

# Across the borderlines

*Coalitional feminist politics beyond identity  
and difference*

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‘From the very beginning, then, “we” are with one another, not as points gathered together, or as a togetherness that is divided up, but as a being-with-one-another.’

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (2000, p. 96)

‘To struggle for an existence is to transform an existence. No wonder: there is hope in the assembly.’

Sara Ahmed, Introduction to *Sexism: A Problem With a Name* (2015, p. 13)

## INTRODUCTION

Class and identity politics have long had a vexed relationship. Proponents of purist class politics have dismissed movements based on gender, race, and sexuality as needlessly divisive, or as anathema to class solidarity. For their part, feminists, critical race theorists and queer theorists have critiqued this form of class politics as unable to give voice to the multidimensional forms of oppression experienced by various social groups. While this debate has been raging for decades in both political groups and theoretical spaces, a resolution or compromise between these two extreme positions has not been established. However, to my mind, the problem is more pressing now than ever, as we reach a global point of unprecedented economic, environmental and humanitarian crises that demand of us novel and coordinated political responses. As Eleanor Robertson writes in the Spring 2017 issue of Australian literary journal *Meanjin*:

Neoliberalism is running into its historical limits, exhausting its ability to stabilise capitalism and pacify those to whom it has doled out poverty and misery. An identity politics that is detached from material and historical questions cannot help us now; neither can faithfully repeating the left tactics of the twentieth century. The process of reconstituting something new, something that addresses the unique situation in which we find ourselves, has begun (Robertson 2017, 69).

Robertson identifies the need for a new way of mediating between the polarities of class and identity. This can also be understood in a philosophical sense as a question about subjectivity - what is the relationship between politics and individual subjects' locations or experiences? What aspects of subjectivity should politics take into account? Where identity politics focuses on membership to social groups and the dynamics of power and oppression arising from such group memberships, Marxist politics provides a more material approach to thinking about the subject and her location vis-à-vis the means of production. There is, ostensibly, a particular

tension between the dominant feminist conception of identity - that espoused in theories of intersectional feminism - and a material approach to the subject of class politics. This subject resists assimilation into an intersectional framework, which treats class as only one element of oppression amongst many, and similarly into postmodern frameworks, which tend to prioritise the discursive or normative aspects of power over the material.

These questions have troubled feminist theorists for decades, and I cannot hope to resolve them fully here. However, I believe that examining the ontology of the subject inherent to feminist theories of identity sheds some light on the supposed incompatibility of 'identity politics' and materialist approaches. In particular, I argue that feminist conceptions of vulnerability and of precarity - the differential distribution of vulnerability - can provide a materialist basis for a political ontology of the subject, one that is at the same time able to incorporate the critical insights of identitarian politics. In this thesis, I aim firstly to examine feminist conceptions of identity, and the critiques of identity that have been raised over the past decades, and secondly to find a feminist account of subjectivity that is able to address these critiques. In the first chapter, I trace the differing meanings that 'identity' has had to feminist theory over time. I argue that the key criticisms raised against twentieth-century feminist conceptions of identity - the problems of essentialism and homogeneity - are unable to be overcome by intersectionality theory, at least in its currently dominant forms. In the second chapter, I examine the ways in which theories of the subject have implications for our ability to form political coalitions. Strictly identitarian models can reify the differences between groups, I argue, precluding the potential for the realisation of shared or overlapping interests. I evaluate Linda Zerilli's attempt to move beyond the 'subject-centred frame', towards a substantive feminist conception of freedom, and the question of whether Judith Butler's work can provide the grounds for a collective feminist agency. Butler's later work on precarity, I argue, addresses the task articulated by Zerilli - that of devising a feminist politics that does not revolve around the subject. In the final chapter, I put forth an argument for precarity as a way of thinking about the ontology of the subject that is able to meet some of the pitfalls of identitarian politics. The condition of precarity is constitutively social, political and economic, articulating the ways in which particular groups are made more vulnerable than others to violence, illness and death by certain historical configurations of power. Precarity is a shared condition, grounded in our primary vulnerability to others, and so cuts across the boundaries of identity groups. In this sense, then, it is beyond identity and difference - able to motivate political coalitions that respond to the structural conditions that produce inequality and violence.

Before beginning my first chapter, some remarks on the methodology of this project are appropriate. Firstly, my thinking is, inevitably, shaped by the socio-political context from which I write. It is, as Donna Haraway would put it, a view from somewhere, a 'view from a body' (Haraway 1988, 589). In particular, it is a response to the current conditions of

neoliberalism and post-industrial capitalism,<sup>1</sup> to a global context of attacks on social support services, ever-deepening economic inequality, and the violent shoring up of national borders. It is also a response to a context in which feminist thinking has spread rapidly, but has attenuated politically in the process. The twenty-first century has seen feminism shift from a concrete political practice to, variously, a brand, a personal identity, an individual choice, or a vague and meaningless slogan. A ‘dangerous liaison’ has begun to form between newer forms of feminist thought, fixated on questions of culture and individual choice, and the expansionary project of neoliberalism (Eisenstein 2005). What were once radical and visionary critiques of gender risk becoming ‘fraught with ambiguity, susceptible to serving the legitimisation needs of a new form of capitalism’ (Fraser 2013, 223). I write from this historical position, in which, as I will argue, there is a dire need for a coalitional and materialist philosophy to underpin feminist politics. Such an approach requires (re-)thinking the nature of subjectivity, relationality and identity, and challenging both the discourses and structures that have the effect of reifying divisions between groups. I hope that my work will provide a small contribution to this task. Secondly, while the claims I make about the subject are, variously, ontological, existential, ethical and political, I do not want to abstract away from the experiences of real-world subjects. I take Charles Mills’ distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory to be instructive here. Mills characterises ideal theory as theory which takes as its starting point an idealised image of the social, and non-ideal theory, which begins with the concrete conditions that characterise our everyday experiences of the world (Mills 2005). Ideal theory, he argues, is ‘in crucial respects obfuscatory, and can indeed be thought of as part *ideological*, in the pejorative sense of a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege’ (Mills 2005, 166). I hope to ground my thinking in the realm of the non-ideal - to seek a philosophical account of feminist subjectivity that speaks to our experiences as embodied, interdependent subjects in the world. Such an account must be able to inform counter-hegemonic practices of critique and resistance, that is, to make visible the aspects of current political structures that marginalise various communities, and at the same time empower these communities to transform these very structures.

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey defines neoliberalism as ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (Harvey 2005, 2). Further, neoliberalism is underpinned by processes such as the dismantling of the Fordist welfare state, the free movement of capital across national borders (i.e. market globalisation), the weakening of trade unions, the automation of production, and the outsourcing of jobs to offshore labour (Duménil and Lévy, 2004).

## CHAPTER 1: IDENTITY

Feminism is one among a number of social movements concerned with questions of identity and difference. However, the meaning of identity in feminist theory and politics has not been static or stable. To situate the current focus on what is nebulously referred to as ‘identity politics’, I will briefly sketch the development of feminist notions of identity over the past decades, and the critiques of these notions that have emerged. In particular, I explore the problems of essentialism and homogeneity that have been raised by various theorists. They argue that politics grounded in group membership can reinscribe essentialist or naturalistic meanings of identity, and that acting on behalf of identity groups can work to homogenise those within groups. I argue that while it has generated crucial insights into the complex and multivalent nature of identity, intersectionality theory has failed to overcome the conceptual critiques levelled at earlier conceptions of feminist identity. The underlying ontology of the subject on which intersectionality theory relies is one premised on individualistic and essentialistic notions of identity. In practice, this has undermined its potential to ground practices of collective resistance - it has left feminists unable to say “we”.

Identity is a term used in highly divergent ways by philosophers. In formal logic and mathematics, identity is conceived as self-sameness - the relation that an object bears only to itself. Leibniz proposed that an object,  $x$ , is identical to another object,  $y$ , if and only if  $y$  shares every property or predicate of  $x$ . However, this metaphysical conception of identity seems to lack analytic power. Wittgenstein argued in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that ‘to say of two things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing’ (Wittgenstein 2002 [1921], 63). That is, two objects can never truly be identical if identity is conceived as the relation that an object has to itself. Even if two red chairs share the exact same physical characteristics (colour, size, weight, and so on), their nature as separate objects in space - as two different ‘things’ - belies this definition of identity. Rejecting this formal conception of identity as meaningless, Wittgenstein proposed an alternative paradigm of ‘family resemblances’, which emphasises not exact identity, but clusters of properties attributed to groups. For example, there is no one attribute that all games share - but we recognise games as games because they have a family resemblance. Categories share ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing’ (Wittgenstein 1953, 66), Wittgenstein argued, so any attempt to reduce them to singular or essential traits will fail. It is this conception of identity as *similarity*, rather than sameness, that is at play in our common understanding of social identity. Clearly, no two people are identical in a Leibnizian sense, and neither is there a *single* trait that all members of a social group share. Rather, groups that constitute social identities share clusters of diverse properties - shared histories, physical traits, geographic location, political beliefs - while not being reducible to any one of these properties. Natalie Stoljar argues, in this vein, that ‘there is no single set of features an individual must have in order to be a woman; she is a

member of the type just in case she participates in the relevant resemblance structure' (Stoljar 1995, 264). 'Woman' has no Aristotelian or Lockean essence - rather, it is a cluster of properties (self-identification, gender presentation, bodily characteristics, and so on) that allows us to identify some things as women, and others as not-women, even when this boundary is not made explicit.

