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# A Radical Theory of Bodies: Synthesizing the Manipulation of Corporeal and Affective Bodies in Feminist Theory

By: Sally Baker, UC Santa Barbara

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing chiefly upon Judith Butler's theory of *gender performativity*, this article argues that feminist theory does not operate in isolation from the body, but rather that the body is a stage for the *performance* of feminist theory. It examines how various feminist theories conceive of the body, both *corporeally* and *affectively*, and how the body is *mediated* by a variety of culturally specific forces. Through a carefully crafted Butlerian lens, the article examines the body of the third world prostitute, the body of the fetus, the invasion of bodies by modern capitalism, the reimagining of the body in radical feminist utopia, and other constructions of the body. By placing the work of multiple feminist theorists in conversation with one another, the article offers theoretical insight by synthesizing seemingly disparate feminist theories.

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## INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BODY

While exploring deeply theoretical questions, the work of many feminist theorists is rooted in the corporeal, or physical, body. In theoretical terms, the body represents far more than its mere physicality. For Judith Butler, leading feminist theorist at UC Berkeley, the body becomes legible through a series of performative acts that interpellate gender in to being.<sup>1</sup> For Betty Friedan, prominent second-wave feminist and writer, the physical location of the body has psychological ramifications, and the politics of female liberation are rooted in the literal movement of the body out of the domestic space of the home.<sup>2</sup> Both Butler and Friedan conceive of the body as a mobile unit, whether in theoretical terms (for Butler), or through physical movement (for Friedan). By rooting my analysis in the framework of Judith

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Feminist Theory Reader*, edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York City: Routledge, 2013), 462-73.

<sup>2</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique* (New York City: WW Norton & Company, 1963).

Butler's theory of gender performativity, I will explore how prominent feminist theorists, like Friedan, manipulate the body, both corporeally and affectively. Through my analysis, I challenge the notion that feminist theory is devoid of practical application by arguing that it does not operate in isolation from the body, but rather that the body is the chief actor in the performance of feminist theory. Thus, the body is the nexus of performativity, and the site through which theoretical and practical applications are expressed. Positioning the body as the site of union for theory and practice establishes it as a potentially radical entity.

## FORMATION OF THE GENDERED BODY

In her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler argues that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."<sup>3</sup> For Butler, gender is performed and created through literal manipulations of the physical body. Gender does not presuppose succeeding acts or experiences, but is rather created *through* the acts or experiences. As a form of identity, gender as a theoretical concept is malleable and, in fact, dependent upon outside forces. Butler argues that gender is not a "locus of agency," suggesting that other acts do not proceed forth from it. Rather, gender is formed in ways similar to other forms of identity: through the tenuous nature of ordinary experiences and actions. If gender, as an unstable identity, is strongly rooted in bodily acts, then the body, for Butler, is also an unstable entity. Were the body to exist in a static space, devoid of cultural contingencies and outside forces acting upon it, gender would be a fixed identity. Since Butler positions the physical and theoretical body as moving through time and space, it is constantly evolving in relation to external identities, subjectivities, and stimuli.

Since Butler argues that gender is formed through its relation to the manipulation of the body, both gender performativity and the body itself are amorphous. Butler posits that, "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one *does* one's body and, indeed, one does one's body *differently* from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well."<sup>4</sup> The body is thus the facilitator of action and embodiment, as the process of embodiment is felt through the performative, stylized acts of the body. Butler argues that the body does not merely exist, but is performed. Through the repetition of stylized acts, the body comes into being through both unconscious and conscious actions. Consequently, the tension in "doing one's body," as Butler describes it, involves both the conscious and the unconscious. Doing one's body "differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors" situates the performativity of individual bodies as individualistic and contingent upon a specific combination of influences. Thus, Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that no two physical or theoretical bodies are the same, as performance is varied and

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Feminist Theory Reader*, edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim, 462. New York City: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 464. Emphasis added.

multidimensional. Through this framework of one not simply being “a body,” but rather “doing” one’s body, I will shape the rest of my analysis.

