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Latticework: Forms of Relation in Critical Materialist Theory

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Latticework: Forms of Relation in Critical Materialist Theory

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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For Thomas, Deirdre, and David;

For my parents;

For Tash, Sidni, and Liz;

And for Darwin.

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Introduction

All That Is Solid: The Project of the Theorist

For all its seeming broadness, the domain of what is loosely called “cultural theory” tends to embody a distinct purpose and drive. In general, cultural and literary theory operate on the basis of a need to gain or regain one’s footing on the modern world; whether the distinct motivation is to find some way of elucidating and even manipulating social reality, or to simply stake out an existence that can bear or accept the chaos and contingencies of life, it appears that cultural theory is as existential as it is political.

The existential meets the social and political at the point where people attempt to build models or maps that can situate individual consciousness with respect to outer material conditions, as well as to the inner lives of others. We might call such an abstract structure a frame of reference. What does it mean to have, or to not have, a frame of reference? What happens if something falls outside of that frame of reference? In other words, how do different frames of reference shape the way we conceive of and interact with the world? In what ways does language mold our frame of reference? How do frames of reference change, and who can change them? How does a frame of reference become a frame of truth? On a most basic level, to have a frame of reference is to perceive reality in a way that filters and organizes one’s experience of it. Specifically, certain aspects of that experience are highlighted and made coherent with each other, and others are diminished or concealed. In general, a frame of reference is shared by many people at once, and so necessarily relates to how people communicate to each other through language. A ‘frame of reference’ is akin to what others might mean by a ‘conceptual system.’ In essence, it is the cognitive scaffolding with which we perceive and assign meaning to our environment, in particular our social and

cultural environments.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), “*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*” (5). When we conceive of things, it is never *per se* but only in relation to—or, in terms of—other things. Thus, our reality, the way we perceive and give significance to it, and then also the way we choose to act toward it, is structured according to a certain network of metaphorical concepts. Conceptual metaphors delineate how we see meaning in reality, and thus what we define as being true. And since the language read and heard by most of us is significantly determined by those in power (whether willfully or not), it follows that “truth” in terms of understanding is not neutral but in fact gives primacy to the interests of power.

A materialist point of view is most often critical of views in which stable, prefigured ideals or essences exist that pass meaning and shape directly to social forms of human life. In a materialist conception, the structure of experience does not occur independently of, or prior to, historical and social conditions. This paper takes an interest in such interpretations of the world. Here I will examine three writers, who each express, in their distinct fashions, an understanding for how the discursive forms we use to grasp and see out everyday life in fact *mediate* the experience of life itself. Specifically, they all describe the process in which a form inscribes and reinscribes itself in a way that presents the form as a stable, discrete construct founded in a prefigured ideal, and does so in such a way that conceals this very inscription/construction process. Too, they understand that, left unexamined, such forms will dominate as seemingly fundamental truisms about individual identity and social reality—as indeed, it is difficult to intellectually overcome a pervasive framework of social meaning that conceals its own seams. But all three writers also acknowledge that if a form *is* scrutinized

carefully, it will eventually reveal sites of hidden contradiction, sites of contingency, and moments of breakage in form's coherence with life: and if these small 'chinks in the armor' can be exploited the right way, they could manifest entirely new categories of possibility for living life. Finally, all three writers share a materialist sensibility for how the reality of oneself, and one's place in the world, is not founded in any prefigured ideals; rather, they all see how the texture of life and its forms are constituted through *relations between the parts* of those forms. Furthermore, this means that the construction of life's forms is based in material conditions, and is therefore of social and political significance and concern.

In the first chapter, I explore the Marxist and literary theorist Georg Lukács in his assertion of the radical potential of the historical realist novel, on account of its ability to pierce through the totality of capitalism. Lukács sees great power in the ability to dialectically mediate social reality by discerning the relations between its particulars.

The second chapter is an examination into feminist theorist and philosopher Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, specifically, its insight into how notions of gender, sexual difference, and even the body itself are presented as stable and discrete forms, but in fact only establish coherence through discursive entailments between the underlying material aspects of these preconceived notions.

In the final chapter, I engage with the postcolonial thinker and theorist Édouard Glissant through his assertion of the world as an "open totality" constituted of interrelated particulars, which he sees as irreducible and yet mediated through their "opacities."

1. Georg Lukács' Totality in the Balance

The philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács, whose long career saw numerous periods of intellectual shifts and open self-refutations, is nonetheless remembered overall as one of the most invaluable contributors to Marxist theory during the twentieth century. He is, too, remembered for his critical confrontations with his interlocutors, a few of who had been his old friends. In particular, Ernst Bloch and Lukács were intellectual peers and close friends since the early years of their adult lives, but throughout their increasingly divergent careers the two often found themselves engaged in argument. In particular, their correspondence during the late part of the Expressionism debates of the 1930s, in which they held opposing views, reached a high point of contention. In 1938, preceding the publication of his latest polemic response to Bloch, Lukács attempted to write a reconciliatory letter to his old friend, which he addressed to Bloch, yet ultimately never mailed:

More than thirty years ago we spent some unforgettable evenings, often taking till midnight, in the cafés of Budapest. Later, we continued our serious discussion in Florence, Ravenna, Heidelberg, and Vienna. The tone of our talks always remained the same even though both of us changed as did our discussions. Still, most of the time, we agreed on the ultimate end. At the same time, we disagreed sharply over our methods. But I think it made our dialogues interesting and productive. Your article has prompted my response because it reminds me of our discussions. Once more, the central issue is the relationship between German development and fascism... (Kadarkay, 337 [Lukács, "Wozu Brauchen wir das Klassische Erbe?" 1938, MS in LAK])

The responding article in question, titled “Realism in the Balance,” was written and published in the leftist German émigrés periodical *Das Wort* in 1938, Lukács defends his previous repudiation of Expressionist literature by extending his criticism to all “so-called avant-garde literature” (29) and thus provides what he argues is the most compelling stylistic tradition of past and present literary history. To begin, Lukács addresses Ernst Bloch’s understandable problem with Lukács’ view of “totality,” which Bloch articulated as, “the idea of a closed and integrated reality... Whether such a totality in fact constitutes reality is open to question. If it is, then Expressionist experiments with disruptive and interpolative techniques are but an empty *jeu d’esprit*, as are the more recent experiments with montage and other devices making for discontinuity” (30). But, as Bloch asks, “what if authentic reality is also discontinuity?” (31). Responding to Bloch’s concerns, Lukács steps back to look at what underlying theoretical disagreements are implicit in their debate. He accurately articulates the fundamental question at stake as such: “does the ‘closed integration,’ the ‘totality’ of the capitalist system, of bourgeois society, with its unity of economics and ideology, really form an objective whole, independent of consciousness?” (31). His approach is then to start with a traditional Marxist-Leninist economic description of the issue, specifically, that “the relations of production of every society form a whole” (32). But as capitalism progresses closer to crisis, “the experience of disintegration becomes firmly entrenched over long periods of time in broad sectors of the population which normally experience the various manifestations of capitalism in a very immediate way” (32). The reason this pertains to literature is that “if literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself

immediately and on the surface” (33). In Lukács’ eyes a true realist will be able to depict not just the “subversive tendencies” favored by Bloch, which appear at the surface level of human life, but as well, the underlying “essence” of social reality (33). Thus, what Lukács sees as the crucial philosophical matter at stake is “to understand the correct dialectical unity of appearance and essence,” and that “the slice of life shaped and depicted by the artist and re-experienced by the reader should reveal the relations between appearance and essence without the need for any external commentary” (33-34).

