

# **CROSSING SPACES, TRAVERSING STYLES: A TRANSFEMINIST MOBILIZATION OF MERLEAU-PONTY**

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In an important and productive way, trans theories queer feminist discourses. Unlike many other marginalized identities which have variously been subjected to the ‘additive’ model of inclusion (Spelman, 1998) in feminist discourses—wherein the pulls of differing identity-allegiances pileup in a seemingly endless chain of signifiers: lesbian, dis/abled, working-class, bi-racial, etc.—trans perspectives enable a particular problematizing of the category of gender upon which inclusion in feminist theories have often been legitimated. By opening up feminist thinking to its own assumptions regarding sex and gender (the very thing feminism has always sought to disclose), trans theories not only uncover the concealed epistemological regimes of many feminist discourses but also enact an intervention that queers these discourses. It is through this queering that a tumultuous and new space for critical engagement is opened up: transfeminism. This does not mean that the ‘trans’ in transfeminism should be understood as a mere modification of feminism. At the precipice of an ‘undoing and reinvestment in gender,’<sup>1</sup> if trans indicates a proliferation of crossings, it may also simultaneously indicate a series of crossings-out. Transfeminism neither stills the troubled waters of sex and gender back into an identitarian framework, nor reduces (so-called) gender variant experience to the constitutive abjected other whose ‘failure’ to perform gender coherence is nonetheless helpful in illuminating its constructed nature for all. Rather, transfeminism develops out of this productive tension and can be understood as an open, dynamic, porous, and promiscuous site of thinking which marks the revivification of the initial impetus of feminism as the desire to respond to the specific suffering of marginalized subjects. These approaches participate in the contingency of their subject matter and accept this turmoil as their point of departure; they take trouble seriously. Such perspectives must not only include the deconstruction, disruption, queering, and subversion of gender, but also the figuring and re-configuring, or *trans*-ing of feminist theory and praxis in ways which are sensitive to the multiple registers of experience and its theorization. By necessity, these labours return gender and sex to their imbrication in structures of race, class, ability, etc., at the same time as crossing-over (and possibility out) the binary of sex/gender, enacting “a conceptual overturning of the debates concerning equality/difference, justice/recognition, and essentialism/constructivism in favor of debates concerning the transversal production of differences” (Beatriz Preciado, as quoted in Corsani, 2007, 135).

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, trans identification and/or trans expression in its multiple forms, has ‘troubled’ and recast the very ways in which we think about sex and gender (and the concomitant binaries of nature/culture, body/mind, woman/man, etc.) as both constituted and constituting. Invoking Butler, A. Finn Enke states, “Gender may trouble every imaginable social relation and fuel every imaginable social hierarchy; it may also threaten to undo itself and us with it, even as gender scholars simultaneously practice, undo, and re-invest in gender” (Enke, 2012, 1).



In what follows, I suggest transfeminism is a modality of interrogation, which assumes the peril of its own work and risks undermining the legitimacy of its own perspective if it loses its originary response to the actuality of lives as they are lived, and not just as they are theorized. As such, the following work acknowledges the danger of erasing the specificity of trans-situated experience for theoretical use and argues that any theory of sexuality, gender or identity, which attempts to flatten out differing experiences into a smooth surface will be theoretically and politically impoverished. Marked by a heterogeneity as its ground, this homogenization is precisely what transfeminism allows us to resist.

In an effort to contribute to the possibilities of transfeminist theorization, the following paper proposes a consideration of gender in terms of style. I propose that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's articulation of style locates a space for the possibility of subjectivity without reducing that space to a self-identical subject and without disenfranchising the singularity of embodied experience. I distinguish this account from Judith Butler's well-known performative deployment of gender as a "*stylized repetition of acts*," (1988, 519; 1999, 179) and argue that Butler's theory of gender performativity relies upon an unelaborated phenomenological notion of 'sedimentation,' and thus depends upon an account of embodiment and subjectivity which it expressly denies. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's claim that every form of being expresses a *style of being* (1997, 182/139)<sup>2</sup> indicates a "sensible spatial" experienced in a temporal horizon and can begin to concretize a way of thinking about gender in terms of style which is ontologically 'trans' at its core.

## The underdeveloped theme of sedimentation in Butler's theory of performativity

Judith Butler's theory of performativity continues to provoke, queer and vitalize debates about identity and the question of sex and gender. Her notion of performativity, which finds gender as an enacting (not, for the most part, voluntarily) of ontologically contingent social scripts, is founded upon an understanding of the thorough saturation of materiality—even the claim to materiality itself—with discursivity. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Butler suggests that sex is a 'regulatory ideal' which obliges its own production—and reproduction—in materialization through the continual reiteration of its norms. Butler suggests that if sex or gender were 'natural' (a given 'fact of the matter' or pre-discursive availability), then we would not need the compulsory practices which require our continual participation in order to solidify sex and gender. For her, identity, and hence what we consider gender, is "instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*." (1988, 519; 1999, 179). She contrasts this account with the "expressive model" (1999, 173) which holds that sexuality reveals the identity beneath or behind its actions. The 'expressive model' reflects a mistake of attribution such that we mistakenly attribute a unified agent beneath actions which we call a 'subject,' rather than consider that the subject is not the cause, but the effect of these repetitions as they congeal in their repetition over time (1993, 9). This congealment operates as a constraint for future action and creates an illusion of the fixity of sex, gender, and the subject, that becomes naturalized, repeated and hence re-stabilized in discourse. Moreover, this stabilization is made possible because the normative identifications which produce the subject are shored-up by a foreclosure of abjected others. Concomitant to the production of this naturalized discourse is an essentializing discourse of sex roles which enforce heterosexuality by