## **LAYERED SUBJECTIVITIES AND COMMODIFICATION OF IDENTITY**

Professor of English at Rice University, Rosemary Hennessy’s essay, “The Value of a Second Skin,” begins with the assertion that, “The human person is never merely an individual, but lives always in social relation.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in a nod to French philosopher Louis Althusser, Hennessy does not position the human person as an individual with an innate capacity for free will, but as a subject interpellated by culturally specific significations (See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”). Althusser argues that one’s subjectivity is formed through one’s interpellation into being by ideology. He offers the example of a policeman exclaiming, “Hey, you there!” in public and someone turning around. The moment the person responds to the call by turning around, the person recognizes himself as a subject. In analyzing Hennessy alongside Althusser’s theory of interpellation, it is through her positioning of the human person as always living in “social relation” to other forces that she constructs her theory of the second skin. Hennessy frames much of her analysis in the context of workers, and mentions the aggressive invasion of bodies by modern capitalism.<sup>6</sup> In her conception of the “invasion” of bodies, Hennessy argues in favor of the claim that bodies do not exist autonomously, but in relation to other material and emotional forces. As a producer of capital, Hennessy claims that the body and its many identities are commodified in a capitalist society obsessed with economic profit and social advancement.

In relation to the central theme of the body, Hennessy’s theory of the second skin can be read as a layer of the body. Or, like layers of clothing. Through her reading of the second skin, Hennessy argues that it is to “place the lives and contested cultural values of identity in relation to the surplus value capital relies upon.”<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Hennessy conceives of the body as generative, and the second skin relates human value to productive value. In the particular context of capital, the second skin is manipulated to produce surplus value. The body, as a tool of agency, generates capital through its abilities and capabilities, thereby continually adding value through modes of productivity. Hennessy’s discussion of a “second skin” locates the body as an entity layered with productive capabilities. Each skin, as a potentially productive identity, adds to the theoretical base of the single-layered body, or the body interpreted apart from the added skins. In a capitalist context, the addition of skins, or identities, increases the productive value of the body. Through reading “worker” as a second skin, one’s worker body and identity as worker are joined. Hennessy thus complicates the relationship between felt identities and the body as a labored subject.

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<sup>5</sup> Hennessy, Rosemary. “The Value of a Second Skin.” *Intersections between Feminist and Queer Theory*, 2006, 116.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

While Hennessy does account for the body as a performative subject, she supports Jay Prosser's critique of Judith Butler's theory.<sup>8</sup> Prosser, a social theorist at the University of Leeds, argues that in the articulation of social constructivism as the leading thesis in feminist theory, the "relation between the psyche and body in shaping gender identity" is lost.<sup>9</sup> The theory of social constructivism, as opposed to biological determinism, states that gender is a social construct, shaped and molded by cultural, social, and political forces. It directly opposes the theory of biological determinism, which argues that gender and sexuality are determined by innate, biological principles. Hennessy's discussion of the second skin as something that is put on in the service of the body seeks to intervene in this narrative, and connect the psyche of the body to its physicality. In her discussion of the abject, Hennessy restates Butler's argument that the act of abjecting something that is "not" the self "sets up the boundaries of the body, which are the first contours of the subject."<sup>10</sup> The concept of "abject," as coined by Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror*, articulates the human response to the potential breakdown of distinction between "self" and "other."<sup>11</sup> Through the theory of abjection, Hennessy shapes the subject both in relation to the value the second skin imparts, or what the subject *is*, as well as through what the subject is *not*. If the second skin is the identity that the worker exchanges for a wage, then the body itself becomes currency in the capitalist system. In the literal manipulation of bodies, Hennessy positions the second skin as a film that wraps around the body. The body is thus able to take on various forms through the addition and removal of multiple skins.

## INJURED IDENTITY AND THE THIRD WORLD PROSTITUTE BODY

In her essay, "Ouch! Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute,'" social critic Jo Doezema draws upon Wendy Brown's theory of "injured identity" in order to examine the politics of anti-trafficking campaigns.<sup>12</sup> Doezema argues, "the 'injured body' of the 'third world trafficking victim' in international feminist debates around trafficking in women serves as a powerful metaphor for advancing certain feminist interests, which cannot be assumed to be those of third world sex workers themselves."<sup>13</sup> The specific "injured body" of the third world prostitute implicates both identity and physicality *as* injury. The white western feminist codes the third world prostitute body as a site of patriarchal oppression and violence that is in need of saving. Through establishing a hierarchy of oppression, the rhetoric of "saving" removes all agency from the body of the third world sex worker. Thus, in appropriating an injured identity upon a subject of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 120 - "Prosser reads social constructivism as an important critique of the positivist notion that biology determines gender. But along with other transsexual critics, he emphasizes that the unfortunate effect has been to replace the scientific concept of gender as the expression of a natural core identity with a new understanding of gender as a purely discursive reiterative practice."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Doezema, Jo. "Ouch! Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute,'" *Feminist Review* 67 (Spring 2001), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