Lukács’ first move is to point out that if Bloch is a true Marxist, as he claims himself to be, then “there should be no dispute on this point” (31). This statement suggests what seems to be a through-line of the entire piece: that if Lukács can confirm his view of totality, and more generally his rejection of modernism and exaltation of realism, to be based in Marx and explainable through concrete economic terms, then he will have proven his point. Hence, for this part of the essay, the focus is on an apparently categorical, detailed, scrupulous explanation of basic economic categories according to Marx. Lukács intends to show here how the economic reality of capitalism, even in its late stages, forms an objective, total unit, one whose individual material processes, which genuinely belong together, increasingly fragment and gain autonomy from one another as capitalism progresses. During periods of crisis, when in actuality capitalism begins to malfunction and therefore its components begin to return towards unity, humans paradoxically perceive the effect as disintegration (32). In other words, not only does the current economic reality indeed account for the totality of human experience, but this also accounts for the illusory experience of rupture and fragmentation that proponents of modernist art forms attribute to the new circumstances of modern reality.

But Lukács does not actually demonstrate how the economic reality of late capitalism, even if it is “intensified” (31), can account completely for social reality as a whole. More than that, Lukács does not actually address the question of the objectivity (and thus, the scope) of economic forces and their precise relationship to social and psychological experiences. On this, Lukács only comes as far as agreeing early on with Bloch that their disagreement does indeed, “raise all the problems of the dialectical-materialist theory of reflection [*Abildlehre*],” but he then simply laments the fact that, “[n]eedless to say, we cannot embark on such a discussion here” (31). There is a sense, here and throughout, that this is a complex and intricate science being discussed, and although it may be hard to understand, it need only be trusted.

From there, Lukács goes on to urge the reader to extend this trust to what he argues is an authentically Marxist theory of literature, of the likes of the one being presented. From a literary standpoint the argument comes down to, once again, a reductive view of the core issue as whether or not the reader (of the essay) will make the choice to acknowledge “objective reality” as it really is and dismiss other opposing irrationalisms. Lukács erects a dichotomy between “authenticity” versus insincerity; “reality as it truly is” versus surface immediacy (33). The sense arises, again, that what matters here is only a person’s trust and conviction in the “objective” and “authentic” choice. The bottom line is simply that one open oneself up to the realization that objective reality is in fact a “totality.” Indeed, “no matter how the writer actually conceives the problem intellectually” (33), the real validity of an absolute and authentic totality, and the need for art to depict it objectively, remain irrefutably true. If a realist author is successful in depicting the totality of the “overall objective social context” (33), it is due to discipline and discernment on his or her own part. But any

literature that decidedly fails to depict reality in such a manner is necessarily a product of error and ignorance. At worst it is a work “which denies that literature has any reference to objective reality” (33). The ontological realism in which Lukács’ literary theory is grounded excludes the question of plurality of experience and interpretation. This emphasis on “all-round knowledge” (33) is devised in a way that functionally swallows concepts that compete with it. Such concepts would therefore include any view that disputes the *correct* discernment of relations between appearance and essence. Lukács maintains that the mark of an authentic depiction of reality is its elimination of the “need for any external commentary.” The implication of “external commentary” is that alternative forms of reality cannot and do not exist.

But even when the reality outside of it is disturbingly omitted, it is worth asking: what does Lukács’ totality really look like? What shape does it take, and what images does it resemble? To begin to answer these questions, one can easily begin to compile a list of words that repeat themselves incessantly, and which seek to waive ambiguities and doubts by appealing to the existence of a uniquely true and complete articulation of reality. That list, to start anyway, reads as follows:

objective

autonomy

extensive

structure

system

surface

superficial

underlying unity

belong

constituent elements

parts

various processes

appearance

essence

relations

dialectic

true significance

To understand the objective social totality is to correctly grasp the relations between appearances and essences. Totality, on a basic level, is simply this: it is a real account of what is passing and what is lasting in the social context. It accounts for the truth of the matter in situations that seem impactful, but are ultimately ephemeral; it also identifies which moments and details in life *do* prove to be of lasting importance, or at least linked in some essential way to the overall connective tissues of human history.

Lukács criticizes modern literary forms for their resultant “abstraction away from reality” (38). On the other hand, he elaborates on this judgment, noting that, of course, “without abstraction there can be no art—for how otherwise could anything in art have representative value? But like every movement, abstraction must have a direction, and it is on this that everything depends.” According to Lukács, the goal of the realist, who strives to discern objective totality,

...is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. Since these relationships do not lie on the surface, since the underlying laws only make themselves felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous. (38-39)

Moreover, Lukács' conceptualization of the social totality takes a distinct shape and texture. Its component 'parts' are combined together, "in all their unity and diversity" (43), to reveal a "rise and fall," (43), for a "growth from within to emerge from the true nature of the subject-matter" (43-44). It is as if the formless "monotony" of the experience of life could be grasped and shaped so that each detail held particular directionality, revealing a coherent form. True heterogeneity depicted a life experience that was discernible, that carried meaning and direction in every instant. Each momentary, small piece contributed, ultimately, to a measured whole, to the *gestalt* of the human world.

Considering this view, it is understandable that what Lukács fears most about modern and experimental depictions of reality is their inability to create a cohesive, total form. "Chaos constitutes the intellectual cornerstone of modernist art," he writes, and thus, "any cohesive principles it contains must stem from subject-matter alien to it" (45). So, what Lukács sees as the motivation behind experimental forms, behind montage, formal disintegration and fragmentation, is the view that reality is fundamentally chaotic and undifferentiated. Such a view fatally mistakes life's complexities for a true absence of pattern or restraint. On the other hand, montage also results in the patently unsuitable attribution of symbols to arbitrary and unrelated themes. And the dissonance this creates in the minds of

the people consuming such art is neither subversive nor profound: “the gulf between the sensuous incarnation of a symbol and its symbolic meaning arises from the narrow, single-tracked process of subjective association which yokes them together” (43).

Lukács sees nothing to gain from the stance, both aesthetic and metaphysical, that reality can in any way constitute as a collection of disparate moments of experience. In his view, montage is merely a practice “of ‘inserting’ [*Einmontierung*] these into scraps of reality with which they have no organic connection (34). Indeed, what troubles him is precisely the loneliness of a life constituted by a series of isolated moments. “When the surface of life is only experienced immediately,” he writes, “it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended” (39). He also notes later on: “the details may be dazzlingly colourful in their diversity, but the whole will never be more than an unrelieved grey on grey. After all, a puddle can never be more than dirty water, even though it may contain rainbow tints” (43). This puddle example shows how Lukács views modernism as a reflection of only the ‘surface’ of reality, whereas a proper realist is capable of depicting both the “tints” at the surface together with the “dirty water” beneath. Moreover, this explains why he sees a faulty literary depiction of reality as “one-dimensional” (43). Lukács’ conception of the difference between the real social totality and false depictions of that totality is a matter of depth—namely, historical depth.

