phenomenology, in other words, queer like that?

I am compelled to answer no to both of these questions, at least on the first go, for it seems to me that if one is queer in the ways and for the reason that I have suggested—that is, for the very reason of challenging the normative status quo—then queer we are but phenomenological we are not, for we are failing to take a truly critical stance—one that interrogates all of our assumptions, not simply the ones that we associate with dominant thought. And so, in pondering Gordon’s question, I wondered if there were a different sense of the term *queer* that might be compatible with phenomenology; thus I came to develop the second subcategory of this second meaning of the term *queer*: queer as a postnormative stance.

In this subcategory, the norm isn’t necessarily a substantive enemy, although it might turn out to be in particular cases or for particular persons. Rather, in this subcategory, the norm is a methodological enemy. What we are at odds with, what we challenge, what we reject and replace when we think in a way that is queer is normative *thinking*, not normative *thought*.

Normative thinking is the kind of thinking whereby we accept the world as given to us—whereby we do not question the assumptions that underlie our everyday goings-on, nor do we see our role in the world as critical thinkers. Normative thinking is the kind of non-thinking we engage in when we refer to an unnamed doctor as “he.” Normative thinking is the kind of nonthinking we engage in when we ask our children if they want to have children when they get married or assume that our coworkers are straight. Normative thinking is the kind of nonthinking we engage in when we take for granted the way the world seems to be.

Queer thinking is postnormative. Postnormative thinking does not assume that all professionals are white, that all presidents will be men, or that all people are straight. Nor does it simply posit that blacks are professionals too, that someday the president will be a woman, or that some of us aren’t straight. It

calls into question these assumptions that normative culture has about the world and that we, when we fail to think, let structure our thoughts. To think queerly is to think, *really to think*, about gender, sex, sexuality, and indeed all forms of identity and expression as being open to various instantiations, as having multiple—even infinite—modalities, as being never what we assume them to be from surface appearances or uninterrogated presuppositions. To think queerly, then, is to make room for tattoos, piercings, transsexuality, genderfuck, S&M, group sex, polyamory, and intersexuality (having both female and male sex characteristics), as well as monosexuality (hetero and homo), monogamy, and vanilla sex—to view all as potential ways of being human. To think queerly is to recognize that most of us occupy identities in bad faith and to consciously choose not to do so ourselves. Queer thinking is critical thinking through and through.

In these ways, queer thinking and this definition of the term *queer*, mean refusing to be what others tell us to be simply because they tell us to be that way. And since both Freud and Foucault were definitely onto something, queer thinking also means refusing to accept who we think we are without having interrogated it simply because it seems natural to us. Queer thinking, in this sense of the term, is clearly postnormative.

A Note on the Term *Normative*

Before we proceed any further, a word on the term *normative* is in order. Analytic philosophy pairs *normative* with *descriptive*: the latter refers to the way things are; the former refers to the way things ought to be. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, uses the term *normative* to refer to those things society puts forth as the ideals that we all “should” (indeed, must) strive toward, if not live up to—things such as heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage. By this usage, it may be “unethical” for us to cede to the demands of normativity. In this book, I am using the term *normative* in this, the psychoanalytic, sense. Thus, my calls for anti- or postnormativity should not be seen as anti-ethics; indeed, it is my position that ethics may in fact require an opposition to normativity itself.

QUEER AS PHENOMENOLOGY

Now, having in large part already determined our answer, we can return to Gordon’s question and ask it again: is phenomenology queer?

If phenomenology is precisely our ability to suspend the natural attitude, to call into question and put out of play the normative thinking that dominates our everyday life and to replace it with a critical eye that questions until it discovers the true and infinitely thematized possibilities of being human, and if by *queer* we mean the type of thinking that suspends compulsory heteronormative thinking in favor of exploring the possibilities that lie beyond our narrow lenses of straightness without falling into either a simple reification of its assumptions (e.g. as does the “straight” gay person) or simply setting itself up as an opposi-

tional paradigm (e.g. as does the “anti-straight” gay person), then the answer is, quite simply, yes. If phenomenology and queer thinking are both forms of post-normative thinking, then they very clearly converge.⁸

THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN

Queer theory is but one regional ontology in the human sciences, of course; now that we know that phenomenology is queer, we may wonder what this fact tells us about phenomenology, queer thinking, and human studies more broadly. For being queer is but one modality of being human, and thinking queerly is but one modality of human thinking. And so, compelled to discover the implications of our inquiry and looking toward the larger issues that they entail, we ask the broader question about these larger issues before coming back to our initial questions of ethics. To get to those questions, we must first ask: what is it to be human?

This is the question of the human sciences—the overarching question for which each branch seeks an answer from the perspective of its ontological presuppositions. For instance, at the most basic level, biology can answer the question in terms of life, reproduction, or evolution; psychology can answer at the level of psyche, cognition, behavior, or neuronal activity; religious studies can answer in terms of faith, awe, and ritual; and sociology can answer in terms of sociality, membership, and demographics. The question of what it means to be a human being is at the heart of all the fields and disciplines of human studies; indeed it is the question that constitutes the study itself. Nowhere is it more important a question than in the discipline that we might broadly construe as philosophy.

Elsewhere I argued that in the history of our approaching the question of the human in the modern West, we have taken three basic approaches: humanist, anti-humanist, and posthumanist. I associated the humanist vision both with the self-defining subjects of (for instance) Husserl (1970) and Sartre (1992) and with the essences of the human put forth by (for instance) Descartes (1986), Rawls (1971), and Habermas (1987). I associated the anti-humanist vision with both the social-constructionist claims of (for instance) Berger and Luckmann (1967), the communitarian claims of (for instance) MacIntyre (1981), and the poststructuralist claims of (for instance) Foucault (1973) and Lacan (1998). I then made the claim that the humanist vision was fundamentally naïve and could not withstand the anti-humanist critique and that philosophy now finds itself in a posthumanist landscape—that is, one in which humanism has had to reformulate itself, absorb the anti-humanist critique, and emerge in a new form. I associated the posthumanist vision with Emmanuel Levinas’s (1991) philosophy of the other. What bound together each of these three approaches was their subject matter—the human—as well as their question: what is it to be human?⁹

I still find this approach a useful one. However, as I pondered the queerness of phenomenology, two things happened. First, I found myself returning to this

heuristic, and, while finding it adequate for the task for which I formulated it (an analysis of the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Lacan), I found it inadequate for the task of thinking the question of queerness, for queerness doesn't easily fit into any of these three schemas. Second, I found myself returning to both Husserl and Sartre (especially Husserl) and reconsidering the naïveté that I had previously ascribed to them. I now return to my threefold categorization to see if there is another way of thinking it—one that might be helpful here and now.

Let me now put forth a new historico-theoretical schema for how philosophy has attempted to approach the question of the human by redefining these three theoretical stances: humanism, anti-humanism, and posthumanism.

Humanism. The attempt to think the human has been dominated by the question: what is the essence of the human? *Humanism* is a slippery term that denotes many things to many people, but at its base humanism is a theoretical stance, a statement that there is something universal to the human that we can ascertain and that we ought to champion in the face of all attempts at dehumanization. What I would call *humanisms* attempt to define the essence(s) of the human by identifying the foundational qualities that all human beings supposedly have.¹⁰ This is a noble cause and a noble stance. Unfortunately, the history of humanism has long suffered from myopia—a shortsightedness to its presumptions and overgeneralizations. Historically, humanism, in its various instantiations, has most often put forth positions that reflect the basic cultural-philosophical meanings that are already dominant in a particular society or culture. As such, humanism has rarely moved beyond the uninterrogated belief systems of society.¹¹ It is, in other words, normative.

Anti-humanism. If humanism's question concerns the essence of the human, anti-humanism challenges the idea of essentialism and claims that the human is fundamentally a contingent construct. That is, anti-humanism emerges in opposition to the very center of humanism itself. It undermines the very idea of an essence by, for instance, showing how specific claims to essence(s) have been particular, not universal; by showing how such posited essences are fictive; and by further offering an explanation as to how such fictions have come to be seen as real. Anti-humanism, then, is a theoretical position that criticizes humanism's myopic universalism by calling our attention to the social, cultural, and linguistic constitution of the human being. However, like humanism, anti-humanism has its shortcomings. It, too, has presuppositions that it fails to call into question, and in so doing it remains primarily a reactionary position. Thus, it fails to undermine in any meaningful way the dominant thought paradigm that it challenges. As Derrida (1982) has rightly shown us time and again, oppositional thinking remains caught up in the very system it claims to challenge. This suggests that humanism and anti-humanism are two sides of the same coin. Is there a way out of this bind?

Posthumanism. Posthumanism, I believe, is the way out. Posthumanists take humanists' desire to battle dehumanization and anti-humanists' suspicion of too-easily-found universals and step back in their attempts to understand the human.

Posthumanist theorists engage in a historically informed search for the transcendental, the realm in which all humanity takes part but which is beyond any singular manifestation or understanding of the human. Posthumanism instead defines the human person through the possible modalities of being human as such and recognizes that these modalities are subject to historical forces that might not only occlude them but also make them inaccessible at any moment in time. In this way, posthumanism hears the warnings of anti-humanism without giving up the hope of humanism. Posthumanism may still search for essences, but these are phenomenological, not substantive. That is, they are not qualities we as human beings possess but are possibilities for being and acting in which we as human beings may take part. In this way, they are “open” essences, not “closed” ones.¹²

PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN

Where does this lead us? Back to phenomenology.

For now we want to know how this question of the human and the theoretical schools that ask it line up with the method that we have been endorsing since the beginning of this chapter. And so we now ask the question: is phenomenology post-humanist?

To begin, most work that I would place under the category of humanism turns out to be complicit with the natural attitude. This is both a historical and a theoretical claim. Foucault (1990) and Wynter (2006) provide excellent historical analyses of humanisms that they show to be based on basic uninterrogated presuppositions.¹³ From a theoretical standpoint, attempts to discover the substantive essence(s) of the human begin from a prejudiced belief about the nature of the human that is not supported by phenomenological investigations.

Further, it should be clear that most work that I would place under the category of anti-humanism could also be shown to be complicit with the natural attitude, albeit from a position in direct contrast to the humanist one. For instance, in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1999) offers an anti-humanist critique of gender identity. While her critique is supposed to undermine the positivism of both anti-feminist biological accounts of the essence of sex and second-wave feminist accounts of the essence of woman, it turns out to rely (though Butler is unaware that it is doing so, I claim) on the very positivist assumptions of its target. Specifically, Butler offers a strong criticism of so-called objective biology, in which she shows that some of the scientists working on sex and gender issues (she cites the work of David Page, in particular) presuppose the very categories of male and female that they are trying to explain. In doing so, Butler cites the work of feminist scientist Anne Fausto-Sterling. Butler’s criticism is out of place in her argument, and one wonders what role Butler intended the criticism to play. I claim that Butler’s project relies on an appeal to natural science precisely because Butler’s project fails to go beyond the positivist assumptions that inform the positions that she is herself opposing. If what the scientists are saying is true,

then she is wrong and her argument stops. However, if what they are saying can be shown to be unreliable because it rests upon unproven premises—in other words, if what they are saying is false—then Butler’s argument can proceed apace. Either way, Butler has failed to move beyond the positivist assumption that hard, objective, and natural science deserves its status as the final court of appeals. Instead of showing how the very concept of rooting a study of gender in science necessarily fails on theoretical grounds, Butler takes on the particular scientists of gender to expose their work as problematically unscientific. Put crudely, instead of arguing that science is bad, Butler exposes bad science, thereby failing to challenge the status of positivist science itself, thereby reinscribing the very positivism that underlies the work she is challenging.¹⁴

This leaves open the possibility, then, that under the category of posthumanism we can place the type of philosophical work that is rooted in the phenomenological attitude and that is, as such, postnormative. Posthumanisms are the kinds of discourses that attempt to define the human by identifying the possible modalities of being human as such. In other words, posthumanisms do not seek to locate and explicate particular substantive qualities that are essential to humans. Their advocates do not argue for a core set of qualities that all humans must possess or embody in order to be considered human; to do so would already be to presuppose an idea about the nature of the human that they ought to have put out of play upon setting out on the philosophical journey itself. To the extent that a theory starts out by calling into question those very assumptions that we bring to the table—that is, to the extent that its theorists step out of the natural attitude into a state in which they may keep their assumptions suspended and inquire to the very root of the question—it remains in the phenomenological attitude. We can see how this becomes a criteria of posthumanist work, for only by being in the phenomenological attitude can we transcend the natural attitude that dominates humanist and anti-humanist thinking.

Under this schema, the theories of Husserl, Sartre, Fanon, Gordon, Wilchins, and myself are rightly posthumanist. While each of these theories ends up positing the human as constitutive of her world, none does so by positing a substantive essence to the human because of remnant assumptions that humans have qualities in much the same way that objects have essential qualities. If one fails to sufficiently suspend the natural attitude, assumptions such as this remain, and the inquiry remains naïve and misguided. If one successfully suspends the natural attitude and enters into a phenomenological mode of inquiry, one sees that consciousness does, in fact, have a history in the life-world (that is, it is in great measure constituted through layers of positivistic assumptions that have sedimented); in other words, phenomenologists take the insights of anti-humanism seriously, but find that the intentional consciousness is still the center of all experience and thus locate the transcendental ego at the root of the life-world.

Posthumanism clearly emerges as the preferred philosophical approach—the favorite child, if you will—and it in part does so because it falls firmly within the phenomenological framework, whereas humanism and anti-humanism do not. But the question of the human only takes full form when we

inquire into specific modalities of being human and explore the range of possibilities that lie within them. In other words, the transcendental ego is a realm of infinite abstract possibility that becomes all the more meaningful when we begin to explore some concrete (and yet perhaps still infinite) possibilities that lie within a particular regional ontology, such as the study of race, gender, or sexuality. And so, having broadened our inquiry from the meaning of the term *queer* to the question of the human, we are led back to the particulars. Only now, those particulars take on new meaning.

THE PROMISE

Queer thinking is postnormative; phenomenology is posthumanist; phenomenology is queer. What follows from all of this? Putting together these three schema, we see that a pattern emerges, and we can extend that pattern even further.

According to this new, integrated schema, the identity “straight” can be read as an instance of normative humanism that emerges from within the natural attitude, while the identity “gay” can be read as an instance of normative anti-humanism that emerges within the natural attitude. The identity “queer” can be read as an instance of a postnormative posthumanism that emerges from within the phenomenological attitude. We can extend this thinking further to other paradigms, such as race theory. Fanon’s new humanism stands as an instance of a postnormative posthumanism that emerges from within the phenomenological attitude (see Fanon 1967 and Gordon 1997). We can further extend this to gender identity, class, ethnicity—the possibilities are endless. In each case, where we end up is neither a stable identity, whether normative or anti-normative, (black, white, straight, gay, man, woman, rich, poor), nor a rejection of identity as constructed and therefore replaceable but a position of possibilities in which identity is open, fluid, lived. Moreover, when we extend this thinking, we connect struggles against racism with struggles against heteronormativity, indeed with all struggles for human freedom, and we do so without sacrificing the specificity of any of them, for each is a valid instantiation of the wider project. Making these connections is essential, for anti-blackness is not simply the hatred of the black by the white, but is also the hatred of the gay by the white, the poor by the white, and the woman by the white, for normative whiteness excludes all others, and does so under the category of black. Posthumanist thought allows us to confront anti-blackness, then, in a holistic way. This is its promise.

THINKING QUEERLY IN AN ANTI-BLACK WORLD

What is it, then, to think queerly in an anti-black world?¹⁵ It is to think postnormatively about our sex, our gender, our race, our ethnicity, our very selves. It is to theorize postnormatively when we theorize the infinite possibilities of being

human. It is not only to transcend normative thinking but also to change the very terrain upon which thinking occurs.

Thinking queerly in an anti-black world takes many forms. Taste This (1998), a performance collective out of Canada, does so when it shatters our conceptions of gender and sexuality by exploring new possibilities of embodiment and expression. Robert Reid-Pharr (2001) does so when he lays claim to his lesbian identity. C. Jacob Hale (1997) does so when he talks about *leather daddy* and *boy* as new ways of thinking our gender and sexual identities. Cherrie Moraga does so when she writes the words that still shatter our thinking: "My brother's sex was white. Mine, brown" (2000, 82). And these are but a few examples.¹⁶

What is it to think queerly in an anti-black world? It is to think the human beyond humanism and anti-humanism. It is to challenge not the normative but normativity itself. It is to refuse to be silenced by, defined by, and denounced by the other. It is the possibility of ethical thought in an unethical world. It is the ethical imperative in action.

2

African-American Queer Studies

INTRODUCTION

African-American queer studies denotes the set of discourses that study issues of sexuality and gender identity as they relate to issues of race and ethnicity, in particular blackness and African-American identity. Sexuality is one of the most highly contested sites of identity construction in modern times—highly regulated by normative social, political, and cultural institutions, structures, and discourses. It is also one of the greatest sources of human expression and holds within it profound possibilities for liberation and transformation. Consider that even in situations of political and social oppressions at their most extreme, there exists the possibility of sexually based encounters with others or with oneself. American slavery enchained the bodies, physical and political, of Africans and people of African descent, but it could not take away the possibility of sexual expression, not even while regulating it, controlling it, and taking it for its own. It is no wonder that sexuality remains one of the strongest fields of personal power, that it resists efforts to explain it away as nothing more than the product of discourse, that it holds its dignity even as society strips us of ours. Yet it has been repressed, regulated, controlled, taken by others. Given its importance, its power, there is no wonder that when our sexuality is regulated, controlled, dictated, and taken from us we feel most deeply the loss of our selves, the violation of our souls, the degradation of our human spirit. Sexuality is one of the greatest sites of human liberation, just as it is one of the most dreaded sites of human oppression.

Thus has been the history of sexuality in the United States since its inception. Foucault showed us how Victorian society was repressive in name only, while the actual mechanisms of power led to the proliferation of perversion in the service of social normativity itself; in the United States, things have developed differently. The Puritan implantation is different than the Victorian one, and perversion here has been hunted in unique and destructive ways. And as sexuality has crossed paths with other forms of human expression and other fields of human oppression, such as those involving race, gender, and class, new and different modes of expression and oppression have emerged. But some of us have resisted the bondage and oppression of homophobia and heteronormativity, just as we have resisted the bondage and oppression of slavery and racism, sexism, and capitalism.

It is within this history that the discourses of African-American queer studies have emerged—first in individual expressions and acts of resistance, later as part of larger movements, and finally on its own and in various ways. From its roots in the semi-closeted sexuality of the Harlem Renaissance and the possibilities of countercultural sexuality in the normative 1950s, then through its involvement in the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it emerged to produce its own voices in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when its first great theorists hit the scene. Today it burgeons, breaking out in new directions and toward greater expressions of individual and group resistance and freedom.

But the term *queer* can be misleading and thus must be used with caution and explanation. Why *queer*? Why not *lesbian and gay*, or *LGBTI*, or *sexual orientation*? Why *queer studies*?

First consider the more popular alternative, *lesbian and gay studies*. In the introduction to their massive anthology *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Ablove, Barale, and Halperin claim that “[l]esbian/gay studies does for sex and sexuality approximately what women’s studies does for gender” (1993, xv). However, if this is the case, then lesbian and gay studies has a very narrow purview. For instance, such a definition would necessarily exclude theorists of gender identity from its ranks. *LGBTI* seems barely an improvement, for although it expands who is included, it also sets up limits and boundaries that will necessarily exclude others who, while trying to theorize in the same areas, about the same ideas, still don’t fit the mold. Hence the emergence of the term *queer*.

The term has recently been reclaimed from its use as a slur to a term of self-identification. Like *dyke*, *fag*, and *fairy*—all once simply terms of debasement—*queer* is now part and parcel of the community. But what does *queer* signify positively? Consider one current description of the term. In the introduction to their edited volume *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, Beemyn and Eliason explain their choice of the term *queer* over and against other possibilities:

We have chosen to use “queer” because it best characterizes our own personal beliefs, and it potentially leaves room for all people who are attracted to others of the same sex or whose bodies or sexual desires do not fit dominant standards of gender and/or sexuality. Moreover, most of the anthology’s contributors use the term “queer,” especially in reference to the particular brand of theorizing known as queer theory—a body of work that does not represent a specific kind of theory so much as it does a number of interdisciplinary texts that emphasize the constructedness of sexuality. The concept of “queer” also aptly characterizes our relationship to the academy. The study of same-sex sexual identities and behaviors is seen as out of the ordinary, unusual, odd, eccentric. “Queer” thus describes our position in regards to the mainstream: we don’t quite fit in, no matter what labels or terminology we use. (1996, 5–6)

Both the title and the content, then, of Beemyn and Eliason’s volume stand as an explicit challenge to Ablove, Barale, and Halperin’s *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*.

So, why my decision here to use *queer studies* instead of *lesbian and gay studies* to signify a discourse? As I see it, *queer* is currently used primarily in three ways in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexed communities. First, *queer* is used as an umbrella term, an overarching way of bringing LGBTI identities under one name, both to avoid the awkwardness of alphabet soup and to offer a display of solidarity among the disparate communities the term tries to cover. Second, *queer studies* is used as a challenge to the focus on sexuality implicit in the term *lesbian and gay studies*. For instance, the adjective *queer* explicitly allows for theories of gender identity within its parameters in a way that *lesbian and gay* does not. Third, *queerness* is seen as an alternative to the conservative (read: “normative”) aspirations of many lesbian and gay liberation movements, movements that (a) base themselves on the existence of an essence and inner identity that determines their members and (b) work toward inclusion within the accepted norms of society by claiming that gay men and lesbians aren’t a danger because they hold the same values as normative society does. The term *queer* challenges both of those claims. First, it recognizes the contingent and constructed experiential and discursive realities of the lives of those who aren’t normatively heterosexual; second, it includes within that group not only those who are of a different sexual orientation but also those who don’t fit into the normative gender binary of man/woman (gender identity), in relation to not only masculine/feminine (gender expression), but also male/female (biological sex); third, it refuses attempts at normalization, recognizing itself as a challenge, indeed as a danger to the implicitly limiting goals of the heteronormative paradigm (e.g., forced monogamy, the two-parent family unit, monosexuality, and fixed gender identity).

To use the term *queer* in this piece, then, is to endorse the three meanings cited above as well as the reasons Beemyn and Eliason cite in so doing. In particular, to use the phrase *African-American queer studies* is to recognize in African-American thought more than movements for inclusion; more than movements about validating inner, pure, identities; more than movements that turn on essence; and more than movements that, while still willing to fight for their own rights, refuse the rights of others considered “too out there,” as the phrase *lesbian and gay studies* so often does. It is to include African-American bisexuals, but it is also to include the African-American transgender communities—from drag queens to FTMs and beyond; it is to use an umbrella that can explore the identity politics of 1970s black lesbian feminism but can also see beyond the limits of such a view to look at the postmodern and anti-identity challenges that have emerged in the last twenty years in such full force both beyond and *within* African-American studies. As I use the phrase, *African-American queer studies* finds its roots both in the experiences of African-American gay men, lesbians, and bisexual men and women of earlier generations and in other, less studied places—the homoeroticism of the blues and Negro spirituals, the transgender undertones of passing and crossing, the refusal to be what white heteronormative U.S. society demands, for instance.¹ Finally, as I use the phrase, *African-American queer studies* leaves open the possibility that

there is much beyond what I cite here—other challenges to normative identity and community that have yet to be unearthed or given voice to but that will align themselves with those struggles past and present that I speak of here in furthering the fight for human freedom.²

A GENEALOGY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN QUEER STUDIES

The Roots of African-American Queer Studies

In his instructive article “The Politics of Black Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity,” Gregory Conerly argues that African-American lesbian, gay, and bisexual theory didn’t begin to emerge in full force and in its own right until the late 1970s. He cites two reasons for this: “the politicization of sexual and gender identities brought on by the lesbian and feminist movements” and the “racial/ethnic and gender divisions within the movements themselves” (1996, 135–136). These two reasons actually are one: according to Conerly’s argument, the emergence of a unique African-American “lesbian and gay” discourse owes itself to the inabilities—unconscious, accidental, and deliberate—of those engaged in the dominant discourses of gender and sexuality to address issues of race adequately. Conerly makes a good point. But equally important to the emergence of uniquely African-American queer discourses is the refusal of African-American movements for liberation to address adequately issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, we really can see a twofold reason for the late emergence of the discourse: a double refusal, or, more accurately, two unique refusals, one from each of these two large-scale political/theoretical movements—African-American studies, born out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and gay and lesbian studies, born out of the gay liberation movement that “began” in 1969—to address the uniqueness of the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are co-experienced in the African-American queer communities.

But it would be misleading to say that there was no African-American queer discourse prior to the late 1970s, and it is worth looking back a bit further to see the precursors to the modern theorists of African-American queer identity and the foundations they laid for the more explicit African-American queer discourse to come.

First, there are a few root sources that need to be recognized in order to understand the trajectory of contemporary African-American queer studies. One is the long history of sexuality throughout African-American history, dating back to slavery. It is this history in which the African-American community finds its roots and much African-American discourse finds its foundations. The ability to recover a history of African-American queer sexualities is important in legitimizing queerness within the African-American community. Another is the explosion of aesthetic and philosophical productions of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance stands as one of the most important moments in African-American history and the development of African-American discourse. To be able to trace queer sexualities in particular back to voices from that time,

including Countee Cullen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelin Weld Grimké, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Alain Locke, and Bruce Nugent, is an essential move for contemporary African-American queer thinkers. Sexuality was an important theme in their lives as well as in their writings, and their refusal of white normativity often included the refusal of a traditional, compulsory heterosexuality.