In the realm of political philosophy, social identity is broadly understood in part as identification with a group (first-person identity), and in part as how one is perceived or recognised by others (third-person identity). Irish people identify as citizens of the same country, and may be identifiable as such by their accents or appearance. An African-American person may identify variously as black, African-American, Afro-American, and so on, and their physical appearance may cause them to be treated by others in certain racialised ways. This understanding of identity is relational, in that it situates identity within the context of our social relations and histories, rather than as a property inherent to the subject. Iris Marion Young, for example, argues for a relational understanding of social groups:

Group meanings partially constitute people's identities in terms of the cultural forms, social situation, and history that group members know as theirs, because these meanings have been either forced on them or forged by them or both. (Young 1990, 44).

Moreover, Young argues, the social dynamic of oppression is crucial to many of the most salient social identities we hold. The social groups of 'women', 'queers', 'people of colour', and so on are forged through processes of power and domination that create these subjective identities only in relation to other ones (men, heterosexual people, whites). We often (but not always) find ourselves already in these groups by virtue of our social situation, physical or psychological characteristics - which is to say that through social group membership, we experience a sense of *thrownness* (Young 1990, 46). Young borrows this term from Heidegger, who uses thrownness [*Geworfenheit*] to conceptualise the phenomenological condition of being born into a particular set of circumstances outside our control (Heidegger 1969 [1927], 219-224). We are delivered into a world as a particular person, in particular relations to others. Gender, culture, nationality, and class are thrust upon one at birth, so the subject finds herself already within certain groups. Such social groups are thus distinct from *associations* like political parties, clubs and unions, which are entered voluntarily, and have formalised membership criteria and practices. From here on, I will refer to 'social identities' as those that are formed through such processes of power and oppression. Identity politics, then, can be understood as a politics forged in response to these processes of group formation.<sup>2</sup> Movements like feminism, the civil rights movement, gay liberation, and

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<sup>2</sup> This definition of identity politics is a capacious one and would include, for example, white nationalist movements - a point to which I will return later in this chapter (§1.3).



Indigenous sovereignty movements focus on the social identities of their subjects. Many point to the historical processes of injustice that have oppressed these groups on the very basis of their identities, and have a tendency to frame members of social groups as having shared interests. However, the nature of these movements' political responses to oppression vary widely, from positive revaluation of difference, to calls for the abolition of certain identities altogether. Here, I will focus primarily on feminism as one among many movements grounded in identity - however, I believe that many of my reflections also apply to the other movements mentioned above. Indeed, the very task of theorising a *coalitional* feminist politics is to challenge the separation of these groups, and to explore the ways in which our relatively rigid conceptions of identity have engendered rifts between social movements.

### **1.1 Identity in feminism: assimilation, accommodation, accountability**

Identity has held differing meanings to feminist thinkers over time. In her particularly succinct model, Jodi Dean argues that identity politics, in the United States, has moved through three phases - assimilation, accommodation, and accountability (Dean 1996). Each phase 'is characterised by a particular notion of the subject, the sort of recognition demanded, the type of appeal raised in making this demand, a vision of society or culture, and a corresponding political theory or conception of the state and legal system' (Dean 1996, 50). Although it somewhat generalises the diversity of feminist movements, I think Dean's model provides a useful framework for understanding the trajectory of feminist politics over time. I will use this model to sketch the dominant notions of identity in feminist thought - from an emphasis on sameness (rooted in shared rationality), to the validation of inter-group difference prominent in twentieth-century feminisms, to the recognition of intra-group difference that characterises contemporary intersectional feminist politics. Ultimately, the concepts of identity and difference should be thought of as bearing a dialectical relationship to one another. If a group claims a common identity, it does so to distinguish itself from another group, thus implicitly marking out its own difference. If we focus on difference within a group, we bring into being the multiple identities that exist within that group. As William Connolly puts it, 'identity requires difference in order to be' (Connolly 2002, 64). The concepts are co-constitutive, and invoking one will always imply the other; hence any attempt to categorise periods of feminist thought as focused *either* on identity *or* on difference inevitably fails.

Early feminisms, such as the suffragette movement, tended to conceive of women's identity as static and monolithic, invoking the category of 'women' as if it were an unproblematic and naturally existing group. Toril Moi argues that in the eighteenth century, alongside the birth of modern European feminism, a new emphasis on sexual difference arose: 'in the transition to the 'two-sex' model, man and woman emerge as two different species' (Moi 1999, 12).

Whether or not they accepted the prevailing ideology of biological difference, suffragette thinkers sought to challenge, in various ways, the deep-rooted social and political subjugation of women. Their primary means of doing so was to highlight some sense of sameness between men and women. For example, while Mary Wollstonecraft believed that women and men did have physical differences, she argued that they nevertheless shared the same cognitive or intellectual abilities. She declared: 'I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties' (Wollstonecraft 2008 [1792], 10). Wollstonecraft acknowledged the role of social conditions, in particular access to education, in shaping the status and capacities of women. By virtue of their universal capacity for reason, Wollstonecraft argued, women deserve the same social status as men. Suffragette movements were thus premised on demands for assimilation into the standards by which men were judged and treated. Such a focus, Dean notes, targets its political claims at the formal institutions of the state, such as the law: 'Law will help me. Neutral and liberal, it will protect me just as it does you. It will secure our equality' (Dean 1996, 50).

Dean's next phase of identity politics, accommodation, is primarily premised not on identity (the ultimate sameness of women and men) but on difference - specifically, intergroup difference. Some feminist movements in the twentieth century sought to unite women under the universal banner of 'sisterhood', grounded in the supposedly shared experiences of women, *as* women. The goal of such movements was a hopeful one - to bring together women from diverse backgrounds, united in political opposition to patriarchy. While they sought to elucidate the unity that underlies women's experiences, these movements also underwent a shift in their conceptions of gender identity. In the 1950s and 1960s, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' were first distinguished by medical professionals working with transgender patients (Moi 1999, 22). The distinction they drew between sex (biological) and gender (psychological) allowed feminists in this era to articulate and analyse sexism as 'the oppressive social norms brought to bear on [biological] differences' (Moi 1999, 24). The effect of these norms, and their related processes of subjugation and domination, create gendered difference in women. This early form of social constructivism allowed second-wave feminists to maintain that women are different from men, but that this difference is not an inevitable outcome of women's biology - rather, it is due to processes of patriarchal socialisation. This recognition of difference engendered a sense of pride, and the reclamation of feminine difference. Rather than disavowing typically feminine traits in order to attain the same social status as men, some second-wave feminists sought to restructure systems of representation and discourse, such that women or femininity could be positively valued, rather than denigrated, in their difference.

The unifying tendencies of early to mid twentieth-century feminism, and the universality of these claims made about gendered difference, were roundly critiqued by marginalised groups

of women from the 1970s onwards. An emphasis on universal notions of ‘womanhood’, these critics claimed, erases the specific experiences and needs of particular groups of women. For example, women of colour in the United States noted that the entry of middle-class white women into the workforce relied on the underpaid domestic labour of black women in their homes (hooks 1984, 2). Lesbian feminists, like Adrienne Rich, pointed out ‘the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship’ (Rich 1980, 632). These internal critiques of feminism recognised the multiplicity of identity, as constituted not only by gender but also by race, sexuality, class, nationality, and so on. This aligns with Dean’s third phase of identity politics, accountability, which Dean summarises as the demand to ‘accept responsibility for those we have excluded, seeking to find new ways to include by constantly changing restrictive interpretations and representations’ (Dean 1996, 52). The most systematic articulation of the politics of accountability is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw argued that conceiving of ‘women’ and ‘blacks’ as monolithic, mutually exclusive categories elides the internal heterogeneity and overlapping nature of these groups. Crenshaw writes:

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite - that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. (Crenshaw 1991, 1242)

That is to say, in demanding recognition of the traits on the basis of which a group is supposedly marginalised, identity politics can take on a disciplinary function within groups, creating new systems of norms to which the members of groups are subjected. For example, second-wave feminism’s focus on the ‘sisterhood’ demanded that black women forego racial solidarities with black men, and maintain a primary focus on their gender identity as the core of their oppression. Within feminist groups, white, heterosexual, upper-middle class women maintained an illicit position of power and privilege, which was rendered invisible by the supposedly universal nature of women’s oppression. Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality is thus an exploration of ‘the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of colour’ (Crenshaw 1991, 1244). Most importantly, Crenshaw argues that the experiences of women of colour cannot be understood as the sum of racism and sexism (an ‘additive approach’) - rather, these processes are mutually constitutive. While Crenshaw’s primary focus was on race and gender, her theory has been extended to analyse the intersecting nature of many types of oppression - homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and so on. It has functioned as a vital tool for feminists in holding theories and organising tactics accountable for their insidious dynamics of elision and exclusion.

## 1.2 Intersectionality and identity critique

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality has undoubtedly had a wide-ranging impact on feminist theory and practice. It represents a crucial critical intervention into the imperialising tendencies of universalist feminist politics, and has given voice to the experiences of women who were previously relegated to the margins of feminist discourse. However, in recent years, it has also been met with a number of critiques. Intersectionality theory has failed to move beyond problematic conceptions of identity that plagued earlier feminist theory - in particular, the problems of essentialism and homogeneity. What I refer to as the *problem of essentialism* is evinced by the critiques of second-wave feminism raised by women of colour and lesbian feminists above. By taking identity as the basis for their political claims, identity movements can inadvertently reinforce or reify the very categories that constitute the basis of their oppression. On the one hand, feminists, queer theorists and critical race theorists, among others, overwhelmingly endorse the claim that identities are socially constructed. Our identities are not inherent or essential products of our biology, the argument goes. Indeed, it is such thinking that has historically justified the subordination of groups, on the basis of their supposedly inherently inferior biological constitution. Identities are not *things* that we are born with; they are social categories produced and imposed upon us through particular processes of socialisation.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, however, to organise around the categories of 'women', 'queer people' or 'people of colour' is to presume, to some extent, the existence of that category. When feminists make claims on behalf of 'women', for example, they call upon the ontological existence of the group in whose interests they supposedly act and speak. This masks the contingency of identities, and the histories of power through which they have been and continue to be constituted.<sup>4</sup> Poststructuralist accounts of gender, in particular, have argued that identity discourse can reinscribe naturalistic understandings of gender, sexuality and so on. Bonnie Honig summarises this worry when she writes that identity operates 'as a site of closure', declaring and disclosing the essential nature of women, or some other identity group (Honig 1992, 224).

