

Normative Aspirations

Sex/Gender Conformative Transsexual Women's Agency and Political
Subjectivity in Contemporary Feminist Discourses

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Introduction

Notes of a Non-Transsexual Feminist Arabist

I. The Introduction to a Subject: Transsexual Women and Social Constructivist Feminism

Trans people are not . . . fascinating case studies for gender studies graduate theses. No, we trans people have our own issues, perspectives, and experiences. And non-trans queer people everywhere need to realize that they cannot call themselves ‘pro-trans’ unless they fully respect our identities . . .

– Julia Serano (2013, 35) –

It is with this quotation from feminist and trans activist Julia Serano’s most recent book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (2013) that I have chosen to introduce the research project presented in this gender studies graduate thesis that, indeed, concerns itself with the issues, perspectives and experiences of trans people – or, more specifically, those of transsexual women.¹ Most prevalent in Serano’s statement is the idea that academic representations of transsexual people bypass these people’s right to, and capability of, self-representation, displaying a lack of respect for the meanings they may give to their own experiences of life, self and reality. Making a similar statement in her previous book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), Serano argues that non-transsexual academic representations of transsexual people’s embodied subjectivities even tend to *erase* their personal and political voices, working with methodological and epistemological frameworks that do not allow for their self-representations to make their appearance into theory (12).²

The idea that transsexual women’s agency and political subjectivity occupy a highly problematic position in relation to contemporary academic feminist discourses, as well as the conviction that the problematic trajectories of this position are characterised by certain forms of epistemic violence, are shared by a considerable amount of transsexual as well as non-transsexual sex/gender theorists, such as Jay Prosser (1998), Viviane K. Namaste (2000),

¹ The term ‘trans people’ here functions as an umbrella term encompassing all those subjects that self-identify as transsexual, transgender, gender queer, or any other lived and used alternative. I will go on to specify ‘transsexual’ as a particular category of trans experience and identification.

² Serano (2007) states: “[N]on-trans representations of transsexuality . . . effectively silence trans people’s political voices and prevent us from describing our lives the way we see and experience them” (8); “Rather than given the opportunity to speak for ourselves on the very issues that affect our own lives, trans women are instead treated more like research subjects: others place us under their microscopes, dissect our lives, and assign motives to us that validate their own theories and agendas regarding gender and sexuality” (12).

David Valentine (2012) and Talia Mae Bettcher (2014).³ When brought back to a most basic understanding, the debate at issue here might be summarised as follows: working towards an understanding of sex and gender as discursively constructed and hegemonic categories, contemporary social constructivist feminist discourses may reject transsexual people's appeal to normative sexed/gendered categories as affirmative and desirable institutions (Bettcher, 2014, 398). In the subsequent paragraphs, I will take some time to unpack several components of this idea.

Although elaborate analyses of different social constructivist perspectives shall be provided in Chapter One of this thesis, I here define social constructivism as a mode of academic engagement that adheres to the idea that 'the subject' and its properties are discursively produced and do not appear as the natural result of a given ontological essence, such as argued by a biological essentialist paradigm. The specific social constructivist paradigm that will be most central to this thesis as both a research object and an epistemological framework is a poststructuralist one. Adhering to the premise that human thought can ultimately not encompass anything but discourse – as everything that enters it first needs to pass through the negative dialectics of language –, the subject as well as the body appear as discursively constructed, and thus ultimately non-natural, non-unitary and unstable (Koložova, 2014, 24). This definition of human subjectivity leads to the idea that political subjectivity, or agency, can only be achieved through the displacement – or 'deconstruction' – of the discursive structures that inform it (Namaste, 1994, 221). In a feminist context the poststructuralist social constructivist paradigm has been most influentially pursued by gender theorist Judith Butler (1990; 1993), whose work continues to set the epistemological standards for the majority of contemporary feminist theories of sex and gender, and the project of queer theory in particular, which explicitly takes the deconstruction of 'the gender binary' as its political goal (Namaste, 1994, 223-4).⁴

³ My use of the linguistic formation 'sex/gender' points to the crucial entanglement of these two discursive categories, departing from more traditional understandings in which 'sex' is positioned as a mere physical affair, whereas 'gender' appears as its social and cultural inscription. As Judith Butler has convincingly argued, the category of sex appears as discursively constituted from the very start, and must in fact be seen as an always already gendered category (1990, 7; see also 1993). I would like to add that gender might equally be thought of as a *sexed* category, as shall be explicated in Chapter Three.

⁴ 'The gender binary' here points towards the binary structure of the normative institutions 'men' and 'women' as two subject positions that are characterised by a normatively aligned sex and gender performance. As several

‘Transgender’, specifically in its queer feminist political deployment, here appears as a name given to those subjects that maintain their non-normative positions, whereas ‘transsexuality’ comes to characterise those subjects that desire their own integration into normative sex/gender categories in the name of an experienced innate desire to belong elsewhere, thereby essentializing their inhabitancy of these categories in the process and presenting a possible force of political regression to contemporary feminist discourses (Prosser, 1998, 11-13; Serano, 2007, 9, 12; 2013, 198-9; Valentine, 2012, 202; Bettcher, 2014, 385).⁵ In this particular context, it has been noted that male-to-female (MTF) transitions have been more frequently criticised within feminist academia than their female-to-male (FTM) counterparts, either because of the more general hyper-constructed status of femininity within popular discourses (Serano, 2007, 14, 46, 238; 2013, 140); an increased invisibility of FTM subjects within both academic and popular discourses (Cromwell, 1999, 11-2, 44-61); or due to a (wrongly) prejudiced model of transsexuality as more frequently MTF-directed (Namaste, 2000, 36; Valentine, 2012, 205). Expanding upon some of these premises in Chapter One, the subject-category of sex/gender conformative transsexual women appears demonstrably most marginalised and invalidated within those feminist perspectives that I shall be addressing.

My distinction between the terms ‘sex/gender *conformative*’ and ‘sex/gender *normative*’ points to the idea that there is something persistently non-normative about a transsexual desire for sex/gender re-assignment, even if such a desired transition takes place across two normative sexed/gendered categories. The term ‘conformative’ then points to a desire to integrate *as* normatively sexed/gendered, surpassing a discursively implicated non-normative social and cultural status – if possible forever, and in all social and personal contexts. My definition of transsexuality has close proximity to that of Serano (2013), who deploys the term to describe “anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex

authors have argued, however, this particular phrasing might suggest that there exists only *one* gender binary, thereby overlooking the ways in which other differences may intersect with sex/gender, constituting a multiplicity of potential gender binaries (Butler, 2014, xvi; Sedgwick, 1990, 11; Serano, 2013, 95).

⁵ Notably, the term ‘transgender’ can also be deployed as an umbrella term that encompasses transsexual subjectivity, functioning much according to the earlier mentioned term ‘trans’ (Stryker, 2008, 1). I will use the term in its more narrow definition, pointing towards those subjects that take up another gender than the one accompanying the categorical classification of their birth sex without working towards the physical normalisation of the latter (Prosser, 1998, 176).

other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of what procedures they may have had” (31).

Serano here defines sex re-assignment as a set of variable procedures that does not necessarily encompass the practice of (genital) sex reassignment surgery (SRS). In the context of this thesis I have chosen to depart from this specification, talking generally of transsexual sex/gender conformity as including a requirement for SRS. This conception thus more closely resembles one possible definition articulated by gender theorist Susan Stryker (2008), referring to those subjects that also “feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth” (18). Rather than making any generalising statements about transsexual people’s situated desires and sensibilities, my choice to include SRS corresponds to its position among those practices conforming to sex/gender normativity that appear most heavily criticised within existing feminist literature,⁶ either implicitly or explicitly underlining the argument that sex/gender normativity – perhaps *especially* in its transsexual deployment – is violent and damaging to those subjects governed by its laws, due to its investment in surgical modifying practices (Valentine, 2014, 185).

The idea that ‘normal’ is a discursively contextual, historically specific, and ideologically prescriptive term rather than an objectively descriptive one lies at the heart of feminist scholarship.⁷ In queer poststructuralist accounts the oppressive, but also powerful and even affirmative potentials of ‘the normative’ have been discussed elaborately, conceptualising the tension between ‘normative violence’ and ‘normative power’ (for example see Butler, 2004a, 1; 2004b, 25-26). I will argue that, despite a variety of valuable poststructuralist inquiries into the question of how sex/gender norms are constitutive of hegemonic and exclusionary political ontologies, the alternative narratives developed by such feminist theories are not always adequately accountable for the ways in which their own political projects might

⁶ For example, see the works of sociologists Dwight Billings, Thomas Urban and Bernice Hausman (in Namaste, 2000, 33-37), and radical lesbian-feminists Janice G. Raymond (1997) and Sheila Jeffreys (2014), of which the latter will be discussed in Chapter One.

⁷ Perhaps the most eloquent example of such scholarship are the countless feminist analyses on the subject of heteronormativity, in which the constructed nature of heterosexuality and its violent tendencies to cut down alternative realities to its own conceptual frame of reference are demonstrated (for example see Butler, 1993, 28-57; Blank, 2012).

exclude other embodied subjects (Lloyd, 2006, 6).⁸ Pushing poststructuralist feminist inquiry closer to its own analytical imperatives, I will argue that its strict adherence to deconstruction and re-signification as *the* standards for all alternative political ontologies must be challenged in order to prevent the epistemologically violent exclusion and invalidation of those subjects who conform to a given normative discursive formation, such as sex/gender conformative transsexual women.

In this thesis, I aim to explicate how such exclusionary mechanisms shape sex/gender conformative transsexual women's contemporary positionalities within, or outside of, contemporary feminist discourses, posing the question of how these function through, and are constitutive of, particular epistemological and political conceptions of the concept of agency, and a valid and valuable feminist political consciousness. My hypothesis here is that the intimately related categories of sex/gender normativity and transsexuality are constituted in opposition to a feminist category of political and intellectual agency to whose constitution academic feminist paradigms appear as universalising and dominating institutions, wielding authority over transsexual women's lived experiences of both themselves and their situated realities.

II. Situating Academic Agency: Working Towards Situated Concepts and Researchers

The perspective I bring to this debate is perhaps a rather unexpected one. Before entering the gender studies master program, I completed a bachelor in the studies of Arabic language, culture, and Islamic religions. According to academic conventions, I could thus position myself as an Arabist scholar – with all orientalist connotations attached (see Said, 1978). Apart from the fact that this academic background has provided me with a detailed understanding of both orientalist and postcolonial studies, it has also supplied me with a particular personal perspective on how asymmetrical power structures give shape to the form and content of academic practice within the university. I have frequently experienced how the normative institution of secular and non-politically religious subjectivity was reinforced, thereby invalidating pious, Islamist and veiled women's political and academic perspectives.⁹

⁸ For a more elaborate account of the counter-hegemonic potential of queer theory, see also Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel (2012, 1-24, 91-120).

⁹ With the term 'Islamism' I refer to a type of discourse that argues in favour of taking Islamic religion as the guiding principle for all facets of human life, including the realm of politics.