Second, two movements stand as foundations for the African-American queer discourses that emerged in the 1970s, actually launching both lesbian and gay studies and African-American studies in the U.S. academy as well as ensuring racism and heterosexism were issues to be taken seriously on the American political scene and in society at large: the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The African-American queer studies that emerged in the late 1970s owe their existence to these two movements in two ways, one positive and one negative. First, it was the civil rights and gay liberation movements that forcibly thrust racial and sexual oppression into the modern public eye and that brought about the changes in social and political structures that allowed active challenges to racism and heterosexism to emerge from the closets into the mainstream of U.S. society.³ Second, as Conerly has properly suggested, it was the inability of activists in both of these movements to see beyond their narrowly defined goals of identity-based liberation that necessitated the rise of a new, explicitly African-American queer discourse. The civil rights movement was often profoundly sexist and heterosexist, even if its rhetoric was not, just as the gay liberation movement quickly became predominantly white and notoriously liberal, even though its earliest proponents were neither.⁴

Third, one figure deserves special mention. While there were several persons in modern African-American history who figure into the development of African-American queer studies, we might see one in particular as the great-grandfather to modern African-American gay history. Although he was not strictly a gay theorist, he was nevertheless both a brilliant novelist who captured the experiences of both the modern African American and the modern gay man and a great public figure who expressed his identities proudly in the face of both homophobia and racism. I am speaking of James Baldwin. His first two novels remain his most important and present him as an important voice for both African-American liberation and gay liberation movements, though politically he worked more for the former than the latter. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* immediately established Baldwin as a bard of the black experience in the United States, and *Giovanni's Room* equally established him as a voice of a gay male sensuality that generations of gay men heeded for years to come. In the 1960s Baldwin was dubbed "Martin Luther Queen" and harshly castigated for his homosexuality, but he did not back down from either his blackness or his gayness. Until his death in 1986, he stood as a model to many in both African-American and gay liberation struggles. For this, he must be read as one of the foundational figures that laid the groundwork for the African-American queer discourses of the 1970s, even if he was insufficiently drawn on as an explicit source.⁵

From the 1970s to the 1980s: Black/Lesbian/Feminism, Womanism, and the Reign of Identity Politics

The late 1970s was a time of proliferation of African-American lesbian and gay discourse, but, interestingly, the majority of what emerged was lesbian focused.⁶ This is interesting precisely because of a profoundly different attitude toward gay men than toward lesbians in the African-American community; this difference is a recurring theme in reflections on gayness in the black community. Audre Lorde asks, “Why . . . is the idea of sexual contact between Black men so much more easily accepted, or unremarked” than the idea of sexual contact between black women (1984, 50)? bell hooks makes a similar claim when she notes that while growing up she found that “male homosexuality was much more widely accepted than lesbianism” in the black community (2001, 190). Perhaps because the black gay man was more widely visible and accepted, the black lesbian in particular found the need to express her own voice, to speak to and from her own struggles and her own identity. And if no single voice stands out as representative of the African-American queer community in the 1960s and early 1970s, the one that does emerge in the late 1970s is arguably the most important one in the history of the discourse. Although many important black lesbian voices emerged in the 1970s (Ann Allen Shockley, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Gloria T. Hull, to name just a few), none was quite so important as Audre Lorde—poet, essayist, and activist, and black/lesbian/feminist.

Audre Lorde’s writings remain today as forceful and potent as when they were first published and read. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” is a widely read feminist statement, one that has withstood the postmodernist and poststructuralist innovations in feminist and gender theory. It is still important, still poetic, and still true in its vision. Lorde’s reminder that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” remains something of a battle cry in radical feminist circles. Her “Open Letter to Mary Daly” stands as a classic critique of a narrowly construed white feminism that refused to see beyond its own ethnocentric racism. Her poetry is as powerful and beautiful today as it was twenty years ago, and her courage in the face of breast cancer was a reminder of the limits and possibilities of the human experience.

“Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” was first published in *The Black Scholar* in 1978 and was reprinted in Lorde’s collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider* (1984, 45–52). (“Uses of the Erotic” and “Open Letter to Mary Daly” were also printed in this volume.) While Lorde’s writings were many, and while much of her work (especially her poetry) dates earlier, this essay stands as a classic statement of her theories and bespeaks her status as the high priestess of African-American lesbian studies. Lorde’s aim in the essay is twofold: first, she wants to connect various forms of oppression and the struggles for liberation that follow from them; second, she wants specifically to defend the black lesbian from attacks from other positions within struggles for black liberation. In the second case, Lorde exposes the twofold attack on the black lesbian by the black man and the heterosexual black woman. On the first form of attack, she writes:

All too often the message comes loud and clear to Black women from Black men: “I am the only prize worth having and there are not too many of me, and remember, I can always go elsewhere. So if you want me, you’d better stay in your place which is away from one another, or I will call you ‘lesbian’ and wipe you out.” (1984, 48)

On the second form of the attack, she notes, “At a recent Black literary conference, a heterosexual Black woman stated that to endorse lesbianism was to endorse the death of our race” (51). Lorde fends off both critiques with the claim that “[i]n the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way” (49). Arguing against the forces that have taught black women to “view each other with suspicion, as eternal competitors,” Lorde argues for a mutual respect among black men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, as they band together to fight the various structures that oppress them all, thus bringing us back to the first aim of the essay: to recognize the necessity that all oppressed persons join together to fight all forms of oppression. As she concludes,

Of the four groups, Black and white women, Black and white men, Black women have the lowest average wage. This is a vital concern for us all, no matter with whom we sleep.

As Black women, we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause; with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism. (52)

One of the reasons Lorde’s ideas remain as powerful today as they were twenty-five years ago is because of her empowering and profound ability to think politically from a position of identity—what we call identity politics—and, likewise, to encourage us to do so. Identity politics is a sticky and dangerous business, as we have come to see. One of its most serious dangers is that it often sets up specific definitions of what it is to have an identity, composed of a list of essential criteria for membership in the political community. Lorde’s writings here are a good example of both the possibility of resisting this trap of essentialism and the impossibility of doing so completely. On the one hand, she resists essentialism, as in her works there is no theory of the “true lesbian” or the “true black,” with certain qualities that must be present to deserve that name. Consider the claims she makes in the prologue to her autobiographical work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. She writes:

I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.

I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or

be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way. (1982, 7)

There are no claims to the normative woman or the normative lesbian here. There is no sense of the purity of the woman over and against that of the man, no sense of the lesbian who must despise men and penetration and power; there are none of these classic essentialist, sexist claims, so common to 1970s lesbian feminism, here. Lorde speaks an appreciation of man and woman, including an appreciation of the hardness of the phallus and the act of penetration; she recognizes the pleasure in both mutual exchange and power play. There is an openness to difference and an appreciation of pluralism and the validity of different forms of expression that seem necessary components of alternative theories of sexuality but that are still so often left out of the fold in the drive for inclusion in gay and lesbian theory. There is no desire to be seen as being just like others, no desire to be accepted as just like someone in an uni-racial, heterosexual, monogamous couple at the expense of those embodying other forms of love and sexual, gender, and racial self-expression. Lorde's words hold within them a tolerance and a respect for diversity all too often lost in the drive to be accepted into the mainstream.

On the other hand, there is the aforementioned claim that it is black men and black women who will fight racism and black women and white women who will fight sexism. Lorde herself did not believe that only blacks could fight racism. In several of her works she speaks with love and reverence of her relationship with her partner Frances, who is white, and their mutual struggles against racism. Yet Lorde also strongly endorses the need to step into all black spaces, as when she argues that "our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging" (1984, 78). So long as there are "black only" or "women only" spaces, the question of who counts as black and who counts as a woman will continue, and the dangers of the lists of essential criteria for belonging will remain. Also consider her struggles to raise her son not to be sexist, heterosexist, or homophobic, beautifully reflected upon in her important essay "Man Child" (1984, 72–80). Yet even though one might think her language would lead her to do so, Lorde stops short of claiming that she is trying to raise Jonathan to be a feminist. In this way she implicitly endorses the claim that only women can be feminists, again not only essentializing feminism, but reopening the question of membership into the category *woman*.

Dovetailing with the problem of identity politics, other shortcomings emerge in Lorde's writing. For one thing, Lorde seems to rely on a theory of sexual orientation as innate, biological, and fixed. For instance, take the closing line of *Zami*: "it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood" (1982, 256). While we can read this as poetry, it also signals an uninterrogated willingness to accept sexual orientation as biologically based. As we shall see below, this claim doesn't hold up in queer theory today; indeed, it now signals a reactionary positivism that is neither scientifically, phe-

nomenologically, nor politically sound.⁷ For another, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Lorde still took for granted the gender binary and the fact of the stability of biological sex and the cultural order of men and women that seems to necessarily follow from it. While there is room for variety in gender expression in Lorde's works, male/female and man/woman are never called into question. This, too, keeps Lorde's work from reaching fully into future directions. And finally, on a slightly different note, Lorde is strongly attached to the woman/nature pairing indicative of much 1970s feminist writing. Take the following from *Zami*: "Woman forever. My body a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth" (7). The uncritical linking of woman and nature is a classic 1970s feminist trope, one that has come under attack from various other feminist positions—and although it has not been discredited entirely, it has been called into question sufficiently to render it at the very least highly problematic and in need of defense. These all provide further evidence of the dangers of the identity politics that Lorde endorses.

However, these shortcomings remain just that—shortcomings. They do not discredit Lorde's ideas, nor do they allow us to dismiss her in due course. To do so would be not only careless but also stupid. Lorde's voice calls to us today with fire and passion and anger and hope, and her work remains an important foundation for African-American queer studies. Due to the time and place of her writings, Lorde may not always be current with the direction of the discourse of contemporary African-American queer studies—a fate we will all suffer one day as new worlds open up of which we could not have previously dreamed—but she remains one of its leaders, its first and most important voice.

Lorde's influence was widespread and profound. Her insistence on her position as black/lesbian/feminist/poet/activist helped shape movements in feminism, queer studies, and African-American studies and helped make identity politics the dominant theoretical model of the 1980s. But identity politics did not stay static; as it grew and took hold of larger and larger segments of the activist and theoretical worlds, it also evolved to the point of metamorphosis. Lorde was black and lesbian and feminist; these were separate labels, signifying Lorde's allegiance to multiple struggles. However, as the political manifestation of these struggles remained separate, contrary to Lorde's hopes and vision, a new model was necessary to accommodate those with multiple conditions of identity, multiple sites of oppression, multiple struggles for liberation. If Audre Lorde as black/lesbian/feminist was the most important voice in African-American queer studies of the 1970s, Alice Walker, specifically in her vision of the womanist and womanism, followed as the most important voice of the 1980s.

Walker's writings date back almost as early as Lorde's do, of course. She was widely read from the late 1960s into the 1970s. Most of her early work, however, was written from a black feminist perspective, and thus it did not yet speak to the queer community at large, nor did it emerge as a unique contribution to queer studies. However, her coining of the term *womanist* opened up a new approach within black feminism—one more closely aligned with the

growing interest in things lesbian, gay, and bisexual, in the late 1970s and early 1980s—and her work became deeply important in the growth of queer studies in the 1980s and 1990s.

On one reading, *womanist* signifies the unique position of the black feminist. While black liberation focuses on issues of racism and feminism focuses on issues of sexism, womanism focuses on the unique position of the woman of color and her need for liberation not only from these two oppressive regimes but also from the oppression of separation—from the idea that these forms of oppression are in fact separate and can be dealt with separately. This was an important shift in feminist theory, signaled as well by Cherrie Moraga’s influential words, “My brother’s sex was white, mine brown” (2000, 82).

But *womanist* referred to more than simply the unique position of the black feminist. It also signified a particular relation among women, and it is this that was important for Walker’s contribution to queer studies. In her dictionary-style definition of *womanist*, Walker includes this as the second entry:

Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strengths. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (1983, xi)

Two themes thus emerge as explicitly womanist and as uniquely challenging both white feminist movements at large and lesbian-identified movements. First, a womanist is committed to supporting lesbian culture and the possibilities of lesbian sexual expression, though she need not be a lesbian herself. Second, a womanist is committed to the liberation of both men and women and refuses a separatist politics.

Womanists argue that one is not simply an African-American and a feminist and that being a black feminist doesn’t simply mean supporting black liberation and gender equality. *Womanist* does not simply equal black plus feminist. It is more than that. The term signifies a unity in the experience of the black woman whereby her blackness and her femaleness are mixed, fused, into a singular identity, creating her unique space. Walker’s advancement of the uniqueness of the position of the mixed identity was hugely significant. Already, because of Lorde and others, feminism was no longer speaking for all women, as different women had different social locations and needs. As well, black liberationists needed to take seriously the difference between the experiences of black men and black women as they experienced oppression in the world—not only as raced and as sexed but as raced/sexed. And further still, gay and lesbian, and, subsequently, bisexual liberationists needed to take seriously sexual attraction and expression and the unique ways they are experienced in different gendered and racial locations. But now, with Walker’s womanism, identities were not simply to be understood as a shopping list of ingredients, each separate, but rather as a fusion, a mix, a stew of ingredients combining into a singular iden-

tity. Walker's womanism was an important impetus for the development and evolution of identity politics, which remained the dominant discourse for African-American, feminist, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual liberation movements throughout the 1980s and thus the dominant discourse for African-American gay, lesbian, and bisexual theory during this time. Walker's own work in African-American gay, lesbian, and bisexual theory stands as its clearest and most profound example.

In addition to its focus on the uniqueness of positions of identity as not simply multiple but rather as fused, Walker's work in African-American gay, lesbian, and bisexual theory had two other foci worthy of particular mention. First, Walker, like Lorde before her, attacked homophobia within the black community, thereby helping to open up a space for gayness, in particular female gayness—a space where sexuality could be experienced and expressed beyond the heterosexual mandate and where doing so need not be understood as a challenge to the black community but rather could be seen as a celebration of its richness and diversity. In “Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life,” first printed in *Ms.* in April 1980, Walker takes this up with eloquence and passion. She speaks of the inexcusable fear that many black women feel at being labeled lesbian, critiquing it because “black lesbians are black women,” and, following her womanist position, shows strongly the connections between racism, sexism, and homophobia. On sexism in the black community, she writes:

During the sixties my own work was often dismissed by black reviewers “because of my lifestyle,” a euphemism for my interracial marriage. At black literature conferences it would be examined fleetingly, if at all, in light of this “traitorous” union, by critics who were themselves frequently interracially married and who, moreover, hung on every work from Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, John A. Williams, and LeRoi Jones (to name a few), all of whom were at some time or another interracially connected. . . . Clearly it was not interracialism itself that bothered critics, but that I, a black woman, had dared to exercise the same prerogative as they. (1983, 287–88)

Connecting this to homophobia, she continues:

Now that I am no longer married, the value of my work is questioned because of my “politics.” This means, I think, what the first dismissal meant: that I am a black woman. Something is always wrong with us. To those who feel this, “lesbianism” is simply another, perhaps more extreme, version of “something wrong with us.” (288)

In response to this move, from sexism to homophobia, Walker suggests the following womanist response, the response validating women who love women, and standing behind all black women in their quest for self-definition:

Luckily we have a fighting tradition . . . if we are writers, we have our typewriters, and if we are not writers, we have our tongues. Like black women who refused to be the exceptional “pet” Negro for whites, and who instead said they

were “niggers” too (the original “crime” of “niggers” and lesbians is that they prefer themselves), perhaps black women writers and nonwriters should say, simply, whenever black lesbians are being put down, held up, messed over, and generally told their lives should not be encouraged, *We are all lesbians*. (288–289)

Walker also worked for a growing awareness and acceptance of bisexuality and its legitimacy in and against the monosexual landscape of most of the gay and lesbian politics and theories of her time. Here we can cite Walker’s own coming out process, but more influential in African-American queer studies on this point was her Pulitzer Prize– and American Book Award–winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982). The relationship between Celie and Shug is often mistakenly read as a lesbian relationship; neither Celie nor Shug ever denounces her feelings for men or the possibility of loving men and women alike. Shug gives voice to Celie’s anger toward how men have treated her and beaten her down, both physically and spiritually. Celie writes:

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (179)

But the enemy here is not men; rather, the enemies are sexism and patriarchy, in particular the patriarchal image of God as a man. Men remain potential and real lovers in Celie and Shug’s world, just as women do. The monosexuality of the 1970s gay and lesbian movements comes under attack as bisexuals became more vocal throughout the 1980s, and Walker was an important voice in those movements. Womanism may be about black women loving women’s culture, but there is nothing *narrowly* lesbian about it.

Walker’s was not, of course, the only voice of African-American queer studies in the 1980s, but she did advance a theoretical position that was new and highly influential in both African-American feminism and African-American queer studies. Walker’s womanist fiction and nonfiction, her poetry and prose stand out as important contributions and developments in African-American queer studies. The advancement and enrichment of identity politics remained the dominant way of theorizing sexual identity in the 1980s and shaped lesbian, gay, and bisexual writings. Her fights against homophobia in the black community were powerful and highly visible. She advanced the cause of gay and straight black women, but she also took a humanist stance toward people in general—blacks and whites, men and women, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Of course, the same problem remains with Walker’s womanism as with Lorde’s black lesbian feminism: as Walker defines it, only a woman can be a womanist. Moreover, only a certain kind of woman can be properly called a womanist: the kind who supports “women’s culture.” The traps of identity politics return. What is a woman? Who is allowed to be called a woman? What is women’s culture? Is women’s culture monolithic? If so, what specifically makes it women’s culture?

If not, then why aren't cultures where women are not woman identified allowed? If we're not sure who women are, then how do we know who lesbians are, who gay men are? Without stable terms of identity, where will we be?

From the 1980s to the 1990s: The Critique of Identity Politics, Queer Theory, and the Rise of the Queer Postmodern

Identity politics is plagued with a problem: who must I be such that I can be part of your political struggle? How do I know if I am or not? What is the essential ingredient that I must have? African-American, feminist, and gay and lesbian theorists of the 1970s and 1980s all presumed that these questions could be easily answered. An African-American is black—a racial designation—and is of African descent; a feminist is a woman, and a woman has XX chromosomes, breasts, a vagina, a labia, and a clitoris, menstruates, and she can give birth; a gay man is a man who is sexually attracted to other men only (to maleness itself?) and a lesbian is a woman who is sexually attracted to other women only (to femaleness itself?), and, again, men and women can be identified by their biology. But what if sexual identity/orientation isn't as stable a category as we think it is? Where does that leave queer studies, particularly African-American queer studies, a set of discourses that seems to be based on a double identity?

In the early 1980s, a new thinker emerged alongside Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, ready to challenge their reign as leading black feminist theorists. When bell hooks published *Ain't I a Woman* in 1982, she exploded onto the scene with a fierce attitude and a fresh, new vision. She has since earned a lasting place as one of the preeminent leftist black intellectuals, with some eighteen books to her name and a strong public presence surrounding her. It was in her second book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), that she quickly announced that she had something to add to queer issues, and in so doing she immediately established herself as an important voice in African-American queer studies.

Interestingly, hooks announced herself as having something important to say in queer studies in response to an earlier comment from her first book, *Ain't I a Woman*. Arguing against what was then a trend in black lesbian studies, hooks wrote in 1982 that “attacking heterosexuality does little to strengthen the self-concept of the masses of women who desire to be with men” (191). In 1983, Cheryl Clarke took hooks to task for this statement. In her important essay “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community,” Clarke stated that hooks was homophobic and was afraid to relinquish her heterosexual privilege (2000).⁸ In *Feminist Theory* hooks responded to these charges forcefully and intelligently. She writes:

Feminist activists need to remember that the political choices we make are not determined by who we choose to have genital sexual contact with. In her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith asserts: “Black feminism and Black Lesbianism are not interchangeable. Feminism is a political movement and many Lesbians are not feminists.” This is also true for

many heterosexual women. It is important for women, especially those who are heterosexual, to know that they can make a radical political commitment to feminist struggle even though they are sexually involved with men. . . . All women need to know that they can be politically committed to feminism regardless of their sexual preference. (1984, 152)

On the surface, hooks's statement may seem like a challenge to the womanist belief that feminism must support the possibilities of lesbian sexuality. However, it is not. hooks is explicit that feminism must fight heterosexism and homophobia. She argues that the "feminist movement to end sexual oppression should create a social climate in which lesbians and gay men are no longer oppressed, a climate in which their sexual choices are affirmed" (153). But, she continues, "it should also create a climate in which heterosexual practice is freed from the constraints of heterosexism and can also be affirmed" (153). It is clear that hooks is disagreeing with Clarke. But is she also disagreeing with Walker? To what extent? Clearly Walker would agree with hooks's defense of the heterosexual and bisexual feminist woman, but would Walker be able to go as far as hooks? Where exactly does hooks go further?

hooks's challenge to Clarke and Walker is not a challenge to the womanist assumption that feminists must be pro-lesbian. Rather, it is a challenge to the assumption that the political must be solely defined by the personal and vice versa. It is a challenge to Walker's claim that womanists are womanists not solely because of their political ideas but also because of their shared culture. It is a challenge to Clarke's attempt to connect lesbianism with feminism with liberation and to do so based on a personal view of lesbianism as "an act of resistance" (1983). When hooks argues that women can be politically committed to feminism regardless of their sexual orientation, she slaps identity politics in the face: one's identity is not part and parcel of one's political affiliation, she says, and there is no identity criterion for entry into the political agenda. Moreover, if we're going to fight for sexual freedom, we're not fighting for the rights of one group over and against another; rather, we're fighting for sexual freedom itself. Notice the difference—the struggle initiated by gay liberation should not be a struggle for gay and lesbian rights. Fighting to get a group its rights isn't radical. Rather, the struggle on which both gay liberation and feminism should focus is the struggle for sexual freedom itself—for freedom of sexual expression. This goal is not based on identity, is not geared toward rights, and is not focused on a particular group. It is based on and geared toward political and social freedoms and is focused on any and all members of society. This stance clearly distances itself from identity politics, and in so doing escapes its traps. hooks's politics require no stable identity upon which to stand; they do not require identification with a woman or a lesbian to make sense. This is not to say that these identities fall out of the picture in hooks's vision—they do not. Women and lesbians remain. And they even remain as identities that have political significance and are in many ways constructions of the socio-political world. But they are no longer the ground from which to do politics, and as such they need not be as fixed and stable as identity politics required them to be.

hooks's critique of identity politics goes even further, though, further establishing her as a new and important voice in African-American queer studies. After defending herself against Clarke, hooks went on the offensive once again, challenging the categories of sexual identity not simply as foundations for politics but as categories of identity themselves. She writes:

There are some feminists (and I am one) who believe that [the] feminist movement to end sexual oppression will not change destructive sexual norms if individuals are taught that they must choose between competing sexualities (the most obvious being heterosexuality and homosexuality) and conform to the expectations of the chosen norm. Sexual desire has varied and multiple dimensions and is rarely as "exclusive" as any norm would suggest. A liberatory sexuality would not teach women to see their bodies as accessible to all men, or to all women for that matter. It would favor instead a sexuality that is open or chosen based on the nature of the individual interaction. Implicit in the idea of sexual preference is the assumption that anyone of the preferred sex can seek access to one's body. This is a concept that promotes objectification. (1984, 154–155)

hooks challenges the norms of sexual identity. She argues that implicit in the idea of heterosexuality is the mistaken assumption that one is available to all members of the opposite sex, underneath which in turn lies the equally mistaken assumption that one is attracted to all members of the opposite sex. This is no truer for homosexuality than for heterosexuality. Yet such labels imply precisely these claims and thus promote not only objectification by the other but also objectification by the self, a form of Sartrean bad faith. When one's sexual identity becomes defining to the point of determining one's possibilities, it not only becomes a lie to oneself but also ceases to hold any liberatory potential. In hooks's critique of fixed and essential sexual identity—what we often refer to as sexual orientation—we are opened up again to the possibility of a politics beyond identity, and an identity beyond essence. We are opened up to a new way of thinking about politics as what we want to achieve (end sexual oppression, end gender oppression, end racial oppression) and who we are (actors, agents, existentially choosing selves in a world of possibilities).⁹

hooks's early work prefigured a move that would emerge in queer studies in the early 1990s. In 1991, a new discourse of sexuality emerged in U.S. theory circles—one based largely on the recent writings of Michel Foucault on the history of sexuality, now translated into feminist and queer circles. In the early 1990s, the discourse we now call queer theory, a movement borrowing the language and insights of poststructuralism (again, in particular in its Foucauldian variety and, to a lesser extent, in its Lacanian variety) was born. Its forefathers included British sociologist/historian Jeffrey Weeks, but it began to take shape with the work of three U.S. theorists who explicitly claimed the name *queer theory*—Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Eve Sedgwick. It was de Lauretis who announced the birth of queer theory in her introduction to the special issue of leading feminist journal *differences* on the topic "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" (1991). Butler and Sedgwick continued the use of the term in

articles and books, notably Butler's "Critically Queer," first published in the first volume of the journal *GLQ* and later worked into her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*, and Sedgwick's "Queer and Now," which appeared in her 1993 book *Tendencies*. Historian William Turner defines the basic approach in queer theory, specifically referencing Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, as:

the investigation of foundational, seemingly indisputable concepts, such as "matter." Queer theorists perform those investigations with an eye to tracing the historical development of those concepts and their contributions to definitions of "sex" and "gender" such that differences of power along those axes of identity pervade our culture at a level that resists fulsomely the ministrations of political action conventionally defined. (2000, 3)

As Turner sees it, queer theorists engage in a series of contestations, arguing against dominant trends in feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and other traditional forms of leftist politics, their most significant critique being that of identity as the foundation of politics. This is clearly the stance Butler takes in her work, a stance that she began in the predecessor to *Bodies That Matter*, her landmark second book *Gender Trouble*.¹⁰

Gender Trouble calls into question "the category of women" as both the one who "initiates feminist interest and goals" and the one "for whom political representation is pursued" (1999, 3). The book unfolds as a critique of (1) gender as a stable signifier of sex, gender, and desire; (2) sexuality as prediscursive rather than shaped by a compulsory heterosexual matrix; and (3) the body as the pre-existing sexed nature onto which gender is transposed, instead exposing the performative nature of gender as constituted in and through its always already politically inscribed acts. It stands as a forceful critique of feminism as identity politics and sets the stage for Butler to develop those theories into an explicitly queer theory of gender, sex, and sexuality. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler further explains the materialization of the body—the body is given status as an ontological foundation through the discursive practices of gender performativity—and then explores the possibility of subversive gender performances; she finally endorses the category of *queer* as a needed corrective to identity and its inescapable fictions. She writes:

the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of "queer" will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term. (1993, 230)

Butler laid out with force the goals, presuppositions, and directions of queer theory. And it is onto this new queer landscape—made possible by Foucault, named by de Laetis, further concretized by Butler and Sedgwick, and defined by its critique of identity politics and its insistence on the contingent category of anti-identity, that is, queer—that the preeminent African-American queer theorist of the 1990s arrives.¹¹

If Baldwin set the stage for African-American queer studies in the 1950s, and if Lorde, Walker, and hooks dominated the debates in African-American queer studies in the 1970s and 1980s, Phillip Brian Harper emerged as the newest and most important voice in African-American queer studies in the 1990s. And if Lorde, Walker, and hooks focused their questions on the relations of black women, feminism, and queerness, Harper focuses his questions on queerness in relation to African-American masculinity. Harper's work, like Lorde's, Walker's, and hooks's before it, is concerned with questions of identity, but it frames these questions within a different framework, one that accepts the basic insights of queer theory. Indeed, Harper, a cultural critic and theorist, is among the first African-American theorists to actively adopt the word *queer* as a designation for his work and his theoretical and political stance. For instance, in the introduction to a special issue of the journal *Social Text* titled "Queer Transsexuals of Race, Nation, and Gender," Harper and his coeditors Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen write:

In terms of this special issue, then, queer theory is an articulating principle functioning in, across, between, and among various social domains and political experiences, and it is therefore consciously provisional and dynamic, strategic and mobilizing, rather than prescriptive or doctrinal. As such, it neither displaces nor makes redundant notions of gay, bisexual, or lesbian experience, but instead queries the field of identity politics into which these notions necessarily intervene, precisely by challenging what Phillip Brian Harper calls the "identific fixity" on which that politics is predicated. (1997, 1)

The critique of identity politics is clearly at the forefront of Harper's project, and it is his reframing of questions of African-American, masculine, and gay identity from a uniquely queer perspective that makes his work so provocative.