An authentic account of reality, both aesthetically and metaphysically, will necessarily also be a temporal one. That is, it requires a sophisticated sense of history. Lukács argues that what makes the great historical novels of the realist form so admirable in a Marxist lens is their often prophetic grasp of historical context and patterns. For indeed, “Marxism has always recognized the anticipatory function of ideology” (46). Notably,

Marx's analysis of Balzac revealed how Balzac's literature not only related the life of the present moment, but as well, depicted character types who only emerged into French culture after the author's own death, under Napoleon (46). As for contemporary examples of this phenomenon, Lukács points to "the important realists" (46) of the time, such as Maxim Gorky (*Karamora, Klim Samgin, Dostigayev*), or Heinrich Mann, the latter whose earlier work (*Man of Straw, The Blue Angel*) undeniably portrayed "a large number of the repellent, mean, and bestial features of the German bourgeoisie, and of a bourgeoisie seduced by demagogues" (47), features which only fully flourished decades later under fascism. Beyond personality characteristics, contemporary realists such as Arnold Zweig, whose novels (*The Case of Sergeant Grischa, Education Before Verdun*) reflect on the First World War, skillfully anticipated key elements of what became the Second World War. Namely, Zweig illustrated the link between the war on the lines and the developments on the home front, as well as the view of the war as indicative of the deepening vulgar inhumanity inherent in capitalism. By contrast, Lukács maintains, although the Expressionists were strongly ideologically opposed to war, "what did they do or say to anticipate the new imperialist war raging all around us and threatening to engulf the whole civilized world?" (47). This question exemplifies the bone Lukács has to pick with Naturalism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Modernism. It seems to imply, *what connections of lasting importance does this work of art have to human life?*

Ultimately, the work of a great realist mind pays off, with
 ...a new immediacy, one that is artistically mediated...[T]he surface of life is
 sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine through (something
 which is not true of immediate experience in real life)... Moreover, in the works of

such writers we observe the whole surface of life in all its essential determinants, and not such a subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality in an abstract and over-intense manner. This, then, is the artistic dialectic of appearance and essence.

(39)

Unlike the recent literary trends, Lukács cherishes the historical novel precisely for its ability to mediate the immediate and the essential, to give lasting shape to the human experience. Such a work is important because it demonstrates a certain epic perspective on individual and social life: each piece of the whole carries a certain directionality that, upon zooming out, guides the entire mass towards a cogent truth. It is this shape, this sort of dialectic mediation of scattered moments, which embodies the totality of life. Hopefully, forms of artistic expression will succeed to grasp it.

Lukács characterizes his notion of totality, of what is truly real and what isn't, as a concept that hangs in the balance. "Balance" here refers to mediation. Too, Lukács' approach to historical inquiry emphasizes social history, rather than cultural history. His conception of history deals in large swaths of people and their dynamics, not in up-close or microscopic perspectives of human experience, which he undoubtedly would view as only indicative of "surface appearances."

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that we begin to conceptualize our experience in a particular way, and from there, we begin to act in terms of that concept. This does not happen immediately, but the more extensive a metaphorical conceptual framework, the deeper its "reverberations," and the more profoundly it guides our actions.

The concerns and deficiencies of Lukács' theory of authentic literature as a representation of an objective totality underscore the need to recognize the interplay between

conceptual language and conceptual actions. Metaphor re-contextualizes our experience, and our behavior and actions inform the metaphors we use. Lukács does not appear to acknowledge the multidirectional current of semantic-representational forces.

Social theorists and cultural critics face a certain dilemma regarding their work: how does one engage with abstract, intangible thoughts in a practical, impactful way? The answer partly lies in the necessity, again, to regard language as simultaneously a reflection of and an informant to behaviors and actions. We live by our metaphors as much as our metaphors live by us. Furthermore, reading and writing could be thought of as kinds of behavior, or more precisely as forms of practice, because of the fact that linguistic communication has the power, down the line, to enact change in the way that actions themselves do. A theory, or an intention, as it stands alone, isn't a form of action. But reading that theory, grappling with it, allowing it to "reverberate" through individual or collective experiences of reality, should be understood as one kind of active practice.

Lukács' literary criticism is a deliberate conflation of form in the sense of some sort of latticework that accounts for patterns in experience, and in the sense of *genre* forms, wherein particular features/styles recur throughout varying material: his theory of an ideal realism concerns both, for it is a literary genre that endeavors to create, through recurrence over time, new meaningful categories of life. Though specifically, and deliberately, categories that reflect the *real, objective* categories and patterns that exist in society but that at present aren't widely apprehensible or evocative concepts. This is why Lukács emphasizes the need for carefulness and dedication in the realist craft: because the historical novelist must engineer reemerging patterns or situations throughout the time passage within the story,

such that they leave the reader with a newly intelligible sense of those patterns as discrete categories.

Done carefully, this method has the potential to simulate for the reader a concrete sense of what is possible—of history that *could* be made. But it would have to successfully show how certain actions or events, recurring over time under varying social environments, would or would not result in certain consequences depending on the circumstances. Such a form has the potential to lead to meaningful praxis, to show which actions would be most important and what the consequences would be.

2. Judith Butler's Anti-Metaphysics of Substance

Lukács and the potential for “totality” in the form of the historical novel later on in his career is contentious, and yet on some level, also keenly aware of the Marxist and formal issues at stake (indeed I would argue that questions of form *are* intrinsically Marxist questions, too). Implicated, too, in the apparent tensions and limitations with totality is the question of whether such a social totality can be adequately expressed. For Lukács, effectiveness of form relies heavily on time—or in other words, history.

In her introductory essay to a recent republication of *Soul and Form* (1910), one of Lukács' earliest works, Judith Butler provides a compelling case for why Lukács' perspectives at different moments in his career cohere with each other fundamentally. She identifies the central project of every stage of Lukács' work as encountering many of the same essential issues and ambitions, those regarding “language, form, social totality, and transformative communication” (Butler, 2). Long before the gestation of concerns about reification, or class consciousness, Lukács' writing is already preoccupied with the search for a decisive and enduring formal account of the human experience (Butler, 1). In *Soul and Form*, Lukács already encounters the central paradox of aesthetic form: That no discrete form can record or express life's experience without halting the further progression of time. And because, to general knowledge, physically stopping time is not a plausible option, it is the task, Lukács believes, of the critic to find an alternative solution around this contradiction. Aesthetic forms are created specifically to fully grasp and resonate with life, he maintains. And yet when successful this only occurs for a moment. Thus, the dilemma of aesthetic form constitutes a fundamental tension between the single moment and all eternity. It is a formidable one to say the least.

As Butler points out in her introduction, the staunch disapproval of the later Lukács contrasts with a more open-minded, if not ultimately more sympathetic, young Lukács when it comes to his analyses of “purely sentimental” poetical forms. Later, after *Soul and Form*, Lukács maintains very little tolerance for over-abstraction, symbolic obfuscation, or otherwise, basically any kind of formal experimentation. In *Soul and Form*, meanwhile, early Lukács indulges romantic endeavors of form more openly in his theoretical writings (Butler, 13). Or at least, he gives romantics such as Charles Louis Philippe (Butler, 13), and poets like Richard Beer-Hoffman (Butler, 14), each their own dedicated essays in the *Soul and Form* volume. And yet, while tonally more kind, it could still be argued that the ultimate judgment of sentimental poetic forms in the early essays are largely similar to the positions of the mature Lukács. That is, both then and later on, he sees the inherent limitations of form exposed in these genres and authors.

