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(Untimely) Critiques for a Red Feminism

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One

Historical materialism haunts feminism. Most postmodern feminists whom I shall call "ludic feminists" — have suppressed "objective reality" in discourse and regimes of signification. Nonetheless, they are feeling (however indirectly) the historical pressures of the return of the suppressed "objective reality." The increasing polarisation of wealth, feminization of labour and impoverishment of women in the world are all historical processes whose objectivity cannot be blunted in discourse. The issue of materialism — of a reality independent from the consciousness of the subject and outside language and other media — is thus gaining a new urgency for feminists after poststructuralism. Many are beginning to ask whether there is "an outside to discourse," as Judith Butler does in her *Bodies that Matter*, and attempt to articulate this material reality. The issue is especially pressing for Anglo-American neo-socialist feminists, who by-and-large have substituted Foucault for Marx, discourse for ideology, and have joined other poststructuralist feminists in embracing a cultural or discursive materialism while rejecting any "positive" knowledge (knowledge free from the consciousness of the subject and independent from language) as positivism. (I am using the term "neo" here because this "socialism" is one with little interest in "labour," "exploitation," and other global issues). Perhaps the best-known neo-socialist feminist to make this shift recently is Michele Barrett, who announces in the preface to her *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* that she is moving from Marx's "*economics of untruth*" — "*being*," as she says, "Marxism's account of ideology, used to show the relation between what goes on in people's heads and their place in the conditions of production" — to Foucault's "*politics of truth*," being his own approach to the relationships between knowledge, discourse, truth and power." In so doing, she announces that, "I am nailing my colours to the mast of a more general post-Marxism" (vii). But as Renate Bridenthal asks: "Where is this ship sailing to? This is not a time for intellectuals to be sailing away on a sea of indeterminacy" (220).

The re-theorisation of materialism in postmodern feminism follows two related paths. The first is a re-understanding of materialist feminism coming out of the Marxist tradition. But this is itself a contradictory and divided site — involving a conflict between those feminists reclaiming historical materialism and those who, following postmarxism, marginalise historical materialism as "positivism." These postmarxist feminists largely subscribe to the continued dominance of poststructuralist knowledges and are caught in the contradictions between the political necessity of materialism and its displacement by the ludic priority given to discourse. They end up substituting discursive determinism for what they reject as an economic determinism in classical Marxism, as Barrett does in *The Politics of Truth*. The second mode of materialism is non-Marxist and is developed entirely out of feminist encounters with poststructuralist theories (especially those of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and, with some recent modifications, Bourdieu) and rearticulates materialism as what is, in fact, a mode of idealism — what I call "matterism": the "matter" of the body, the "matter" of sexuality, the "matter" of race, the "matter" of media, and, above all the "matter" of language.

In its engagement with "materialism" ludic postmodern feminism has reached a political crisis. But it attempts to represent and deal with this crisis as an exclusively epistemological question — as if

epistemology itself is not partisan. We, therefore, need to examine some of the reasons why "materialism" — after the serious epistemological and political challenges from poststructuralism, postmarxism, post-Heisenbergian physics and New Historicism — continues to remain a fundamental issue in feminism and how ludic feminism (as the avant-garde of discursivist social theory) has theorised materialism in the post-al moment.

It is important to point out that the "ludic" is not a rigidly defined category but a widely shared social "logic" that is articulated in a number of diverse and even conflicting ways by various ludic theorists and feminists. The crux of all ludic postmodern and feminist theories, however, is the rewriting of the social as largely discursive (thus marked by the traits of linguistic difference), local, contingent, asystematic and indeterminate. In many cases, this move is accompanied by a rearticulation of power as diffuse, a — causal and aleatory — most notably as articulated by Michel Foucault and elaborated by a number of feminists, especially Judith Butler. Social systems (totalities) become, for ludic postmodernists, merely discredited metanarratives rather than social "realities" to be contested. According to ludic logic (which is itself a metanarrative that forgets its own meta-narrativity), not only history but also the social are seen in semiotic terms: as "writing," as traces of textuality (Jacques Derrida), as "given by the universe of the phrase" (Jean-Francois Lyotard), and as a regime or genealogy of discursive practices and power-knowledge relations (Michel Foucault), as the "risk" of reappropriating through the materiality of literature what is lost in conceptuality (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*). In all these cases the fundamental nature of the social is without centre or determination: for Derrida this is expressed as the absence of any grounding ("transcendental") signified, such as "revolution," resulting from the play of *differance*; for Lyotard it is articulated in terms of the "differend," while for Foucault, it is accounted for by the a-causal, aleatory nature of power. Nancy, in his *The Inoperative Community*, of course, posits the social as a community without a collectivity (of production).

The political consequences of this idealist move — in which, as Derrida says, everything became discourse" (*Writing and Difference* 280) — are clearly articulated by the post-Marxist political theorist, Ernesto Laclau, who develops a ludic social theory "identifying the social with an infinite play of differences" ("*Transformations*" 39). Following Derrida, he argues that "to conceive of social relations as articulations of differences is to conceive them as signifying relations." Thus, not only is the social "de-centred," according to Laclau, but social relations, like all 'signifying systems,' are "ultimately arbitrary" and as a result "'society' . . . is an impossible object" ("*Transformations*," 40-41). By reducing the social to "signifying relations," that is, to a discursive or semiotic process, Laclau renders social relations "ultimately arbitrary" (like any sign). This means that social relations cannot be subjected to such determining relations as exploitation since they are 'arbitrary,' and if social relations are not exploitative (determined), they no longer require emancipation. In other words, Laclau and other ludic theorists, from Derrida to Drucilla Cornell, Foucault to Judith Butler, are not only rewriting the basic "struggle concepts" necessary for social change (e.g., "society," "surplus labour," "history," "class," "exploitation," "use-value," and "emancipation") as a series of tropic Metanarratives, but they are also turning the *realities* that these concepts explain into "arbitrary," indeterminate, "signifying relations." Ludic theorists, in short, are troping the social. In so doing, they de-materialise various social "realities," cutting them off from the material relations of production, and turn them into a superstructural matrix of discursive processes and a semiotic, textual play of *differance*.

However, as long as ludic feminism continues to address the question of "women" — and does not simply collapse into a merely textual or epistemological meditation on the fate of the sign — that is, as long as it follows the feminist imperative of praxis, ludic feminism (unlike other varieties of postmodern discourse) is pulled into debates over the actual conditions of the lives of women. But, no serious engagement with these conditions can possibly bracket or evade the matter of materialism. Ludic feminism is thus constantly drawn into arguments and counterarguments over questions raised by "materialism" and its epistemological "other" idealism. Some ludic feminists, however, have tried to obscure the problem of materialism and prevent a full critique of the issues

involved. ironically this "new" debate replays an old and familiar strategy described by Lenin nearly a century ago in his critique of idealism (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, 196-255). Describing the writings of the Machians, Lenin says that one thread that runs through their texts is their rejection of binaries, their claim that they have "risen above" materialism and idealism and "have transcended this 'obsolete' antithesis." This gesture, Lenin writes, is no more than an ideological alibi because in their actual practices, they "are continually sliding into idealism and are conducting a steady and incessant struggle against materialism" (354). Like Machians, ludic feminists declare that the debate over "idealism and materialism" is an "outdated" binary and, in the ecumenical spirit of postmodernist eclecticism (which underwrites liberal pluralism), provide a reconciliation of the two. Judith Butler, for instance, offers her theory of "performativity" to, in effect, "think through" the binary of what is "characterised as the linguistic idealism of poststructuralism" and a "materiality outside of language" (*Bodies that Matter* 2731). Similarly, Drucilla Cornell offers her notion of "remetaphorisation" and the "performative power of language" as a way of avoiding "pit[ting] 'materialist' feminism against feminine writing" (*Beyond Accommodation* 3). However, as Lenin writes, any such "hybrid project" is in fact an alibi for the legitimisation of idealism (*Materialism*, 350).

The politico-epistemological crisis that "materialism" has produced in ludic feminism has to do with its class politics. Ludic feminism becomes — in its *effects*, if not in its intentions — a theory that inscribes the class interests of, what bourgeois sociology calls, the upper-middle classes and of Eurocentrism. It does not acknowledge the "materiality" of the regime of wage-labour and capital. Nor does it acknowledge the existence of a historical series independent from the consciousness of the subject and autonomous from textuality. Such a recognition would lead to the further acknowledgment of the materiality of the social contradictions brought about by the social relations of production founded upon the priority of private property. Ludic feminism cannot accept a social theory that finds private property — the congealed surplus labor of others — to be the cause of social inequalities that can be remedied only through revolution. Ludic feminism is, in effect, a theory for property holders. Nor can ludic feminism simply revert to an a-historical, essentialist position and posit the "consciousness" of the subject as the source of social reality. Such a move would go against the general post-structuralist constructivism and consequently would lead to, among other things, a reinscription of logocentrism and the phallogentrism that underlies it. Ludic feminism therefore needs to 'invent' a form of materialism that gestures to a world not directly present to the consciousness of the subject (as classic post-structuralism has done), but not entirely "constructed" in the medium of knowing (language) either. It has simply become "unethical to think of such social oppressions as "sexism," "racism," and "homophobia" as purely "matters" of language and discourse. Ludic feminism is beginning to learn, in spite of itself, the lesson of Engels' *Anti-Duhring*: the fact that we understand reality through language does not mean that reality is made by language.