Although Harper's first book established him as a serious cultural and literary critic, it was a series of articles and his next two books that established him as the premier African-American queer critic of the 1990s. His second book, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996), takes up the issue of "authentic blackness," exposing it both as a constraining fiction and as inherently tied to a conception of "authentic masculinity." Ultimately Harper argues that blackness and black masculinity need not follow normative models, examining several "African-American cultural interventions" that offer alternate models of identity and self-expression (xi).

It is no accident that in the book's first chapter, "Eloquence and Epitaph: AIDS, Homophobia, and Problematics of Black Masculinity," Harper takes up these issues directly in relation to the AIDS epidemic. Given the disproportionate number of African-American males infected with the virus, and given the significance of the epidemic in Africa today, Harper takes on members of both the traditional black and the traditional gay establishment for not recognizing the connections between race, gender, and sexuality, and thus between racism, sexism, and homophobia. He adeptly analyzes the problem of silence in the black community, taking on the symptomatic responses to the death from AIDS of the

first black network news anchor, Max Robinson, and to Magic Johnson's admission of his HIV status. In both cases, notes Harper, the desire to preserve the men's normative masculinity—that is, their straightness—was overwhelming and indicative of a deeply rooted homophobia in the African-American community. For Harper, this homophobia exposes a deep connection between authentic blackness and authentic masculinity, whereby the only true black man is the normatively masculine man.

As important as black homophobia to Harper is gay racism. In his important article “Gay Male Identities, Personal Privacy, and Relations for Public Exchange: Notes on Directions for Queer Critique” (1997), Harper takes up the issue via a critique of mainstream white gay journalist Andrew Sullivan. Harper takes Sullivan to task for his meditation on “the end of AIDS,” supposedly achieved through the rise of protease inhibitors. The article, titled “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” was published in the *New York Times Magazine* in November 1996. In it, Sullivan writes:

Most official statements about AIDS—the statements by responsible scientists, by advocate organizations, by doctors—do not, of course, concede that this plague is over. And, in one sense, obviously it is not. Someone today will be infected with H.I.V. The vast majority of H.I.V.-positive people in the world, and a significant minority in America, will not have access to the expensive and effective new drug treatments now available. And many Americans—especially blacks and Latinos—will still die. Nothing I am saying here is meant to deny that fact, or to mitigate its awfulness. But it is also true—and in a way that most people in the middle of this plague privately recognize—that something profound has occurred these last few months. The power of . . . protease inhibitors . . . is such that a diagnosis of H.I.V. infection is not just different in degree today than, say, five years ago. It is different in kind. It no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness.

As Harper shows, Sullivan's logic (or lack thereof) is that while the “vast majority of HIV-positive people” are those who will not have access to protease inhibitors and will thus die, “most people in the middle of this plague” no longer consider HIV a death sentence, instead seeing it as merely “illness.” Harper rightly concludes that “in Sullivan's conception, ‘most people in the middle of this plague’ are not nonwhite, or non-U.S. residents” (8). Harper continues to interpret Sullivan's words to say, “I know that not all people who have AIDS are U.S. whites, but in my narrative, they are” (8). Harper rightly takes Sullivan to task for his fetishization of “masculinized normative whiteness” (14). In the end, Sullivan represents for Harper the gay theorist of authentic homosexuality (read: normative—specifically, read: monogamous, white, masculine, and socially conformist homosexuality based on a “natural” homosexual identity). Thus Sullivan emerges as “the effective poster boy for a legitimated gay male experience” whose “masculinized white normativity” is “‘authentic’ homosexuality” (14).

Alongside his projects of exposing the homophobia of the black community, the racism of the gay community, and the intertwined logic of normative

black and normative masculine identities—all aimed at exposing the fiction and danger of “identific fixity”—Harper seeks to make space for identity within contemporary culture without falling into the trap of identity politics. He attempts to do so by introducing a new method of theorizing, one that writes identity without essence, writes the personal without exalting the particular as the universal. He explains this new method as his “use of personal anecdote as a central analytical strategy” (1999, xiii). This method plays a central role when Harper uses his critique of Sullivan to launch into a meditation on identity and the binary of the particular/universal in which it is necessarily caught. In his use of the personal anecdote, Harper claims that he hopes to “discover the quotidian effects of social structures and cultural formations all too often conceived as ‘merely’ theoretical” (xiii). By showing how social structures and cultural formations shape the everyday, Harper hopes to break down the supposed lines between public and private, instead revealing them to be elastic enactments of a social demand meant to control and regulate personal behavior.

For instance, Harper takes up the topic of public sex in order to see how public and private are mobilized for the sake of social normativity. Examining the actor Paul Reubens’s arrest for public masturbation alongside his own experience of being accused of engaging in public sex with his lover at their local Y, Harper effectively shows how the lines between the public and the private, if not arbitrary, are not fixed, either; instead they are deliberately drawn to regulate the personal. He writes:

To put it in the now clearly crude terminology of “public” and “private,” the nominally “public” sexual encounter is always effectively, though tentatively, a *private* encounter up until the moment that that privacy is broken by a newcomer’s entrance onto the scene, at which point, however, the encounter ceases, and the sexual activity that characterizes it is replaced by gestures that, while likely feigned, are nonetheless apparently suitable to the ostensibly “public” nature of that venue. Thus, according to this analysis and in the contexts that I have been addressing, there is really no such thing, practically speaking, as public sex; there is only the deft manipulation—through finely tuned regulatory strategies—of the boundary between public and private such that space is carved out in the former realm wherein activities of the latter nature can take place with relative ease. (1999, 76)

Lines between the public and the private are strategic interventions in daily life meant to regulate, in the sense of both controlling and creating. Harper very effectively shows, in his analysis of his own personal life, the structuring agency of the social in both defining and delineating the personal itself.

What does this mean for explicitly queer critique? How is Harper’s problematizing of the public/private binary as enacted through the use of the personal anecdote a problematizing of the notion of “identific fixity”? In Harper’s work, the connection between inner identity and the private parallels the connection between discursive construction and the public. By showing how the lines between the public and the private are not natural but rather are strategically enacted in different power relations, he effectively problematizes the idea of an

inner, essential identity. The very idea of “identic fixity” is clearly exposed as a fiction.

What is so powerful about Harper’s exposing of identic fixity in the use of the personal anecdote is that at the very same time that he is calling fixed identity into question, he is making room within hegemonic discourse for agency and political action. One of the most striking critiques of Butler’s position is that her criticism of identity politics disallows all forms of political agency, despite her careful attempts to argue that it is precisely new forms of agency that emerge when identity is seen as a fictive effect of performative discourses. Harper’s method achieves a rewriting of the personal that Butler herself was unable to achieve—a model of the personal that is replete with the awareness that the social constructs and structures the personal but that allows for and encourages agency actively and practically, not just theoretically, which is all that Butler’s model seems to do. All of the difficulties of employing the personal remain, for even though Harper effects a certain kind of post-Butlerian agency, he does so with Butler’s critique of voluntarism clearly in sight; he also sees the important connections between agency and capital, thus further recognizing that the social structure works in such a way as to keep its agents in line, doing what it wants them to do in the ways it wants them to do it.¹² Still, in the end, Harper seems to get done what Butler could not. He does so simply by *doing it*.

How is Harper’s a project of and for queer theory? According to Harper himself:

Inasmuch as queer practice entails a challenge rather than a capitulation to operative categories of social-subjective discipline, its objective is not, as Sullivan suggests, “the redefinition of what is normal” [Sullivan 1996b, 91], but the deconstructive interrogation of the concept itself. In order to achieve this, queer analysis must allow for all the disparate factors comprised in the registration of various social identities and in their adjudication against the standard of social normativity—an openness that I would argue *defines* queer engagement in the first place. (1997, 24)

He continues:

The great promise of queerness, after all, lies in its potential to conceive and mobilize modes of social subjectivity not accounted for in advance by structures entailed in ideological narratives—that is, to render effectively negotiable the “open” of the public arena, not by simply conceiving the latter as a site for the free play of multiplicitous subjectivities, but by consciously deploying it as a constitutive element within subjective identification itself. (25)

Queerness thus stands as a challenge to normativity not in order to displace and redefine the normal but in order to challenge the very idea of normal itself. Queer critique enacts its subjectivity in ways that challenge the hegemonic norms of the liberal agent, but its theorists recognize that it can only do so within the system it is trying to dismantle. Queer critique is wholly queer and critical; not yet a construction in its own right, it instead enacts the deconstructive

moment in order to open up space for something like what Foucault called “the undefined work of freedom.”¹³

Harper’s contribution to African-American queer studies is thus three-fold. First, it gives to African-American studies one of the strongest and most intelligent critiques since Fanon of normative masculinity and authentic blackness, as well as their connection in the African-American community and psyche. Second, it offers a unique contribution to queer theory in the personal anecdote as subversive moment, recognizing not only the social structuring of the personal but also the possibility of using the personal to disrupt the social norm. Third, it does so all while exposing the impossibility of seeing race, gender, sexuality, and class as separable categories. We cannot speak of queer without talking about race, and we cannot talk about race without talking about gender, and we cannot talk about any of these without considering the realities of class.¹⁴ Thus, Harper’s theory offers itself as the first uniquely *queer* African-American queer discourse and as the first uniquely *African-American* queer discourse precisely because it refuses to see these things as separate. In all of this, in its poststructuralist insights, subversive deconstructions, and located contextual positionings mobilized by the use of the personal anecdote, Harper’s theory presents itself as the specifically African-American queer heir to those of Foucault and Butler, and Harper emerges as the voice of what I would call the new “queer postmodern.”

This is not to say that in Harper’s writings all the work is done. For even in its adoption of the anti-identity politics stance inherent in queer theory, all the dangers of the earlier positions remain. It is still all too easy to slip from the analytic use of the personal into the positing of the personal as both a description of a fixed, inner essential identity and a model for a universal identity to which others “of that kind” must subscribe. Harper is aware of this, of course. He is vigilant about reminding us that his use of the personal is not meant to do either of these things. For instance, he writes: “What I hope *not* to do . . . is to write others *out* of the scenario I envision” (1997, 23). And he explicitly connects this desire to queer critique when he continues, “I want to conceive of my advocated project of discursive admissiveness in terms of ‘queer theory’” (23). Still, this does not mean that Harper can be entirely successful in his use of the personal anecdote, for no matter how much we insist otherwise, the norm is still for us to read identity as fixed and to universalize individual experiences, even those not our own. So, for all our protestations to the contrary and against Harper’s good intentions, his work still often comes across as a narrative both too much about what seems to be his inner life; it is too easily read as a meditation on the essential experience of black gay identity.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN QUEER STUDIES

Clearly, as Lorde, Walker, hooks, and Harper have shown us, identity is an important category in queer studies. But if lesbian and gay studies rest on the

mobilization of repressed identities, queer theory rests on a critique of identity itself. William Turner writes:

The practice of assigning persons to categories, while it depends on relations of authority, power, and force operating in specific institutions, also depends on the logic and justification that the categories themselves provide. Queer theorists examine the meanings that attach to pairs of categories: man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black, young/old, rich/poor. Rather than simply accept a naturalized ontology according to which such terms simply reflect existing distinctions in the world among persons, queer theorists insist that persons do not divide so neatly into binary categories. “Queer” became useful for the theory and politics of sexual minorities during the late 1980s and 1990s not only because it is easier to say than “lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender” but also because the proliferation of different groups who demand inclusion in the movement demonstrates the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of binary identity categories. What is the opposite of transgender? Heterosexual? Does a pre-operative male-to-female transgender person date women or men in order to be heterosexual? Does s/he then switch after surgery? What if this person is married? What if this person is a priest? Insofar as we stuff each other into binary categories anyway, the process is historical and political; we cannot understand these categories apart from their past and their change over time. (2000, 34)

For Turner, as for Beemyn, Eliason, Harper, and myself, the term *queer* signifies the refusal of stable and essentialist notions of identity, understands issues of sexuality and gender to be fundamentally intertwined such that they resist a neat separation into “lesbian and gay” issues as opposed to “feminist” issues, and forces us to rethink issues of sexual and gender identity in terms of history, politics, and intricate discursive productions of truth via strategic mobilizations of knowledge/power.

But as Harper himself has shown, even after the fall of identity politics, identity does not cease to be an important category in queer theory. Adopting a queer stance is more sophisticated a move than a simple refusal of the categories of identity would be. To simply refuse identity would be not only silly but also impossible. Identities remain, and we continue to define ourselves according and in relation to normative as well as anti-normative identities. As Jane Gallop wrote some time ago, “Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question” (1982, xii). Still, after queer theory, it is not just the political and historical that must refigure themselves now that identity is no longer the ground of politics but a historical event, but the more personal question of what it is to have an identity at all must refigure itself. What is it to “have” an identity at all, if queer theory has exposed the fictions surrounding our ideas of identity?

Robert Reid-Pharr explores these questions in his provocative book *Black Gay Man* (2001). In an attempt to rescue and recuperate a nonessentialist, non-identity politics–based form of identity as a potential site for political action, Reid-Pharr notes that the “dissolution of identity comes precisely at the moment when many American institutions, particularly American universities, are less and less hospitable to poor people, Black American people, and other people of

color” (2–3). While endorsing the critique of essentialism and supportive of the discursive/genealogical approach of a Foucault or a Butler, he first notes that the “attack on identitarian discourses is indeed an attack on the actual lived reality of the American left” (6). In its place, he argues that we must “offer an alternative that speaks to the realities of people’s lives, the means by which they seek not only for justice, but also for beauty, light, the transcendent, the metaphysical” (8). To do so, he appeals to both Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek as two theorists of community who can compel us to envision politics beyond essentialist identities while still allowing for empowering identity-possibilities for non-normative subjects.

Reid-Pharr’s theory represents one exciting new possibility in African-American queer studies that helps us think both identity and politics after and beyond the shackles of identity politics. The most shining example of this comes in the chapter titled “Living as a Lesbian.” Consider the following passage from this potent meditation on his own lesbian identification, in which black gay man Robert Reid-Pharr writes:

Cheryl phones on an early weekday morning looking for \$100 and advice. I write a check for fifty and remain on the telephone for hours debating the relative merits of worry versus denial. She complains that too many of the wrong kind of women love her. I answer that’s my problem exactly. We laugh, make plans to see each other, and hang up. The two of us maintain a type of charming delicacy with each other. I respect her boyishness as she cherishes my effeminacy. We are a couple, mentioned in one breath as dinner parties are planned, given to public quarrels over the minutiae of everyday life, constantly aware of each other’s steps and jealous of the intrusion of outsiders. Our lesbianism runs deep. We are drawn together because of our profound love of women, our unquenchable thirst for companionship, our hot blooded sexual passion, and our constant struggle to find and create home. She chides me to help her write her story. I respond by looking hard at her small breasts, pulling from the details of her menstruation and resisting the urge to cover my penis, floating in the bath water, as she passes by the tub. . . . Living as a lesbian continues for me to be a process in which I am constantly brought back, in my search for spiritual perfection, for transcendence, to my body, to the luscious beauty of my heavy thighs and hairy chest, my fleshy ass and strong hands. And I still continue to love and desire “her” body, Cheryl’s body, Yvette’s body, Joanna’s, Daphne’s, Pat’s, Sabhia’s, and Nicki’s bodies, not simply the image or the promise, but the texture of their hair, the color of their skin, the smell of their sweat. (160–161)

Reid-Pharr writes not simply of his kinship with a lesbian culture, not simply of his status as a “dyke tyke”; rather, he writes of his experience of “living as a lesbian” in which he creates the identity of lesbian as an expression of himself, not limited to or by a male anatomy, refusing the essentialist determinations that would otherwise exclude him. He writes of both an inner and an outer experience, a shared community in which his lesbianism is recognized and validated. He affirms his identity in all its variedness and in the richness of its contradictions. He writes:

By becoming a lesbian then I have done nothing more nor less than become myself.

I had expected to end this piece with these words, forcing all of us, myself included, to reevaluate what it means to be labeled lesbian, gay, straight, bi, transgendered, asexual. And yet this is not enough. For, even as I recognize the difficulty of giving definition and meaning to our various identities, I also realize that as I struggle to lay claim to my lesbianism I am always confronted with the reality of my own masculinity, this strange and complex identity that I continue to have difficulty recognizing as privilege. (162)

Respect, love, and what appears to be almost a sense of desperation come through in Reid-Pharr's words. Recognizing the impossibility of putting aside "masculine privilege," he nonetheless refuses to speak of his masculinity only as a cherished possession, instead telling of his desire for his lesbian self, refusing to foreclose it, refusing to shut it out and tear it down, yet all the while realizing that it lies within him as contradiction. It is this brutal honesty that makes Reid-Pharr's work so moving. It is this brutal honesty applied to the most important question of identity that makes his work so interesting. It is this brutal honesty applied to the most important question of identity without falling into the traps of essentialism and instead claiming the identities that identity politics would have refused him that make his work so important, so groundbreaking, and so useful as we look to what new ground we may forge in the twenty-first century.

We may have thankfully put identity politics to rest in the past ten years, but the politics of identity are far from decided, far from over. As we refuse identity-based politics precisely because identity has itself been called into question, it is now this question of identity that we must confront. What is it to "have" an identity? Where does it come from? To what extent are the poststructuralists right that it is merely an "effect" of discourse? To what extent does this even matter? For even if identity is an effect of discourse, isn't it an effect that is experienced as real? How, then, are we to proceed in our interrogation of identity? These are the newest questions that emerge in the wake of the poststructuralist deconstruction of essential identities, and this is the pressing question for queer studies today.

As queer studies moves into the twenty-first century, it must interrogate the question of identity, and it must do so from new and different angles. The post-structuralism of Foucault and Butler has been a deeply important development in queer studies precisely for its ability to deconstruct our given notion of an inner, essential identity. But where poststructuralism has stopped is in asking the question, what now? As Reid-Pharr has shown us, identity is not a dead issue. In fact, it is more alive than ever. Explaining inner identity as a discourse-effect does not explain it away; in fact, it only makes us all the more keenly aware of how powerful the fiction of inner identity is and forces us to confront it head on. What queer studies needs to do now, in response to the poststructuralist critique, is interrogate identity as a lived category of experience. That is, it is time for a return to phenomenology.

Here African-American queer studies is in the unique position of being able to take the lead, for much of the work in the phenomenology of identity has already been done in African-American studies by Lewis Gordon, Linda Alcoff, and others. Consider Gordon's project, the most developed of existential phenomenological analysis of race to date. Gordon's project is bold and inherently simple. Following Husserl, Sartre, and Fanon, Gordon tells us that in theorizing about race we need to start with the fact of race as the lived experience of racialized bodies. What makes us raced isn't the point. Whether or not race is "real" in some biological sense isn't the point. The point is that we, in this world, experience race, experience ourselves as raced, and that in this world, as a matter of fact, our experience of race is predominantly racist. We live in an anti-black world where anti-black racism permeates our very being to the point of pre-determining our responses in ways that we haven't even begun to sufficiently explore and question. In order to confront the issue of racism, we must confront the issue of race and vice versa, and the only way to confront either of these issues is to explore them from an existential phenomenological perspective.¹⁵ Queer theorists need to share with Gordon a belief in the basic insights of existential phenomenology à la Husserl, Sartre, and Fanon. They need to push beyond what we might call the positivist impasse and work on these questions as existential questions—that is, as rooted in the lived life of the human subject.

In offering a reading of identity, in particular gender and sexual identity, from the perspective of phenomenology, queer studies can move past the inherently positivistic discourses of both identity politics and poststructuralism. It may seem odd to call both identity politics and poststructuralism "positivistic" discourses, but, upon careful examination, it is clear that "positivistic" is precisely what they are. Consider: we have the "gender and sexual identity are my real, true, inner essence" theorists on the one hand and the "gender and sexual identity are nothing but discursively produced fictions" theorists on the other. What both of these discourses assume is the primacy of a positivism. What some theorists turn to today to root their belief in the metaphysics of essential identity is science, in particular the so-called gay-gene theorists. They say, "If science can prove it's there, then it's there and we can't ignore or change it." The post-structuralist response is equally positivist, for from its perspective, the final nail in the coffin of the fiction of metaphysical essence is the refutation of the objectivity of scientific discourse—a move that, even in its critique, preserves science as the final court of appeals. The poststructuralist response is, "If I can show how science posits it as real because science unwittingly buys into the normative claims of society, then we can ignore it and get beyond it." However, such a response implicitly endorses the primacy of science, understood as the objective search for value-neutral truth, because doing so ultimately says that if science did succeed, the poststructuralist critique would fail. It thus preserves science as an ultimate authority for what we know and how we ought to act. In other words, both of these positions depend on the pre-Husserlian claim that objectivity is only objective if it is divorced from subjectivity and agree that we are either objective or subjective, but never both. It matters not whether or not both of

these sides of the debate endorse scientific objectivity as possible, for in the end they both still privilege it.

Thus queer studies has hit an impasse. Poststructuralists like Butler have effectively undone the primacy of identity politics, and hooks and Harper have done excellent work in the wake of its fall. But identity still remains an under-interrogated concept because the function of identity has remained underexplored. While I fundamentally agree with the poststructuralist claim that sex and gender are, like race, scientific fictions created by a dominant social order and falsely posited as objectively real, that doesn't mean they aren't subjectively real, in the existential phenomenological sense; just because they aren't scientific doesn't mean we can dismiss them. Just as we experience race, we experience sex and gender as real categories of our lived lives and lived bodies. And just as we experience race in a racist world, we experience sex and gender in a sexist and heteronormative world. The only way forward is for us to ground our studies of sex and gender in our experiences of them. We need a study of sex and gender rooted in existential phenomenology.¹⁶ Queer theorists need to do for gender and sexual identity what Gordon and others have done for race—provide an existential phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of identity, gender and sexual, beyond essentialism and beyond genealogy, by examining identity in all its richness and in all its contradiction. What needs to be understood is not simply that normative discourses function in such a way as to lead us to believe that identities are inner essences, but also how they come to do so and what that means for how we live our lives. It is these next steps that Butler fails to make, that Harper begins to look at, and that Reid-Pharr continues to take, but we need to push forward even more.