For decades, a dominant critique of Lukács’ intellectual history emphasized a stark division between the ‘young Lukács’ and the ‘mature Lukács,’ between an early, pre-Marxist, romantic anticapitalist, and a later, post-1918 Marxist radical concerned with political practice. In 1923, Lukács published his landmark political theoretical work in what came to be known as “Western Marxism,” as opposed to Soviet Marxism, *History and Class Consciousness*. Here he formulated a concrete theory for the process of “reification,” which might be thought of to mean ‘thingification,’ or more literally translated, “making something thinglike.” Through reification, commodity life becomes so violently fetishized that the view of reality in human consciousness is pervasively warped (Butler, 2). For the revolutionary Lukács of the 1920s, then, a familiar problem surfaces in which there is a failure of effective mediation between the apprehension of reality in the individual, ideal realm—the “soul,” at

other times, but here it becomes “consciousness”—and the greater contingent social conditions where it exists.

When, beginning in the 1930s, he criticizes Expressionism and modernism for over-fixating on subjective, myopic moments, and thus forgoing a critical grasp on the real world and its issues, “he chastises a position that in some ways resembles his own early reflections of the 1910s. But this critique should be read less as a self-repudiation than a change of emphasis, one that comes to focus on the realistic potential of certain literary forms” (Butler, “Introduction,” 3). This “change of emphasis,” is, in other words, an elaboration on his ongoing project of understanding the mediatory power of forms.

Butler reminds us that the Lukácsian insight of a historical understanding of form was far from being a product of the later, distinctly Marxist Lukács. Although it was before his declarations heralding the redemptive promise of the historical novel, the essays in *Soul and Form*, which reflect on a series of different authors (including Kierkegaard, Novalis, Theodor Storm, and Stefan George, among others), articulate already a sensibility for the social and temporal contingencies present for the writer when trying to communicate one’s inner impulses. It was this sensibility—in different terms, that “the context enters into the form and becomes part of the forming process itself,” that remained key to Lukács’ life’s work in all its phases. “This is what it means to claim, as I believe Lukács has taught us to claim,” writes Butler, “that form has a historicity” (“Introduction” 7).

Butler emphasizes that this dialectic between the existential and historical forces in communicative forms is not merely a situation in which either the soul or the forms it produces exists before or independently of the other; form is hardly a mold into which the soul, one’s pure, preexisting truth, is poured. She maintains:

Something called ‘life’ cannot be fully apprehended by the soul and the forms it makes: the soul must also live, become a vessel, and even house a certain chaos and contingency that goes with life. The social forms Lukács sought would bear qualities of unity and discreteness, but he found that life, understood as longing, invariably breaks with them and demands that new ones be found. This was the moment that fascinated him and that he found so difficult to abide. (“Introduction” 12-13)

It is worth noting how, twenty years prior to writing this essay, Butler herself, in her own celebrated debut, *Gender Trouble* (1990), pointed out that, “language is not an *exterior medium* or *instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self” (*Gender Trouble* 196). Here, too, is an acknowledgement by Butler of an understanding that the social form of language does not merely act as a “vessel” into which a self or soul that exists purely and prediscursively can be poured. The central dilemma being addressed in *Gender Trouble* is, rather than the limitations and potentials of literary forms, about the implications of *gender* forms. Nonetheless, Butler’s inquiry in many ways gets at the same core concerns about form as do Lukács’ endeavors. Specifically, her gender performativity theory reveals the complex mechanism by which forms of gender expression, which she argues are constituted through repeated discursive (and therefore communicative) signification, simultaneously reflect, or report on, but also *give new meaning to*, our lived experiences. Like Lukács, Butler pursues a critical grasp on forms and their relationship with life, for she recognizes that forms do not appear *in addition to* life, but rather forms are themselves the very mode by which life is made intelligible.

In this section, I explore in greater detail how Butler addresses in *Gender Trouble* the very same tensions and possibilities in the ways that form grasps and constitutes human life.

Gender Trouble begins with a recollection of the confounding implications of “trouble” in childhood; as a child, one was threatened with getting in trouble, and sometimes was even put in trouble, all in an effort to stay out of trouble. Butler’s view is that it is impossible to keep oneself out of trouble; hence the only question should be how to best make and be in trouble. We see from the outset Butler’s insight into the “subtle ruse” of the law, and of discursive forms more generally. The very act of trying to resolve a troublesome reality in turn creates more trouble. Already, we see focus turned toward the same old quandary, the question of the stability of constructed forms (xxx).

Butler frames her entire inquiry with a sense of “trouble” that seems to pervade all feminist discourse about gender categories and their meanings. The source of this trouble, furthermore, includes not only the ambiguity of gender itself, but also the tenuousness of the critiques offering to explain and prescribe recourse to the curiosities of human sexuality. As Butler observes, trouble might allude to some essential mystery or enigma that underlies the feminine condition; in Sartre, all (presumptuously heterosexual and masculine) desire is characterized as trouble. Indeed, “trouble became a scandal” (xxx) when the feminine object of desire suddenly and unexpectedly reverses the male gaze, revealing through dialectical inversion the truth of how reliant the supposedly autonomous masculine subject really is on the supposedly dependent female Other. But for Butler, this radical reversal of power is by itself not sufficient as an illustration or critique of the power dynamic: “Power seemed to be more than an exchange between subjects or a relation of constant inversion between subjects and an Other; indeed, power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender” (xxx). In other words, to truly destabilize gender roles means more than to simply elucidate the moments of their illusion or reversibility. To expose the

limitations and double standards of gender dynamics is still, ultimately, to presume some pre-contingent foundation, some “natural fact” (xxx) on which constructions of gendered difference are inherently based—in which case, of course, they may not be called constructions. Instead, Butler’s critical emphasis on *trouble* requires relocating the point of inquiry from the validity of these categories to, rather, the internal stability of the very categorical matrix itself.

The mechanisms that form identity and that form gender identity are the same process. Indeed there is no identity that can be said to form prior to culturally intelligible gender categories, simply because one only becomes a “person”—only gains visibility and meaning—through and in relation to “recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (22). But just as “identity” becomes stable through coherence and continuity with normative categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, too, “the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (23) Indeed, incoherent, discontinuous forms of gendered existence are “themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence” (23). Not only that, but they are produced by those very rules and norms which try to elucidate innate, “natural” connections between biological sex, gender identity, and their corresponding configuration of sexual desire and practice (23).

The “epistemic regime” (xxi) of ostensibly natural gendered ontology is produced and reinforced by and in *regulatory practices* of culturally coherent formations of gender. This is to say that coherent identities are formed, through regulatory practice, in accordance with the matrix of coherent norms. The ‘matrix of intelligibility’ is partially key to understanding

Butler's genealogy of categories of gender identity and sexuality. A binary, heterosexual framework of intelligible identity requires "discrete and asymmetrical oppositions" between feminine and masculine expressions of identity (24). Only by doing so, the cultural matrix takes the shape of a binary opposition: the designation of one way of gendered existence, one set of coherent categorical attributes, necessarily negates the possibility of occupying the alternate. Moreover, the foreclosure of certain possible meaningful categories of existence is integral to the entire notion of the matrix of intelligibility, since the matrix relies on relations between categories to denote either the presence or absence of a meaningful (but constructed/contingent) entailment. The implication here, then, is that certain persons, whose own categories of being do not cohere with either of the normative, *intelligible* patterns of identity entailments, appear not as alternative formulations of identity, but rather only as flawed executions, logical breakdowns (24). Here, cultural unintelligibility translates as existential failure.

