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## **Postmodern Bodies Field Statement**

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Postmodern bodies “are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context” (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995: 2).

## I. Introduction

An historical analysis of the fields of science and technology shows that technological change is exponential<sup>1</sup>; and with these technological advancements come similarly substantial social and cultural changes<sup>2</sup>, prompting more theoretical bridges between the sciences and humanities. Thus, as we move rapidly into a highly digitalized and biotechnological era, and as bodies more frequently interface with technologies<sup>3</sup>, questions and concerns around issues of subjectivity, embodiment, consciousness, bodily performances, identity, agency, what constitutes humanness, and the body’s role in the ‘body politic’ become increasingly important to theorize. This field statement therefore focuses on these primary areas of discourse and explores how the body has been conceived as a (biotechnological) production and (sociological) construction, a postmodern text and a subject of postmodernist discourse, but also in its theorized intertextuality, unreadable and non-discursive.

Of course, part of understanding these bodies as “postmodern” necessarily requires a review of both late modernism and postmodernism, in order to situate these bodies within a broader theoretical context. Yet as Susan Bordo (1992) suggested, the concept of postmodernism is rather elusive because “the kaleidoscope of the postmodern shifts from discipline to discipline” (160). Alternately described as anything from an ideology or historical era to an epistemological project or political movement, postmodernism has been, if nothing else, characterized by ambiguity. As a result, when considering the bodies that emerge within the postmodern landscape, it seems apropos to consider how these bodies may have become sites of resistance—refusing to be defined or explained by any particular dominant narrative or master discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the exponential growth in technology, see Ray Kurzweil’s books: (2000). *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. NY: Penguin; (2006) *The Singularity is Near*. NY: Penguin. While Kurzweil’s work has been heavily criticized for its technological (or “cyber”) totalitarianism and exaggerated futurist claims, many (even his most ardent of critics) have agreed that his algorithmic progression charts mapping the exponential growth in technological developments accurately describe the acceleration of (bio)technological developments. What is most often criticized is how Kurzweil predicts this change will occur and how such change will impact our world.

<sup>2</sup> Though as shall be explored within this statement, significant social and cultural changes have equally informed scientific and technological developments.

<sup>3</sup> A human machine interface (HMI) is any interface (technology, software, device, etc.) that allows interaction between a human being and a machine.

And yet, while postmodern bodies offer new material constructions, scholars seem to frequently return to older theoretical frameworks to help explain and interrogate these new configurations. Thus a secondary goal of this field statement is to explore whether and how theories about the postmodern body offer a politics of resistance and how the use of previous theoretical frameworks may help or fail to explain the body within our biotechnological era.

This field statement focuses primarily on theories of gender and sexuality, though not exclusively so. I begin this statement by reviewing early philosophical debates and other critical discourses around the body, many of which proposed or sustained a dualistic and hierarchical framework of mind *over* body that strongly informed ensuing theoretical discourse. I also discuss how late modernism and postmodernism have been described, and how theories of both help to frame the emergence of the postmodern body. I next examine how ideas of identity, autonomy versus heteronomy, embodiment, performativity, gender and sexuality, and reproductive and body politics work to describe the postmodern body in ways that resist master discourses and elaborate on or contradict theories of the body as part of larger wholes (whether institutional, social, political, etc.). Furthermore, I highlight scholarship that challenges ideas of corporeal coherence, destabilizes previous homogenizing and universalizing theories of identity, and focuses on bodily difference, plurality, multiplicity and textuality. And I conclude by exploring how notions about the body have been further complicated by various human machine interfaces, discussing some of the more recent concerns that have been raised, with a special focus on theories of postgenderism.

I assume, throughout, that the major theoretical frameworks that contribute to our understanding of the postmodern body and accompanying struggles for disciplinary dominance are not merely indicative of the battles between different approaches, but rather, that these theoretical paradigms arise out of social and political forces and are often constituted in both tension and collaboration with other intellectual projects. Therefore, these theories do not merely describe or explain the postmodern body, but are also always woven into the fabric of its discourse. Indeed, discussions of postmodern bodies include a wide array of theories and methodologies from a variety of disciplines, making a comprehensive survey of the field a significant cultural studies project.

## II. The Pre-Postmodern Body

Briefly surveying the discursive terrain of the pre-postmodern body and its theoretical evolution provide a better understanding of how knowledge about the postmodern body is produced. This section explores some of the more significant theoretical positions about the body, from the early seventeenth century to the mid twentieth century, and traces a few major debates into the late modern period. Rather than attempt a thorough historical, time-line approach, I highlight some of the major theories and discursive junctures that have particular resonance for contemporary discourse about the body. Consequently, this review of literature offers more of a conceptual historical flow of ideas and examination of the intersections between fields of thought, beginning with René Descartes, whose theories about mind and matter set off a mind/body dualism discourse that persists today.

In the seventeenth century, Descartes, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*,<sup>4</sup> theorized that two substances exist, that of Mind and that of Matter. The Mind, he argued, is defined by its ability to think and is characterized by self-awareness, thought, and consciousness,<sup>5</sup> whereas the defining characteristic of Matter is its spatial extension; the body is an example of this extended substance—something that can be measured and quantified (Cottingham: 1996, 16-23). Therefore, the mind and the body, he insisted, are two distinct substances, bringing forth the “problem” of the mind/body dualism. The senses, Descartes suggested in his “Second Meditation” section<sup>6</sup>, appear to be the bridge between thought and corporeal experience, but cannot be trusted to deliver the truth of the world. But it is because we can think, he argued, that we exist. Summarily, according to Descartes, God created the mind separate from the body<sup>7</sup>; the body is an extended material substance that does not require a mind to exist; and the mind is thus a reality distinct from the body that contains it. Descartes concluded that “I” (as a thinking being)

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4 Descartes book was originally published in Latin in 1641; multiple translations and editions have been published since. The version that I refer to is: Cottingham, J. ed (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (revised ed.). MA: Cambridge University Press.

5 Descartes is attributed with the famous quote “I think, therefore I am,” though there has been much debate over his actual wording of the phrase and its meaning. See: Grayling, A. (2007). *Descartes: The Life of René Descartes*. NY: Simon and Schuster.

6 See: “Second Mediation: The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known that the body,” in Cottingham, J. ed (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (revised ed.). MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 16-23.

7 Descartes’ thesis was also built upon the tradition of the Christian notion of original sin and the traditional struggle between spirit and flesh.

therefore can exist without a body, a notion that provides fodder for intense debate for centuries to come.

Descartes' theories, most significantly, demonstrate how this philosophical line of thinking drew a distinct difference between the immaterial mind and the material body and set the precedence for a rather indefatigable mind/body dualism discourse that continues through today. As I shall explore in later sections, Cartesian dualism<sup>8</sup> sets the stage for a wide range of other persistent dichotomies; and indeed, it is this ever-present mind/body problem that many contemporary theorists still struggle to resolve. Donn Welton (1999) argued that while Descartes' theories about the mind and body set the ontological discourse parameters for the next 300 years, his method of framing the problem introduced an epistemological "reduction" that then produced two other "interconnected ontological reductions;"<sup>9</sup> the result was an elevation of mind over body that has remained relatively uncontested until recently (1).

Many theorists who followed Descartes (such as Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche) challenged his dualistic mind/body theory, but the assumption that the mind's capacity for reason made it more valuable than the body, with its capacity for sin, remained relatively intact until the early twentieth century when, with the rise of phenomenology, theories were introduced to offer a more effective counter-discourse to Cartesian dualism (Welton 1999: 3). Edmund Husserl (1901), for instance, was the first to develop the concept of *Leib*, the "lived experienced body," which he set in opposition to the more strictly physical description of *Körper* and connected to an associative consciousness (thus connecting the body with the mind), setting the foundation for ensuing phenomenological approaches to the body (Welton 2003: 50-51). Combined with his theory of intentionality<sup>10</sup> and *Erlebnis*,<sup>11</sup> the "experiencing subject-Body" emerged<sup>12</sup>. Although

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8 Furthermore, the Cartesian body is interpreted and defined as 1) having measurable weight, shape, and mass 2) occupying a specific location and 3) having definitive boundaries; see Aho, Kevin. (2009). *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body*. NY: SUNY Press, p. 14.

9 Rather than offering a unified account of being, Descartes, Welton (1999) argued, ended up offering two rather disparate theories: 1) that the mind's existence is completely separate from the body and 2) that human experiences (feelings, passions, and determinations of the will) are mechanical processes of the body.

10 Husserl suggests, by his use of the term "intentionality" that consciousness is intentional. For more of an explanation on the concept of "intentionality," see: Lawlor, Leonard. (2002). *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*. Indiana: Indiana University Press; p. 16-17.

11 German word that describes personal, lived experience. See Ströker, Elisabeth. (1993). *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology*. CA: Stanford University Press. As opposed to *Erfahrung*, which describes a more active perceptual experience, *Erlebnis* emphasizes a more passive lived experience. According to Ströker, "Husserl uses *Erlebnis* to refer to a mental process that one undergoes in the course of experience" (xi). Husserl's concept thus emphasizes a connection between what the body experiences and its impact on the mind, drawing a necessary connection between the two rather than a distinction.

Husserl claimed a sort of “ontological neutrality,” there was an irrefutable “spirit of dualism” within his phenomenology; Husserl’s theory of intentionality, Taylor Carman argued, was built upon a strict distinction between reality and consciousness (1999: 208). In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger (1962) developed an ontological field of inquiry that moved from Husserl’s theories about the relationship between subjectivity (consciousness) and the body’s experiences of the external world (reality) to an analysis of “being.” In doing so, Heidegger, turning from the body towards a study of embodiment, replaced Husserl’s concept of subjectivity with that of *Dasein*, or human existence. “We do not ‘have’ a body,” Heidegger insisted, but rather, “we ‘are’ bodily” (Heidegger 1979: 99-100).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), coming out of a strong Cartesian tradition, was more reluctant to dismiss the concept of consciousness (as connected with the mind), but in his book, *Being and Nothingness*, he expanded on Heidegger’s theory of *Dasein* and broadened the concept of consciousness. Although Sartre set out to dismantle determinist views of the human being, he seemed to reiterate Husserl’s subjectivity and material world dichotomy and thus, by extension, the problematic mind/body dualism initially posed by Descartes. By positing an ontological distinction between consciousness (Nothingness, that which is ‘for-itself’) and the material, external world (Being, the ‘in-itself’), leaving the body “suspended between the two,” Sartre, like Heidegger, concentrated more on structures of embodiment, but did not successfully challenge the mind/body dualism (Welton 1999: 5).

Out of this group of phenomenologists, however, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]) offered the most influential and thorough account of the body and embodiment. Moving beyond the subject-object dichotomy, and refuting Husserl’s distinction between consciousness and reality, Merleau-Ponty argued that the body itself blurs the boundaries between consciousness and external, material reality<sup>13</sup>. Critical of both scientific empiricism and Cartesian intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty suggested that the body simultaneously is constantly perceived and yet “remains marginal to all my perceptions,” and is therefore neither just an internal subject nor an external object (90). Rejecting notions of the body as only a physical, material object, he contended that we are embodied perceivers—not pure egos inhabiting an external body. The body, rather, is an agent for our perceptual acts; through perception, we do not experience

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12 For a more thorough discussion of the experiencing subject body, see: Welton, Donn. ed. (2003). *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*. Indiana: Indiana University Press; pp. 161-162.

13 “...the distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body,” wrote Merleau-Ponty (167).

ourselves as *having* bodies, but rather as *being* bodies (90-94). Thus, we can be better described as having an embodied consciousness; because the body is actively situated within the realm of perception, the body can also be viewed as a conscious subject. And because the body-subject finds itself within a world of constant stimuli and change, its relationship to other body-subjects and the world is dialectical.

Another major body of literature that developed concurrently with philosophical texts, and proved to be one of the most significant and defining narratives in the history of the body, is that which came from the burgeoning field of medicine. Because the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought about advances in surgery and knowledge of anatomy, the body and its parts became increasingly probed, prodded, dissected, labeled, categorized, and documented. In fact, as early as 1543, with the publication of Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, anatomy became a field that relied, for the next several centuries, most heavily on medical illustrations and accompanying descriptive text.<sup>14</sup> Knowledge about the body, suggested Vesalius in his opening preface, can only be garnered through hands-on dissection. Through such practices as dissection, anatomical illustrations, craniometry, and physiognomy, however, bodies became increasingly differentiated and hierarchized, most notably by race and sex, leading to what Judith Butler (2004) later referred to as "anatomical essentialism" (8).

The field of science both reinforced and was informed by dominant social and cultural discourses. Thomas Laqueur (1990) argued that rather than merely establishing empirical facts, science provided a rhetoric of difference, but one that could not be sustained without accompanying social and political agendas.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the seventeenth century, Laqueur explained, the body was described and understood within what he called a one-sex model, while gender<sup>16</sup> was the primary or "real" basis for difference. No particular physical differentiation was made between bodies; rather female genitalia was explained as a variation (or inversion) of male genitalia, similar in physical structure, but existing within, rather than outside of, the woman's body. Being a man or woman indicated a social rank, a cultural role, not to be "organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes;" thus, the concept of sex before the seventeenth

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<sup>14</sup> To see a photocopied version of Vesalius's original Latin text, with illustrations, and accompanied by summary commentary, go to the National Library of Medicine's "Turning the Pages Online" site at: <http://archive.nlm.nih.gov/proj/ttp/flash/vesalius/vesalius.html>.

<sup>15</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of science's impact on the construction and articulation of race, see: Harding, Sandra, ed. (1993). *The Racial Economy of Science*. Bloomington: Indiana Press.

<sup>16</sup> What we now consider to be a modern cultural category of meaning.

century was a sociological rather than ontological category, and dominant discourse described both male and female bodies as “hierarchically, vertically, ordered versions” of the same sex (10). By the eighteenth century, and arising out of social and political events<sup>17</sup>, the body became increasingly described in terms of two distinct sexes. Laqueur suggested that as scientific and anatomical illustrative advances occurred, rather than weakening cultural or social attachments to the one-sex model, a one flesh representation—or what he called a “one corporeal economy”—was strengthened (114). Sexual organs that once shared the same names were increasingly differentiated linguistically, and by the nineteenth century, behavior was irrelevant to sexual classifications; the question of sex became “biological, pure and simple” (136). The body as two distinct sexes was not, Laqueur concluded, simply a product of scientific knowledge; historically, differentiations of sex succeeded differentiations of gender. And when differences were “discovered,” they were already deeply marked by the politics of gender and informed by various social and cultural contexts.