One of the sites where this work on identity is beginning to happen is transgender theory. The work of trans theorists Kate Bornstein and Riki Wilchins has laid the ground for a new generation of trans theorists to interrogate gender and sexual identity as sites of lived experience, and the border-crossing experiences of transgender identities offer themselves as particularly rich areas for exploration.¹⁷ As Foucault has already shown us, it is in exploring sites of oppression and resistance that we can gain the most insight into normative discourses and ways to undermine them. More important, transgender experience gives us something else that will help us in investigating identity: a wide and conflicting variety of experiences in the transgender communities, including—in particular and to name just three interpretive paradigms for understanding the trans experience of gender and sexual identity—experiences of identity as positively claimed (the identity-politic trans community), negatively challenged (the post-structuralist trans community), and profoundly called into question while experimentally explored (the genderfuck trans community). In this, transgender experience is particularly fertile ground for exploring the question of identity.¹⁸ And, again, African-American queer studies is in the unique position of being a fertile site for precisely this kind of exploration, given the underexplored but profoundly important history of transgender experiences in the African-

American community, from the black drag queens of Stonewall to RuPaul, from Vaginal Davis to Craig Hickman and Dennis Rodman.

African-American queer studies, as I have here traced its genealogy, is a rich set of theories of identity and oppression aimed at liberation. Having grown from the ideas and ideals of both the gay liberation and the civil rights movements, finding its roots in the Harlem Renaissance, and tracing its ancestry back to the earliest days of U.S. slavery, African-American queer studies has now emerged as a discourse in its own right. Finding its strength in a sophisticated reading of identity and a commitment to the fullness of ontological and ontic freedom, it is at the leading edge in theorizing the existential condition of humanity. As it continues to theorize beyond the homophobic, anti-black racist ideals of normative American society, it will continue to present new ideals for human expression. With thinkers as strong as Lorde and Walker to ground it and Harper and Reid-Pharr to continue its quest, it remains a discourse worth watching.

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3

Toward a Phenomenology of Gender Identity

What is it to call oneself a woman or a man? Today, most of us take both this question and its answer for granted. To call oneself a woman or a man is simply to state the truth of one's identity, and one's identity is known to oneself and seen by others as one's body. To be a man is to have a penis, to be strong and powerful, to grow facial hair, to have a deep voice, and to be master of the household. To be a woman is not to have a penis, to demur and acquiesce, to be delicate and gentle, to have breasts and hips, and to do what one's husband demands. To call oneself a man or a woman is to identify what one is, what one always has been, what could be no other way. And calling oneself a man or a woman marks one with one of the most powerful and obvious symbols of the human we have—gender/sex.

Of course, this narrative is old and weary. First- and second-wave Western feminists have sufficiently called it into question. First-wave feminist theorists questioned the supposed inferiority of women and focused on the proliferation of the rights of women as human persons. Second-wave feminist theorists, first emerging with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking *The Second Sex* in 1949 and then developing their work in the 1960s and the 1970s in the United States and Europe, took these challenges further, focusing more on issues of gender expression and the question of innateness. Are all women feminine, second-wave feminist theorists ask? Does biological sex necessarily decide how we, as human beings, act? Of course not, said de Beauvoir and others. Enter the feminist use of the distinction between sex (biology) and gender (socially prescribed roles and attributes), a distinction that finds its roots in the writings of Sigmund Freud and one that was pivotal for second-wave feminism.¹ To recognize, as de Beauvoir famously put it, that "one is not born a woman" is to understand that the social roles taken on by men and women are not rooted in biology but are, rather, products of socialization. Although one may be born female, this does not mean that one is by nature womanly or feminine in the ways cited above; rather, these are traits that are instilled by society and that we come to internalize.

But careful examination of both the traditional gender narrative and its second-wave feminist critique has revealed that they share with each other certain basic assumptions. While second-wave feminists may have challenged our

assumptions about gender stereotypes, they still believed in the naturalness of the categories of male and female as biological givens. Women are female, men are male, and never the twain shall meet, the story still goes. Although gender has been called into question, the category of sex, here meaning biological identity, has remained unchallenged and even become reified. After second-wave feminism, then, we still may ask what gender is and where it comes from, and we may still argue back and forth over whether or not gender is connected to sex, but the terms of the debate remain the same. Given these two narratives, whether we think gender is or isn't an inner essence or an outer category, we are still arguing on the same page as our opponents.

But the story doesn't end there. These basic assumptions are being called into question as well. We hear about postmodern feminism and poststructuralist feminism, and we are told that we no longer believe that sex is the base upon which the superstructure of gender is laid. We no longer take for granted that the claims of biology are untainted by nature—that female and male are truly innate categories—and we are told that they are as suspect as gender. We are told that these insights emerge in the writings of French thinker Michel Foucault and U.S. feminist philosopher Judith Butler. If we are able to decipher the code they often seem to write in, we find rich arguments and new ideas that shatter our shared assumptions about sex and gender, and new worlds open up for us in gender theory. According to Foucault and Butler, the categories that we suppose are natural, innate, and fixed—categories such as sex—are in fact not simply the givens or the untainted, pre-cultural bases that we heretofore thought they were. Instead, we find that they are actually social, cultural, and linguistic products. They are the results of thinking about the world in certain ways, and are as much a part of social construction as the categories we have hitherto called into question, such as gender. Further, we find that it is not incidental that we have come to think of these categories as given. To the contrary, it is precisely in the service of the normative order that we come to naturalize these categories, forgetting—or, if you will, repressing—the knowledge that they are historical creations. The less we question our belief that sex is natural (biological and fixed) and binary (with only two options, male or female), the less we can act to undermine the hold that this conservative belief system has over us—and the less we can work toward real social change.²

Foucault and Butler lend refreshing voices to a tiresome debate. But as far as second-wave feminism has gone, without challenging the basic assumptions laid out by the dominant order, we still and often have found ourselves hitting certain walls that keep us from enacting radical social change. Foucault, Butler, and their followers have not lived up to what their work seems to have promised. Their studies have not sufficiently radicalized gender expression, nor have they actively resulted in a large-scale challenging and undermining of certain assumptions about biology and nature. They have not even engendered a radical following on a small scale. Why? Why have they not lived up to the hope they seemed to offer us? Why have they not moved the activist and political worlds forward significantly? Why have they not changed the way most of us think?

Certainly they have taken hold in the academic community, but why do they seem radically confined there?³

These questions are the key to understanding the state of gender theory today, and in their answers lie in turn the key to a radical shift in the political and mundane landscapes of our world. Through an examination of Butler's, and by implication Foucault's, ideas, we can both appreciate their brilliance and expose their shortcomings, thereby making room for a move forward. A careful examination of Butler reveals both the truth of her assertion that we must call into question sex as the foundation of gender on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the missing dimensions of her work that are needed for radical social change—a rigorous and critical but appreciative analysis of the lived experience of gender. In so doing, however, we must be careful, for any theory that grounds itself in an analysis of experience must take seriously the critique of experience that Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Butler have already laid out. Experience is not a solid ground for epistemic work, nor is it always a progressive ground for political action. In fact, as we saw in the wars of identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s, it can act as a deeply reactionary force in both theory and politics. Thus, any analysis of experience must move beyond Butler without dismissing her or Freud, Lacan, or Foucault. How are we to achieve this? What can serve as a sufficiently rigorous and self-reflective method for such an analysis? Here we will find a return to the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl key, or so I shall argue. In his insistence on the radical interrogation of experience and the radical self-critical stance of the investigator, Husserl's method stands as the model for theorizing experience in the face of the poststructuralist critique thereof. Using it, we can pave the way for our march forward, into the realm of a sustained, radical challenge to the status quo of our normatively gendered world.

Second-wave feminism flourished both in and out of the academy in the United States and Europe. It permeated thinking across disciplines. Among its central teachings, reflected in its challenge to philosophy, was that the dominant mode of thinking legitimized by the academy, what we call "rationality," was not the only way of knowing. Women, socialized in different ways than men, had learned other ways of experiencing the world and thus were privy to other ways of knowing. For instance, the body went from being something to be dismissed as irrelevant to something to be celebrated, for humans are bodily creatures, and knowing is rooted in the body. Emotion became valued alongside reason, praxis alongside theory.

These feminist revolutions in epistemology (the study of knowledge) ultimately led to "standpoint epistemology"—a philosophical theory that knowledge is always situated, always from a standpoint, and that the idea of a detached, God's-eye objectivity is a fiction that needs to be done away with. Standpoint epistemology allowed previously silenced voices to be heard for what they could now bring to the discussion; these voices offered a perspective unique to their situation and history. Women could speak of their experiences "as women" in the classroom. Black students could speak "as black students" about the racism they experienced in their lives. The proliferation of previously

silenced voices is one of the great achievements of second-wave feminism, in conjunction with other struggles for liberation of the 1960s. Finally, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, standpoint epistemology reached its high point as it evolved into identity politics, or the theory that one's political goals are intimately attached to one's identity and history. Thus, the slogan "the personal is the political" became the battle cry of a new generation of feminists.

By the mid-1980s, however, feminism hit a wall. Soon the proliferation of previously silenced voices led to the silencing of other voices and the compartmentalization of political struggles. Suddenly only women could understand women's oppression; only African-Americans could understand racist oppression; only gay men or a lesbians could understand homophobia. Even worse, people started to believe that since only women could understand women's oppression, only women could fight sexism. While the emancipation of personal history as a legitimate source of knowledge and struggle was a profoundly important achievement, the degeneration of identity politics into categories of exclusion was theoretically and politically detrimental.

It was just at this moment that Judith Butler emerged onto the scene. The publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1989 marked a new stage in U.S. feminist theory. Butler, a philosopher schooled in Hegelian and existential phenomenological traditions, came of age at the height of second-wave feminism but turned to the poststructuralist theories that began to proliferate in the 1970s and 1980s in English literature departments (sociology and political science departments were still dominated by U.S. second-wave feminism). Poststructuralism tried to reexamine the sex/gender split so central to U.S. feminism and interrogated the origins of the idea that biology is destiny. Poststructuralism worked through the idea that language is a structuring activity through which human beings are made subjects—that is, are given the power to "speak" as authoritative—and came to see certain seemingly pre-linguistic claims and categories as products of a social-linguistic culture, a culture through which we must pass in order to become subjects. Building on the work of poststructuralist theories, Butler offered a new reading of gender that shattered the beliefs of U.S. feminists tied to second-wave sociological theories, and a truly poststructuralist feminism was born. In *Gender Trouble* and in her follow-up book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler, drawing on Foucault's genealogical reading of sex and sexuality, deconstructs the sex/gender binary, showing that sex (which we believe is a biological category) is ultimately a result of the social category gender. Then, drawing on Freud's theory of identification, Austin's theory of performativity, and Althusser's theory of interpellation, Butler argues that gender is fundamentally an external, ritualized series of performances that mark our bodies as men's or women's and thus as male or female. That is, gender is how we enact our subjectivity in the world, and the fact that we enact our subjectivity as gendered, as men and women, leads us to posit some natural base on which gender is founded, sex. She calls her theory of gender as ritualized performance of social dictates *gender performativity*. Ultimately, Butler's theory undermines the very core of both second-wave feminism and its identitarian political discourse. By

demonstrating that sex is a constructed fiction posited as real to support the gender regime, Butler equally displaces both the biological ground female upon which the category woman rests and the essential category of women's experience through which it operates, showing them to be philosophically questionable and politically insufficient for radical social change.

As we have said, Butler builds her theory by drawing on several sources. Perhaps the most important of those for our purposes (an understanding and endorsement of Butler's argument that sex is the discursive result of a dominant gender regime) is Foucault's genealogical reading of the history of sexuality. To fully understand Butler, then, we should back up a few steps and solidify our understanding of Foucault. By *genealogy*, Foucault means an examination of the hidden roots of socially embedded discourses aimed at proliferating radical readings of these discourses and, ultimately, of counter-discourses. In other words, if we engage in a radical uncovering of the roots of our current understanding of a particular discourse (say, the dominant theory of how our society came to deal with sexuality), we will find that the origins of our current ideas are not as they seem, thus making room for the possibility of a different understanding of the history of our current understanding of sexuality itself and, ultimately, different possibilities for how we might come to understand sexuality today and tomorrow. It is precisely this project that Foucault takes on in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1990), and it is this work that figures centrally in Butler's. Interrogating the history of sexuality in the Victorian West, Foucault starts with the inherited assumption that we Victorians are repressed when it comes to our sexuality, and that this repression is a result of the confinement of sex to the bedroom of the heterosexual, monogamous, married, child-bearing couple—in Foucault's words, the "legitimate and procreative couple" (1990, 3).⁴ Moving backward from the idea, then, that to talk about sex in the modern era is to talk about a history of repression, Foucault carefully uncovers various discourses of sexuality that in fact tell us a different story than we might otherwise have thought. In the course of his analysis, Foucault finds several interesting things: that the crackdown on "unnatural" and "perverse" forms of sexuality—that is, those not aimed at and enacted by the legitimate and procreative couple—was not based on a prior concept of acceptable versus unacceptable sex but rather created such a distinction in the first place; that in so doing, the Victorian crackdown in fact did not push unacceptable forms of sexuality to the sidelines, but rather proliferated them, such that Foucault found that "Our epoch . . . initiated sexual heterogeneities" (37); that the discourses around sexuality that created and emerged from this proliferation told the story of perverse sexuality as a pathologized distortion of an innate and natural sex drive understood to be uniform and omnipresent, but that the very idea of this sex drive was a product of these discourses of sexuality; and that careful examination of these discourses shows that the ideas that the sex drive are meant to explain are so diverse and so much the products of historical events that the sex drive is clearly exposed as a fictive, strategic creation meant to order the unruly morass of the various and varying discourses of sexuality.⁵ As Foucault tells us, "it is precisely this idea of

sex in itself that we cannot accept without examination. Is ‘sex’ really the anchorage that supports the manifestations of sexuality, or is it not rather a complex idea that was formed inside the deployment of sexuality?” (152).

Think about it like this: what is sex? Sex is biology. But what does that mean? Chromosomes? Organs? Hormones? Are these fixed? Can they be changed? If so, can sex be changed? Try again. Sex is an activity. What kind? Between whom? For what purpose? Is it universal in kind, partners, and purpose? Try again. Sex is an instinct/drive. Toward what? Is it like hunger? Thirst? Survival? How do these manifest themselves in culture? Differently than sex or not? Three strikes, you’re out. The problem is, *sex*, as we use the term, is all of these things and more, but when we use it we don’t realize the complexity of it, the many things it signifies for us. When and how did it come to signify so many things? Can the term even be said to be useful if it is so vague, so multivalent? To this Foucault says,

the notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (154)

Foucault argues that this usage of sex is not where we ought to go. As he tells us: “It is the agency of sex that we must break away from” (157). In questioning the univocity of the term *sex*, Foucault begins to undo our uninterrogated use of it, thereby making room for challenges to the status quo usage to emerge and opening up space for what he elsewhere calls “the undefined work of freedom” (1997, 126).⁶

Foucault, of course, was hardly a feminist. So it was up to feminist appropriators such as Butler to turn his theories into their feminist version. Several prominent theorists drew on Foucault in their own studies, including, for instance, Sandra Harding, Sandra Bartky, and Donna Haraway. But it was Butler who made the real breakthrough in adapting Foucault’s brand of analysis to offer the first fully poststructuralist feminism. Butler’s use of Foucault was sophisticated and revolutionary, and, as we have stated, centered around a genealogical reading of the sex/gender split that dismantled the dominant understanding of sex as the base to gender’s superstructure, much as Foucault’s work had dismantled the dominant understanding of sex as the base to sexuality’s superstructure. Ultimately, much of Butler’s argument rested on Foucault’s; for if he were right, then, by extension, she could use him to support her own argument. Of course, extending Foucault did not prove sufficient for her argument, for what Butler meant by sex was different than what Foucault meant by it, and it is here, with Butler’s usage in her discussion of the sex/gender split, that we should begin.

Butler’s breakthrough work, *Gender Trouble*, opens with an intervention in the familiar late 1980s debate over the unity of the category woman as the subject of feminist discourse. The political critique of the identity politics inherent in the invocation of the term *woman* quickly turns to a discussion of the

sex/gender split then operative in U.S. feminism. Butler quickly and deftly dismantles the workings of the sex/gender split thusly:

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical extreme, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two . . .

This radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a “given” sex of a “given” gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is “sex” anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us? (1999, 10)

Right away we notice Butler’s implicit definition of sex. By *sex* Butler does not refer to a drive or an act, as Foucault in part did. Rather, *sex* for Butler refers to a biological entity. She questions how to define or fill in that entity (hormones, chromosomes, anatomy), but it is clear that by *sex* she means “male or female,” not heterosexual intercourse. Continuing, we can see already that there are problems with the sex/gender split as Butler found it while writing her book. Not only had feminism not sufficiently interrogated this most precious of all assumptions, Butler argues, but when put under proper scrutiny it began to show serious strain, for in our society gender did (and does) for the most part line up with sex along a binary—men are for the most part male and women are for the most part female, and regardless of masculinity and femininity, these basic gender identities are nearly as rigid as sex itself seems to be.

At this point there are several directions Butler could have gone. She could have assumed the stability of sex as a base and worked to further dislocate and distantiate gender from it. Or she could have made an argument that sex and gender are best seen as more closely linked and instead developed her theory into a type of sexual difference feminism. Instead, what Butler did was undermine the very idea of sex as a base for the superstructure of gender, exposing how gender is the dominant operative binary in society that needs to be undone; in other words, she did to sex and gender what Foucault did to sex and sexuality. First she engaged in a genealogically motivated philosophical analysis of Irigaray, Foucault, and Wittig to show how our culture produced the idea of sex as a material, ontological ground, relying on what Butler referred to as a “metaphysics of substance.” Then she moved through careful analyses of Levi-Strauss and Lacan to explain how and, to a lesser extent, why this takes place, showing us how sex is posited as a prediscursive ground. Finally, she returned to Foucault, now finding herself able to make a strong case for what she had laid out at the beginning as one of *Gender Trouble*’s ultimate goals—to show that, as she

writes, “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is . . . [rather] the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (1999, 10).⁷

The argument that sex is the product of the discourse of gender is in some ways complex, but ultimately is not difficult for Butler to make. First, relying mainly on Foucault’s already established claims that sex is the product of discourses of sexuality, Butler applies this framework to the sex/gender split. In this she offers little in the way of new genealogical argument, instead trying to extend Foucault’s claims to her own theme via analogy. Of course, by itself, this analogy won’t do, for it isn’t logically sufficient to make her argument. Given that Foucault’s displacement of sex as the ground of sexuality rests on a different definition of sex, Butler can’t simply extend his argument and claim that it equally applies to her attempt to displace sex as the ground of gender. Given the care with which she reads texts, it is doubtful that Butler was unaware that her terms were different than Foucault’s, and given her training as a philosopher it is even more doubtful that she would miss the fact that she could not logically extend his claims to her own. So she must have another strategy in mind, another way of making her argument, and we would do better to look for another piece in her argument that allows her to claim a solid ground to her work beyond its being analogous to Foucault’s.

This is where things get particularly interesting, I believe. To get this grounding, Butler could have undertaken a genealogical argument similar to Foucault’s. She didn’t. Instead, she went in a different direction, one that is little examined in Butlerian scholarship—one that is not given the prominence it deserves. In the third and final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler sets out to show that

the very notion of “the body” [is not] . . . a ready surface awaiting signification, but . . . a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained. No longer believable as an interior “truth” of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not “to be”), one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the paranoiac proliferation of subversive play of gendered meanings. (1999, 44)

In this chapter she includes a short section titled “Concluding Unscientific Postscript.”⁸ In this section, Butler, as she herself puts it, “interrogates the univocity of sex” by reading “the recent controversy over the master gene that researchers at MIT in late 1987 claim to have discovered as the secret and certain determinant of sex” (136). Drawing in part on the work of feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, Butler exposes an “incoherence” in the findings presented by Dr. David Page, lead researcher in the project (137). Page and his research team sought to find the master gene in order to explain why a significant percentage of the population does not fit neatly into our biological definitions of sex—specifically, as Butler puts it, “that a good ten percent of the population has

chromosomal variations that do not fit neatly into the XX-female and XY-male set of categories” (137). In their research, Page and his team examined XX-males and XY-females in order to locate in them a more certain gene determinant of sex, because, clearly, if there are XX-males, then the XY chromosome set is not what makes them male. Following Fausto-Sterling, however, Butler argues that Page and his team made a profoundly unscientific mistake in assuming at the outset that his XX-males should be considered male and his XY-females should be considered female when it is precisely the categories male and female, the biological distinction between the sexes, that is at issue in the research itself! Butler concludes that research into sex determination in molecular cell biology rests on fundamental, uninterrogated assumptions about the reality of the sexual binary of male/female and that, in fact, as she puts it, “cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex-determination” (139), ultimately rendering the scientific status of the binary sex questionable.⁹

Having succeeded in sufficiently undermining sex as a pure, non-discursive, scientifically discovered entity, Butler can now assert with great strength that sex is the product of a discursive gender regime. Invoking and endorsing the arguments of all those she investigated in her work who argued that our cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, heterosexuality, and the like inform and structure what we have come to believe about the natural substances and essences that supposedly lie beneath these categories, Butler can now take them all one step further and, because of both Foucault’s analogous work on sex/sexuality and Fausto-Sterling’s critique of so-called objective science, unequivocally tell us that sex is not the ground of gender, but, rather, that gender is the ground of sex, or, as she puts it in her development of this claim in *Bodies That Matter*, that sex itself is a fiction.¹⁰ Thus, she makes her argument strongly, convincingly, *logically*, and with sufficient grounding to require that it be taken seriously both by those who have already accepted Foucault’s analysis and are content with analogous extension and by those who are more skeptical and require something more concrete upon which to base their acceptance.

The work does not end here. Given the fact that sex is not the ground of gender and keeping in mind the initial issue that opened the book—the status of the term *woman* as the ground for feminist discourse (notice here that the initial term to be interrogated is *woman*, a term of gender identity, not *female*, a term of biological sex)—Butler can now come full circle, applying her critique of sex to the issue of identity in order to show that gender is not only the alpha in the gender/sex split, but that gender itself is a purely discursive category, a term without substance, a self-creating entity that ultimately rests on nothing. As she puts it, gender is not descriptive, a means to describe what lies beneath, but is rather performative, a mechanism by which we posit what lies beneath. (Here Butler relies on J. L. Austin’s philosophical discussion of “performative utterances” and Louis Althusser’s theoretical discussion of “interpellation,” though neither is invoked by name.)

To make this claim, Butler again turns to Foucault—this time to his genealogy of the modern prison system, *Discipline and Punish*. Here Foucault shows how the emergence of modern systems of discipline sought to instill punishment into the psyches of the punished by drawing on traditional Christian imagery to create the idea of the soul as the locus of guilt and punishment. In an extension of Foucault's argument that also echoes her earlier readings of Freud and Lacan, Butler lays forth the claim that such a description of the regulation of bodies also applies to the realm of sex and gender, and subsequently posits gender as the creation of a regime of power that seeks to regulate bodies in the field of sexuality.

This is a complex claim. In explaining how the gender regime produces both the concept of an inner gender and the idea of a substantial sex that it reflects, Butler writes:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core of substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (1999, 173)

Let us take a close look at a few key pieces of this section. By describing “acts, gestures, and desires,” Butler seems to be connecting gender with its outer manifestations, what we might call gender *performance* (not to be confused with gender *performativity*) or gender *attributes*, as well as with desire, both in the sense of what we desire to be and whom we desire to be with (which are, according to both Freud and Butler, intimately connected). These “produce the effect of an internal core of substance”; that is, we come to think of these acts, gestures, and desires as emanating from inside, but in fact we simply project these onto the idea of an internal core, a substance we might call our *inner gender*. They are *performative*. According to Austin, utterances are performative if, as he writes, “to utter the sentence . . . is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin 1975, 6). In terms of gender acts, gestures, and desires, when we act, gesture, or desire, we enact, construct, and engender our gender. Our acts do not describe our gender—they “do it.” They make it real; they bring it to life. Its being is in their doing. This happens “on the surface of the body”—gender is intimately connected with the body in our culture. Being a woman is inseparable from being female; being a man is inseparable from being male. Femininity is not indifferent to breasts, hips, and soft skin; masculinity is not indifferent to muscles, beards, and low voices. Finally, “the gendered body” has “no ontological status” if what is brought into being is gender, and, more specifically, the gendered body, then it is brought into being as nothing other than an effect of

discourse, as nothing other than a fiction. It is not real in the ontological sense (that is, it has no essential reality in the world of being). It is constituted as real via these acts, gestures, and desires. But outside of them, without them, before them, it does not exist. Gender performance is not the expression of an inner gender identity; gender identity is the fictive result of the performative performance of gender.