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<sup>2</sup> In all cases where a French text is cited, French pagination will be followed by English pagination.



consigning sexuality to the service of reproductive ends.<sup>3</sup> That we must continually re-enact gender also means that we can ‘fail’ to enact gender. This allows for the possibility of changing discourse with regard to gender and identity; in other words, this potential to fail to perform gender indicates the possibility of ‘undoing gender’ (Butler, 2004).

While Butler’s philosophy is invaluable in exposing the epistemological and disciplinary deployment of gender, she nevertheless leaves trans(gendered) experiences unaccounted for except as sites of rupture (the failure of ‘successful’ repetition of gender norms) which help expose the contingency of gender or indicate its limits. As such, some have protested that Butler and queer theory have initiated the possibility for radicalizing accounts of gender only to undermine such accounts by erasing embodiment. For Jay Prosser, this elision has meant a collapsing of the transsexual subject into the transgendered subject without an account of the experiential difference which marks them (1998, 6). Viviane Namaste argues that the taking up of transsexual and transgendered people in the academic production of knowledge has contributed to an ‘invisibilizing’ of the actuality of trans lives (2000). Such an assumption or dismissal of lived experience is a subsumption which speaks to the way in which academics violate transgendered and transsexual subjects in a kind of “epistemic violence” (Namaste, 2009). This violation has occurred by making assumptions about gender variance (including the assumption that transgendered and transsexual people are the apotheosis of subjects who suffer because of their sex or gender), rather than attending to the specificity of experience as it is situated, lived and undergone. For Namaste, this entails finding ways to enable trans persons to actually participate in the production of knowledge about trans experiences. Such critiques of the academic uptake of trans lives are crucial and point to a deeper marginalization of trans persons as they become fodder for theoretical imaginaries, which often erase the complexity and diversity of trans experience.

Such critiques also rightly challenge Butler’s inability to account for the nature of embodied experience. Butler certainly does not deny the materiality of the body—at times the ‘body’ is understood to be a discursive mobilization for her. According to Butler, the materialization of bodies is a reiterative process rendered through the normative, discursive operations of power, repeated in a “ritualized production” (1993, 95) that temporalizes the subject. Yet, because of her commitment to the overarching claim which discursivity has on us when Butler attempts to account for gender variance it must always be from the perspective of an interruption in normativity (as a failure to fully perform one’s role or as the appearance of the illegibility of an abjected other) rather than in terms of the experience of embodiment (or even a consideration of such a perspective). Suggesting that there is a material nature to the body, or suggesting that the body is not reducible to language, is not the same as accounting for embodiment. Perhaps this is why she tells us that, “[e]very time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language” (2001, 198). In this way, “[t]he Butlerian body is merely a residue, a discursive product, just as sex and gender are” (Bourcier, 2012, 236).

This under-theorized account of the body also leads Butler to reduce materiality to a position of unceasing passivity. Discourse stamps out *human* subjects who only experience their bodies through its mediation (even if it is a ‘dynamic’ experience)—and yet, such a mediation, in turn, leads only to the mutability of discourse and not the bodies it carves out. Thus, Butler assumes an ahistorical account of the body as the ground for the historical work of discourse. Such a position reveals the conflation of “an ontogenetic

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<sup>3</sup> Butler is following Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* here.



condition of possibility with an empirical cause,” not to mention that it results in “anthropologism” (Cheah, 1996, 119).

But while Butler may elide embodiment, her theory of performativity nevertheless requires its presumption. In particular, her notion of performativity depends upon a phenomenological assumption of sedimentation which enables the ‘stylized acts’ that constitute gender to emerge and repeat. The importance of sedimentation in Butler’s thought has also been noted, though not critically examined, by others. For instance, in her 2006 work, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed uncritically appeals to Butler’s approbation of phenomenology with particular reference to sedimentation, “For Judith Butler, it is precisely how phenomenology exposes the ‘sedimentation’ of history in the repetition of bodily action, that makes it a useful resource for feminism” (56). What is at issue here is the conceptual labour that the notion of sedimentation provides Butler’s theory; importing, I claim, an implicit account of an embodied subject that is not simply the material site of discursivity but its very *ground* and possibility.<sup>4</sup>