Closely linked to the advances of science, the concept of nature, as Anna Clark (2008) pointed out in *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, also became a central and authoritative framework for many eighteenth century authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1797). In these texts, the reverberations of earlier articulations of mind/body dualisms reappeared and were debated as the difference between the higher faculty of the mind (Reason) and the lower substance of the body (Nature). In *Émile* (1762), for instance, Rousseau insisted that women have natural roles that are necessarily inequitable (because of bodily differences); though his writing also revealed, to the detriment of his argument, that in order for women to fulfill these roles, sex and gender were necessarily socially constructed. Wollstonecraft (1797), influenced by Rousseau but also arguing against him, denied the concept of the essential female and argued that women, as members of the human race, possessed equal capacities for reason and virtue and should therefore be afforded basic “natural rights;” and yet she agreed with Rousseau’s broader vision of the roles of women in marriage, raising children, and assisting in the production of a more virtuous society, implying that women do, in fact, have some sort of natural or biological-based social role (12-13).

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<sup>17</sup> According to Laqueur, some of the political and cultural factors that influenced the need to differentiate physical categories of sex were: rise of evangelical religion, Lockean ideas of marriage as a contract, Enlightenment political theory, new kinds of public spaces, post-revolutionary conservatism and feminism, and the sexual division of labor.

It is clear from Rousseau's writing, however, that his idea of "species" was specifically male, and he suggested that whatever (general species-related) similarities women have to men must be socialized to be uniquely feminine. Women's uniquely feminine characteristics, Rousseau asserted, should be encouraged for the pleasure of man, though also closely monitored and restricted, otherwise women's natural inclinations (for cunning, manipulation, selfishness, etc.) would pose a threat to men and ultimately to society. But because women's roles must be so tenaciously developed or thus molded, the paradoxical implication of Rousseau's treatise was that women were *not* naturally inclined towards specific gender roles. Rousseau also argued that while women were like men in every regard except sex<sup>18</sup>, his reduction of women to little more *than* sex reinforces Laqueur's thesis that science and Reason became a rhetoric of 'natural,' biological differences strengthened by social and political agendas. Rousseau certainly acknowledged the impact that one's natural physical impulses play on both men and women; but whereas he portrayed men as being capable of transcending their biological difficulties through Reason, women were defined primarily by their physical capacities for reproduction and motherhood. Pride, greed, lust, and envy, in Rousseau's opinion, were simply becoming worse, and women, in particular, had a tendency to abuse the power they garnered through coquetry and were always in danger of becoming idle, insubordinate, and overly-indulgent. Because society at-large and men, specifically, are particularly vulnerable to this corruption, men necessarily had to re-establish and maintain their mastery. Thus, Rousseau's solution was a return to nature and the basic simplicities of life, and in his grand vision, women played an important, though entirely subjugated role.

Though Rousseau and Wollstonecraft both agreed on the development of women's reason and its necessity for virtue, Wollstonecraft placed no limits on a woman's intellectual development, while Rousseau wanted to cultivate women's reason only insofar as it benefitted or supported her natural role and specific ends (care of men) and social duties. Whereas Rousseau advocated for a different method of education for women specifically designed for her socially prescribed duties and based purely on sex, Wollstonecraft argued that women would better acquire the virtues necessary to raise children and become productive members of society by being educated the same as men and allowed to freely choose, rather than forcefully be

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau (1762) also contradictorily added that the female "has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties, [...and is] constructed in the same manner, the parts are the same [and] differ only by degree" (para 1251).

subjugated (4-5). Ironically, Rousseau's advocacy for social intervention paradoxically implied that women are not naturally inclined to accept the roles for which he believed they were born, while Wollstonecraft's argument that "*without* coercion, the sexes will fall into their proper places" reinforced the existence of natural roles—that women and men *have* "proper places" in the social order (6). However, Wollstonecraft located more similarities than differences between the sexes and argued that both men and women need to "obtain the character of a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex" (10).

With the advent of egalitarian feminism<sup>19</sup>, the discourse thus shifted from a focus on the rights of women to human rights, though the body was still heavily encoded with a nature/culture opposition. Though these theorists (from Wollstonecraft to Beauvoir) argued that women were equal to men (as part of the larger universal category of 'human') and had the same intellectual capacities, they acceded to patriarchal visions of the female body as having limited physical capacity and a certain sort of biological determinacy and thus sought to free women from these biological constraints. Beauvoir (1989 [1949]), for instance, supported technological developments that would help free women's bodies (such as regulating reproduction) from their biological limitations, giving them better access to full participation in the cultural, social, and political sphere. Firestone (2003 [1970]), on the other hand, argued that until women were liberated from their biological roles of childbearing and motherhood, gender equality was impossible; thus, she proposed a more radical solution: the creation of an artificial womb<sup>20</sup> for the growth of fetuses and communal raising of children. For these theorists, women's oppression was primarily an effect of their biologically determined maternal bodies—and thus, to some extent, justifiable; therefore, biology itself, these theorists suggested, required some modifications or adjustments. The paradox, Denise Riley (2003) pointed out, was that women could neither reside comfortably and truthfully within the framework of such biological differences "as a sealed sociological group," nor could they escape these differences to fully

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<sup>19</sup> Egalitarian feminism (by theorists such as Beauvoir, Firestone, and Wollstonecraft) describes a discourse that is centered on women as independent agents, rather than in relationship to men (i.e. wives, mothers) and in which theorists argued that men and women are essentially the same; thus, women should be liberated via appeals to social justice and universal rights, as well as scientific advances that would challenge biological determinisms.

<sup>20</sup> While artificial wombs are not yet medically available to the public, there are a handful of research institutes that have already begun work on making Firestone's vision a reality. For a fascinating and interdisciplinary set of discussions about the technologies thus far developed and debates about the social, cultural, political, and ethical implications of artificial wombs, see: Gelfand, Scott and John R. Shook, eds. (2006). *Ectogenesis: Artificial Womb Technology and the Future of Human Reproduction*. Amsterdam: Value Inquiry Books.

integrate into humanity; women either got stuck in the collectivity or had to bypass it altogether (66). If woman's "entanglement" in the discourse of nature held her back from being a part of humanity, Riley argued, so did her more recent entanglement in "the social," constructed as it was in such a way as to dislocate her from the political. How women transitioned from the social to the political sphere thus depended not only on how women were socially conceptualized, but also how the social and political spheres evolved.

Concepts of women as "natural," however, did not recede with the new "social" constructions of women, but rather made entry into the 'human' even more complicated. Iris Marion Young (1990) criticized Rousseau and his vision of the civic republic as it reiterated a division between (a masculine) reason and (a feminine) sentiment; by assuming an opposition between reason and desire and the body and affectivity, she argued, such a dichotomy negatively impacts citizenship because it excludes those who are perceived to be incapable of transcending the body and sentiment (women) from participation within the public sphere. Joan Landes similarly argued that the public sphere or "civic public" was an inherently masculine construct, not only excluding women from engaging in civic deliberation, but working against them. Landes and Young both concluded that the public sphere—based as it was on reason, and thus irretrievably masculine—necessarily excluded women, because reason was perceived, as Landes pointed out, to be "counterposed to femininity" (46). Of course, Landes and Young's argument also assumed that women were bound to femininity and men to masculinity, an assumption that was criticized by gender theorists.

Science and public discourse throughout the eighteenth century generated an intense scrutiny of natural differences and deployed new ways of measuring, defining, and articulating these differences. Race also became central to a number of nature versus culture critiques of the body and debates about what constituted the human; thus, both women and non-whites were regarded and treated as deviates of the norm. If, as Londa Schiebinger (1999) pointed out, "an appeal to natural rights could be countered only by proof of natural inequalities," then the fields of science and medicine seemed more than willing to legitimate the exclusion of non-whites from the social, political, and legal realms (21). Furthermore, if the framework of Enlightenment thought was to provide a justification for social inequalities, Schiebinger argued, medical and scientific evidence would need to prove the disparities of human nature through authoritative analyses of race, age, and sex. As Schiebinger also suggested, eighteenth-century anatomists were obsessed

with black men (as the dominant sex of an inferior race) and white women (as the inferior sex of the dominant race), because these two groups proved most challenging to European white males (22).

One of the most powerful doctrines influencing ideas about race in the eighteenth century was that of *scala naturae* (or what has been loosely translated as “the great chain of being”<sup>21</sup>), which placed all species on an hierarchical scale from the most base and simple of life-forms to the most complex and perfect, with God at the top (22). Thus, the implication here, too, was that the placement of non-whites below whites on the chain of being was ordained by God. Scientific texts that ensued (in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) then backed up this theory of a natural hierarchy through various fields of study, from anthropology to craniometry<sup>22</sup>, the texts of which have since been identified as examples of “scientific racism.” Such theories, along with the advent of eugenics, pioneered by social Darwinist, Sir Francis Galton (1869), and his book *Hereditary Genius*, in which he argued that the races are unequal and that the Negro race has not produced one single man of genius, are all examples of ways in which science attempted to justify and reinforce social hierarchies of race.

These debates over the different (purportedly ‘natural’) roles that race, sex, and gender play in society, as a result of one’s biology or “nature,” illuminate another major thread of discourse: how the individual body fits into the larger ‘body politic.’ Perhaps the most forceful critique of hierarchical differentiation of bodies and the body’s role in society came from Karl Marx (2000)<sup>23</sup>, who, concerned with the real material conditions of labor, suggested a parasitization of the working classes when he argued that the bodies of the lower (proletariat) classes were exploited for the maintenance and well-being of the upper classes. Marx suggested that the working classes were feeding the wealthy, who continued to grow richer, while the poor were starving. Marx also used the metaphor of the body to describe the role of the working class body within the larger capitalist system when he illustrated, for instance, the way in which British industry, “which, vampire-like, could but live by sucking blood, and children’s blood, too”

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21 For a more detailed discussion of the influence of the concept of *scala naturae*, see: Lovejoy, Arthur. (1964 [1936]). *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

22 Craniometry refers to the scientific method of measuring the cranium and other physical features to categorize human beings; for more detailed discussion of craniometry and other models of “scientific racism,” see: Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn. (2006). *Race and Racism: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Alta Mira Press.

<sup>23</sup> See: Marx, Karl. (2000). *Karl Marx, Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(579). In discussing the civil war in France, Marx again referred to the upper class as parasites feeding upon the bodies of workers and often used words and phrases such as “vampires” and “blood-suckers” to describe the bourgeois society (588-591).

As Marx argued, the origin of the commodity and the process that generates its production often remain obscure, and this obscurity enables commodities to be ‘fetishized,’ appearing to have some sort of intrinsic value, while concealing the power relationships involved in their production (2000). Fetishization of the body (whether that of the average laborer or a prostitute) takes place in myriad ways, and the enigma attached to these commodities then results from the way in which value “converts [this] product into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx 2000: 473). Though Marx was referring to the exploitative labor practices that engender the production of the mystified commodity and the obscuring of its origins in the process of production, his framework can be applied to practically any subjugated body—whether that of a slave, a housewife, a prostitute, or a factory worker—for in each instant, the body becomes not just one of labor, but also a commodity in itself. And the mystification of such a commodity does not, as Marx insisted, originate in its use value, but rather in its social value, reinforcing the notion of the body (and its identified variations—of class, sex, and race) as one that is socially constructed.

Rather than focusing, as did Marx, on larger centralized sources of political and economic power (such as the nation-state and the economy), Michel Foucault (1977; 1978) and Giorgio Agamben (1995; 2005) theorized the body as becoming, through various historical junctures, primarily an object of broader cultural, political, and economic contexts (i.e. the rise of the nation-state and the formation of military, scientific, and industrial institutions and systems). Foucault, for instance, offered an analysis of the relations between the body and power on a micro-level, in the everyday practices within local communities, where power relations reproduce. Ultimately, Foucault defined the body as an object of knowledge that arises out of state power and governmentality, as a result of local practices that combine to create a larger system of power. The body, Foucault argued, becomes a necessary component of economic and social systems to be trained and managed in such a way as to be productive to the larger social body.

One specific example of how power works on the body at the micro-level is highlighted in Foucault’s writings about the body and sexuality, in which he argued that sex became the center of social control and various regimes of biopower. In Foucault’s first volume of the *The History*

*of Sexuality*, he argued, as did Laqueur, that through an entire medico-sexual regime, sex is made to become visible; classifications, examinations, coding, observations, and illustrations of sex, for instance, gave it an “analytical, visible, and permanent reality,” a process that was then reinforced by a wide variety of institutions—from schools and therapists’ offices to churches and prisons (1978: 44). The modern paradox of sex and sexuality, Foucault argued, is the constant discussion generated about how we can’t talk about sex; and yet, within the last three centuries there has been a “veritable explosion” of discourse around sex (17-25). The irony of all this, Foucault pointed out, is that this consistent insistence to break the silence (and supposed repression) about sex actually provokes discourse that has the opposite effect, mirroring a secret “whose discovery is imperative” and making, in the process, sex a thing *to be* confessed. Foucault added that even silences about sex have been a part of this discourse, indeed, a strategy underlying its discourse, and, as a result, a “whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified” (17). Thus, power does not repress sexuality, Foucault argued, but rather produces it through this constant incitement to discourse, which has intensified and proliferated since the 1700s as an object of knowledge.