“otherness,” the body of the “other” is controlled by the one abjecting. By abjecting the third world prostitute body as “not self,” white western feminists reify their own bodies. Doezema positions these respective bodies within a hierarchical structure: “‘saving bodies’ were middle class and white; the ‘suffering bodies’ working class or black and colonial.”<sup>14</sup> For Doezema, the body is not a blank entity upon which forces act; rather, it is a site shaped both by internal and external forces. As race marks some bodies while leaving others unmarked, Doezema explores how bodies are implicated in notions of “salvation.” Through the literal placement of white and brown bodies, Doezema draws attention to the ways in which the bodies are politicized in entirely different ways, according to the narratives attached to them. The third world prostitute body is not only viewed as a corporeal injury, but also as an affective injury. Through the process of othering based on difference in physical, visible bodies (corporeal) and othering based on ideological difference (affective), the injury of the third world prostitute body functions in two senses. Injury is constructed in direct relation to difference, and according to variance in physicality and ideology between the tenets of white western feminism and the perceived experience of the third world prostitute. In relation to Butler, white western feminists appropriate the performance of injury on to the third world prostitute body. While the third world woman is not actively performing injury, the interpretation of her body *as* injured renders her an injured subject.

## PROCESSES OF “BECOMING” A GENDERED BODY

Butler critiques the concept of “becoming” a woman that French writer and intellectual, Simone de Beauvoir, espouses in *The Second Sex*, where the body is integral to processes of embodiment.<sup>15</sup> While Butler may perhaps position performative acts as an approximation *to* embodiment, de Beauvoir actively associates the embodiment of womanhood directly with the physical body. Butler positions the body as embodied through the performance of gender. Since she argues that the process of gender performance is always evolving, the body can only ever approach embodiment, rather than attain it. De Beauvoir argues that woman “finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other,” almost as if man abjects woman in order to control her.<sup>16</sup> If men compel women to the status of “other,” as de Beauvoir argues, then the process of embodiment, and woman’s relation to her body, involves challenging the position of “other” through a process of re-embodiment. For de Beauvoir, as woman moves towards embodiment, she must shape what it means to be a woman. She also argues that society positions woman as what is “not man.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, woman’s body is positioned in relation to man’s body, for woman is the disembodied foil to man’s embodiment.

In relation to de Beauvoir’s argument that bodies act in relation to one another, Butler argues: “For Beauvoir, the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, 462.

<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction to *The Second Sex*.” In *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim, (New York City: Routledge, 2013), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

cultural and historical possibilities.”<sup>18</sup> Butler expands this concept of embodiment to include gendered acts, acts that both constitute meaning, or cultural legibility, and through which meaning is constituted. “Meaning,” in relation to surrounding social structures, refers to the production of significance within a specific sociopolitical locale. Butler further argues that de Beauvoir does not deny the existence of the “natural dimensions of the body,” but positions the body as distinctly separate from the process through which it develops cultural meaning.<sup>19</sup> While de Beauvoir is interested in the process of how one comes to embody a body, Butler is interested in how manipulation of bodily acts reconfigures the formation of gender itself.

## SEXUAL MEDIATION OF THE BODY

While Butler’s concern is with the process by which gender is created and sustained through the body, sex and gender theorist Gayle Rubin engages with the gendering of bodies on a deeply physical plane. In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin calls for a radical theory of sex, which she states, “must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression.”<sup>20</sup> Rubin explicitly links the felt experiences of bodies to the acts that bodies engage in, connecting the psyche to the body. For Rubin, the erotic realm must not be thought of as separate from the body, for it is lived out *through* the body. One of Rubin’s key arguments is that, “We never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it.”<sup>21</sup> Rubin argues: “The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms.”<sup>22</sup> In accordance with Butler’s theory of performativity, and the processual nature of embodiment, Rubin articulates the body, brain, genitalia, and capacity for language all as necessary components of sexuality, but does not assert that any of the entities precede sexuality. Rather, human sexuality, like gender, is in a constant state of creation based on the specific combination of the body, brain, genitalia, and capacity for language at any given time.