Among the analyses Butler provides of French feminist and poststructuralist theoretical considerations of coherent categories of gender, biological sex, and sexual desire, there are widely varying explanations for how exactly these sexual identities come to exist through frameworks of discursive power (24). We already explored, briefly, some qualities of the matrix of intelligibility. Namely, this included the fact that categories of expressive attributes within the matrix may be signified or non-signified, potentially with mutual exclusivity, until the aggregate of those signs takes on a coherent, discrete shape in coherence with gender-normative relational entailments. Still, the complexity of this process of inscriptions of cultural identities leaves room for the question of what "field of power" is responsible for articulating those identities (25). That is, could there exist a monolithic

subject of hegemonic resignification, a traceable source or site of origin at which the production of gendered identities might be located? And if so, what does that subject or source imply for whether the scholarly subject, i.e. the feminist observer, would be able to obtain a critical distance from the production of identity categories? The theorists in Butler's analysis differ widely in their conceived approaches: For Irigaray, the current phallogocentric discursive paradigms allow only for a single, masculine sex that asserts its identity through its production of and relation to categories of non-masculine "Other." Foucault, meanwhile, believes that all identity categories of sex are elaborated by "a diffuse regulatory economy" of sexual discourse and practice. Yet for Wittig, any conception of sexual category subject to compulsory heterosexuality necessarily becomes feminine—with respect to a neutral, universal masculinity—with the only recourse being to displace hegemonic categories of sex with radically new, disruptive ones (i.e. radical lesbianism, for Wittig) (25).

Clearly, these analyses offer divergent conceptions of the "field of power" that articulates identity categories of sex. But, Butler notices one aspect that these disparate theories share in common: Fascinatingly, all of these views are centered in an understanding that sexual category—or indeed, sex itself—appears discursively as a *substantive* entity, in a metaphysical sense. The quirk here, specifically, is that a descriptive category or term takes on the effect of an ontological condition, and then *conceals* the truth of the matter that it is impossible for any person or subject to *be* a descriptive quality (25-26). Elaborating on this, Butler invokes a Nietzschean phrase, the "*metaphysics of substance*," to describe a philosophical criticism applicable to this substantiation of sex. What this criticism observes is the fact that, "a number of philosophical ontologies have been trapped within certain illusions of 'Being' and 'Substance' that are fostered by the belief that the grammatical formulation of

the subject and predicate reflects the prior ontological reality of substance and attribute... In no sense, however, do they reveal or represent some true order of things” (28). The critique of the metaphysics of substance serves the purposes of the present debate, about substantive notions of sex, because it problematizes the essentialism that underscores much of the logic behind identity politics. Irigaray identifies grammar as necessarily a phallogocentric instrument of masculine self-perpetuation, one which simultaneously conceals the real asymmetry and univocality of the discourse behind an illusion of equally-split binary feminine-masculine hegemonic language. The result of Irigaray’s conception of sexual intelligibility, curiously, is a bind in which existing language is (deceptively) pervasively masculine, and thus categorically unable to comprehend or express genuine modes of feminine existence (26). For Irigaray, the substantive grammar of the gender binary is wholly inadequate to signify and represent women, nor is it adequate to provide for ultimately critically productive or liberatory considerations of feminist politics. The essentialism of this view lies in the assumption of a metaphysics of substance: the feminine subject here is presumed to exist as a substantive category of ontological truth *prior to* the moment of oppression, the moment of hegemonic cultural production.

Butler locates Wittig within a peculiar, and arguably nuanced, position on the substantive effect of gender. In Butler’s view, Wittig does call into question the authority of the metaphysics of substance. She sees Wittig as having an understanding of substantiation that acknowledges the (gramato-)logical impasse of trying to conflate sex as a category with one’s existence as a subject, and still attends to the fact that persons are constructed within gendered language to begin with and therefore cannot exist in any coherent, discrete sense *before or above* the categories of gender imposed by language (29). Furthermore, her

position implies a curious compromise between, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of a metaphysics of substance of the fact of sex—it carries a firmness, indeed, a certain physique—and on the other hand, a clearly materialist sensibility for understanding performative constructions of sexual category as forms of cultural material practice (35). In other words, for Butler, Wittig realizes a substantiation of sex insofar as sex can only be substantiated through repeated stylized practices, to the point that a discretely discernible *mark* is produced and made to signify sex. In Wittig's formulation of the metaphysics of substance, the actual "substance" of a categorical notion only occurs by and as the *mark* itself.

Perhaps, Butler's particular generosity towards and interest in the nuances of Wittig's materialism stem from Butler's own critical enthusiasm for material practices of performative construction, which primarily constitutes her third and final chapter, *Subversive Bodily Acts*. Here, an inquisitive light is shone on presumptions about the human body itself. Butler points out that distinctions between categories of sex and gender, even when understood as culturally inscribed, still presuppose a view of the body as a passive, open medium that exists unmarked prior to discourse. The active, signifying counterpart to this open medium, meanwhile, can be understood as a profoundly immaterial, indeed, even spiritual, entity that exists as pure demarcation, serving to leave a mark of meaning on the neutral plane of an unmarked body. Butler identifies certain historical iterations of this phenomenon in "Christian and Cartesian precedents" (176), which classically recognized a stark binary opposition between the body, an unconscious, objective, purely tangible space; and the mind, or 'the spirit,' a "radically immaterial" (176), nearly specter-like ephemeral human awareness that inscribes meanings onto blank bodies. Moreover, Butler's scrutiny of

theoretical assumptions about the body centers partly on the assumption of the mind/body duality. What accounts for the pervasive acceptance as truth of the body as an empty vessel, one that remains neutral until it becomes marked upon by a radically disembodied sentience? And, more to the point, what effect might there be from taking this dualism for granted, even in radical, liberatory-minded political discourse? For Butler, the suggestion here seems to be that the assumption of a fundamental mind-body contrast in feminist discourses proves problematic for the purposes of a political theory that seeks specifically to overcome implicit binarism between sexual categories (176). Hence, further genealogical sifting is warranted to understand the stakes behind the presumption of dualisms of mind/body, spirit/vessel, ideal/material, etc.

Particularly cogent is Butler's appropriation of anthropologist Mary Douglas's work *Purity and Danger*. For Butler, Douglas's findings on human bodily taboos and rituals are strong evidence in favor of the argument that the very physical boundaries of the body are discursively inscribed over repeated practice, like with other cultural categories. Butler invokes the characterization of the human cultural experience as a genuinely "untidy" one (178)—that is to say, an often complex, and undifferentiated, experience—and it is as such that frameworks of cultural coherence and distinctions are discursively instated. Social life is only intelligible, indeed only possible at all, when it is mediated through these boundaries, which are intellectual *as well as* physical:

[Douglas's] analysis suggests that what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systemically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become, within her analysis, the limits of the social *per se*. A poststructuralist appropriation of her view

might well understand the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially *hegemonic*. (179)

To put this in different terms, we may well say that the body itself, as it is culturally circumscribed, truly becomes a physical manifestation of the matrix of intelligibility. Previously, the matrix of intelligibility was discussed as only an abstract entity, but here, it becomes clear that the naturalization and regulation of boundaries and categories in social space can quite literally occur on a physical level, i.e., on and around the human body. Further, this is also to say that the body may only be rendered discrete by coherence with intelligible boundaries.