Because language and knowledge are linked to power, according to Foucault, whoever determines how sexuality is talked about also determines what can be known; and this knowledge then defines how we think and behave. Those in power control this discourse, which is then connected back to their maintenance of power. Foucault also suggested that this constant discourse about sexuality has led to a proliferation of articulated perversities.<sup>24</sup> Science and medicine played an increasing role in this dynamic, and it is in this way that biopower is exercised through the need to “kill” (the “perverse”) in order to retain the lives of ‘normal’ individuals and groups (society). In pre-modern societies, Foucault (1978) argued, power was centered within and exercised by sovereign authorities through open and direct threats or displays of violence, whether through religious rituals or the use of the scaffold; later, new mechanisms of power emerged that focused specifically on the management or control of life. “Power over life,” or “bio-power,” appears in both disciplinary and regulatory forms that focus on the usefulness of the body to society. Sex became a critical public and political issue because eighteenth and nineteenth century societies were anxious to manage and direct the lives of

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<sup>24</sup> Sexually deviant behaviors as then defined by supposed experts; Foucault’s point here is that these “perversities” did not exist prior to being articulated and were, thus, originally a product of discourse.

individuals, control (reproductive and non-reproductive) bodies, and populations. The emergence of biopower, Foucault added, reflected the efficiency of the government to manage and control the population and exercise “disciplinary power,” which trained and manipulated the body through the use of direct control<sup>25</sup>. Foucault outlined his theory of power as all-encompassing—everything and everyone is a source of power, and power exists in every relation. Subservience, subjection and silence do not signify an absence of power, but rather indicate different manifestations of power.

Agamben (1995), on the other hand, argued that the body was always a product of political life. Agamben suggested that *zoē*<sup>26</sup> was nothing more than just the body itself and not named within the system of the *bios*,<sup>27</sup> or political life, and was thus devoid of any particular meaning; though the body was always taken for granted as a product of *bios*. With the rise of the nation-state, Agamben suggested, the body became increasingly marked (i.e. as German, French, or Jewish) and, as a result, became the bearer of *bios* and certain rights and meanings and existing within an identifiable hierarchy of power. *Zoē*, Agamben pointed out, is a necessary prerequisite to entering a political life, but is only recognized as such in its paradoxical *exclusion* to political life. The entry of *zoē* into the political sphere—what Agamben called the “politicization of bare life”—is the “decisive event” of the modern era, he argued, indicating a radical transformation of previous political-philosophical categories of thought. The *homo sacer* (sacred man; ‘living dead’), Agamben added, is a juridical, rather than religious or spiritual term that describes one who is either a criminal or outcast, deemed worthy of being killed because they are not deemed worthy of life; but this identified outcast is not sacrificed through state or religiously sanctioned actions because their bodies are already thought to have been consigned to higher powers (already with the gods of the underworld). Because the *homo sacer* can be killed by any member of the community with impunity, however, this places him both within and outside of the system of politics and law.

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<sup>25</sup> Such practices were first developed in institutions such as the military, prisons, and hospitals, but became more broadly applied as tools of social regulation and control. Under such disciplinary practices, the body and its activities are under constant surveillance and examination, optimizing the body’s productivity and encouraging its docility. Foucault later explained how constant surveillance (such as in the prison system) had the psychological effect of inducing a state of “conscious and permanent visibility” and was internalized in such a way as to make individuals constantly aware of their actions and behaviors to the point where they self-modify according to the rules of the institution (1977: 201).

<sup>26</sup> Meaning: “bare life” – expresses the simple fact of living in common with all other living beings.

<sup>27</sup> Meaning: the form or way of living as an individual or within a group – a qualified, “good” life of political participation.

Agamben outlined a Western political history of the *production* of such sacred men, providing a number of contemporary examples, from Holocaust victims to coma patients, to describe the movement of these bodies into sacred (perishable) lives that exist precariously on the edge of politics, between life and death, being a part of the community and yet exiled, and inside and outside of law. Additionally, there exists a “state of exception,” during which governments invest one person or political body with the power to increase control over people in perceived times of crises and operate outside of previously established laws; in these moments, he argued, states override or reject human rights in favor of addressing the perceived threats to the state<sup>28</sup>. But these states of exception, Agamben argued, can often become prolonged states of politics<sup>29</sup> and normalized; and certain modes of knowledge are then acquired and privileged, while other knowledge is ignored or suppressed. Significantly, Agamben demonstrated how these states of exceptions operate within democracy, signaling the paradox and aporia of modern Western politics. Science and technology also plays a significant role, collaborating with political powers and helping to produce such sacred men.

Agamben sought to locate the convergence of power in what Foucault identified as the seemingly paradoxical existence of both techniques of subjective individualization and power structures of objective totalization within the juridico-institutional system. Agamben questioned whether, when confronted with the power of the society of the spectacle (and its impact and transformation of the political public sphere), holding subjective technologies and political systems apart is a legitimate mode of theory or praxis. He insisted that while this line of thought is perhaps logically implicit within Foucault’s work, it remained unarticulated. Agamben concluded that an analysis of subjective individualism and political and institutional power structures of objective totalization cannot be separated. The inclusion of “bare life” within the political realm indicates the original, though concealed, nexus of sovereign power; indeed, Agamben argued, the original activity of sovereignty is “*the production of a biopolitical body*” (6). Like Foucault, Agamben believed that an increased tendency to take control of life is characteristic of the modern era. But what characterizes modern politics, Agamben argued, as he attempted to correct and elaborate upon Foucault’s thesis, is not the inclusion of the *zoē* in political public life, but rather that, together with the way in which the state of exception

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<sup>28</sup> Recent examples can be located within post-9/11 decrees, such as Guantanamo Bay, as Agamben points out in a later book: (2005). *State of Exception*. Chicago University Press.

<sup>29</sup> Here he cites Fascism and the entire Third Reich as primary examples.

everywhere seems to become the rule, bare life (originally located at the margins of political life) starts to coincide with the political realm; as a result, inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, and bios and *zoē* all enter “a zone of irreducible indistinction” (9). The modern political system both excludes and includes bare life, revealing the ways in which bare life becomes both subject and object of the political system and its conflicts. Thus, modern democracy, he argued, is indicative of this combined antithetical process of state power that turns man and his body into an object of its discipline and also, simultaneously, becomes the object of man’s subjective political power. And it is this conflicting, paradoxical convergence of opposing forces that characterize, as Agamben described, the “new biopolitical body of humanity” (9). Democracy, Agamben argued, presents itself as the liberator (and often vindicator) of *zoē* (via human rights rhetoric), but reveals its aporia—attempting to place liberty and individual freedom into the very place in which “bare life” marks their subjection.

Whether through the characterization of biopolitics as a form of liberalism (Foucault) or associated with the power of sovereignty (Agamben), biopolitics represented, above all, a politicization of life and thus challenge humanistic visions; biopolitics, for both theorists (perhaps their only major point of agreement), provided an example of *anti*-humanism. The pre-postmodern body, as the literature within this section highlights, was primarily described and produced within Enlightenment and Humanist frameworks, wherein a stable, coherent, conscious, rational and autonomous self was purported to exist. The discursive constructions of binaries, such as between mind and body, male and female, or nature versus culture, provided dominant social, scientific and political models for ways of thinking about, inscribing, and controlling bodies. Capable of knowing itself and its position within society through reason, the mind maintained precedence over the physical body; and, as illustrated above, the perceived objectivity of philosophy and science provided universal truths about the body and its relationship to the larger social and political body. Foucault and Agamben were two of the first to theorize the body and human life as becoming increasingly objectified, politicized, and constructed, a discourse I shall return to in the fourth section.

### III. Theories of Postmodernism

This section discusses some of the major characteristics of and debates about the late modern and early postmodern era. While postmodernism is a highly contested concept and could easily be its own rather extensive field of inquiry, I offer a brief survey of postmodernism—how it has been described and theorized<sup>30</sup>—in an effort to locate key themes, concerns, and issues that impact our understanding of the postmodern body. Postmodernism is often described in a variety of ways, from a reaction to modernism to a set of rhetorical and critical practices that utilize and highlight strategies of repetition, difference, fragmentation, and Baudrillard’s concepts of simulacrum and hyperreality to subvert modernist models of identity, presence, cohesiveness, or unicity.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, postmodern aesthetics and theories are often said to embrace popular culture, the superficial and formulaic, the image for its own sake, pastiche, self-reflexivity, parody, the recycling of ‘high’ culture, and hybridities, as well as the breakdown of boundaries and theoretical binaries—from that of fact and fiction or real and virtual to machine and human. As David Harvey (1989) suggested, whereas Baudelaire attempts to combine a modernist aesthetic of both the transitory and the eternal, the whole and the fragmentary, postmodernism rather rejects such attempts at patterning, totalities, or immutability and instead exposes elements of flux, transitoriness, fragmentation, chaos, and difference. The postmodern era thus also seems to be characterized by a poststructuralist suspicion of any stable or fixed concepts of the “real.” And all of these ideas, together, offer significant challenges to previous notions of bodily coherence, the natural body and fixed identities.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard (1984) posited that the postmodern condition is characterized by a suspicion of and disbelief in grand narratives, which he suggested was the primary feature of modernism. Postmodern critiques set out to unmask the instabilities and contradictions of social, political or cultural narratives. While many postmodern analyses focused on the aftermath of the modern industrial era and the rise of technology, Lyotard concentrated on the intersections of science, technology (and technocracy),

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30 For instance, by authors such as Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson.

<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard’s theory of simulation describes a mediated process in which the real is replaced with simulacra, without depth, referents, or origins. The realm of experience these simulacra create constitute what Baudrillard calls the ‘hyperreal,’ in which mass media makes reality abstract. In Baudrillard’s conception, the distance between subject and object is obliterated, language has no stable meaning, and original artifacts are reproduced to the point where society is saturated with copies of copies.

the arts, and how information flows and is controlled. He argued that advances in mass media, communication systems, and computer technologies have relied on an increased linguistic and symbolic production, resulting in a plurality of language-games that lacks any significant or defining structure; thus, Latour concluded, technological and scientific fields have destroyed their own metanarratives.

Jean Baudrillard raised similar concerns in his critique of postmodern culture and posited that the superfluity of signs that emerged within advanced capitalist and technological productions led to simulated and hyperreal experiences that imploded meaning. In “Simulacra and Simulations” (1985) and *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1987), Baudrillard argued that while modern societies are organized around commodities (production and consumption), postmodern societies rely on simulation, in which codes, images, and signs provide the organizing principles for society and determine how one’s identity is constructed around the appropriation of these images, codes, and (value and proliferation of) signs. Thus, within postmodernism, because there are only signifiers, any sense of stable or fixed reality disappears, as well as the signifieds that signifiers reference. Baudrillard further claimed that in the postmodern landscape, the private sphere, with its private rituals is exteriorized—or made explicit and transparent—and the most intimate moments become fodder for mass culture, a sort of inversion of private into public. Baudrillard argued that consumer spectacles show us everything instantaneously and are explicit, ecstatic and obscene in their over-transparency; pointless symbols, imagery, and codes have no real meaning other than a sort of demanded visibility and call for attention that is characteristic of the postmodern era. We become a “pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence,” and all divisions and boundaries (implicitly, also the boundaries of our bodies within these spectacle-saturated environments) lose distinction and power and are characterized by de-differentiation or a sort of implosion of power, class and social distinctions and high and low culture (27). People in postmodern society exist in a state of schizophrenia, he contended, wherein the perpetual bombardment of spectacles leaves one in a constant state of confusion; people are not out of touch with reality, but rather characterized by an overexposure to what he calls the “transparency of the world,” resulting in the dissolution of all meaning and content (27). The past, as well, is lost in postmodernism, Baudrillard argued, as history itself becomes a lost referential.

Frederic Jameson (1991) in many ways echoed Baudrillard's views of postmodernism, claiming, for instance, that postmodernism has led to a weakening of historicity, a sort of "historical deafness," as he called it. Comparing this era of postmodernism to modernism, he suggested that the modernists clung to some residual elements of a sense of nature or being, always making references to the past, whereas postmodernism has lost this sense of distinction between culture and the Real. Postmodern productions cannibalize the past—the styles, the images, the allusions, and so forth. But in such a pastiche, Jameson argued, we lose our connection to history, as it dissolves into a series of styles and simulacra. Marked by a sort of inverted millenarianism, we have replaced (modern) premonitions of the future—be they utopian or dystopian—with a sense of the "end" of things (i.e. the end of ideology, social class, art, the author, man, or the subject). Also reflecting Baudrillard's criticism of the era as exhibiting a profound superficiality, postmodernism is also characterized, Jameson suggested, by a new "depthlessness," which is then countered by a "waning of affect," and sparked by extreme moments of intense emotion that are aligned with a sort of cultural schizophrenia. This heightened intensity, Jameson argued, brings with it a sort of mysterious affect, perhaps best described, negatively, as anxiety or a loss of reality or, positively, as euphoria, intoxication, or hallucinatory sensations. Whereas modernism at least still critiqued the commodity and made efforts to transcend commodity culture, postmodernism, he argued, is a sort of frenetic consumption of the processes of commodification—a commodification of affect<sup>32</sup>. Postmodernity has morphed the past into a sort of emptied-out stylization or pastiche<sup>33</sup> that is then consumed in mass quantities, a capitalization of manufactured nostalgia.

For David Harvey (1989), postmodernism offered a new "cultural dominant," in which elements of modernism are still found, but with added intensity. Harvey argued that the most important cultural change that occurred as a result of the transition from modernism to postmodernism—and from Fordism to flexible accumulation—is that of the time-space

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<sup>32</sup> Jameson added that the postmodern skepticism of metanarratives as a mode of experience derives from late capitalism conditions of intellectual labor. Thus, the "cultural logic" of postmodernism, Jameson asserted, is primarily that of late capitalism and commodification.

<sup>33</sup> By the use of the term "pastiche," Jameson referred to the way in social codes are no longer able to be the subject of parody in the traditional sense. Pastiche, Jameson remarked, is "without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (1988: 16). Jameson (1991) recognized a sort of mishmashing of culture and discourse into an undifferentiated whole, which he believes was the result of the colonization of the cultural sphere. In postmodern pastiche, "modernist styles [...] become postmodern codes" that then leave us with nothing but a "field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (17).

compression, a phenomenon he suggested arises from transportation and communication technologies, in which people experience a shortening of time and a shrinking of space. The time it takes to travel now anywhere around the globe, along with the ability to communicate instantly with people half-way around the world, he argued, has significantly altered our perceptions of space. Harvey argued, furthermore, that because this phenomenon directly impacts our daily practices and physical relationship to space, postmodernism therefore emerges as a cultural response to the disorienting effects of this time-space compression, turning the relative stability of modernism into fluid and fleeting qualities of a “postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms” (156). Also drawing upon Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, Harvey argued that simulacra is interwoven into daily life in such a way as to bring together different worlds of commodities into the same space and time, but in such a way as to conceal the labor processes and social relations associated in their production, thus, the “simulacra can in turn become the reality” (300).