The dilemma of ludic feminism in theorising "materialism" is a familiar one. In his interrogation of Berkeley, Lenin points to this dilemma that runs through all forms of idealism: the epistemological unwillingness to make distinctions between "ideas" and "things" (*Materialism* 130-300), which is, of course, brought about by class politics. Ludic feminism, like all forms of upper-middle class (idealist) philosophy, must hold on to "ideas" since it is by the agency of ideas that this class (as privileged mental workers) acquires its social privileges. Although posed as an epistemological question, the dilemma is finally a class question: how not to deny the world outside the consciousness of the subject but not to make that world the material cause of social practices either. Ludic feminism, like Berkeleyan idealism, cannot afford to explain things by the relations of production and labour. This then is the dilemma of ludic feminism: the denial of "materialism" leads ludic feminism to a form of idealism that discredits any claims it might have to the struggle for social change; accepting materialism, on the other hand, implicates its own ludic practices in the practices of patriarchal-capitalism — the practices that have produced gender inequalities as differences that can be deployed to increase the rate of profit. This dilemma has led feminism to an

intolerable political crisis: a crisis that is, in fact, so acute it has raised questions about the viability of feminism as a theory and practice itself.

Two

Given its class politics, ludic feminism has attempted to overcome this politico-epistemological crisis by theorising materialism in a way that reconciles its contradictory interests. On the one hand, it is primarily a theory of "upper-middle class" (to use the term of bourgeois social theory) Euroamerican women and, on the other hand, it claims to be interested in social change for all women. These "solutions" have taken two historically determined forms.

In the early phases of its 'romance' with post-structuralism — roughly from the early 1970's (as in the writings of Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva) to the mid-1980's (as in such early writings of Teresa deLauretis as *Alice Doesn't*) — ludic feminism understood materialism mostly as a matter of "language" ("sign"). This idea of the material as the "matter" of language is perhaps most comprehensively performed in a book published at the end of this phase of ludic materialism namely, *Textualising the Feminine* by Shari Benstock (1991). By the time Benstock's book was published, materialism-as-language theory had become institutionalised in feminism. Benstock's conventional reading of what I am calling ludic feminism does not directly engage the question of "materialism," but her book is basically an instance of the emergence (and decline) of the notion of (mostly Derridean-Lacanian) textuality in contemporary feminism. Such feminists as Mary Daly, who are not in any conventional sense post-structuralists, also have a ludic understanding of materialism as a matter of language, as is clear from her tropic books such as *Gyn/Ecology*.

In theorising "materialism" as a "matter" of language, ludic feminism essentially deployed the concept of "textuality" in Derrida (for example, in *Of Grammatology*, especially 141-164), the idea of the "sign" in Lacan (*Ecrits*, particularly, 30-113 and 146-178), and also the notion of language as discourse in Foucault (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, especially 40-49 and *The Discourse on Language*). For Foucault "discourse" has an exteriority of its own ("Politics and the Study of Discourse" 60); it is a reality in its own right and not simply a reflection of an independent reality outside it. In his elaboration on this view of "discourse," Ernesto Laclau goes so far as to say that "The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being coextensive with the social as such" (*Populist Rupture and Discourse* 87). Understanding materialism as a matter of language has led ludic feminism to rethink politics itself. If the "matter" of social reality is "language," then changes in this reality can best be brought about by changing the constituents of that reality — namely, signs. Therefore, politics as collective action for emancipation is abandoned, and politics as intervention in discursive representation is adopted as a truly progressive politics. Since language always works in specific contexts, the new progressive ludic politics was also deemed to be always "local" and anti-global. From such a perspective, emancipation itself is seen as a metaphysical metanarrative and read as totalising and totalitarian (e.g., Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*). Following the post-Marxism of Laclau, ludic feminists like Judith Butler, proclaim the "loss of credibility" of Marxist versions of history" and "the unrealisability of emancipation." Emancipation for Butler has a "contradictory and untenable" foundation and thus becomes part of a sliding chain of significations ('Poststructuralism and Postmarxism'). Social change, thus, becomes almost entirely a matter of superstructural change, that is, change in significations. Political economy, in short, is displaced by an economy of signs.

With minor local modifications in the works of various ludic feminists, this notion of materialism is maintained in ludic theory from the early 1970's to the mid-1980s. However, from the mid-to-late 1980's (around the time of publication of Jane Gallop's *Thinking Through the Body* in 1988) the idea of "materialism" as solely a matter of language loses its grip on ludic theory. After the publication of Paul deMan's *War-time Journalism* — when questions of "ethics" suddenly become foregrounded in contemporary high theory — an under the increasing pressures from New Historicism, ludic feminism has made new attempts to rearticulate materialism in a less discursive manner. The

pressures on reunderstanding "materialism" as a non-discursive force have not been entirely internal to theory. At the end of the 1980's, as a result of conservative social policies in the U.S. and Europe (for example, new tax laws), a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the owning class has taken place. Moreover, the working of postmodern capitalism has literally affected "everyday" life in U.S. and European cities (homelessness, crime in neighbourhoods devastated by unemployment, abandoned children ...). In the face of such conditions, the idea of progressive politics as simply a question of changing representations and problematising the "obvious" meanings in culture has become too hollow to be convincing. As part of the emergence of "ethics" in critical theory and the decline of "high theory" itself, ludic feminism has been rethinking its own understanding of "materialism." In the 1990's materialism in ludic feminism is no longer simply the "matter" of language, rather it has become the resisting "matter" of the non-discursive, or as Diana Fuss puts it in her *Essentially Speaking*, "the body as matter" (52). The main theorists of this new version of materialism" are writers such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz. (Increasingly the notion of materialism deployed by Eve Sedgwick and other queer theorists is to a very large extent influenced by Butler). The idea of the non-discursive ("the real or primary relations") is, of course, available even in the early work of Foucault himself (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, for example 45-46; 68-69). Butler, whose recent writings are increasingly marked by her engagement with something called the non/extra-discursive is, of course, a close reader of Foucault. (Butler's doctoral dissertation, later published as *Subjects of Desire*, it is helpful to keep in mind, is focused, in part, on Foucault).

What is of great importance in any theory of materialism is the way in which the relation of the material to the non-material is articulated. In his earlier works such as *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault had posited a more causal relationship between the discursive and non-discursive. The "innovation" in *Archaeology* (and in the writings that followed) is that causal explanation (in fact any explanation) is dismissed as a modernist search for origin. In the post-*Archaeology* writings the discursive and the non-discursive exist side by side without any "necessary" relation between them. The Marxist principle that the extra-discursive explains the discursive ("it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness," Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 21) is abandoned in favour of indeterminacy. In fact, the "indeterminateness" of the relation between the discursive and nondiscursive is central to the idea of the "material" in ludic feminism. Through indeterminacy, ludic feminism — like all idealist theory — argues for the freedom of agency and proposes a theory of the social in which the bourgeois subject is still the central figure. The subject in ludic feminism does not, of course, always appear in its traditional form. However, it is commonly affirmed through a trope or a practice, such as the practice of performance in Butler: it is, for example, impossible to think of a performance, no matter how performative — without a performer. It is, therefore, important to say here that Foucault and ludic feminism ostensibly reject any causal explanation in order to acquire the freedom of the agent, but in actuality the only determinism that they are opposing is the determinism of the material (labour, class, and the relations of production). In spite of their formal objections to explanation and causality, they, in fact, establish a causal relation in their theories between the discursive and non-discursive in which the Marxist theory of the social is reversed. In ludic theory it is the discursive that silently explains the nondiscursive. Dreyfus and Rabinow (hardly opponents of Foucault!) put it this way:

"Although what gets said depends on something other than itself, discourse dictates the terms of this dependence" (*Michel Foucault* 64). In other words, not only is also determining: it organises the non-discursive. In is discourse autonomous, it more of a formal(ist) gesture towards an "outside" which short, the non-discursive is might be regarded as "material." The decidability/undecidability of the relation between the discursive and non-discursive — and not the mere acknowledgment (as in both Foucault and ludic feminism) that there is an extra-discursive — is the central issue in theorising materialism.

The result of this ludic positing of a relation of indeterminacy is a materialism that does not act

materially; it does not determine anything: it is an inert mass. For the poststructuralist feminist, such as Butler, Cornell, or Fuss, this non-determinate relation is what makes the theory of the non-discursive in postmodern feminism "progressive" and non-reductionist. However, this is a very conservative and constraining understanding of the non-discursive and its relation to the discursive. The indeterminacy that it posits as a mark of resistance and freedom is, in actuality, a legitimisation of the class politics of an "upper-middle class" Euroamerican feminism that is obsessed with the freedom of the entrepreneurial subject and as such privileges the "inventiveness" of the sovereign subject — in the form of what Butler calls "citationality," Cornell calls "remetaphorisation," and what more generally is understood as creativity, agency — over the collective social relations of production. This individuality is materialised in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of each body.