Finally, having argued for her theoretical stance on gender, Butler concludes with some important suggestions for political action in the face of a repressive binary gender regime. Butler here endorses a strategy that might be labeled *parodic repetition*. If, as Butler sees it, gender is performative—that is, if it is in the act that the identity emerges—then perhaps different acts can produce different identities, or at least disrupt the old ones. As she puts it,

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a “natural sex” or a “real woman” or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their originators, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible “cause” to be an “effect”? (1999, 178)

Butler does not deign to answer her question here. She realizes that we are at the beginning of a battle and that whatever she might endorse will only be a first step. Thus, she only offers suggestions, a look forward, toward possible modes of disruption, possible disengendering performances. Here Butler finds drag a worthy model of gender parody that can be disruptive, a model of parodic gender repetition that can deconstruct the norms it supposes to mimic.¹¹

As I see it, Butler’s theory is far and away the most important and the most insightful reading of gender today. But something’s not quite right with it. Something’s missing. Butler on her own is just not enough.¹² What’s wrong with Butler’s work? What’s inaccurate in it? What’s missing from it? And where can we find what we need?

In order to answer these questions, let’s go back to the “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” that I claim is so central to *Gender Trouble*. It’s a bold claim to make on my part, especially when you consider that this section takes up only six pages in a 190-page text.¹³ And, from what I can tell, it is not given serious treatment in Butlerian scholarship. However, I view this section as pivotal precisely because of the role I believe it plays, as I outlined above. Without this section, Butler’s argument ultimately rests on taking up into her own work the arguments of others, most importantly Foucault’s. And since she and Foucault have a different definition of sex, then from the outset her work needs a different foundation. This section’s brief excursion into biology provides it (though perhaps not comprehensively).¹⁴

Now there is no doubt that Fausto-Sterling has done great work, particularly in her 2000 book *Sexing the Body*, in exposing the cultural assumptions

underlying scientific research into sexuality; in so doing, she has called into question the faith we put in science as the means of grounding our ideas in solid, provable facts. I myself sometimes teach Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body* alongside Butler's *Gender Trouble* in my gender theory classes and find both of them brilliant. But I also find myself wondering a number of things: Why did I start doing this? That is, why did I find it necessary to start teaching Fausto-Sterling alongside Butler? Why did Butler find it necessary in her work to invoke a feminist-scientific critique of science? Why do my students seem to react so much better to Butler's work when I teach it with Fausto-Sterling's? Of course we have already answered one of these questions—as I see it, Butler cites work such as Fausto-Sterling's to give her work a grounding in reality. But why does she do this? I don't think she does it simply because she didn't want to write a genealogy of sex/gender the way Foucault wrote a genealogy of sex/sexuality; I don't think it was a cop-out. Rather, I think that Butler made a strategic play in inserting this so-called postscript.

Butler's work is inspiring and groundbreaking. Her claim that gender is performative, that the acts of gender that we perform every day enact gender as a lived category of experience in the world, that gender is in the doing, and that, as a productive discursive category, there is no doer behind the deed, is brilliant. But in relying solely on textual analysis, Butler doesn't make her case strongly enough, and she knows it. It isn't enough because her audience, academic and lay, wants evidence—cold, hard facts. Foucault gave us facts in the form of historical analysis. Butler offers something else—something like science. Ultimately, this is the problem with not only Butler's theory, but also poststructuralism at large—they too easily capitulate to the audience's desire for and praise of science as the ultimate, indisputable ground upon which all scholarly argument becomes not merely valid but ultimately true. Although I, too, crave the solid foundation of science, I know that such cravings are our academic downfall.

I'm not out to bash science here. After all, it makes little sense to make sweeping claims about anything as *un*-monolithic as the history of science or the scientific community. What I'm really against is not science per se but the positivism that underlies most of it. And thus, what I'm really arguing against in Butler's work is her incipient endorsement of positivism even as she claims to be undermining its hold on us.

Consider: Butler finds Fausto-Sterling's work groundbreaking for undermining the solid scientific foundations that we thought supported the supposed fact of binary sex. In this undoing, Butler finds the triumph of the poststructuralist critique—for if science cannot argue otherwise, then the poststructuralist claim that sex is the construct of a gender binary must be true. In other words, while the scientists claim that sex is real because they can show us it is real, Butler claims that if we can show that sex is not real, then it ceases to be real. By extension, if sex is not the material support of gender but rather the materialization of the gender regime, then the gender regime doesn't lie on any solid foundation and thus can be undermined and, ultimately, overthrown. In other words, after engaging in a critique of science's so-called objectivity using

Fausto-Sterling to expose science's faults, Butler then continues as if she's won the battle, for if science is overthrown, then there's nothing left standing in her way. In this, Butler is, by implication, endorsing positivism—the view that objective, neutral, verifiable, and observable facts are foundational for human beings—foundational when it comes to knowledge, and thus foundational when it comes to how we live our lives. If Butler can show us how science has become invalidated, then our foundations cease to be foundational, and we open up a new world in which to explore.¹⁵

But is it that simple? In exposing scientific objectivity as an ideologically motivated stance, do Fausto-Sterling and Butler sufficiently “free” us of the trappings of science? Does Foucault's genealogical analysis entirely free us of the trappings of our inherited ideology? Does Butler's analysis free us of the fictions of a compulsory gender binary and its ideal of a fixed gender essence based on a heterosexual matrix? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding no. To be fair, it is a no that each author would answer if asked the question. Still, these theorists fail to offer a sufficient answer for how to overcome the oppressive regimes they are exposing and opposing. Foucault hints at mobilizing our attempts at the “undefined work of freedom,” but this remains an entirely unarticulated ideal in his work; Butler urges us to perform subversive acts of gender parody, but this hardly seems sufficient to undermine and overthrow the binary gender regime. Thus we are left with this nagging feeling that our authors believe they have done more than they actually have; they seem to believe that by undoing the legitimacy of the primary mechanism of oppression, they have to some extent freed us and opened up space for us to construct a different world. This is what I mean in pointing to their undisclosed positivism—if attacking the positivist institutions and structures is their main strategy in freeing us, then they have implicitly endorsed these institutions and structures as foundational, and in so doing they have failed to free us sufficiently precisely because these institutions and structures are not foundational for us. So the question emerges, if objective science and factual history are not foundational for us, what is? Experience doesn't serve as an answer if we take all of what Butler says to be right; indeed, experience has led to the pitfalls of identity politics even as it has been exposed as masking over the fantasy creation of identity categories. So where are we, or, more properly, what can we turn to? If we can answer this question, then perhaps we can begin to move toward a theory that is truly freeing and more fully revolutionary. Enter phenomenology.

By phenomenology, I mean a particular kind of phenomenology (which some argue is the only true phenomenology)—Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.¹⁶ Husserl's project of transcendental phenomenology posits philosophical analysis as a form of thick description of our experiences of the world and aims at uncovering the essences of our experiences as well as the structure of experience/consciousness itself.

Immediately some red flags may go up here, for poststructuralism seems already to have doomed experience to being nothing more than the illusion-creating product of our social-linguistic system. However, it is my contention

that, when properly understood, Husserlian phenomenology offers us a way to think experience without falling into the traps Foucault and Butler warn us about, a way of thinking experience that is consonant with Butler's general observations without throwing away experience entirely as Butler, in her positivism, seems to do. To make sense of this, however, we need to understand some of Husserl's basic teachings.

So, to begin, first Husserl teaches us that all we know of the world we know through our experience of the world. In other words, Husserl is a radical empiricist. Second, Husserl reminds us that if knowledge begins with experience, then all knowledge begins with the human subject as she who experiences the world.¹⁷ Third, Husserl explains that we, as human subjects who experience the world, always do so through what he calls our intentional consciousness—that is, consciousness that directs our attention toward objects in the world, be they concrete and material or abstract and theoretical. Our consciousness is never simply pure, un-attached; rather, it is always directed, intending its object.¹⁸ Fourth, and this is the important step, Husserl shows us that beginning with the human subject does not lead to a self-contradictory relativism; rather, beginning with the subject can and does lead to what he calls transcendental knowledge—that is, knowledge of things that transcend our individual ego-selves and that in fact are shared structures of consciousness and experience in an intersubjective world.¹⁹

So far so good, but to achieve a fuller sense of what this means there are a number concepts we can clarify. We should understand that by *transcendental* Husserl means those a priori assumptions that structure our experiencing of the world. But recall that Husserl tells us that all our knowledge begins from the human subject. Thus, the starting point of our investigation ought to be the human subject qua subject—that is, as world-constituting agent of experience. By *constitution*, Husserl means the fact of subjects actively engaging in, though not always necessarily with conscious intent, making sense of the world, or, better put, making a world of sense for themselves. Knowledge is the result of lifelong processes of sifting through sensations in order to understand phenomena, the result of the activities of the subject as agent, as starting point, as center of her world. This does not, however, mean that subjects can simply construct any world they wish, giving it random meaning or a radically private structure. Instead, subjects are constrained by the a priori conditions of their experience capabilities.²⁰ In other words, there are certain things a subject, a consciousness, can and cannot do. Husserl calls these a priori possibilities for what and how subjects can constitute the world the *transcendental ego*.²¹

In analyzing the possibilities for how we can be world-constituting subjects in the world itself, Husserl also uncovers certain a priori conditions of the world as the world of our experience. For instance, we constitute the world as temporal and spatial, and we distinguish ourselves from other egos insofar as each of us experiences herself as her own inner stream of time. Continuing, we experience the objects in our three-dimensional world as having multiple sides and faces and we find that we can directly experience only part of an object at a given

time, having to either reorient the object so that we may experience its “hidden” sides or reorient ourselves so that we may do so in a different temporal moment. Furthermore, we find that we encounter the world itself through protentive and retentive horizons—that is, as temporal arenas that approach and recede as we navigate our way through the world. Husserl calls these the “invariant structures of the lifeworld,” and they again mark the possibilities for how we constitute the world as intentional consciousnesses.

Finally, we need to understand what Husserl means when he tells us that part of transcendental knowledge is eidetic knowledge. Eidetic knowledge is knowledge of the essence of phenomena, but in using the word *essence* we must be careful. *Essence* tends to conjure up images of static, unchanging substances. This would be Aristotle’s sense of the term. Husserl’s sense of the term *essence*, and thus the notion of a phenomenological essence, is different. It is not ontological substance that is uncovered but rather the possibilities of a thing’s coming to be that are uncovered. Thus, phenomenological essences tell us nothing about ontology or metaphysics; instead, they tell us about the transcendental realm of experienced objects as products of world-constituting, intentional egos.

Now, how does all of this relate to the questions at hand—both our original question, What is a man/woman? and our emergent question, How can we move beyond Butler? Though I may have presented it a little too much in the abstract, the bottom line is that Husserl’s is a philosophy that analyzes experience and takes the lived experience of the human person as its starting and ending points. It is radically nonpositivistic, as it never searches for knowledge separate from the subject (Husserl would call such knowledge an *empty intention*, meaning that it is unfulfillable). It is, at least in his later works, deeply connected to what others have called the *existential moment*; that is, it is concerned with how human beings experience the world not simply for the sake of knowledge itself but for the sake of offering us personal insight into what the world means for us (an interesting phrase in itself, as the world can only ever mean “for us” in the sense that all knowledge of the world is the knowledge of the intentional consciousness, the human subject!). And as a theory that concerns itself primarily with experience, it directs itself toward disclosing the sedimented layers of obscuring ideological and ontological assumptions about the world that we have come to take for granted and pushes us toward a radically reflective understanding of the essential, transcendental structures that actually underlie our experiences—and indeed experience itself—so that we can free ourselves from false commitments and open ourselves up to the myriad possibilities that have been closed off to us because of the things we have taken for granted, things that aren’t actually how things must be.

Thus, phenomenology can direct us to precisely that area that Butler seems to gloss over—human experience—without falling into the traps Butler has warned us about. Consider: using Husserl as a guide, we can now study our experience of gender in order to better understand the functions it serves, the dangers it presents, and the undisclosed possibilities that it offers. Husserl’s phenomenology provides us with this opportunity without falling into the traps that

poststructuralism so vigilantly warned us against because it is a method of radical investigation and self-reflective exposure. First, if we think about it, we can see how Husserl's attention to experience is different than the privileging of experience that underlies identity politics. Identity politics failed to interrogate its assumptions, instead relying on what Husserl calls the *natural attitude*—the unreflective, nonphilosophical attitude whereby we take for granted things about the world and our knowledge of it; by contrast, Husserl draws us into the *phenomenological attitude*, whereby we suspend our ontological commitments and uninterrogated assumptions and engage in a radical inquiry aimed at uncovering hidden and covered-over possibilities for being. Husserl's phenomenology avoids the trap of identity politics, then, and allows us to investigate and interrogate experience without lapsing into Aristotelian forms of essentialism and exclusionary politics.

Next, we can see the three things that a phenomenological investigation of gender can positively do for us: first, it can expose the hidden assumptions we have about gender in the natural attitude; second, it can help us uncover a radically self-reflective understanding of the essence of our experience of gender in the world—that is, the transcendental conditions of experiencing gender; and third, it can thereby introduce a new way of enacting gender in the mundane world that is not based on sedimented layers of ideologically based knowledge that we have inherited but that instead encourages us to explore the various and multiple possibilities for experiencing gender as both mundane and transcendental egos. Phenomenology does thus not simply dismiss experience as in and of itself nothing but an effect of discourse (though it certainly might find some experiences and some kinds of experiences to be so); instead it would perform a radical philosophical investigation to determine which and what kinds of experiences need to be exposed and called into question and which have something more genuinely and fully human at their core.

Moreover, phenomenology realizes that the task does not stop with separating out kinds of experiences in order to validate some and invalidate others. In its investigation of the lifeworld, phenomenology also investigates how experiences, even ones that are more properly discursive products than keys to the transcendental, shape our worldview and experiences of the world. That is, phenomenology is not about dismissing experiences that are “fake,” as Butler's poststructuralism seems to do when exposing the fiction of identity. Rather, it simply forces us to reassess our relation to such fictions. In the constant privileging of the subject as starting point, phenomenology realizes that even if something is scientifically invalid, it may still be foundationally significant for us—in good ways as well as bad. Determining that something isn't real in the positivistic sense is no reason to do away with it; rather, that determination is a means to allow us to find something real beneath it and rebuild our experiences around that in a more freeing and human-validating manner. Clearly, phenomenology is a way out of the mire of both identity politics and positivism, a way forward that builds on Butler's critique without succumbing to its nihilism and that radically opens up new possibilities for us.

Although I cannot here perform a full phenomenological analysis of gender and cannot explain everything that we might find in so doing, I do want to point to a few possibilities that I believe lie in wait for us. First, I think that a phenomenological analysis of gender will further solidify the usefulness of the new triadic model of sex/gender identity/gender attributes that I believe ought to fully displace once and for all the problematic binary model of sex/gender. As we saw in Butler, the simply binary model sex/gender fell apart under close scrutiny, for we found that gender itself was not a single category but had (at least) two significant components to it: the gender performances that we enact, which include what others might call our gender attributes, and the inner sense of gender identity that those performances construct. Butler was right to see these different components of gender, but didn't go quite far enough in codifying them into a new model of gender. I would suggest that if we follow Butler's argument we find that we must explain gender using the three-tiered model. As Butler argued, gender performance/attribution creates a sense of gender identity that creates, and is in turn supported by, the fiction of biological sex. Thus, in the world of our current binary gender regime where we are either *M* or *F*, we can use the adjectives *masculine* and *feminine* (among others) to describe gender performance/attribution, we can use the adjectives/nouns *male* and *female* to describe sex, and we can use the nouns *man* and *woman* to describe gender identity.²² This three-tiered model, I believe, does two things for us. First, it remains consistent with Butler's poststructural analysis. Second and more importantly, it gives us better options for analyzing our experiences of gender in more radical ways.

This leads to my second point about the overall usefulness of a phenomenological analysis of gender—it will give us a way to investigate the experiences of gender of those who live outside the gender norm—something that Butler's analysis couldn't really do. Here I am speaking of some transgender and genderqueer theories as representing the cutting edge in theorizing gender and of the proximity they have to a phenomenological analysis that itself remains close to a poststructuralist one. One thinks of the work of theorists of an earlier generation such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg, as well as the work a bright young set of new transgender and genderqueer theorists. The work of these young theorists since the late 1990s has shaken the very foundations of how we think about gender, performance, and identity. These artists are able to remain true both to their own and others' experiences *and* to the poststructural insights of Butler; by not losing sight of the constructed nature of experience—and even turning that to their advantage—they theorize the experience of trans experience without falling into the traps of identity politics or essentialism, either political or personal. Here the work of Riki Wilchins stands out, as does the work of the collective Taste This. One also thinks of the philosophical reflections of C. Jacob Hale and Henry S. Rubin, especially given Rubin's attempts at an explicit marriage of trans theory and phenomenology.²³ These authors have found ways to enact Foucault's "undefined work of freedom" and to partially dismantle the gender binary that Butler advised us to undermine; however, they do so not simply for

parodic disruption, but rather to create space for new and unique expressions of the human that Butler could only reach toward. Their work stands as a testament to the importance and possibility of thinking through the human while neither sacrificing lived experience nor failing to recognize the reality of discursive production and social-linguistic determination.²⁴

What is it to call oneself a man or a woman? This isn't such an easy question to answer anymore. It's clear that calling oneself a man doesn't have to conjure up images of masculinity, nor does it necessitate one's having male biology. We've known for some time that calling oneself a woman need not tie one down to an essential nature, but nor does it require the normative female body. Calling oneself a man or a woman must signal something other than biology and indeed something other than the discursive, for just as the body is a product of discourse, so, too, does discourse seem to be produced by and for existing beings. True, we are products of discourse—at least insofar as discourse shapes us. But perhaps we are also something more. It seems phenomenologically evident that gender identity is more than a discursive effect; the lived life of gender is rather both overdetermined and overdetermining. As we seek to push gender theory forward and as we seek more and greater liberation from gender-based oppression, we come to realize that gender identity now emerges as the prime object of investigation. And only through phenomenology will we succeed in uncovering what is both “real” and “unreal” about it. This is the task that lies ahead of us—thinking queerly about gender identity itself. This is the task that this chapter calls us to undertake.

4

What Levinas and Psychoanalysis Can Teach Each Other, or How to Be a Mensch Without Going Meshugah

Psychoanalysis has a complex history with queer lives. Freud's own insights into human sexual life were profoundly misinterpreted by generations of practitioners who came after him as well as by generations of second-wave feminist thinkers. Freud's work has only recently been revived as the resource that it is for both feminist and queer theory. But what about what actually happens on the couch, so to speak? As a practice, is psychoanalysis salvageable? Is there a way to overcome the limits of the seemingly paternalistic relationship between analyst and analysand? Is there a vision for an ethically informed psychoanalysis? To answer these questions I turn to a potential rapprochement between psychoanalysis and phenomenology and ask the additional question, what would it mean to queer psychoanalysis?

PHENOMENOLOGY VERSUS PSYCHOANALYSIS?

The relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis is marked by a history of suspicion and mistrust.¹ Phenomenologists have long questioned Freud's theory of the unconscious, critiquing the idea that there can be a hidden agency making decisions while remaining not only unknown but also at times unknowable to consciousness itself; psychoanalysts have long questioned phenomenology's insistence on consciousness as fundamentally transparent and accessible. Thus, any attempt to bring phenomenology and psychoanalysis together remains suspect and in need of not only significant clarification but also defense. Nonetheless I will attempt to bring the two schools together here.

Before we can begin, we will need to clarify a few things, both specific to my project and universal to the theoretical problematic at hand. On the personal level, I am not one of those who think that phenomenology and psychoanalysis ought to be at odds with each other. In fact, I believe that Freud himself was

engaged in a kind of phenomenology and that psychoanalysis, when properly executed, must come closer to the insights of phenomenological analysis.² Additionally, I believe that Edmund Husserl, the founder of philosophical phenomenology, did not have a narrowly defined understanding of consciousness and thus would not have thought that an analysis of the unconscious lay outside of, let alone against, the phenomenological project. In other words, the history of suspicion and distrust between these two schools of thought does not, I believe, accurately reflect the views of either founder. However, Emmanuel Levinas would not have shared my assessment. Levinas inherited from his teachers and colleagues a deep suspicion of psychoanalysis, especially its insistence on the unconscious. Levinas rather narrowly equated consciousness with the knowable and thereby excluded the unconscious from phenomenological investigation. Though I disagree with his reading of consciousness and his subsequent critique of psychoanalysis, I respect Levinas's conception of his *own* work as standing not only outside of but also against psychoanalysis. Thus, I move here with caution as I attempt to make an argument for what Levinas can offer psychoanalysis. I have no problem with those who would alter Levinas for the benefit of psychoanalysis. But for me, the question is, what can we do with Levinas that, even if inflicting a kind of violence on his *intention* for the purpose of the overall project, still draws on his *work* without fundamentally altering it? This is a difficult line to walk, but I will try to proceed apace nevertheless.

CONSCIOUSNESS, THE EGO, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Already we have introduced the first of many difficulties that we will encounter on the theoretical level while trying to read phenomenology alongside psychoanalysis: the term *consciousness*. Phenomenology and psychoanalysis mean different things by the term, which is so deeply important to both projects. Phenomenology, specifically in its Husserlian form, offers itself as an investigation of consciousness. By *consciousness*, phenomenology means the plane of activity upon which phenomena are grasped by an intending subject. A subject is, put simply, a mind-body that is situated within the world from a first-person perspective. The activity of a mind-body subject is the grasping of phenomena by which it encounters the intersubjective world in which it resides. The subject is an intending subject because all of its activity is intentional—that is, directed at or aimed at an object (whether real, unreal, imagined, what have you). It is not intentional in the sense that the subject “knows” or “means to do” something as it grasps phenomena. In phenomenology, we call this subject a *consciousness*. Psychoanalysis, of course, means something different by the term. Consciousness is often juxtaposed with the unconscious to denote two interrelated but separate and indeed often conflicting registers of the mind. What is conscious (adj.) is contrasted with what is unconscious (adj.). Phenomenology gets into trouble when it misunderstands its own project and confuses the phenomenological consciousness with the psychoanalytic consciousness. This is the mistake that Eu-

gen Fink, one of Husserl's secretaries, makes in his 1936 "Appendix on the Problem of the 'Unconscious'" (Fink 1970).

Things get even more confusing when we add the term *ego* to the fold. An ego, or subject, for phenomenology, is an *I-consciousness*, that is, a consciousness that is aware of itself as an *I*. All consciousnesses are fundamentally aware of themselves, of course. To call something an ego or a subject, then, is not to mark it as a member of a subset of consciousnesses; it is simply to put a different emphasis on what we are exploring. There are two kinds of egos in phenomenology—the mundane ego and the transcendental ego. The mundane ego is the personal I, the ego that marks any particular individual. The transcendental ego, which all mundane egos are, is the set of infinite possibilities of being in which each mundane ego takes part. While mundane egos are individual, differentiated, and unique in their abilities and perspectives, the transcendental ego is universal in all aspects as a field of (theoretical, if not necessarily factual) possibilities.³ Psychoanalysis uses the term *ego* to signify something else. In his classic work *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud posits the ego as one of the three structural components of the mind, alongside the id (the lower part of the ego that exists prior to world-representation and that is made up primarily of the libidinal drive) and the superego (the precipitate that is formed within the ego from the remnants of the Oedipal double-identification with the mother and father and whose dual function is demand/prohibition). For Freud, the ego is that bodily representation around and in which psychical life is organized.

HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY, LEVINASIAN PHENOMENOLOGY, AND THE STRUCTURE OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Phenomenology does not have a theory of the world because phenomenology is fundamentally concerned with *evidence*—that is, with how we know what we know. It doesn't posit that the world is or is not a particular way separate from our experience of it. Rather, it describes what we know about the world and how we come to know it. Husserl doesn't ever go about telling us what the world "in itself" is.⁴ We do, however, come to discover things in his work about the world as known, as phenomenon—most importantly that it is an intersubjectively constituted, shared world. In other words, the world is more than *my* mere perceptual framework because *you and I* constitute it. We do so together, and as "there for all of us," that is, as objective. We recognize that the table is not simply a figment of one person's imagination. Though we also recognize that such intrasubjective imaginary "objects" do exist for us, we can distinguish between those intrasubjective objects and intersubjective objects precisely because we have a conception of the world as transcendental (that is, as transcending any of us individually).⁵ Phenomenology thus eschews relativism in its positing of the world as transcendental (that is, as transcending any one individual's belief in it).

If phenomenology is not interested in offering a theory of the world, it is interested in describing to us the things we find in the world and in determining what it is to be a constituting subject in the world.⁶ As a theory of evidence, phenomenology describes what we can and cannot know and helps us to discover the knowable, including how consciousness works and what subjectivity, or the consciousness of a subject (actor, agent), is.⁷ And in its battle cry for us to return to the things themselves, phenomenology argues that we ought to put aside our accumulated prejudices (which Husserl calls layers of sedimented knowledge) in order to rediscover what things truly are. Phenomenology can attend to its task in one of two basic ways: by discerning what something is and by discerning how something came to be constituted as such. We call the first static and the second genetic phenomenology. Moreover, as ought to be increasingly clear, phenomenology can take as its object two fundamental kinds of things—objects in the world and subjectivity itself. Phenomenology that takes as its object of study subjectivity itself is called transcendental phenomenology.⁸

Husserl did a wonderful job of describing and thereby explaining the workings of subjectivity, in particular how subjects intend objects through acts of meaning-bestowal and how the world itself is constituted as the plane upon which subjects do their object-intending. Many of his students took on smaller projects, such as the description of particular phenomena to which Husserl did not attend. One of Husserl's brightest and most imaginative students, Emmanuel Levinas, discovered in his early studies not something that Husserl hadn't yet attended to but rather something that Husserl's conception of phenomenology could not attend to. Thus Levinas went beyond the boundaries of phenomenology as Husserl understood it.