Butler’s key claim that gender “is an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*” (1988, 519) is theoretically supported by the qualifying notion that these acts *sediment* over time to produce corporeal styles (1988, 524; 1999, 179; 1993, 244-45; 1997, 36; 2004, 44). In order for stylized acts to be repeated, and hence do the work of ‘stylizing’ gender, there must be a locus from which such a repetition is generated—and *to which*—such repetitions are enacting stylization. For Butler, sedimentation fulfills this function in providing the temporal coherence necessary to secure repetition. As such, sedimentation secures the constructs of discourse as the “constitutive constraint[s]” (1993, xi) which delimit acts into stylized articulation. But what, or where, is sedimentation and *how* does it happen? At times, Butler suggests that identity is an effect of the stylized repetition of acts (1988, 524) and yet, at other times she claims that identity is an effect of sedimentation (1993, 244-245). This equivocation may account for how she variously describes the site of the failure of gender performance: oscillating between the misfiring or inadequacy of the performative act itself, and the failure of sedimentation (1997, 49). Likewise, on the one hand, Butler claims that repeated acts get sedimented, and, on the other hand, that sedimentation *is an act* (1993, 244). If identity is an effect of the sedimentation that these repetitions enable and reproduce, it would seem that as well as an account of the performativity of acts, we require an explanation of how the sedimentation of those acts is possible. To suggest sedimentation is an act of sedimenting begs the question as to what this sedimenting is, and what is being sedimented. If we read sedimentation as an inscription of discursivity on the body, which sculpts that body into a gender (for instance) through the stylized repetition of acts, we would still require an account of how this discursivity marks or occasions the materialization it realizes in style. Beyond the dispersal of “surface significations” (1999, 177), Butler’s use of sedimentation activates and depends upon phenomenological resonances that it implicitly deploys. Perhaps this is of no surprise given that her early work directly engages the phenomenological tradition (1986; 1988). As a “repetition that congeals” (1997, 36), sedimentation not only enables temporal coherence but it also accounts for variation in intensity.

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<sup>4</sup> I note that Butler does note Merleau-Ponty’s notion of sedimentation in passing during her critique of Pierre Bourdieu in her *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative*, New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 155. She suggests that Bourdieu’s notion of the bodily *habitus* “has strong echoes of Merleau-Ponty on the sedimented or habituated ‘knowingness’ of the body.” However, here she conflates sedimentation with habit, and though it is the case that habit is possible because of sedimentation, this does not mean it can thusly be reduced to habituation. Indeed, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* as read by Butler is only possible because there is a more primordial process of sedimentation in process.



It is unclear if Butler's theory of performative acts, or its later extension to citationality, can maintain cogency without importing this sense of sedimentation as ground (even if it is the ground of repetition). It may be that Butler's thought conflates or obfuscates the relationship of sedimentation and acts because, in reducing the body to passivity, she cannot account for *how* the body could be 'mattered' by these discourses. In this way performativity fails to theorize the body in its concreteness.

Although Butler's theory of performativity avoids essentializing sex or gender, it does so only by avoiding questions concerning the specificity of the body. Since her account posits materiality as fundamental passivity, the *difference* in different bodies is reduced to trying to account for failures in utterances, performances and citations. She reinscribes bodies into a fundamental unintelligibility. This may be why her theory cannot adequately address any difference *in kind* between cultural responses to drag queens and to transsexual bodies. Ethically, politically and theoretically we must account for this difference and, I suggest, that an articulated theory of sedimentation can do just this—obviating the performative claim of gender which Butler offers us.

## Sedimentation and institution in the work of Merleau-Ponty

In contrast to Butler's theory of gender performativity, I propose thinking about gender in terms of certain conceptual resources in the thought of Merleau-Ponty.<sup>5</sup> In this way, I understand transfeminist work to be strongly informed by the feminist tradition of traversing the canon in order to uncover, de-centre and reconfigure forms of thinking (from which it has nonetheless been excluded.) Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can be fertile ground for transfeminist theorizing because it begins in an understanding of the sensible spatial as the concrete and temporal situatedness of experience given to us through perception.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenological sense of perception, possible only because we are embodied, indicates the shape of a subjectivity that is never closed in on itself because it is always changing, partial, in transit(ion), and experienced in terms of its own history; a history that is always already caught up in the cultural, historical and discursive significations in which it finds itself but which it is nevertheless also in the process of making. Unlike the theory of performativity, Merleau-Ponty's comprehensive explication of sedimentation (and its institution) does not reduce the corporeal to a passive materiality but rather indicates that meaning is layering corporeality, and corporeality is already a way of meaning. Transposing Merleau-Ponty's discussion of style (from his theory of language, and his analysis of the painterly work), I argue that style indicates an ontological emergence of gender without an essentialist reduction. Such an ontology of style gives us an account of the way in which particular styles (such as what we come to see as sexes and genders) arise in relation to the horizontal possibilities available to us only because we are spatio-temporal beings, embodied, singular, and always shaped by the others of our history. This description of style indicates the multiplicity of bodily experience and reveals how our embodied experience of sex and of gender is generated out of the possibilities and limitations of situated experience: material, phantasmatic, discursive and historical.

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<sup>5</sup> I distinguish the following work from Sara Ahmed's, *Queering Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) in which she offers an important reading against the tradition which opens up ways of thinking a queer phenomenology. In fact, although Ahmed points out the need for this turn to sedimentation, given her aim in this text she does not develop it. Her focus, which is orientation, would already assume sedimentation and its institution.