The non-discursive for ludic feminists in the 1990's, thus, becomes more and more a question of not simply that which exists outside the discursive but as that entity which is resistant to the discursive — and the body is put forth as the prime site for this resistance. What I have said so far about the history and theory of "materialism" in recent feminist theory should not conveniently be read to mean that, for example, no feminist theorist before the mid-to-late 1980's talked about "materialism" as a matter of the body or that no feminist theorist, at the present time, regards "materialism" to be a matter of language. My point is that, at the present time, the notion of materialism as "language" is, to use Raymond Williams' terms, a "residual" concept (writers such as Barbara Johnson, who have shown an interest in feminism in their more recent writings, for example, still, by and large, regard materialism to be a matter of language). The idea of "materialism" as a matter of body — as, in short, a force resisting the discursive — is an "emergent" theory. We see the effort to suture these two theoretical tendencies together in the work, for example, of Judith Butler.

In his move from the project of "archaeology" (questions of language and knowledge) to "genealogy" (issues of power and practice), Foucault has concluded that the only possibility of social change is through an entity that can resist the all inclusive and all-encompassing regime of the dominant "episteme" that he himself had so thoroughly analysed in *The Order of Things*. Since the episteme defines and controls all that was intelligible, to move beyond its regime, one has to appeal to an entity that is non-thinking, non-intelligible and has the power to resist the episteme. This entity, for Foucault, is the body, and the power of the body is acquired through its relentless seeking of purposeless pleasure: pleasure not as the reward for performing the task of reproduction. As Foucault elaborated in his later works, such as *History of Sexuality and Discipline and Punish*, the body has its own materiality that enables it to "exceed" and "escape" discourse and its associated regimes of power-knowledge. This, of course, does not mean that the body is not conditioned, inscribed, and moulded by discourse. However, it does mean that power-knowledge never succeeds in completely overcoming the body: culturalisation is never total and the body always exceeds the power-knowledge that attempts to completely control it. This "exceeding" is possible partly because of the internal conflicts and contradictions among the various discourses that attempt to control the body.

The notion of the body as a resisting site in Foucault, however, is a highly political one and is devised in part to inscribe a bourgeois ludic "materialism" (of pleasure) in place of historical materialism. Foucault himself is quite clear on this point. In his "Body/Power," Foucault states that

The emergence of the problem of the body and its growing urgency have come about through the unfolding of a political struggle. Whether this is a revolutionary struggle, I don't know. One can say that what has happened since 1968, and arguably what made 1968 possible, is something profoundly anti-Marxist. How can European revolutionary movements free themselves from the 'Marx effect. . . .' This was the direction of the questions posed by '68. In this calling in question of the equation: Marxism = the revolutionary process, an equation that constituted a kind of dogma, the importance given to the body is one of the important, if not essential elements. (*Power/Knowledge* 57)

The politics of Foucault's theorising of the body as a site of resistance materialism becomes even more clear when he says, "I wonder whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn't

be more materialist to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it" (*Power/Knowledge* 58). The materialism of the body in Foucault, then, is specifically designed to oppose collective revolutionary praxis by substituting individual regimes of purposeless pleasure-pleasure as a mode of the Kantian "sublime," a pleasure that is an excess of all systems of representation and an escape from discourse and all social meanings. Social meanings — it is assumed — are all ideological, and the true freedom of the subject is attained by transcending ideology: pleasure deconstructs ideology (the preordained obviousness upon which the metanarratives of a society are founded) and arrives at surprising encounters that can only be called novel "experiences" (Foucault's formal opposition to "experience" notwithstanding).

This legacy of Foucauldian inferential materialism has dominated the ludic feminist notion of the non-discursive and the material. Materialism in ludic feminism (as in Berkeley and other idealist philosophers) is, in fact, more a theological category than a materialist one. It is a form of what Lenin in his critique of Berkeley called "objective idealism" (Lenin, *Materialism* 23). The masquerading of this objective idealism — or what, in the context of Lenin's discussion of Berkeley, could be called spiritual materialism — as "materialism" in ludic feminism has notescaped the attention of ludic feminists themselves. Kathryn Bond Stockton, herself a ludic feminist theologian, describes the prevailing mode of "materialism" in ludic feminism in this way:

I mean materialism in its strongest sense: the material onto which we map our constructions, 'matter on its own terms that might resist or pressure our constructions, or prove independent of them altogether. This materialism is the nondiscursive something poststructuralist feminists now want to embrace, the extradiscursive something they confess necessarily eludes them. ("Bodies and God" 131)

Unlike historical materialism, which foregrounds the historical praxis of the materiality of labour, materialism, for the ludic feminist in the 1990's, is not an actual historical praxis that determines other practices, rather it is a purely "inferential" entity. It is, in fact, the consciousness of the subject that creates ("invents") this ludic "matter." Any understanding of "matter" as a positive entity (labour) is dismissed in ludic feminism as vulgar determinism/positivism. The "matter" of ludic feminism, in short, is a non-determining matter that depends on the subject and, as such, it is a reinscription of traditional Euroamerican idealism — this time represented as postmodern (non-positivist) materialism — to cover up the contradictions and crisis of patriarchal-capitalist. Materialism becomes (through such practices as .performance") that which exceeds the existing systems of representation — an escapes from socially constructed meanings. In ludic feminism, then, materialism (as a resisting matter) is an "invention." The seemingly "antitranscendental" element that materialism is supposed to bring to bear upon social analysis for ludic feminists, as Stockton herself realises, "only masks their deep dependence" upon "mystic unfathomable Visibilities" (132). Ludic spiritual materialism, in Stockton's words, stands as a God that might be approached through fictions and faith but never glimpsed naked" (131). Stockton's analysis is a conservative and local one: she simply observes the striking similarities that exist between spiritual materialism in ludic feminism and Victorian theological thought. In so doing, she blocks a more global understanding of ludic materialism: ludic materialism is an outcome of the contradictions of the social divisions of labour in class society. Spiritual materialism is, in short, is a strategy for managing the crisis of class relations.

Materialism, in other words, is "invented" in ludic discourses to bring back transcendentalism in a more postmodern and thus convincing rhetoric. Moreover, as I will discuss more fully below, the trope of "invention" and theories of "invention" are introduced in contemporary theory as a means to overcome the impasse of "constructivism." Constructivism effectively combated humanism along with humanist and essentialist notions of the subject, but it also left the subject and subjectivity too determinate: "upper-middle-class" ludic theorists have not been able to accept any theory that circumscribes the freedom of the subject (of capital). However, what is commonly represented, under the guise of invention, as "materialism" in ludic feminism, is merely a re-invention of the very familiar technocratic imagination so valorised in capitalism: materialism as *techno-ludism*. The

most well-known example of techno-ludism — that is, the conjuncture of technocratic fancy, inventionism and spiritual materialism — is Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* which has become for many the manifesto of new, post-socialist ludic materialism. An apt commentary on the writings of Haraway and other feminist techno-theorists is provided by Marx and Engels. In their critique of idealist philosophers, Marx and Engels called them "industrialists of philosophy" who live on "absolute spirit," and this description remains valid for (techno)ludic feminists today (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 27, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5). It is necessary to recall that Haraway's essay ends with what Stockton calls the trope of the "Christian Pentecost" ("Bodies and God" 138): Haraway claims that "Cyborg imagery ... is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia... a feminist speaking in tongues" (*Simians* 181). This spiritual materialism — this ludic matterism in its various forms from cyborgian techno-ludism to Butlerian "citationality" — is now the dominant theory of materialism in the postmodern knowledge industry. It is a materialism that does not determine the non-material but is, in fact, determined by the consciousness of the subject that infers it and thus constitutes it. ludic materialism, then, whether perceived as the matter of sign/ textuality or as the matter of the body is an invention to overcome the determinism of social constructionism: it is a device to return the freedom of the subject and the contingency and non-necessity of the social with a newly legitimated force to the entrepreneur and patriarchal-capitalism.