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<sup>3</sup> This particular post-structuralist claim has been challenged, notably, in the work of Moira Gatens (1996). Gatens claims that gender socialisation theory takes the relationship between gender and the body to be arbitrary, and relies on a problematic body/mind dualism. In *Imaginary Bodies*, she argues that it is more fruitful to think of gender as the way in which certain bodies are experienced and made meaningful, which occurs in the subjective relation to culturally available imaginaries, rather than as a set of 'social lessons' that are inscribed on the blank slate of the body (Gatens 1996, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Sally Haslanger (2011) provides a useful linguistic analysis of how generic claims (for example, 'women are oppressed') can smuggle in claims about the *essential* nature of the object or phenomena in question. While these claims seek to describe the ways in which social groups are affected by processes of socialisation or oppression, the way in which they are structured as generics obscure the 'broad system of social relations within which the subjects are situated' (Haslanger 2011, 179). The pragmatic effect of a generic claim is to construct a 'common ground' - a set of background beliefs taken to be true. Haslanger argues that generic claims about social identities 'introduce implicitly into the common ground a proposition about a generic essence about how beef or women or blacks *are* by nature or intrinsically' (Haslanger 2011, 193).

The related but separate *problem of homogeneity* has been articulated by some theorists through the ‘paradox of identity’. The paradox of identity is set out by José Medina as follows:

Any political movement for the liberation and empowerment of a group requires that the identity of the group be fixed, for such movement is predicated on the interests of the identity shared by all the members of the group; but by forcing people into fixed molds of group identity, these movements end up repressing and oppressing the very identities that they set out to liberate (Medina 2003, 657).

For Medina, talk about identity groups, and organising ourselves politically around fixed axes of identity, will never allow us to escape the repressive hold of sameness. The terminology of identity inevitably fails to capture the internal heterogeneity of groups like women, black people or queer people, so claims made around those categories will always impose normative standards on their constitutive members. Thus, inadvertently, identity talk can take on a disciplinary function within groups, demanding that members conform to pre-given ‘molds of group identity’ while closing off the shape of these molds from the sphere of negotiation. Not only does this risk erasing the presence of other marginalised identity categories within groups, contributing to the oppression that these sub-groups already face, it may also amount to a denial of individual subjectivity, obfuscating the heterogeneous ways that members relate to the group.

While intersectionality theory emerged in the context of both of these critiques, in particular as a response to the problem of homogeneity, it has ultimately failed to resolve the tensions presented above. Intersectionality remains firmly rooted in an identitarian approach to feminist politics, one that takes identity categories to be, at least in some sense, fixed and knowable. While it aims to show that these categories are not separate entities, but rather overlapping and mutually constitutive, it accepts - at least implicitly - that their referents are immutable groups in the world. Jennifer Nash notes that Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality called not for the rejection of identity talk, but rather aimed ‘to add complexity to existing identity categories’ (Nash 2011, 5). Rather than dissolving the problems of essentialism and homogeneity, intersectionality has reinscribed them on a micro-level. In challenging the homogeneity of the category of ‘women’, intersectionality proposes to replace it with its constituent sub-categories - women of colour, trans women, lesbian women, women with disabilities, and so on. This process regresses, leading to groups which seek to represent increasingly specific identity categories - for example, trans-lesbian-women-of-colour-with-disabilities - a methodological approach that has been termed ‘intra-categorical complexity’ (McCall 2005, 1774). To be sure, this confronts the essentialism and homogeneity of the *broader* group, showing that ‘women’ is an internally diverse category; but it does little more than displace the conceptual problem onto various subgroups. These

subgroups, like ‘women of colour’, ‘lesbian women’, or ‘women with disabilities’, will face the same problems in seeking to make claims on behalf of their members. In the wake of robust critiques of the exclusionary effects of categorisation, intersectionality theory has failed to propose a new vocabulary or methodology for thinking about subjectivity and oppression, opting to disaggregate groups within categories, rather than challenge the process and political value of categorisation altogether. By seeking to recognise intragroup differences within the same ontological understanding of identity, intersectionality remains ‘inextricably linked to the production and maintenance of identity categories’, Nash claims, so is unable to transcend the troubles that plagued earlier and simpler modes of identitarian politics (Nash 2011, 5).

Intersectionality has also been accompanied by a movement towards a troubling individualism. While Crenshaw and the Cohambee River Collective advocated for a structural understanding of power, contemporary manifestations of intersectionality theory tend to focus on *individual* identity and, particularly, on privilege. A corollary of the focus on the intersections of oppression which some women experience is the recognition that other women - white, able-bodied, heterosexual, wealthy - possess relative power and privilege. To be sure, the notion of privilege sheds an important light on the workings of power within feminist spaces. However, Sonia Kruks argues, the notion of privilege can also mask the structural dynamics of power, becoming something that only individuals hold or have the ability to address (Kruks 2005, 181). This stimulates a confessional enumeration of the types of privilege one holds, in ‘a discourse of personal discovery, self-confession, and guilt’ (Kruks 2005, 181). But this ‘guilt-ridden focus on the self’ can be paralysing, leading the individual to inaction for fear that they will do more harm than good (Kruks 2005, 183). On the other side of the equation, Wendy Brown analyses the political psyche of the oppressed subject:

Politicized identity, premised on exclusion and fueled by the humiliation and suffering imposed by its historically structured impotence ... is as likely to seek generalized political paralysis, to feast on generalized political impotence, as it is to seek its own or collective liberation (Brown 1993, 403).

Drawing on Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, Brown argues that identity politics is reactionary; it engenders and rewards ‘wounded attachments’ to the very structures that create oppression and suffering. In her genealogical approach, Brown also argues that identity politics must be understood in its political and historic context, as an expression of liberal capitalist ideology. This ideology places primacy on the individual subject, and prioritises the incorporation of the individual into the abstract, universalised “we” (Brown 1993, 392). Identities are produced and commodified in a way that allows subjects to be subsumed into the fold of capitalism, displacing or repressing the *ressentiment* that emerges from social

exclusion. This genealogy explains the identitarian focus on the *individual* as the bearer of identity, oppression and privilege, obscuring the structural dynamics that give rise to these phenomena. Brown's critique is not a wholesale rejection of the politics of identity - rather, it calls upon us to take account of the ways in which 'certain troubling aspects of the specific genealogy of politicized identity are carried in its political demands' (Brown 1993, 391). She proposes a shift in identity discourse, from a focus on 'being [a certain identity]' to one of 'wanting [a certain future]' (Brown 1993, 407). I will return to this notion of desire and futurity in Chapter 3.

### **1.3 Conservative identitarianism - the logic of borders**

There is also a dark underside to the logic of identity. If, as I have argued above, 'identity politics' encapsulates political theory and practice that responds to group identities formed by dynamics of power and oppression, not all movements within this category are emancipatory ones. Consider the following quote:

So long as we avoid and deny our identities, at a time when every other people is asserting its own, we will have no chance to resist our dispossession, no chance to make our future, no chance to find another horizon (Spencer, quoted in Haider 2017).

This comes not from a feminist or a civil rights advocate, but from Richard Spencer, the director of the National Policy Institute, a white nationalist think tank in the United States. Spencer himself rejects the term 'white nationalist', preferring to think of himself as an 'identitarian'. He has advocated for the 'peaceful ethnic cleansing' of the United States, to protect what he sees as 'a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity' (Lombroso and Appelbaum 2017). Spencer's politics are mobilised around a category of identity - whiteness - which he sees as under threat. He writes that 'identitarianism is fundamentally about *difference*, about culture as an expression of a certain people at a certain time', and argues that white people should reclaim and value their difference (Spencer 2015). The structure of the identitarian framework Spencer deploys is thus virtually indistinguishable from the ways of understanding identity presented above, though clearly its content and political purposes are more sinister. It takes an identity category as the basis of its claims, and argues for the recognition and revaluation of this categorical identity.

How are we to understand the relation of this white nationalist rhetoric to feminist politics? Examining the cooptation of identitarian discourse by white nationalists, like Spencer, elucidates some of the underlying conceptual problems within identitarianism, in what Fredric Jameson would call the 'political unconscious' of identity concepts (Jameson 1981). Identity politics (at least in its categorical forms presented above) maintains an investment in distinguishing the borders between groups. Being able to speak and act on behalf of groups

(women, women of colour, queer people, and indeed, white people) presupposes a 'we', and thus implicitly a 'they'. Those in the outgroup cannot speak on behalf of 'us', for they are not one of 'us'. This investment in the borders of identity groups can be seen in separatist identity movements, like lesbian or black separatist groups, but also in the aspiration to 'racial purity' held by white nationalists like Spencer. This is an inevitable consequence of the essentialist logic of difference. As Butler writes,

... every determination of "the people" involves an act of demarcation that draws a line ... and that line immediately becomes a contentious border. In other words, there is no possibility of "the people" without a discursive border drawn somewhere (Butler 2015, 5).