An outspoken conformation to religious normativity – and especially to those sexed/gendered trajectories implying *women's* subject positions – here often appeared as the basic principle to which exclusionary gestures made by secular(ist) academic agents would respond, in a way that was deemed perfectly acceptable and went largely unnoticed within the context of the faculty. Informally banning Islamic facial veils from the classroom as well as persistently ignoring Muslim women's objections against the reading of sexually explicit Arabic texts in class, the academic careers of those women who conceived of these practices as going against the integrity of their personhood were severely obstructed, as well as a vast number of intelligent, capable and motivated female students was implicitly but undoubtedly discouraged to enter the program.

In this differently situated context of academic exclusion, the category of sex/gender normativity, as opposed to a seemingly universally valid definition of 'the political' and 'the academic subject', appears central to the distribution of affirmative intellectual and political agency. In addition, the increased political value attributed to particular sexed/gendered relations to such normative discourses – that are, womanhood, female-ness and femininity – can be observed.¹⁰ I myself have long struggled to reconcile my own political perspectives and experiences: As postcolonial politics instructed me to conceive of people's agencies and political perspectives as inherently valid and valuable within their own contextual situatedness, feminist politics seemingly urged me to draw the line at those practices and beliefs constituent of, and founded upon, patriarchal and/or otherwise asymmetrical power relations. From my own encounters with those few pious Islamist women who did enter the program, I also learned how some asymmetrical power structures – such as those governing human subordination to God – might be conceived of as granting a certain mode of being with an exceptional sense of self-worth, personal and political agency. In her development of an epistemological definition of agency and political subjectivity that opens such concepts up to

¹⁰ Proceeding, I will use these three terms to point respectively to a certain subject position ('woman'), a performance of sex ('female') and a performance of gender ('feminine'). Rather than deploying the term 'female' in reference to a presumably neutral bodily characteristic, I refer to the local outcome of a situated negotiation between a certain discourse and a specific embodied subject-agent. By using these terms separately, I aim to keep the possibility open that these three levels of engagement might be negotiated differently across different processes of subjectivation. For example, a claim to the social category of 'women' might be made without the assuming of a female sex and/or feminine gender, and some transsexual subjects might see their sex and gender performances as being ultimately the same thing, while others feel that their gender performances require a surgical re-performance of their sex.

a pious and politically religious interpretation, the work of feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood ([2005] 2012) appeared conciliatory towards this dilemma.

In the course of researching prevailing social constructivist representations of sex/gender conformative transsexual women's (political) subjectivities I have yet re-encountered a situation in which an embodied and throughout investment into sex/gender normative categories – and especially a conformity corresponding to normative formations of femaleness, femininity and womanhood – is continually rejected by, and excluded within, (feminist) academic discourses. Once more I find myself engaged in an internal debate in which a political belief in both the rigour of a social constructivist analytical paradigm and the integrity of lived experiences of self and reality are negotiated. Drawing upon my earlier inquiries into a Dutch Arabist academic practice, I have come to believe it is the epistemological approach rather than people's self-identifying practices that are in need of change, if feminist academic representations are to avoid becoming counter-hegemonic forces of epistemological violence.¹¹

Notably, this debate holds a particular proximity to my personal life, having found love as well as intellectual challenge with my girlfriend and life-partner; a sex/gender conformative transsexual woman who strongly believes in, and politically stands for, the necessity of a 'rightly' assigned physical sex and the innateness of her own sexed/gendered identity. Importantly, this personal element has given shape to the political and analytical direction pursued by my research project: my call to reconcile situated experiences of reality with its academic framework of analysis is at least partly rooted in an affectionate care I have for the academic integrity of my partner. Most significantly, however, the proximity that might be passed on to me through this relationship is equally characterised by a position of non-transsexual distance, as Serano urgently reminds the feminist researcher in the introductory quotation.

In order to frame this critical distance, I will adopt the term 'non-transsexual' as developed by linguistic and cultural anthropologist David Valentine (2012) to analytically account for my

¹¹ Coined by political theorist Antonio Gramsci, the term 'counter-hegemony' points towards the establishment of alternative authoritative orders that oppose existing hegemonic power structures to force political change. Butler's queer politics have been argued to function according to this same principle (Castro Varela and Dhawan, 2012, 91-120).

specific situated agency, which lies at the base of my capability to do feminist research on this particular subject. Valentine's term is based on the recognition of the asymmetrical power relations that shape transsexual and non-transsexual agency within academic feminist discourses, arguing the latter has traditionally entertained the privilege of going unmarked, whereas the former has been forced to carry an increased political responsibility for either the deconstruction or upholding of the gender binary (207). If feminist academics do not want to perpetuate the myth of the 'natural' modernist subject-agent as *essentially* non-transsexual, so Valentine argues, they must start recognising themselves as situated within their own specific, embodied non-transsexual subject position. Importantly, their non-transsexuality *can* situate them within an unmarked affirmative experience of sex/gender conformity – they may not feel a need for embodied non-conformity –, thus presenting their subject positions to be just as politically challenged as those of transsexual people.¹² Immersing myself within Valentine's non-transsexual imaginary, it is important to highlight that the project presented in this thesis could equally be utilised to establish a more affirmative conception of *non-transsexual* sex/gender conformity and normativity, which both equally tension my own position as a sex/gender conformative non-transsexual feminist researcher.

Clearly, I perceive there to be strong parallels between the exclusion of (politically) religious sex/gender conformative articulations of womanhood and that of sex/gender conformative transsexual women from feminist academia. This thesis will be concerned with an exploration of the epistemological premises that shape those conceptions of agency and political subjectivity which currently prevail to exclude, devalue or obscure modes of agency and subjectivity that do not easily fit within these established epistemological boundaries – that are, modes of subjectivity which are founded upon a situated desire for, and practice of, sex/gender conformity. Demonstrating how contemporary conceptions of sex/gender

¹² A small comment on the use of the term 'non-transsexual', rather than the more conventional 'cissexual', is necessary. Serano (2007) defines cissexual people as "people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned" (12). Although the first part of this definition concurs with Valentine's use of the term 'non-transsexual' (i.e. 'not transsexual'), the second part departs from the conceptual boundaries of his concept: located within an academic context that affirms gender queerness and transgender identification, a conception of non-transsexual subjectivity can encompass those subjects that do experience their subconscious, culturally/socially interpreted, and physical sex to be misaligned, and might surgically, hormonally and/or behaviourally intervene into one of these levels of perception. They may, however, not desire to realign these three levels of experience – something that those transsexual people addressed in Valentine's article do aspire to.

conformative transsexual women's agency and political subjectivity are invested in the same one-directional political narrative that may serve to devalue pious agencies and subjectivities – that is, one solely aimed at the subversion and deconstruction of established sex/gender norms –, I will adopt a so-called postsecular approach to make visible the hegemonic boundaries constituent of prevailing feminist conceptions of agency and political consciousness, working towards an alternative epistemological framework that articulates a more affirmative and – dare I say it – a more realistic perspective upon situated practices and experiences of, and aspirations towards, transsexual sex/gender conformity.

Coined by feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2008), 'the postsecular turn' refers to a contemporary trend in feminist thinking aimed at the active inclusion of pious, religious and/or spiritual subject positions as politically valid subject positions. As Braidotti argues, the idea that religious agency can be compatible with a viable political subject position comes with the crucial realisation that agency may no longer, or not solely, be seen as an act of resistance against 'something' that must be overthrown, opposed or destroyed, and is not necessarily seated upon an oppositional consciousness. Rather, subjectivity itself appears as the relatively temporal outcome of an on-going dynamic process of critical *or* uncritical, positive *or* negative, conformative *or* non-conformative modes of relating to dominant norms, clearing space for normative identifications and conformative practices to be seen as affirmatively agential trajectories (2). This realisation provides a possible starting point to break down the traditional opposition between 'agency' and 'false consciousness' as perpetuated by a hegemonic Western modernist paradigm, shedding new light upon related oppositional classifications of agency, such as conformation and subversion; submission and rebellion; regression and transgression; affirmation and resistance.

As I will demonstrate, the epistemological framework advocated by the postsecular turn can serve as a methodological tool to lay bare the hidden biases that inform contemporary epistemological conceptualisations of transsexuality, agency and political subjectivity, at the same time fuelling the development of an alternative epistemological approach that can accommodate respect for, and secure the intrinsic value of, *all* embodied subjectivities. This alternative framework would avert the revival of yet another version of the social constructivist versus biological essentialist debate, overcoming persisting forms of hegemonic binary thinking that continue to haunt (post-) modernist feminist theories and practices,

instead working towards a theory of subjectivity that adheres to a model of what I call ‘situated agencies’.

III. Arguing Amongst Solutions: Outlining a Non-Philosophical Approach

The inherent political value of *all* situated experiences of, desires for, and perspectives upon, particular manifestations of sex/gender will be central to this project. Rather than evoking the idea that sex/gender conformative positionalities are necessarily feminist (or not) by virtue of any presupposed intrinsic property, the word ‘inherent’ here refers to a political relevance that does *not* flow from either a far distance or a close proximity held by a certain subject position in relation to an already established intellectual and/or political feminist theory, in which the first can be conveniently deployed to sublimate the latter. Rather, I mean to point to the idea that women’s experiences of themselves and their realities might be considered as an always already valid and valuable starting point for feminist engagement, even if they cannot be subsumed under established political goals, such as the deconstruction or subversion of hegemonic sex/gender norms.

In order to demonstrate how this approach may depart from existing solutions to transsexual women’s problematic place within social constructivist feminist discourses, I will briefly discuss the work of gender theorist Talia Mae Bettcher (2014). Summarising the potential opposition between transsexual people’s need and desire to have their sex/gender recognised as real, and social constructivist feminism’s imperative to conceptualise all emergences of sex/gender as socially constructed fictions, Bettcher concludes that the potential appeal of a theory that supports transsexual people’s sex/gender realness may indeed position transsexual politics against feminist ones: the former may benefit from the naturalisation of gender, while the latter seeks to denaturalise it (398). In order to overcome this opposition, Bettcher makes the following suggestion:

While actual acts of resistance may appeal to gender realness (and use a theory that justifies that realness), a constructionist theory can be used to illuminate such manoeuvres without itself committing to the realness of gender. . . . [W]hile the actual appeal to native gender must be rejected from a transfeminist perspective, the socially constituted denial of realness must be taken with dead seriousness. (Bettcher, 2014, 299)

Bettcher here suggests an increasing of academic sensitivity for the marginalisation and violence transsexual people may face at the hands of ‘the constructivist’ argument, at the same time perpetuating a rigid social constructivist epistemological framework in which any appeal made towards sex/gender realness is respected as an act of resistance, but never as intrinsically valid, or simply real. In this methodological approach, transsexual women’s experiences of the realities in which they live and know themselves continue to be subsumed under epistemological supremacy – that is, a certain experience can be sublimated by a theory that carries a higher level of truth than the situated reality constituted by the experience itself. The question rises of how a commitment to the situated realness of sex/gender can be actualised in an academic context without falling back on biological essentialist assumptions, which, as Bettcher emphasises, equally devalue the authenticity of transsexual women’s sexed/gendered realities (386).