Bruno Latour (1993), however, in his interrogation of both modernism and postmodernism, came to the conclusion that “we have never been modern.” Thus, since we’ve never been modern, we’ve either *never* been postmodern or we’ve *always* been postmodern. To understand Latour’s argument, it is first helpful to consider his thesis in *Science in Action* (1987), in which Latour developed a theoretical analysis of “actor-network” and argued that society, science, and technology are continually coproduced through the reciprocal modifications of theories, machines, human actors and social relations. Latour’s theory challenged the dualistic and deterministic view that science causes social change or social change causes scientific progress. *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) elaborated upon this thesis, but interrogated, as well, the seeming fixation we have on the nonhuman/human dichotomy. Modernism, Latour argued, is built upon two primary practices: *purification* (of nonhuman and human culture, seen as separate) and *translation*, which he insisted works through mixtures or hybrids of nature and culture. Modernism, he argued, works by keeping these two processes (purification and translation) separate—in effect purifying or eradicating the traces of each discourse (nature versus culture) from one another. Latour claimed that contemporary society, which he suggested is based on the purification, or separation, of nature and culture, the object and the subject, and so forth, is founded upon a sort of common ignorance of the “proliferation of hybrids” that has spawned social growth on an unprecedented scale. He suggested that pre-modern societies were

more self-conscious about the correlations between nature and society, but that this self-consciousness was somewhat paralyzing, because this interconnectedness prohibited changes in both.

Latour also argued that in our everyday life, culture and nature end up tossed into a sort of story stew of topics and relationships shoved under specific headings and categories, none of which are ever either fully explored (in their interdisciplinarity) or adequately categorized (because of their interdisciplinarity). But this model, Latour argued, is an impoverished one because social or natural objects have never just been only real, social or discursive, but rather always hybrids circulating within networks of translation and mediation. The moderns, however, worked to purify all these categories of their hybridity and entrench them on either the subject or object end of the spectrum. And it is for this reason, Latour argued, that scholarship and the disciplines are both a cause and symptom of what we refer to as the modern constitution. Latour highlighted the paradoxical guarantees of modernism: We construct Nature, but Nature is as if we didn't construct it; We don't construct Society, but Society is a result of our construction of it; Nature and Society must be distinct, but the work of purification should be distinct from the work of mediation; there is no God intervening in either Nature or Society, but there is a God. Because the modern constitution allows for the expansion of the hybrids whose very existence it denies, modernism, Latour argued, and its critique become invincible through its paradoxes; modernism can simultaneously critique any view and yet also dismiss it as pre-modern by utilizing paradoxical critical resources. For these reasons, Latour argued, no one has ever been modern.

Contrary to Baudrillard, Latour insisted that we are *not* quickly advancing into a new postmodern era defined by technology and theories of the simulacrum, nor do we need to stay mired in the hegemonic and dichotomous narratives of modernism. We can avoid both, he suggested, by simply recognizing that we have never been modern. Modern critical analyses, he argued, have always been internally inconsistent, if not often contradictory; and, most significantly, we have always lived comfortably within the non-modern world with hybrid constructions of natural and social objects and subjects; the modern constitution, he suggested, has just ignored this. Latour refused to reduce either human or non-human objects of knowledge to discourse or politics; rather, he argued for the existence of composites—what he calls quasi-object or quasi-subjects, which are purified and isolated into specific categories while hybrids

proliferate. This concept, as I shall discuss within the last section, as well as its political and social implications, can be compared to Donna Haraway's (1991) theory of cyborgs and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) theory of "assemblage" and nomadology, which suggested that knowledge of the world is produced by both nonhumans and humans across networks as they transverse seemingly impenetrable boundaries.

Latour thus argued for a new non-modern constitution that recognizes our dependence on hybrids of nature-culture. Furthermore, Latour proposed a new sort of approach that keeps many of the ideas of modernism, but leaves behind the purification of nature and society; from the pre-moderns, we should keep theories of hybridization and view humans as the creators of these hybrids or quasi-objects. Latour suggested that there never was such a thing as scientific reasoning in which we have produced a combination of a human technological systems and universal natural truths, in which case, there has never been a period of modernity, never mind postmodernity. The postmoderns, Latour argued, accept a total division between the technological and material world on the one hand, as well as the linguistic play of speaking subjects on the other; they also accept the divisions between categories of nature, politics and discourse, reiterating the dichotomies and binaries rather than breaking them down. Latour clearly wanted to reconceptualize knowledge and find a way out of the binary (modern) Cartesian systems of opposites; but *how* we do this is unclear within Latour's text.

As highlighted within this section, in the contemporary "postmodern climate," notions about autonomy, subjectivity, and a pre-social, historical subject clearly no longer figure as the source of rationality, truth or identity. Postmodernism rather figures the body as a position, a subject that produces, as Chris Weedon (1987) argued, a wide range of economic, social and political discursive practices, "the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power" (21). One obvious site of struggle that emerges within postmodern theory is the idea that autonomy and heteronomy preclude one another, and postmodernist theorists tended to connect subjectivity with what was previously theorized (in the tradition of Descartes and Cartesian dualism) as being completely separate from and outside of subjectivity: the *body*. Peter McLaren (1991), for example, in his essay, "Schooling the Postmodern Body," referred to the body as a "body/subject," because, above all, he views the body as a "terrain of the flesh in which meaning is inscribed, constructed, and reconstituted" (150). Conceived as the interface between what

constitutes the individual and society, this site of embodied subjectivity, McLaren insisted, also always reflects “ideological sedimentations of the social structure inscribed into it” (150).

But while McLaren argued that the postmodernist deconstruction of Enlightenment rationality and the fragmentation of the once mythical (and sovereign) subject were long overdue, he raised concerns about postmodernist theorists’ radical textualization of the subject itself (147). The body, McLaren argued, is not so much constitutive of a text as it is “various modes of intertextuality,” what he later referred to as “modes of subjectivity” (150). Troubled by the “Baudrillardian tendency to dissolve the subject almost entirely into media text” and other critics’ tendencies to render the empirical world into “complex strands of discourse,” McLaren argued that the theorization of the subject into a “surface of meanings” depoliticizes the subject and reduces it to a contingent position that devitalizes and devalues the body into nothing more than a material referent (150). Stripped of autonomy and intentionality, the postmodern body, McLaren argued, is in danger of being “liquidated to the currency of signs,” and the experiences of the body thus negated (150). Quoting Alan Megill (1985: 345), McLaren pointed out that when one approaches everything as discourse, “the *realia* are trivialized. Real people who really died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz or Treblinka become so much discourse” (151).

Thus, we are challenged by the (rather dangerous) postmodern “waning of affect” that Jameson highlighted. We are also, McLaren argued, in danger of textualizing differences (such as gender or sexuality) or treating difference as formal category rather than historically (151). Such textualization of the body and subject threatens individual, political power, because the body no longer exists as a referent, but is rather just a sign of itself. The body, McLaren argued, is a “promiscuous term” that has been understood as a “warehouse of archaic instinctual drives, to a cauldron of seething libidinal impulses, to a phallogentric economy waging war on women, to a lump of perishable matter, to a fiction of discourse” (150). McLaren argued, instead, for the body to act as a site of resistance to the prevailing hegemony, and called for the “absent body” to be put back into the theoretical agenda (150). And it is this actual corporeal body as not only a discursive, but also cultural, biological, political, and social site of resistance that makes it uniquely postmodern. As the next section discusses, theories of embodiment, identity and performativity begin to theorize the body in precisely this way.

#### IV. Bodily Constructions

Contemporary theories of sexuality, gender, race, embodiment, identity, and performativity, reflected within a myriad of disciplines, arose primarily out of a politics of resistance that was significantly aligned with the civil and human rights movements of the 1960s through the 1980s. What notably drove many of these analyses were theorizations of the body as socially, linguistically or symbolically constructed. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) pointed out, while the body is not seen as an “obstacle” per se, as with earlier feminist critiques<sup>34</sup>, scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Michelle Barrett, Nancy Chodorow, and feminist Marxist and psychoanalytical theorists generally posited the body as a biological object that is politically and socially marked as male or female. Rather than just a nature/culture binary, however, the body is here primarily coded by mind/body dualisms. These theorists, Grosz suggested, viewed the body as biologically determined and fixed and had an ahistorical notion of the body as inherently demarcated by a mind/body opposition; the inside of the mind and the outside body are too often presumed to be distinct, often disparate or mutually exclusive separate entities. Additionally, she pointed out, the mind/body dualism has often been accompanied by many other binary pairings (mind/body correlating to reason/emotion, self/other, culture/nature, reality/representation, male/female, and so forth), none of which have been particularly useful for the feminist project. The mind is perceived as culturally and socially impacted—a product of ideology, while the body is perceived as natural and pre-cultural. “Political struggles,” Grosz argued, “are thus directed toward neutralization of the sexually specific body” in primarily social ways. Bodies are constructed not so much by biology as by social systems that organize how we think about biology.

As discussed earlier, Foucault’s work, in particular his theories of genealogies and power-knowledge, became highly influential for scholars who sought to challenge traditional power structures and theorize the body as a potentially powerful site of resistance to hegemonic structures and narratives. Based on Foucault’s analysis of the body’s role as the primary site of power, his theory of power as being exercised rather than simply possessed, and his belief that power proliferates throughout a variety of political and social contexts (not just from the top down), many theorists began to challenge previous accounts of sex, gender, and race and develop

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<sup>34</sup> See first section on Pre-Postmodern bodies.

models of praxis. Here, I return, briefly, to Foucault's theory of biopower, because it offers a useful theoretical transition into theories of the body as a social construction. As explored earlier, Foucault's conception of biopower, unlike Agamben's model of power based on the sovereign threat of death, emerged from an emphasis on the control, regulation, and the (re)production of life through a variety of techniques and technologies of power, most notably through sexuality<sup>35</sup>. In contrast to previous theorizations of bodies as being distinct from and less important than the mind (i.e. Cartesian dualism), the human subject as having no body (or the subject existing prior to its subjection as representation), or the body as merely discursive or the effects of linguistics, for Foucault, biopower determined how we experience the *materiality* of our bodies.

Grosz (1994) pointed out that, for feminists, issues around the body have inevitably focused on questions of power, gender, sexuality, and emancipatory potential. Grosz, in some ways echoing Foucault, argued that corporeality offers a better framework for the understanding of subjectivity because it insists on the material specificities of the body, making the question of sexual difference central in a way that analyses of the mind alone cannot. And yet, she also raised questions about Foucault's theoretical framework; on the one hand, Foucault suggested that bodies are the objects of power, and yet, she noted that he also implied that these bodies pre-exist power: "in Foucault, it is bodies and pleasures that either preexist the sociopolitical deployments of power or resist them" (156). Butler (1989; 1993a; 2004) also criticized Foucault for offering an account of the body that was simultaneously and contradictorily deterministic (determined by culture) and naturalistic (natural and unmediated by culture). Thus both Grosz and Butler argued that given Foucault's account of the body as being reliant upon a model of social inscription, there must also then be a way in which the body escapes that inscription if it is to be resistant to power.

It is this focus on the ways in which we experience, understand and even resist the materiality of the body that has been theorized extensively by second wave feminist and queer scholars, amongst others. Gender, many argued (Simone de Beauvoir 1989 [1949]; Jeffrey Weeks 2003; Judith Butler 1986, 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 2004), is a culturally derived set of meanings that has been contingent upon sex, but is not attached to the biological body. As Jeffrey Weeks (2003) suggested, sex is not "a primordially 'natural' phenomenon," but rather a product of

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<sup>35</sup> Echoing Foucault, for instance, Gayle Rubin (1992) argued that sex is institutionalized and used as a political agent, an instrument of repression and domination in society, primarily through systems of power and discourse.

historical and social forces (6). One of the first to explicitly theorize gender is de Beauvoir (1973), who—while acknowledging differences between the sexes, though more through a continuum than as a distinct set of binaries—argued that these differences are socially constructed. Even the “natural” differences (biology and physiology), she asserted, do not account for women’s historical subjugation. Beauvoir thus challenged the concept of “woman” altogether, insisting that while concepts of sex and gender are socially constructed, the material realities of the “other” sex nevertheless exist (viii). As de Beauvoir pointed out, nearly two centuries after the debates between Rousseau and Wollstonecraft, woman is always in the process of becoming: “we are exhorted to be women, remain women, *become* women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is *not necessarily a woman*” (my italics, vii). Thus, de Beauvoir’s most oft cited argument that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” inspired subsequent theories of gender construction (1973: 301).

The category of “women,” Riley argued, has been historically and discursively constructed, but always in context with other changing categories, such as that of the soul, the mind and body (and Cartesian mind/body dichotomies), nature, the social, and the political, thus making “women” always a volatile collectivity. Additionally, categorizations of women often has also relied upon (or been set in contrast to) changing ideas about what it means to be “human,” as I shall explore in more depth later in this section. The degree to which woman becomes a part of the collectivity of the category of women is inevitably influenced by notions of gender, which Riley argued has been increasingly constructed since the late seventeenth century. After which, it is not so much that the nature of women or ideas about women change, but rather that the category of women is more frequently articulated and redefined through discourses of the social and natural. Thus, the history of women is also implicated in the changing histories of the social.