Materialism, however, is neither a matter of "language" (sign/discourse/ textuality) nor is it an a-historical, inert, "resisting" mass (of the body) whose existence can be inferred by "faith or fiction," by performativity, resignifications and other ludic rituals. In its most radical rendering, ludic postmodern materialism leads to a form of Feuerbachian materialism about which Marx writes: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 41). Materialism, is not a matter of inference. It is the objectivity (of "surplus labour"). Moreover it is an active objectivity: a praxis — the praxis of labour through which humans "act "upon external nature" and change it, and in this way simultaneously change themselves (Marx, *Capital* I, 284). As a praxis, it is historical, and as labour, it is conflictually structured between the owners of the means of production and those who have nothing but their own labour power to sell. Materialism, in short, is a historical praxis and a structure of conflicts that determines other practices. Unlike the Foucauldian and ludic inert non-discursive, it does not simply exist side by side with the discursive: it make the discursive possible; it "explains" the discursive. Explanation is, of course, the very thing that Foucault's theory of the autonomy of discourse is designed to erase. For Foucault all explanations (why) are ideological: only description (how) of discourse is a legitimate form of knowledge. Materialism is not an inert resistance to discourse, that has to be inferred by "fictions and faith." Instead materialism is (as Marx meticulously describes it in *Capital*, I, 340-416) what confronts the subject of labour in "the working day": the working day is the site in which the material and historical process of extracting surplus labour from the worker by the capitalist takes place.

Three

Theories that approach materialism as a matter of language, as discourse, base their argument on the assumption that discourse/textuality have an opacity and density of their own, a physicality, which makes language "mean" not simply by the "intention" of the author and speaker or by her conscious "control" but by its own autonomous and immanent laws of signification. This understanding of "materialism" is transhistorical: it refers mostly to the material in the sense that I have already described as inert matter, "medium" or "thingness" and is, in short, a form of "matterism" rather than materialism. Or as Marx says in his "Theses on Feuerbach," "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism" — and we can add poststructuralist materialism to the list — "is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*" (*The German Ideology* I 21). And "human sensuous activity" is above all, for Marx, labour: the way people "*produce* their means of subsistence" and thus

"indirectly produce their actual material life" (*The German Ideology*, 42).

It is, then, especially surprising to see a neo-socialist-feminist like Michele Barrett define materialism in Marxist thought as "the doctrine seeing consciousness as dependent on matter" without realising that "matter" in Marxism is not inert mass but the praxis of labor and the contradictions and class conflict.,; in which it is always involved. Barrett goes on to pose the poststructuralist debate over materialism as one between "words and things," "matter" and "meaning" ("Words and Things" 202, 201). However, "words and things," to use her terms, are not finished a-historical entities: they are the product of the social relations of production. To pose the question the way Barrett does is to erase the dialectical projector Marxism and to occlude the structure of conflicts in capitalism. Historical materialism is an explanation of these conflicts. Barrett's misreading is symptomatic of a more serious problem over the issue of materialism within Marxist and socialist feminism. This is fundamentally the problem of the place of the relations of production in feminist theory and political practice. It is the question of whether feminist knowledge should give priority to the way people "produce their means of subsistence" (labour) — to the material reality and historical struggles of the relations of production — or whether, as Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell argue, "the confrontation between twentieth-century Marxism and feminist thought requires nothing less than a paradigm shift ... the 'displacement of the paradigm of production'" (*Feminism as Critique* 1). This is not simply a debate among materialist feminists. The "displacement of the paradigm of production" by a majority of postmodern, Anglo-American neo-socialist feminists has significantly contributed to the occlusion of the economic and suppression of the problem of exploitation in most other feminist theories and consequently in contemporary social theory in general. It has produced a ludic or post-al socialist feminism *without* Marxism, turning it into a general left-liberalism, and has participated in the ludic substitution of a discursive politics of individual, libidinal liberation for a revolutionary politics of collective socioeconomic transformation.

Why should this displacement matter? The erasure of Marxism from feminism and (ludic) postmodern knowledges has become so pervasive that the importance of these issues has been largely suppressed, and the question itself can no longer even be asked without requiring extensive explanation. It matters because, as Marx and Engels say, "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (*The Communist Manifesto* 75), and there can be no "free development" unless the fundamental needs of each person are met: unless production fulfils needs instead of making profits (Marx, *The Gotha Program* 10). Making profits, in short, is the denial of the needs of the many and the legitimisation of the desires of the few. As a revolutionary (not a post-al) socialist feminist, Nellie Wong argues,

Without overthrowing the economic system of capitalism, as socialists and communists organise to do, we cannot liberate women and everybody else who is also oppressed.

Socialist feminism is our bridge to freedom.... Feminism, the struggle for women's equal rights, is inseparable from socialism.... (*Socialist Feminism*, 290).

A revolutionary socialist feminism is based on historical materialism. It insists that the "material" is fundamentally tied to the economic sphere and to the relations of production, which have a historically necessary connection to all other social/cultural relations. The "material," in other words, contrary to ludic theory does not simply exist autonomously as a resisting mass, side by side with autonomous discourse. Materialism, as Engels puts it, means that "the degree of economic development," in a society forms "the foundation upon which the state institutions ... the art and even the religious ideas ... have been evolved, and in the light of which these things must therefore be explained instead of *vice versa*" (*The Funeral of Kari Marx* 39). It is — to repeat what is so violently erased in idealist theory — therefore, not "the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 21). In short, Marx argues that "the nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production" — "both with what they produce

and with how they produce" (*The German Ideology* 42).

For a red feminism this means that issues about the "nature of individuals" — gender, sexuality, pleasure, desire, needs — cannot be separated from the conditions producing individuals: not just the discursive and ideological conditions but most important the material conditions, the relations of production, which shape discourses and ideologies. Thus the struggle to end the exploitation and oppression of all women, and in particular of people of colour, lesbians and gays, within the metropole as well as the periphery, is not simply a matter of discursive or semiotic liberation or a question of the resisting "matter of the body," but a global social relation: it thus requires the transformation of the material conditions — the relations of production — producing these forms of oppression.

Historical materialism thus means the primacy of women's and men's productive practices — their labour processes — in the articulation and development of human history and in the construction of their own subjectivities. As Marx argues in *Capital*, through labour the subject "acts upon" external nature and changes it and in this way the labourer simultaneously changes her/his own nature (v. 1, 283). Such a view of materialism also understands 'reality' to be a historically objective process: reality exists outside the consciousness of humans — ideas do not have an autonomous existence and thus reality is not merely a matter of desire of the body, or the operation of language (or, on the other hand, of the "thingness" of things). This does not mean that reality, as we have access to it, as we make sense of it, is not mediated by signifying practices. But the empirical fact that reality is mediated by language in no way means, as Engels and others have argued, that it is produced by language. Social relations and practices are, in other words, prior to signification and are objective. The subjugation of women, then, is an objective historical reality: it is not simply a matter of representation by self-legitimizing discourses. The extraction of surplus labour is an objective social reality in class societies and all social difference are produced by it, whether directly or through various mediations. Transformative politics depends on such a view of reality since if there is no objective reality there will be little ground on which to act in order to change existing social relations. Transformative politics, in other words, does not simply "redescribe" the existing social world through different discourses as does ludic politics (e.g., see Rorty, *Contingency* 44-69), but rather acts to change the "real" social, economic — the material conditions of the relations of production exploiting women and determining our lives.

Four

It is by now commonplace among ludic postmodernists and feminists, including many socialist feminists, to dismiss the insistence on relations of production as economic reductionism and to discredit the concept of any determination of the "superstructure" (e.g., the cultural, ideological, representational, political, juridical, etc.) by the economic base. This is, for instance, the core argument *against* historical or dialectical materialism and for cultural materialism in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean's *Materialist Feminisms* (e.g., 61-62). It is necessary to discuss this book at some length since it articulates many of the questions I have raised in this chapter — the problem of feminism, critique and materialism — in direct opposition to my own argument. A critique of their book, therefore, will provide a more open contestation between my argument and that of ludic feminism. Landry and MacLean's book attempts "to present a history of the debates between Marxist and feminist social and cultural theorists in the 1960's, 1970's and early 1980's, primarily in Britain and the United States, and to analyse what has happened to transform those debates in recent years" (ix). But as deconstructionists they are quite ambivalent about the project of writing a history and end up with what they themselves describe as a "schematic and inconsistent" "chronological narrative." *Materialist Feminisms* is especially representative of the discursive, post-Marxist turn in socialist feminism and demonstrates some of the limitations of this ludic mode.

They begin their book by saying that "this is a book about feminism and Marxism written when many people are proclaiming the end of socialism and the end of feminism.... We find these claims

to be both premature and misleading" (vii). However, the authors are deeply invested in poststructuralism, especially deconstruction, as the ground of their knowledges, and this leads them to turn Marxism into a *textuality* that they try to deconstruct. In fact, the book expends considerable energy trying to displace and erase Marxism altogether from materialism and from feminism. Thus, while the book begins by treating Marxist, socialist, and materialist feminism as nearly synonymous, it concludes by saying: "Need materialism be only an alias for Marxism? We hope that by now the distinction between Marxist feminism and materialist feminism is clear" (229). But in writing a materialist feminism *without Marxism*, the book offers little more than a left-liberal, poststructuralist "identity politics of undone identities."

