

Ontological Inflections in Post-Paranoid Theory: Epistemic Prison and Ontological Alternatives¹

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ABSTRACT: Has critique run out of steam, as Bruno Latour (2004) famously suggested? In this paper we take a closer look at Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' as an exemplary case of a certain paranoid epistemological stance in contemporary critical theory more broadly. Whereas Butler's edifice posits an 'infinitely distant' nature as a kind of transcendental occasion which enables the productive work of cultural fictions, thereby confining critique to the realm of language, we seek to offer two plausible alternatives to this epistemic prison: the new materialist approach, which offers an affirmative possibility of theorizing nature, and the value-form reading of Marx, which discovers a certain negativity of value at the heart of contemporary social formations.

KEY WORDS: Judith Butler, new materialism, ontological turn, paranoid epistemology, performativity, value-form theory.

In this paper, we seek to intervene in the poststructural² strand of contemporary critical theory to pinpoint and articulate a predicament that

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² We use the term *poststructural* in a narrower sense than is often the case: primarily to refer to linguistic and epistemological tendencies within the literature that are typically wary of metaphysical or ontological theorizing. Although thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze—and even Jacques Derrida, on some readings (e.g., Kirby 2011)—are frequently grouped within the broader poststructuralist tradition, they do not exhibit the particular tendencies we seek to critique in this paper.

we believe this project finds itself in. We, then, proceed by sketching two alternative responses that circumvent the predicament in question.

We focus our inquiry on the writings of Judith Butler, as it carries an exemplary case of the issue we wish to highlight. Through an exegesis of Butler's understanding of *performativity*, which we believe reflects a variety of their theoretical commitments, we demonstrate how Butler's arguments operate under the problematic dichotomy of nature/culture, a two-systems framework which they struggle with from their earliest writings to their most recent ones. While in their earlier writings nature appears as pre-discursive materiality and thoroughly unavailable to us, given that we are locked within the epistemic prison of culture, in their more recent writings Butler more explicitly addresses previously disavowed nature and endows it with its own agency, positing the two systems in 'a kind of chiasmic relation'. For us, the heart of the issue, which runs throughout Butler's opus, is therefore the following puzzle: Butler either overtly accedes to a binary systems model of two ontologically distinct estates (nature and culture), thus explicitly abandoning some of their defining poststructural commitments, or they completely abandon pre-discursive materiality (nature) as fundamentally unavailable, since we are only ever able to meditate on various representations (discourses) of nature in the cultural realm in which we are inexorably enclosed.

We seek to tap into the increasingly pervasive feeling of discontent with this ostensibly ineluctable predicament of epistemic prison, to which poststructuralism would conscribe us, by offering two plausible alternatives. While quite different from each other, they both participate in a broader literature of the 'ontological turn', breaking away from the obsessive focus on epistemology stemming from Cartesian dualism. For purposes of scope and brevity, these two responses are not put in conversation with each other but are rather only sketched as promising ways of employing conceptual resources already present in contemporary critical theory to defuse and/or completely circumvent the predicament in question.

The first response is associated with the body of literature referred to as *new materialism*, a multi-disciplinary effort to challenge the dominant Western ontological imaginary with a non-anthropocentric one focused on the agency of matter, assemblages, process, and immanence. The second response stems from the Marxian tradition of *Wertkritik* (value-critique); also referred to as *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (New Marx

Reading) whose main aspiration is to (re)introduce Marx as a post-foundationalist social theorist, rather than a political economist. The primary contribution of this paper is to provide a common ground for two ontological approaches that are following different theoretical legacies and are consequently almost never paired together, nor perceived as responding to the same set of concerns. However, both the value form and new materialist project share a common aim of criticizing the 'culturally constructed' understanding of reality.

Butler's Performativity: Between Epistemological Void and Quasi-Ontological Surface

Butler defines performativity as a 'reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' and announces early on in *Bodies That Matter* that this conceptualization is 'fully material, but [that] materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect' (1993: 2). In Butler's edifice, the relationship between matter and power is a curious one. On the one hand, even though power is said to have a mysterious ability to convert matter into its own effect, this proximity of power to matter is not of a kind which would simply collapse one into the other. On the other hand, Butler remains faithful to Foucault's power analytics, so much so that their insistence on the impossibility to anchor culture in any exogenous frame of reference has become somewhat of their signature mark. Butler explicitly refuses to put matter and power into a relationship of exteriority and to subscribe to a two-systems model; that of nature and culture. What interests us here is how exactly is it that power acquires a magical capacity to harness materiality for exogenous purposes without this exogeneity almost immediately implicating Butler's argument in a two systems framework.

We believe this problematic acquires its most salient shape in the chapter 'Between Freud and Foucault' in Butler's *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) where they explicitly address what we call the problem of 'inscription'. Namely, if there is no outside to power then the language of surfaces cannot go unsupplemented because power would be an external operation inscribing onto an exogenously available surface. Butler believes that any model which argues that everything is X, and therefore claims to operate within one domain and one domain only, cannot conceive of power's operation as inscriptive given that inscribing always

presumes a prior surface available for inscription. A power that inscribes would always demand a domain properly external to itself. In other words, if it is not an external origin on which power inscribes, then what is it? The main conundrum which Butler tries to solve in 'Between Freud and Foucault' chapter is the following: what can possibly precede something if not an origin of some sort?

They identify the following problem with Foucault's conceptualization of the body: on the one hand there is no body outside of power; body's very materiality is entirely coextensive with power's investment in it, and on the other hand, that same body frequently appears in Foucault's formulations as a site of that same investment; a surface animated by power onto which power inscribes. But this latter formulation would obviously require an ontologically distinct bodily materiality which appears on the scene prior to its investment by power. Yet Foucault would clearly not accede to such a formulation. The question therefore emerges: what exactly is the power's operation on the body if not one of inscription? Butler finds Foucault's language to periodically fluctuate between the movement of inscription and that of destruction:

The body is *inscribed* surface of events (traced by language and *dissolved* by ideas), the locus of a *dissociated* self (adapting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual *disintegration*. (Foucault 1984 in Butler 1997: 91; emphasis ours)

They accredit this infelicitous fluctuating movement between inscribing and dissolving to Foucault's precipitated repudiation of psychoanalysis and argue that for Foucault 'the body [has] come to stand for a certain operation of the psyche' (ibid.: 95); 'one which Foucault cannot quite describe, and which would perhaps engage him in the problematic of the ego as an imaginary function?' (Butler 1997: 90). This Freudian imaginary function of the ego, as elaborated in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990), consists in ego's peculiar relationship to the law; one which cannot be said to be one of exteriority, as Foucault presumes. For Freud, Butler argues, the ego that develops a narcissistic investment which it can then redeploy to other objects, a cathexis of a sort that allows it to lead a civilized existence, does not precede the prohibition requiring of it to do so but is instead formed through an attachment to the very prohibition whose object it incorporates, not so much *onto itself* but *as itself*. Because ego is therefore itself the result of this incorporating operation, it cannot be said that the prohibition in Freud ultimately has

an exterior relationship to the subject. Prohibition becomes a way of preserving that which has been barred, and what Freud calls the ego is no more than the result of that preservation. The law therefore constitutes the self-conscious ego by forcing it to first imagine himself/herself as an object before it can engage in other object-cathexes.