This rhetoric ignites 'a declaration of wants and desires, or intended acts, and political claims' particular to the bordered-off identity group (Butler 2005, 175). Further, it constructs the appearance that the interests of different identity groups are in irresolvable conflict. Nancy Ehrenreich calls this the 'zero sum problem', whereby the interests of different identity groups and subgroups seemingly cannot be simultaneously met (Ehrenreich 2002, 267). For Ehrenreich, this is due to a 'discourse of distinctness' that conceives of identity groups as separate and discrete, with competing social interests. For example, if black women's interests are fundamentally at odds with those of white women, the same feminist movement cannot simultaneously address both groups' needs; likewise, in Spencer's case, the interest of American whites in maintaining dominion over 'their' territory cannot coexist with other racial or ethnic groups' interest in living in the country. Although it is not necessarily a logical conclusion of a politics based on identity, the conflation of identity with interest is a common and dangerous one, as it furthers the problems of essentialism and homogeneity described above. It also entrenches and reifies intra-group difference, closing off possibilities for coalitional political thinking that could enable diverse groups' coming-together across the borderlines of group identity.

It is important to ask how the borders of identity are created, normalised, stabilised and upheld. When identity categories are thought of as having rigid borders (between men and women, blacks and whites, homosexuals and heterosexuals), those occupying liminal spaces can find themselves excluded from multiple categories at once. This is the experience described by Gloria Anzaldúa in her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa 1987). Through the notion of *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldúa explores the 'psychic restlessness' caused by the experience of being 'torn between ways', living at the juncture of multiple cultures, traditions and identity groups (Anzaldúa 1987, 78). As a Chicana growing up on the border of Mexico and Texas, Anzaldúa experienced both the figural and the literal violence of borders. She describes the borderlands as 'a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary' (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). Anzaldúa writes in two



variations of English and six variations of Spanish to evoke in the reader the sense of alienation and multiplicity that arises from existing in the 'borderlands'. While she does not seek to disavow or discard the groups and cultures to which she experiences a sense of belonging, Anzaldúa's text can be read as an argument for the need to attend to the ways in which dualistic ways of thinking about identity groups will occlude those living at the intersections. Constructing identity as something shared by an in-group, and not by an out-group, is one way in which the logic of borders is enacted. But, as Jennifer Nash argues, intersectionality can at times replicate this same logic, particularly through the treatment of black women as a prototype of intersectional identity, and as 'a unitary and monolithic entity' (Nash 2008: 8). She points to a fundamental paradox in the theory of intersectionality, which, while it rightly seeks to expose the exclusionary dynamics of identity categories, has replicated these dynamics in its theorisation of marginalised groups.

In response to the critiques of identity politics summarised above, some theorists have advocated *tout court* for the disavowal of identity as an analytic category. Some Marxist theorists, for example, have drawn the conclusion that what is needed is a return to the material politics of class, that is, an approach that takes into account the subject's class position and relation to the means of production. Butler phrases this as a demand for a politics unsullied by 'factionalizing, identitarian, and particularistic' matters of identity (Butler 1998, 33). But such a politics clearly risks reinstating the forms of oppression that identity movements set out to critique in the first place - white supremacy, heterosexism, misogyny, and so on. Indeed, the very success of these movements has been to make these 'merely cultural' forms of oppression visible, to show that they have deep and enduring material effects on our lives. For example, as Butler argues, socialist feminists brought to light the way in which the dynamics of gender influence economic relations, especially through the sphere of unpaid domestic and reproductive labour that is rendered invisible in capitalist economies (Butler 1998). Identity, messy and complex as it is, remains a powerful force in the social world - and one that can be both a source of domination, and of meaning. This motivates the difficult task of heeding the critical insights of intersectionality, while seeking to resolve some of the conceptual flaws in the way it portrays subjectivity. In the next chapter, I will evaluate theoretical attempts to overcome the persistent and troublesome focus on identity in feminist theory.

## CHAPTER 2: LANGUAGE AND AGENCY

‘Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert.’

- Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (1970, p. 44)

How might feminist theory be able to ground collective political agency? In this section, I argue that our models of subjectivity - whether identitarian or otherwise - have material implications for our ability to act together in the world. In doing so, I evaluate a feminist conception of agency that moves beyond the identity-centric frame of the subject - that of Linda Zerilli (2005). Zerilli argues for a substantive feminist conception of freedom, grounded not in the subject or social group’s identity, but in the agonistic act of coming together to make political claims. I analyse Zerilli’s attempt to construct a feminist politics that is able to move beyond identity and difference and transcend a persistent focus on the subject’s identity. I argue that while her Arendtian notion of freedom is a helpful orientation for theories of political coalition, and indeed one that I will adopt in the next chapter, she fails to ground this freedom in an appreciation of the material conditions necessary for the exercise of this freedom. Secondly, I analyse a set of criticisms commonly levied at Judith Butler’s early work, which charge her theory with being unable to motivate or explain practices of resistance, agency, and/or freedom. Discursive frameworks for thinking about subjectivity, it is claimed, tend to elide the embodied dimensions of subjectivity - the substantive conditions that preclude subjects from assembling, from acting together, and from making political claims. This can work to obscure the ways in which particular groups are precluded from the realm of political speech and action, motivating a search for a way of thinking about political subjectivity that brings light to and works against this exclusion. Finally, I argue that Butler’s more recent work might provide tools for addressing these concerns, and for theorising together experiences of subjectivation,<sup>5</sup> with sensitivity to the insights of intersectionality and identity theory, and a material understanding of collective agency.

### 2.1 Theorising collective political agency

I will firstly note that here I am not strictly interested in questions of individual agency and autonomy, important though they are. I want to ask, rather, how can feminists enable *collective political agency*, an acting-together in the public realm, despite the ineradicable differences between subjects and groups? How can political coalitions between different groups be built? Is there space within critical theory, which has been partly preoccupied with

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Subjectivation’ broadly refers to the processes through which subjectivity is formed. For poststructuralists, these processes include exposure to disciplinary norms, the recognition of others, and interpellation. Through these interpersonal mechanisms, situated within dynamics of power, the subject comes to realise her own position in the world, and forms a coherent and enduring self-identity. As Butler puts it, ‘one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency’ (Butler 1997b, 83).

the *individual* subject, with *individual* agency, with *individual* identity, to think about such possibilities? By *collective political agency*, I mean the ability to coordinate political action in order to resist conditions of subjugation. This action can take many forms - having a public voice to criticise these conditions, the ability to assemble for demonstrations or protests, the capacity to found new social organisations, and so on. Two necessary (but not sufficient) conditions of collective political agency are: i) the ability to communicate and formulate shared goals and intentions, and ii) the ability to realise these intentions through coordinated action. The first of these conditions is relational; it recognises the importance of dialogical communication to the coordination of action. It also recognises the plurality of perspectives that exist, and indeed the very role of dialogical communication in formulating these perspectives. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the success of democratic politics ‘depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as on the possibility of choosing between real alternatives’ (Mouffe 1999, 756). The step of communicative deliberation provides a means for elaborating alternatives to the status quo, and collectively determining what constitutes a preferential state of affairs. This is not done purely by reason-giving - it is also an affective and emotionally engaged process, one of ‘turning towards the other’, in the words of Sara Ahmed (2004). The second condition is a substantive one - to be able to realise one’s intentions requires certain material and social conditions. For example, when public protest is made illegal, or when the assembly of particular marginalised groups is banned, condition (ii) is undermined. In contrast, privileged groups, with access to media platforms and influence over lawmaking, have relatively high levels of agency to enact their political will.

The way one thinks and talks about identity, and the ontological framework from which one articulates and enacts political claims, can both enable and constrain collective political agency. Given the dialogical, affective and communicative nature of collective agency gestured to above, it is important to consider the practical implications that certain theories of subjectivity will have. Identitarian models, beyond being reductive in how they carve up social groups along certain boundaries, are also inhibitive in a normative sense. Considering identity groups as discrete entities, with inevitably conflicting political interests, hinders both the ability to conceive of and articulate shared political aims, and the capacity for heterogeneous groups to work together in coordinated action to achieve these aims. The problem remains, as Alexander Dunst and Caroline Edwards put it, ‘to think subjectivities capable of systemic collective transformation’ of the social landscape (Dunst and Edwards 2011, 7). How, then, is the subject best conceived if the aim is the remediation of collective political agency? A useful account must face the difficult task of elaborating some shared framework through which the aims of collective action can be arbitrated. Such a framework must be sensitive to the dynamics of oppression acting between and through social groups (for example, homophobia, sexism, and racism) without splitting these groups into fragments or factions that are unable to communicate on shared grounds, or recognise when acting

together would be mutually beneficial. To be sure, this is a demanding threshold, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully address these problems; but nonetheless I hope to provide some insight into the ways in which feminist conceptions of the subject relate to the goal of collective political agency.