The regulation of corporal boundaries occurs by inclusion as well as exclusion. As previously explored with the matrix of intelligibility, discrete cultural morphologies are formed from a collection of binary opposition categories that are each signified one way or the other. This is to say, in the case of the body, that bodily boundary sites are categorized as either *the body* or *not the body*, or from a first-person perspective, the *me* and the *not-me*. Hence, the idea of a mutual distinction between interior and exterior is rendered essential to institute the body as we know it as the identity-unit. In order for the body to remain its conception as a stable and discrete entity, it requires its “inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct” (182). To enforce this distinction, something which Butler, vis á vis Julia Kristeva, calls “abjection,” occurs (181). Rendering something abject, in this sense, is to imply the expulsion of a previous part of oneself *out of* oneself, and out of one’s identity, and thus instituting that expelled part as a *not-me*—as an Other.

Butler notes how the expulsion of part of an entity that is considered to be alien to that entity is in fact the very process by which the alien is constructed in the first place (181).

Thus, it is through exclusion by which not only the contours of the self, the inner world, but those of the non-self, outer world, are made and kept intact. Indeed, this process of expulsion has the effect of setting and regulating culturally hegemonic and non-hegemonic identities:

As Iris Young has suggested in her use of Kristeva to understand sexism, homophobia, and racism, the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation. (182)

What Butler cares to argue here is that while, paradoxically, the notion of the discrete self relies on seemingly strong and fixed boundaries in between *me* and *not-me*, and interior and exterior, it is precisely at the site of the margins of an ontological morphology that a tenuous permeability is most present. It is precisely this precarious site that, to the effect of the corporal model, “is the mode by which Others become shit” (182). The hegemonic self is the body and the non-hegemonic non-self is its expulsion. The stability of each relies on the supposed impermeability of their boundaries. But at some point, somewhere in the body there had to be a site of substantial permeability between the me and the not-me, between inner and outer, such that the expulsion could be transvaluated from “something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (182).

Once we recognize that the site of the boundaries between self and non-self, and between identity and Other, are by no means fixed or innate, but indeed actually mediatory and uncertain, what more might be revealed? The notion of bodily inscription on prisoner bodies in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* tells us that laws are not enforced onto or into the identities of the prisoners, but instead the prisoners come to embody the very prohibitive language of the law in their own existence. In this understanding,

[the] law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body; there the law is manifest as the essence of their selves, the meaning of their soul, their conscience, the law of their desire... it never appears as external to the bodies it subjects and subjectivates. (183)

The implication that the same model of Foucaultian prisoner identity inscription also applies to *gender* identity leads Butler to ask, “What is the prohibitive law that generates the corporeal stylization of gender, the fantasied and fantastic figuration of the body?”(184). For Butler, this is the moment when a *performativity* theory of gender becomes pertinent. Whereas law becomes law and criminal becomes criminal when society acts according to how they are written—people behave in compliance with the written rule, or when they transgress it, they are punished for it—gender only attains his value as gender once people live and express according to what gender supposedly necessitates. The normative model of coherence between sex, desire, and gendered behavior purports to suggest of some essential underlying cause tying them all together, that is, the coherence appears to describe an inner source that can’t be seen with the naked eye. However, Butler maintains that in actuality the direction of causality is to the contrary: gestures, actions, and discursive signs work together to construct the semblance of an inner core, which is in reality fictive. To say it is fictive, of course, is not to say that its effect is unreal; through the performance of expressive acts and signs in accordance with a certain constructed ideal, the result is the sensation of a fixed, substantive foundational identity (185). Furthermore, since the site of manifestation of internal identity is actually located on the *surface* of the body, i.e. the locale of social performances of gender, this also means that “that very interiority is an effect and function of

a decidedly public and social discourse” (185). Once we can believe that self-essence from within is the effect of forces from without, that is, outward social acts, we become open to the possibility of a liberatory politics, based on performances and signs which do *not* cohere according to the hegemonic norm, that can displace and dissolve the fiction of an inner core truth that disciplines an individual’s life.

Butler puts forth drag as a possible means by which people might playfully yet radically subvert preconceived and deeply instituted notions of gender that seem natural but are in fact fictive. For her, drag is an art form that demonstrates quite literally the ‘performative’ nature of gender. That is, drag “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true identity” (186). Thus, according to this view, forms of gender ‘impersonation’—the practices of “drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (187)—provide performer and spectator with a way of calling into question and critiquing an assumed natural coherence between sex, gender, and presentation. It does so, specifically, by highlighting the relations between the three, as well as the contingencies of each. For, “[i]f the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (187). Moreover, drag performance is significant for Butler for its ability, within a unified presentation of a formal experience of life (that is, drag is presented in the form of a woman) to reveal and exploit the sites of hidden contradiction—of *dissonance*—between supposedly stable and coherent aspects of gender forms.

Both Butler and Lukács argue for a formal discernment of reality that is radically dynamic, rather than one that is rigidly predefined and based on some independent nature. For Lukács, his ideal aesthetic is specifically one that can cut across the predispositions that cause us to believe in capitalism as the natural order of the human world. He writes with enthusiasm for the “artistic struggle to shape the highly complex mediations [of reality] in all their unity and diversity and to synthesize them as characters in a work of literature” (43), and with an equal degree of disdain for forms that embrace only the “one-dimensionality” (45) of their worldview. Butler, for whom genders can be thought of as “styles of the flesh” (*Gender Trouble*, 190), similarly believes a truly radical grasp on reality would emphasize the fact that no human forms are static or universally applicable; rather, she understands that “styles have a history, and those histories limit and condition the possibilities” (190).

But they seem to depart in that while Lukács believes in a certain consciousness as being the true reality, Butler cannot be said to see any one experience of life as being the authentic ‘kernel’ of experience beneath all the superfluities.

On the other hand, one might argue that indeed neither believe an underlying kernel of life; instead the only “authenticity” one could argue for would be the truth of the fact that all naturalistic truisms about the human experience are not inherent, but constructed, specifically through repetitive iteration over time. According to this truth, then, people are opened up to consider other ways that life *might be made real*. Thus, we could say that this is what Lukács means by an “authentic” grasp on reality.

What also seems to be a variable is how each theorist believes we should think about and discuss the issues of forms, and of a form in particular, for indeed we know that just by bringing it up we are in one way or another, however small, altering its existence as a

discrete category. In any case, though, it is agreed that one key should be to avoid whatever approach will only exacerbate the dehumanizing effects of naturalized delimitations of reality, and only serve to maintain the violence of existing power structures. Butler's approach is to lean into the minutely reformative power of discourse, and to encourage active, curious disruption—trouble—of gender categories that we assume to be innate, through parodic practices such as drag. Lukács' approach is to explore, through realist literary simulations, new potential alternatives for the future course of social history. In either case, the goal is not to engage in insular, academic wordplay. It is rather to reveal new categories of possibility for experiencing life in a way that makes it a more "livable" life (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxiii).

3. Édouard Glissant and the Right to Opacity

In the last chapter, I discussed the ways in which Judith Butler's theory of gender as stylized performance understands form, and in particular how it contests a view of form/forms as stable, discrete constructs that are founded in prefigured ideals. For Butler, subversive possibility exists in drag performance because of the practice's ability to demonstrate dissonances and contingencies in supposedly natural and innate forms of gender. Previously, as well, I explored Georg Lukács' theoretic relationship with form, specifically introducing his aesthetic and ontological view of the social 'totality.' For Lukács, modern Western society is dominated by the 'totalizing' worldview of capitalism, meaning that tropes of social alienation and disparateness are believed by its members to be innate, indisputable elements of human life. Lukács finds a radical, liberatory aesthetic in his particular conception of historical realism, because of its potential to reveal how the relations between aspects of social life tend to play out, how they do or don't cohere with presumed patterns, when repeated over an extended period of time.