In *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (2014), feminist non-philosopher Katerina Kolozova takes this seemingly methodologically irreconcilable opposition between anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminist theories of sex/gender and people’s frequent experiences of these trajectories as essential to their situated selves as her research object.¹³ She argues that the exclusion of generic lived experiences of sex/gender from a perspective of academic legitimacy presents a persistent form of epistemic violence perpetuated by the poststructuralist paradigm, subsuming people’s situated experiences of reality under the authority of academic thought. Such condemnation of *all* forms of generic and ‘essential’ thinking as unitary and *thus* politically regressive – including those concerning situated self-identification – is an act of unspeakable arrogance that fuels political exclusion, rendering people’s claims to certain subject positions as fictitious, false and even unreal, thereby failing significantly to account for the ways in which such subject positions may respond to, or are generative of, experiences of marginalisation (6-7, 16, 72).

In addition, Kolozova argues that the radical exclusion of certain subject positions as inherently constituted upon false consciousness re-introduces a mode of binary, hegemonic and essentialist thinking in its adherence to the *instability* of the subject as an ontological quality (80, 82). I suggest that this analysis of poststructuralist feminism’s exclusionary

¹³ The principles of non-philosophy are developed by the French thinker François Laruelle (1996), who proposes the deployment of this approach in the broader context of philosophical practice. In Chapter Three I explicate these principles in more detail.

gestures corresponds to the disavowal of transsexual women's potential desires to stabilise the categorical and embodied inhabitancy of their sex/gender, in which sex/gender conformity may come to stand for a certain form of sex/gender consolidation. Moreover, Kolozova's observation regarding the privilege carried by those processes of transformative subjectivation that affirm their own radical instability might be adequately applied to the earlier noted privilege carried by transgender subjectivities over transsexual ones in a queer feminist context, pointing towards a similar phenomenon of what Serano (2007) has described as the establishment of hegemonic 'radical/conservative gender binaries' in the course of defining the ideal feminist political subject (110).¹⁴

Following Kolozova's alternative approach, academic concepts can only be conceived of as viable and accountable if they correspond to a certain lived dimension of women's experienced realities, and bare responsibility to this reality rather than to philosophical sublimation (4; Laruelle, 1996, 56). Although this method resists *Unitarianism* (i.e. all people share the same reality), it is radically *unifying* in its call for feminist solidarity (i.e. all theoretical feminist concepts must correspond to women's experiences of reality and bare accountability to these and these alone, instead of to a specific philosophical tradition, 8-9; Laruelle, 1996, 13, 45). This methodological gesture advocates full respect for people's lived and experienced identities and realities, pressing the argument that epistemological premises should not be impressed upon, but rather flow from, generic human experiences. I suggest that Kolozova's conceptualisation of a methodology that pushes feminist theories towards "radically universal solidarity" (8-9) concurs with Serano's (2013) proposal of a holistic model of sex, gender and sexuality, moving beyond the epistemological conflict between a social constructivist and biological essentialist paradigm, thereby resisting a hegemonic binary system of political subjectivity (138-168).

Combining a postsecular approach with a non-philosophical research practice, I am accountable to the following research goals, namely to provide a critical and situated analysis of the contemporary feminist categories of agency and political consciousness, and to come to an alternative epistemological understanding of situated agencies. By doing so, I will give way to a radical congruency between feminist theories of sex/gender and transsexuality on the

¹⁴ I use the term 'subjectivation' as it was generally deployed in the work of Michael Foucault, referring to an individual process of becoming a certain situated subject (Foucault, 1984, 41).

one hand, and transsexual women's experiences of themselves and their realities on the other, overcoming radical/conservative gender binaries as well as good/bad models of feminist subjectivity and agency. Importantly, these research goals as well as my related project of situated agencies correspond to, *and* take issue with, feminist theorist Donna Haraway's (1988) renowned work on situated knowledges.

IV. Structure

In Chapter One I will provide an elaborate overview of prevailing academic narratives representing transsexual women's agencies and subjectivities, mapping the critical trajectories that tension social constructivist engagements with transsexual realities, experiences, desires and aspirations. The main question posed here is how such narratives may relate to notions of conformation and subversion, submission and rebellion, regression and transgression, affirmation and resistance, and which persisting epistemological models of agency and political subjectivity flow from these premises. A concept that shall be crucial to my critical approach to these questions is Valentine's (2012) non-transsexual imaginary, bringing out previously unmarked, hegemonic non-transsexual and academic privileges.

Proceeding, I will provide a clear outline of the imperatives of the postsecular turn in feminism as coined by Braidotti (2008), proposing a postsecular analysis rooted within Mahmood's (2012) work in order to recover the unmarked asymmetrical power relations residing behind currently prevailing models of transsexual women's agency and political subjectivity, situating these within a persistent hegemony of Western humanist, liberalist, secularist and even modernist thought. Focussing upon the relation between a traditional secular(ist) conception of agency on the one hand, and intimately connected understandings of the agentive versus the suffering and surviving subject on the other, the work of postcolonial anthropologist and Islamic scholar Talal Asad (2003) will be central to my exploration of the question of how such discursive legacies are played out across a feminist debate regarding sex/gender conformative transsexuality, and a situated desire for SRS in particular. My deployment of a postsecular epistemological framework concurs with the ways in which it has been deployed by both Braidotti and Charles Taylor (2007), putting it to the task of critically unpacking emergences of secular(ist) thinking, its discursive and ideological situated-ness, and related hegemonic trajectories. In addition, my own deployment will demonstrate the

worth of postsecular engagement outside of the disciplinary boundaries of postcolonial and religious studies.

In Chapter Three I will propose a postsecular model of human agency and political subjectivity as a viable alternative framework to re-envision transsexual women's subjectivities, agencies, and positionalities within academic feminist discourses, working towards a conception of situated and distributive agencies. In addition, I will engage with the question of which epistemological and political interventions might be necessitated by a recognition of sex/gender conformative transsexual women's agencies and political subjectivities *as* valid and valuable, arguing for a radical re-thinking of the status of 'reality' within feminist politics and research practice. Haraway's (1988) theory of situated knowledges as well as Kolozova's (2014) and Laruelle's (1996; 2014) practice of non-philosophy will stand in support of my argument.

Concluding, I will come back to the central research question of this thesis, that is, what kind of new, viable feminist agencies and political subject positions do the imperatives of postsecular feminist inquiry open up for sex/gender conformative transsexual women? Here I hope to successfully position my work as an epistemological intervention into contemporary academic feminist representations of transsexual women's agency and subjectivity, proposing this intervention as a starting point for a modest re-engagement with the question of which position sex/gender conformity and normativity may take within the broader context of feminist theory and politics, arguing for the broader integration of a situated, liveable non-philosophical epistemological approach.

Chapter 1

Fakes, Dupes and Rebels

Transsexual Women's Agency in Contemporary Feminist Theories of Sex/Gender

1.1. Introduction: Transsexual and Non-Transsexual Agency in Feminist Academia

This is the big question: Why? Why choose to do that to your body? And the second question – the one that is usually expressed quietly, even if we are alone – is not far behind: What are the politics of this (that is, the politics of SRS)? Even though as a pragmatic political act, they say, they would step up to the line to support a transsexual person's right to SRS, in the end isn't it politically retrograde (they say), choosing to reshape a body to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman?

– David Valentine (2012, 186) –

Aiming to increase embodied feminist accountability in a contemporary academic context, David Valentine (2012) develops a rather unconventional theory of non-transsexual embodiment, identity and subjectivity. Connecting a present feminist political discomfort with the presumed normative imperatives of physical transsexual transitioning to the question of what 'choice' and 'agency' actually entail in this particular debate, Valentine places the prevailing *non*-transsexuality of feminist academics under political consideration: Why not reshape the body to refute societal expectations? Why choose *not* to have SRS? The counterintuitive affect generated by these questions draws attention to the privileged, presumably neutral status of the non-transsexual subject that resides behind the asymmetrical distribution of affirmative agency and political responsibility; a distribution that is primarily carried out by non-transsexual academic subject-agents, whose non-transsexual embodied subjectivity continues to go unmarked and unidentified on both a personal and theoretical level (185).

'Transsexual exceptionalism' – that is, the tendency to distribute transsexual subjectivity with an increased responsibility for the upholding of sex/gender normativity –, so Valentine argues, has its roots in an unmarked modernist ideal of non-transsexual somatic wholeness that does not concur with the social constructivist (and overwhelmingly postmodernist) episteme that prevails in feminist academia today (188, 199). The imperatives of this paradigm, so I suggest in line with Valentine's argument, dictate that the distribution of agency always takes place within a particular epistemological and political framework that is founded upon, and produces, certain power relations. As Valentine demonstrates, these power relations seem to have a particular asymmetrical, hegemonic character when it comes to contemporary academic representations of transsexual embodiment and subjectivity, enabling "scholars to frame particular humans as agents and others as dupes of forces beyond their control" (193). Which epistemological premises, so Valentine asks, enable such academic

representations? “Who and what gets framed as the ‘agent’ of action in these social fields” (193)?

In this first chapter I take up these questions in order to subject two different academic feminist representations of sex/gender conformative transsexual women’s (political) agency and subjectivity to a critical analysis. Which representations currently prevail within different social constructivist feminist theories of sex and gender; which epistemological definitions of agency, subjectivity and feminist politics are entertained here; and which political subject positions do such representations enable, or foreclose? In addition, the question of how the political and epistemological narratives considered here relate specifically to transsexual womanhood, female-ness and femininity, will be central. In the context of Valentine’s important observations, the questions of where non-transsexual academic agency resides within these narratives, and how the political directedness of modernist and postmodernist subjectivity is negotiated, will be of additional importance. This chapter will consist of three subsections. In the first two I will subject respectively a radical lesbian-feminist and a poststructuralist feminist narrative of transsexual subjectivity to the previously formulated questions. The third subsection will consider several counter-narratives to these two major social constructivist modes of representation in light of the same research questions.

1.2. Fake Feminists and Perpetrating Patriarchs: The (Undercover) Agents of the Transsexual Empire

The first academic narrative I want to consider here is Janice G. Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), which is one of the most prominent feminist texts on the subject of transsexuality. Raymond’s main argument is that transsexuality as a contemporary phenomenon is produced by patriarchal norms that work to re-assign sex to otherwise gender-deviant individuals. The medical discourse that seeks to carry out this moral constraint, so Raymond argues, has created a medical reality that meets transsexual people’s experiences of ‘gender dissatisfaction’, seeking to surgically resubmit them to an embodied subject position that concurs with established sex/gender norms (132, 143). By using the term ‘dissatisfaction’ rather than the medical terms ‘dysphoria’ or ‘dissonance’, Raymond points to the idea that transsexuality is first and foremost a problem caused by certain social constraints

that are exercised by patriarchal discourse.¹⁵ The phenomenon of ‘transsexualism’, then, is the socially imposed solution to gender dissatisfaction, working to re-subsume transsexual people under normative sex/gender discourse without altering the contents and mechanisms of the system itself (16).