In the 1970s and 1980s, most notably at the height of identity politics, many theorists began to focus on issues of individual subjectivity, bodily representations, and the ways in which we each become gendered subjects. Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane (1989), speaking of early theories of spectatorship, pointed out how the “subject” became “an indispensable category in the theorization of signifying practices,” particularly within film (5). Subjectivity, they contended, was theorized as an effect of narrative, looking, and hearing in a way that was particular to film. Laura Mulvey (1999 [1975]) focused on the concept of spectatorship as a ‘subject position’ that is constructed and inevitably reinforces dominant social narratives of the body. Mulvey argued

that viewers identify with the bodies on the screen through “recognition,” which is then “overlaid with misrecognition”<sup>36</sup> (836). The image perceived on the screen is recognized as a reflection of the viewer’s body, but the viewer’s perception of this body as somehow superior projects the screen body as an ideal ego—an alienated subject. Mulvey claimed that through this process, as well as the visual and textual systems of film, traditional social gender narratives are reinforced and exacerbated; building upon various features of cinema (from cinematography and editing to narrative and audience seating) that facilitate both a voyeuristic process of objectification (through scopophilia) and the narcissistic process of identification (an ideal ego; ego libido), the pleasure in looking—the “male gaze”—mimics the social patriarchal split between active male and passive female (833). Standing in patriarchal culture as symbolic of the male “other” (via her lack of a penis, thus existing only in relation to castration but always unable to transcend it), the woman, Mulvey argued, is bound up into a symbolic order that allows men to repeatedly live out their fantasies, obsessions, and power by imposing upon them (in this instance, through film) an image of woman still tied to her role as bearer of meaning rather than maker of meaning (834).

Mulvey’s contention was that a feminist psychoanalytical analysis of cinema will reveal these systems at work and get women closer to the “roots of [their] oppression” and open up a dialogue that will begin to *challenge* the ways in which the unconscious, structured like language, similarly represses women through the objectification of the female body and the language of the patriarchy characteristic of conventional film. Although Mulvey’s article was seminal for not only the future of film studies, but also feminist studies of spectatorship, representation, and identity formation, Mulvey made assumptions that since have been critiqued. Steve Neal (2002 [1983]) and Richard Dyer (1977), for instance, suggested that the male, not just the female, is also sexually objectified in mainstream cinema and that it is just as possible for the female to be in control of the gaze. Neale questioned not only the gendered subject position of viewers, but their sexuality, which he contended, within Mulvey’s analysis, is not only always implicitly male, but also always heterosexual. Neale furthermore suggested that the notion of heterosexual masculinity has not been discussed enough and has been “identified as a structuring

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<sup>36</sup> Here, Mulvey uses Jacques Lacan’s (1977 [1949]) theory of the mirror stage to frame her argument and draw parallels to the viewer; just as infants misrecognize their perceived fragmented body as a whole while looking in the mirror and assume an illusory sense of unity and a deceptive sense of mastery over their bodies, so do film viewers, the process of which then acts as the basis for the development of the ego—and for the viewer, the development of the “I” of subjectivity. The screen image, she insisted, helps to construct the “matrix of the imaginary,” recognition and misrecognition, and identification—thus the articulation of an “I” of subjectivity, which finds such intense expression, she argued, within film (836).

norm in relation to images both of women and of gay men” (277). Neale therefore sought to interrogate how heterosexual masculinity has been inscribed in cinema and how this also was problematic.

Also in response to Mulvey’s essay, in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, Ann Kaplan (1983) argued that the gaze could be adopted by either male or female viewer (23). Additionally, the male is not always a controlling and active subject, nor is the female always a passive object. Similarly, Teresa de Laurentis (1984), who sought to theorize what she perceived to be an excluded female experience, argued that a female spectator does not merely adopt a masculine subjectivity, but rather experiences a “double-identification,” in which she alternately experiences both the passive and active subject positions (69). Christine Gledhill (1988), on the other hand, argued that the psychoanalytical film approach originates from a masculine perspective; theoretically, she contended, the feminine, from the beginning, is categorized by lack, absence and otherness. Jackie Byars (1991) reiterated this when she argued that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis viewed the feminine as deviant and masculine as normative; psychoanalytical film theory therefore “cannot account for resistance and ideological struggle [... but represents, instead] the psychic mechanisms for reinforcing dominant ideologies” (137). Ironically, as Bergstrom and Doane (1989) pointed out, the origin of the female spectator arose out of an absence of the female viewer in Mulvey’s analysis. But in isolating sexual difference as the primary process involved within cinema, the use of psychoanalysis, Bergstrom and Doane argued, enabled critics to overlook or ignore other important categories of subjectivity, such as class, race, or sexuality, all of which are implicated in structures of looking and are thus important factors to consider when providing an analysis of identity formations via spectatorship (Lutz & Collins 1994; Gaines 1988; de Laurentis 1987; Tagg 1988; Traube 1992).

Mulvey’s theorization of pleasure through negative terms, “a mark of the subject’s complicity with an oppressive sexual regime,” however, sparked a wave of analysis that sought the visual empowerment of women and their pleasure (8). Mulvey’s essay led many feminist scholars, for instance (such as Joan Scott 1991; Teresa de Laurentis 1984; and Gaylyn Studlar 1993), to theorize the significance of “experience” in subject formation. De Laurentis (1987) and Scott (1991), for instance, both utilized the term “experience” to discuss the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects—and through which subjectivity is constructed. De Laurentis explained that experience continually changes and is reformed (through double or

multiple modes of identification) within varying contexts (1987: 18). Though Scott argued for a limited legitimacy of experience, she insisted that experience alone cannot be provided as an explanation or evidence of knowledge. While such narratives make visible one's experiences, exposing various mechanisms of repression, Scott argued that we still need a theoretical framework to help us explain how these experiences have been constructed. Otherwise, we risk the tendency to naturalize or reify our discursively-produced identities. Using experience as evidence also prompts us to often oversimplify group histories by using a few key set of experiences to represent all within a group. Thus, theorists, she concluded, should study the various processes of subject formation, not just experience.

Elaborating upon other theories of subjectivity, Grosz (1994) provided an analysis of the work of psychoanalysts and psychical topographies by theorists such as Freud, Paul Ferdinand Schilder, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who theorized how the psyche is formed through the interpretation of bodily sensations, desires, and experiences—or the processes of psychic inscriptions of corporeality. By focusing on the interwoven processes of constitution and reconstitution and the production of sexes and psychological subjectivity, these theorists, she argued, emphasized a basic indeterminacy of body/mind (psyche). Grosz focused on theories (by Foucault, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari) that inscribed the body in social ways—through medical, juridical, legal, and political texts and practices. Here, power is implicated in the production of the body as a social object. She also discussed Schilder's theorization of the body as an image that mediates the intersections between the natural and psychical world in such a way as to produce transformations within both realms. Body images impact how the subject perceives her own body and its actions, and objects outside the body become incorporated into the body—so the body is described as having a certain flow with the external world, impacting one's subjectivity, as highlighted in previous discussions of how subjectivities in large part are formed through cinematic visual representations. Corporeality and agency are thus inextricably linked. While psychoanalytical theorists have offered many useful frameworks, though, they often still present a binary opposition between mind/body, Grosz insisted, confining subjectivity to the mind or biology. And yet, together, these theories also pointed to a certain kind of fluidity of interaction between the mind and the body, the body and the world. Problematically, however, these theorists typically used the male body as the universal model of all bodies. So while these

theories are not biologically deterministic, Grosz argued, they are not adequate for feminist projects of sexuality.

Responding to a perceived tendency amongst theorists to align the body with the concept of femininity or masculinity and risking an essentialist discourse that negates or subsumes the plurality of gender and sex and excludes the differences among women, Scott and Butler argued that studies of gender needed to be broadened. In “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” Scott (1986) argued that theorizations of gender must go beyond the study of women and interrogate the role of gender in signifying power relations and constituting social relationships more broadly. Scott argues that theorists should be concerned with how systems and symbolic orders of gender construct women and men, femininity and masculinity. Additionally, Butler (1986; 1990) called into question theoretical assumptions that a common or unitary subject of feminism even exists, or whether such unity in identity is necessary for political action.

While the long-standing distinction between sex and gender has been critical to feminist efforts to discredit the claim that anatomy is destiny, Butler challenged the notion that one is male or female, masculine or feminine; these distinctions, she insisted, are simply false. The sex and gender distinction, notably highlighted by de Beauvoir’s thesis, “implies a radical heteronomy of natural bodies and constructed genders,” argued Butler, consequently setting up the dichotomy between being female (gender) and being a woman (sex) (1986: 35). Butler therefore challenged the assumption that there exists a fixed corporeality, arguing that sex is a social construction through regulative discourse.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, deconstructing de Beauvoir’s sentence that one *becomes* a woman, Butler argued that the use of this word implies a voluntary construction of our own gendered identity; thus, Butler raised questions around social versus individual constructs of gender, highlighted issues of agency, and challenged the notion that gender is somehow passively determined or “constructed by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogentric language” that precedes and helps to determine the subject (*italics in original*, 36). Furthermore, Butler contended, the terms “woman” and “women” are categories that are complicated by class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other modes of identity.

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<sup>37</sup> Here, she borrows from Foucault’s theory of biopower; regulative discourse refers to the disciplinary techniques outlined in his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), for coercing subjects to perform in particular ways, thus reinforcing the discourse produced about these bodies.

Butler (1993a) argued that gender is performative and that these acts of gender constitute, rather than express, gender, and create an illusion of an original stable or fixed gender identity where none exists. Rather than sex producing gender, Butler argued, reiterating Laqueur's argument, gender produces sex; it is *through* the act of performance that gender is constituted, thus remaining contingent and interpretive in its resignification. Gender is a simulacrum, Butler suggested, a construct that is not embodied within anyone. According to Butler's theory of performativity, gender is something that one performs every day. Gender is as gender *does*, instead of what one *is* biologically. Therefore, Butler's (2004) intervention of the assumed stability of gender categories was to later propose an "undoing" of gender through drag and "gender trouble," as a way to undermine and subvert male/female, masculine/feminine, and exterior/interior binaries. It is important to note, however, that Butler emphasized that the process of 'undoing' is not necessarily either positive or negative, but is always embedded within a paradoxical tension between individual agency and the need to survive within a mediated heteronormative system.

Butler (1990) also addressed contemporary French feminist debates, arguing that these discourses of gender become circular and unproductive. Luce Irigaray, Butler pointed out, suggested that language is phallogocentric and continues to reproduce the discourse of male desire; and while women are not marked, they are radically set apart from this discourse. Both de Beauvoir and Irigaray, asserted Butler, assumed a certain female self-identical being—or ontological integrity—that is in need of representation, but neither addressed the impossibility of a fixed gender. And this need to mirror sex through gender, or gender through sex, insisted Butler, comes from a socially perceived need to make gender intelligible. Through the notion of "intelligible genders,"<sup>38</sup> Butler examined (1990) the stability or fixity of gender and its attendant, seeming coherence of identity as an effect, not a cause, of social construction. Thus, any notion or sense of discontinuity or incoherence is imaginable only in relation with or comparison to existing norms, but socially prohibited and produced by laws and social expectations that are based on causal connections to biological sex, cultural constructions of gender, and the expression (or effect) of gender through sexual practice and in the manifestation of desire. Thus, the "cultural matrix" that regulates our gender identities and renders gender intelligible is a web

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<sup>38</sup> "Intelligible genders," argued Butler, "are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23).

of cultural and social assumptions that requires that certain types of identities cannot exist (those in which gender is not a cause of—or follows from—sex).

Butler insisted that many theorists' (such as Irigaray and Monique Wittig) understanding of sex was based on how each approached notions of power or how "the field of power [was] articulated" (25). But this kind of approach, particularly by the poststructuralist feminists, Butler suggested, is too simplistic; by destabilizing the concept of male or masculine through the suggestion that the female is not a subject (not fully in the symbolic—and thus more fluid than man), Butler pointed out, takes away agency (for how can one have agency if not a subject?). Butler (1990) also responded to Julia Kristeva's argument that the semiotic language of poetry brought to the surface an expression of the "maternal" that could not be controlled by patriarchal logic. Butler argued that Kristeva "conceptualize[d] this maternal instinct as having an ontological status prior to the paternal law," but failed to address how that very law might be the cause of the desire it purportedly represses (91). The concept of maternity, Butler insisted, is merely a social construction, and she called upon Foucault's work to help support her argument that notions of maternity as either preceding or defining woman is a product of discourse, and thus the patriarchal logic—through the invention of the category of "feminine"—produces the object that it then subjugates. Butler also interrogated the grand-narratives of psychoanalytical theory (particularly that of Freud) and how the category of woman is formed through a sort of utopian non-differentiation of the sexes and followed by the creation of difference. This psychoanalytical grand narrative, suggested Butler, privileges certain ideas that work to produce a coherent gendered subject.

Although Butler critiqued the poststructuralist feminist theorists, Grosz (1994) categorized Butler, along with Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, and Monique Wittig, into the same theoretical framework, which she described as theories of "sexual difference;" these theorists, she asserted, all posited the body to be a crucial key to understanding women's social, cultural, and psychological existence, but no longer understood as "an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object" (18). The concern, for these theorists, Grosz argued, is the *lived* experiences of the body, how it is represented and (ab)used in particular cultures. The body is constituted of a series of symbolic and signifying systems that give meaning (inscribed, so to speak, with cultural, social, political, legal, biological significance). The body is both a signifying and signified body, and yet also an object of social, political, economic, and legal

systems. These theorists challenged the gender and sex distinction and argued whether biological or universal, these differences are indelible; they “require cultural marking and inscription” (18). The body, for these theorists, was not a mere biological *tabula rasa* for the inscription of masculine or feminine characteristics, she argued, but was rather more complicated (sex is not just an essentialist category, nor is gender merely a constructionist category). Additionally, the body is not precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic—but a social and discursive object bound up with signifying systems of desire and power—always a site of contestation.

Butler (2004), elaborating upon the issues she raised earlier in her work about cultural intelligibility and the exclusion of those who do not conform to normative systems of sex, gender, and desire, argued that remaining unintelligible had its advantages, especially “if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (3). Referencing Hegel and his dialectical argument that we become fully constituted as social and viable human beings through the process of ‘recognition,’ Butler advanced this theory by suggesting that the ways in which we are recognized as human are “socially articulated and changeable” and sometimes what constitutes some people as human are the same terms that “deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status” (2). In other words, argued Butler, those who do not conform to this normative system of sex-gender-desire are not understood as recognizably human; this can have negative consequences on how people understand themselves within the world, because it renders their lives as unlivable, and such an exclusion can negatively impact their political and human rights within the public sphere. And yet, the social existence of those considered to be less-than-human is also delimited by the (at least) partial recognition of them as human.