For the theorist Édouard Glissant, form is also central to the political struggle for dignified human life. In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant shares a sensibility with Butler and Lukács for the dominance of a politically inscribed, yet internally and personally felt, painful experience of reality. In the context of the experience of the postcolonial Caribbean Other, cultural identity is tied seemingly inextricably to the feeling of "the torments of inner exile" (Glissant, 19). Here, "inner exile" refers not to a concretely determinate status of political oppression of certain people within their own country, such as the plight of blacks in South Africa during apartheid, but rather, inner exile is meant to describe "individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at

least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole” (19). This suggests, furthermore, that as far as reconciling with naturalized and totalizing epistemic frameworks, it is the project of the writer, of the poet as well as the theorist, to lead the “voyage out of this enclosure” (19).

Glissant outlines the limitations of the Western episteme by discussing the remnants and tropes of the baroque, from its formation and through its height. Under the paradigm of baroque thought, the previous tendency to want to unveil the depths of nature, a nature that was “harmonious, homogenous, and thoroughly knowable” (77), and moreover to imitate its unalienable properties, went by the wayside. Previously, classicism touted a rationalism that assumed to be able to master and penetrate reality, which carried a fixed and obvious knowability. In its place, the “historical” (78) baroque offered a fresh, indignant rejection of the classicist assumption of the positivity of a natural order; it asserted a “stubborn renouncement of any ambition to summarize the world’s matter in sets of imitative harmonies that would approach some essence” (78). Instead, the baroque approach was one of expansion, of unfolding distances and infinite totalities.

The evolution of the baroque, as Glissant outlines it, surpassed its original definition as merely the reaction to a positivist, classicist ‘Nature’ and soon came to stand for its own conception of Nature, which was conveyed not through certitude, but through diversified contacts and renewed relations. At this point, according to Glissant, the baroque grasped at the world through the lens of *métissage*, or intermixing, of systems of discernment. This became true not only stylistically but scientifically; it was the naturalization of the baroque tendency during which “[s]cience entered an age of rational and basic uncertainties” (79). For

Glissant, this sensibility, of continually deferred discovery of the depths of reality, continues to define the tendency of our world today. It is what Glissant calls “being-in-the-world” (79).

But Glissant also acknowledges the tension that arose as the baroque, of the later sense, of *métissage*, became further realized in and between cultures worldwide. The greater the normalization of *métissage*, the less distinct became its central theme of cross-encounter. Thus, Glissant begs the question: “How can continuity (which is ‘desirable’) be practiced in this incessant turnover? How can the stabilizing action of former classicisms be replaced? And with what?” (92). Indeed, it is compelling to wonder, how can a sensibility based on continually reconfigured relations gain and maintain some degree of systemic stability? Where is the opportunity for sustainability in a system that runs on upheaval?

To reconcile with these questions, Glissant reconsiders prefigured beliefs about order and disorder. Specifically, there can in fact be such thing as too much measure, and similarly, there can be a modest degree of disorder. With regard to the sensibility of the baroque, and in other words, of relation, this means that, “the only discernible stabilities in Relation have to do with the interdependence of the cycles operative there, how their corresponding patterns of movement are in tune” (92). For Glissant, the sensibility of grasping the world through Relation is sustainable and stable because its end result is “unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality” (93). These “unities,” moreover, are what he calls “*échos-monde*,” the ‘resonances-world,’ perhaps.

It is through the invocation of creolization that Glissant helps us understand his *échos-monde*. He maintains that in this notion of ‘complex intermixing,’ the defining characteristic is not the nature of the elements themselves that are being mixed together, but instead, only the relations between those elements. In his words, creolization is “only

exemplified by its processes and certainly not the ‘contents’ on which these operate” (89). Furthermore, he argues that, “the Creole language is a “fragile and revealing *écho-monde*, born of a reality of relation and limited within this reality by its dependence” (93).

But examples of what Glissant considers to be *échos-monde* extend and vary vastly beyond just spoken languages. “William Faulkner’s work, Bob Marley’s song, the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot, are all *échos-monde*,” Glissant writes, in addition to the urban architecture and layouts of Chicago, Rio, and Caracas (93). What ties together all of these instances of *échos-monde* is, for Glissant, the fact that each is a case of a unity formed from the “interdependent variances” (92) of its particularities. An *écho-monde* may exist on a communal level or an individual one, and indeed they exist among both. Always, the *échos-monde* of humanity are in flux, dynamic, never static, and never actually absolute. But their function is consistently “in order to cope with or express confluences,” and their result, a “sort of music” that is composed on an individual, a communal, and a global level (92-93). That is to say, the resonances of *échos-monde* emanate from relations of every scale.

The *échos-monde* only account for one component of Glissant’s conception of how we grasp and exist in the world. Necessary to understand along with the notion of *échos-monde* is that which our *échos-monde* works to synthesize and configure into unities of relation. For Glissant, this is the concept of the *chaos-monde*. The *chaos-monde* is the world of energetic particularities, which engage each other in “turbulent confluence,” and achieve organization only in and through the relational “globality” of the *échos-monde* (94).

Glissant is careful to underline the fact that the aesthetics of the *chaos-monde* is not the aesthetics of the disordered universe. *Chaos-monde* could only constitute the disordered elements of the universe if one assumed any prior scale or set of norms by which one could

evaluate whether the world is closer or further away from an ideal state of order in and of itself. But as the chaos of the *chaos-monde* is neither “muddled nothingness” in this sense, nor is it “devoid of norms” (94). This is true simply in the sense that whatever principles it abides by “neither constitute a goal nor govern a method there,” Glissant says (94).

But Glissant does not only describe his *chaos-monde* by everything that it is not; he also explains it compellingly in terms of what it *does* do:

The aesthetics of the *chaos-monde* (what we were thus calling the aesthetics of the universe but cleared of a priori values) embraces all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us; it is totality’s act and its fluidity, totality’s reflection and agent in motion. (94)

The “totality within us,” furthermore, accounts for the third fold of Glissant’s conception of the world: that of the *totalité-monde* (91). As implied in the above quotation, the *totalité-monde*, the world in its entirety, is enacted in the *chaos-monde*. By this account, then, the *totalité-monde* does not prioritize any particular self-expression or form: its only mode is the *chaos-monde*, and as we have established, this world does not assume any sort of a priori foundation. Rather, form is only introduced to the *totalité-monde* and its *chaos-monde* by virtue of our manifold and dynamic *échos-monde*. In other words, the *chaos-monde* becomes synthesized, and indeed, realized, in and through the *relations* between all things as we intellectualize them, i.e., our *échos-monde*.

Just as, for Glissant, the aesthetics of *échos-monde* are constantly in flux, constantly self-destructing and reiterating, so, too, it is the case that, “totality’s imagination is inexhaustible” (95). Furthermore, this also implies that the notion of totality is “always, in every form, wholly legitimate—that is, free of all legitimacy” (95). Finally, it is through the

forms of our *échos-monde*, through the fluid relations between the particularities of life, which allow us to have stability and sanity in a realm of continual upheaval.

Glissant's threefold image of the world, constituted by the *totalité-monde*, the *échos-monde*, and the *chaos-monde*, altogether, seems to necessitate an open compartmentalization of human discernment of the world. In a footnote, translator Betsy Wing adds that for Glissant, "the world is totality, echoes, and chaos, all at once, depending on our many ways of sensing and addressing it" (216-217). This suggests that Glissant's triadic dimensions of the world are simultaneously distinct from one another yet always act in tandem and confluence with one another. It is by this account, moreover, that Glissant understands Relation. Glissant's Relation cooperates between, or indeed, compartmentalizes "the possibility for each one at every moment to be both solidary and solitary there" (131).