Therefore, the ostensibly primordial origin of the ego cannot serve as a ground for the ego's formation but must itself be one of the epistemic objects made available for the ego's cathexes. Accordingly, the psychic domain cannot be said to precede the social domain in any way and it is Freud himself, Butler argues, that sows the seeds that undermine his own psychoanalytic project to the extent that this project is understood as derived from a prior, external system (nature/organic matter). In other words, it follows from Freud's own theory that ego's incorporation of the prohibition, which inflicts it loss, disassociates that ego from its own origin. Butler writes:

Under the pressure of the ethical law, a subject emerges who is capable of reflexivity, that is, who takes him/herself as an object, and so mistakes him/herself, since he/she is, by virtue of that founding prohibition, at an infinite distance from his/her origin. (Butler 1997: 103)

This is what Butler calls the 'imaginary function of the ego' in Freud, which they argue Foucault mistakes for the body within his own edifice. In the same way that for Foucault subject appears at the expense of the body, as that body's 'ghostly form' (Butler 1997: 92), so too does the body for Freud assume an equally phantasmatic character by forever disappearing for the ego that projects it in the course of its constitutive narcissistic cathexis. In both instances, the body is that which is forever lost for the subject and on the condition of whose loss subjectivity can become a possibility. But because Foucault uses 'body' interchangeably to refer to both what had to be destroyed for the subject to emerge and for that emergence itself, he necessarily slips into the language of surfaces and sites (which presume a presence available for inscription) instead of that of sublimation and/or projection (which signify an absence radically at odds with an inscriptive operation). So for Butler, properly speaking, there is no origin of subjectivity that power invests. Instead there is a 'destruction on the occasion of which a subject is formed' (ibid). In other words, there is no site available for inscription but only that which Butler calls a 'constitutive loss'; a particular type of void

around which a subject emerges who is entirely autonomous vis-à-vis this void even if he/she depends on it for his/her own existence.

This void, however, is of a particular kind. In Butler's opus, the loss acquires an unequivocally epistemological character. Consider that in the course of identifying the cause of Foucault's slippage from the language of destruction to that of inscription, Butler gets caught up in a slippage of their own; one from loss to that of infinite distance. Contrary to Butler's intentions, it must be admitted that the adjective 'infinite' does not fulfill its purpose to approximate this distance to loss, and therefore to justify their interchangeability, but it merely forecloses in advance a possibility of crossing the distance. The difference between the two still proves to be immense because what is lost is there no longer, but what is infinitely distant is still somewhere there, even if it ceased to be available to an external observer. On the occasion of loss something has changed objectively and for itself, but distance demands a subject to whom something has changed its relation, but has not changed *per se*. In distance the change is in proximity, in loss the change is in nature. It is precisely this unwarranted interchangeability of loss with distance that betrays the essentially epistemological nature of Butler's conception of a void.

In this epistemological edifice, performativity is said to operate within an infinitely expandable and boundlessly malleable matrix. Because materiality is lost (or infinitely distant) and has no say in how it will get delineated and put to power's service, performativity names a magical capacity of power to create its own objects and ventriloquize them for its own political purposes. This power will outline arbitrary borders on the material surface and then retroactively ground its own legitimacy within the morphologies hence outlined. It will posit those morphemes as stable and fixed by 'nature', permanently unresponsive to human agency.

The way in which discourse can produce the effect that it names is through casting a ghostly morphological matrix, a net-like imaginary mold of a sort, on top of a material surface whose intrinsic properties have either been 'constitutively lost' or have been made 'infinitely distant', and thereby sculpting imaginary objects to stand in for what are really merely symbolic relations internal to discourse and not to the material surface itself; objects that Butler describes as 'reifications of logical and structural relations within the symbolic' (1993: 88). Materiality here

merely lends itself to power and allows it to employ it for entirely exogenous purposes. Butler argues:

[...] this imaginary morphology is not a pre-social or pre-symbolic operation, but is itself orchestrated through regulatory schemas that produce intelligible morphological possibilities. These regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter. (1993: 13–14)

Power is here doing the work of ‘orchestration’ which consists in a draw-like movement on a matrix conceived as a canvas where in the same stroke as it engages in border-making, it also invites into being the objects hence delineated. It treats those objects as material proofs of what is actually its own discursive abstraction. However, power’s capacity to produce effects is contained in its ability to present its own mischiefs with the brush as material works of nature, pure and simple; to endow its own abstract movement with a materiality. Much like a virus is said to die in an open environment without the support of an embodied host, so too does an abstract discursive object disintegrate if its material support is withdrawn.

This is so because these discursive objects, according to Butler, reside not in objective material reality, but in an intersubjective psychic world where the criteria of what is going to appear is not objective presence but intersubjectively determined intelligibility, defined as a socially conditioned capacity of an object to get recognized by a culturally conditioned subject in his/her field of vision. Power is what implants those objects in the subject’s perceptive purview, understood as a socially conditioned psychic imaginary Butler calls ‘the matrix’. What actually differentiates separate objects in the matrix, as opposed to what demarcates them in a mirror, Butler argues, are not their material properties naturally marking off one from the other, but the different social functions power invests them with.³

Therefore, a matrix is for Butler an imaginary landscape in which objects that appear reside in the psyche and even though they are

³ The issue Butler has with Jacques Lacan’s (1977) notion of a ‘mirror stage’ can summarily be expressed in their insistence that not even a mirror can be said to escape the hold of the matrix. They argue: ‘although the mirror stage attempts to narrate how a body comes to have a sense of its own totality for the first time, the very description of a body before the mirror as being in parts or pieces takes as its own precondition an already established sense of a whole or integral morphology’ (Butler 1993: 82). For Butler, this sense of an integral morphology is established through the workings of a matrix.

morphologically ‘orchestrated’ by the social relations of power, they present themselves to the psyche as indigenous inhabitants of that landscape. This ability of power to socially produce and psychically naturalize the shapes it carves out of material surfaces is, for Butler, ‘power’s most productive effect’ (1993: 2). This is how Butler’s concept of performativity ends up depending on the capacity of power to acquire a psychic life.