The core of Landry and McLean's notion of materialism is an adaptation of Raymond Williams' notions of "cultural materialism" and "green socialism" which they graft onto deconstruction. While they continue to call their position "historical materialism" (following Williams' revisions), they, in fact, fundamentally break with the tradition of historical materialism and instead subscribe to the, by now, dominant *discursive* conception of materialism:

the production of signs, of signifying systems, of ideology, representations, and discourses is itself a material activity with material effects. Instead of arguing that the material or economic base produces certain effects, like culture and ideology, as part of its superstructure, a cultural materialist would argue that ideology and the discourses generated by social institutions are themselves located in material practices which have material effects that affect even the economic structures of the base. (61)

This issue of the "materiality of the many signifying practices" and whether or not cultural, ideological and discursive practices (superstructure) are determined by the "material or economic base" is the basic conflict between a cultural/discursive materialism and historical materialism. As Landry and MacLean explain, "from a cultural materialist position, arguments for the determinism of the 'base' suffer from economic reductionism" (61-62).

But it is not really "reductionism" that disturbs Landry and MacLean since they seem to have no trouble at all in accepting the post-marxist view of Laclau and Mouffe that "history and the real are discursive" (1 40), which is itself quite a reductionist and deterministic position. What Landry and MacLean, like other poststructuralists and postmarxists, are doing is simply replacing "economic reductionism" with a "discursive reductionism" and calling it a new non-deterministic materialism.

Thus, Landry and MacLean claim that the "more adequately materialist feminist reading" is one that reads both Marx and the world "as texts," for the world and history are "always discursively constructed" (139-140). Their main argument against Marx (and for deconstruction), thus involves reading "Marx's concept of value," following Gayatri Spivak, "as a catachresis or pun," which "not only shifts the grounds of debate from a tendency towards economic reductionism but opens potentially productive contradictions in Marx's texts" (64). But "surplus value" in Marx is the profit gained from the appropriation and exploitation of the contradictions in the social divisions of labour in production. To turn it into a linguistic pun, not only erases a powerful explanatory concept, but it also "shifts the grounds of debate" from social contradictions over the exploitation of people's lives and labour to the play of textual differences. The ultimate goal of such readings of the "labour theory of value" in Marx is to turn it into a concept analogous to "value" in Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics* 111-122). However, "value" in language is a "local" condition of meaningfulness (Saussure 116). Signs acquire their "value" by "opposition," to use Saussure's own term, but this "opposition" is itself the outcome of prior material oppositions which Voloshinov effectively discusses as the oppositions of classes: language is "an arena of class struggle," that is, a site in the struggle over the extraction of surplus value (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* 23). The meaning of the sign "black," in other words, is not determined simply by a local, immanent "opposition" to white but by the way "black" and "white" are constructed and given meaning in the process of production. immanently it would be difficult to explain why "black market" is a term of derogation and 'white lie' is a term of justification and thus acceptance. "Black" in black market is

negative because of what is outside discourse: the race and class antagonisms over the social divisions of labour and expropriations of surplus value — antagonisms which are made intelligible and fought out in the arena of discourse. "Surplus value" in the labour theory of value, in short, determines not only the value of the sign but of all systems of intelligibilities in class societies (Alex Callinicos, *Race and Class* 16-39).

However, for discursive materialists, in spite of their formal protests, discourse in their practices determines not only the "real" but also social and political change. Materialist feminism, then — as put forth by Landry and MacLean and the majority of ludic postmodernists and feminists — becomes a discursive "politics of difference" sensitive to the "leaky distinctions" among questions of race, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, post-coloniality, religion, and cultural identity, as well as class and gender" (90). Materialist feminism is reduced, in short, to what Landry and MacLean celebrate as a poststructuralist "identity politics of undone identities." But such an identity politics completely displaces the transformative struggle against "interlocking systems of oppression — racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," called for by earlier materialist feminists, such as those of the Combahee River Collective (145). This substitution of a politics of difference reunderstands power relations, following Foucault (*History of Sexuality*, 1, 85-102), as reversible relations of difference and rearticulates binaries, oppositions and hierarchies as discursive categories and practices that can be "reversed ... [and] displaced" by a "deconstructive reading." But such a rhetorical displacement of binaries does not eliminate the real existing social and historical binaries between exploiter and exploited. It simply covers them over, concealing their grounding in the social divisions of labour and the relations of production.

Five

At the core of discursive materialism is the poetics of invention. The post-al politics of "invention" is a politics of discursive transformation that seeks to move "beyond" established codes into a "utopian" space of unencumbered (semiotic) freedom through the subversion of existing regimes of discourse and hierarchies of representation, language games, and signifying relations. It is a politics of local, contingent acts generating new phrases, idioms, linkages and rules of judgments for each particular situation without any pre-existing criteria. Such judgments, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, have 'to be always done over again' because they concern incommensurable linkages among *differends* — linkages that must be "always done over again" in order not to suppress some other *differend*, some other linkage (*Differend* 140). Politics is thus reduced to discursive alterations and subversions: what Lyotard calls the "invention of new idioms" for the *differend*.

As I earlier suggested, part of what is at stake in the emphasis on "invention" by ludic postmodern and feminist theorists (not only Lyotard but also Derrida, Butler, and Cornell, as well as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Gregory Ulmer and others) is the crisis of social constructionism. Structuralism and, later on, poststructuralism critiqued traditional humanism for its metaphysics of presence — by which it secured its basic categories (self, consciousness, gender, sex, race ...) in nature. They offered, as a "supplement" to this theory of the subject, the notion that the subject was not naturally created but was socially constructed. By now, the idea of social construction as opposed to a "natural" essentialism has become the ludic orthodoxy, and the conflict between "essentialism" and "constructionism" has become one of the most contested scenes in feminism. Recently, however, the theory of the subject as socially constructed is turning into an impediment for ludic feminists and postmodern theorists, for whom constructionism seems too deterministic and restrictive of the agency of the subject. Ludic theorists are thus attempting to problematise this determinism through the trope of "invention" — the multiple, indeterminate, reversible play of significations that subverts any stable, definite meanings. For these ludic critics, the subject's inventiveness — that is, her/ his participation in the discursive "play" of language games, metaphors, significations — enables her/him to overcome the determinacy of social construction and move into the terrain of a utopian future.

This move first to a semiotic constructionism and then to invention involves a double displacement of historical materialism. By construing social construction largely in terms of a discursive construction, structuralists and poststructuralists have substituted a linguistic determinism for a historical materialist concept of construction as determined by the forces and relations of production. Now the more recent ludic rejection of even linguistic determinism entirely eclipses the historical actuality of determinism without having to address its materialist and economic forms.

This valorisation of a liberating inventiveness and complete erasure of any form of necessary relation is clearly evident in Drucilla Cornell's "utopian feminism" with its strategies of "remetaphorisation" (*Beyond Accommodation*). But perhaps one of the fullest articulations of this eclipse of historical materialism in the shift from constructionism to invention is developed by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*.

Butler's work combines a deconstructive textualism with a Foucaultian analytics of power. It is thus important to briefly critique here the basic presuppositions of Foucault's notion of power. Power in Foucault is not understood as primarily textual, although it is irrevocably linked to the operation of discourse and knowledge relations. Rather power, according to Foucault, "must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation" (*History of Sexuality* 92). Moreover, these "force relations" of power are, according to Foucault, self-constituting, immanent, local, diffuse and a-systematic. Power, in other words, is "aleatory" (that is, marked by chance and arbitrariness); contingent (rather than historically determined); heterogeneous (divided by difference within), and unstable — by provoking "resistance" it "undoes" itself. Foucault's analysis of the local, specific and contingent, however, is based on a quite abstract, static, a-historical and mystified concept of power: for Foucault "Power is everywhere ... comes from everywhere ... is permanent, repetitious, inert" — it is always already with us and always will be. Moreover, Foucault turns resistance into a nearly automatic, immanent response to the exercise of power: "where there is power, there is resistance" (95-96). For "Resistances," Foucault declares, "are inscribed in the [relations of power] as an irreducible opposite" — rather like a natural resistance to a physical force (96). Such a theory of power substitutes a logic of contingency for the logic of social necessity. In so doing, it preempts any need for collective, organised social transformation — any need, in other words, for emancipation, and more important, it dispenses with the necessity for organised social and political revolution to overthrow dominant power relations. All we need to do, according to this ludic logic, is recognise and validate the local "multiplicity of points of resistance" that power itself already generates.

Perhaps the most "appealing" aspect of Foucault's theory for most "left" critics and feminists is that it offers, as Foucault himself says, "a non-economic analysis of power" as opposed to the "economism in the theory of power" in Marx as well as in the juridical-liberal notion of power (*Power/Knowledge* 88-89). Foucault conflates these two quite opposed understandings of power by equating a trope with a theoretical explanation — he follows the ludic assumption that explanation/concepts are, in fact, tropes. He characterises the juridical-liberal notion of power as a form of economism simply because it relies on the trope of commodity exchange. Whereas, in "the Marxist conception of power," he says, "one finds none of all that" (88). What one does find — and what Foucault's entire theory of power is an attempt to displace — is, as Foucault describes it: "an economic functionality of power ... power is conceived primarily in terms of the role it plays in the maintenance simultaneously of the relations of production and of a class domination which the development and specific forms of the forces of production have rendered possible" (88-89). In opposition to a Marxist theory of power — which always insists on the *dialectical* relations of power and the economic — Foucault (the former student of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser) develops an unrelentingly anti-historical-materialist theory of power. He severs power from its material connection to the social relations and contradictions of production, and reduces it to an abstract force confined to the superstructure. His is an anti-dialectical theory that substitutes an analytics of localised, reversible domination for a theory of systematic global exploitation. This

ludic displacement of historical materialism has made Foucault one of the main articulators of post-Marxism in late capitalism and given him an extraordinary influence among academics, professionals and other middle and upper class knowledge-workers, especially in the West.