Glissant's conception of knowledge of the world through Relation, which by definition is neither static, nor ever quantifiably exhaustible, yet indeed still penetrable, is radical on account of the challenge it poses for the dominant epistemological paradigm of *transparency*. "Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image," Glissant argues. Rather, now,

There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing. (111)

Yet, Glissant continues, he is alarmed at the continued insistence by the West to deny this fact. The ideal monolingualism of the French language, he argues, has always purported itself to "have a humanizing function supposedly inseparable from its very nature" (113),

such that it would be able to transcend destructive sterility. Too, Glissant sees the essentialism of the French language as also including its “literary dedication to clarity” (113), a classicist insistence on examining and exposing the entire human world, in full accordance with some fictitious unity of inherent norms and principles. Glissant calls this essentialist fiction endemic to French literary language its “pleasing rationality” (113).

Glissant suggests that neither of these aspects of the French, neither its “humanizing function” nor its prefigured justification to crusade for ‘clarity,’ actually holds up under critique. “Languages have no mission,” he reasons, continuing on to write that,

[t]his is, however, the sort of learnedly dealt nonsense we have to struggle eternally against in a discourse depriving populations of cultural identity... such windbags are anxiously intent on confining themselves to the false transparency of a world they used to run; they do not want to enter into the penetrable opacity of a world in which one exists, or agrees to exist, with and among others. (114)

Here, then, is where we come to encounter Glissant’s argument for *opacity* instead of a “false transparency.” When we examine literary texts, he notices, “ideas of transparency and opacity quite naturally present themselves as the critical approach” (115). The way that a text is produced, and the way it appears once it is written, both concern themselves with the transparency-opacity paradigm. On the one hand, the writer acts with an absolute intention in mind of what it is she would like to convey in words. But by actually putting it into writing, this absolute is rendered *relative* to the words that constitute it. Hence, “[t]he text passes from a dreamed-of transparency to the opacity produced in words” (115). As well, when a different person reads the words produced by the writer, another degree of relativity, of opacity, arises between the reader and the presumed intention of the writer, which the reader

(and the writer too) likely imagines to be transparent but is not. In other words, for Glissant opacity inhabits the space in between pure, inner impulse, and the sign of that impulse as it is realized out in the world. But this does not mean to suggest that impulse, opacity, and expression are three distinct yet interrelated elements of a social process, wherein “opacity” simply refers to some unavoidable margin of ambiguity between intention and interpretation. Rather, Glissant sees opacity as being the very actualization, fact, and mediation of two imagined absolutes. Opacity exists in the space between two absolutes in the sense that *all* of that space is opaque space. By this Glissant suggests that the logic of Relation will always resist *conflation* through and in opacity. Furthermore, he advocates for preserving and recognizing the opacities implicit in discursive thinking. He maintains the need to understand of language, “its situation within Relation, its precursors and its conceivable future” (116).

Since language is the condition through which we express and understand the world around us, for Glissant, then, it is also the case that we must appreciate the opacities present in human life in general. He urges his reader to agree “to the right to opacity” (190). By the “right” to opacity, he means to suggest a conscious, shared, mutual acknowledgement among all people of life’s irreducibility to containers, but more than that, of the viability of an alternative view, one in which the incondensable pieces of reality can still be grasped as a whole by focusing on their interrelations. Glissant conceptualizes this interrelatedness as a fabric, a cohesive whole that is, at the same time, fundamentally incapable of collapsing into itself (to take the metaphor a step further, we could point out that a fabric cannot be boiled down into a concentrate, or if one tried to boil it, the only possible result would be useless, a black mound of charred clothes). Instead, he asserts that the only feasible way to discern the world in all its opacities is to “focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its

components” (190). Thus, Glissant’s conceptualization of the world is an expansive, open one; it is not fundamentally reducible under a single scale.

Glissant’s totality henceforth takes the form of the woven textile. Yet, he also expresses strong criticism for the idea of totality itself. His critique here is central to his position as a whole in *Poetics of Relation*. Specifically, he considers his own conception of totality, which is based on dynamic Relation, to be an “open totality evolving upon itself” (192). The open nature of the world of Relation, moreover, is due to the fact that the whole of all diverse constituents does not represent a “finality” (192). That is, in this case, “it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea” (192). This notion of non-finality is central to Glissant’s understanding of Relation: the difference between an open and a closed totality, for him, is the difference between a diverse, interrelated, and *malleable* texture, versus a discrete, prefigured, immovable enclosure. “The idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality,” he concludes (192).

In place of a reductive insistence on the unity of totality, Glissant offers *radiance* as a poetic alternative for grasping at the unstable expanse of an open totality of Relation (192). Radiance is, in other words, a different way to describe opacity. Although in general the concept of opaqueness may invoke qualities such as darkness, cloudiness, or greyness, indeed the opposite holds true for Glissant in the current context of opacities in Relation. Opacity in this conception is not synonymous with obscurity (191), and it by no means implies “cornering [oneself] within futility and inactivity” (192). Rather, in Glissant’s view, opacities in an open totality radiate outwards, “animating the imagined transparency of Relation” (192). The result, he explains, is that opacity lends a certain warmth to life, such that it softens and suffuses the intense pressure to see the world in absolutes. “Whether this

consists of spreading overarching general ideas, or hanging on to the concrete, the law of facts, the precision of details, or sacrificing some apparently less important thing in the name of efficacy,” he holds, “the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices” (192). Throughout, Glissant’s account of embracing opacity evokes a sense of dynamics; of stimulation and mobility; of not allowing oneself to “become cornered in any essence” (192). When Glissant argues for an open totality that *evolves upon itself*, he defends a stabilizing form of life whose structure only exists in motion.

Conclusion

Show Us Another Way

It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism...
—Mark Fisher

I have depicted three accounts for how the discursive forms we use to grasp and see out everyday life mediate and constitute that life, specifically through dynamic, relational frameworks of meaning. For Georg Lukács, the only literary form that can dialectically keep up with life's contingencies over time was the lengthy realist novel; only the realist can discern the texture of the relations over time between the seemingly disparate particularities of life. Judith Butler, meanwhile, finds that gender forms simultaneously report on and give new meaning to experience; furthermore, the continuous reiteration of this reportage over time becomes the mechanism by which stable notions of the gendered body is constituted by form. Finally, I explored Édouard Glissant's account of the world, comprehended through language, as an opaque, open totality whose interrelations constantly breathe and grow, "evolving upon itself" (192).

The respective theories of Lukács, Butler, and Glissant are alike in that they all share a similar sensibility for the centrality of relations between particulars in constituting cohesive frameworks of meaning. Moreover, they all understand how these relations operate *temporally*, that is, they are not inherently stable but rather they vary, break, and expand over time.

But what each of these theories also demonstrate, if only implicitly, is the real necessity of meaningful theory in order for political struggle. Rather than only suggesting,

‘What if there could be another way?’, they all take on the project of *making a new way intelligible*. In this sense, ironically, critical theory is at its most powerful when it is the *least* theoretical. This is to say, we need strong theory in order to enact radical change. Meaningful political progress cannot come about unless such a future is made comprehensible as a serious possibility for how life can be lived. Essential is the theoretical work that actually enables us to imagine an alternative.

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