In his earliest works, Levinas, under the hypnotic sway of his studies with Heidegger as well as Husserl, explored being as an object of study, quickly following up on Heidegger's distinction between beings and Be-ing and re-orienting us toward beings as the key to understanding the fundamental whys of human existence. When beings, instead of Be-ing, are put first, Levinas argues, the fundamental why question changes. As he puts it, "The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself" (1989, 86). But as he continued to explore some of the realities of existents—of human beings living in and confronting the world—Levinas stumbled upon something that he could not get at using traditional phenomenological analysis: *otherness*.

Levinas was not the first or the only thinker of his day to stumble onto otherness as a category for study. Under the influence of Kojève's lectures on Hegel, "the other" was on nearly everyone's tongue. Husserl himself was deeply interested in understanding the nature of otherness, in particular the other ego. For Husserl, the other ego is another I like myself, and I perceive him as such. He writes:

I do not perceive the other ego simply as a duplicate of myself and accordingly as having my original sphere or one completely like mine. I do not apperceive him as having, more particularly, the spatial modes of appearance that are mine

from here; rather, as we find on closer examination, I apperceive him as having spatial modes of appearance like those I should have if I go over there and be where he is. (1999, 117)

Levinas agrees that the other ego is another I like myself. But in studying the encounter with the other person, Levinas discovers something more: in addition to being another ego I like myself, the other person is something else, as well. He writes:

The other person as other person is not *only* an alter ego; the other person is what I myself am not. The other person is this, not because of the other person's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the other person's very alterity. (1987, 83, emphasis added and translation modified)⁹

The otherness that Levinas cites here is an otherness that belongs to the other person, the other subject, the other consciousness in a way undiscovered by Husserl. This otherness is not the otherness of another mundane ego (character, physiognomy, or psychology). That would be no discovery at all. This otherness is a radical otherness, the otherness that confronts us but that we cannot grasp, the otherness that makes itself known to us in its unknowability, the otherness that presents itself on the level of structure as a structure beyond and contrary to our ability to represent it. Husserl discovered the other ego as another ego like myself, but Levinas discovered the other person as also a radical other beyond my capability and capacity to know.

The radical otherness that Levinas discovers in the other person is the crux of his work on subjectivity; as he shows, in my encounter with the other person I discover a great deal about myself and my relation to that unknowable other. Levinas's argument in a nutshell is as follows: the other person thus confronts me as radically transcendent, as a being that I cannot subsume into my own sphere of immanence, knowability, presentation, or presence. I find myself in a state of radical passivity, wherein I simply cannot act on the other person without enacting a primal violence against her. In this recognition of the other as transcendent, I recognize in myself the possibility that my acting from my own desire and of my own accord can, and in all likelihood, will, enact a violence upon the other, indeed may even kill her. As the only being that truly transcends me, the other, in fact, presents itself as the only being that I can truly wish to murder (for all other acts of violence would be acts within my sphere of immanence and thus fundamentally acts of violence against myself, or a form of suicide). But the other person also confronts me as the one who can say no to me and thus calls upon me not to kill her. As she faces me, I hear the first word uttered, which Levinas calls the primordial expression: "you shall not commit murder" (1969, 199). In the face of the other person's radical transcendence, embodied in the other person's ability to say no to me and the subsequent demand that I not harm her, I, as subject, finds myself subjected to the other person's call and thrown into a position of responsibility for her. If I want to respect the other person's transcendence as transcendent, my only response can be one

that announces my presence and awaits the instructions that I ought to follow not to kill her. I can only answer with what we might call the primal response, the first utterance in the face of the other person's plea. I can only answer as Noah, Abraham, and Moses did when called upon by the absolute other, God: the *hineni*: "here I am."¹⁰

LEVINAS AND THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE/FREUD AND THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF ETHICAL LIFE

Sadly, everyday life rarely reflects this deep structure—the uttering of the primal expression followed by the primal response. In nearly every encounter between the I and the other, the alterity and subsequently discovered responsibility are covered over in an exchange in which they view each other as commodities, as bearers of capital for use in their own sphere of concern. We barely give so much as a cursory nod to our responsibility for the other person. Instead, she is nothing more than a tool for our own devices. We need not think very far to see the truth in this. We read about it every day in the newspapers and on the internet, hear it on the TV and radio, see it when we walk down the street, and enact it when we ignore each other as we are caught up in our own concerns, needs, fears, and pleasures, whether petty or significant. Everyday life is, from a Levinasian perspective, a constant covering over of our original responsibility for the other person, a continual and deliberate forgetting of our fundamental guilt.

The solution, of course, is for us to be more attentive to our responsibility to the other person by attending to that inner voice that alerts us to the other's radical alterity, awakens us to our radical passivity in the face of such alterity, and allows us to recognize and answer the other person's plea not to kill her with our response, "Here I am." But here a major problem arises—not the problem of how we are to do this, for that isn't such the problem Levinas's critics make it out to be. Becoming aware of this originary responsibility simply requires keen attentiveness and openness to our selves and the scene of encounter. No, the problem arises when we return to psychoanalysis. Consider Freud's description of the ego-ideal from *The Ego and the Id*:

It is easy to show that the ego ideal answers everything that is expected of the higher nature of man. As a substitute for a longing for the father, it contains the germ from which all religions have evolved. The self-judgement [sic] which declares that the ego falls short of its ideal produces the religious sense of humility to which the believer appeals in his longing. As a child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship. The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. (1923, 37)

Now, we must not be too quick to conflate Freud's ego ideal with Levinas's originary responsibility and resulting sense of guilt. Contrary to what others have argued, they are not the same.¹¹ Still, they function in similar ways, and thus are apt to lead to similar results. As we know, the super-ego, while helping the ego tame the id, can also be a dangerous agency, one that can cause as many problems as it prevents.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, first published in 1929, Freud offers a potent analysis of the dangers that the introjected demands of civilization, in the form of the super-ego, create in the psyche. Civilization demands a renunciation of most every vicissitude of the sexual drive, save monogamous, procreative heterosexual coupling and further forces us into an unnatural assumption of the love command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." While there is little question that some renunciation of the sexual drive is necessary for safety, too much renunciation leads to frustration, which often leads to repression and neurosis. In this way, the love commandment, as the prime moral demand, can be pathogenic (Freud 1930).

From a Freudian perspective, we don't have much of a reason to embrace the commands of the super-ego and civilization other than necessity. Freud certainly recognizes civilization as necessary, but too much super-ego, he warns, is as dangerous as none at all. We know that allowing civilization to ride roughshod over our libido will lead to illness, but we also know that allowing libido to run wild without supervision will lead to a fundamental breakdown in the order that civilization imposes on us. Freud doesn't offer much in the way of advice at this point in the story. Nor does he offer much hope. After *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and after the death of humanity that followed it in Auschwitz, we are left wondering where to go. Some ask, "Why shouldn't we allow our libido to take over, finding ways of using civilization to our advantage while shunning the demands it makes upon us? Why shouldn't psychoanalysis lead to precisely the kind of hedonism it was accused of supporting in days past? If too much super-ego is pathogenic, then ought we not put it aside for something more primal?" Others wonder, "Isn't libido precisely what needs to be reigned in, but even more so and with even more will and determination? Shouldn't we be advancing our morality more deeply, not only on ourselves but also on all those who might now be standing in its way or, worse yet, actively opposing it? Isn't now the time to make certain the power of civilization be wielded before we find ourselves in another Auschwitz or another 9/11?"

Here is where Levinas comes back in, and here is where the dialogue between Levinas and psychoanalysis becomes most fruitful. For Levinas does have a thing or two to offer psychoanalysis's reading of morality, and psychoanalysis has a thing or two to offer back to Levinas, whether he realizes he needs it or not.

WHAT LEVINAS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS CAN TEACH EACH OTHER, OR HOW TO BE A MENSCH WITHOUT GOING MESHUGAH

Why should we take on the commandment not to kill the other in our primal response when doing so clearly might lead to illness? Why should we take responsibility for the other's life and death if doing so puts our own sanity, if not our own life, at risk? Why, in short, be ethical?

The simple answer is the phenomenological one: we ought to be ethical because it is who we, as humans, fundamentally are. We ought to follow the responsibility that Levinas lays out for us because we are, in fact, individuals responsible for one another. We ought to say, "Here I am," because we are guilty in front of the other, because she is right when she accuses us. But this will hardly be enough to convince most of us, so let me approach the question from within a psychoanalytic framework instead.

We are, as human beings, constantly haunted by our failures to be responsible to the others in our lives who make demands of us. We constantly fault ourselves for not being able to respond to others' needs, to deliver what we ourselves promise. We fail ourselves and others when we are unable or unwilling to live responsibly, responsively. This is true of patients as much as it is of analysts. It happens in everyday life, and it happens in the analyst's office. There are many examples we could give to illustrate this. Here I'd like to turn to one of Freud's most famous case studies: Dora.

Dora is perhaps not only Freud's most famous, but also his most infamous case study, for it is a case of an analysis that failed, and the record of that case study that Freud published has been the subject of numerous attacks on Freud and psychoanalysis itself. Freud has been accused, both in his treatment and in his subsequent reporting of his treatment of the young woman he calls Dora, of narcissism, sexism, uninterrogated counter-transference, carelessness, inattentiveness—in short, everything an analyst ought to guard herself against. To a degree these and other accusations are justified. But only to a degree. For though Dora may represent a failed analysis, it also represents a learning point in Freud's career, and his presentation of the Dora case shows far more care and conscientiousness than he has been given credit for. Consider the following from *Dora*:

I have been obliged to speak of transference, for it is only by means of this factor that I can elucidate the peculiarities of Dora's analysis. Its great merit, namely, the unusual clarity which makes it seem so suitable as a first introductory publication, is closely bound up with its great defect, which led to its being broken off prematurely. I did not succeed in mastering the transference in good time. Owing to the readiness with which Dora put one part of the pathogenic material at my disposal during the treatment, I neglected the precaution of looking out for the first sign of transference, which was being prepared in connection with another part of the same material—a part of which I was in ignorance. At the beginning it was clear that I was replacing her father in her imagination,

which was not unlikely, in view of the difference between our ages . . . But when the dream first came, in which she gave herself the warning that she had better leave my treatment just as she had formerly left Herr K.'s house, I ought to have listened to the warning myself . . . But I was deaf to this first note of warning, thinking I had ample time before me, since no further stages of transference developed and the material for the analysis had not yet run dry. (1905a, 108–109)

Freud's attention to his failure is deeply honest, and the shortcoming he finds is in his own failure to listen to what Dora was really telling him. We know, of course, that patients tell analysts things in all sorts of ways—directly and indirectly, in words and in actions. Dora's first dream was, in part, her attempt to tell Freud that she was in the process of a deep and powerful unconscious transference. Freud did not hear it. Why didn't he hear it? Probably for all of the reasons he has been critiqued, which all boil down to one: he wasn't listening. His own active ideas and desires got in the way of his ability to be truly empathetic and receptive to what Dora was telling him; in the act of not listening, he committed a violence against her by failing to respond to her needs.

It is easy to blame Freud for Dora's failed analysis, but it isn't very productive to do so. It doesn't reveal about Freud anything that Freud himself didn't reveal directly in his presentation of the case. Freud is well aware of how he failed, and in examining this case in the context of the rest of his work, it is clear how much he learned from his failure. Psychoanalysis was never a completed method, nor did Freud ever intend it to be one. It is a constantly evolving practice that, when executed properly, shows analysts not only how to respond adequately to and help a particular patient but also how to respond to and help the practice itself, locating and curing illnesses and pushing toward greater health and thus greater effectiveness. It does so not because it is a self-interested practice, pushed on by narcissism and libido; it does so because it takes itself seriously as a calling to attend to the other person in her cries of need. Psychoanalysis is itself, as a practice and in its history, a testament to the truth of the primal responsibility that Levinas describes. And when analysts remember this, they may not be so quick to dismiss the importance and power of the call of the other person.

In his work, particularly *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud too easily dismissed the importance of guilt as a teaching tool, one that was so significant in his own life, particularly in the development of psychoanalysis. Analysts overly concerned with the repressive power of the super-ego are likewise too quick to dismiss the power and importance of the plea not to kill the other as it manifests itself in the daily struggles of their patients to be ethical, available, and responsive. There is no question that too much super-ego can lead us to take on guilt that we don't deserve. But equally there ought to be little question that we as human beings are responsible for one another, especially as we examine what analysts do and why they do it. To help us understand this, we can use what we have learned from Levinas.

The problem with introducing Levinas at this point is that his conception of originary responsibility leaves little room for *any* libidinal desire, thereby looking an awful lot like “too much” super-ego. Of course the super-ego is not the same as originary responsibility, and recognizing this disjuncture might make it easier for the analyst to recognize a responsibility besides the harshly repressive and self-contradictory super-ego. Still, the super-ego and originary responsibility do operate similarly in the psyche, so the problem of psychopathology remains. It seems that assuming one’s originary responsibility as laid out by Levinas could lead to repression and, in turn, obsessional neurotic disorders. So the question remains: how is one to assume this responsibility without falling into neurosis or worse? Here is where we must turn to the insights of psychoanalysis after Freud.

Lacan (1992) offers an excellent elaboration of Freud’s analysis of civilization and guilt. Lacan’s work helps us see how we can continue acting in conformity with either the super-ego or the id without falling into neurosis. He shows us how guilt, in the form of the super-ego, is the direct product of the censor’s prohibition against our libidinal desire (the id) and how, in order for the obsessional neurotic to be released from his pathology, his desire needs to be liberated from the super-ego’s “half-unconscious, paradoxical, and morbid command” (7). According to Lacan, the goal of analysis is to teach the I how to stand up to the super-ego’s command and to embrace the desire that structures the I; *desire* is the operative term here. As Lacan writes, “The sphere of the good erects a strong wall across the path of our desire. It is, in fact, at every moment and always, the first barrier that we have to deal with” (230). Analysis is successful when it allows the I to see how the moral imperative sets up a wall across that path of desire and gives the I the freedom to act with that knowledge of the conflict at the heart of their crossing. This does not necessarily lead to a hedonistic celebration of desire: psychoanalysis’s ethos is not a libertine one. Rather, it leads to the possibility of choice and the necessity of taking responsibility for one’s choices. Thus Lacan’s concluding analysis of the conflict between traditional ethics and psychoanalysis: “if, in one’s accounts with one’s desire, one isn’t exactly in the clear, it is because one couldn’t do any better, for that’s not a path one can take without paying a price” (323). The conflict does not dissipate, and bringing that conflict to light does not make one demand disappear in the face of the other. Now non-pathogenic action is possible, which is, after all, the goal of analysis.

None of this, of course, necessarily leads to happiness. Freud wasn’t joking when he told Jung that they were bringing us the plague. For even where they do not lead to neurosis, there is no question that, according to Freud, morality/guilt/civilization lead to deep psychic unrest in the form of unhappiness. As Freud writes, “threatened external unhappiness . . . has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt” (1930, 128). Lifting repression and in turn negating symptoms doesn’t liberate good feeling. In fact, all too often it can lead us to feel our pain all the more acutely. Recognizing that civilization, in the form of the super-ego, has blocked our

libidinal desires doesn't make it easy to deal with the remaining conflict. Rejecting the super-ego's demands isn't something we do without sacrificing the safety and security they provide us, and turning our back on desire isn't easy given the power of the sexual drive and its primacy in human life. We may be better equipped to negotiate the conflicts we find, deciding when it is worthwhile to move one way or the other, but we still pay a price every time we do so.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Levinas has much to offer psychoanalysis, particularly with respect to the problem of guilt and responsibility. Levinas can teach psychoanalysis a great deal about how we are responsible for one another beyond the constructs of civilization by illuminating the very desire we have to help others in pain and in need. Similarly, psychoanalysis has something to add to Levinas, by insisting on tempering the demands of the super-ego and similar structures in order to respect our desire and thus keep us healthy. When brought together, the two perspectives offer us a richer picture than either does individually of the nature of responsibility and a greater possibility of keeping ourselves healthy.¹²

However, we must bring Levinas's work to bear on psychoanalysis with the understanding that we are taking his work into territory he would have found questionable. Levinas did not consider his work a psychology, nor did he think his work was of much use to psychology. He disapproved of Freud's work, and he had little patience for those who in any way critiqued the ethical root of our being. Still, I think the work I propose in this chapter uses Levinas in a way that respects what he actually attempted to do—offer a description of a fundamental structure of our subjectivity. Moreover, when we see the two schools of thought in this light, we can begin to move forward on a project of bringing phenomenology and psychoanalysis, which have followed divergent and often contradicting paths, closer together in a way that is truer to what their founders envisioned.¹³ In a very real sense, then, this is about queering both phenomenology and psychoanalysis—about bringing them together in a way that, upon more careful analysis, is true to their most basic insights. By refusing to take their opposition for granted, we can see where they connect, thereby making them both more humane theories and more humane practices, thus moving us beyond the simple humanism of the one (phenomenology) or the so-called anti-humanism of the other (psychoanalysis). A Levinasian-inspired psychoanalytic practice is a decidedly posthumanist—and decidedly queer—venture.

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Reading Responsibility in *The Hours*: Two Accounts of Subjectivity

Sex, gender, race, sexuality. Phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminism. Inter-subjectivity, interhuman relations, social interactions. What do these all boil down to as we consider what it is to think queerly in our world? Where does thinking queerly lead us when we consider ourselves as parts of a larger community? In short, how does thinking queerly lead us to live ethical lives?

To put it another way, what is it to be an actor in the world? How do we and how should we go about making choices? Why do we do what we do, and are these good reasons? What is the nature of our relationships with others and how should we interact in a shared world? To whom are we responsible and for what? How do we reconcile our own needs with the needs of those around us? What do we do when those needs stand in opposition to each other? Finally, to pose these questions philosophically: what is the nature of subjectivity?

The question of subjectivity is among those that philosophers have long taken seriously, but perhaps none have taken it quite as seriously as did Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, two important figures in twentieth-century French thought. Whereas Sartre's understanding of subjectivity is a humanist one, founded on the belief in freedom, self-awareness, and the fundamental possibility of the human person, Levinas's is a humanism of a different kind, grounded in the idea of a foundational responsibility and indebtedness of the self to the other prior to one's freedom, a theory that Levinas labels a "humanism of the other person."¹ Sartre's and Levinas's accounts of subjectivity stand as two alternate modes of viewing the nature of the self and the relation between self and other. Both have their strengths and its weaknesses, and, when viewed side by side, they may offer us a glimpse of what a posthumanist account of subjectivity—and thus a posthumanist account of the ethical life—might look like.

The work of both of these thinkers strikes readers as difficult, obtuse, at times even impenetrable. Of the two, only Sartre found a way to make his theory more available to his audience, both in his use of real-life examples in his philosophical writing and in his having written a great deal of interesting (though often still obtuse) fiction alongside his more technical nonfiction. But the work of both Sartre and Levinas still remain among the most important and original

attempts to theorize subjectivity to date. So it is incumbent upon the ethicist not only to engage their work but also to present it to a nontechnical audience for consideration and, possibly, integration. In this chapter, we will attempt to do just that through an engagement with Stephen Daldry's 2002 film *The Hours*.

In doing so, we will come to better understand their theories, and thus we will be able to decide how to proceed with them. We will find that in their opposition, each seems to hold up a possibility found neither in the other nor elsewhere in contemporary thought. But we will also find each to fall short in itself—in terms of its completeness and thus in terms of coherence. Will that mean the end of the line? Will we need to discard these two thinkers because of their shortcomings, or might we find a way to hold on to their best insights? In other words, might we not find a way to reconcile the two thinkers, to find a rapprochement, and could this rapprochement perhaps lead us to a better account of subjectivity than we find in either thinker alone? If we think with and through these positions—and especially if we do so queerly—where might we end up? These are the questions I will attempt to answer through an engagement with *The Hours*.

THE HOURS

The Hours is based on Michael Cunningham's award-winning 1998 novel of the same name; it is a book of immense power and brilliance. Playwright David Hare's carefully sculpted screenplay follows Cunningham's book quite closely, with only a few deviations, and renders the book in beautiful dialogue and stage direction. Phillip Glass's score captures and presents the mood of the book with great precision. The film stars a powerhouse of actors, all of whom offer some of their finest performances in recent memory, from Meryl Streep as Clarissa Vaughn to Julianne Moore as Laura Brown, Ed Harris as Richard Brown, Jeff Daniels as Louis Waters, Claire Danes as Julia Vaughn, and Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf. Director Stephen Daldry, who directed the highly acclaimed *Billy Elliot* (2000), led the actors in tour-de-force performances. All of this resulted in a deeply thought-provoking and moving film, highly praised by critics and audiences alike.

The film follows a single day in the life of three women: a fact-based though imaginatively fictionalized Virginia Woolf, in the midst of writing *Mrs. Dalloway*; Laura Brown, a 1950s Los Angeles housewife trapped in a marriage and family that she finds unbearable; and Clarissa Vaughn, a 1990s editor living an elite New York life. On these days, the women experience life in its entirety, in all of its magnificence and immenseness, in all of its pain and agony. Each of these days is a turning point of sorts, a critical juncture during which each woman must face her darkest demons and the somber realities that she has been struggling to counter. In this, each woman is, in a sense, experiencing the day of Clarissa Dalloway of Virginia Woolf's famed novel. Thus each woman's experience parallels that of the others. Not insignificantly, by film's end we find

the lives of the three women intertwined: Laura Brown reads *Mrs. Dalloway* throughout her day; Clarissa Vaughn not only has the nickname Mrs. Dalloway but also plans a party for which she will buy the flowers herself, and witnesses the suicide of her once-lover and now sick friend Richard Brown; Laura Brown turns out to be the mother who abandoned Richard as a child.

The Hours is both an inspired piece of writing and a profound piece of filmmaking. For our purposes, however, I won't be exploring the intricacies of the connections between the characters or the brilliance of Daldry's direction. Instead, I want to look at some of the movie's characters as representative of our theorists' versions of subjectivity in order to illuminate just what it might mean to live as Sartre and Levinas described and prescribed. We will begin with Sartre.

SARTREAN FREEDOM

In *Being and Nothingness* (1992), Sartre offers a comprehensive picture of human reality.² First, Sartre distinguishes between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. Being-in-itself is the being of an object, the kind of being in which "all that something is" is already contained in that thing itself and can be known, explained, and understood (the being of a table, say, or some other inanimate object). Being-for-itself, on the other hand, is the being of a subject, the kind of being that is free to choose its future and thus is not confined to or determined by "what it has been" but is open to becoming "what it will be." As human beings, we are not determined by either our past or our present situation. Rather, we are free to choose our next step and at every moment, whether we admit it or not, we do, in fact, make the choices that lead us to where we are going. That is, human nature does not dictate how we will act in a particular situation; neither do our childhood memories. Whenever we act, we act because we are choosing to act that way. Human beings, then, do not have fixed essences that determine what they are and how they will be in the world. Human beings are free subjects who choose their paths and create their own existences. This is what Sartre means when he tells us that existence precedes essence.

Next, Sartre tells us that if human beings are fundamentally free subjects who choose their paths and create their existences, then human beings alone are responsible for their choices, past, present, and future. No one and no thing can force us to choose how we act. We cannot lay the blame elsewhere. No one else is at fault, and no one else deserves the credit. Sartre realizes, of course, that this freedom is a great burden for us to bear. After all, if we truly are responsible for the choices we make, then we cannot lay the blame on anyone else when things don't go the way we planned. If our actions have negative consequences, we alone are responsible. Moreover, when faced with difficult decisions, we cannot pretend that others will make those decisions for us. We alone choose our paths and we alone must bear the responsibility for doing so. Often we cannot accept such responsibility and flee from it. Sartre calls this fleeing *bad faith*. Put

simply, to act in bad faith is to lie to oneself in such a way that one fails to take responsibility for one's actions. To say (to myself) that I had to act in a certain way is to lie to myself, for it is always possible that I could have acted otherwise. To say (to myself) that I had no choice is a lie, for choice is fundamentally what human existence is. To say (to myself) that I did so-and-so because of my childhood, because of my nature, or because "that's the kind of person I am" is to fail to own up to the fact that I did so-and-so freely and of my own will. It is no doubt true that I may choose to act in a way that is in accord with beliefs that I hold or because I, on some level, realize that acting otherwise would challenge the perception I have of myself, but neither situation negates the facts that I am the only one responsible for my action and that I am the one who chose to act in the way I did. To claim otherwise is to lie to myself, to pretend that I am not responsible and thus to fail to carry the burden of my existence.

In this, we come to a basic picture of Sartre's theory of subjectivity. The world is full of objects and subjects; human beings are fundamentally subjects, agents, actors, and choosers—fully free. As fully free beings, we alone are responsible for our actions, indeed for our very lives, and we find this responsibility too much to bear and flee from it. In fleeing, we deny that we are responsible, instead finding the causes and locating the sources of our actions and decisions outside of ourselves, even though we know that to do so is to lie to ourselves, or, in Sartre's language, to act in bad faith.