Building on Foucault's theory of a localised, diffuse, a-systematic power, Butler rewrites constructionism, specifically the construction of gender/sexed bodies, as indeterminate. In short, she rewrites it in terms of invention — what she calls "performativity" or "citationality." In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler specifically contests, what she calls, "radical linguistic constructivism" which "is understood to be generative and deterministic" and forms a "linguistic monism, whereby everything "is only and always language" (6). According to Butler, "what ensues," from this position, "is an exasperated debate that many of us are tired of hearing" (6): a debate over determinism and agency, over essentialism and constructivism. She decries the way structuralist and radical linguistic theories reduce "constructivism" "to determinism and impl(y) the evacuation or displacement of human agency" (9). This is an especially important issue in Butler's work. She is committed to the preservation of "agency"; in fact, it is the priority of her post-al politics. But she rejects both the "voluntarist subject of humanism" and the "grammatical" subject of structuralist and classical post-structuralist theories. She thus dismisses those who "construe" construction "along structuralist lines," because they "claim that there are structures that construct the subject, impersonal forces, such as Culture or Discourse or Power, where these terms occupy the grammatical site of the subject" (9). In other words, she objects to what she considers to be a personification of "discourse or language or the social" that posits a grammatical subject as initiating the activity of construction. Butler attempts to displace this grammatical logic of structuralist and "radical linguistic constructivism" (the logic of subject and predicate) with a more open rhetorical or discursive logic of agency as "reiteration": in other words, with a notion of agency as *invention*, which she variously calls "performativity" or "citationality."

She argues that Foucault's "view of power" should be "understood as the disruption and subversion of this grammar and metaphysics of the subject" (9); it is an analytics of power that, for Butler, accounts for the generation of subjectivities without in turn positing a determining subject. This enables Butler to understand construction as "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" (9). In other words, subjects/agents, are for Butler, effects of the agency of a reiterative power that she calls performativity. Butler is asserting a localised and localising theory of power and construction (performativity) that is determinate yet indeterminate; involves subjectivities but not a "Subject," and an agency that constructs its own agents.

Invention or performativity enables Butler to posit a mode of inquiry — into the construction of the subject — that she claims "is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism," because there is, Butler asserts, "an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse" (8). However, this is an "inventive" rather than a conventional notion of "outside": as Butler says,

this is not an absolute 'outside,' and ontological there-ness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside,' it is that which can only be thought — when it can — in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. (8)

In other words, the very "outside" to discourse that allows us, according to Butler, to escape the dichotomy of constructivism/essentialism, is itself *invented* through the play of discourse. By this she means that "the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself" (11). However, this is not so much a move beyond the "exasperated debate" as it is yet another ludic displacement of fundamental issues through a tropic play that conflates differences through a logic of supplementarity.

The limits of this discursive "invention" of the outside (the "extra-discursive") are made especially clear in Butler's ludic articulation of matter/materiality. She re-understands "the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a *process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the*

effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (9). In other words, Butler is substituting "materialisation" for construction, but in so doing, she puts forward a concept of "materiality," "matter," "materialisation" that breaks both with the common sense understanding — where these terms refer to a reality or referent *outside* language — and with a historical materialist understanding, in which these concepts refer to the objective reality of the actual historical conditions produced by the mode of production. Instead, Butler rewrites materialisation, itself, as a form of discursive practice: as she says, "*materialisation* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power" (15). Citationality — that is, the practice of "citing," repeating, summoning sexual norms and "laws" — is, in turn, also a form of performativity. Performativity, a concept Butler originally developed in *Gender Trouble*, is a form of performance, but its meaning, for Butler, cannot be simply reduced to performance, especially theatrical notions of performance as role playing. Butler argues that "performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer . . . further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake" (*Bodies* 234). The meaning of performativity, in other words, slides into a kind of "speech act" that enacts, repeats or "cites" the norms of sex. In fact, one of the main concerns of *Bodies that Matter* is "the reworking of performativity as citationality," so that Butler now defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (14, 2).

Butler's "outside" to discourse, in other words, is what discourse itself constructs through "exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, objection." But this "outside" is itself supplementary: it is a "disruptive return" that constitutes what excludes it. For example, the primacy of masculinity in Western metaphysics is, Butler argues, "founded ... through a prohibition which outlaws the spectre of a lesbian resemblance" (the lesbian phallus); masculinity, then, is an "effect of that very prohibition ... dependent on that which it must exclude" (52). The "outside" (the excluded lesbian), in other words, is the necessary ground "constituting" the "inside" of masculinity and heterosexuality. Butler is following here the classic poststructuralist erasure of the boundaries between inside and outside, that is, "supplementarily" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 144-145). But this supplementarity — what Butler insists is the "indissolubility of materiality and signification" (30)- also locates us as always already in an infinite semiotic loop: a kind of discursive Mobius strip. Butler reduces materiality to the materiality of the signifier and the effects of signifying processes, notably citationality. As she declares, "it is not that one cannot get outside of language in order to grasp materiality in and of itself; rather, every effort to refer to materiality takes place through a signifying process which ... is always already material" (68).

Thus, sex, for Butler, is not "a bodily given ... but ... a cultural norm which governs the materialisation of bodies" (2-3). The "construction" of sexual identity is an activity of performativity in which the body "assumes" or "materialises" its sex through a process of "citationality" — that is, a speaking in and through bodies in which the symbolic laws, norms and discourses of heterosexuality are "cited" in the same way, according to Butler, that a judge "cites" a law (14). There is in Butler's theory then an equivalency or rather a tropic sliding and linking together of materialisation, performativity, citationality as all forms of discursive reiteration. In other words, "matter" (the body) is given its boundaries, shapes, fixity and surface — it is "materialised" (sexed) — through the "citationality" of discourse, through the "reiteration of norms." The materiality of sexuality, then, is not outside language but is the *effect* of discourse.

However, in a footnote, Butler specifically disclaims that materiality is "the effect of 'discourse' which is its cause" (*Bodies* 251, n. 12). But, she is able to make this disclaimer only through a series of dissimulations that in turn validate "dissimulation," itself, as the crux of her theory of materiality/materializations. She does so by deploying Foucault's theory of power, which, as I have already indicated, posits power as diffuse and dispersed without a cause or originary source. Foucault's aleatory and contingent notion of power enables Butler to, as she says, "displace the

causal relation through a reworking of the notion of 'effect.' Power is established in and through its effects, where these effects are the dissimulated workings of power itself" (251, n. 12). Butler is, in short, deconstructing causality (following Nietzsche's re-reading of causality through its effects in his *The Will to Power*) into a circuit of supplementary relations in which the "cause," as Nietzsche claims, is itself the effect of its own dissimulated causality, or the "effect" is itself the causality of its own dissimulated effects. This move enables her to rewrite materiality as the "effect of power": according to Butler, "'Materiality' appears only when its status as *contingently constituted through discourse* is erased, concealed, covered over. Materiality is thus the dissimulated effect of power" (251, n. 12, emphasis added). In Butler's ludic argument, materiality is thus entirely confined to the level of the "superstructure," to discourse. Moreover, this ludic articulation of materiality is an extended ideological re-mystification. In the name of openness, it puts forth an understanding of power as a closed, self-legitimizing operation. It completely suppresses the real material conditions of what Marx calls the "working day": the production of profit (surplus value) through the exploitation of our unpaid and subsistence labour.