The narrative proposed here seems to suggest that the agency residing behind transsexualism is located within those subjects enforcing patriarchal sex/gender discourse, that is, those that constitute the medical establishment. Indeed, Raymond argues that the medical term transsexualism itself functions to ‘delete the agent’ behind the practice: it “cloaks the power of the medical empire to generate a unique group of medical consumers. Thus the actions of a primary *agent*, the medical establishment, are rendered invisible, and the so-called need of the transsexual, the *patient*, is highlighted” (13). According to this conception, transsexual people are will-less products of a patriarchal agency, possessing no agency at all. This perspective is emphasised especially in Raymond’s consideration of transsexual people’s seemingly voluntary subjection to the medical practices of ‘the transsexual empire’. She asks:

How can transsexuals truly give ‘*informed consent*’ and freely choose to convert to the opposite sex anatomy and role when the coercive power of sex-role socialization is filtered through all institutions in a patriarchal society? Not that such socialization is deterministic, but rather that it deeply conditions one’s choices as well as one’s *motivation* to choose. (Raymond, 1979, 134-5)

Raymond later poses the question: “How can they be ultimately ‘centres of autonomy’ if their motivation to choose differently is held captive by a patriarchal society, so that even what they finally do choose (i.e., transsexual surgery) binds them even more firmly to that society?” (147). In these two quotations Raymond clearly establishes the idea that one cannot *freely* choose to have a sex change: the desire to be of the opposite sex cannot be but the projection of oppressive, patriarchal ‘sex-role socialisation’, because it *follows* the direction of

¹⁵The medical and psychological term ‘gender dysphoria’ was most certainly known to Raymond, as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) was most active prior to the publication of her book. The increasing publicity of the association’s work led to the incorporation of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) into the American Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980 (Matte, Devor and Vladicka, 2009, 44; Stryker, 2008, 111). At present, the term ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ has been officially replaced by the term ‘gender dysphoria’ within the latest version of the DSM (DSM-5) in order to make clear that sex/gender non-conformity is not in itself a disorder, but might in some cases cause severe personal distress, demanding clinical help of some kind (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

sex/gender normativity. The concepts of ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’ are here positioned at the base of moral and political agency, and come to be understood as the capacity to choose *differently* from what is constituted as acceptable within a certain situated moral discourse, a political imperative that those subjects that consent and *conform* to normative regulation clearly fail to embody.

It is precisely at this point in Raymond’s narrative that the transsexual subject moves from having virtually *no* agency to possessing a potentially *bad* one that upholds and reproduces patriarchal norms. Instead of taking gender dissatisfaction as the starting point for political reform, so Raymond argues, transsexual people actively pursue ‘sex-role conformity’ in order to overcome their personal suffering, thereby failing to see how their personal ‘choices’ contribute to the upholding of patriarchal sex/gender norms that oppress all, and females in particular (98, 132, 142, 166). The idea that transsexual women’s desire for a feminine and female subject position reproduces and upholds non-transsexual women’s subordination is even more strongly present in Sheila Jeffreys’ (2014) most recent work, in which she argues that a transsexual desire for femininity and female-ness is the result of a patriarchal fetish for the non-transsexual female subject (187-8). In this conception transsexual women are no longer seen as the will-less subjects of a patriarchal empire; they themselves appear as its willing agents.

The perspective offered by both Raymond and Jeffreys posits transsexual women in strong opposition to a feminist perspective, which they dictate should take gender dissatisfaction as a motive for social reform rather than personal transition (Raymond, 1979, 80). Because Raymond follows the idea that transsexual women’s embodied subjectivities *only* exist because of, and are constructed by, patriarchy, her conception of which possible political directions their agency might take is radically closed: any movement towards a feminist political consciousness must be seen as either an act of *deception* committed by a subject that attempts to extend patriarchal power into the previously inaccessible realms of women’s spaces, bodies and minds, or a misplaced act of *conversion*, which success is always already foreclosed by the transsexual subject’s ontological origin, that is, patriarchy (104).

I suggest that the definitive rigour of the epistemological boundaries that separate ‘the transsexual’ from ‘the feminist’ subject in this context works through a persistent onto-

epistemological asymmetry between the two.¹⁶ After all, if one accepts the idea that *all* gendered subject positions – and that of ‘women’ in particular – originate in patriarchal discourse, then why is “the lesbian-feminist [able to *cross*] the boundary of her patriarchally imposed sex role”, whereas any attempt by “the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist” to do so necessarily makes her “a *boundary violator*” (Raymond, 1979, 108)? I suggest that the answer to this question might be found within the methodological and epistemological premises that underpin both Raymond’s and Jeffreys’ radical lesbian-feminist definition of ‘the feminist subject’; a subject that has been born into ‘the female sex caste’ and has been socialised as a female and a woman (Raymond, 1979, 181; Jeffreys, 2014, 5-6).

Although both authors maintain a social constructivist paradigm, this definition firmly binds ‘the feminist subject’ to a non-transsexual female anatomy that remains obscured from further inquiry, risking close proximity to a biological essentialist paradigm. This risk is clearly present – if not fulfilled – in Jeffreys’ claim that “the differences between male and female bodies . . . are all *objectively knowable*” and unalterable (2014, 53, emphasis added). In Raymond’s theory this tendency is equally, yet more implicitly, present:

I am not arguing that what is nature is good, I am not polarizing technology against nature. Rather I am making an appeal to the integrity or harmony of the whole. Thus my development of an ethic of integrity . . . is not meant to state that transsexual treatment and surgery are violations of a static biological nature of maleness or femaleness but that they violate a dynamic process of be-ing and becoming . . .”. (Raymond, 1979, 17)

Raymond here defends herself against an accusation of biological essentialism, which operates through the polarisation of ‘the constructed’ and ‘the natural’, and makes an appeal to the ‘static biological nature’ of the ‘naturally’ sexed body. Yet, what can ‘the integrity or harmony of the whole’ be other than a moral and political appeal to such a body if the ‘dynamic process of becoming’ forecloses and invalidates the option of embodied, physical re-formation? The element of invalidation here emerges from the particularly *un*-dynamic

¹⁶ With my use of the term ‘onto-epistemological’ I point to the idea that this asymmetry is ontological in nature: it works on a fixed level of what one *is*, or can be, as the result of a certain state of being. ‘Ontology’ here does not signify a certain biological essence, but the material-semiotic product of a certain epistemological narrative (Barad, 2007, 90). By addressing subjectivity here as a material-semiotic fabric, I refer to the entangled nature of matter and meaning: subjectivity encompasses both the material body and the negotiation of personal and collective meaning that this material generates, and is constituted upon.

conception of the boundaries that constitute the sexed subject, resulting in the idea that transsexual women will always remain men, and transsexual men will always be women (Raymond, 1979, 4; Jeffreys, 2014, 8).

I argue that what is at stake here is a *re-naturalised* conception of the category ‘women’ as *essentially* non-transsexual females; a conception that defines ‘the feminist subject’ by extension in an equally essentialist manner. Even though both Raymond and Jeffreys reject ontological fixity in name of a social constructivist paradigm, their epistemological definition of feminism – i.e. a discourse that merely works against the subordination of female-born subjects – posits the closed category of ‘being female’ as the unquestioned and unquestionable ontological origin of both being and becoming feminist. This definition of ‘the feminist subject’ leads to an onto-epistemological asymmetry between those transsexual and non-transsexual subjects that make claim to the socially established and politically invested subject position of ‘woman’, as I suggested earlier in this chapter.

It is here that I would locate the preoccupation of both authors with transsexual women’s presumably harmful subjectivities, rather than with those of transsexual men. According to their definition of the sexed subject, transsexual men will always be females, and therefore victims of patriarchy instead of its perpetrators. Their agency might be the product of a mislead consciousness, but can be excused and retrieved. This argument concurs with Raymond’s statement that female-to-male (FTM) transitions are equally the product of patriarchal agency, this time working to *eliminate* non-transsexual women (xxiii). In this conception, FTM transsexualism becomes an act of violence directed *against* originally non-transsexual females, rather than one perpetrated *by* them.¹⁷

The emergence of politically ‘good’ feminist agency is here enabled by an ontological determination of the female non-transsexual body and subject as the only legitimate seat of feminist consciousness as well as the capacity to choose freely and consciously *against* the established order – something that the MTF transsexual subject cannot achieve *qua* being

¹⁷ Jeffreys (2014) more strongly pursues the idea that transsexual men constitute themselves upon a particularly un-feminist agency by seeking to increase their personal power via patriarchal structures (101). However, her overall representation is more apologetic than it is condemning, laying the blame with patriarchal gender discourse and its adherence to the idea that one even possesses a ‘gender identity’ that needs active materialisation in the first place (104).

MTF transsexual. Returning to the preceding block quotation by Raymond, the capacity to choose differently – that is, non-normatively – here appears strongly connected to a certain non-transsexual physicality. Political *integrity* emerges in opposition to the *integration* of the gender dissatisfied subject, which Raymond suggests functions through a piecing together of various parts into a ‘wholeness’ that is no longer original, but artificial and constructed (154). The presumed essential integrity of the non-surgical, non-transsexual body here appears almost interchangeable with a sound political consciousness that is seated upon “values as choice, awareness, and autonomy”, which the transsexual body is ontologically unable to entertain (18).

On the level of academic inquiry, my argument that the radical lesbian-feminist representation of transsexual women’s agency and (feminist) political subjectivity is marked by a methodological fraudulent combination of a social constructivist and a biological essentialist paradigm might be strengthened by the fact that Raymond *explicitly* forecloses any engagement with even the most basic analytical discussion of which persistent ontological differences might exist between ‘the transsexual’ and ‘the non-transsexual’ woman. Avoiding any attempt to answer this question, she states:

The point is, however, that the origin of these differences is probably not the important question, and we shall perhaps never know the total answer to it. Yet we are forced back into trying to answer it again and again. Transsexuals, and transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists, drag us back to answering such old questions by asking them in a new way. And thus feminists debate and divide because we keep focussing on patriarchal questions of who is a woman and who is a lesbian-feminist. It is important for us to realize that the only answer we can give to them is that we know who *we* are. (Raymond, 1979, 114)

I argue that the answer offered here functions according to a reversed patriarchal logic: because patriarchy has historically defined *what* women, lesbians and feminist are, these questions should be rejected by settling them once and for all; i.e., by closing these categories from further inquiry on the authority of (a certain kind of) feminism.¹⁸ Especially the last

¹⁸ Both the supposedly patriarchal questions of ‘who is a woman’ and ‘who is a lesbian-feminist’ are explicitly ontological in nature, working across a fixed trajectory of ‘being’. Raymond’s own re-formulation of these questions is, as the rest of her argument demonstrates, ‘who can *become* a woman’ and ‘who can *become* a lesbian-feminist’. Although this formulation *seems* to be more dynamic in nature, I hope to have demonstrated that her answers to these questions make a strategic return towards ontological determination and biological

sentence of this quotation seems to me an uncanny echo of the voice that haunts Raymond's attempt to situate transsexuality as a mere social construction from the outset – that is, the voice of the transsexual subject that feels themselves to *be* something other than what discourse (including the one advocated by Raymond) confines them to. I suggest that Raymond's statement cannot but lead to the idea certain groups of people – in this case, radical lesbian-feminists, or non-transsexual women in general – have a right to exist without providing any rational justification, whereas others – in this case, lesbian-feminist transsexual women, or transsexual people in general – have to explain themselves against the presumed 'naturalness' of the former.