<sup>6</sup> Against poststructuralist critiques of notions of experience, I follow Silvia Stoller's argument that phenomenology is not guilty of the "charge of epistemological foundationalism" (2009, p. 709)



Without reinscribing the binaries of materiality/ideality, subject/object or even self/other, phenomenology begins in experience and uncovers the complexity of perception, which is always spatially and temporally situated by the distinctive sensibility of lived experience. Although corporeality is central to its theory, phenomenology does not naturalize the subject, nor does it leave the sensible as the unintelligible, or a source of plenitude, but rather takes the singularity of experience as the continual starting point of its investigation and theorization. In salvaging perception from the reductive positivism of scientific discourses which amputate it from experience, phenomenology restores perception to itself. When we attend to experience as we perceive it, rather than through our assumptions about experience, perception opens up the possibility for uncovering the nature of experience we assume is mundane or 'given.' This focus of perception reveals its rootedness in a particular spatio-temporal horizon which both constrains and locates its position. It discloses an intentional structure which means that my attention is always directed toward one area in the field of perception such that other possible perceptions fall away from my attention. Experiential disjuncts uncover the peculiar nature of perception as ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty famously illustrates this fundamental ambiguity in terms of the blind spot of vision (I can never see the place from which my vision arises) as well as the gap between the touching-touched.<sup>7</sup> When I grasp my hands together I can either focus on the feeling of my hand engaged in the act of touching or attend to the experience of being touched. Between being touched and touching there is a gap that I cannot cover over; as I come up against this gap I am forced into a divergence (*écart*) of experiencing either being touched or touching. I may be able to temporally oscillate my perception, but I cannot experience the touching-touched in simultaneity, "the reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last minute" (1997, 24/9). Since without a place from which my retinas can be positioned, I would not be able to see, and since the gap between the touching-touched enables me to be both a perceiver and one who is perceived, this ambiguity is not a limitation of my perception but the very possibility of perception as such. In this way, Merleau-Ponty tells us that ambiguity is ontological: "ambiguity is the essence of human existence" (1962, 197/169). This phenomenological exemplar of ambiguity expresses an (indirect) ontology of the dehiscence, which "opens my body in two" (1997, 162/123) at the same time as it uncovers a fundamental reciprocity, or intertwining (*entrelacement*), between the touching-touched relation.<sup>8</sup>

This reciprocity is not a correlative symmetry or a point-to-point correspondence between the touching-touched or sensing-sensed, but a dynamic of "enjambment or encroachment" (1964a, 282/173). The depth of this encroachment and divergence—the intertwining and chiasm, which Merleau-Ponty calls 'flesh' (*chair*)—thoroughly undermines any notion of a self-identical subject and points to an anonymous, pre-personal generality of perception. My body shares the carnality of the world. With this notion of generality, Merleau-Ponty is attempting to specify the emergence of experience prior to its reflection. If he is to maintain the ontological ambiguity of perception then he cannot suggest that ambiguity only extends to the clear-cut edges of the subject. Such a claim would commit the positing of something prior to, or outside of, the experience which founds subjectivity. In turn, this generality, this pulsating of being in perception that I share with the world because I am of the world, can only ever be realized in its incarnation, and hence, in its individuality.

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<sup>7</sup> "I know very well that I will never see my eyes directly and that, even in a mirror, I cannot grasp their movement and their living expression. For me, my retinas are an absolute unknowable" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 230/213).

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of the present project, I position my reading of Merleau-Ponty in terms of his final ontology without emphasizing the conceptual differences between his earlier and later work.



It is important to emphasize the radical nature of the claim Merleau-Ponty is making with his account of generality as it helps to articulate the notion of style. Generality is not an abstraction, or a collection of individuals: it is a dimension of experience that is always embedded in the history of its perception, which, as we have seen, always arises in a temporal-spatial locus with particular horizontal structures. This concrete being-in-the-world is an “absolute individual and...absolutely general” (1962, 512/448). The sensible of which I am a part always precedes me. Such a structure indicates a meaning beyond me which is not constituted by me, but nevertheless in which I find myself, and through which, I specify myself. This generality (that Merleau-Ponty will later call the ‘flesh’ and the ‘elemental,’ (1997, 182/139)) entails an account of an anonymity articulated as intersubjectivity at the interstices of inter-corporeality. To concretize this thought, Merleau-Ponty offers a consideration of child development and traces the formation of subjectivity from the basic condition of general transitivity or syncretic sociability. He is clear that his appeal to psychology is not a return to positivism but an ontological explication (1997, 228/176), which concretizes generality.

Transitivity is the absence of an experiential division (2010a, 425) in early childhood experience between the self (who is only now discovering its individuality) and others. For example, an infant who does not yet possess an awareness of this distinction between herself and others may cry out in pain when her sibling is spanked or falls. Transitivity is an inconsistent circuit between self and others “wherein the other’s intentions somehow play across my body while my intentions play across his” (1960, 33/119).<sup>9</sup> This circuit of intention shapes the corporeal schema (schéma corporel) or body schema, as the implicatory structure which enables me to realize my spatio-temporal location in terms of a lived and embodied situation; as an entire complex of possibility which also entails an implicit understanding of my body such that “[o]ur body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space” (1964b, 5).