But being less-than-human also means being less-than-intelligible, a state of being that can offer some liberatory potential to these partial subjects from the complete subjection to normative culture and open up more substantial critical engagement with heteronormativity. Throughout, Butler reiterated the tension that exists between lived reality (how people actually perform gender and understand and express desire) and the dominant gender binaries that exist within a heteronormative system that only validates those who adhere to it. Butler also reminded us, however, that we do not author our own gender, because gender is always negotiated within collective cultural contexts and “individual agency is bound up with social critique and social

transformation. One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself” (7).

Furthermore, the risk of aligning oneself with a sexed category, as Riley argued, is also the risk that the category can be, at any time, used against that person. There is no easy transition, she insisted, between being woman and being human, nor is there any easy movement from feminism to democratic humanness; an historical study of these “sexed abstractions” can help make sense out of why this is so (17). There is no continuity, she asserted, of the female subject, no ontological foundation on which feminists can discursively rely. On the contrary, feminism relies on the inherent instability of the category of “women.” It is precisely this “sexual antagonism,” Riley argued, that shapes feminist discourse—both in its solidarity and challenges to any notion of a universal category of women (10). While feminism has recognized that the category of women is not (racially, sexually, ethnically, politically, etc.) homogenous; “the specifications of difference” are nevertheless elaborated upon, and they still come to rest on the category of women—the isolation of which remains in question (17). Thus, the category of women, Riley asserted, is simultaneously always both the foundation for feminist politics and its “irritation” (17). The only way that feminism can productively work is to recognize this ambiguity. Just as the notion of woman changes, so does the concept of ‘humanness;’ and the difficulties of the move from woman to ‘human’ is thus exacerbated by this fact (18). Under Butler’s rubric, a hegemonic power binary will still always exist; because even if some of us become human, in order to be so, others will have to be ‘other’ than or less-than-human, an issue that becomes central within the realm of biotechnological discourse, as the next section will explore.

In considering how bodies are normalized and constituted as human, Butler (2004) also interrogated the concept of autonomy. Individual agency, she remarked, is necessarily bound up with the navigation of social norms. And her emphasis on the public dimensions of bodies suggests that the struggle for autonomy is also always a struggle for self within society: “to live is to live a life politically, in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future” (39). Grief and rage, as well as emotions of desire and mourning, Butler emphasized, are examples of an undoing of the self, but also what allow us to relate to one another. But it is also this sense of vulnerability that allows us to understand the social dimensions of our embodied existence and thus also has implications for a collective

response to our world. Butler argued that we must move beyond attempting to just understand the problematics of gender, but rather how gender works in global and transnational contexts and to “combat false forms of universalism that service a tacit or explicit cultural imperialism” (9). Gender, she suggested, is in a constant flux—being continually remade within a variety of cultural frameworks; thus, terms around gender designation are never something that can be settled once and for all. Sex and gender, for instance, cannot be understood outside racial and ethnic frameworks in which they are articulated. Additionally, the category of ‘human’ is similarly renegotiated and continually remade (i.e. blacks once not thought of as human, either); thus, if there exist certain norms of recognition of how human is constituted, “and these norms encode operations of power,” then how the human is to be defined in the future is always a matter of contestation “over the power that works in and through such norms” (13).

Focusing more on scientific theories of sex and gender, biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (1995) argued that gender is a combination of both nurture and nature. She challenged previous scientific experiments that attempted to prove there is a biological basis of sexual difference and focused on debunking notions that women are less intelligent than men. Biology, she argued, certainly can have an effect on behavior, but one’s behavior can also impact one’s physiology. Such claims by the scientific community, Fausto-Sterling argued, echoing Laqueur, only end up rationalizing and reinforcing sexism. Responding to theories that humans are totally under the sway of genetic information, she argued that while genetics certainly plays a significant role, the binarism of the genetic sex model is much more complicated (hence variations such as hermaphroditism). External environments and variations in development, she pointed out, can also influence one’s gender. Additionally, Fausto-Sterling contends out that most studies of sexual development are focused on men, and she derided arguments that attempted to place menstruation or menopause into categories of illness or disease or argue that it is a physiological abnormality.

Grosz (1994) also pointed out how the body has been discursively colonized by medical and scientific discourse or, conversely, how bodies are conceived within prevailing social contexts. Bodies are not only “inscribed” by social processes, she argued, but are also the products of “the very social constitution of nature itself” (x). She adamantly denied, from the outset, that there exists, on the one hand, a ‘real’ material body and, on the other, one that is purely cultural or representational. Grosz utilized the concept of the Möbius strip as a potential model for

subverting the dualisms inherent in so much discourse around the body, as it provides a way of thinking about “the inflection of mind into body and body into mind [...] through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another” (xii). Such a reconceptualization of the body, Grosz suggested, offers a more nuanced and theoretically sophisticated way of understanding the ways in which both nature and culture constitute the body. By reconfiguring the body through this framework, Grosz contends that the social forces become a sort of nucleus of the body, rather than external forces upon the body (thus marking or inscribing it). Bodies cannot be perceived, she insisted, as ontologically given or whole, but rather as ontologically incomplete; contrary to Cartesian logic, bodies must necessarily be ordered, organized, and structured through society.

In *Sexing the Body* (2000), Fausto-Sterling elaborated on her earlier arguments within *Myths of Gender* that medical research and practices are gender-biased and argued that sexuality *is* a somatic fact *created by* a cultural effect (21). Such practices, she insisted, help to create the way we perceive and understand sexuality and gender. In making her case against previous scientific approaches to sexuality, Fausto-Sterling referred to cases of intersexuals, past and present, to demonstrate how the medical profession is itself socialized and mired in sex and gender dichotomies—to such an extent as to either “assign” a sex to an ambiguously sexed person (with indistinct or mixed genitalia), label such a person as “abnormal, and often utilize surgical techniques to “fix” these individuals. Like Fausto-Sterling, and echoing Butler, Joanne Meyerowitz (2002) also explored how our social assumptions and dominant ideologies about sex and gender play significant roles in medical “treatments”<sup>39</sup> that, in the case of transsexuals, were frequently either perceived as mutilating the bodies of those who suffered from mental illness or an appropriate and legitimate treatment for those suffering from a medical condition. Reiterating Fausto-Sterling’s thesis, Meyerowitz also pointed to the assumptions on the part of the medical community that these individuals had abnormalities in need of either psychological or surgical fixes. Meyerowitz furthermore argued that the tendency within the medical community has historically been to conflate transsexuality with homosexuality and other perceived sexual aberrations. However, the breaking away of the transsexual community from the gay community, and its increasing appeal to medicine, while resulting in the medical sanctioning of

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<sup>39</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz (2002), in her study of the social, cultural, and medical history of transsexuality, suggested that previous theories of inversion (as highlighted earlier by Latour) and subsequent attempts of people attempting to identify as the “other” sex eventually led to the emergence of surgical sexual “reassignments.”

transsexuality, also created and fueled debates and contentious relationships between the two groups. She thus also explored the battle that arose between transsexuals and the increasingly more powerful gay community that often sought to exclude transsexuals from its political agenda and social landscape.<sup>40</sup>

Both Meyerowitz and Fausto-Sterling pointed to the ways in which sex is as much of a social construction as gender, and argued that sex is a lot more malleable and complex than the scientific community has historically acknowledged. The medical community, both authors highlighted, operates from three primary set of assumptions: that only two sexes exist, heterosexuality is the “norm,” and specific gender attributes characterize one as either a healthy male or female. Both Meyerowitz and Fausto-Sterling thus called for the breakdown of such binarisms and assumptions and challenged, in the process of their arguments, a number of dichotomies, such as those between male and female, nurture and nature, and real and constructed. While both Meyerowitz and Fausto-Sterling still recognized the role that anatomy and physiology play in the formation of one’s sexuality and gender, they each highlighted the ways in which gender and sex are also socially constructed at the scientific level; in other words, science itself is a social construction, a concept that leads us into the next section, in which technologies of science—amidst growing recognition of its fallibility—nevertheless becomes, once again, a highly influential field in not only the knowledge of, but also the production of the body, as the next section explores.

## **V. Theories of the Machine Human Interface (HMI), Biotechnologies, and the Posthuman**

As this section explores, contemporary human-machine interfaces (HMI) and other biotechnological developments create a shift in our way of thinking about what it means to be

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<sup>40</sup> Butler (2004) similarly discusses how a number of the sex/gender-related movements, which she refers to as being part of a “New Gender Politics,” have recently surfaced and raise questions about the tensions of identity categories that seem to be inherent in these discourses (i.e. the tension between queer theorists who seek to oppose all identity claims and the claims of transsexuals and intersexuals to oftentimes have the right to claim gender identities). These movements, however, while sometimes dialectical, nevertheless seem “to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself” (8). But “the critique of gender norms,” Butler insists, “must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived” and guided by elements aimed to maximize a livable life and minimize the unbearable moments of life – or what she calls “social or literal death” (8).

human, subjectivity and consciousness. As subjectivity and consciousness are increasingly experienced through a number of (bio)technological interfaces, issues of embodiment, corporeal integrity and permeability become central themes to those theorizing the body in an increasingly virtual, biotechnological, and cybernetic world. As biotechnological advances continue to accelerate at an exponential pace, popular culture, special interest groups, journalists and scholars are beginning to imagine the potential impacts on our bodies. In this era, in fact, there is a particularly heightened awareness of and attention to issues of the body, as well as what it means to be human. And so it is at this theoretical juncture that scholars begin to articulate, in more explicit terms, what they identify to be a shift from postmodernity to posthumanism—or conversely, an attempt to recover the body from a posthumanist future. This section will explore whether and how earlier theories of identity, performativity, gender and sexuality, and others still offer a politics of resistance and how they may help or fail to explain the body within our biotechnological era. Though I do not find it necessary to delineate boundaries or declare any particular end to postmodernism or the bodies it describes, I review recent discourse that anticipates a posthuman future.

In the last twenty or so years, gender and sex remained prominent themes within postmodern and posthuman theoretical discourses, while theories that address how biotechnologies intersect with issues of race and ethnicity are curiously underrepresented. Most of the literature addressing race and ethnicity in our biotechnological era discusses it in terms of genetics and the recent wave of genealogy testing. Alondra Nelson (2008), for instance, has written extensively about the geneticization of race and ethnicity and the impact of the decoding of the human genome on non-white groups. Nelson argued that participants of genetic genealogical testing often use the results of genetic testing (which is often rather unspecific, in terms of identifying ancestry) to interpret or construct more meaningful auto-biographical narratives, thus engaging in what she calls “highly situated ‘objective’ and ‘affiliative’ self-fashioning,” interpreting test results in such a way as to reinforce their own genealogical aspirations (2008: 759). The concern, here, of course is how these biotechnological developments are also impacting social identities and public policy<sup>41</sup>. Another concern raised is whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century biotechnological wave is

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<sup>41</sup> This has been an issue, as well, for the gay and lesbian community in the search for a “gay” gene; while some are concerned that locating such a gene could cause some to abort fetuses with the gene or ensure the absence of such a gene through gene selection or manipulation, others welcome the identification of such a gene to utilize for the

creating a revival of 19<sup>th</sup> century theories about race. Osagie K. Obasogie (2009), for instance, argued that despite good intentions, many genetic technologies are being applied in such a way as to potentially offer new justifications for thinking about racial disparities and differences in biological terms, thus reinforcing, rather than challenging, biological essentialisms (vii).<sup>42</sup> In “Sex and Race in the Long Shadow of the Human Genome Project,” Roger Lancaster (2006) highlighted similar concerns when discussing what he perceived to be a recent trend of “genomania” and argued that “the major news venues have essentially served as cheerleaders for every imaginable variant of bioreductivism: hormonal tales, evolutionary fables, fanciful genetics—and now, a re-born scientific racialism” (para 6). Ideologies of race, gender, sex and sexuality are still embedded within political-economic contexts, he suggested, and science is being utilized, perhaps more than ever, to further entrench us in Cartesian dualisms and deepen and justify age-old hegemonic systems of inequality.

Some, however, have seen the advent of biotechnologies as holding out potential for the breakdown of such power structures and the liberation of the body from its historical sociological and cultural implications. Donna Haraway (1991) argued, in “Cyborg Manifesto,” that that the cyborg, which she defined as a “hybrid of machine and organism [...] is a creature in a post-gender world” that “has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (1991: 151). Freed from the Western humanist myth of original unity, born out of natural reproduction and Christian tradition, and “inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism,” Haraway suggested that the cyborg, a creature of both fiction and social reality, offers a way beyond binary gender codes (150). Because the cyborg is the “illegitimate offspring” of the “inessential” militaristic cyborg “father,” Haraway argued, the cyborg is in a unique position to break the chain of human genealogical historical trajectories of patriarchy, hierarchies and dichotomies, and escape the myth of original unity—the Oedipal complex and (real) Freudian and (symbolic) Lacanian familial narrative theories of organic wholeness (151). The cyborg is not dependent on human natural reproduction for its existence and is thus outside gender, argued Haraway; nor does it seek completeness through coupling

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advancement of civil rights. Simone LeVay (1993; 1996; 2008; 2011) has been perhaps one of the most prolific writers in this debate.

<sup>42</sup> For more of a detailed discussion, see: Obasogie, Osagie K. (2009). *Playing the Gene Card? A Report on Race and Human Biotechnology*. Oakland, CA: Center for Genetics and Society. <[http://www.geneticsandsociety.org/downloads/complete\\_PTGC.pdf](http://www.geneticsandsociety.org/downloads/complete_PTGC.pdf)>

with a heterosexual mate or desire nuclear family formations. Though cyborgs do have a history (within the military industrial complex), Haraway argued that cyborgs are rebellious and disloyal to their capitalist patriarchal roots, and thus capable of being transmuted into a postmodernist feminist force.