## **2.2 The subject of feminism - women and freedom**

Poststructuralist analysis presents a significant challenge to the very notion of the subject inherent to much feminist theory. Following Foucault, Butler rejects the idea of the 'sovereign, founding subject' (Foucault 1977, 50). We are not self-willing or self-creating subjects, Butler argues - rather, we are shaped (in ways that are both constraining and enabling) by processes of subjectivation. Importantly, these processes are to a large extent influenced by language. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler opens with the statement: 'we ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory' (Butler 1997a, 1). For example, through the discursive process of interpellation, the subject is 'hailed into being' and comes to recognise their own positionality as a certain kind of subject (as a girl, a man, a racial Other, or as subjugated to the law). In turn, this self-reflexive recognition - crucial to the process of subject formation - engenders certain kinds of bodily performances, citations of gendered or racialised scripts, that are self-regulatory and self-disciplining (Butler 1990). Strongly compelled to repeat these scripts, in part by the threat of punishment for deviant performances, we cannot be considered autonomous in the traditional sense - as self-constituting, free-willed, or purely rational subjects. The sense in which we have agency, at least in Butler's earlier works, is restricted to the subversion or inappropriate citation of scripts. This 'performative excess' arises from the fact that our embodied citations will never be perfect iterations of social scripts. In the case of gender, 'becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal which nobody actually inhabits' (Butler, quoted in Kotz 1992, 85). In this radical inhabitability lies the potential to subvert the norms through which we are formed.

In *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Linda Zerilli follows the poststructuralist critique of traditional notions of the subject - but, as we shall see, she also directs it back at Butler. Zerilli focuses on Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'social question'. The social, for Arendt, denotes the sphere of necessity, in which the biological needs of the body take precedence. While these needs were previously contained to the domestic sphere, leaving the *polis* as a space of political discourse, modernity is characterised by the expansion of the social realm (Arendt 1958). For Zerilli, the 'social question' refers to the way in which particular groups make political claims. She argues that feminists have framed 'women' as a group with pre-given interests and demands, and have used democracy as a means to fulfilling these demands. This stands in contrast to Arendt's ideal of freedom, which takes democracy to be an end in itself (Zerilli 2005, 4). Following Arendt, Zerilli claims that the social question is

fundamentally bound to the notion of the sovereign subject, ‘the nodal point around which every political question of freedom gets posed’ (Zerilli 2005, 10). For example, Foucault’s later analysis of ethical practices of self-creation retains this focus on individual agency, despite his understanding of how individuals are situated within and shaped by regimes of power. He examines the potential for freedom in the ethical relation to self, but fails to create a *political* conception of freedom that could extend to communities and collectives. Butler is less reliant on the ontological existence of the individual subject than Foucault, but, Zerilli claims, she does not so much transcend the frame of the subject as move into its ‘negative space’ (Zerilli 2005, 12). Zerilli argues that Butler, in her critique of subjectivation, seems to gesture towards a strangely liberal ideal of freedom as freedom from subjection. If the only sense of agency the Butlerian subject can muster is the subversion of existing norms, then it becomes difficult to see how women or feminists could ever be truly capable of founding anything anew. Within this framework, any concept of freedom will inevitably collapse into the question of the subject’s agency. Zerilli calls this ‘the vicious circle of agency at the heart of politics’ (Zerilli 2005, 12).

To move beyond the trap of a subject-centered politics, Zerilli argues, we need to develop a non-sovereign conception of freedom. She draws on Arendt’s understanding of freedom as an action or practice, founded through relations between plural communities in the public realm (Zerilli 2005, 16). In the difficult task of constructing a non-sovereign notion of freedom, Zerilli turns to the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, who together wrote *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (‘Don’t Think You Have Any Rights’; published in English as *Sexual Difference*) in 1987. The Milanese collective sought to transcend the ‘impossible choice’ of equality or difference, revolving around the identity of the individual subject, that has polarised feminist debates (Zerilli 2005, 96). In doing so, they turned to a radically different notion of ‘freedom ... as the capacity to found new forms of political association’, and a specifically feminist freedom that centres voluntary, reciprocal and complex relations among women (Zerilli 2005, 98). This informs Zerilli’s understanding of a feminist politics of freedom that revolves around speech and action in a public space. She describes this as a politics of “I can”, recognising the conditions that must be in place for one to act, not just an abstracted “I will” (Zerilli 2005, 11). A formal conception of freedom - like having a set of rights enshrined in the law - is no guarantee for the effective exercise of these rights. Freedom must be an immanent practice, exercised by groups in their everyday practices of association.

Zerilli’s freedom involves various types of speech acts: promising, making judgments, and the act of critique. Drawing on Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*, Zerilli posits language ‘as a war-machine’ (Zerilli 2005, 70), able to inaugurate the new through ‘a new grammar of difference’ (Zerilli 2005, 29). In her focus on the ‘inaugural power of speech’ (Zerilli 2005, 24), however, Zerilli’s aim to establish a substantive conception of freedom flounders. It

takes for granted the capacity of language to have uptake in the world - indeed, our capacity to speak freely in the first place. But what good is making promises or judgments when they do not have traction on the rough ground of our actual circumstances? It seems that Zerilli overlooks a crucial aspect of Arendt's conception of freedom - namely, that political speech and action depend first and foremost on the fundamental needs of the body being met. Without a basic level of sustenance, comfort and security, Arendt argued in *On Revolution*, these needs will dominate the political domain (Arendt 1963). As Honig paraphrases, 'there can be no speech, no action, unless and until the violently pressing, indeed irresistible, needs of the body are satisfied' (Honig 1992, 218). A politics that takes for granted our ability to speak and act freely, then, is one unable to address the material conditions that systematically preclude some from entry to this domain - for example, those confined in indefinite detention, those constantly under threat of police violence, or those who are not deemed to have the rational capacities for meaningful speech in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, a similar critique is commonly made of Butler's earlier work, in which, some claim, there is a tension between her aim - to think about the relationship between norms of performativity, and their effects on bodies - and the primary focus on the linguistic or psychic dimension of these cultural practices (cf. Fraser 1997, Grosz 1995, Braidotti 2005.). As Butler recounts in the preface to *Bodies That Matter*, she was repeatedly interrogated by those with this concern, who asked, 'but what about the materiality of the body, Judy?' (Butler 1993, ix). She certainly does not claim that bodies do not exist *per se*, or that we can voluntarily constitute the body through certain choices of words or practices - Butler has forcefully addressed these common misreadings of her theory. Rather, with a deconstructionist tactic, she aims to rethink the opposition between the discursive and the material, showing that the two cannot be neatly divided. This does not, I believe, involve a disavowal of the material dimensions of the body, so much as it is a rethinking of the *meaning* of this materiality. Indeed, she remarks:

For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these 'facts', one might sceptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. But their irrefutability

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<sup>6</sup> The latter dimension of oppression comes to the fore in the field of social epistemology. Feminist philosophers like Miranda Fricker (2007) and José Medina (2013) have analysed the ways in which certain groups are subject to epistemic injustice - being denied voice or credibility on the basis of their identities, and being excluded from contributing to social imaginaries. For example, Fricker examines the creation of the term 'sexual harassment' by a group of women who had experienced inappropriate gestures and remarks in the workplace. Before this term was created, Fricker argues, women lacked a shared language through which to understand and express the harm of harassment at work, and this instance of epistemic injustice had serious impacts on the working conditions of women (Fricker 2007, 149-152). This exemplifies the way in which feminist theory and practice bring to light the interconnections between 'merely cultural' forms of oppression (such as sexist gestures and speech in the workplace) and material/structural dimensions of oppression (women's exclusion from, or subjugation within, the labour force).

in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means (Butler 1993, xi).

Read in this light, can Butler's theory plausibly be read, as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman want to suggest, as a 'flight from the material', which fails to pay adequate attention to our embodiment as subjects (Alaimo & Hekman 2009, 3)? Butler's earlier work fails to answer some critical questions about the nature of bodily necessity and its relation to the discursive, and there is some merit to the argument of materialist feminists that the body sometimes overflows or escapes the textual dimensions of subjectivity. As Grosz puts it, 'the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what any body is capable of doing, is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture' (Grosz 1995, 215). This is to say that there are surely some features or capacities of the body that cannot be reduced to effects of language or socialisation. Sometimes bodies may surprise us, escape our control, or produce actions that are unable to be made sense of through culturally available scripts. A consideration of these moments of excess can bring to light the limits of a linguistic/cultural account of subjectivity, and it can serve to expose - as in the above analysis of Zerilli - the exclusions we make in the use of certain frameworks to understand speech and action.

### **2.3 Materialising collective agency**

There are important lessons to be learnt from both Zerilli and Butler. Zerilli goes a long way towards recuperating a substantive feminist and political notion of freedom, which, I believe, is especially important for conceiving of and building collective political agency, and displacing a troublingly individualist focus on the subject. For her part, Butler shows that we cannot easily demarcate discursive norms from their effects on bodies and actions. Both articulate a related conception of agency and subjectivity, in which we cannot do without others in understanding our being-in-the-world. But, at the same time, there is a worrying elision of the body in these theories. For their focus on communication, recognition and speech as the primary means by which we establish relational social bonds and develop agency, they seem to overlook the capacity of the body to limit or enable what is doable or sayable. To take the second, substantive criterion of collective political agency seriously means accounting for not only the social but also the material conditions that underlie our ability to act together. Yet Butler's early work stops short of explicating exactly *how* bodies are implicated in the domain of the discursive or the normative. In this vein, Karen Barad argues for a materialist elaboration of performativity that 'allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming' (Barad 2003, 803). Such an account, Barad argues, challenges the representationalist foundations of social constructivism - that is, its commitment to the ontological distinction between representations and their referents. Barad suggests that this distinction is founded in remnants of a Cartesian mind-body dualism that separates the knower (the mind) from the known (objects), with representations playing a

mediating role between the two. However, poststructuralists have argued that the separation of representations from that which they represent is not so straightforward. For example, representations in the media are not merely depictions of social reality - they play a constitutive role in shaping that social reality, in a way that has material consequences on bodies, lives and institutions.