Butler's suppression and mystification of the materiality of materialism the materiality of labour — is quite explicit in two brief references she makes to Marx's historical materialism. The first is an offhand reference in which she attempts to appropriate Marx to her position by linking him to her rereading of classical notions of matter as "temporalised" and as positing the "indissolubility of ... materiality and signification" (Bodies 31). She attributes this temporalisation to what she claims is Marx's understanding of "'matter' . . . as a principle of transformation" (31). However, Butler is able to appropriate Marx for a genealogy of (idealist) theories of matter, only by profoundly misreading him and completely excluding the issue of labour from his work. In a footnote to her observation on Marx, she specifies that her reading is based on the first of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which, she says, Marx "calls for a materialism which can affirm the practical activity that structures and inheres in the object as part of that object's objectivity and materiality" (250, n. 5). She goes on to argue that on the basis of "this new kind of materialism that Marx proposes ... the object is transformative activity itself and, further, its materiality is established through this temporal movement.... In other words, the object *materialises* to the extent that it is a site of *temporal transformation* ... as transformative activity" (250, n. 5). This reading is a remarkable act of mystification and idealist abstraction, for it completely suppresses the fundamental element in Marx's "new kind of materialism": this "practical activity," this "transformative activity," constituting the object *is labour*. Marx's reunderstanding of materiality in the first *Theses on Feuerbach* as "*sensuous human activity, practice*" is the insistence on materiality *as labour*. To reduce labour to mere temporality is to exclude its materiality and do exactly what Marx opposes: to substitute "interpretation" for "transformation" of the world. As Marx writes in *Capital*, "Labour is, first of all, a process . . . by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (*Capital*, Vol. I, 283). Labor, of course, takes place in a temporality, but this is a specific "history" (i.e., a particular articulation of a mode of production), not an abstract, idealist, immanent "temporality" of *differance*. However, Butler does indeed reduce this transformative activity to basically an abstract (and quite idealist) notion of "temporal movement." Of course, the notion of temporality informing Butler's concept of materiality — as well as her concepts of performativity and the differences — within reiteration and citationality is not a historical, materialist temporality but rather the deconstructive trope that is one of the core principles of the Derridean notion of *differance*.

In "basing" her theory of materiality on Foucault's notion of a diffuse, autonomous, contingent and aleatory power, Butler, like Foucault, makes power, itself, the *constitutive* "base" of society and all social processes, substituting it for the Marxist concept of a *determining* economic base. But how effective is such a move, especially when we also consider that Butler has articulated Foucault's analytics of power in relation to a deconstructive logic of supplementary, thus generating a circular logic that quite outdoes Foucault? As I have already suggested, Butler constructs a supplementary circuit in which all the fundamental concepts of her social analytics are equivalent — or tropically

slide one into the other. She declares not only that "'materiality' designates a certain effect of power or, rather, is power in its formative or constituting effects" (34), but also that "performativity is one domain in which power acts as discourse . . . [as] a reiterated acting that is power" (225). Moreover, Butler insists, as we have already seen, on the "indissolubility of materiality and signification" (30) and that "*materialisation* will be a kind of citationality" (15), that is performativity. In other words, power is not only the constitutive base of the social, immanent in all processes, but, through a series of tropic slippages *power is materiality is discourse is citationality is performativity*. Such an understanding of power and materiality becomes so closed and circular as to border on the ludicrous. It does not so much explain processes of power and social construction as avoid explanation altogether by inventing a series of tropic displacements. Butler is, of course, following Foucault, who claims that "power is everywhere . . . comes from everywhere" (*History of Sexuality* 93). But as Nancy Hartsock rightly points out, "Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere" (170). Such a notion of power is so broad and idealist, it is both absurd and quite ineffectual. How much more absurd, then, is Butler's supplementary logic in which *power is materiality is discourse is citationality is performativity*.? Not only is power everywhere and nowhere, but power is everything and nothing.

While this may be a quite ineffectual theory of power for any politics of social transformation, it is nonetheless a very appealing and popular one among ludic feminists and theorists, precisely because it provides an analytics of power in which we do not have to confront the global relations and systematicity of power; in which we do not have to deal with the most serious consequences of power operating in dialectical relation to the mode of production and division of labour—, the consequences, in other words, of *exploitation*. By construing power as immanent in all processes, as operating as discourse, as citationality — and thus as a "reiterative acting" divided by differences-within — this ludic logic constitutes power as reversible, as generating its own resistances. The "compulsory power relations," that Butler argues operate through multiple local sites to "form, maintain, sustain, and regulate bodies" (34), are themselves "unstable" and indeterminate: generating and sustaining resistance along with regulation. Moreover, the privileged place ludic theories accord discourse means, as Foucault argues, that "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." The agency of change, in other words, is discourse itself or power as discourse. More, specifically, it is what Butler calls "resignification."

The politics of such a ludic theory is that it blurs the lines between the powerful and powerless, oppressor and oppressed, and produces a social analytic that turns the historical binaries of social class into reversible matters of discourse in which exploiter and exploited become shifting positions in the (Lacanian) Symbolic, open to resignification. This means that, through the play and invention of discourse (resignification), every subject, everyone, always already has access to the power imminent in discourse without any connection to the position of the subject in the social division of labour. In other words, in this analytics of power, the social relations of production-class relations—are covered up and concealed. Everyone is always already located in multiple sites of resistance no matter what their location in property relations may be. This view occludes the source of power: the fact that power is always constructed at the point of production. In contrast, power for historical materialists is always linked to relations of production and labour. In any society divided by the unequal division and appropriation of labour, power is a binary relation between exploiter and exploited; powerful and powerless; owner of the means of production and those who have nothing but their labour power to sell. Power, thus, cannot be translated into a plurality of differences as if all sites of power are equally powerful. The resolution of these binaries does not come about through a linguistic resignification but through revolutionary praxis to transform the system of exploitation and emancipate those it exploits.

We especially see Butler's assertion of the agency of invention (citationality) as a de-materialised site of reversible power in her efforts to account for the way "sex is both produced and destabilised in the course of this reiteration" of norms (10). Not only does citationality invoke the "chain of

binding conventions," but it is also "by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up," producing instability, and "this instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which "sex" is stabilised" (10). In other words, as supplementary processes, citationality, reiteration, and performativity, all simultaneously constitute and "deconstitute"; regulate and deregulate; 'produce and destabilise" the materialisation-sexing-of the body. The process of reiteration (citationality/performativity) is, *in and of itself*, a process of *invention*: the reversible, de-stabilising, de/reconstituting play of significations that subverts any stable, definite meanings. What this means is that the "regulatory power" of norms-which is established through reiteration-is itself reversible: it is also a deregulatory power.

However, contrary to ludic claims, this diverse deployment of deregulating invention by Butler, as well as by Cornell, Lyotard, Derrida and others (whether as performativity, citationality, resignification, remetaphorisation, refiguring, the differend, *differance* ...) is not a progressive move beyond (free of) the bounds of existing systems and their material conditions. Rather invention is a way of avoiding the consequences of the structural forces in society-the social relations of production. The logic of invention is a double move that attempts to displace exploitation. Again, it does so by first construing material structural forces either as discourse or as so heavily mediated by discourses as to be "indissociable" from them, as Butler does. Then it reinterprets these structures in terms of the trope of invention and a differential logic (*differance/differend/difference-within*), thereby defining them as, in themselves, heterogeneous, indeterminate, self-deconstructing processes. In other words, within this ludic logic, structures are always already being *undone* by their own destabilising processes, their own differences-within. This means, in effect, that, for ludic theorists, there are no exploitative or determining *structures or systematic* relations, including production, because such structures would always already be in the process of *undoing* themselves and their effects. Of course, ludic critics do not deny oppression (that is, domination as opposed to exploitation), but they largely confine both their recognition and explanations of the occurrences of oppression to particular, local events and gestures of power that are, by definition, reversible, that generate their own resistances. What this means is that there is no need for revolution or class struggle since any oppressive "structure" is itself a deconstituting process that undoes its own effects (oppression). Domination is especially seen as undoing its own attempts to regulate subjectivities. As Butler argues, "'sexed positions' are not localities but, rather, citational practices instituted within a juridical domain," which attempts to "confine, limit, or prohibit some set of acts, practices, subjects, but in the process of articulating that prohibition, the law provides the *discursive occasion* for resistance, a resignification, and potential self-subversion of that law" (*Bodies* 109). Liberatory politics, for Butler, is thus a matter of invention, of resignification: the difference-within every citation or repetition of norm that opens up a space for reinvesting the norm and its symbolic regime, as in the regime of heterosexuality.

However, by trying to explain heterosexuality as regulatory regime of discourse, a compulsory symbolic law operating through "citationality," Butler confines "the regime of heterosexuality" entirely to a scene of the superstructure, to a discursive order. She suggests how it may operate, but she is not able to explain in any way why it does so; why it has the social and historical power it does; why it deploys (cites) the norms that she thinks it does. In cutting off heterosexuality-as well as materiality-from the material conditions of production, she isolates the "regime" of heterosexuality from any relation to patriarchal capitalism. This move then enables her to substitute the *symbolic regime* of heterosexuality for the *social formation* of patriarchal capitalism (which she entirely occludes) as the determining structure constructing our lives, gender and sexuality. Moreover her post-al politics posits invention as the latest trope for the freedom of deregulated subjectivities and unbounded desire-unconstrained by the "truth" of needs. But in actuality, the deployment of invention justifies, normalises and, in the name of deregulation, regulates the subjects of the new World Order. None of these ludic modes of invention-Butler's resignification, Cornell's remetaphorisation, Haraway's recoding, Lyotard's ode to the pleasures of inventing new phrases break the logic of the dominant ideology of capitalism which produces subjects according to the needs of the moving forces of production.