As a partial conclusion, the radical lesbian-feminist representation of transsexuality as offered by Raymond and Jeffreys resides upon a presumed non-transsexual bodily and political integrity, and a definition that posits agency as the capacity to choose against established sex/gender norms – something which the transsexual subject is always already unable to preform because of her determined patriarchal ontological origin. The epistemic violence enacted by this definition is not confined to the invalidation of transsexual women's agency and feminist political subjectivity, but extends itself into the realms of epistemological absolution: the boundaries that separate 'the transsexual' from 'the feminist' subject appear radically closed to intellectual contestation. Choice, awareness and autonomy here appear as both the preconditions of agency, and the natural attributes of the non-transsexual subject.

Valentine (2012) argues that both such an appeal to an 'uncut', complete, whole and natural non-transsexual body, and the conception of agency and choice as natural attributes that move the subject into a singular direction – that is, *forwards* in linear progression – find their place in what he describes as 'the seamless story of modernity' (193, 208). The adjective 'seamless' here appears as an ironical reference to the 'seams' or scars of the post-operative transsexual subject, emphasising the non-transsexuality, natural-ness and un-constructed nature of the modernist subject as an ideal feminist political agent. In Chapter Two I will explicate how a modernist definition of the political subject-agent might relate to the specific vicissitudes of the surgical modified subject-body, emphasising the relation between modernist conceptions

essentialism: following her overall argument, the uniform answer to both questions must be 'those subjects which are born female'.

of ‘whole-ness’ and ‘sanity’ on the one hand, and physical and mental pain and suffering on the other.

1.3. Deluded Dupes and Resisting Rebels: The Queer Political Subject of Poststructuralist Feminism

In this subsection, I will consider a postmodernist narrative of agency, subjectivity, feminist politics and transsexuality, paying close attention to the implications of a postmodernist intervention into the concepts of agency and subjectivity, and the haunting remnants of ‘seamless political progression’ that I suggest persist in this alternative epistemological framework.¹⁹ The specific narrative I will consider is that of Judith Butler, whose books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) have become canonical textual objects of both critique and celebration within feminist academia.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler takes up a poststructuralist framework to look at how the sexed and gendered subject is discursively produced.²⁰ Taking psychoanalytical theory as her main object of inquiry, she seeks to demonstrate how discursively situated norms, laws and prohibitions determine how the subject as an intelligible sexed and gendered entity comes into being. As a logical conclusion, the subject does not pre-exist its discursive inscription, but is brought into being precisely through a psychological and embodied engagement with such discursive constraints (2-3; Foucault and Butler in Mahmood, 2012, 19-20).

¹⁹ I use the adjective ‘postmodernist’ rather than ‘postmodern’ in order to refer to a mode of academic engagement rather than to a temporality. Postmodernist engagement is here defined as an epistemological paradigm that de-naturalises the premises of modernist engagement, which is argued to be based on the assumption of certain natural, neutral and unmarked attributes, such as autonomous subjectivity, the natural body, and universal humanity (see Asad, 2003).

²⁰ I define ‘poststructuralism’ as a specific postmodernist paradigm that is constituted in response to a structuralist paradigm. It follows the premise that reality – in all its heterogeneous emergences – is constituted by certain discursively established structures, of which language is the guiding principle that functions according to a negative, binary dialectic. The ‘post’ in poststructuralism may stand for a belief that such reality-determining structures can never fully encompass that which they aim to signify – something that can be referred to as ‘the lost referent’. This argument leads to the idea that reality as it is perceived and described is haunted from the outset by ‘something’ that human thought and language will never be able to encompass, serving as a permanent site of instability, re-signification and deconstruction (see Spivak, 1997, 8-74).

This line of reasoning has important implications for Butler's conception of sex and gender. Most importantly, gender appears not as an innate property of the subject, but as the product of certain discursively enforced norms and prohibitions. The concept of 'gender identity' thus consists of a particular identification with a certain relation or position that the subject assumes in relation to the discursive laws that bring 'him', 'her', 'them' (or any other personal identification) into being. It is in this sense that Butler asserts that gender is performative: it is a specific set of acts whose constant repetition consolidate the illusion of a stable identity and subject, constituting gender as a 'real' and lived trajectory in the process (17, 25, 33).

As a continuous performance, the assumption of gender stylises the body in a certain way, producing "the appearance of *substance*, of a natural sort of being" (33, emphasis added). This substance might be conceived of as the trajectory of sex, which has traditionally been viewed as the bare material of gendered inscription, even in some social constructivist theories, such as those of Raymond and Jeffreys. In Butler's epistemological narrative, sex and gender ultimately appear to be the same thing: a highly regulatory principle that groups together certain "anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures" into the fictitious unity that is the sexed/gendered subject; a fiction that appears as a natural entity because its constructed origin must remain invisible (Foucault in Butler, 1990, 92). In *Bodies that Matter* Butler develops this last point more elaborately, conceptualising both sex and the materiality of the body as discursively produced trajectories (1993, xv). Logically, this postmodernist narrative of subjectivation dismantles the seamless, natural modernist subject-agent as a fictitious, constructed unity.

The postmodernist subject requires a radical rethinking of the concept of agency and the resultant emergence of (feminist) political consciousness. If *all* performances of sex/gender are somehow constituted in relation to certain discursively established and enforced laws – and that very negotiation constitutes what *is* the subject – than how can this subject act, and be aware, in excess of what the law prescribes to be possible and desirable? How does it become possible to think, choose, act and become *differently*, that is, outside of sex/gender normativity? Butler suggests that this question demands a rethinking of the concepts of social construction and agency:

For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the *constituted* status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways

in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism. Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. (Butler, 1990, 147)

Here, Butler argues that agency, identity and free will cannot be located outside of social construction. Rather, these attributes are enabled by the very structures of the law that constitute the subject to which they are attributed. Agency here emerges as the capacity of the subject to negotiate the containments of its own discursive fabric; a fabric that is constraining, but not (fully) determining; open for resignification, yet not ‘free’ in its capacity to signify just anything – after all, a cultural intelligible meaning can only emerge when there is at least some correspondence to the language spoken by the discourse towards which such resignification is directed. Agency can here no longer be defined as the capacity to fulfil a natural ontological potential for freedom and escape discursive determination, but comes to be seen as the capacity to negotiate signification and resignification within a given social construction, or discursive tradition (Butler, 1990, 144).²¹

As for the *direction* such agency must take in order to entertain a *feminist* political consciousness in this poststructuralist narrative, Butler repeatedly emphasises how a revelation of the sexed/gender subject’s *constructed-ness* might oppose biologically determined inequalities. A feminist political agency can be performed through a *subversive* repetition of the law that dictates gender performance into being; a repetition that displaces the law as a natural given, instead revealing its alterable constructivism, thereby pointing to the fictitious nature of coherence, stability, and significance itself (1990, 145; 1993, xxiii).

This political directionality comes with an important imperative: because re-signification can only take place *within* a certain discursive tradition, it must make use of the so-called ‘constitutive outside’ that brings normative laws into being. Constituting itself through exclusion or abjection, discourse always already encompasses its own ‘outside’ through constitutive negation – it signifies what it is as well as what it is not (Namaste, 1994, 221-1). Re-signification takes place when this outside makes its (re-) appearance on ‘the inside’ of discourse. Thus, it is “the strange, the incoherent, that which falls ‘outside’, [that] gives us a

²¹ The term ‘discursive tradition’ was coined by Asad in 1986, pointing toward the idea that discourse is an historically cumulative fabric of symbols and meanings that are negotiated, consolidated and re-negotiated across an ever-changing temporal, spatial and social context (Asad, 2009, 10).

way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently” (Butler, 1990, 110). This conception of feminist political consciousness as mobilised through the affirmation of ‘the strange’ and ‘incoherent’ requires such productive, re-signifying ‘outside’ to be preserved as exactly that: *on the outside*. With this gesture Butler positions herself against a so-called politics of integration, or, as she puts it, against the domestication of the queer subject: normalisation and integration must be rejected in order to keep feminist political consciousness ‘moving forwards’ (1993, 73). Resultantly, normative identities, subject positions and categories *can* be affirmatively deployed in the course of a political project, but must remain radically open to “permanent political contestation” and re-signification (1993, 168). As a partial conclusion, it might be suggested that although agency itself is not confined to the capacity to re-signify, political *feminist* agency is.

On the one hand, the imperative to keep identity categories open may work against epistemological absolutism, as is characteristic of Raymond’s definition of both ‘women’ and ‘the feminist subject’. On the other hand, Butler’s *political* narrative might privilege those sex/gender performances that bring the fragmented, incoherent subject into being over those performances that work to consolidate a certain coherence or unity of subject, thereby (re-) introducing a politically invested hegemonic bias into feminist analyses (Prosser, 1998, 15, 48; Serano, 2007, 110, 9, 90, 146, 149; Kolozova, 2014, 41, 80). In addition, Butler’s political rejection of integration in some ways resembles Raymond’s rejection of a transsexual aspiration towards integration and *re-constructed* integrity. Both authors – albeit in different ways and for different reasons – share an investment in a singular progressive political direction, that is, the subversion of sex/gender normativity. The ideal postmodernist feminist political subject-agent operates without making an appeal to an original, natural integrity, but equally resists the “re-member[ing]” or “coherent reassembling” of the denaturalised, fragmented subject (Butler, 1990, 127). Proceeding, I will demonstrate how the idealist, systematic operation of this investment might prove to be problematic in relation to Butler’s representation of the MTF transsexual subject, her agency, and her capacity to entertain a feminist political consciousness.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) mentions transsexuality only once, deploying transsexual sexual desire and its supposed investment in imaginary body parts as an example to demonstrate how *all* human sexual desire is founded upon a phantasmic imaginary (71). I

suggest this tendency to use the transsexual subject as exemplifying of a phantasmic or fictional trajectory occurring in *all* human subjectivation may set transsexual subjectivity aside as somehow sublimating the constructed-ness of subjectivity itself, resultantly assigning an ‘extra-constructed’ quality to the transsexual subject. By revealing the socially constructed origin of certain trajectories that falsely pass as natural pre-givens, the academic social constructivist exercise suspiciously resembles the mechanism of reality reinforcement; an association that is strengthened especially when trans “phenomena are utilized as argumentative tools to show that sex and gender are constructed in this deceptive way” (Bettcher, 2014, 398).