Barad's account thus builds on Foucault and Butler's accounts of power and performativity, but focuses primarily on the '*causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world ... and specific material phenomena*' (Barad 2003, 814, original italics). Feminist new materialists<sup>7</sup> like Barad have sought to think the material on its own terms, and as such to integrate an understanding of the body and its biological, human needs with our social, cultural and emotional relationality. They propose a reconsideration of the nature of matter and the weightiness of bodies, thinking about how bodies might exceed the boundaries of cultural or linguistic construction. While Barad criticises Butler for failing to '*take account of how the body's materiality ... and other material forces actively matter to the process of materialization*' (Barad 2003, 809, original italics), Butler's more recent work on precarity is able to address Barad's worries. Through the concept of precarity, Butler is able to rethink the relationship between the social, the bodily, and the material, attending to their mutually constitutive dynamics. She takes up a more explicitly embodied conception of subjectivity, examining how political structures act upon the body, and how certain material conditions can disbar groups from political action. This theoretical turn makes Butler's recent work well-placed to meet the challenges to Zerilli's work made in this section - namely, the lack of substance to Zerilli's discursive conception of freedom.

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<sup>7</sup> Sara Ahmed problematises the term 'new materialism'. She argues that 'the very claim that matter is missing can actually work to reify matter as if it could be an object that is absent or present' (Ahmed 2008, 35). To argue for a 'return to matter' erases the way in which it was there all along, Ahmed claims, in the work of feminist science studies theorists like Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway and Emily Martin. I think this is an apt point, and I use the term 'new' materialism here with this caveat.



## CHAPTER 3: A POLITICS OF PRECARIETY

In this final chapter, I examine the potential of a politics of precarity to respond to the problems raised in the first two sections - namely, the conceptual and pragmatic difficulties faced by identitarian models, and their incompatibility with substantive understandings of collective agency. I argue for a political ontology of the subject grounded in the condition of *precarity*, a term which will be defined in the first section of this chapter. Thinking with Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey, I argue that such a politics can account for both the social and material dimensions of human relationality. As a condition that is shared, but not universal, it is able to overcome the endless dialectic of sameness and difference. It is temporally extensive, projecting itself into the future, in contrast to static or fixed categories of identity. And, crucially, precarity is constitutively social and economic - it reintroduces material analysis of class conditions into a feminist theory of subjectivity, while also accounting for the ways in which social identity affects the subject's experience of precarity. Finally, I defend the concept of precarity against some critiques commonly levied at it, and consider the question of what struggles against precarity gesture towards - in other words, what the precarious might demand from the future.

### 3.1 Defining precarity

In recent years, some social theorists have turned to the concept of precarity as an explicitly political, social and economic condition underlying the experiences of the contemporary subject. The notion of precarity is drawn from the economic concept of the *precariat*,<sup>8</sup> a class characterised by insecure and unpredictable conditions of employment (see Standing 2011). As a class, the precariat is a particular product of neoliberal economic climates, in which there are high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and in which workers are expected to be flexible and self-skilling to succeed in the labour market. Philosophical and sociological work has taken up this concept by considering the existential and ontological dimensions of precarity. In particular, Judith Butler employs the term as a way of understanding the material and economic dimensions of our vulnerability to others. This builds upon her earlier psychoanalytic work, which emphasised the fundamentally relational nature of subjectivity. For Butler, the process of recognition by the Other is a crucial mechanism by which we are constituted as subjects. For example, through the discursive process of interpellation, the subject is 'hailed into being' and comes to recognise her own positionality as a certain kind of subject. In turn, this self-reflexive recognition - crucial to the process of subject formation - engenders certain kinds of bodily performances, citations of gendered or racialised scripts, that are self-regulatory and self-disciplining (Butler

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<sup>8</sup> The term *precariat* is a portmanteau of 'precarious' and 'proletariat', and in this sense can be read as a reworking of the traditional Marxist concept of the proletariat class. The 'precariat', for Standing, is a particular product of the neoliberal emphasis on flexible and mobile labour (Standing 2011, 9-10).

1990). It is in this recognitive sense that we are dependent upon others for the coherence and legibility of our self-understanding. We are, in the words of Hannah Arendt, always already 'exposed to the presence of others' (Arendt 2006 [1961], 152). As relational and social beings, we share this kind of primary vulnerability to one another. We need others for care, for support, for recognition, and for the social relationships and structures that allow us to live sustainable lives - but this also makes us vulnerable to abandonment and violence. Butler argues that the self 'invariably loses itself in the Other who secures that self's existence' (Butler 2004b, 149). One is given over to the other, in one's ineradicable need for the security that they provide.

However, there is more to be said about our vulnerability to others, for social and institutional frameworks can and do act to distribute vulnerability amongst populations in heterotopic ways. To this end, Butler defines precarity as:

... that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death (Butler 2015, 33).

Precarity is thus rendered as the differential distribution of vulnerability. When social and economic networks of support fail - for example, when welfare funding is cut, or when public healthcare is rolled back - certain groups suffer more than others. Vulnerability is thus distributed unevenly through populations, coalescing around bodies at the junctures of different axes of oppression - for example, the vulnerability of sex workers, people of colour, or refugees, to violence and persecution. It is in this sense, then, that precarity is a 'politically induced condition'. Historically specific social configurations heighten the vulnerability of certain people and communities, placing these groups at particular risk of violence and suffering. For Butler, this takes place through the disavowal or denial of the primary vulnerability that characterises social existence. Discourses and policies that seek to reinforce sovereignty (whether at an individual or collective level) cannot erase this vulnerability - rather, they serve to relocate it. For example, the neoliberal trope of the successful, self-made entrepreneur is surreptitiously deployed to justify the dismantling of welfare programs - for if *he* was able to create his own wealth from nothing, why can't *they*? The Australian stereotype of the 'dole-bludger', too lazy to get a job and thus living off taxpayers money, stands in contrast to the responsible citizen who works hard to contribute to society. These twin images are an enduring part of the Australian cultural imaginary. A 2015 study found that the majority of respondents thought that welfare recipients are 'lazy and dependent', and should work harder to find a job (Schofield & Butterworth 2015). This was linked to the perception that work is easy to find. Notably, the respondents who held this view most strongly were those who had stable jobs and had never needed welfare to subsist. The material effect of this individual heroism, itself a disavowal of primary human vulnerability, is thus to heighten the

vulnerability of lower-income communities. As Butler argues, this ‘fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition I can will away’ (Butler 2004a, xii) - never fully effaced, vulnerability can only ever be displaced onto others.

Isabell Lorey builds on Butler’s understanding of precarity, integrating this work with Foucauldian theories of biopolitics to elucidate how the precarization of particular groups is imbricated in the functioning of power. Foucault described biopolitics as a concern ‘with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem’ (Foucault 2003, 245). Biopolitics represents the imperative of governments and institutions, in modern capitalist societies, to shape and produce a population that serves their particular political ends. For Lorey, then, precarity ‘can be understood as a functional effect arising from the political and legal regulations that are specifically supposed to protect against general, existential precariousness’ (Lorey 2015, 22).<sup>9</sup> These regulations seek to stabilise, order and hierarchize bodies into economically useful configurations. For example, without adequate welfare provisions, workers are forced into the waged labour system. Under post-Fordist conditions, Lorey argues, workers are additionally expected to act as self-entrepreneurs, continuously developing their own skills and capacities, and performing the role of the virtuoso labourer to obtain a wage (Lorey 2015, 86). Lorey analyses the work of a Spanish feminist activist group, *Precarias a la Deriva*,<sup>10</sup> who aim to highlight the affective and cognitive dimensions of precarious labour. ‘Time and the capacity for caring for others become scarce; self-care serves almost exclusively to (re-)produce a profitable and productive body’ (Lorey 2015, 95-6). *Precarias a la Deriva* thus expose the gendered (feminised) nature of contemporary precarity. The work done to sustain bodies and selves through increasingly insecure and violent conditions falls primarily on women, and this kind of care labour is rarely paid. Lorey’s analysis shows the fruitfulness of precarity, as a concept, for thinking through the relationship between structures, institutions, bodies and subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Butler and Lorey, I will move through a number of arguments for why a politics of precarity is able to overcome the critiques levied against identitarian models of subjectivity. Indeed, in many ways it can be read as an integration of some aspects of intersectionality theory with contemporary materialist feminisms. Delivering a keynote at the Southbank Centre in 2016, Crenshaw sought to address the misappropriation of intersectionality theory. She reflected that ‘intersectionality is not primarily about identity - it’s about how structures make certain

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<sup>9</sup> Lorey uses ‘precariousness’ to denote the existential state arising from the vulnerability of the body, which I take to be analogous to Butler’s use of ‘vulnerability’ or ‘primary vulnerability’. For the purposes of this thesis, I will follow Butler’s usage, and will not distinguish between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’.

<sup>10</sup> The name of the group (*Precarias a la Deriva*) roughly translates to ‘precarious drifters’, or ‘the precarious adrift’. The concept of ‘drifting’ (in French, *dérive*) is borrowed from the Situationists - Guy Debord defines it as ‘a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’ (Debord 1958). *Precarias a la Deriva* take up this methodology in their ‘drifts’ through Madrid, talking to women about their working experiences in a kind of roaming ‘picket survey’ (*Precarias a la Deriva* 2004, 77).

identities the consequence of, and *the vehicle for, vulnerability*' (Southbank Centre 2016, my italics). Strengthening identity theory with a robust socio-economic understanding of precarity, I suggest, can ameliorate the problems discussed in the preceding chapters.