The turn to psyche allows Butler to avoid grounding their concept of performativity in the interplay between two separate systems (nature and culture), in which one would write over the other, and permits them to ground it in the interaction between two different domains of one and the same system; that of culture. Butler will call this interaction the ‘play between psyche and appearance’ (1993: 234). Therefore, what we find in Butler’s earlier formulation is the notion of loss as a transcendental occasion, which serves merely as a condition of possibility for their discursive domain but no longer has any effect on it. Within this discursive domain we can find two subfields whose mutual interdependence allows for the operation of performativity; an exteriority of the body (where the notion of the matrix applies) and the interiority of the psyche (where power is said to *live*).

However, in the course of the last fifteen years, Butler has shown to be significantly less determined to stay within the confines of culture. Other than her own explorations outside of the territory circumscribed by her earlier work, such as her proposition of an ontology of vulnerability preceding performativity of culture (2009; 2015), Butler has also given nature some explicit reconsideration. And not the ‘nature’ that has been making a frequent appearance in their earlier works in the role of the usual suspect (the discursive ‘nature’ always already enlisted by power, appearing on the pages of Butler’s works under quotation marks), but nature which seems to escape the ‘interplay between psyche and appearance’ and which therefore somehow eludes the discursive domain altogether. Already in 2006, in an interview with Vicki Kirby, Butler answers in an almost confessional tone:

I think perhaps mainly in *Gender Trouble* I overemphasize the priority of culture over nature [...] At the time of *Gender Trouble*, now sixteen years ago, it seemed to me that there was a cultural use of ‘natural’ arguments to provide legitimacy for natural genders or natural heterosexuality. But that criticism did not take account of a nature that might be, as it were, beyond the nature/culture divide, one that is

not immediately harnessed for the aims of certain kinds of cultural legitimization practices. (Butler in Kirby 2006: 144–5)

The problem with this position, however, is, as Kirby (2011: 93–7) points out, that it inadvertently posits a kind of ontological purity of nature and culture. One that would guarantee the pregivenness of both of their identities, that would always already successfully prohibit their miscegenation and, most importantly, one that reinstalls unadulterated and self-same entities that precede their own interaction; a purity which Butler would otherwise be vigilant to oppose. Kirby comments on Butler's change of position:

In the scenario described above we are presented with two quite different entities – Nature and Culture. Although each is able to affect and transform the other (chiasmically), their respective identities appear to be given before the interactions that affect them [...] And yet the belief in identity as something coherent and wholesome before its intercourse with 'otherness', its violation by 'otherness', is routinely contested in feminist and queer analysis. (Kirby 2011: 94–5)

If a commitment to a critique of ontological purity is to continue to guide critical theoretical research then a problem, with respect to this later formulation of Butler's, instantly arises. If nature is now allowed to make an appearance in its own right, but only as an entity entirely separated from the workings of culture, then critical theory is forced to reckon with internal contradictions with respect to its emphasis on relationality and its repudiation of essence, given that now both nature and culture come with their own separate set of essences. On the other hand, if the occasion of epistemic loss of nature is said to be constitutive of the totality of our world, as Butler originally proposed, and if that world changes and reproduces itself exclusively according to an internal play between matrices and psyches, entirely enclosed onto the intersubjective realm and detached from the workings internal to nature itself, then the materiality of that world remains to be accounted for. In setting the ground for her attempt to give performativity a much wider purchase than Butler originally intended, Karen Barad ponders on precisely this puzzle in her *Posthumanist Performativity* (2003), when she writes:

The inscription model of constructivism is of this kind: culture is figured as an external force acting on passive nature. There is an ambiguity in this model as to whether nature exists in any prediscursive form prior to its marking by culture. If there is such an antecedent entity then its very existence marks the inherent limit of constructivism. In this case, the rhetoric should be softened to more accurately reflect the fact that the force of culture 'shapes' or 'inscribes' nature but does not

materially produce it. On the other hand, if there is no preexistent nature, then it behooves those who advocate such a theory to explain how it is that culture can materially produce that from which it is allegedly ontologically distinct, namely nature. What is the mechanism of this production? (Barad 2003: 825)

The following sections of the paper sketch out two possible responses to precisely that question, which we believe contemporary critical theory certainly has resources for providing.

A New Materialist Response: ‘What if Culture was really Nature all along?’⁴

New materialism is a nascent body of literature united by a shared commitment to disrupting the dominant Western ontological⁵ imaginary, particularly its assumptions about human exceptionalism, the passivity of matter, and the nature/culture divide. One of the most helpful ways to introduce this body of work is through its distinctive form of critique, which William E. Connolly terms *ontopolitics* (1995). In *The Politics of Ambiguity* (1987), Connolly argues that it is impossible to conceptualize any form of politics without relying on an underlying *social ontology*. He defines social ontology as “a set of fundamental understandings about the relation of humans to themselves, to others, and to the world” (1987: 9). In *The Ethos of Pluralization* (1995), he names this dimension of politics *onto-political*.

Onto, because every political interpretation invokes a set of fundamentals about necessities and possibilities of human being, about, for instance, the forms into which humans may be composed and the possible relations humans can establish with nature. An ontopolitical stance, for instance, might strive to articulate a law or design set into the very order of things. Or it might deny the existence of a law or natural design while still identifying a profound stability of human interests that persists across time. Or it might deflate this theme of stable human interests while striving to draw us closer to a protean abundance that enables and exceeds every socially constructed order. To say either that something is fundamental or that nothing is fundamental, then, is to engage in ontopolitical interpretation. Hence, every interpretation of political events, no matter how deeply it is sunk in a specific historical context or how high the pile of data upon it sits, contains an ontopolitical dimension. (1995: 1)

In other words, whether explicit or implicit, avowed or disavowed, ontological assumptions—about what is, how it is, and in what

⁴ Vicki Kirby (2011: 68).

⁵ We follow Stephen White (2000: 3) in collapsing the distinction between *ontology* and *metaphysics*, and take it to be the study of (a) what is, (b) how it is, and (c) in what relation.

relation—underpin every political theory or analysis. These assumptions may vary widely: some emphasize the ahistorical permanence of being, others the flux of becoming; some assume monism, others posit pluralism; some draw on empirical evidence, others are highly speculative. But whatever their content, they are inescapable. Still, the fact that we all inhabit ontological imaginaries does not mean we must hold them dogmatically. A major reason why many critical theorists have avoided engaging ontological questions in political theory is that they could not envision a way of doing so without falling into said dogmatism.

Stephen K. White's *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (2000) offers a compelling account of how contemporary political theorists have come to non-dogmatically avow their ontological assumptions, a tendency which he names *weak ontology*. White contrasts these thinkers with pre-modern and modern political ontologists, for whom "the whole question of passages from ontological truths to moral-political ones is relatively clear," and who exhibit a high degree of certainty about the superiority of their ontologies (2000: 6). *Weak ontologists*, by contrast, resist both strong ontological foundationalism and the disavowal of ontological assumptions altogether, a stance common among political liberals like John Rawls, historicists like Jacques Rancière, and neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty. What unites weak ontologists, White argues, is their shared conviction that ontological assumptions are both *fundamental* (central and indispensable) and *contestable* (provisional and open to revision). For new materialists, who are paradigmatic political ontologists in this sense, the turn to weak ontology is crucial. Closely tied to this is their engagement with *ontopolitical* critique.