Cyborgs, according to Haraway, challenge not only the distinctions between the organic and technological, but also, through their crossing and blurring of multiple boundaries, other persistent modernistic dualisms such as physical/non-physical, animal/human, mind/body, nature/culture, public/private, active/passive, primitive/civilized, God-made/human-made, male/female and feminine/masculine (Balsamo, 1996; Haraway, 1991). The cyborg is not subject to Foucault's biopolitics, Haraway insisted, but is rather a "kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" that simulates politics, offering a "much more potent field of operations;" the cyborg is a self that feminists can and should (re)code (1991: 163). In order to adopt this political position, however, Haraway insisted that we neither engage in wholesale adoption or rejection of advanced technologies, but rather situate ourselves within both perspectives at once because each perspective reveals various modes of domination, as well as possibilities that would be unperceivable from the other vantage point (155).

It is important to note that Haraway's manifesto was written as a direct critique of previous radical feminist epistemologies of the 1970s and 1980s that presumed women to be unified as objects of desire, sought to expose the roots of gender oppression, and increasingly viewed technology as inherently patriarchal. Echoing Judith Butler who just the year prior argued, in *Gender Trouble*, that feminist scholarship was not offering an adequate criticism of essentialist categories and even challenged the use of the category of "woman" as an either naturally essential or unifying platform for feminist politics, Haraway (1991) argued that the emphasis on identity (*any* identity) is limiting and does not allow for any experiences that blur Western dichotomous constructions. Haraway articulated particular concern over radical feminism such as that espoused by Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich because they insisted on opposing the organic with the technological and therefore reasserted, rather than challenged, gender essentialism (175).

Both Butler and Haraway agreed that the concept of "woman" is far too complicated by factors of race, class, and ethnicity to ever offer an effective feminist (identity) politics because it assumes a universal understanding of "woman" that simply does not exist. As discussed in the

last section, Butler argued for gender performativity as a way of complicating social gender constructions, while Haraway argued for affinity politics that embrace technological advances in the figure of the cyborg, and through which Haraway believed we can begin to construct a new postmodern feminism. Haraway essentially argued for a co-optation of Western hegemonic power via the figure of the cyborg. Two years later, in her article “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” Butler (1993b) reiterated Haraway’s criticism of identity politics and argued that identity categories tend to be tools and instruments of regulatory regimes, representing normalizing categories of hegemonic structures (308). Butler’s concept of gender as performance, which was neither constituted by a natural or essential ‘self’ or a preexisting identity, was thus aligned with the figure of the cyborg in its break from the concept of original unity and in its ability to code itself, all the while making explicit how gender is both reiterated and persistently performed.

The same year that Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” was published, Judy Wajcman (1991), in *Feminism Confronts Technology*, challenged those who presumed that technology was somehow gender-neutral. Wajcman asserted that technology “fundamentally embodies a culture or set of social relations made up of certain sorts of knowledge, beliefs, desires, and practices,” most notably around sex and gender (149). Because the production and consumption of technologies are ideologically imbedded with gender interests, Wajcman argued, rather than challenge or change the social status quo, technologies reinforce it by entering into and engaging with preexisting social structures and relations of race, class, and gender. To prove her point, Wajcman surveyed the use of technologies developed over the course of several decades and their functions within both the public and private sphere (from what she calls “domestic technologies” to those of reproduction) and, by demonstrating their male bias, challenged the assumption that technologies can be, as Haraway argued that same year, “liberating” for women. On the contrary, Wajcman contended, these technologies serve to reinforce sexual divisions of labor and gender dichotomies.

Although Haraway may have envisioned her cyborg to be beyond gender, as Anne Balsamo pointed out, technologies also reinscribe the body with socio-cultural norms. Elaborating on Wajcman’s thesis, Anne Balsamo (1996), in *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, argued that because technologies are ideologically constructed, they “serve to reinforce traditional gendered patterns of power and authority” (10). Balsamo began with the

premise that the body is a “hybrid construction of materiality and discourse,” both a product (a material embodiment of socio-cultural codes, such as ethnic, racial and gender identities) and a process, or a way of knowing and marking the world and self (1996: 12). Balsamo argued that when the seemingly stable boundaries of bodies are penetrated by technologies, while new bodily possibilities certainly emerge, other boundaries, such as gender, are more rigidly guarded and enforced. From virtual reality and cosmetic surgery to cyberpunk and reproductive medicine, Balsamo argued that the high-tech body is as gendered as ever. Balsamo conducted a close-reading of popular culture representations of the post-modern female body, and combined these with analyses of recent technological advances, medical literature, and public policy documents to describe how biotechnology, in both the practical and imaginary socio-cultural realm are ideologically shaped by gender biases. Thus, even though the body may be (re)coded within scientific and technological discourses, gender nevertheless remains a naturalized marker (9). Reiterating the ways in which technologies are gendered, the cyborg body, Balsamo argued, is most often a “*man-machine hybrid*” and furthermore inscribed with “ancient anxieties about human difference” (emphasis in original, 18).

But in an attempt to move away from the either-or logic of the body as material flesh or discursive construct, Balsamo argued that nature and culture are mutually constitutive. In traditional accounts of the body, particularly that of medical discourse, Balsamo noted, the female body is simultaneously articulated as knowable through science and yet always in danger of exceeding its limits, both always under and potentially transgressing scientific control (26-27). Furthermore, despite technological advances, this vision of the female body has persisted and is often cast in opposition to a normative unmarked body. Because the cyborg embodies both natures of the hybrid (human/machine) simultaneously, it is never purely human or machine; it cannot be conceived as entirely technological or completely organic; neither can cyborgs be conceived of as only discursive (33). For Balsamo, Haraway’s model of the cyborg still offered some hope for remedying this division between the material and the discursive and ensuing contradictory notions of the female body because it connected the discursive body with an historically material body by addressing the ways in which the body is (re)constructed within various social and cultural formations (33). Balsamo had less faith, however, in cultural representations of cyborg bodies, suggesting that popular media and cultural images of cyborgs reproduce limiting, rather than liberating, gender stereotypes (341).

Expanding on this logic, Peta Cook (2004) insisted that despite technological developments, the legacy and historical metaphors of the body and gender are pervasive in society and therefore continue to affect human-cyborg ontology. The scientific-militaristic and science-fiction origins of the cyborg, she suggested, look towards a future in which the human body and its vulnerabilities (i.e. to illness, harm, death, etc.) can be overcome by the use of integrated biotechnologies; as a result, Cook argued, the quest to overcome bodily weaknesses and vulnerabilities through the use of science and technology reinforces the patriarchal Cartesian view of the body as something to be conquered, manipulated or disposed of, thus also reinforcing (rather than escaping, as Haraway suggested) Western Cartesian conceptualizations of duality (2004: 2-3). Cook additionally argued that Haraway's vision of a postgender future via the cyborg is a utopian ideal that neglects to fully acknowledge the material and subjective realities and experiences that continue to be inscribed by "patriarchal cultural legacies" upon cyborg bodies; thus, while the cyborg may attempt to challenge gender dualisms, the persistent interconnections between embodiment, technology and gender, as well as the fact that cyborg ontology is "enabled through the knowledge generated by, and the interventions of, technology" render us far from a post-gender utopia (2004: 4). Cook concluded that while Haraway acknowledged the cultural influences on material-semiotic actors, she focused on "cyborg post-gender 'fiction' at the expense of cyborg-gendered realities" (4). It is therefore important, Cook added, that we think about what such a 'reality' would actually mean for the "lived experiences of cyborg bodies" (4).

As an early transgressive figure that sought to blur the distinctions between various regimes of signification, Haraway's cyborg led the charge into the field of cyberfeminism and provided a foundation from which to explore the possibility of a world without gender. Though the term has yet to be adequately defined or theorized, what is clear from recent literature is that postgenderism is a burgeoning concept that attempts to speak to a bio-technological future in which gender is radically re-imagined. For some, such as Haraway (1991), who seemed to have first coined the term, "post-gender" in "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,"<sup>43</sup> the human/machine interface, in the figure of the cyborg, offered significant challenges to gender binaries. If the cyborg is constructed, as

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<sup>43</sup> Article first appeared as an essay in 1985 and then later redrafted as a chapter for her book entitled *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991).

Haraway suggested, it can also be reconstructed, re-imagined. The cyborg, at least as a liminal metaphor, challenged notions of essentialist identities and potentially affected how we think about and begin to (re)imagine the body, as bio-technological advances continue to offer new possibilities. For others, such as the transhumanists George Dvorsky and James Hughes (2008), the concept of postgenderism marked, via technological advances, an erosion of gender categories altogether or, at least, allowed for a greater “biological fluidity and psychological androgyny” (2).

Ironically, Haraway never had any particular intellectual investment in her use of the term “post-gender.” In an interview with Haraway, published in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, Haraway in fact remarked that she “has no patience with the term ‘post-gender.’ [She] has never liked it” (Ihde and Selinger, 2003: 53).

Interviewer: But you used it in the manifesto.

DH: Yes, I did. But I had no idea that it would become this ‘ism!’

(Laughter) You know, I never have used it since! Because post-gender ends up meaning a very strange array of things (54).

Haraway suggested that in the sense of “blasting gender,” she approved of the term, but would not advocate the use of post-gender to describe a “utopian, beyond-masculine-and-feminine sense” of the world, which is how most have since interpreted it (Ihde and Selinger, 2003: 54). Post-gender, rather “is the blasting of necessity,” she argued, “the non-necessity of this way of doing the world,” moving beyond essentialist binary categories of gender (54). Haraway’s use of the term “post-gender,” therefore, did not offer an explicit theory per se, but rather implied a movement away from Western Cartesian gender dualities through the figure of the cyborg, which operated as a larger metaphor for human/machine interfaces and bio-technological advances. For those theorizing about the impact of bio-technologies on gender since Haraway, however, the concept of postgenderism has emerged as a specific, though inadequately articulated, theoretical proposition.

Responding to these techno-theoretical attempts to complicate gender binaries and Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” more specifically, Steve Dixon (2003) wrote that “AI [Artificial Intelligence] has its own gender,” adding that AI cyborg prostheses could be considered a new model of gender within sociological and cultural theory (para 1). Responding to Butler’s (2003) comment that “ ‘gender is a fabrication and true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on

the surface of bodies,”<sup>44</sup> Dixon reasoned that the inscription of our *metal* fantasies on the body thus could be conceived as yet another form of gender inscription, quite separate from the traditional feminine or masculine gender models (para 1). Cyborg ontology, Dixon suggested, symbolizes a sort of Newtonian ‘double inversion,’ signaling an outer gendered appearance that is different from the inner essence; while the cyborg may appear male or female on the exterior, it symbolizes a “significant inner gendering as metal and machine,” thus making the cyborg “tri-gendered and tri-sexed—as man, woman *and* machine” (para 2). But because gender theory relies on notions of the body, social action, and sexual practices, Dixon argued, we cannot conceptualize the cyborg only in terms of its physical ontology, but must recognize how the cyborg challenges each of these central assumptions, “seismically reorienting the body,” as well as its social action, performances, and sexual practices (para 3). The cyborg, he argued, marks a new hierarchical relationship—not only in terms of gender, but positions the human/machine hybrid in a superior position to both (human) males and females (2003: para 4). Therefore, insisted Dixon, current socio-cultural-biological considerations of gender, which inevitably operate from a base binary dichotomy, cannot adequately address this new bio-technological creature; therefore, we need to reconfigure gender theoretical models when thinking about a comparison between the male or female cyborg and that of the technologically unmodified male or female subject (para 4). To this end, he suggested, the “gendering of intelligent metal” offers new models of thought about “machine and cyborg gender” and extends the binary models (male/female; masculine/feminine) into a “trinity of male/female/metal” (para 4).

Although Dixon never quite illuminated what this sort of new gender theory would entail or how it would be applied, he argued that AI metal will begin to impose an equally powerful socio-cultural classification system, which operates beyond the male/female taxonomy. This too will profoundly mark social differentiations, he argued, and will entail similar modes of domination, but without adhering to current sociological classifications of class, race or gender (Dixon 2003: para 6). We have a tendency, Dixon argued, to over-emphasize hyper-gender binaries, whether through the identification and theorization of dominant masculine, phallogentric and militaristic images of the male cyborg as killing machine bringing forth the technological apocalypse or the

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, "From Interiority to Gender Performatives." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, pp. 136-142. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 363, quoted in Dixon, S. (2003) "Metal Gender," *CTheory*, Articles, 14th May, <[http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file?pick=384](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file?pick=384)> accessed December 6, 2009.

hyper-feminization of female cyborgs, with their sexy, sleek metallic curves and femme-fatale personas (para 8). Dixon pointed out that, particularly within literary, media and film studies, these cyborg embodiments have typically been discussed as extending and re-inscribing gender difference, which he viewed as problematic, because it is driven by a belief in the “androgynous ontology of the robot or the post-gendered ontology of the cyborg,” as theorized by Donna Haraway, and thus neglects the real problem of gender in “metallic metamorphoses” (para 9).

Dixon also suggested that, influential and ironic as it was, Haraway’s discussion of gender in “Cyborg Manifesto” was both “self-contradictory and unconvincing” (para 10).<sup>45</sup> Most significantly, he asserted, gender, in Haraway’s cyborg, was “addressed in confused ahistorical double-speak,” ignoring, simultaneously, the gendered beginnings of the human subject and the “bio-cultural foundations” of gender theory (para 10). He also pointed out that while Haraway, on the one hand, criticized Catherine MacKinnon for constructing a ‘non-subject, a non-being’ and used essentialist devices to erase all difference, Haraway herself proceeded to do the same:

Her "hope for a monstrous world without gender" where cyborgs "are suspicious of the reproductive matrix" and instead re-grow their limbs and bodily structures like salamanders signals a Deleuzo-Guattarian 'becoming-animal', but with that transformation a subsequent disappearance of the feminine within the female-cyborg subject (para 11).

Dixon recognized, however, Haraway’s impact on postmodern cyber-feminists such as Katherine Hayles (1999), Sadie Plant (1998), and Rosanne Allucquere Stone (1996), all of whom he suggested firmly located technology and the conjunction of machine and human within a feminist discourse, but while simultaneously attempting to critique theories of all-inclusive postgendered world (para 12). By doing so, he argued, these writers successfully reclaimed technology from hegemonic male narratives, but risked losing the feminine altogether in the process (para 12).