Developing insights on the body schema in relation to psychoanalytic and phenomenological work on the bodily ego, Gayle Salamon’s ground-breaking transfeminist work, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010), has interrogated the possibility that the implicit “felt sense” of the body can be psychically invested in ways which diverge from how one finds their morphology, and can be differently invested and experienced over time. My claim here, is that along with the ambiguity of perception, the primordial phenomenon of transitivity contributes to the plasticity of the corporeal schema and helps us grasp the way in which Merleau-Ponty reconfigures the idea of generality in its concreteness.

The openness of early childhood enables a transitivity of schemas (there can be multiple schemas), which will allow the developing child to articulate herself as located and belonging to a world (this idea of world is multiple: spatial, temporal, cultural, etc.). Again, a corporeal schema is not a sketch of a bodily state but is the schema of all possible activity. If I have taken my first step as a child toward the supportive arms of my mother, the possibility of taking other steps becomes available to me. However, in my mother’s absence those same possibilities may be less available to me. Although the corporeal schema includes developmental maturity it is not reducible to it since my possibilities are circumscribed by the situation in which I find myself. As such, the corporeal schema is the organization of possibility, not its totalization.

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<sup>9</sup> Although the English version of this essay appears in *The Primacy of Perception* cited above, I will hereafter cite this particular essay in that book parenthetically by its original French publication date, 1960. There were two French versions of the “The Child’s Relations with Others” published. I will cite the French version that corresponds to the published English version in *The Primacy of Perception* - with the French pagination followed by the English pagination.



The mapping of the boundaries between the self and other is realized in the transitive field as the capacity for a mimetic response to others which is “an opening to generality: I live the offered behaviors as my own, and I see them animated by a corporal schema” (2003, 287/225). The transitivity is not a simple passivity wherein the schemas of the others imprint me. As a perceptual being, I am already directed, experiencing both the ambiguity as well as the specificity of my own perceptions and so this mapping of the schema contains the gaps of its own particular configuration. In an activity of mimesis, I apprehend schemas, “my corporality becomes a comprehending power of their corporality” (1973, 42). Hence, this mimetic transference triggers both a mimesis and a divergence of the generality as I tacitly realize other schemas through my own corporeal schema. The “entire placement [mise en place] of the corporeal schema is at the same time a placing of the perception of others” (1960, 39/123). As such, perception is already intersubjective and generality is always inscribed in my individuality.<sup>10</sup> This is why “the self is perverse, polymorphic, imaginary” (2010b, 241/184). We do not need a separate moment to explain the movement from the formation of the subject to its intersubjective participation in constituting the other, “he is already there” (1997, 270/221). (For this reason, Merleau-Ponty will move away from the phenomenological language of constitution in his later writings.) Moreover, this other is not an alterity which constitutes me from its exteriority but a reversibility of the flesh. It is an openness to generality, which will always be located, always entail ambiguity, and always be realized in a situated and incomplete grasp of other perspectives, other schemas, in a process that is never finished (1960, 33/119). For example, “[t]o learn to see colours is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body: it is to enrich and recast the corporeal schema” (1962, 179/153, translation altered). This enriching and recasting is possible because transitivity, which may be most intense in childhood, is not overcome or surpassed in maturity but remains a structural feature of our being by way of generality (1997, 317/ 269). Again, this generality is not an abstraction or a subsuming of individuals, it is the aspect of my individuality as it realizes itself through its inter-corporeality. As the indication of the continual potential for reshaping of our schema (by way of a continual engagement with others), Merleau-Ponty tells us that generality is a ‘porosity,’ ‘pregnancy’ (193/149) and a style, and as such “generality...already ‘diffuses itself along the articulations of the aesthesiological body’” (Fóti quoting Merleau-Ponty, 2009, 188).

In order to understand this notion of style in terms of generality realized in the individual, it must be clarified from a notion of generality as the ‘natural’ structures of human experience. For Merleau-Ponty, although we can proceed through stages of what we have labelled ‘development,’ there is nothing ‘natural’ about the ways in which our corporeality will come to have meaning. Thus, there is no ‘natural’ developmental stage of a three-year old. This would imply a generality *outside* of individuality. Rather, Merleau-Ponty tells us, there is the “existence of collective configurations and possible behaviors that a particular moment gives an individual” (2010a, 230). Likewise, in one of his many discussions of Freud, Merleau-Ponty complains that the list of the psychoanalytic stages of development (from oral to genital) does not give us insight into our relationships with others (including what we call ‘nature’), but rather provides us with a picture of a particular cultural type or *style* of being. He tells us that Oedipalization, for instance, is just one of many “different crystallizations of an initial polymorphism of the body as vehicle of being-in-the-world” (1964a, 163/101). Indeed, all crystallizations are “provisional” (2007, 225), or partial, since, in good

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<sup>10</sup> Although I am using the language of intersubjectivity here, arguably Merleau-Ponty’s later work on the flesh overcomes intersubjectivity while still accounting for his earlier phenomenological insights. For ours purposes, the point here is that I am inscribed by the other of my perception.



phenomenological fashion, they are *situated* articulations subject to the ambiguity of perception, and the fecundity of the spatial-temporal horizons of possibility which are always changing. To try to strip down what is ‘essential’ from its appearance is to want something to appear all naked whereas it is always clothed” (1997, 149/112).