We have already established that Butler's key notion of *performativity*, and the 'epistemic prison' on which it relies, is grounded in an ontological framework structured by the nature–culture dichotomy. Addressing this issue thus requires descending to the underlying ontological level at which their argument operates. In what follows, we trace the *onto-imaginary* that underpins Butler's work, attending to how it shifts over time in relation to the onto-imaginaries they seek either to contest or to align with. We examine Butler's early 'flight from nature'—a response to representationalism and to conservative political theories that reify gender—and their later 'return to nature', which, we argue,

ultimately fails to unsettle the Cartesian ontological framework that has shaped their thought throughout.

As Butler themselves note, their early positions emerged in response to conservative political theories that invoked the notion of nature, particularly in its adjectival form (“it is natural”), to legitimize normative claims. Reflecting on this, Butler writes: ‘At the time of *Gender Trouble*, it seemed to me that there was a cultural use of ‘natural’ arguments to provide legitimacy for natural genders or natural heterosexuality’ (Butler in Kirby 2006: 144–45). Appeals to nature, and to what is considered ‘natural’, have a long and well-documented history of justifying violence, exclusion, and exploitation. In dominant frameworks, nature is often understood as something beyond and prior to the human: that which is neither created nor altered by human intervention. It is precisely this presumed distance from human construction or politics that has endowed nature with significant moral authority, making it a powerful tool for political legitimization. Such appeals tend to be made by those promoting broadly conservative agendas, as they seek to preserve social arrangements they regard as natural and therefore morally justified.

In response to conservative appeals to nature, progressive thinkers have typically taken one of two approaches. Some have sought to *denaturalize* the phenomena or social arrangements in question, exposing them as products of entrenched power relations and thus as historically contingent and human-made. Others, particularly when such appeals were directed more squarely at the nonhuman world, have accepted their opponents’ ontology of nature and instead drawn a stark contrast between a mechanistic conception of nature, which they argue must be rejected, and a creative, agentic human realm, which they seek to affirm. Crucially, however, the very verbs *naturalize* and *denaturalize* presuppose an underlying image of nature as static, transhistorical, immutable, and essential. By accepting this image and confining their struggles to the domain of culture, theorists like Butler enact what Stacy Alaimo (2000) terms a “flight from nature.”

At a more theoretical level, Butler’s principal philosophical target at this stage is *representationalism*, a form of indirect realism that posits a separation between the knower (the representer), knowledge (the representation), and the known (that which is represented). On this view, representations mediate between two ontologically distinct entities: the

subject and the object. Butler's concept of *performativity* is a direct challenge to this framework. It collapses the assumed ontological gap between pre-existing entities, showing instead how the knower participates in the very constitution of the known. Butler emphasizes that language structures all attempts to access the world "as it really is," rendering any such attempt inherently limited or even futile. The knower and the known, rather than being separate and pre-given, emerge as co-constitutive, each a function of the other.

Butler's two central targets—(1) conservative political theories that reify gender and (2) representationalism—share a common commitment to the idea that we can first represent what *is* and only then derive what *ought* to be. While representationalist methodologies, such as positivism in the social sciences, tend to limit themselves to descriptive claims about what is, the conservative theories Butler critiques explicitly and directly derive normative claims from such descriptions, thereby violating Hume's law.⁶ Butler's intervention can be read as an inversion of this framework: rather than deriving the normative from the descriptive, she insists that normative assumptions *precede* and *structure* our accounts of what there is. On this point, Butler and the new materialists are in close agreement. Both reject the notion of a neutral or pre-given ontology that can serve as the basis for political or ethical claims. However, they diverge on the source of the normative 'ought' that shapes our experience of 'is'. For Butler, this structuring force is language; for new materialists, it is the lived, material-semiotic ontological imaginary that we inhabit.

Connolly, for instance, also emphasizes the primacy of the normative in shaping experience. He argues that perception is inseparable from its normative dimensions: 'Perception expresses a set of anticipatory expectations that help to constitute what it actually becomes' (2011: 48). These anticipatory expectations, he suggests, enable us to navigate the complexity and volatility of the environments our bodies inhabit. Here, the normative should not be understood in a strictly moral sense, but rather as a pre-reflective orientation—one that shapes how reality *ought* to appear in order to be perceptible and actionable within a dynamic "world of becoming." The ontological assumptions we inhabit are therefore highly normative: they structure our modes of world-

⁶ In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume famously insisted we cannot derive normative statements from positive ones. A rule which came to be known as 'Hume's law'.

disclosure and are deeply implicated in our identities. Butler makes a similar point when weighing in on the consequences of clashing ontological imaginaries: 'Depending on which normative framework controls the semantic field, the phenomenon in question will turn out to be a different sort of thing' (2013: 97). A few pages later, they spell out the implications of this for the distinction between 'is' and 'ought': 'We may think that we first describe a phenomenon and then later subject it to judgment, but if the very phenomenon at issue only 'exists' within certain evaluative frameworks, then norms precede description' (ibid.: 99). While Butler's critique rightly calls attention to the interpretive preconditions of knowledge and to the normativity embedded in acts of recognition, their argument remains tied to a Cartesian dualism of mind and body and, by extension, to the nature–culture dichotomy that underwrites it.

Had Butler not accepted the onto-image of nature assumed by their intellectual opponents, the trajectory of their work might have taken a very different form. Rooted in a broadly Cartesian ontological framework, Butler's theory restricts interpretation to the domain of mind or language. A new materialist, by contrast, need not accept these constraints. In other words, the theory of performativity need not be Cartesian. As we elaborate later in this section, an alternative onto-framework views human bodies as multiplicities or assemblages, composed of diverse interpreting agents, through which the world is taken in⁷ via a variety of interpretative modes. No single mode is inherently privileged or granted a primary structuring role. Within this view, language is not the dominant filter through which all other modes of interaction with the world (sight, smell, tactility, hearing, emotion, affect, experience, etc.) are organized. First, language is constitutively entangled with these other modalities and cannot exist apart from them. Second, it is as much shaped by these other forms of interaction as it is shaping of them. We are, in this sense, entangled bodies encountering the world through a complex interplay of cognitive and non-cognitive⁸ modalities, none of which can be cleanly isolated or treated as

⁷ We use the word 'intake' rather than 'interpret' or 'influx', as the former is too often associated with the affairs of mind and latter with those of body, but these are synonyms in the new materialist onto-framework.