I suggest that this same argument has relevance with regard to Butler’s deployment of female and/or feminine subject positions as *the* sides of potential re-signification. Drawing on the psychoanalytical works of Freud and Lacan, Butler conceives of ‘the feminine position’ as the ultimate mimicry of the patriarchal law, holding a symbolic position whose approximation is bound to fail and therefore inhabits a unique “critical distance between what the law compels and the identification that the feminine body offers up as the token of her loyalty to [that very] law” (1993, 67). In this conception, the body that is marked by discourse as feminine becomes singled out as *the* side of both phantasmic identification and potential (feminist) disruption. Despite the attribution of a positive political value, ‘the feminine’ and ‘the transsexual’ here both appear as associated with phantasm, illusion and instability.

Butler’s definition of feminist agency as constituted through acts of subversion makes it hard to entertain and pursue an *affirmatively* (i.e. non-subversive) feminine position, thereby risking a conception of masculinity as its more neutral (and perhaps even more natural) counterpart. Serano (2007) establishes the argument that femininity continues to be seen as somehow more constructed by patriarchy than masculinity, suggesting that this premise continues to posit transsexual women’s embodied subjectivities as a side of feminist critique there where those of transsexual men might be conceived of as either more neutral or even subversive in their transgression of femininity itself; a tendency that can be observed in ‘unilateral’ (radical lesbian-feminist) and ‘deconstructive’ (poststructuralist) feminist representations of transsexuality alike (4, 14, 18, 46). Furthermore, as Bettcher (2014) suggests the counter-argument that transsexual and feminine subjectivity are merely easy examples of a more generic human condition does not suffice here: offering no critical analysis of how transsexual femininity often appears as extra-constructed or fake in the

context of daily occurring violent encounters, the academic argument in (political) favour of its constructed character erases such mechanisms of violence and marginalisation, instead risking their reinforcement (398).

This same tendency to deploy the MTF transsexual subject as an illuminating example against which the queer feminist political agent may emerge, persists in *Bodies that Matter*. Engaging in a critical reading of transsexual woman Venus Extravaganza's life as represented in Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), Butler (1993) argues that Venus – who aims to 'pass' as a non-transsexual woman and desires to have SRS in order to align her physical body and gender identity according to normative standards of femaleness and womanhood – “calls into question whether *parodying* the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (85, emphasis added). First of all, the transsexual subject here again appears as an exemplified sublimation of gender-as-parody, something which is supposed to apply to *all* sexed/gendered subjects. Secondly, this short quotation draws attention to the potential hegemony generated by re-signification, deconstruction and fragmentation as *the* feminist political ideals. Taking signification, affirmation, coherence and sex/gender normativity as their oppositional counterparts, these ideals may invalidate a lived transsexual desire or necessity to *be* sexed/gendered in a certain way as politically undesirable, or regressive. Such political invalidation is strongly present in Butler's later suggestion that sex/gender conforming subject positions such as Venus' might be seen as an “*uncritical* miming of the hegemonic” (90, emphasis added). By phrasing the pursuit of a desire for sex/gender conformity as 'uncritical', Butler's argument approximates the idea such agentive acts are the product of an ill-informed 'false consciousness', concurring with Raymond's representation of the transsexual subject as an uncritical consumer, as opposed to the non-transsexual feminist subject-agent as a conscious critique.

By means of a third observation, Butler (1993) argues that the pursuit of sex/gender/race normativity resides on the fulfilment of a fantasy that involves the erasure of its violent foundations, falsely constituting the direction of this fantasy – in Venus' case white, middle-class, heterosexual, non-transsexual womanhood – as a site of privilege that it does not really

inhabit (90).²² I suggest that this argument closely resembles both Raymond's and Jeffreys' argument that transsexual women would reinforce, and are constituted upon, the historical subordination of non-transsexual females. The question that could be posed here is whether the pursuit of any given normative position – for example, the statement that one is heterosexual, or a woman with a feminine and female performance of sex/gender – must not ultimately be seen as uncritically reinforcing certain formations of subordination, and aspiring to false privilege. After all, if the category of 'women' has served the historical subordination of those subjects encompassed by it, then surely any assumption of this category must be based on false consciousness.²³ The fact that this question is asked *solely* in the context of Venus' subject – a sex/gender conformative MTF transsexual subject – therefore signals of a persistent onto-epistemological asymmetry where political responsibility is concerned.

By means of a short summary, I suggest that Butler's representation of transsexuality in general inhabits an unmarked tendency to attribute the subjectivation of the MTF transsexual subject with an extra-constructed character that can somehow sublimate the unfolding of human subjectivation in general; that her representation of the sex/gender conformative MTF subject devaluates her political agency by foreclosing the possibility that a desire following a normative directionality can be accompanied by a feminist consciousness; and that her analysis unwillingly inhabits an unmarked onto-epistemological asymmetry when it comes to the distribution of political responsibility – one that burdens the transsexual subject with the consequences of prevailing sex/gender norms that are, according to her own conception of subjectivity, inhabited and negotiated by *all* human subjects.

According to Valentine (2012), this persistent tendency to place more emphasis on the political implications of transsexual sex/gender normativity than on that of non-transsexual subjects not only "begs an answer that requires transsexuals to bear the full weight of binary gender" in which all subjects are somehow invested, but also "produces 'agency' as something external to the agent of the question" (189). The last part of this quotation points to

²² By deploying a slash in my articulation of 'sex/gender/race normativity' I refer to the idea that different differences intersect and co-constitute each other's situated emergence (see also Butler, 2014, xvi).

²³ The same suggestion might be made on behalf of male or masculine identifications: if the category of 'men' has historically served to empower those subjects that are encompassed by it at the expense of other categories of embodied subjectivity, such as 'women', then surely any assumption of this subject position reinforces the hegemony of male-born subjects and the consequential subordination of their female-born counterparts.

the often unanswered question of which *specific* agency resides behind the capacity to make a life lived into an academic research object (189). Valentine suggests that the persistent invisibility of this agency that resides behind theoretical and political representations of transsexuality – one persistently inhabited by a non-transsexual academic subject – signifies an act of epistemic violence, leaving an asymmetrical power relation unmarked. When applied to Butler's representation, this argument may illuminate the fact that the agent behind *Gender Trouble* (living non-transsexual gender theorist Judith Butler) clearly sways intellectual authority over the agent in trouble (murdered, poor, transsexual woman Venus Extravaganza). When one takes this asymmetry into account, it becomes clear that the representational bias between respectively the *rebellious* feminist agent and the transsexual subject *duped* by patriarchal constraint is not innocent: the distribution of agency as well as the weight of the gender binary might very well be connected to the operation of non-transsexual *and* academic privilege that persists in contemporary postmodernist feminist theory and practice.

Serano (2007) pursues exactly this last suggestion, arguing that the division between subversive/progressive and conformative/conservative subject positions is rooted within cissexual privilege: "Because these scholars have not had to live with the reality of gender dissonance, they are afforded the luxury of intellectualizing away subconscious sex, thus allowing them to project their interests or biases onto trans people" (155). The suggestion made here is that subconscious sex (the existence of which is recognised in Butler's psychoanalytical analysis) is present within all subjects, but that only the materialisation of transsexual people's subconscious sex appears as the object of academic analysis and political judgement, because of its visible difference from 'the norm' that here comes to be reinforced as the non-transsexual sexed/gendered subject. Academic and political judgement, then, are made possible by a cissexual distance to the transsexual agent in trouble.

Importantly, Serano emphasises the idea that both unilateral and deconstructive feminist theories are guilty of such intellectual imperialism, because they posit the subversion of sex/gender norms as *the* moral and political imperative (2007, 136-7; 2013, 120-1); a political and ideological system of classification that she calls 'subversivism' (2007, 346). This re-introduction of hegemonic binary logic into feminist discourse in the name of political progression or radicalism, so she argues, is an unspeakable *un-feminist* gesture that works according to patriarchal sexist logics, introducing a new-found radical/conservative gender

binary into feminist analysis (2007, 110, 9, 90, 146, 149, 359). The establishment of any theoretical or political imperative that involves a judgement of which *personal* sexed/gendered performances are *politically* vital (a gesture Serano addresses as ‘the perversion of the personal is political’, 2013, 5) creates new asymmetrical power relations, performing a type of ‘gender entitlement’; a mechanism that allows some people to present their gender performances as more (politically) valid than others, and to pursue this opinion academically and politically.

Coupling this analysis back to Butler’s representation of the transsexual subject – or more specifically, her representation of Venus Extravaganza –, it becomes possible to see how the mechanism of both ‘gender entitlement’ and academic privilege might lead to the violent erasure of transsexual women’s lived realities and their political validity in an academic context. Pursuing this argument, sociologist Viviane K. Namaste (2000) argues that Butler’s representation *erases* the social contexts and inequalities that characterise the constitution of both subject and self-understanding according to her own poststructuralist definition of subjectivation. By reading Venus’ ultimate death as an allegory for the inherent disappointment of coherent identification, Butler erases the specific social context that led to Venus’ murder, which took place on the intersection of race (Latina), class (poor), working opportunities (occasional prostitution), access to medical care, and sex/gender performance (pre-operative transsexual woman, 13). Taking this context into account, the assertion that transsexual sex/gender performances resemble ‘an uncritical miming of hegemonic norms’ must be seen as an erasure of transsexual people’s daily struggles to actualise their presupposed ‘normative’ sex/gender performances (14). A mere focus on the *production* of the transsexual subject by normative discourse, so Namaste concludes, obscures the ways in which transsexual people are in fact *erased* from political, health, and welfare agendas. Political sublimation here appears favoured over a political representation of transsexual realities that might serve to oppose lived social inequalities (2, 51).

1.4. The Politics of Subversivism: Debating the Political Destination of the Transsexual Subject

In the previous two subsections I have argued that both Raymond’s radical lesbian-feminist and Butler’s poststructuralist feminist epistemological narratives of agency and political subjectivity have little or no conceptual place for a MTF sex/gender conformative transsexual

subject to assume an affirmative position within feminist discourse. As one of the main reasons for this I have addressed the shared singular directionality of their different political projects – that is, the subversion of sex/gender normativity. In addition, I have argued that an unmarked onto-epistemological asymmetry between the subjectivation of the non-transsexual and the transsexual subject resides behind the uneven distribution of political and personal responsibility for an investment in sex/gender normativity; an investment that, according to Butler's own poststructuralist definition of subjectivity, is shared by all subjects who assume a socially intelligible sexed/gendered position. With regard to this last remark, it becomes possible to see how Butler's poststructuralist epistemological definitions of agency and subjectivity may work against the violence imposed on transsexual subjectivities by a political deployment of the modernist subject, simultaneously maintaining the idea that her definition of the *politically* viable feminist subject may continue to bear the mark of liberalist, modernist and hegemonic binary thinking. In this last subsection I want to consolidate this argument by taking four counter-narratives that work against Raymond's and Butler's representations as the objects of my analysis, subjecting them to the question of how the political directedness of modernist and postmodernist subjectivity is negotiated.