To manage otherwise—that is, to do so without falling into bad faith—would be to live authentically. Sartre does not develop the concept of authenticity, but he suggests that it might be possible to step out of bad faith and take responsibility for one's freedom, even in a world of others. However, Sartre concludes, a description of how one may do this belongs to the sphere of ethics (the study of the "ought"), not the sphere of ontology (the study of the "is"), and so, as a study in ontology, *Being and Nothingness* ends.

What does a Sartrean subject look like? What does the person in bad faith do? What does the person striving for authenticity do? Is there a life that strives for but ultimately falls short of authenticity that we can examine to help illuminate Sartre's theory? Here a turn to *The Hours* will be instructive, as we examine its most Sartrean character: Laura Brown.

Laura Brown is a 1950s housewife, mother to young Richie. By movie's end, we discover that Richie is, in fact, Richard Brown: the poet in whose honor Clarissa is throwing the party, the love of Clarissa's life, a man haunted by a mother who did not love him and in the end abandoned him. Laura does not belong in her life. To say she is not happy is to sorely understate the matter. Laura is smothered in her suburban Los Angeles home, in her normative heterosexual marriage, in her role as mother. She is lost; she is drowning. She is losing herself, or perhaps she is simply in a situation in which she cannot find the self that, deep down, she wishes to be. She is a failure at the everyday responsibilities of being a housewife. This day is her husband's birthday, but Laura—overwhelmed by fear and a feeling of incompetence—fails at her first attempt to bake him a cake. Everyone knows that it isn't a hard thing to do, to bake a cake,

and everyone knows that she always fails when she tries. Her neighbor, Kitty, knows it; her son, Richie, knows it; she herself knows it. The only person who doesn't know it is her kind and loving yet utterly clueless husband, Dan.

As the movie unfolds, we learn many things about Laura. She is in love with her neighbor and friend, Kitty, and even kisses her tenderly upon learning that Kitty is to undergo surgery on her uterus. She married Dan more out of a misplaced sense of his deserving it for having fought in the war than for any love, or even connection, she might feel for him. But he dotes on her to excess, unable to see fault in even her most glaring mistakes, and in that she finds comfort, as well as a hint of shame. She finds her son Richie's needs difficult, to say the least. He is a sensitive child, a needy child, and a child desperate for her love and attention. She talks sweetly to him (mostly) but seems awkward around him, not quite knowing how to handle one so sensitive. When he is upset she simply tells him not to worry but doesn't help him confront his fears, for she knows what his fears concern, and she knows that she cannot comfort him. He fears that she does not truly love him, that she is incapable of loving him—and, indeed, this is at least in part true. She cannot give him the love he needs—the physical caresses, the emotional closeness, the tenderness, and, most of all the reassurance that she will never leave, that she will always be there for him. She will not. By day's end she will have contemplated suicide. Unable to kill the daughter she holds in her womb, Laura instead plans to leave after her child is born, to flee and start a new life—a life without Dan, Richie, or her yet-to-be-born daughter.

We follow Laura as she leaves her son with a babysitter, all the while not planning to return, for she is off to kill herself in the solitude of a hotel room. We see her cry, overcome with dread both at the thought of staying, which she knows is slowly killing her, and at the thought of leaving those to whom she has vowed her life, those to whom she knows she is responsible. We see her step back from the threshold of death and return to life, but with a new plan, a new determination, that will lead her to her freedom. We see that staying with Dan and Richie is killing her, and we see that her decision to leave is killing her as well. But one path will lead to the death of her soul; the other, to the possibility of life. At the end of her day, we see the distraught Laura hiding from her husband in the bathroom, crying for fear of losing Kitty, for the pain she knows she will cause Dan, Richie, and the daughter-to-be, and, just a little, for herself and the life she will leave behind. But she will leave it behind, and she will go on to live a life of her own.

Laura returns, of course, as the evil mother who abandoned Richard and caused him so much misery, so much pain. She is "the monster," as Clarissa's daughter Julia so eloquently puts it. She is the one Richard has longed for all his life, the one for whom with desperate need and unfulfilled hope he pined even before she left and all the more after she was gone. We find that in the novel he has written, Richard has Laura commit suicide. We find that Laura in fact moved to Canada and became a librarian. We know nothing of her love life. (Did she have one? Did she find the woman lover she desired? Or was she

alone?) We find that she read Richard's poems and his novel and that she admired his writing greatly, but that they rarely talked to one another. Finally, we find her reflecting on her abandoning of her family, on her decision to leave them behind:

There are times when you don't belong and you think you're going to kill yourself. Once I went to a hotel. Later that night I made a plan. The plan was I would leave my family when my second child was born. That's what I did. I got up one morning, made breakfast, went to the bus stop, got on a bus. I'd left a note. I got a job at a library in Canada. It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean? What does it mean to regret when you had no choice? It's what you can bear. There it is. No one's going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life.³

What do we make of Laura's actions and pronouncements? She chooses a life that does not feel like death, but how does she act in making that choice, and in what state does she reflect on it? Laura Brown, the monster, the housewife, the librarian, the mother, the repressed and oppressed lesbian, reflecting on her life, on her most painful life, realizes the pain she caused and realizes that she alone caused it, comes so close to taking full and total responsibility for her actions, but still cannot do it completely. She chose life, she tells us—chose it. Yes, she knows it was a choice, and she knows that it was she and she alone who made that choice. In recognizing this, she knows that she alone is to blame. She doesn't ask forgiveness or offer a false apology for she knows that, were she to choose again, she would again choose life. But is she yet truly authentic? Here she falters. She had *no choice*, she tells us—she had no choice. And so it seems that at the moment she is most ready to take responsibility, she lapses into bad faith. Almost authentic, she slips back into the human condition, into bad faith.

But Sartre knows that authenticity is in a sense impossible. He knows that we all fall back into bad faith, for that is fundamentally how human beings face their freedom. In this, she is Sartre's subject, Sartre's human being. Sartre also knows that some fall into bad faith more often and more deeply, while others are able to face their freedom and take on their responsibility in a movement toward authenticity. Laura Brown does the latter—she is one of those few others. But, in the end, while trying desperately to confront and reclaim her own freedom, coming as close as anyone might, she ultimately collapses under its unbearable weight.

Laura Brown fails to achieve Sartrean authenticity. But for this we cannot blame her, for she comes as close as we might expect of anyone. In showing us the fact of our freedom and the difficulty that we encounter in facing it, Sartre gives us a look into the nature of our subjectivity that is at once both sobering and inspiring. But consider: what if Laura Brown, and in turn we, were able to live authentically? Would that be enough? Would that be the way we want to live? Would it necessarily lead to an ethical life? I am inclined to say no, for I can imagine an authentic Laura Brown whom I could admire in some respects but not from the perspective of the ethical, from the perspective of our responsi-

bility to one another. To find ethics we must look elsewhere. And so we now turn to our second theorist of subjectivity for an altogether different account than Sartre's.

LEVINASIAN RESPONSIBILITY

If Sartre defines responsibility as the fact that no one but oneself determines one's actions, then Levinas can easily be read as Sartre's polar opposite. Like Sartre, Levinas is attempting a description of the human person aimed at explaining the nature of our subjectivity, but, unlike Sartre, for Levinas, the responsibility he finds is not to one's own freedom but rather to the needs of the other person. In his magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas offers just this description.⁴

Levinas's project hinges on his description of what happens when the self's solitary existence is interrupted by another person. Although Levinas does agree with his teacher Husserl that as selves we see others as alter egos, as other selves-like-me in the world, Levinas also notices something that Husserl does not: the radical otherness of the other. While I do recognize the other person moving around the world in the same way that I do, comporting herself toward similar things in similar ways, and while I thus recognize that she must be another self like myself, I am also confronted with the fact that I cannot direct her actions. I cannot dictate her movements, experience her experiences, think her thoughts, or see through her eyes. As much as she is like me, there is something fundamental about her that not only escapes me but also confronts me as entirely not mine, as completely out of my grasp, as radically other. She is her own subject—not an object that I can possess, not a tool that I can use, not another body that I can step into and claim as my own; no, she is radically her own, and, as much as I may see her as like me, there is something basic about her that is not only not like me, it is entirely out of the realm of my experience and thus inaccessible in the most total of ways. She is an other.

But she is not just any other; she is an other person. She is not simply something that confronts me as unknowable and ungraspable, the way death does. No, she confronts me as something unknowable and ungraspable that has its own intentional field, its own need, desires, wants, and basic directedness. She confronts me as an other person who is at one and the same time an other like me and an other completely other to me. It is this second quality, her otherness qua otherness, that Husserl fails to see, and that Sartre underestimates. It is this second quality that Levinas sees as fundamental, as foundational, as the starting point for a theory of the subject. For this otherness confronts me in such a way that I begin to call my own needs and desires into question. It confronts me in such a way that I realize that not only is the world not entirely for me, but it is also at one and the same time a world for an other, and thus when I act in the world, I am potentially involved in an action that disrupts the other's plan, that takes away what she is longing for, and that may in fact take away the thing she

needs to survive. I do not know what it is that she needs. I may have my ideas, I may think I know, but in the end only she knows what she needs. As such, any action I do on my own may potentially take from her. It may put me first when I have no legitimate reason to place myself before her. Anything I do of my own accord privileges me over and against her without justification. This realization calls my freedom into question, hurls my intentions into doubt, and puts my desires on trial.

In this realization, Levinas says, I come to recognize that I have an original responsibility to the other, that I and I alone am responsible for keeping her alive, responding to her needs, emptying myself of my intentions and desires, and taking up her intentions and desires as my own. Of course, as I cannot know what her intentions and desires are. All I can do is declare myself open to her, open to whatever she may ask of me, willing to do what she needs. In this, I find myself utterly passive before her, knowing that my actions may damage her, knowing that her needs must come first, but now knowing what those needs are. As such, the only thing I can offer her that does not do a potential violence to her is to pledge myself ready to tend to her needs. As she faces me and I am awakened to the command implicit in her otherness, a command that Levinas equates with the biblical command "Thou shalt not kill," the only non-violent response I can give is my offer to respond as she needs in my uttering the biblical response, "Here I am." In this response, I move from being a mere self, absorbed with my own needs and desires, to becoming a subject, one who recognizes her originary responsibility or, to put it another way, subjection to the other, and takes it on as her own.

In this we have a basic picture of Levinas's theory of subjectivity. For Levinas, the subject is the self who becomes awakened to her primal responsibility to the other person and accepts its call in the "here I am." My freedom is not seen as something that I must protect but rather as that which may cause violence to the other if not kept in check, if not subordinated to the other's needs. My responsibility is not to accept my freedom as my own but to subjugate it to the needs of the other. In doing so I am, as in Sartre's theory, taking responsibility for the outcomes of my actions but not in the simple sense that no one else is to blame; instead, I am taking responsibility in the sense that I, fundamentally, am to blame, am at fault, and that in acting I am potentially killing the other. Thus, the only responsible thing to do is to put aside my freedom for the other's needs.

What would a Levinasian subject look like? What would life be like if we were to recognize the responsibility that we have to the other, if we were to subject ourselves to the other's needs before our own, if we were to answer the call with the passive "here I am"? To better understand how a person accepting and embracing his Levinasian responsibility might act, we again turn to *The Hours* and to one of its most interesting characters, Richard Brown.

Richard Brown is a man haunted by his past, tortured in his present, and despairing over his future. Having been abandoned by his mother as a child, he has spent his life agonizing over his love for her and her seeming lack of love for

him. As a young adult, he found love in the arms of both Louis Waters and Clarissa Vaughn, moving from Louis's bed to Clarissa's and back again but never letting go of the perfect moment he had one morning long ago in Wellfleet, when he first called Clarissa Mrs. Dalloway. As an adult he has become a highly acclaimed poet, and now, on his last day, he is preparing to receive the Carrouthers Prize for lifetime achievement in poetry. But on this day he is in no position to accept the prize happily, for his body is ravaged with AIDS. He is dying, almost already dead. He could live for years like this, the doctors tell him, but to live like this, with his body decaying, his mind decaying? He hears voices. The voices never leave him. And his only company, besides the people that bring him food, is Clarissa, his dear Mrs. Dalloway, now settled down with her longtime lover, Sally, living the bourgeois New York lifestyle, and giving parties, always giving parties. "To cover the silence," as Richard puts it.

Richard has spent his life mourning his losses. There is Louis, who left him in Europe to finally be free; his mother who could not love such a sensitive child, who, however usually kind to him, could lash out over nothing, such as when he stood there looking at her after her failed attempt at baking a cake, leaving him wondering why she was angry and wishing he could comfort her, and who abandoned him and his father and his sister, leaving young Richie without the one person he loved the most in the world; and Clarissa, his dear Mrs. Dalloway, with whom he shared the perfect moment, the perfect day, the perfect morning, those many years ago in Wellfleet. Clarissa longs for him, too, needs him more than she realizes, for in her bourgeois life now she is not happy; no, she longs for that morning in Wellfleet when she thought happiness was all in front of her, not realizing then that it was that moment, that very moment itself, that was happiness. Clarissa takes care of him, visits him, cares for him, loves him even in the midst of his illness, physical and mental, even when all of his other friends have left him, after he has driven them all away, Clarissa stays, against all odds, by his side.

But why? Why does Clarissa stay? And why does Richard let her? Why does she continue to take his manipulation (his abuse?), his refusal to come to her party (oh, but we both know he will come—except for the fact that he will kill himself by day's end, with Mrs. Dalloway looking on), his returning to their past to relive that moment of true perfection, of happiness?

And why does Richard stay? Why does he stay alive when he is ravaged by AIDS, his mind and body dying together? What makes him go on when he knows that all he has left is more madness, more pain, and his steady decline until what was once Richard Brown, poet, novelist, is no more?

She stays because she needs him. She needs his presence as a reminder of what she once had, what she once was, a bittersweet remnant of the happiness she has so long been without. And so does he. He stays for her. He stays because she needs him. Because she needs his presence, a reminder of what she once had, what she once was, a bittersweet remnant of the happiness she has so long been without:

Richard: Would you be angry?

Clarissa: Would I be angry if you didn't show up at the party?

Richard: Would you be angry if I died?

Clarissa: If you died?

Richard: Who is this party for?

Clarissa: What do you mean who's it for? What are you asking, what are you trying to say?

Richard: I'm not trying to say anything. I'm saying, I think I'm only staying alive to satisfy you.

Clarissa: Well, so that is what we do. That is what people do; they stay alive for each other. And the doctors told you, you don't need to die, they told you that you can stay alive like this for years.

Richard: Well, exactly.

Clarissa: I don't accept this. I don't accept what you say.

Richard: Oh, and it's for you to decide, is it? How long have you been doing that? How many years coming to the apartment? What about your own life? What about Sally? Just wait 'til I die, then you'll have to think of yourself. How are you going to like that?

Clarissa: Richard, it would be great if you did come to the party, if you felt well enough to come. Just to let you know, I am making the crab thing, not that I imagine it makes any difference to you.

Richard: Of course it makes a difference. I love the crab thing. *Clarissa?*

Clarissa: Yes?

[They kiss. She laughs. He smiles.]

Clarissa: I'll be back at 3:30, and I'll help you get dressed.

Richard: Wonderful.

Clarissa: 3:30.

[She leaves. His face turns serious.]

Richard: Wonderful.

Richard is hardly the model friend. He is brusque, abusive even. He is manipulative and rude. In this, we can hardly call him someone who has embraced his ethical side, hardly a model Levinasian subject. Yet there is something about him, something more basic, something more brute in his life, in his living. He is dying. He has been dying for years. He no longer wishes to live. He no longer wants to fight, to be brave, to survive. He is ready to die. He has been ready to die for years. But he can't. Or, more to the point, he won't. He won't let himself die because he knows that Clarissa needs him. He knows that she needs him to survive so that she can hold on to her one true moment of happiness from those many years ago—so that she can continue to find love in the love she once had with him, however distant, however lost. He lives because she needs him to.

But living for her isn't enough, he comes to realize, because in living for her he is keeping her from living. She is avoiding her life, playing the part of the lesbian partner and mother in bad faith, longing for something else, something that once was and is no longer. She is refusing to live because as long as she can hold on to the lost past, she can pretend to relive that moment of pure happiness, of perfection, and not be forced to deal with the difficulties of her real life. And he knows it. He knows that as much as living for her is keeping him from want

he wants, it is also, and perhaps even more so, keeping her from what she needs. He knows it then, at that moment, when she reminds him, “3:30,” closes the door, and leaves. He knows it when he says to himself, “Wonderful.” And he, like his mother before him, makes a plan: that afternoon, when Clarissa returns, he will kill himself. Then and there, right in front of her, he will take his last breath and take his life, the life that pulses through his veins but that he is no longer truly living, and in so doing, he will save them both, himself and Clarissa, from holding on to a past that is lost, from refusing to face the future:

Clarissa: Richard? It’s me. I’m early.

[She enters the apartment to find Richard frantic, tearing down the boards and the shades from the wall and wrecking the apartment.]

Clarissa: What the hell is going on? Richard?

Richard: What are you doing here? You’re early!

Clarissa: Wha—what is going on here? What are you doing?

Richard: I—I had this wonderful idea I needed some light. I needed to let in some light.

Clarissa: Richard, what are you going?

Richard: I had this fantastic notion—I took the Xanax and the Ritalin together. It—it never occurred to me.

Clarissa: Richard?

Richard: Don’t come near me! It seemed to me I needed to let in some light. What do you think? I cleared away all the windows.

Clarissa: All right Richard, do me one simple favor, come, come sit.

Richard: I don’t think I can make it to the party, Clarissa.

Clarissa: You don’t have to go to the party. You don’t have to go to the ceremony. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You can do as you like.

Richard: But I still have to face the hours, don’t I, I mean, the hours after the party and the hours after that?

Clarissa: You do have good days still, you know you do.

Richard: Not really. I mean, it’s kind of you to say so but it’s not really true.

Clarissa: Are they here?

Richard: Who?

Clarissa: The voices.

Richard: Oh the voices are always here.

Clarissa: And it’s the voices that you’re hearing now, isn’t it?

Richard: No, no, no, no. Mrs. Dalloway, it’s you. I’ve stayed alive for you, but now you have to let me go.

Clarissa: Richard, I—

Richard: No, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Tell me a story.

Clarissa: About what?

Richard: Tell me a story from your day.

Clarissa: I, um, I—I got up.

Richard: Yes?

Clarissa: and I went out, and, um, I went to buy flowers—like Mrs. Dalloway in the book, you know.

Richard: Yes.

Clarissa: And it was a beautiful morning.

Richard: Was it?

Clarissa: Yes, it was so beautiful. It was so fresh.

Richard: Oh, fresh was it?

Clarissa: Yes.

[He opens the window.]

Richard: Like a like a morning on the beach?

Clarissa: Yes.

Richard: Like that?

Clarissa: Yes.

Richard: Like that morning when you walked out of that old house and you were, you were eighteen and maybe I was nineteen.

Clarissa: Yes.

Richard: I was nineteen years old and I'd never seen anything so beautiful, you coming out of a glass door in the early morning, still sleepy. Isn't it strange—the most ordinary morning in anybody's life. I'm afraid I can't make it to the party, Clarissa.

Clarissa: The party doesn't matter.

Richard: You've been so good to me, Mrs. Dalloway. I love you. I don't think two people could've been happier than we've been.

[He throws himself out the window.]

For whom does he kill himself? For himself? For her? For both of them? And who is it that leads him to this decision? Himself? Or, perhaps, her?

These questions are not easily answered, but let me offer a Levinasian reading. His suicide is clearly for himself on one level, but it is even more so for her. He has longed to die for some time, but has been unable to because of his feeling of obligation to Clarissa. But something happens on this day; he becomes aware of something. He realizes that his living is keeping Clarissa from living, and he realizes this not because he is a master of insight. He realizes this because it is Clarissa, in fact, who tells him. She knows that she is living in the past, and she knows that she is staying with Richard both to hold onto that past and because she feels the obligation to care for him. But she also knows that by staying with him she is slowly killing herself. She knows that the past is just the past and that she needs to let it go and move on. But she can't bring herself to do it. She can't bring herself to make the decision to leave, the very same decision that Laura Brown made those many years ago when she left Richie. For Clarissa to leave now would be for all of Richard's fears to come true: he is not worthy, and he never was. His mother left because he was a failure as a son, just as he was a failure as a lover, to Louis, to Clarissa, and a failure as a writer, for his "difficult novel" could never capture the love that he and Clarissa once felt, could never convey it to others. No, Clarissa cannot leave Richard, even though part of her knows she must. And it is Richard who understands as much on this day. It is Richard who hears Clarissa's silent plea, the voice inside her that is saying, "You are killing me—please, please let me live." And it is Richard who must leave so that Clarissa can be free.

It is more than a little disturbing to think of Richard's suicide as something that he is doing for someone else, to think of it as an ethical act. Yet, from a

Levinasian perspective, it seems to be. It is not a selfish act, for his living is helping neither himself nor Clarissa. And though his suicide is on some level for himself, it is even more for her, for Clarissa. Suicide is Richard's Levinasian gesture, his taking on his originary responsibility to the other person, Clarissa Vaughn. Killing himself is giving Clarissa her life back. It is in that act that he is able to say to her, "Here I am."

But Richard's act fails on two levels. First, Richard acts in bad faith, for his suicide is not a pure act of selflessness, a pure moment of taking on a responsibility for Clarissa's call. The drama, the drastic nature of the act, reveals Richard's intentionality still at play. Why does Richard kill himself in front of Clarissa? Because Richard is a drama queen and an attention seeker; because Richard needs an audience. Intentionality can never be fully given up, for even though Levinas postulates a pure passivity in the face of the other, we are never without intention, never entirely empty of self, never wholly for the other, because we are always still subjects who act, not simply subjects subjected. We are always still subjects who choose, and who live, who want, need, feel, desire, and, ultimately, are in charge of and in control of our own lives, in all of their minutiae. Sartre knows this; Levinas forgets it. To think that we can be fully for-the-other in a Levinasian sense may be a beautiful wish, but it is a wish, nonetheless.

Moreover, it may just be a foolish wish. If Richard had not pretended to be acting for Clarissa and Clarissa alone, perhaps he would have realized that, while freeing Clarissa from her past, he also caused her immense trauma, and in this we see the second way in which Richard failed: had he been able to reconcile his need to act for her with her genuine need to find a way to love him and let him go at the same time, perhaps he could have found a way to slip peacefully into death, leaving love in his wake instead of a body and an image from which Clarissa will never be free. Richard's emptying of self, which is ultimately impossible, leads him to fail to see Clarissa's need truly and honestly. In his attempting to be completely for her, he lost sight of her, and in so doing he failed to give her what she truly needed. In other words, by making Clarissa only other, he forgets that Clarissa is also like himself. Levinas's theory claims to keep sight of this, but in actuality it does not. Otherness becomes privileged over connection to the point of erasing connection, and the possibility of true empathy is lost. Richard's actions, then, seemingly conform to what Levinas calls the ethical, but from our perspective they aren't part of any kind of ethics that we would want to fully embrace.

Richard's seemingly ethical act is in bad faith, for he still acts with intentions—though he denies this to himself—and it is also lacking in ethics, for the pain he inflicts upon Clarissa is unnecessary, even selfish. To flee so far from Sartre as to forget his lesson is to be as problematic a subject as the Sartrean version; and to forget just what ethics are about in the name of something called the ethical is to lose sight of why it is we act for each other. In the end, we may admire Richard and his actions on some level, but, just as we did when looking

at his mother's actions, we realize that his is not the model we truly want to follow.

AUTHENTIC MOMENTS/ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS

Sartre gave us a stunning picture of who we are as free beings responsible for our own lives, and in this we are inspired to claim our lives and live them as our own. Levinas gave us a stunning picture of the ways in which we are bound to the other, and in this we are inspired to put others before ourselves. In theory both look beautiful. But on its own each is lacking. Laura cannot escape bad faith, nor can she find the ethical. Richard cannot escape intentionality, and his ethical act lacks compassion. Is there a way to theorize subjectivity other than Sartre or Levinas that might offer the best of each without the lacks they engender? This is a tricky question, and while we could explore it simply at the level of the theoretical, let us instead return to our film and to one key moment in its narrative to see what it might look like to theorize Sartre *with* Levinas. Then we can return to the philosophical question and put forth a modest suggestion for how a theory of subjectivity ought to unfold.

The moment I want to explore is a short one that comes at the end of the film. Laura Brown has come to Clarissa's apartment, we assume to attend Richard's funeral, in the wake of his suicide. Laura and Clarissa have already talked; Laura has made her pronouncements about her past and her choice to leave her family those many years ago. Now, settling down for the night in Julia's room, Laura Brown and Julia Vaughn, daughter of Clarissa Vaughn and an unknown sperm donor, have a brief but powerful exchange. Julia enters her room and approaches Laura:

Julia: I thought you might like a cup of tea.

Laura: Oh my goodness, thank you dear. I feel like I'm stealing your room.

Julia: Um, we put the food away, so if you're at all hungry in the night just help yourself.

Laura: Oh, I will. Where will you sleep?