⁸ We borrow the vocabulary of 'cognitive' and 'non-cognitive' to help elucidate our point, even though these concepts and their dichotomy stem from an ontological framework that we wish to contest.

epiphenomenal relative to the others.⁹ While Butler's account of performativity grants language a privileged role as the filter and maker of experience—impressing power-contingent morphologies onto passive, pre-discursive matter and retroactively positing these effects as natural and pre-political—a new materialist ontology retains the central insight of performativity but resists the Cartesian monopoly over its meaning.¹⁰ On this view, performativity is distributed across bodily, affective, sensory, and semiotic registers, not reducible to language alone.

Both representationalism and Butler's critique of it remain anchored in a Cartesian ontological framework. It is worth examining how this underlying ontology embeds itself in these seemingly opposed positions. Philosopher of science Joseph Rouse (1996) characterizes representationalism as a product of the Cartesian division between what is considered 'internal' and 'external' to the knowing subject. Central to this view is a tripartite model consisting of the representer, the representation, and the represented. Rouse takes particular issue with this model's asymmetrical epistemic commitments: it places unwarranted trust in our access to representations while simultaneously harboring deep skepticism toward our access to what those representations purport to represent.

The presumption that we can know what we mean, or what our verbal performances say, more readily than we can know the objects those sayings are about is a Cartesian legacy, a linguistic variation on Descartes' insistence that we have a direct and privileged access to the contents of our thoughts that we lack towards the 'external' world. (1996: 209)

Butler's critique of representationalism, while admirable, does not really do away with the underlying Cartesian logic of the accessible 'internal' and inaccessible 'external' that Rouse rightfully finds problematic.

⁹ It is important to note that for a new materialist these modes of interpretation/interaction of/with the world are not only epistemological, they are more properly ontological. (We use the qualifier 'only' because most new materialists subscribe to a version of Karen Barad's 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology', insisting on the interrelatedness of these three, commonly separated, fields, as constitutively entangled.) This crucial distinction, we believe, goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche, an intellectual forefather of both poststructuralism and new materialism. Although both traditions trace major parts of their theoretical legacy to Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism, the former read it as an exclusively-human epistemology, while the latter read it as a non-anthropocentric ontology (depicted in Nietzsche's concept of will-to-power). New materialists thus espouse a version of ontological relationalism (Vrdoljak 2024).

¹⁰ A notable version of a new materialist account of performativity can be found in Karen Barad's article 'Posthumanist Performativity' (2003), further elaborated in her seminal work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007).

They present us with a significantly more nuanced and elaborated, but familiarly Cartesian, version of the same argument. Butler coopts all three parts of the representationalist model into the 'internal' workings of culture, the 'external' to which has been 'constitutively lost'. Comparing humanist and antihumanist versions of Cartesianism, new materialist philosopher Vicki Kirby comes to the same conclusion. Namely, that not much has changed between these ostensibly antipodal traditions of thought, only proving the resilience of Cartesian residues in Western ontology. 'This elaborated form of Cartesianism where everything is always-already a cultural construction foregrounds ideation and the human mind's now enlarged and collective success' (2011: 14).

Sixteen years after *Gender Trouble* was published, Butler renounced her previous argument on the hermetic enclosure of cultural systems of signification, noting they may have overemphasized the primacy of culture, and leaving more overt space for nature by establishing 'a kind of chiasmic relation' between the two systems. While a notable departure from their earlier thought, Butler's later theory does not do much to discard the underlying Cartesian onto-framework that also confined their earlier writings. Whereas previously the nature-culture binary in their work was somewhat implicit, it now figures quite prominently. As Kirby makes clear, Butler presents us with two, ontologically distinct, entities whose separate identities, although in chiasmic relation of mutual influence and transformation, appear to precede their interaction. This logic hence follows Butler's standard onto-narrative of nature temporally preceding culture, the only difference being the abandonment of their earlier theory of constitutive loss. Voicing her frustration with this frequently rehearsed move in contemporary theory, Kirby writes:

Arguing that we remain indebted to the materiality of the body, that we are always attached to it and never independent of it, that both women and men are equally corporeal...doesn't in any way dislodge the premise of Cartesianism as it is commonly received. (2011: 71)

Rather than claiming that we are *also* biological beings, new materialists argue that we are *entirely* natural, as is everything else. This marks a central commitment of new materialist ontology: the world is understood as wholly natural, in all its variation and complexity. It is a genuinely one-system framework. On this view, human culture is not separate from nature but one of its many internal differentiations entangled with others, some of which literally constitute it, and many of which it

depends on for its continued existence. This ontological narrative affirms the naturalness of all things while rejecting the historical baggage associated with the concept of 'nature'. Nature is no longer seen as immutable, passive, or transhistorical. Instead, it is understood as agentic, spontaneous, creative, and internally diverse.¹¹ Qualities once thought exclusive to the human (e.g., agency, unpredictability, and creativity) are refigured as expressions of nature itself, of which the human is just one relatively minor and contingent part. Crucially, the point is not to project human characteristics onto the rest of nature, but to recognize that the very capacities we associate with humanity are already features of nature. Agency, spontaneity, and transformative potential are not signs of human exceptionalism; they are evidence of our embeddedness in a dynamic, generative natural world.

By de-reifying the concept of nature, new materialists strip it of the rhetorical power that has often been exploited by conservative agendas. While certain things may indeed be worth conserving, that decision cannot rest on their being 'natural', since, on this view, everything is natural. Naturalness, therefore, loses its moral valence. Although it is impossible to fully disentangle ourselves from the residues of previous ontologies, the more thorough rejection of the Cartesian narrative proposed by new materialists would involve a profound shift in perspective, one that gives rise to new values and modes of inhabiting the world. Attempting to inhabit a different ontological imaginary, and to genuinely assume another perspective, is a gradual and often difficult process, particularly when the new imaginary diverges significantly from the one in which we were formed. Because new materialists reject the Cartesian mind-body dualism, which privileges certain modes of interaction (such as language) over others, they emphasize that such a transformation is not merely intellectual. It is a whole-body undertaking. William Connolly refers to this as the 'micropolitics of perception' (2011: 55). Given the entangled and intersensory nature of our engagements with the world, adopting a different ontology means working on ourselves at multiple levels: sensory, affective, cognitive, and imaginative.

This effort is intimately bound up with the normative dimensions of perception. Our capacity to hear, see, smell, think, touch, and make sense of the world is always already shaped by anticipatory frameworks

¹¹ Arguably the most prominent depiction of new materialist onto-imaginary described here can be found in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010).

that structure what can be perceived and how. Reorienting these frameworks enables us to encounter the world differently. At times, such shifts are the result of sustained attention and intentional practice. But often they arise unexpectedly—from reading a poem, experiencing intimacy, smelling the morning rain, or being moved by a work of art. These moments can spark subtle yet profound transformations in how we perceive and relate to the world. Embracing new ontologies, then, is not merely a conceptual endeavor; it is a practice of cultivating new sensibilities and modes of being in and with the world.