### 3.2 Aspects of the politics of precarity

Firstly, precarity is a keenly relational condition. It is a phenomenon that emerges as a result of the complex confluence of bodies, institutions, spaces and norms. As such, precarity cannot be coherently conceived as a predicate of individual bodies or subjects. To be sure, we can talk of individual vulnerability to others (as Butler does, in works such as *Psychic Life* and *Gender Trouble*) - but if precarity only takes shape as the social and economic distribution of this vulnerability, it is never merely a property that one *has*. Rather, it is a structure or relation in which one exists. This dimension of precarity goes some way towards challenging the troubling individualism of identitarian logic. Where declarations like 'I am a woman' propose identity as the predicate of individual subjects, statements like 'my life is precarious' - or, indeed, 'I am precarious' - cannot but make reference to these complex social and economic networks that engender the very condition of precarity. If, as Bonnie Honig argues, identity operates as 'as a site of closure', as a constative already possessed of content, precarity is a site of openness (Honig 1992, 224). It recognises the situated, dynamic and relational character of subjectivity, its continuous refusal to be fixed or essentialised. In this vein, Emily Parker argues that Butler's notion of precarity is ecological insofar as it 'seek[s] to address the violence against certain bodies through an approach that is *at once ecological and political*' (Parker 2017, 320, original italics). It is ecological in that it constitutes a rethinking of the nature of political communities, challenging the idea that they are made up of individual subjects with fixed interests or identities, coming together in voluntaristic or contractual relations. Rather, precarity emphasises the ways in which our bodies and selves emerge through dynamic and intra-active processes that depend on our primary vulnerability to others, and to extant economic and political structures - for example, labour markets, war, and ethnic cleansing. This ontology of co-existence is expressed well by Jean-Luc Nancy (2004), who emphasises the 'singular plural' nature of human existence. We can only make sense of being [*Dasein*] as a disposition, as a being-with others. For Nancy, 'this is the meaning of the world as being-with, the simultaneity of all presences that *are* with regard to one another, where no one is for oneself without being for others' (Nancy 2004, 84-85). Such a relational ontology underpins the political concept of precarity, whereby subjects always exist in entangled relations of power, desire, care, violence, and need.

Secondly, the condition of precarity is one that is shared, but not universal. We are all precarious, but not in the same way or to the same degree. In their writings, the group *Precarias a la Deriva* argue that 'precarization affects all of us ... however, axes of stratification traverse it' (Precarias a la Deriva 2010). The flows of precarity follow axes of

identity - women are made more precarious by the cultural-economic burden of childcare and unpaid domestic labour; migrants are made more precarious by imperialist border regimes that implement a distinction between documented and undocumented work; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are made more precarious by the ongoing theft of their land, by police violence and mass incarceration, and by the intergenerational health impacts of systemic racism and colonialism. We can thus map the topography of precarity along these 'axes of stratification'. The concept of precarity contains a sensitivity to difference, while not collapsing into absolutised difference; it retains a shared character, without universalising the experience of precarity. It thus constitutes 'another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having this condition separately and so having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference' (Butler 2004a, 27). Through this framework, we can understand contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter as emblematic recognitions of the interconnection between precarity and identity. The guiding principles of Black Lives Matter describe the movement as 'an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are *systematically and intentionally targeted for demise*' (Black Lives Matter 2013, my italics). In consideration of the vulnerability of black lives and bodies to violence, the founders were also driven to recognise that black women, transgender black people, black people with disabilities and poor black people were especially vulnerable - a recognition that is integrated into the praxis of the movement. It also engendered new forms of solidarity between black people and First Nations communities, for example through shared protest against resource extraction at Standing Rock in 2016.<sup>11</sup> This affirms Butler's argument that precarity 'cuts across these [identity] categories and produces potential alliances among those who do not recognize that they belong to one another' (Butler 2015, 58). Through the recognition that racialised violence at the hands of the police makes both black lives and Indigenous lives precarious, these communities were driven to act together, despite spatial and ethnic difference and a history of considerable animosity (see, e.g., Krauthamer 2013, Coleman 2013).

Thirdly, precarity brings a new temporal structure to politics. Where identity categories remain fixed and static, precarity, as an existential condition, projects itself into the future. The experience of being *on the edge*, under threat of imminent violence, starvation, illness or death, gestures towards the uncertainty of the future. It exposes the ways in which we live in flux, subjected to the changing forces of structural conditions - but this also opens up an important space of resistance. It motivates struggles to secure the conditions for liveable lives, for survival and resistance. Indeed, the very sites of resistance are to those conditions that make precarious lives uncertain or unvalued - for example, unsafe public housing strata,

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<sup>11</sup> From April 2016 to February 2017, thousands of people camped at Standing Rock in North Dakota to protest the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The 1886 km pipeline route runs through numerous sites that are sacred to the Sioux Nations, and may contaminate important sources of drinking water. The protest camp drew coalitional support from diverse groups, including war veterans, environmentalists, the Black Lives Matter movement, and many First Nations tribes (Donnella 2016).

racialised police violence, repressive laws preventing public assembly, or exploitative working conditions. The politics of precarity targets these conditions with a view to their destruction. So where identitarian politics is backward-looking, fixed in its 'wounded attachments' (Brown 1993) to past subjugation and oppression, precarity occupies the space between the present and the future, imagining a future without the constant threat of illness, violence or death. In Butler's words, we 'petition the future' for a less precarious existence (Butler 2004a, 44).

Finally, a politics of precarity works against the insidious logic of borders that I argued above (§1.3) permeates identitarian politics. As a shared and relational condition, it centres the ways in which we belong to others and depend on others for recognition, care and support - and this dependency extends beyond the confines of national borders. The recognition, for example, that sovereign border policies throw refugees into heightened conditions of vulnerability engenders a kind of solidarity between those who live precarious lives 'inside' national borders, and those 'outside'. Butler argues that this provokes us 'to disengage feminism from its First World presumption and ... to rethink the meaning of the tie, the bond, the alliance, the relation, as they are imagined and lived in the horizon of a counterimperialist egalitarianism' (Butler 2004a, 41-2). In the context of global capitalism, any lives in the Global North that are experienced as secure or comfortable ultimately depend on flows of capital that heighten the vulnerability of entire populations in the Global South. Luxury consumer goods are made in sweatshops, under exploitative and unsafe working conditions; natural commodities like oil and gold are exploited for the profits of transnational corporations, depriving countries in the Global South of resources and wealth. National identity, then, cannot be understood in a vacuum - it exists within a global framework, in which the abjection of racial/ethnic/political Others forms the constitutive outside of citizenship. At the same time, this global understanding of precarity motivates the recognition of those 'inside' our borders that lack the status of citizenship. *Precarias a la Deriva* have used the concept of precarity to mobilise solidarity with undocumented workers in Spain. They write: 'the borders are among the principal enemies of any struggle against the precarization of existence ... Creating spaces of mixture, of alliance between precarious with and without papers, from here and from there, is to challenge these borders, subtract their command from them, to produce the common' (Precarias a la Deriva 2010). In the Australian context, the ongoing violence of colonialism acts to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities particularly vulnerable to illness, poverty, and violence, through a process Elizabeth Povinelli describes as 'letting die' (Povinelli 2008). The brutality of colonialism is another mechanism of precarization, securing the existence of the colonial nation-state at the cost of Indigenous lives and cultures.

In sum, this understanding of precarity is better able to address the challenges presented in sections 1 and 2. Firstly, in recognising that precarity emerges primarily as a result of

political and economic structures, precarity is non-essentialist. One's experiences of precarity cannot coherently be understood as something inherent to the subject - rather, precarity is always already linked to the structures, institutions and conditions that give rise to it, by distributing vulnerability in particular and historically contingent ways. For this same reason, with regards to Linda Zerilli's concern, it effectively displaces a focus on the subject, moving beyond identity/difference and towards analysis of structural and interpersonal conditions. Secondly, precarity is non-homogenising. As a shared category, it encapsulates us all, without assuming that we are all equally precarious, or precarious in the same way. Thirdly, precarity does not draw or reify borders between groups - it illuminates their interconnectedness, rather than their difference. And finally, it overcomes the problematic focus on the figural, rather than the material, body that has plagued much poststructuralist feminist theory. Understood as a socioeconomic and political condition, and a state of being intimately connected to the material needs of the body, precarity urges a materialist analysis of the subject and of oppression. However, the concept has not been immune to conceptual critiques. I will now attempt to defend my conception of precarity, and its potential for theorising and enacting political coalitions, against recent criticisms.

### **3.3 Contemporary critiques of precarity**

Firstly, critics such as Julia Cooper and Alyson Cole have argued that as a shared condition, precarity might (much like categorical conceptions of identity) tend to homogenise heterogeneous groups of subjects. Cooper worries that the proposal of finding a common ground in experiences of precarity can make invisible the 'platforms of privilege and social stability from which we proclaim commonality' (Cooper 2016, 6). This is based on her reading of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* project, which aims to construct a 'singularity politics' in opposition to (what they take to be) 'identity politics'. At the heart of Cooper's worry is that the disavowal of identity is a privilege only available to some. For those facing daily marginalisation and violence on the very basis of their social identities, the call to overlook or transcend identity is naive at best, and at worst erases the histories of oppression that identities embody. Similarly, Alyson Cole argues that an ambivalence in the meaning of vulnerability 'could in fact prevent us from clearly perceiving what differentiates our vulnerability from the vulnerability of others' (Cole 2016, 265). However, as the above has shown, the notion of precarity - conceived structurally, rather than as a property of subjects - is inherently sensitive to the stratifications of identity, and does not require a disavowal of social identity. I think Cooper's argument depends on a conflation of vulnerability with precarity, and once we separate the two it becomes clear that precarity does not, and indeed cannot, homogenise experiences of vulnerability. For example, Cooper asks, 'is the CEO of the global multinational equally vulnerable as the residents of Chicago's South Side whose lived experiences are, in part, ones of racial segregation and systemic oppression?' (Cooper 2016, 5). It is very clear they are not equally vulnerable, and this

asymmetric distribution of vulnerability, in this case coalescing in poor and predominantly black neighbourhoods, is precisely what precarity traces.