In her canonical essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1988) Sandy Stone responds directly to Raymond's *Transsexual Empire*. Noting the represented absence of feminist (political) agency, Stone suggests that transsexual people have not yet succeeded at effectively proving this representation to be incorrect. As the reason for this failure she points towards the hegemony of normative (medical) discourses on transsexuality, which she suggests are aimed at colonising and erasing transsexual difference (10, 11). By means of a counter-discourse, Stone argues that transsexual people's agency resides *behind* the dominant narrative of transsexuality (10) and can be retrieved through a resistant re-reading (or re-signification) of the transsexual body; a re-writing in which physical transsexual difference remains visible upon the body's surface, thereby disrupting the normative trajectories of the subject positions 'men' and 'women' to which such bodies lay claim (12). Stone thus suggests a resistant demonstration of how transsexual bodies are never exactly normative, working against a politics of integration and assimilation.

Recalling my previous analyses, Stone's rejection of the *seamless* (i.e. invisible) integration of the transsexual subject into sex/gender normativity is a political gesture that she shares with both Raymond and Butler. Moreover, her ultimate political goal – the destabilisation and re-

signification of “conventional gender discourse” (12) – concurs with Butler’s. In addition, her method follows the lines of Butler’s queer political project: it reworks the transsexual subject as a ‘readable’ textual construction by allowing its seams to be visible. Following Butler’s (1993) argument that a sex/gender performance can only be *successful* when such a reading is no longer possible (88), Stone’s political counter-narrative functions upon a productive failure to embody discursively established sex/gender norms, preserving the transsexual subject as a productive ‘outside’. Stone’s intervention into Raymond’s devaluation of transsexual women’s agency and political integrity demonstrates how Butler’s queer politics can indeed be deployed to posit transsexual subjectivity as a possible side of a transformative feminist subversion of patriarchal norms.²⁴

I suggest that Stone’s intervention into a radical lesbian-feminist (mis-) representation of transsexual people’s agency and (political) subjectivity is made on the epistemological terms of a political discourse that rejects the comfortable integration of the transsexual subject into sex/gender normativity, positing deconstruction and re-signification as a final political direction. As already suggested, this political direction might burden the transsexual subject with an increased political responsibility to provide the means for its final goal (i.e. the deconstruction of sex/gender normativity); a responsibility that is distributed along the lines of an onto-epistemological asymmetry between the transsexual and the non-transsexual subject. Stone’s strategy to reclaim transsexual subjects’ feminist agency requires those subjects to preform their sex/gender in a mode that demonstrates a *visible* difference from normative (cissexual) performances of these same sexed/gendered subject positions.²⁵

²⁴ Stone (1988) emphasises the proximity of her approach to that of queer theory, preserving the transsexual subject as a (re-) constitutive outside: “For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a true, effective and representational [counter-discourse] is to speak from *outside* the boundaries of gender, *beyond* the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible” (12, emphasis added). However, the differentiating goals of both authors must be emphasised: Butler aims at the deconstruction of sex/gender normativity in general, working against the violent effects of biological essentialist discourses. Stone’s argument is aimed at the reclaiming of transsexual people’s feminist political agency, of which she feels existing feminist discourses – and that of Raymond in particular – have deprived them.

²⁵ Stone (1988) states: “Transsexuals who pass seem able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. . . . To deconstruct the necessity for passing implies that transsexuals must take responsibility for all of their history . . .” (14). Although clearly speaking from a concern with transsexual people’s social integrity, this argument functions through the assumption of an associative parallel between (invisible) transsexual

Therefore, I suggest that this epistemological intervention does not *necessarily* distribute any affirmative agency to those subjects that aspire to a non-visible and non-re-signifying integration into normative sexed/gendered categories, but rather wish to assume such a category to give their own subjectivity a different *significance* within a given discursive tradition. Recalling my analyses of Raymond and Butler as well as Valentine's, Serano's and Namaste's illuminating reflections, the question I would like to pose here is whether the assertion that transsexual sex/gender performances 'can be subversive too' adequately responds to the asymmetrical power relations residing behind the (re-) distribution of agency in this particular context.

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) Jay Prosser refutes such argumentation, critiquing both Butler's devaluation of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity and Stone's proposal to re-subsume transsexual embodiment under a queer political project (48, 173). The main argument supporting this rejection is threefold. First of all, Prosser argues that Butler's epistemological portrayal of the queer subject's political agency resides on a hegemonic binary opposition between resistant, subversive *transgender* and passive, conservative *transsexual* subjectivity. Practicing a gender performance that does not align with a normative assumption of sex, transgender disrupts the 'fictitious unity' of the subject and its normative social/cultural inscription. The transsexual subject here comes to be seen as re-inscribing an originally transgendered identification within a normative framework by re-assigning sex according to established sex/gender norms (15, 48) – a perspective that is present in both Raymond's and Butler's representations. This observation is consistent with Serano's (2007) argument concerning the introduction of a radical/conservative gender binary (110).

Secondly, Prosser highlights the idea that the hegemonic characteristics of this bias are reinforced through intellectual authority of poststructuralist academics. Butler's representation

subjectivity and totalitarian modernist conceptions of identity, thereby burdening transsexual subjectivation with an increased political responsibility for the latter. Moreover, it implicitly affirms the idea that anyone who does not openly read one's history aloud might be considered inauthentic, fake or false in their self-representation. In addition, it could be argued that the visibly fragmented postmodernist subject is here positioned as a site of retrieved, 'true' authenticity, thereby bypassing the fact that the very concept of authenticity is rooted within modernist idealism (for example see Griffiths, 1994).

of transsexual transitions as “[signifying] a failure to be subversive and transgressive to hegemonic constraint where it *ought* to be” (48) clearly demonstrates how the conceptual deployment of the subversive/conformative binary comes with a political and even moral judgement that governs the distribution of (political) agency. This argument concurs with those offered by Valentine, Serano and Namaste, as previously discussed.

Third, Prosser’s detailed reading of a vast body of transsexual autobiographies demonstrates how a discourse that merely focuses on the destabilisation of identity categories fails to capture a considerably generic human experience of *being*, and desiring to be, coherently sexed/gendered in the world, as well as the highly persistent importance of sexual difference as a *significant* and regulatory principle of contemporary life (204). Proposing this realisation as the starting point for an alternative political and epistemological framework, Prosser argues such narratives should start with the recognition that sexed/gendered belonging in the world might, for some, be a valuable “basis for [a] liveable identity” (204). Based on the recognition of transsexual people’s lived experiences (which are located in a world that is governed by normative sexual difference), Prosser posits a so-called ‘politics of home’ against Butler’s rejection of the domestication of the queer subject. The concept of sex/gender transition can here no longer be solely “explored in terms of its deconstructive effects on the body and identity (transition as a symptom of the [constructed-ness] of the sex/gender system and a figure for the impossibility of this system’s achievement of identity)”, but must also be considered as “the very route to identity and bodily integrity” that it signifies for many transsexual subjects (6). The idea here is precisely not that identity and integrity *precede* the subject, but rather that they are produced by socially, culturally and discursively regulated processes of subjectivation.

Prosser’s argument distinguishes itself from Butler’s by opposing the idea that stable sexed/gendered identity and bodily integrity are politically ‘wrong’ outcomes of subjectivation processes, leaving space to consider them as ideals that might (for some) be worth striving for. By granting sex/gender conformity with an equal personal and political value – and I suggest ‘value’ here points not to any relation with a moral and/or political ideal, but to the *significance* of its relation to a certain lived and liveable reality –, Prosser’s politics of home deconstruct the binary logic of good (i.e. subversive and anti-essentialist) versus bad (i.e. conformative and essentialist) agency and subjectivity, rejecting the authority of an academic social constructivist evaluation that distributes political agency based on the

‘revelation’ or ‘concealment’ certain subject positions may offer with concern to their own constructed nature (15).

Importantly, the notion of ‘home’ has been heavily critiqued within various postmodernist narratives. In “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It” (1986), Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty demonstrate how traditional perceptions of home within feminist writing have been closely related to the question of identity, representing both as coherent, stable, uniform and originating principles in accordance with a hegemonic Western modernist paradigm. A postmodernist intervention into this narrative, so they argue, posits home “as an illusion of coherence and safety based upon the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (296-7; see also Anzaldúa and Keating eds., 2002). This argumentation has close proximity to a more general poststructuralist standpoint regarding the illusionary coherence of any normative formation, which is haunted by the constitutive outside that forever threatens its seeming stability (see Namaste, 1994).

It would in fact be quite easy to apply this critique to Prosser’s deployment of the politics of home. Repressing the historical and material differences of a certain transsexual self, the subject self-constitutes as a coherent, stable and safe sexed/gendered entity. This safety is enabled by the exclusion of the subject’s history of resistance against the very normative discourse that now gives shape to its ‘home’ in the world. I would, however, like to offer an alternative reading. In his well-known essay ‘Imaginary Homelands’ (1982) writer Salman Rushdie argues that ‘home’ is always already the product of autobiographical narration, piecing together incoherent fragments of a re-membered past in the course of constituting a liveable ‘point’ of entry into a situated present. Home, so Rushdie argues, “is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also . . . a useful tool with which to work in the present” (429). As I demonstrated earlier, Butler’s perspective posits the piecing back together of a fragmented postmodernist subject almost solely as a necessary failure, generated by a nostalgic pursuit of (modernist) unity. Rushdie’s conceptualisation, however, allows for home, identity and domestication to be seen as indeed constructed and nostalgic, but also as valuable and meaningful constituents of lived reality that may allow for a situated healing of the fragmented and traumatised subject (430). Laying emphasis on the affirmative, life-generating capacities of home-as-illusion, rather than on its imaginary quality as a side for the deconstruction of reality itself, Rushdie’s conception bears accountability to reality and

subjectivity as they are lived instead of to their academic or philosophical sublimation, exactly as is Prosser's final objective.

Without necessarily rejecting queer theory and the queer feminist subject – something that would equally result in the perpetuation of a hegemonic binary logic – Prosser's argument works through the affirmation of (sex/gender conformative) transsexual difference to a queer paradigm:

There is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as 'real-ly-gendered' in the world without trouble; perhaps above all . . . a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend . . . the literal." (Prosser, 1998, 59)

I suggest that Prosser's use of 'the literal' might also be read as 'the textual', 'the discursive', or even 'the normative'. Agency here comes to be seen as the capacity to re-assume one's position in relation to the normative discourse (the prescriptive text of sex/gender), by using the discursive tools (techniques, words, or positions) that are available to enable such re-assignment. Similar to Stone, Prosser locates agency *beyond* the normative medical version of 'the transsexual text', but not *outside* of it. At least partially produced by a certain awareness of, and response to, situated experiences of transsexuality, normative medical discourses offer themselves as a locus of on-going agentive negotiation between 'the norm' and 'the self' (9). Even though the norm might not adequately represent the self, or may even violently attempt to subsume its situated experience under its authority, it can still serve as an existent discursive vocabulary through which a certain sense of self can be articulated. The extensive autobiographical descriptions of how transsexual subjects make use of existing medical and autobiographical texts in order to articulate themselves and gain access to medical services serve to support this argument. Agency here is mobilised not necessarily through a *rejection* of this discourse, but equally through its *affirmation*; it is present regardless of the direction such autobiographical negotiation might take; regardless of whether the final text (body, subject, or identity), might reveal or conceal its own inscriptional process.