Julia: Oh, the sofa.

Laura: Oh, oh, I'm sorry.

[Julia hugs Laura. Laura smiles.]

Laura: Goodnight, sweetheart.

Julia: Goodnight.

What do we make of this? First, notice that this is a dialogue between the two characters—a genuine exchange, not a monologue, or a one-sided proclamation of one to another. Second, notice that they are talking about nothing of great importance—tea, food in the refrigerator, where one of them will sleep. Yet in their discussion, the full weight of the day is present, and the rich meaning of a few simple words becomes clear. Laura says to Julia, “Oh, oh, I'm sorry.” I'm sorry for displacing you. I'm sorry for making you sleep on the couch. I'm sorry

for making your home not your home tonight. And Julia realizes that Laura is apologizing not only to Julia for taking her room, but also to Richard, the grown man now dead; to Dan, her dead husband; to her unnamed daughter, also dead and to Richie, the little boy from long ago, for leaving them. She is apologizing for displacing Richie, for making his home no longer a place of love and comfort. She is apologizing for abandoning all of them, even though she would do it again. And Julia responds. She sees beyond her earlier proclamation of Laura “the monster” and, seeing a fellow human being in pain, and in need, she reaches out. Moreover, when acting this way, Julia does not feign an emptiness of self where she is acting in passive response to a call from the other. Julia remains herself, and in this she is able to remain fully human and fully connected to her feelings, and thus to the feelings of the woman standing before her. Because she remains an acting subject, not simply a subjected subject, she is able to empathize. Julia feels Laura’s pain, recognizes Laura’s need, acknowledges Laura’s sorrow, and reaches out to Laura as a daughter, a friend, a fellow human being. Julia reaches out to this other person because she chooses to connect with this woman in the midst of her pain, chooses the ethical in line with compassion. This is thus both a fully authentic movement on Julia’s part and a fully ethical one. It is taken upon freely, chosen, fully authentic. And it is for the other, a response to a need, unforeseen and unplanned, yet embraced and taken up without hesitation as a self connects with and understands the needs of the other, who while other, is also like myself. In this, Julia’s action is a recognition of the original responsibility that the self has to the other, indeed Julia’s action is an embrace of it, but it is done with care and attention, and with full intentionality behind it. It is done authentically, and so it does not fail to see Laura’s need for what it is.

Julia’s response to Laura’s need is both Sartrean and Levinasian. In this Julia stands as an authentic ethical subject. But Julia’s response is also more than this, for Julia’s response takes place within a world of mutually engaged and interacting subjects—in a world that Sartre’s and Levinas’s predecessor Edmund Husserl called *intersubjective*. In this world, we recognize ourselves as part of a co-created world and take responsibility for both ourselves and others. In this world, we see the other as an alter ego, another I like myself, and so can engage in empathy with the other because the other is like me. In this world, subjectivity always already entails intersubjectivity. And so Julia offers a third component to our picture—the co-constitutive component. We are only subjects to the extent that we are co-subjects in an intersubjective world.⁵

There it is. In that simple exchange, and in that one simple moment, two subjects meet in an ordinary moment that quickly becomes an extraordinary one, for in Julia’s gesture, in Julia’s hug, Julia embodies the best of both Sartre and Levinas (and now, too, Husserl), showing us just what subjectivity can look like when we recognize its potential to be authentic ethical intersubjectivity. This is the posthumanist moment par excellence. It refuses the simple answers of any humanism or anti-humanism, transcending both. It queers our lens, forcing us to turn back on our assumptions to get to the root of the matter in a gesture of true

humanity. It is what happens when we start to think queerly, as we open up a new world around us. Even more so, it is an act of living queerly, in which the human is redeemed as it is posited. It is the moment toward which we all strive.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

1. There are many *wes* in the world. My *we* here refers to the dominant paradigm of the modern West, in particular the social milieu of the United States since the end of World War II, though the roots of these conditions reach much further back and much farther away than that.

2. I am using this term to signify its etymological meaning, not simply its popular meaning. Our world is anti-Semitic in that it is biased against all Semitic peoples, Jews and Arabs alike.

3. This presentation was later developed into what is now Chapter 3 of this volume.

4. In Chapter 2 of this volume, I lay out three meanings of the term *queer*. In this chapter, I am engaged in a slightly different discussion. So, for the sake of focus, I am here putting aside the second definition from Chapter 2, but more fully exploring the meaning of the third.

5. As should be clear by now, the term *queer*, in this second sense of the term, is not the same queer of popular culture's current love affair with gay male culture. For instance, in this sense of the term, there is nothing queer about television show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" of the early 2000s.

6. For the ways in which our danger to normative society becomes dangerous to us, see Chapter 5 of this volume.

7. The most interesting and groundbreaking work on asexuality is Karli Cerankowski's "Asexuality: Queering and Redefining Sexual Identity" (2009).

8. For another take on how phenomenology can be queer, see Sara Ahmed's masterful *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Ahmed's work is a tour de force in which she calls for re-orienting the phenomenological gaze toward what is overlooked—what she calls a *disorientation*. In my first reading of this book, I put Ahmed's work in the category of anti-normative thought. However, upon further study, I believe I was wrong—her work is postnormative in precisely the manner I prescribe here. Ahmed's *disorientation* is very much in line with my reading of postnormative thinking. Ahmed is a bit less confident in the ability of Husserlian phenomenology to achieve this than I am, but, all disagreements aside, I believe her work stands as an example of what the best in both queer theory and phenomenology can be.

9. For a brief but fuller explanation of the original schema, see Fryer (2001). For a more detailed explanation, see Fryer (2004).

10. I think this stands as a good description of the work of Descartes (1986) and Habermas (1987).

11. Wynter (2006) offers a penetrating analysis of this phenomenon in her essay, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre*."

12. I think this stands as a good description of the work of Husserl (1970), Fanon (1967), and Gordon (1997, 1999). While each, in some form or another, adopts the term *humanism*, I would place their work under the category of posthumanism.

13. Wynter (2006) explains this as being more a product of a kind of blindness to, or a forgetting of, the origins of these claims as putting forth a historical understanding of “man.”

14. For her critique, see Butler (1999). For the full account of my argument, see Chapter 3 of this volume.

15. Thinking queerly in an anti-black world is but one model for the kind of post-normative thinking I am advocating. Maldonado-Torres (2006) suggests one such model when he argues that we need to look past Continentality in conceiving the terrain of philosophy and critical thought today; Knies (2006) suggests another when he advocates a turn to what he calls the post-European sciences. I see these three models as part of the same struggle for full human recognition.

16. Bornstein (1995), Cameron (1996), and Wilchins (1997) are other excellent examples.

CHAPTER 2

1. I will use the term *queer* to signify all three of the meanings of the term *queer* that I outlined above, but to keep the reader from confusion, I will try to be clear when I am doing which. In particular, I will use the term *queer studies*, *queer discourses*, and *queer community* in the first, umbrella sense of the term, to cover all studies about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual issues from a theoretical perspective, while I will use the term *queer theory* only in reference to a specific movement within queer studies that emerged in the 1980s, in response to the works of, among others, Foucault and Butler, and that explicitly aligns itself with all three meanings of the term *queer*.

2. In this way, I am more creating a field of study than describing one in this piece. Had I chosen to describe *African-American lesbian and gay studies* as it is already conceived, this would have been quite a different piece. Thankfully, Lewis and Jane Gordon, the editors of the volume in which an earlier version of this chapter first appeared, encouraged me to delineate the terms of my study myself, and what has emerged is precisely this set of discourses that I herein discuss. Many thanks to the Phenomenology Roundtable for helping me see the creative moment in my work here.

3. I use the term *sexual oppression* to refer to oppression based on one’s sexuality, meaning the sensual, physical, and erotics of the mind/body. I use the term *gender oppression* to refer to oppression based upon one’s perceived or internalized gender identity (man/woman) or gender expression (masculine/feminine). Thus, *sexual* refers to issues of sexuality and *gender* to issues of gender identity and/expression. I use the term *sex* to refer both to the acts of sexuality as well as to the biological distinction between males and females—a distinction that I will call into question later in this chapter.

4. Consider, for instance, Eldridge Cleaver’s and Imamu Baraka’s heterosexist and homophobic stances and consider the rewriting of the Stonewall riots to have been led by white, gay men, when in fact a large contingent of the rioters were people of color and drag queens.

5. Of course, the reason he was not so drawn on was precisely because he primarily did not write about gay black experience and did not present as a prominent figure in gay liberation movements. More recently, Lee Edelman and Robert Reid-Pharr—two important queer theorists—have drawn on his work. I will discuss Reid-Pharr’s work in the last section of this chapter.

6. Here I use the phrase “lesbian and gay” because nearly all of what emerged in the 1970s was explicitly about sexual orientation and argued from a monosexual perspective.

7. Here and in the next paragraph, I mean to reference all three meanings of the term *queer*.

8. Interestingly, in her essay Clarke paints hooks as no less homophobic than Imamu Amiri Baraka. No doubt Clarke would take issue with my claim that hooks is an important positive voice in African-American queer studies today.

9. I doubt hooks would be comfortable with my existentialist language in reference to her work, but it does seem to fit. In reference to her critique of identity politics, hooks herself might cite the influence of the Birmingham school of cultural studies, in which we find a well-developed postcolonial critique of identity in the work of Stuart Hall and his students. For more on the Birmingham school, see the collection of essays edited by Morley and Chen (1996). This collection includes important essays by Hall as well as commentaries on his work by many of his former students, including Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, both of whom have done important work on race and sexuality.

10. I here explain queer theory through a quick overview of Butler’s work, though I also could have done so through an overview of Sedgwick.

11. From this point on, unless otherwise noted, I will use the term *queer* to reference all three meanings of the term, especially the second and third. The phrases *queer studies*, *queer discourses*, and *queer community* will still reference only the first meaning.

12. Harper offers an excellent discussion of Butler, agency, and capital in “The Subversive Edge”: *Paris Is Burning*, Social Critique, and the Limits of Subjective Agency” (1999, 33–59).

13. The phrase “undefined work of freedom” is taken from Michel Foucault’s “What is Enlightenment?” collected in, among other places, Foucault (1997, 126).

14. Thus, even the way I just framed Harper’s contribution runs counter to his theory, for it makes little sense to separate African-American studies from queer theory at all.

15. Gordon says that his work is rooted in existential phenomenology. In this, he is presenting himself as a student of Sartre more than Husserl, though one notices that in his work Gordon is often critical of Sartre from a Husserlian perspective.

16. Of course, poststructuralism makes this a suspect enterprise; if all experience is socially constructed from the get-go, then how can we legitimately turn to experience as a ground? As suspicious as I am of experience as an epistemic ground, however, I don’t think we can simply write it off as nothing more than an effect, the way Butler and Foucault do. It seems to me that Husserl is onto something when he claims that human subjects constitute knowledge of the world. This is worth exploring.

17. Three edited volumes are particularly worthy of mention here. The first two, Susan Stryker’s “The Transgender Issue” (1998) and Kate More and Stephen Whittle’s *Reclaiming Genders* (1999) focus explicitly on trans issues, while the third, Harper, McClintock, Muñoz, and Rosen’s “Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender” (1997) include several important essays exploring trans issues, including José Esteban Muñoz’s excellent “‘The White to be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag.”

18. For more on this, see Chapter 3 of this volume.

CHAPTER 3

1. See, for example, Freud (1905b).

2. This is not to say that second-wave feminism did not produce powerful, important, and real social change. It did. Rather, this is to say that regardless of the social

change that we have so far achieved, we are still radically constricted when we accept the basic rules laid out by the powers we wish to challenge. Accepting the fixity of sex limits our ability to challenge it radically.

3. Of course, there are exceptions to the limitations I outline here. Certain activists, most notably Riki Wilchins, have called on Foucault and Butler to ground and further their work. However, Wilchins herself has done so through a creative misreading of Butler. Wilchins seems to think that Butler understands gender as some sort of free-floating artifice, when in fact Butler is quite clear that gender is the result of a sophisticated set of social and linguistic prescriptions and proscriptions. Moreover, Wilchins seems to think that Butler endorses a gender revolution where the binary is simply overthrown, when in fact Butler endorses a more conservative undermining of the gender binary through parodic repetition, one day making room for a freer range of personal expression. While Foucault's and Butler's critiques motivate Wilchins's critique, what actually motivates Wilchins's positive claims and actions is not to be found in Butler, and can only be marginally ascribed to Foucault—what, for lack of a better term at this point, we might call lived experience.

4. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Foucault is examining a history of Victorian sexuality. It is worth noting that things operated differently in Puritan America and that Foucault's genealogical analysis can only take us so far in understanding the history of sexuality in the United States. Still, Foucault's basic insights about the fact of discourses of sexuality creating the idea of a singular, essential "sex," though probably not his specific findings about what those discourses were and how they operated, most likely do apply.

5. Foucault's study also includes sophisticated analyses of mechanisms of power and discourses of truth as they relate to sex, pleasure, and bodies. I do not explore them here for the sake of focus and brevity, but they certainly merit attention.

6. I am not here examining the why behind the what, but Foucault convincingly shows how the regulation of sexuality was at the same time an ordering of society around the heterosexual, monogamous, state-sanctioned couple, a means of controlling the new industrial worker in the Victorian age. This argument is seen most fully when reading *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, alongside Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

7. This is difficult stuff that she takes us through here. And though I find her case strong, not everyone did. This was one reason she was compelled to write a follow-up book to *Gender Trouble*, the 1993 *Bodies That Matter*, in which she continued her line of argumentation by showing how sex is materialized (or, more simply stated, how we are made to think of it as substantive, ontological, pre-discursive matter) through the cultural effects of power. This book is even more difficult than *Gender Trouble* and requires, at the very least, the reader's having an extensive knowledge of Foucault's analysis of power and Lacan's analysis of sexed subjectivity. As its argument is mostly an extension of the ideas found in *Gender Trouble*, and as I cannot assume the reader of this article has sufficient background in the theories it engages, I will not delve into this book here.

There are other important moves that Butler makes in *Gender Trouble*, including a powerful reading of Freud's theory of identification as well as insightful readings of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and others, ultimately leading to a sophisticated theory of gender performativity and a bold call for anti-identitarian coalitional political organizing. For the purposes of this chapter, it is Butler's claim that sex is the product of a discursive gender regime and her claim that the proper mode of displacement of this dominant paradigm is subversive repetition.

8. I find this choice of title odd for two reasons. First, I can see absolutely no reason for referencing Kierkegaard in this most un-Kierkegaardian book, and an even less Kier-

kegaardian section. Second, as I shall argue, this section actually invokes science against itself in a very positivistic fashion.

9. What motivates this? What forces and structures enact it and regulate it and to what end? Recall that Foucault has already tied the regulation of sexuality to the desire to control bodies in the economic and reproductive realm. Butler convincingly extends Foucault's argument to the regulation of a gender regime that supports heterosexuality through an internalization of the incest taboo.

10. In many ways, the claim that sex is a fiction is more the thesis of *Bodies That Matter* than *Gender Trouble*, but Butler first makes this claim in *Gender Trouble* (though not in those words), and without this claim all the arguments in *Gender Trouble* begin to fall apart. As she writes in the preface to *Bodies That Matter*, this is why she wrote it—to strengthen the rather cursory claims to the fictivity of sex upon which *Gender Trouble* lies.

11. Butler's discussion of drag is sophisticated precisely in her insistence that drag is not a repetition of a prior, true gender, because such a prior true does not exist. Given this, Butler argues that drag "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (1999, 174).

12. The claim that it's not enough is a serious one. So many authors take on other authors in order to make their name known, to mark their territory in the academic world. The pressures of scholarship in the world of academia are deep and poignant. But let me make this clear—I truly do believe that Butler's is the best theory we have yet, and I truly do believe that it is lacking. As a gender and queer theorist, as a feminist, as a philosopher, as a professor, and as an activist, I fundamentally believe both of these things. And it is as all of these things that I offer this critique. Not with the hopes of knocking Butler down a few pegs, but rather with the hopes of pushing us all forward.

13. This is based on the 1999 tenth-anniversary edition pagination.

14. It is worth noting that in recent talks Butler has drawn more on newer work by feminist biologists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling. Butler uses Fausto-Sterling's research into intersexuality as the key to undoing the sex binary in order to better support the arguments she initially laid out in *Gender Trouble*.

15. In all fairness to Butler, she is not saying that now that we have revealed gender identity and sex to be fictions we can ignore them or that they no longer exist. She is insistent that they have a strong hold on us precisely in their entrenchment in our social and linguistic order, in what Lacan calls the Symbolic. Thus she is very careful not to argue that we can or should pretend that we can escape the gender binary simply because we know it to be fake.

16. The application of transcendental phenomenology to gender theory is one I plan to undertake in future articles or perhaps a book.

17. I say "human subject" not to single out human beings as the only creatures who can gain knowledge but to emphasize that our knowledge of the world is precisely that—knowledge.

18. See Husserl's discussion of noesis and noema in his *Ideas* (1998).

19. This is the step that gets misunderstood or simply ignored in most critiques of Husserl. Husserl's focus on beginning with subjectivity does not preclude objectivity, nor does it entail relativism. Rather, Husserl was intent on developing a theory that could serve as a certain foundation for scientific knowledge. What he found is that it is countersensical to begin with anything other than the human subject and that this starting point provides the only way to true transcendental knowledge.

20. I say “constrained by” here, but rather than talk about constraints I should talk about possibilities. The point of the notion of the transcendental ego is as much to elaborate what human subjects can do as what they cannot do.

21. The best explication of Husserl’s theory of the transcendental ego comes in his *Cartesian Meditations* (1999).

22. Thus, one can be biologically female (or labeled as such), identify as a man, and have a feminine form of gender expression/performance. Consider a feminine FTM (female-to-male transexual) or a feminine transman (a differently politically focused term similar to FTM, emphasizing gender over sex) as an example.

23. Rubin’s phenomenology comes more from Sartre than Husserl, and therefore suffers from many of the same mistakes one finds in Sartre, for instance in incorrectly collapsing Husserlian and Aristotelian essence and in improperly dismissing the Husserlian epoch. See Rubin (1998).

24. I hope to write a follow-up article to this chapter in which I explore the work of these theorists and see how they might be married with a Husserlian phenomenological perspective.

CHAPTER 4

1. Phenomenology is herein represented by Emmanuel Levinas. However, I label his work phenomenology with a warning. Levinas himself argued that his work went beyond phenomenology, for it attempts to articulate something that is, by definition, not a phenomenon—that is, something that is not grasped by, made present to, or knowable by an intuitive consciousness but is rather ungraspable, outside of that consciousness, and thus describable only in indirect ways. For the argument that puts Levinas’s work on the other person in a negative relation to phenomenology, see Moran (2000); for the argument that situates Levinas within the phenomenological tradition, see Drabinski (2001).

2. Nissim-Sabat (1986, 1991, 2005) offers a penetrating argument for why psychoanalysis needs phenomenology.

3. In general, I will use the term *subject* instead of the term *ego* when discussing phenomenology, both for clarity’s sake and because it is Levinas’s preferred term. For the classic statement on the transcendental ego, see Husserl (1999).

4. Husserl does make an important distinction between the world itself and the world-in-itself and between things themselves and things-in-themselves. For Kant, the thing-in-itself (the noumenon) is the object that exists outside of consciousness that makes knowledge of it possible, and we can never know the thing-in-itself, only our experiential representation of it (the phenomenon). Husserl argues that Kant goes too far in positing the existence of the thing-in-itself, for if all we can ever know is our experience of the thing, then we have absolutely no knowledge of anything outside of our experience of it. All we can ever know is the phenomenon, not the noumenon, and this knowledge, or lack thereof, includes both descriptive knowledge as well as ontological knowledge. That is, not only can we by definition not know about the thing-in-itself, but also we can by definition not know even if there is (or is not) a thing-in-itself to begin with. Thus, Husserl instructs, when we engage in phenomenological reflection, we must bracket everything we think we know about our object of study, including its very being as an independently existing noumenon. However, Husserl’s critique of Kant is not a lapse into relativism, for Husserl shows that the plane of the phenomenon is an intersubjectively constituted, shared plane. While we have personal experiences, our experiences are, in

their originary instances, pure, and through phenomenological analysis, we can peel back the layers of sedimented prejudice that have clouded over our untainted experience and get back to the phenomenon as pure phenomenon, that is, as the thing itself. In this, Husserl is in many ways the last great Enlightenment universalist thinker, for he refuses to fall into relativism by taking skepticism and showing where and why it stops. See Kant (1965) and Husserl (1970, 1998).

5. In phenomenology, an object is a correlate of consciousness that is intended (meant, understood) as there for everyone. An intrasubjective object is understood to an individual as only there for that individual, though it may be described to others and thus becomes a shared object in addition to being an imagined object, though what is shared is a different kind of object (a description of an internal, imagined personal mental representation) than the original (the internal, imagined mental representation itself). This way of distinguishing is my convention, though the fact of such different kinds of objects is all in Husserl. For more, see Husserl (1973) and (1998).

6. This paragraph is a very simplified and truncated description of phenomenology. It is a far richer enterprise than I can do justice to in this space.

7. I would like to reiterate this definition. By *subjectivity*, Husserl means the activity and structure of the subject. This is important because analytic philosophy juxtaposes subjectivity with objectivity, using the term *subjectivity* to mean relativism. However, for Husserl subjectivity is a transcendental state with transcendental conditions, and is thus anti-relativist. Moreover, and again, phenomenology clearly demonstrates that objectivity is always an achievement of subjectivity—that is, what it is for something to be an object is for it to have been constituted as such (“there for everyone”) by subjects.

8. Husserl became more interested in the transcendental project in his later works. See in particular Husserl (1970, 1999).

9. I have added the emphasis on *only* to drive home the point that Levinas is not offering his theory as a replacement of but rather a supplement to Husserl’s. Levinas does not claim that Husserl was wrong in positing the other ego as an other ego; Levinas simply shows that Husserl missed something that needs to be articulated as well. I have also slightly modified this translation. Standard convention in Levinas scholarship in English has been to translate *autre* as *other* and *autrui* as *Other*, and also to translate *Autre* (when capitalized) as *Other*. I find this convention not only not instructive, but also confusing. *Autrui* is the personal other, representing an other that is not simply not myself, but rather is an other who is a consciousness and whom I recognize as having the quality I call subjectivity. I translate *autrui* as other person to convey this, although technically, not every *autrui* need be a human person. Translating *autrui* as *Other* gets even more problematic when we read Levinas in conversation with psychoanalysis, where Lacan’s *other* and *Other* are also technical terms. For every time I quote Levinas below, I will retranslate *autrui* as *other person*.

10. “This is all quite interesting,” the typical reader might at this point say, “but it sounds a bit speculative to me.” The best answer I can give to this is that what I have just given is a serious simplification of a deep and probing descriptive analysis of the subject-other encounter. This is not to say that what Levinas describes is something any of us will recognize if we look at what happens when we meet another on the street. In fact, most likely nothing like what he describes will occur. Rather, Levinas is describing the deep structure of intersubjectivity, the very mechanism by which true encounters with the other, on the everyday, mundane level, are possible. It is only because “this is how intersubjectivity works” that we are able to have any meaningful encounters with other people, encounters in which we listen to the other with openness and care instead of simply imposing our will upon him. It is only because this structure operates underneath our en-

counters that we are able to encounter at all. In this sense, Levinas's work may not seem to be describing any experience we know; but, indeed, it is describing every encounter we have or can hope to have by explaining the transcendental conditions for encounter itself.

11. Alenka Zupancic (2000) argues that they are, as does Simon Critchley (1999). For the counterargument, see Fryer (2004).

12. Elsewhere I argue that psychoanalysis, particularly Lacan's, can teach Levinas's philosophy a great deal about the nature of desire itself, thus helping to account for why we might wish to take on our originary responsibility in an active way. I will not go into this here, however, as I am organizing this chapter around the theme of responsibility, not desire. For that other discussion, see Fryer (2004).

13. There are many other tasks to the project of bringing together psychoanalysis and phenomenology: explaining how psychoanalytic theory is a theory of the constitution of the unconscious, explaining how psychoanalytic practice is a kind of phenomenological description, and explaining how phenomenology can redirect psychoanalysis back to its humanistic roots. The second task is one I am engaging in currently in an essay I am writing, tentatively titled "Description/Interpretation/Constitution or Psychoanalysis as Phenomenology." The third task is the one that Nissim-Sabat (1986, 1991, 2005) takes up in her work. The first task is one that will have to be taken up another day.

CHAPTER 5

1. This is the title of Levinas (1982). I have elsewhere called Levinas's humanism of the other person a *posthumanism*. For more on this, see Fryer (2004).

2. *Being and Nothingness* (1992) is the major work of Sartre's early career. He developed and revised his theory of the subject throughout his career, culminating in his multipart *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1976).

3. All quotes from *The Hours* (2002) were transcribed from the film by the author.

4. Levinas, like Sartre, develops and revises his earlier work as well, offering in his *Otherwise Than Being* a modification of his earlier theory of the subject (Levinas 1991).

5. Of course, Husserl does not explicate a theory of ethical obligation, nor does he offer a description of the difficulty of freedom, and so Sartre and Levinas still stand as the two main thinkers through whose theories we can explore *The Hours*. Still, Husserl does help round out the picture a bit more, giving our subjects a world to live in.

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