Rubin distinguishes between the body as a *physical* site and the body as an *imagined* site through which cultural meaning is explored and expressed. If bodies are always already mediated for Rubin, then this directly challenges Butler’s theory of bodies as in the process of performing gender. If the body is already mediated by cultural meaning as Rubin suggests, then the process of gendered embodiment is far more complex than Butler accounts for. The body as a mediated entity cannot simply call gender into existence through the repetition of stylized, performative acts; rather, these acts are already inherently mediated and interpreted.

In her theorization of the “charmed circle” of sexual activity, Rubin places the corporeal body in the center. In the movement from “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” to “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality,” the physical body moves through

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, 463.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Rubin, Gayle S. “Thinking Sex,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984) 9

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

spaces that have already been interpreted by society.<sup>23</sup> As the charmed circle is constructed based on how bodies act upon one another, there is a clear correlation between bodies, sex, and sexuality. If sexual activity requires a body, then sexual activity predates sexuality in the charmed circle. This assertion relies on the assumption that sexuality and sexual activity are interdependent. A Butlerian reading of the charmed circle would perhaps suggest that the identity category of sexuality and the enactment of various sex acts aids one in the performance of gender, or even that gender performance depends upon the enactment of sexuality, in some sense. Through her representation of perceived notions of sexuality, Rubin situates the conversation about sexuality in direct contact with the body. According to the logic that Rubin sets forth in her discussion of the charmed circle, society perceives sexuality as being formed through the body. Rubin goes on to advocate for sex positivity within a radical theoretical context, but it is her particular focus on physical bodies that allows for the construction of an imaginative, sex radical theorization.

## REPRODUCTION AND IMAGINED BODIES

A body often found at the center of theoretical feminist debates is the body of the mother. While Betty Friedan discusses motherhood in the context of domesticity, Emma Goldman, a prominent developer of anarchist political theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, addresses the ability to control pregnancy as an integral part of motherhood. In her article “The Social Aspects of Birth Control,” Goldman argues that, “Surely, [the mother] ought to be in a position to decide how many children she should bring into the world, whether they should be brought into the world by the man she loves and because she wants the child, or should be born in hatred and loathing.”<sup>24</sup> While Goldman is primarily focused on the body of the mother, she also focuses on the ability of the maternal body to give birth to more bodies. A mother has the potential to produce more bodies, which places the great burden of “biological vulnerability,” as Goldman terms it, upon her. Biological vulnerability is a state of being in which the maternal body is haunted by the prospect of reproduction. Goldman also implicates male bodies in her discussion by stating: “It is not woman alone who is beginning to realize the importance of Birth Control. Men, too, especially working men, have learned to see in large families a millstone about their necks...”<sup>25</sup> There is a concern in Goldman’s support for reproductive rights not only for women, but also for men. In the acknowledgement of budding male support for the movement, Goldman appeals to the potential for bodily leisure. The implication is that birth control will also relieve men of their doubly exhaustive duties as provider and father. Thus, Goldman also manipulates bodily *identities* through her manipulation of the corporeal body.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Goldman, “The Social Aspects of Birth Control,” *Mother Earth* 11 (April 1916), 469.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 469.



## CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MOTHER BODY AND THE “NON-BODY”

While also exploring the “mother” body, American journalist and feminist Ellen Willis further complicates Goldman’s notions of motherhood in her piece, “Putting Women Back into the Abortion Debate.”<sup>26</sup> Willis argues that abortion is a feminist issue above all, and that the question of the fetus is always asked without regard for the woman’s body.<sup>27</sup> Through the construction of the fetus as a “non-body,” Willis inserts the body of the woman back into the abortion debate. She states, “I believe the debate has to start in a different place – with the recognition that fertilized eggs develop into infants inside the bodies of women.”<sup>28</sup> Willis draws attention to the “body” within the body, but highlights the importance of not overlooking the outward body in the quest to validate the life of the forming inward body. Rather than situating “Are fetuses the moral equivalent of human beings?” as the key question in the abortion debate, Willis argues that the real central question should be, “Can it be moral, under any circumstances, to make a woman bear a child against her will?”<sup>29</sup> In her repositioning of bodies, Willis reads the woman’s body apart from the fetus. While still mediated, as Rubin would argue, the woman’s body does not have to become gendered as “mother” through the iterative, generative “performance” of childbearing.