Butler's own analysis points up the limits of her ludic privileging of the discursive. Class, labour and the relations of production are the suppressed, covered over, "exclusionary" and "constitutive outside" of her own theory. Her notion of citationality, for instance, is unable to *explain* the material reality, of lesbian and gay oppression. Thus, she briefly moves toward a class analysis of resisting sexualities in order to ask, "For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal 'outness'" (227)? However, following her notion of citationality, Butler regards class, itself, to be a performance: an individual quoting of the texts of power. In other words, class, for Butler, is based on "power" as access to discourse and is contingent and individual; it does not concern the position of the subject in the social relations of production. But class is not the "effect" of power; rather it is the construct of production and, as such, it is a collectivity of practices.

For historical materialist feminists and lesbian/gay critics, however, "outness," and the possibility of exploring alternative sexualities is not simply a matter of individual "desire" nor is class a series of individualities. This is not to deny that one "experiences" sexuality on the level of individual experience, rather it questions whether sexuality can be *explained* on the level of experience. Butler's question about the "affordability" of "outing" both hints at and withdraws from dealing with the historical forces that, in fact, make "individual" experience socially possible. In his text, "it's Not Natural," Peter Ray demonstrates how the

industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries broke down the traditional bonds and constraints of a society which had been tied to the land by economic necessity. Millions began to work in the cities for money wages, and for some at least the possibility arose of living outside the traditional family arrangements. Heterosexuality and homosexuality were concepts developed by the medical, moral and legal authorities at that time, in order to police the new society by demarcating acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Male homosexuality was not specifically outlawed in Britain until 1885. (32)

Similarly John D'Emilio's work develops a sustained argument for the way alternative sexualities are tied to the labour relations of capitalism (*Making Trouble*). In her intimate critique, "A Question of Class," the contemporary lesbian theorist and writer, Dorothy Allison offers an explanation of alternative sexualities and class that is an effective intervention in the ludic reading of queerity. She argues that "Traditional feminist theory has had a limited understanding of class differences and of how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial" (*Skin* 15). Focusing specifically on lesbian sexualities, she writes:

I have known I was a lesbian since I was a teenager, and I have spent a good twenty years making peace with the effects of incest and physical abuse. But what may be the central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it. I have learned with great difficulty that the vast majority of people believe that poverty is a voluntary condition. (*Skin* 14-15)

No matter how much ludic theorists try to erase questions of class, poverty and the economic from their work, their analysis is haunted by the relations of production and divisions of labour. We find this "return of the repressed" of the relations of production in Butler's ludic analysis in the opening chapter of *Bodies that Matter*, in which she attempts to "discern the history of sexual difference encoded in the history of matter" through a "rude and provocative" re-reading of Plato (54, 36). She begins by positing matter within the metaphysical binary of matter and form, and confines her argument to this metaphysical circuit. But at two points in her text, when she attempts to explain why Plato has constituted the category of the "excluded" in the way he has, she is forced to move beyond the domain of discourse to the *relations of production and the division of labour*. As Butler

explains, "This xenophobic exclusion operates through the production of racialised others, and those whose 'natures' are considered less rational by virtue of their appointed task in the process of *labouring* to reproduce the conditions of private life" (48, emphasis added). And again, she says, "There is no singular outside, for the Forms require a number of exclusions; they are and replicate themselves through what they exclude, through not being animal, not being the woman, not being the slave, whose propriety is purchased through property, national and racial boundary, masculinism, and compulsory heterosexuality" (52). All these exclusions are part of the same "singular outside": the material relations of production which construct all of the social divisions and differences around labour and the appropriation of social resources. In other words, for all Butler's discursive displacements, the concealed, sutured over base of her own theory-as it is of any theory or knowledge practice-is still the (occluded) *economic base*.

We can see the consequences of these different theories of materialism by briefly examining the construction or "materialisation" of female gender-what Butler calls "girling." To describe this process, Butler adapts Althusser's concept of "interpellation" which means the ideological process of "calling" a person to take up (identify with) the position "named" (e.g., girl). According to Butler, medical interpellation ... (the sonogram notwithstanding) ... shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming, the girl is 'girded,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender.... The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (7-8)

Butler understands this naming ("girling") as placing the infant in a "regulatory regime" of discourse (language and kinship). But for historical materialists, ideological interpellation does not simply place the infant in discourse, but more important it also places the child in the relations of production, in the social division of labour (according to gender, heterosexuality, race, nationality). Butler's theory of performativity completely eclipses this dialectical relation between ideology and the economic. Butler is concerned with changing how "bodies matter," how they are valued. But without relating ideological "interpellation" to the relations of production, no amount of resignification in the symbolic can change "What counts as a valued body"-for what makes a body valuable in the world is its *economic value*.

This *truth* is painfully clear if we move beyond the privileged boundaries of the upper-middle class in the industrialised West (for whom basic needs are readily fulfilled) and see what is happening to "girling" in the international division of labour — especially among the impoverished classes in India. Here the "medical interpellation" (naming) of infants/foetuses, particularly through the use of the sonogram, immediately places "girded" foetuses not only in discourse but also in the gender division of labour and unequal access to social resources. About 60 per cent of the "girded" foetuses are being immediately aborted or murdered upon birth (female infanticide) because the families cannot afford to keep them. The citational acts, rituals, and "performatives" by which individuals are repeatedly "girded" such as expensive ear-piercing ceremonies and exorbitant bride dowries-are not simply acts of discourse, but economic practices. In India, under postcolonial capitalism, the appropriation of women's surplus labour is increasing to such an extent that these rituals and "performatives" of "girling" are becoming highly popular and widely exploited sources of capital and direct extraction of surplus labour. So much so, the unmarried woman's *family* is itself being "girded" in order for its combined labour to collectively produce the surplus value taken from the "girded body" (e.g., bride dowries). Revolutionary praxis and not simply "resignification" is necessary to end the exploitation and murdering of hundreds of thousands of economically de-valued "girded" bodies.

Six

How is making discourse or the matter of the body the ground of politics and social analytic any less reductive than the economic base? Yet, while economic reductionism is to be avoided at all costs according to ludic theories, a discursive reductionism or a theological matterism is widely embraced

as a complex, sophisticated, and open multiplicity. The issue here is not whether "reductionism" is negative: it is not-ask any rigorous scientist (Weinberg, "Two Cheers for Reductionism"). To articulate the relations connecting seemingly disparate events and phenomena is in fact a necessary and unavoidable part of effective knowledge of the real. Rather the question is why are some reductions-particularly those connecting the exploitation and gender division of labour to the accumulation of capital-suppressed and rendered taboo in ludic (socialist) feminism while other reductions-such as the discursive construction of sex/gender or a matterist resistance as performance-are championed and widely circulated? The answer, of course, does not lie in the "logic" of the argument, although that is the way it is commonly represented. On a purely epistemological or logical level both moves establish a necessary relation between two phenomena. Instead, the answer is in the economic, social and political interests these two forms of "reductionism" support and the power of bourgeois ideology to discredit historical materialist knowledges.

Thus what is at stake in this displacement of the economic by discourse is the elision of issues of exploitation and the substitution of a discursive identity politics for the struggle for full social and economic emancipation. Marx and Engels' critique of the radical "Young Hegelians" applies equally to ludic cultural materialists:

they are only fighting against 'phrases.' They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world. (*The German Ideology* 41)

This is not to say that the conflicts over ideology, cultural practices and significations are not an important part of the social struggle for emancipation: the issue is how do we explain the relation of the discursive to the non-discursive, the relation of cultural practices to the "real existing world"-whose objectivity is the fact of the "working day"-in order to transform it? Obviously this relation is a highly mediated one. But for ludic materialists the relation is so radically displaced that it is entirely suppressed: mediations are taken as autonomous sites of signification and consequently the actual practice of ludic cultural analysis is confined entirely to institutional and cultural points of mediation severed from the economic conditions producing them. The analysis of "mediations" becomes a goal in itself, and the operation of "mediations" is deployed to obscure the "origin" (surplus labour) and the "end" (class differences) that in fact frame the "mediations." It is only in the context of historical materialism that one can point up the politics of this erasure of "origin" (*arche*) and "end" (*telos*) in poststructuralist theory. In ludic feminism the *arche* and *telos* are erased as if they were merely metaphysical concepts. My point is that the erasure of *arche* and *telos* serves a more immediate and concrete purpose: it makes it impossible to connect the "mediated" to other social practices, and consequently the inquiry into and analysis of the "mediations," themselves, take the place of knowledge of the social totality in which mediations are relays of underlying connections. For historical materialist feminists, however, cultural and ideological practices are not autonomous but are instead primary sites for reproducing the meanings and subjectivities supporting the unequal gender, sexual and race divisions of labour, and thus a main arena for the struggle against economic exploitation as well as cultural oppression. The untimely time of red feminism has come.

Further Reading:

[Foucault](#) | [Drucilla Cornell](#) | [Derrida](#) | [Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#), Lenin | [Lyotard](#) | [Richard Rorty](#) | [Nietzsche](#) | [de Saussure](#)

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