And it is for this reason, he insisted, that Haraway’s famous declaration that she’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess still resonates, because it marks a break with traditional metaphysical

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<sup>45</sup> Dixon argues that “Haraway suggests that we are *already* ‘hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs’ before declaring that ‘the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world ... [and] has no origin in the Western sense [...] This formulation suggests that *we*, the already-cyborgs, are right now living in a post-gendered world, with no sense of our origins [and] the lack of a gendered origin is qualified on the following page when she admits that cyborgs are the ‘illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism’ [...] This statement is then re-qualified to suit the argument, but not any type of logic, by the assertion that their very illegitimacy renders cyborgs unfaithful to their patriarchal origins” (2003: para 11).

notions of “the earth-mother or the spiritual-transcendent implied in the Goddess figure” and proposes a new evolutionary course towards a “technologized embodiment” that is no longer connected to gender, having erased both the masculine and feminine (para 13). Thus, while cyborgs or AI configurations may seem to eliminate problematic aspects of gender, Dixon argued, they also displace gender (para 19). Therefore, he argued, Butler’s “Derridian formulation of gender as a ‘complexity whose totality is permanently deferred’”<sup>46</sup> provided a more useful way of thinking about how a new gender evolves—a third gender, he insisted, that is marked by “‘deferred’ intelligence forged into metal,” originated by programmers, but evolved and modified by the AI entities themselves (para 19). Like gender, Dixon insisted, machines are not neutral constructions, and the imbrication of artificial intelligence with flesh transforms not just bodies, but the genders of bodies, as well as their desires (para 20). Dixon thus concluded that while our current gender taxonomies, replete as they now are with a theoretical “sliding scale of signs,” may work well for human-only gender theories, the growing and very real possibility of human/machine interfaces and AI technologies—demand a new theoretical approach (para 22).

Similarly frustrated with what she perceived to be the inadequacy of contemporary gender theory to address an escalating era of bio-technology and virtual sex, as well as the seemingly endless arguments about how nature or culture substantiate theories of gender performance, Luciana Parisi (2004), in *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology and the Mutations of Desire*, offered a bio-philosophical investigation of how recent advances in science and information technology, from genetic engineering and cloning to viral information transfer and virtual reality, have impacted and challenged our understanding of sex and sexuality. Parisi suggested that even the most recent discourses on sex still reinforce patriarchal economies of pleasure, rather than significantly challenge it. She argued that theorists have been too long caught up in essentialism versus constructivist arguments and discourses that are unproductive and only serve to reinforce the dualisms they seek to dismantle. Parisi argued that our understanding of sex has been forever entangled with a legacy of heterosexual coupling and procreation. But because human sex no longer involves only the previously theorized set of social and cultural codes that have thus far characterized sexual identities and reproductive couplings, Parisi suggested that we have entered

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46 Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, p. 22, quoted in Dixon, S. (2003) “Metal Gender,” CTheory, Articles, 14th May, <[http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file?pick=384](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file?pick=384)> accessed December 6, 2009.

an era of molecular sex, wherein information is not only traded between sexes, but also across species and increasingly between human and machines, producing a new sexual multiplicity and an accelerated mutation of desire, nature, and culture (1). As demanded by feminism, she argued, the female body is no longer biologically destined for procreation due to advances in biotechnology. And yet, at the same time, Parisi suggested, the patriarchal dream of liberation from both nature and the female body has also been fulfilled. But is this so-called liberation from anatomy and the alliance with women for the purposes of sexual reproduction, she asserted, contrasts strongly with the accomplishments of Cartesian disembodiment “in the cyberspace of information” (3-4). Parisi, however, also argued that the post-gender world of the cyborg also risks dissolving the biological differences of the material body and its connection with the corporeal world of sex, thus problematically celebrating, through the closed economy of “charge and discharge,” the male economy of pleasure (via disembodiment) and threatening to displace the mind from the body—a patriarchal tradition that should not be reiterated by feminists (8). In the end, Parisi contended, these debates about the implications of information and biotechnologies tend to reiterate a critical impasse between discursive constructivism and biological essentialism.

The feminist, post-gender attempt to disentangle feminine desire from nature through free-floating cyber-signifiers of sex, Parisi argued, problematically reiterates the mind-body dualism by opposing the body as associated with matter, as a fixed and stable category. Parisi’s solution, which in some ways echoes Dixon’s call for a theoretical third gender but perhaps offers more possibilities, is that of “abstract sex,” which she believed offered an alternative route to widen our critical interpretations and understandings of the body and move us beyond these binary oppositions between biological, natural, embodied, and essentialist sex versus cultural, discursive, constructivist, disembodied sex (10). Drawing upon Spinoza’s hypothesis about the indeterminate power (or “abstract potential”) of bodies, thus challenging the analogy between pre-established biological forms and functions and highlighting the changing capacities and possibilities for bodies within the “continual mutations of nature,” abstract sex is abstract, she insisted, because it is *everywhere*; it no longer acts as just a signifier, designating cultural, biological and political models of reproduction and representation, but rather spreads like a bacterial disease into variously (re)formed bodies and the macro-parasitic machine of capitalist culture.

“Abstract sex,” she argued, addresses three levels of human stratification: the biophysical, the biocultural, and the biodigital. Together, these strata form an amalgamation of layers that compose a more fluid formation of sex and sexuality than previously considered. Parisi used the word “stratification” in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense to describe how collective organizations sediment upon one another across distinct layers or strata. The biophysical is one such strata and constitutes movement toward life and sex, but not in a linear, inorganic to organic, fashion; another, the biocultural is indicative of the modern Foucauldian perspective of biopower and the proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality; while the third, the biodigital, marks our contemporary era, in which virtuality, cybersex, and biotechnologies of reproduction and cloning illustrate our capacity to intervene in natural sexual processes and the creation, modification, and manipulation of sex. But while we may think we are capable of controlling sex, Parisi argued, we rather find that our human interventions are merely reiterations of naturally occurring events of multiplicity and interchange.<sup>47</sup>

Specifically, Parisi’s concept of abstract sex challenged sex as a linear, progressive, or hierarchical phenomenon by offering an alternative and “turbulent” view of sex that locates chaos within forms otherwise presumed as stable and highlights how sex and sexuality are fluid, malleable, disordered, and unpredictable, forever moving within a matrix of both nature and culture and crossing over—just as bacteria do. Abstract sex illuminates the matrix of connections that exist between these different levels and layers of body-sex organization and provides new ways of understanding sex and gender, which no longer rely on “the primacy of identity” and its mind-body dualisms, and wherein nature does not define culture, nor sex gender (11). In this sense, then, biological sex no longer provides *the* physical mark of gender. Rather, gender is offered as a parallel dimension of sex that entails a networked system of variations of bodies that challenge the dualisms between the social and the natural (11). And yet, while Parisi’s vision of abstract sex was grounded in theories of bio-technological and cultural convergence, multiplicity and inexplicability, its variations and unpredictability foregrounded and even mapped within the matrix of abstraction, her concept highlighted a sort of precarious centrality about sex that threatened to fall into a similar Foucauldian trap of discursive knowledge-production.

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<sup>47</sup> For instance, biotechnology, Parisi suggests, mimics what already occurs at a cellular level (like when mitochondrial DNA joins with nucleic DNA).

In “Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary,” George Dvorsky and James Hughes (2008) argued that the gender binary is an involuntary product of nature that places unnecessary limits on our human potential. Dyadic gender roles and sexual dimorphisms, they argued, are often to the detriment of both individuals and society. Our contemporary values, they suggested, have come into conflict with “the rigid gender binary” system that currently exists (1). Though we have spent the last two hundred years attempting to dismantle the patriarchal heritage of power, and while laws and social, political, educational and economic reforms have eliminated the rationale for male domination and gendered social roles, Dvorsky and Hughes argued that postgenderism nevertheless confronts the limits of what remains a social constructionist account of sexuality and gender. They therefore proposed that the transcendence of gender, started by these social and political movements, can be both complemented and finally resolved by biotechnological means. Echoing de Beauvoir and Firestone, Dvorsky and Hughes suggested that part of this stratification is the result of the burden of childbearing on women; only through a bio-technological blurring and erosion of these sexual differences, they argued, can all human beings thus reach their full potential. Dvorsky and Hughes argued that if we take biological sex for reproductive purposes out of the equation, as Firestone suggested with her proposition of artificial wombs, many of our problems of gender will be solved. Assisted reproduction, for instance, would make it possible for anyone to reproduce, in any sex combination; artificial wombs would make biological wombs unnecessary; and the burdens on women that have long been associated with reproduction will be eliminated. Additionally, greater gender biological and physiological fluidity (allowing people to either be fully androgynous or explore both masculine and feminine traits and characteristics), will liberate us from gender constraints and allow for a more enriched “palette of diverse gender expression” (1).

Dvorsky and Hughes (2008) praised genderqueer theorists such as Judith Butler, Kate Bornstein, Martine Rothblatt, and Leslie Feinberg, amongst others, for purposefully subverting the gender binary, offering new theoretical frameworks, and for their roles in the emergence of a new and rather successful genderqueer politics, but suggested that these strategies are largely “ideological, psychological and cultural,” and have not provided the kind of *materialist* critique or liberatory technological models of praxis to successfully deconstruct the gender binary (7). And it is for this reason, they suggested, that 21<sup>st</sup> century posthumanist and transhumanist discourse around the use of technologies to “transcend” the biological and psychological

limitations of the human body is the only way to begin to seriously address problems of gender (7). A “post-biological” species, they added, would by definition be also postgendered (7). Artificial wombs, cloning, parthenogenesis, and same-sex reproduction, they asserted, are no longer merely “hypothetical” liberatory technologies, but are rather just on the horizon of possibilities<sup>48</sup> (10). Liberation from natural, biological reproduction, they continually insist, is a key component to a postgender society

To some degree reinforcing Dvorsky and Hughes’ claim, Butler (2004) argued that feminists who criticized the replacement of the maternal body with the patriarchal apparatus of technology must also consider the advantages brought to women by technologies. She insisted that those feminists who opposed biotechnological innovations because they threatened to efface “the primacy of sexual difference,” risked further naturalizing heterosexual reproduction (p. 11). Technology is a site of (reproductive and productive) power, she argued, and as such, can have both liberatory and oppressive effects; technology then cannot be either wholly and completely criticized or celebrated. Of course, when Butler was discussing bodies as social constructions, she was referring to human bodies, but her suggestion that “ ‘the body’ *appears* as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” seems entirely apropos to most techno-body representations (my emphasis, 12). While these bodies may *seem* like blank tablets on which to inscribe our desires, fears, identities, and so forth, their mere presence is already indicative of “a set of cultural meanings” (12).

Postgenderism, Dvorsky and Hughes (2008) concluded, radically reinterprets feminist critiques of patriarchy and gender, as well as the genderqueer critiques of how binary gender constructions constrain individual potential, and offers both a basic theoretical framework and set of practices that may be able to transcend both essentialism and social constructivism through the use of biotechnologies. Despite a wealth of historical variations in gender roles, they argued, no evidence of a gender-free society exists, and our efforts to create gender-neutral societies have reached their theoretical limitations (13). Therefore, they insisted, biotechnologies, neurotechnologies and information technologies offer necessary and complementary ways of freeing ourselves, once and for all, from patriarchy and the constraints such binarisms of sex and

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, “progress in nuclear transfer from somatic cells into fertilized embryos,” as well as the use of somatic cells as faux sperm and eggs, “suggests that soon gay and lesbian couples will be able to combine germplasm to make biological children” (2008: 10).

gender, putting an end, they added, to “static biological and sexual self-identification,” and offering people the opportunity to choose for themselves which biological and gender traits they prefer (13).

Notably, however, what several of these theorists (Haraway, Parisi, Dvorsky and Hughes) did *not* address was how, once such discursive and biotechnological problems are worked through, people may resist becoming genderless cyborgs or may cling to their humanness, even as it has been constructed within humanistic and modern discourses. Additionally, Dvorsky and Hughes’ use of the concept of postgenderism is precisely the kind of techno-utopian, beyond-gender appropriation that Haraway was worried about. And as Dale Carrico (2008) pointed out, in response to Dvorsky and Hughes’ thesis, there is nothing inherently emancipatory about technology. Furthermore, Carrico contended, their arguments pointed to a huge underestimation of the practical work that has been performed by anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist discourse. Dvorsky and Hughes’ argument, Carrico added, bordered on a kind of technological-essentialist and technological-determinist premise that is as equally problematic as earlier gender-essentialist arguments.

In many ways, we seem to have come full circle, back to Haraway’s treatise on the cyborg as a potentially liberating figure of the technological era. Though Haraway’s cyborg, at the time, was more of figurative than literal character on the postgender theoretical landscape, the advent of recent (and promise of future) bio-technological advancements make her attempts to theorize the implications of a bio-technological future all the more relevant and necessary, which is no doubt why postmodern theorists continue to return, again and again, to the “Cyborg Manifesto.” Additionally, concepts such as postgenderism arise out of increasing dissatisfaction with previous and contemporary theories of gender that seem to have been unable to adequately address the gender binary problem. Postgenderism, above all, seems to be concerned with disrupting gender binaries, though *how* is still unclear.

## **VI. Conclusion:**

Many of the debates discussed in this statement evolve out of concerns and hopes for what appears to be a bio-technological future in which the human/machine interface offers a possibly radical (re)envisioning of the body as we have thus far known it, potentially impacting

subjectivity, embodiment, sexuality and gender, the material body, and the role of the body in the body politic. As this field demonstrates, while postmodern bodies represent new bodily configurations, many of the theoretical frameworks used to understand these bodies are still seemingly entrenched in Cartesian dualisms. As highlighted within the last section, many recent theorists are attempting to move beyond these dualistic discourses and locate new theoretical models, but successful frameworks likely will require more theoretical bridges between the fields of science and technology and the humanities. Additionally, as humans increasingly interface with machines, questions of ethics, power, and inequality resurface in new ways and will no doubt need to be addressed more directly in the near future.

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