## THE AMERICAN SUBURBAN HOUSEWIFE BODY

While Emma Goldman is primarily concerned with advocating for a means to protect the female body from becoming unwillingly maternal, Betty Friedan is concerned with the 1960s American suburban housewife body in *The Feminine Mystique*. For Friedan, the “problem that has no name” is far more arresting than the implications of the suburban housewife’s sociopolitical position.<sup>30</sup> Rather than complicating the idea that a movement out of the house would solve every depressed, forlorn feeling a housewife may have, Friedan positions the body of the housewife as a captive in the home. She asks, “Can the problem that has no name somehow be related to the domestic routine of the housewife? When a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often describes the daily life she leads.”<sup>31</sup> In her exposure of this “problem that has no name,” Friedan theorizes that it is likely affiliated with the literal daily movements of the housewife body. As she moves through the house performing mundane tasks, the tasks come to define her. Friedan argues that the suburban housewife comes to have no identity outside the home, and hardly an autonomous identity inside the home either. Read alongside Butler, the iterative performance of “housewife care” creates the gendered identity of “housewife.” Friedan focuses on housewifery as a sort of performance, yet does not seek to complicate the implications of moving a body outside of

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<sup>26</sup> Willis, Ellen. “Putting Women Back into the Abortion Debate.” *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays*. Wesleyan U Press, 1992.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

<sup>30</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1963). 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

the home. Rather than a shift in understanding in the process of identity construction, Friedan argues for a shift in bodies outside of the domestic sphere.

## **BODILY MOBILITY IN FEMINIST UPTOPIA**

If all of the above mentioned feminist theorists are concerned with the movement and manipulation of bodies, radical American feminist Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* presents a profound alternative imagining for the potential of bodies.<sup>32</sup> While the other theorists have implicitly or explicitly made allowance for the assumed male body, Solanas positions the female body as the only necessary body in a utopic, post-male world. Solanas collapses the male body into the female body, while still preserving the separateness of the female body. In her treatise on sex, Solanas states: "Screwing, then, is a desperate, compulsive attempt to prove he's not passive, not a woman; but he [man] is passive and does want to be a woman."<sup>33</sup> In her radical reimagining of gendered and sexed bodies, Solanas suggests that there is really only one necessary body: female. If the female body is the only necessary body, then, it follows that all males must want to be females. In her drastic reimagining of a world in which men are rendered obsolete, Solanas does what feminist theorists only hint at: imagine a world in which bodies are unmediated. The mediated male body is eliminated, to leave only the "perfect female" body. If this is the body that survives, perhaps it can be read as unmediated. If, according to Solanas, patriarchy is constantly mediating female bodies, then a removal of patriarchal forces creates a potentially unmediated subject. Within the specific context of feminist utopia, the resilience of the female body shapes a world order in which patriarchal forces are dismantled, rather than reconstructed.

## **CONCLUSION: A RADICAL THEORY OF BODIES**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity positions the body as the site through which the repetition of theatrical, stylized acts are performed. When read alongside Butler's theory, the work of other feminist theorists, such as Jo Doezema and Gayle Rubin, thinks of the body in expansively theoretical, rather than physically linear, terms. If Rubin argues for a new radical theory of sex, I would argue for a new radical theory of bodies. In expanding the body beyond the corporeal body, bodies can be interpreted by identity politics. If the psyche and the body are to be kept in conversation, as Hennessy argues, then the corporeal and affective bodies must work alongside one another, as an analysis in varied theories proves. Reimagining bodies in an innovatively radical way makes space for alternative communities of bodies, as expressed in Solanas's manifesto. Feminist utopian literature should not be the only place where progressive articulations of the body are represented; instead, the joining of complex understandings of corporeal and affective bodies in feminist theory has the potential to reimagine gender and sex in radical ways.

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<sup>32</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2004), 1-18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

In placing the work of these specific theorists in conversation with Butler's theory of gender performativity, bodies are not only sites of manipulation and canvases upon which social meaning is projected, but also sites for imagining a new, progressive theory of bodies. The theory of bodies I propose is not one simply focused on the physical movement of bodies through time and space, or the theoretical projection of gender and sexuality, but a combination of the two. Perhaps this reimagining of physical and theoretical bodies offers a conceptual bridge between theory and practice, initial movements and iterative practices. In a focus on the repetitive, stylized acts of gender, Butler may overlook the potentiality of initial movement, innovative acts, or new conceptions of gender and sex formations. Through an exploration of the various forms the gendered and sexed body takes, a collective theory of bodies argues that in the very articulation of bodily identity lies the essence of gender: that it is not formed simply through the repetition of stylized acts, but through the relation between the corporeal and the affective, the physical and the theoretical.

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