The polymorphism of the body should not be understood as a naturalized plenitude or pre-cultural state upon which discourse can stamp out subjectivity. The body is always arriving with its own spontaneity, ambiguity and history as its specificity is spatio-temporally located. This implication of our corporeal schema is possible because of the way in which our experience emerges in relation to our own history (which always includes the history of others.) As such, the malleability of our schemas is conditioned by its history of previous changes—which is not a foregone determination, but a continual implicatory structuring of my possibilities. My past is not available to me through a repetition of my entire history of perceptions *as* perceptions, but as a sedimentation of meaning which is always being reactivated in perceptual experience and re-sedimented. In turn, these possibilities indicate the ways in which my past experiences have become sedimented in action and in expression which takes up the thread of this possibility available to us in sedimentation and re-sediments. As such, the ‘enriching’ and ‘recasting’ of a schema is not a process akin to a recording device that passively captures each moment of my life as a series of flat images that are successively framed. Meaning is qualitatively and variously localized in corporeal affectivity with varying degrees of intensity and repetition, and is always generated out of, and in relation to, the style of being from which it emerges. What is an ‘emotionally’ charged moment for one person, (or even between different moments of one person’s life), is related to what becomes sedimented for them. This sedimentation occurs in relation to an already instituted meaning—institution. Here, Merleau-Ponty reinvigorates Husserl’s notion of *Stiftung* (institution) as the way in which culture, language, convention, history, etc., can be given to us in generality. While Merleau-Ponty accounts for the sedimentation of meaning in the individual, he must also consider how meaning is founded in its generality. Sedimentation reveals the specific way in which meaning comes to be an en-framing of individual possibility but it does not account for the way in which the available meanings, which activate, and re-activate, and become possible for sedimentation. For this, the generality of institution is in reciprocity with sedimentation as a continual opening up of possibilities for us. (Of course, this opening up of possibilities also occurs as the closing down of other possibilities). The activation of what is sedimented is not arbitrary but, is itself reactivated and discovered in expression. Institution as the generality of experience—such as I experience in language and culture, makes a claim on me and solicits me to discover myself, and my possibility for action, in particular ways. As engaged in the generality of my experience, this demand is inscribed in my individuality: “the instituted exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge” (2010b, 123-24/76). Merleau-Ponty states, “[w]hat we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or history—or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future” (1970, 40-41)

Crucially, if the term sedimentation is meant to imply depth, it is not meant to imply a ‘residue’ or a series of graduated deposits. Beyond a recalcitrant or static space, sedimentation is the spatial-temporal dynamism of possibilities generated in the multiple chiasms of experience, unfolding in meaning formation, which “is neither above nor beneath the appearances, but at their joints; it is the tie that secretly connects an



experience to its variants” (1997, 153/116). As “the call to follow, the demand of the future” (2010b, 124/77), sedimentation is the past as a possibility to be realized in the present; it outlines the possibilities of action, the possibilities of my expression. But, as such, it is also a delimitation of possible action and hence of possible meaning. This call to follow is beseeched out of my very being. My history is not a chronology with an index of experiences, but a dynamic re-inscribing-inscription written in intensities through my body, pressing-up against the possibility of expression. Temporality emerges from, and is folded into, the sensible spatial—continually initiating meaning as it is lived (and re-lived). What is past is not past-by, but becomes the ever-present latent sedimentation ready to be activated as expression. In arising from that which was previously sedimented, sedimentation is not a universal well-spring of *any* possible meaning, but rather a demand to take up a particular attitude that has been instituted (2010a, 99). As a ‘call to follow,’ this “certain style or shape of experience” (1962, 222/191) is the unfolding of that demand toward the future as well as the opening up of the possibility to meet that call to follow in a different way, which, in turn, illuminates other possibilities to sediment a different set of possibilities. Individuals always have the sedimentation of their life histories intertwined with an historical sedimentation of institution, “[t]hus the instituted exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to the one selfsame world” (2010b, 122/76). Institution as a founding which is instituted in the generality of formations, can be disclosed as a *style of being* (1997, 182/139).

## Towards an ontology of style

For Merleau-Ponty, style is not an individual instance but takes the form of a generality. Any reference to an individual’s style is always a reference to a generality regarding that individual. Style is never entirely available for us to absolutely specify because it implies a generality which always exceeds expression. Hence, Merleau-Ponty tells us that to speak of style is always to refer obliquely, or laterally (2010a, 20). As a movement of generality it is not a collection of individual instances or an abstraction of a quality which appears. No matter how extensive a list, or how detailed a description one could offer, there could be no words which could convey, for example, the style of Cezanne—only the actual perception of a Cezanne painting could disclose his style. Style is a dimension of experience *as it appears*, which always invokes the sensible from which it arose. It is the apprehension of the “elusive and elliptical” (1997, 197/152) which cannot be directly signified but which makes “all signification possible” (1969, 81/58). For instance, I can immediately grasp the gait or gestures of a friend without reflection; I recognize the poem of a favorite poet despite the fact I have never read it before because I grasp its ‘style.’ Yet, it is precisely the immediacy of style that can obscure its debt to perception. Merleau-Ponty states,