Although in a very real sense political contestation has always debated first principles, once the substantive difference between Nature and Culture... is disestablished, we enter a very different zone of political possibility. (Kirby 2011: 68)

A Value-Form Response: Negativity of Value and the Ontology of Nothing

Does performativity have an ontology? It is precisely this question that can be seen as encapsulating the guiding impetus of a variety of otherwise heterogeneous responses to Butler's early work on gender. After Butler's original rendering of performativity as a process of fabrication of ontological essences, which locates power precisely at those sites which are seen as prior to politics, and therefore as uncontested and fixed foundations of any given set of social arrangements, many have wondered whether critique can (or indeed should) sustain its commitment to a repudiation of affirmative ontological claims. And while Butler's early stance towards these questions can, we believe, be adequately expressed with a short answer 'no ontology' (which reads prohibitively as: a theorist is better off when refraining from making ontological claims), some have attempted to extrapolate implicit ontological imaginary sustaining their own work (White 1999), while others endeavored to generalize their notion of performativity to ontological (Kirby 2011) and metaphysical domains (Barad 2003). Stephen K. White, for example, rereads Butler's 'no ontology' as an illustration of what he proposes should more accurately be seen as a 'thin ontology'; a work deliberately kept ontologically austere by its author for the fear¹² of foreclosing

¹² Critical theory guided by this fear of implicatedness of power in every ontological claim is precisely what Sedgwick (2003) called a 'paranoid reading' to which she opposed what she called a 'reparative reading'. Together with White's (2000) 'weak ontology' and numerous other

possible spaces of dissensus by ontologically affirming assertions that might otherwise be contested. Against this equivocating strategy, White proposes the full-blown acceptance of explicit ontological theorizing; a coming out of a sort which instead of recoiling from ontology strives to foster the creation of rich ontological imaginaries, all the while acknowledging the complete contestability of its own tenets. This strategy White terms a 'weak ontology'.¹³

What we see here is a development of a narrative within political theory which goes something like this: performativity at first appears as a theory with *no ontology* but because no theory can indeed be completely devoid of ontological content, and because politics generally needs affirmative vision to engender effect, Butler's performativity was actually implicitly relying on a *thin ontology* all along and the task that is before us is the one of complementing it with a rich, if *weak ontology*, instead. However, this is but one specific strategy of ontologically inflecting the conceptual strength of performativity among other possible strategies. What we wish to do in this section of our paper is to briefly sketch an alternative trajectory for future development of this capacious concept; a counter-narrative of a sort in which the movement is not from no ontology to a weak one, but quite the reverse, from *no ontology* to what we would term an *ontology of nothing*. This entails disrupting the notion that doing ontological work *necessarily* implicates one in a project of 'sustaining affirmation' (White 2000) and imagines an ontological research which not only fails to affirm any given ontological vision but discovers negativity to be an ontological predicament theory must grapple with, rather than a theoretical strategy in need of reconsideration.

What follows is a reconstruction of a strand within value-form interpretations of Marx, guided by the works of Christopher Arthur (2004) and Moishe Postone (1993), in such a way as to read them as distinct responses to precisely that set of ambiguities revolving around Butler's formulation of performativity and the ontological question that formulation has since generated.¹⁴ The central argument which we wish

formulations, these inflections are what we tentatively term 'post-paranoid theory'. See also Ricoeur (1970) and Felski (2011).

¹³ According to White, it is an acknowledgment of its contestability that would render this ontology weak, rather than it being weak due to the narrowness of its scope.

¹⁴ Despite their shared commitments to anti-foundationalism and an unrelenting emphasis on the social, the conversation between value-form and post-structuralist theorists has failed to

to put forward is that Marx's work can help us understand how Butler's circling around ontology in their early works can be interpreted not as a strategy of equivocating around an ontological core (White 1999) but as a move symptomatic of a real ontological void at the heart of the social formation they attempt to theorize. In other words, it is not Butler's ontologically *thin* theory of the social order that is incomplete, but that social order itself; constitutively so. We will see that what Butler's performativity lacks is not a 'richer' ontological imaginary, an additional 'thickness' to its 'onto-story' (White 1999), but a theorization of a constitutive ontological emptiness at the core of the social which precisely effectuates this elusive uneasiness hovering above ontological claims in the first place. A Marxian intervention into Butlerian edifice, we will propose, will consist in arguing that this uneasiness is not an indication of an epistemological *foreclosure* of reality, like Butler would propose, but a consequence of an actual ontological *erasure* of reality incurring as a result of what Marx calls the process of the self-valorization of value.

The gist of a value-form rereading of Marx consists in a thorough reconsideration of some of the most fundamental 'truths' ascribed to Marx—that labor is a source of value, that it is the transhistorical essence around whose organization all historical stages revolve (the main tenet of *historical materialism*), that his emphasis on factory labor is intended to bring about the triumph of material facticity within 'the hidden abode of production' (1976: 280) over the ideational delusions of what he called the 'Eden of the innate rights of man' (ibid), and hence a trumping of materiality over ideality, that his critique was proposed from the standpoint of labor, and had capital as its critical target—to name only the most salient ones. Even though value-form responses come in a variety of different formulations, what they all share is a proclamation that neither of these arguments were actually proposed by Marx, but were in fact the principal tenets of classical political economy which Marx was subjecting to a radical critique. Marx's own arguments could be summarized as follows: labor is not a transhistorical essence of value but both labor and value are novel objects that first appear in the world with the advent of capitalism; Marx was not proposing a philosophical grand narrative of the historical rise and fall of social systems, but was attempting to grasp the internal relations within one historically

materialize. This portion can be seen as a step towards sketching the contours of that future conversation.

specific social order—the capitalist social order. Consequently, rather than solid matter being celebrated over lofty ideations within Marx's *Capital*, it is actually the other way around—for Marx, these ideations about value being congealed in the products of labor are what actually materializes the capitalist world, and are therefore given unfaltering analytical precedence over any notion of 'matter'.

What intuitively ties this tradition of approaching Marx's writings to Butler's theory of performativity is their shared capacity to understand matter as an effect of a social process rather than as a natural fact separated from the workings of power. Étienne Balibar gives us a valuable cue when he explicitly argues that 'Marx's materialism has nothing to do with a reference to matter' (2007: 23). Proceeding in similar vein, Butler parodically accepts the consequences which their avowed refusal to engage matter may carry for the reception of their self-professed materialist theory when they preemptively confess that they are not a very good materialist: 'every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language' (2004: 198).