Other critics have examined the dynamics of real-world precarity movements, and have argued, on not dissimilar grounds to Cooper and Cole, that precarity is a concept mobilised predominantly by more privileged groups. Eli Thorkelson analyses a movement of French academics (the *Intersyndicale*) against precarious labour conditions in the public education system. He argues that in this movement, precarity operated as ‘a category of political delegation’, led primarily by unions and delegates, rather than precarious workers themselves (Thorkelson 2016, 477-8). Further, he argues, the uses of the term in the third person (‘*their* working conditions’) often served to stigmatise and other ‘precarious workers’ (Thorkelson 2016, 479-481). But is representation not the very role of labour unions and delegates? In this context, should the labour of organising and mobilisation really have fallen on the shoulders of already precarious workers? In the situation Thorkelson examines, the fact that comfortable, tenured academics were organising against the precarisation of casual workers’ contracts seems to me a good example of the work precarity can do in making the interests of the more vulnerable visible to groups living in relatively secure conditions. Rather than leaving casuals to fend for themselves in the academic hierarchy, tenured academics recognised that ‘it is by improving their working conditions and by defending them in front of management that we can improve working conditions for all’ (Intersyndicale, quoted in Thorkelson 2016, 479). Of course, such movements should not speak over the experiences of those who they claim to represent, and precarity should not be an opportunity for privileged elites to take pity on more vulnerable groups, as Thorkelson suggests it might. But these dynamics are not inherent to the concept of precarity - rather, they are expressions of the deep and pervasive imbalances of power that currently structure our society. Movements against precarity should (and do) seek to address and destabilise these very imbalances, while at the same time remaining vigilant to their potential presence within these movements.

Finally, Kathleen Millar enquires into the implications of resisting or refusing precarity. She argues that such a resistance ‘can smuggle in a conservative politics - conservative in the broad sense of seeking to preserve the status quo’ (Millar 2016, 2). If precarity is ‘synonymous with vulnerability’, she argues, then the opposite of precarity might be something like *security*. For example, if we take casual or flexibilised labour to be the paradigm case of insecure work, we implicitly uphold full-time, fixed-contract labour and full employment as normative ideals. This can re-entrench capitalist aspirations for things like ‘a stable job, middle-class home, guaranteed rewards for hard work, and the promise of upward mobility’ (Millar 2016, 7). At the same time, this paradigm obscures a deeper critique of the ways in which waged labour under capitalism is inherently insecure, and might preclude us from more transformative visions of how labour and life could be organised otherwise. Moreover, the ideal of security can dovetail neatly with oppressive regimes that seek to



‘secure’ certain populations, for example through exclusionary border policies. I think Millar’s concern is an interesting one, as it opens up questions of the normative significance of a politics of precarity. What do we struggle *towards* when we struggle against the precariousness of contemporary existence? While the concept of precarity certainly can be deployed in the ways Millar describes, I don’t believe that these are necessary corollaries to the concept. Rather, the orientations of precarity movements are constructed by those very movements, by the language and action they undertake and the goals they proclaim. In response to Millar, I will conclude by elaborating one possible direction that this could take.

The etymology of the term ‘precarious’ can be traced back to the Latin *prex, precis*, meaning ‘to pray’ or ‘to plead’ (Casas-Cortés 2016, 30). This raises the question: what are we praying for when we make claims from a state of precarity? Precarity movements must inevitably make claims on the future. A crucial part of this project is envisioning a world in which vulnerability is not distributed with such extreme asymmetry, and in which certain groups do not bear the burden of heightened vulnerability to afford others security. However, as Millar argues, this cannot be achieved by resurrecting outdated middle-class aspirations of upward mobility, full employment or a Fordist welfare state. I think a visionary politics of precarity can surpass this conservative aim, by demanding a world in which lives are not merely liveable or sustainable, but one in which the conditions for flourishing and creativity are fostered. In his analysis of Japanese anti-precarity movements, Carl Cassegard notes that the demands of these movements go beyond basic demands for survival, and instead look towards the conditions for ‘free life’ [*jiyû na sei*] (Cassegard 2014, 54). As one of the Japanese union members, Settsu Tadashi, puts it: ‘To ‘survive’ is important, but we must ask about the content of life too. . . . The problem is if life is worth living or not, and what we are calling for is, ‘Let us live a life worth living!’’ (Tadashi in Cassegard 2014, 50). The content of a ‘life worth living’ cannot be determined in the abstract, and will necessarily relate to the cultures, histories and values of particular communities. But such a vision will allow a politics of precarity to go beyond mere reformism. Making explicit the aims of such a politics can guard against its cooptation by, for example, securitarian agendas. It gives precarity movements a sense of hope and vision, of the sort that arises from common struggle towards a more just future. This vitality can emerge in the very assembly of bodies in protest of precarious conditions, from the experience and exercise of collective political agency in resisting and transforming these conditions. To return to the quote from Sara Ahmed that I began this paper with: ‘to struggle for an existence is to transform an existence. No wonder: there is hope in the assembly’ (Ahmed 2015, 13).

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on feminist critiques of identitarian politics, I have argued for precarity as a political ontology of the subject suited to the predicaments faced by feminists in the twenty-first century. The politics of precarity may serve as an entente between Marxist and feminist theorists, who share the aim of transforming social and economic structures, but have disagreed on the best way to conceive of the subject's relationship to this process. Marxists emphasise the material and structural conditions in which the subject finds herself, and give primacy to class relations as the grounds for solidarity between groups; feminists, in turn, have analysed the ways in which these relations are deeply gendered. Identitarian politics have been denigrated for lacking the power to analyse or respond to the material dynamics of class, and Marxists have been charged with a failure to take account of the ways in which capitalism intersects with structural racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. This tired debate has engendered methodological and ideological rifts between political spaces, splitting energies and in some cases precluding the possibility of productive coalitional work. Yet in a world marked by economic crisis, environmental catastrophe, and exclusionary and increasingly militarised nationalism, the need for such work is pressing. My hope is that articulating a shared ontological framework, one that addresses the orientations of both feminist and Marxist theory, may open up space for realising the shared political interests of these groups.

In the first chapter, I argued that feminist theories of identity have a number of unresolved conceptual flaws. In particular, identitarian politics runs the risk of essentialism, by declaring the meaning or nature of certain identities. This can work to homogenise those within an identity group, and can have a disciplinary effect within political movements. While intersectionality theory provides a necessary critique of this homogenising tendency, it does not offer a new ontology of identity, and thus suffers from the same flaws as earlier identitarian models. In the second chapter, I examined Linda Zerilli's argument that feminist politics must de-centre questions of the subject, and instead orient itself towards freedom. While I agree that substantive freedom is a useful normative stance for feminist politics, Zerilli's own model fails to provide a materialist grounds for enabling this freedom. This motivates the turn towards feminist new materialism, in particular Butler's recent work. Thus, in the third chapter, I argued for precarity as a political ontology of the subject that addresses the problems with identitarianism raised in the first two chapters. Unlike intersectionality theory, a politics of precarity does not treat class as reducible to a single identity amongst other axes of identity. Rather, it recognises that material conditions and the social and psychic vulnerability of the subject are mutually imbricated. Subjects are not made precarious *either* by virtue of their position within capitalist structures *or* by virtue of their social identity. Vulnerability is distributed in radically unequal ways by and through the complex interactions of capital, gender, race, colonialism, natural and built environments, and so on. This demands of us responses that aim to transform these structural conditions, rather

than those focused only on representation or meagre reformism. These responses, I have argued, must aim at the shared condition of substantive freedom - that is, the capacity of heterogeneous groups to exercise collective political agency, one which is corroded by precarity (§2.2).

The specific ways in which precarity might be mobilised as a methodology for political practice will undoubtedly depend on the particular social and historic contexts in which it is deployed. The history of feminist theory explored in Chapter 1 shows that political spaces working towards liberation can themselves be ridden with insidious power imbalances, and this is surely also true of precarity movements, as evinced by Eli Thorkelson's examination of the *Intersyndicale* in France. Critical analysis of the operation of power within these movements, then, is necessary to ensure that they do not reproduce the dynamics of marginalisation that they seek to challenge. We must remain attentive to the inevitable potential for concepts like precarity to be co-opted by other agendas, as has happened with identitarianism (see §1.3). Despite this, precarity provides a robust and flexible framework for identifying the diverse types of injustices that pervade our world. It brings these injustices together under a shared framework, allowing analysis of how the dynamics of class interact with those of sexism, racism, colonialism, and so on to make certain bodies and groups hyper-vulnerable. This avoids the problems with the additive approach of identitarianism ('add race to class and stir'), and moves away from the individualistic tendencies of identity discourse, towards a relational analysis of power and oppression. Future research should continue to explore the normative dimensions of the relational politics of precarity - in Judith Butler's words, the ethical question of what it means to be 'up against another person or group, [to] find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose' (Butler 2012, p. 134). Developing a concrete normative and political framework that responds to systematically unjust distributions of vulnerability is critical. This must be informed by real-world practices of resistance, by the movements of those who seek to challenge the precarity engendered by capitalism, colonialism and racism, and those who dare to call for and create a life worth living.

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