“Style as preconceptual generality—the generality of the ‘axis’ which is preobjective and creates the *reality* of the world...because there is a transtemporality which is not that of the *ideal* but that of the deepest wound, incurable...bites into me, and what I bite into through my body.”  
(1969, 63/44-45)

Here Merleau-Ponty articulates the depth of style. Generality is only possible because of our transtemporality (he also speaks elsewhere of our concomitant transspatiality (2003, 233/176)). Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the generality made possible by transtemporality is *not ideal* since the spatio-temporal locality of



experience is *not a singular happening* but a continual transversal of our perceptual experiences as they are reactivated from what is sedimented and arise as the shape, or style, of our experience, hence “perception *already* stylizes” (1969, 83/59, emphasis added). We translate and transpose our perceptual histories as the ground from which the contours of our experience emerges. This is why style, which ‘creates the reality of the world,’ is our deepest wound and why it is ‘incurable.’ This incurability is the generality which becomes expressed as the institution which has proceeded me and which always exceeds me. Yet, this is not a radical passivity since I also ‘bite into’ this generality of perception which shapes the world. As I take up this tradition of what has been instituted, I also diverge from it. In my divergence, I create a sedimentation of new possibilities for perception. Merleau-Ponty explains this in terms of the institution of language: While I am carved out by a language through which, and in which, I already find myself, my taking up of that tradition in expressions of it (i.e., speech) also constitutes a *divergence* from that institution. Invoking Maulraux, Merleau-Ponty terms this a “coherent deformation” (1964a, 149/91). This deformation or divergence, in turn, makes new forms of what can be sedimented as institution possible.<sup>11</sup> “[E]very deviation of his body in relation to the norm [what is instituted] induces an interdependent entourage [a following or train of possibilities] specifically from this difference” (2010b, 254/195).

It is only within the context of his transfiguration of perception in ontological terms, i.e., the realization that the ontological is phenomenologically uncovered (even if only obliquely), that we can begin to understand the meaning of this non-substantial ontology of style. Following Véronique Fóti, this sense of ontology is a ‘non-positive ontology’ (2009, 183). In Merleau-Ponty’s words,

“In short, there is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and geography. Not that it is *confined* there and inaccessible for the others, but because, like that of nature, the space or time of culture is not surveyable from above.” (1997, 152/115)

Merleau-Ponty points to an ontology which does not posit essences or take a view from above and as such (to borrow a term from Husserl) is always a regional ontology. Merleau-Ponty indicates a thinking from within (specific places, times, bodies) which abandons any overarching universal structure of meaning in order to show how—from specificity—multiplicity arises. This is why for Merleau-Ponty “[t]he originating is not of one sole type...the originating breaks up” (2007, 163/124). This differentiation and noncoincidence at the ontological level is what makes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of multiplicity so critical for transfeminist thinking. Rather than an emptied out abstraction of exteriority, divergence (read through ambiguity, generality, and sedimentation) emerges located and incarnate. The continual emergence of sense is lateral, “a time and a space that exist by piling up, by proliferation, by encroachment, by promiscuity...generativity and generality” (2007, 152-153/115). In this way, the source of all sense [*sens*] happens generationally where that source is only ever incarnate.

The radical nature of Merleau-Ponty should not be underestimated here. Even structures which are believed to transcend differences, such as the universal structure of the family, actually end up re-inscribing naturalistic assumptions about how life *should* be organized and lived. This is why he will maintain that even the “essences of kinship are styles of existence” (2010b, 121/74-75). Our naturalization of the familial structure is a style which includes the history of sedimentation as the history of what is possible for

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<sup>11</sup> For a rich account of the relationship between art and language in Merleau-Ponty see R. Kaushik, *Art Language and Figure in Merleau-Ponty*, (2013).



perception. Similarly, “[t]he human body is the stage on which expressions appear; it is *the style that creates the perception of race*” (2010a, 445, emphasis added). Style is a way of grasping what appears and, as such, it has a history and is the shape of our generality. Perception stylizes because our body is already shaped by the transitivity of the perceptual which is sedimented and instituted in our specificity. This apprehension of gendered styles is only possible on the basis of a generality of style towards genderization. As a generality realized in the individual it is perceptual and as an account which takes seriously the way in which generality and individuality both unfold possibility, Merleau-Ponty’s thought is also political in the most profound way.<sup>12</sup> When I pick up the phone and hear a voice *I perceive* that voice in terms of a style of gender; an activation sedimented as possibilities for meaningful experience which arise in that very perception. By the same token, social questions surrounding the ‘invisibility’ of trans people, are invisibilized only because perception has circumscribed this binary of gender identity. However, since that very process of sedimentation is located in a specific and singular experience, with its own corporeal dynamic arising from its unique historical encounter with the world as marked by ambiguity, expression arises as a divergence which opens up other possibilities. It is important to note that this account in no way denies a generality which may be coercive and oppressive. Instead it acknowledges that hate, like love, sediments and reactivates, instituting varying possibilities. Indeed, such an account provides an understanding of the intransigence of oppression from its realization *in embodiment*.