More specifically, what is the shape that this 'materialism without matter', as Alberto Toscano (2006; 2014) called it, acquires in the works of Butler and Marx? Much like Butler employs the concept of performativity to describe a process by which a social relation of prohibition against homosexuality produces the ostensible naturalness of a sexed body, Marx develops the notion of a fetish to describe the process by which capitalist relations of production allow for an immaterial ideation such as labor to gain a footing in a material world through its ostensible condensation in the body of its product. Rather than transhistorically invariant material facts of life, metaphysical abstractions of sex and labor are exposed in Butler's and Marx's formulations, respectively, as effects of a specific kind of power which operates through enclosing around a portion of a material surface, thereby arbitrarily isolating it and turning it into an ostensibly independent object, 'naturally' separated from the mesh of its material environment. In Butler's and Marx's work alike, power proceeds by declaring those 'objects' to be proofs of its own ontological abstraction; the phallus becomes a natural object which 'proves' the natural existence of sex of which it is said to be a manifestation. Similarly, a commodity becomes a natural object which 'proves' the natural existence of labor which is credited with making it. Far from transhistorical truths of human existence, sex

and labor are here exposed to be noting but effects of power immanent to the social field of its own operation. This is the operation for which Butler frequently uses a shorthand of 'discursive production' and which Marx has in mind when he repeatedly writes of 'relations of production'. In both 'productions', the literal materiality is largely absent and serves only the function of a playfield for the social game of power.

Unlike Butler's performativity, however, Marx's fetish is a concept with a subtle and frequently overlooked ontological content. In our attempt to zoom in on this ontological distinction of performativity and fetish, it is crucial to point out that the notion of a 'surface appearance' plays a constitutive role in both formulations, yet with a very different ontological bent. Already in *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces a key theme which will be making a frequent appearance throughout their subsequent works; one which points to the peculiar place of ontology in their writings, and one which they identify as an investigation into 'the slippery distinction between *appearing* and *being*' (1999: 60). It is precisely when pressed on the slipperiness of this distinction that performativity and fetish begin to clash in ways which may prove to be of great interest to contemporary debates over the meaning and task of critique; a pressing that can only be briefly dramatized within the boundaries of this paper.

We can start by noting that to posit the distinction between being and appearing as slippery, as Butler is prompted to do, is in the first place to posit *a* distinction between the two, as slippery as it may be. Furthermore, a holistic approach to Butler's entire oeuvre reveals that their early formulation of performativity merely clears the room for the possibility of a different ontology, but whose own validity is limited to deconstructing false ontologies. Performativity for Butler is a concept whose usefulness is circumscribed to the cultural sphere where ontologies are known to be fabricated by power, and which loses its explanatory potential as soon as one shifts the focus from appearance to being.¹⁵ At first it seems that Marx follows the same strategy of reserving the validity of his arguments merely to the sphere of appearances. This is how Postone, one of the prominent commentators on Marx, assesses the movement of *Capital*:

¹⁵ We read Kirby's (2011) and Barad's (2003; 2007) works as attempts to reread performativity as itself an ontological principle.

The movement of Marx's presentation from the first to the third volume of *Capital* should, therefore, be understood not as a movement approaching the 'reality' of capitalism but as one approaching its manifold forms of surface appearances. (Postone 1993: 134)

In other words, what Postone is telling us is that Marx wants us to keep our eyes on the surface appearances for the sake of understanding them and not for the purpose of seeing what is beneath them. According to Postone's interpretation, Marx is entirely disinterested in the reality which would appear without quotation marks. Postone wants to follow Marx in his ostensible renouncement of an investigation into ontology:

'Essence' is an ontological determination. The essence I am considering here, however, is historical – a historically specific social function of labor. [...] the social relations mediated by labor are self-grounding, have an essence, and appear not to be social at all but objective and transhistorical. They appear, in other words, to be ontological. (Postone 1993: 167)

This would indeed seem to put Marx in the same boat with early Butler; rather than *being*, it is the *appearance of being* that is in the analytical focus, and, consequently, ontology is interesting only as an object of critique, never as itself a field of critical study. This resolve to keep with the surface and to stay within the immanent realm of the literally appearing, without seeking recourse to an external force which occasions it, features most prominently in Butler's explicit rejection to bestow power itself with the attributes of a subject. Commenting on an interpretation of Foucault which would charge him with merely replacing the agency of a subject with the agency of a subject-like notion of power, Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter*:

If power is misconstrued as a grammatical and metaphysical subject [...] then power appears to have displaced the human as the origin of activity. But if Foucault's view of power is understood as the disruption and subversion of this grammar and metaphysics of the subject, if power orchestrates the formation and sustenance of subjects, then it cannot be accounted for in terms of the "subject" which is its effect. And here it would be no more right to claim that the term "construction" belongs at the grammatical site of subject, for construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both "subjects" and "acts" come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. (Butler 1993: 9)

This rendering of power is consistent with Butler's early commitment to an immanent approach and a rejection of any recourse to a

metaphysical outside; a move which would simply 'outsource' agency to an external power residing 'elsewhere'.¹⁶ This is consistent with the spirit of Foucault's (1978) famous pronouncement that behind the curtain there is nothing to see. Yet there are at least two roads one can take on a way to abiding by this idea and it is here where performativity and fetish begin to part ways. Butler's road is the abovementioned rejection of bestowing power with a subjectivity which leads her to a pursuit of appearances. Marx's fetish, on the other hand, follows an alternative path as it precisely depends on bestowing value with the attributes of a subject in a way in which the *nothing* in 'nothing behind the curtain' itself becomes a subject-like entity:

In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the *occult ability* to add value to itself. (Marx 1976: 255, our emphasis)

This *occult ability* Marx attributes to capital should serve, we will propose, as the focal point for grounding his understanding of fetish. Through self-valorizing itself, capital also fetishizes itself and in that very movement of self-valorization (or fetishization) it also tricks itself into existence. Fetish is therefore a peculiar kind of *subjective* error, yet an error that Marx attributes to capital and which at the same time has the very existence of capital as its result. It is only through mistaking itself for a subject that capital can simultaneously emerge as a subject from the process of its own self-valorization; it is a trickery constitutive of its very being, an *appearing* of a sort which allows capital to bring itself into *being*. The occult ability Marx attributes to value consists in its capacity to fetishize itself into existence and is this 'occult' kind of existence which turns Marx's fetish into an ontological concept. This peculiar kind of being that is capital as a subject is therefore precisely the kind of being which collapses Butler's insistence on the slippery distinction between being and appearing. For Marx, capital emerges into existence precisely through turning this slipperiness into its own ontological content. For Marx, there ultimately is something to see behind

¹⁶ As we have seen, it is the notion of 'psyche' which allows for Butler's commitment to immanence.

the curtain—nothing! Marx's *Capital* becomes an investigation into the ontology of this nothingness that is capital.