This ontology of style helps us to understand how gender can be given as a sedimentation received through culture and place, as well as show us how sedimentation can be re-activated along axes of different possibilities that arise from within the specificity of individual experience. How one body experiences the matrices of individuality and generality (culture, for example) may not be the same for all. Deepening our understanding of style also enables a situating of Butler’s insights on gender performativity, such that the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ can be read as *techniques* of style which indicate the deeper ontological structure of style made possible by sedimentation and institution. This understanding of style can account for the arising of other styles and articulations of gender and being that can emerge. Such an account of gender as style also implicates it in the very location, history and bod(ies) from which it arises. By returning us to this robust sense of the perceptual, we can resist articulations which reduce the complexity of the emergence of gender in other places and times. For instance, gender identification may become more or less rigidified depending on class structures. Indeed, this notion of style problematizes assumptions made about the nature of gender in many contexts, for example, “[t]he Western term transgender assumes a gender binary...sex reassignment refers to changing sexes as understood in the West” (Ocha, 2012, 563).

## Multiplicity and interrogation

Merleau-Ponty’s generality of style moves us towards a lateral thinking that avoids the dangers of an essentializing which hierarchizes according to a given definition of what counts as a authentic subject (e.g. ‘real’ woman). This thinking also captures the specificity of embodied experience on its own terms and not simply as an assertion that materiality ‘matters.’ Merleau-Ponty shows us how materiality already assumes a meaning and how that meaning is generated (and generative) in the first place. Multiplicity on this view leads

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Merleau-Ponty considers more clearly political forms in his work, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, 1969, (1947).



to a multiplicity of the political in which the specificity that entails multiplicity cannot be framed as a series of instances collected into an abstract generality. It means that the validity of another meaning always has its own internal integrity which is incomprehensible to me. Multiplicity and style offer us resources which do not specify the 'trans-subject' as such, but rather, open us up to a way of thinking that resists reifying *any* subject while acknowledging that sedimentation and institution are only ever realized in their specificity. This would allow for multiplicity even where points of view are incommensurable.

Finally, in furtherance of mobilizing Merleau-Ponty for our present purposes, I would like to suggest that his notion of interrogation is helpful in reflecting on epistemic considerations for transfeminist theorization. Understanding that the apprehension and comprehension of another's style is based on my own apprehension, which is also always stylized, can limit or question such an apprehension. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the work of interrogation, which is always partial and provisional, since, in attending to experience as it arises, it also recognizes the finitude of its own knowledge productions. Interrogation helps us understand that every expression is a privileged position which renders invisible other possibilities which were not taken. Any claim to account for all possible positions leads us back into an empty universalism, and to the erasure of the experience we were trying to give voice to in the first place. As a site of interrogation and contestation, transfeminism can help to articulate, and defend, multiple styles of being without requiring a rigidification of those styles—helping us to traverse our own styles and cross into new spaces. Merleau-Ponty claims that we need to engage in perceptual archeology (2007, 285) that discloses 'styles,' not essences. For it is when "we learn to know the body as a 'structuring' principle, that we glimpse the other 'possibilities,' no matter how different from it they may be" (1964a, 164/101).

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## Résumés

Dans un effort pour contribuer aux possibilités de la théorisation transféministe, je propose, dans cet article que, grâce à son élaboration du concept de style, Maurice Merleau-Ponty dégage un espace où la subjectivité est possible, sans toutefois réduire cet espace à un sujet identique à lui-même ni non plus réduire la singularité de l'expérience incarnée. Je distingue cette conception de l'analyse bien connue de Judith Butler concernant le déploiement performatif du genre comme « répétition stylisée d'actes » et soutiens que la théorie de la performativité du genre de Butler repose sur une notion phénoménologique non-développée de 'sédimentation', et présuppose donc une conception de la corporalité et de la subjectivité qu'elle nie



expressément. Je soutiens que l'affirmation par Merleau-Ponty que chaque forme d'être exprime un *style d'être au monde* suggère un « espace sensible » vécu dans un horizon temporel, et peut donc nous aider à élaborer une façon de penser le genre comme un style qui soit ontologiquement « trans » à sa base.

In an effort to contribute to the possibilities of transfeminist theorization, the following paper proposes a consideration of gender in terms of style. In what follows, I suggest Maurice Merleau-Ponty's articulation of style locates a space for the possibility of subjectivity without reducing that space to a self-identical subject and without disenfranchising the singularity of embodied experience. I distinguish this account from Judith Butler's well-known performative deployment of gender as a "*stylized repetition of acts*," (1988, 519; 1999 [1990], 179) and argue that Butler's theory of gender performativity relies upon an unelaborated phenomenological notion of 'sedimentation,' and thus depends upon an account of embodiment and subjectivity that it expressly denies. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's claim that every form of being expresses a *style of being* (1997 [1964], 139) indicates a "sensible spatial" experienced in a temporal horizon and can begin to concretize a way of thinking about gender in terms of style which is ontologically 'trans' at its core.

## Mots clés

Transféministe, phénoménologie, style, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler.

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