It is this easily overlooked negative ontological status Marx bestows on capital that Arthur (2004) attempts to clarify with his notion of a 'determinate nothing' and 'present absence'. Unlike the surface appearance, this negative determination is devoid of substance, and therefore materially inexistent, yet it is *logically* real to the extent it has the power to make those surfaces 'speak' in its name. That power is its reality, properly speaking. The power of logic is what capital *is*. Arthur borrows Bhaskar's (1993) notion of *emergent powers materialism* to bring to light the idea that that through making the materiality of surfaces an attestation of the spectral void 'beneath' them, this power itself emerges as a peculiar kind of ontological reality. This spectrality of capital, its falsity as a material entity, becomes irreducible to whatever surface materiality it forces into attesting it; the falsity itself becomes a reality proper. 'In the society of the spectre the false is out there', Arthur (2004: 172) argues.

Within this view, the operation of power consists in making these surfaces mere projections of its own void, and then turning back on the surfaces themselves and taking logical priority over them by ontologically converting them into its own effect. Money reflects commodities, commodities reflect money ($M - C - M'$) and in those reflections void in between them (–) fetishistically projects and imprints its own immateriality onto the material world. It establishes itself as an independent process irreducible to the surfaces which it makes into its reflections. Its existence consists not in the materiality of the surface but in the movement of surfaces over which it acquires command (and hence onto-logical priority). It emerges into reality only through the play of surfaces (metamorphosis of commodities into money and vice versa) yet it logically detaches from them and becomes the conductor of that play and as such gains primacy over them. The consequence is that it can no longer be grasped only through reference to them. Arthur writes:

To those who doubt that 'Nothing' can have agency and power I reply: 'It acts therefore it exists.' That it acts is demonstrated by the impossibility of trying to say what is going on in a factory without referring to valorization; and what is that but increase in money? And what is money but the empty universal that not only 'stands for' real wealth but elbows it aside and takes precedence? In money making the spirit of capitalism is able to enter into commerce with the earthly reality of production and consumption. (2004: 173)

What Arthur makes clear is that it is impossible to talk about power without supplementing the notion of surfaces. Capital projects its void onto these surfaces yet the power to project can neither be reduced to the surfaces themselves, nor can it be said that it lacks ontological reality. The surface becomes a determination of value's negativity; it allows that void to 'react back' (Bhaskar 1993 in Arthur 2004: 173) on the surface independently and makes that independence of capital a reality in its own right.

With Butler's performativity, however, we only have surfaces on the one hand, and epistemic loss as their condition of possibility on the other. This loss is in infinite distance from the surface and has no bearing on it other than formally allowing for its emergence. In sharp contrast to this notion of infinite distance of nature is Arthur's version of *emergent powers materialism*. Here the crucial caveat is that something new emerges in the place of prediscursive nature—capital as a self-val- orizing subject. Unlike Butler's lost nature which disappears from the scene in order to make room for the surface, capital is coextensive with the surface; it immanently orchestrates the movement of surfaces from within the same plane yet it is not reducible to the surface because of it. Far from being infinitely distant from the surface, capital is a void around which the surface materializes. To the extent Butler's notion of performativity does not allow for a separate ontological reality of this empty presence upon which the surface appearance depends, it gives us an unduly flattened conception of the social order. It could be said that unlike Butler's, Marx's surface appearance is in 3D. In Marx's edifice, surface appearance depends on a frequently overlooked *ontology of nothing* and it is this 'occult ontology' which has a lot to say about contemporary debates over the necessity of affirmation and the spirit of critique.

Conclusion: Moving Beyond the Paranoid Predicament in Critical Theory

Contemporary critical theory finds itself at an impasse, caught between the epistemological skepticism inherited from poststructuralism and the pressing need to articulate affirmative ontological frameworks. The central conundrum, as exemplified in Judith Butler's work on performativity, revolves around the tension between the discursive construction of reality and the materiality that ostensibly precedes or exceeds it.

Butler's early insistence on the 'constitutive loss' of pre-discursive nature, a loss that confines critique to the realm of cultural signification, leaves critical theory in a dismal state which this paper describes as an 'epistemic prison'. Said prison is characterized by a paranoid disposition, one that suspects all claims to materiality or ontology as covert exercises of power, yet struggles to account for the very conditions of its own critical practice.

This paper proposes two distinct pathways out of this conundrum, each offering a way to reconcile critique with ontological inquiry while avoiding the pitfalls of foundationalism. The first, rooted in *new materialism*, challenges the nature-culture dichotomy by reimagining matter as agentic, dynamic, and inseparable from the processes of meaning-making. New materialists like Karen Barad and Jane Bennett argue that culture is not an external force acting upon passive nature but is itself a natural phenomenon, entangled with the broader web of material relations. By collapsing the Cartesian divide between mind and body, new materialism opens space for a non-anthropocentric ontology that affirms the vibrancy of matter without reinscribing essentialism. This approach not only disrupts the paranoid fixation on discursive domination but also reorients critique toward the generative possibilities of material-semiotic entanglements.

The second pathway emerges from the *value-form* readings of Marx, particularly as reinterpreted by scholars like Moishe Postone and Christopher Arthur. Here, the focus shifts to the 'ontology of nothing'—the spectral logic of capital as a self-valorizing abstraction that generates its own material effects. Unlike Butler's performativity, which treats power as immanent to cultural surfaces, value-form theory reveals how capital's 'occult ability' to produce reality hinges on a void at the heart of social relations. This negative ontology underscores the paradoxical materiality of abstraction, where the 'nothing' of value (e.g., labor as a social relation) structures the very surfaces it appears to inhabit. By foregrounding the constitutive emptiness of capitalist social forms, this approach reframes critique as an engagement with the logic of erasure rather than the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Both responses, though divergent in their theoretical lineages, share a commitment to moving beyond the paranoid style that Eve K. Sedgwick famously diagnosed in her essay 'You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You' (1997). Sedgwick's critique of paranoid

reading—a hermeneutics that equates critique with the relentless exposure of hidden power—directly confronts the epistemic prison of post-structuralist theories and emphasizes the urgency of an escape route. The new materialist and value-form approaches, in their own ways, exemplify what Sedgwick advocates as ‘reparative’ modes of thought: the former by embracing the affirmative potential of material entanglements, the latter by confronting the negative core of social abstraction without succumbing to nihilism.

To move beyond the paranoid disposition, critical theory must neither retreat from ontology nor remain confined within the safety of epistemological skepticism. Instead, it might pursue one of the dual trajectories outlined in this paper: one that recasts matter as an active force in world-making, and another that demystifies the void around which capitalist reality coheres. In doing so, critique can reclaim its generative force: not as a mode of relentless unmasking, but as a creative and transformative practice attuned to the many ways our material world might be reimagined.

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