Prosser's work demonstrates that the re-distribution of (political) agency and the related development of an affirmative epistemological narrative of transsexual subjectivity cannot emerge through a strategic usage of the same epistemological premises that enable its very

exclusion, that are, the logics of subversivism. Rather, a lived reality of transsexual identity and desire here becomes the starting point for a more modest social constructivist academic engagement that does not make a certain directionality imperative to how one may inhabit the construction one is inevitably bound to be.

Notably, this realisation works against a *systematic* conception of sex/gender. Serano states:

[W]hen we start buying into the existence of a hegemonic gender system, it becomes all too easy for us to get caught up in the illusion that we are infallible warriors in the fight to bring down that system. Suddenly we start seeing the world in black-and-white, cut-and-dried terms, where everybody is either with us or against us. When we get caught up in that illusion, it is easy to assume that any person who engages in a behaviour that does not personally resonate with us must somehow be reinforcing, or conspiring with, that system. And when we accuse someone of reinforcing the gender system, it is always a dehumanizing act – it allows us to ignore that person's experience or perspective because after all, they are colluding with our enemy.” (Serano, 2013, 136)

Shedding light on the binary logic of systematic thinking, Serano here demonstrates how poststructuralist thinking as a philosophical system might lead to exactly such exclusionary and dehumanising tendencies within queer theory, even as it explicitly tries to resist such violent gestures (see also Kolozova, 2014; Namaste, 1994, 226). I suggest that the following observation by Butler is illuminating of such tension, residing in a careful awareness of the possibility of epistemic violence on the one hand, and a negative dialectic trap on the other:

None of the above [an explanation of the phantasmic nature of identity] is meant to suggest that identity is to be denied, overcome, erased. None of us can fully answer to the demand to ‘get over your-self!’ The demand to overcome radically the constitutive constraints by which cultural viability is achieved *would be its own form of violence*. But when that very viability is itself the consequence of a repudiation, a subordination, or an exploitative relation, the negotiation becomes increasingly complex.” (Butler, 1993, 79, emphasis added)

Here, Butler recognises the potential violent threats of making deconstruction and subversion imperative to all subjects. The second part of the quote, however, shows that the mark of discourse that makes the subject viable within its own discursive context is considered to be part of a Symbolic order – or system – that is *essentially* subordinating and exploitative; within the poststructuralist system of thinking, it cannot have any other significance. Although Butler appears mindful of this negotiation, her work so clearly takes an opposite

political direction (that is, to overcome subordination and constitutive constraint) that there remains no space to map in detail such ‘complex negotiation’. What this account demonstrates is that the *equal* distribution of affirmative, political agency – that is, one that is not regulated by asymmetric power relations within the field of academic representation itself – might require an alternative non-systematic epistemological framework.

Serano suggests a so-called ‘holistic’ approach: a mode of thinking that judges “all people’s actions according to a *single standard*. Namely, [non-consensual] ideologies, assumptions, and behaviours deny other people’s autonomy and humanity, and thus should be challenged” (255). I suggest that this proposition, which is aimed at the enforcement of ‘respect for all’, leaves many of the corner stones of modernist thinking untouched. Taking into account Butler’s postmodernist conceptions of discourse and subjectivation, for example, the question arises of how ‘autonomy’ must be conceived of when one assumes that agency *is* in fact discursively produced. What seems to be at stake here is a retrospective move towards modernist ideals – such as autonomy, free choice, and “your ability to decide for yourself who you are, and how you relate to your own sex, gender, and sexuality” (Serano, 2013, 251) – to counter the challenges of postmodernism. I suggest such gesture may revive another endless debate about whether or where to locate agency; a debate that has clearly already been won by postmodernist theory in the academic context, and whose re-invention risks perpetuating the same modernist premises that – recalling Valentine’s analysis – may serve to devalue the transsexual subject even further.

By means of an alternative approach, Namaste (2000) argues in favour of a poststructuralist conceptualisation of agency, power and discursive categories as the base of a social theory of transsexuality, but one that is free of what she conceives of as a haunting liberalist celebration of the ‘free’ political agent of queer theory – that is, an agent-subject that is capable of, and can risk, assuming a long, critical distance to the socially constructed nature of its ‘self’ (19, 22, 40). Because Namaste gives no further concrete examples of the liberalist tendencies in Butler’s queer narrative, I would like to offer the following quotation to expand on this suggestion:

In order to avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed [i.e. the integration of queer subjectivities into normative discourse], it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and *to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body* beyond the law. If subversion is

possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be *liberated*, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, *but to an open future of cultural possibilities.*” (Butler, 1990, 93, emphasis added)

Although the liberation of the subject would not strictly be possible from a poststructuralist perspective (after all, ‘the subject’ *is* discourse), the language Butler uses here risks a disguised suggestion in that direction, something that I suggest is informative for the critique her work has received. Even though Butler acknowledges the impossibility of ‘liberation’ in the traditional sense (i.e. the possibility to be completely free of discursive constraint), there is a clear link here between the ideal of liberation and a certain kind of freedom in the form of an ‘open’ future not of unlimited, but of a discursively enabled *variety* of possibilities that exist beyond the established order. It is clear here that the pursuit of sex/gender conformity or a *unified* subject position is not among the politically valid options, because they require a different, less ‘open ended’ horizon. Resultantly, a lived transsexual desire for sex/gender conformity appears here as pursuing ‘the illusion of a true body’, thereby invalidating the (lived) real in favour of the affirmation of the (politically viable) illusion of the constructed body/subject.

Kolozova (2014) comments on exactly this tendency in Butler’s work to reverse the hegemonic value of the biases of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ versus ‘fiction’ and ‘illusion’, while leaving the structure of the opposition itself intact. Positing sex as a discursively constructed ‘necessary fiction’, so Kolozova argues, Butler reintroduces a hegemonic bias of ‘the real’ versus ‘the unreal’ (or fictitious), in which the positive side of the binary is *reversed* from dominant logic (54). In a somewhat complicated linguistic spin, Kolozova proceeds by arguing that “the argument that the fiction of sex is real even though it is not *the* real intimates that there is a real which is more real than this fiction”, albeit one human thought will never be able to grasp (56, emphasis added). Here, it becomes possible to see where academic authority may be wielded over that of a heterogeneously lived and experienced reality: the faint (yet necessarily incomplete) knowledge of a deeper reality than the one that is generically lived by human beings re-introduces the old metaphysical “problem of the real and the illusion that always already ‘translates’ and transposes itself into the problem of *truth* and *delusion*” (55, emphasis added). Academic representation here assumes the status of truth, positing lived identity and sex/gender coherence as a (necessary) delusion.

Such line of reasoning, so Kolozova argues, is paradoxically enabled by the *exclusion* of other possible realities, such as those characterised by continuity, coherence, stability, and identity (41). The principles of uncertainty and fragmentation here come to be seen as “a positively determined ontological truth about the ‘essence of being’” (82). I suggests that this analysis is illuminating for the preference of queer and transgender identity and subjectivity over those that are transsexual: Raymond, Butler and even Stone favour the perceived dynamic of transgendered *becoming* over the statics of transsexual *being*, conceptualising the coherence and stability of self as phantasmic motivations for sex/gender transition, thereby denying the validity of its outcome’s considerable status within (intellectual) reality.

Kolozova’s analysis demonstrates how a certain notion of ontological essence persists within poststructuralist accounts of sex/gender, begging the question of how the concept of essence might be rethought *differently*, that is, without making an appeal to the biological essentialist paradigm, or perpetuating academic hegemony. I suggest that this is a question worth considering in light of a possible alternative academic representation of transsexuality, for it closely relates to the question of how a politics of transsexual integrity, wholeness and belonging – such as articulated within Prosser’s politics of home – can resist giving in to the same biological essentialist paradigm that might be used to summon transsexual people out of existence (as evident in Raymond’s representation; see also Bettcher, 2014, 386). Pondering on the problematic status of essence in poststructuralist theory, Kolozova quotes Braidotti, who states:

If ‘essence’ means the historical sedimentation of many-layered discursive products, this stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements and expectations about women or female identity – this repertoire of regulatory fictions that are tattooed on our skins – then *it would be false to deny that such an essence not only exists, but is also powerfully operational.*” (Braidotti in Kolozova, 2014, 25)

Again, what is at stake here is not so much a disavowal of the idea that the subject and its trajectories *are* discursively constituted. Rather, what Braidotti and Kolozova suggest is the very real possibility that a certain kind of sexed/gendered essence might be deeply felt, and is a part of how the real is experienced and lived. Notably, this argument cannot be reduced to a logic that accepts essence as a subjective feeling that nevertheless should be considered a fiction from an intellectual or philosophical point of view (25): essence – or the ‘unifying principle’ that “‘glues’ the subject together” (27) – must be considered as *real* in its effects

and substance, because it is part of a certain discursive fabric, or skin, that constitutes the subject and its capacity to relate to, and be in, the world. The capacity to integrate ‘the outside’, or ‘elsewhere’ into ‘the real’ as it is normatively constituted and perceived, can be seen as the affirmative materialisation of a certain discursively acquired attribute of a specific subject.

This conception could mobilise the development of an affirmative approach to sex/gender conformative transsexual transitions, such as the one advocated by Prosser’s politics of home: “[W]hen the fantasized ‘elsewhere’ is *embodied*”, so Kolozova argues, “it brings elsewhere home” (76). Indeed, one could say that when the fantasy of, and desire for, a differently sexed being *is* embodied – may it be through hormonal therapies, surgeries, gender performance and/or a different relationality to the world –, it brings one home to one’s own subjectivity, allowing one to feel at home in the world. Kolozova emphasises that this conception does not suggest that the subject must be seen as autonomous: “On the contrary, insisting on the presence and the [academic] relevance of the instance of oneness [or essence] – which implies continuity and a specific mode of unity for the self – *reaffirms* self’s ultimate vulnerability and constitutive dependence on the ‘world’” (72, emphasis added). Kolozova’s epistemological narrative makes it possible to see how the embodied realisation of a certain type of relationality can be considered agential and relevant to feminist inquiry without making imperative a certain directionality to the unfolding of the subject. It is an invitation to academic feminism to conceive of transsexual subjectivity in the world as it is, and not how it should, or could be.

1.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how a definition of feminist agency as the capacity to resist and subvert sex/gender normativity has defined the political feminist subject across different traditions of social constructivist feminist thought, including that of radical lesbian-feminism (Jeffreys and Raymond), poststructuralist feminism (Butler) and trans feminism (Stone). Sex/gender conformative transsexual women here occupy a position of decreased or politically invalidated agency, due to their subjective investment in normative sex/gender discourses on femininity, femaleness and womanhood. The epistemological narrative that generates the asymmetrical distribution of agency and political feminist consciousness in this particular context is founded upon an onto-epistemologically determined non-transsexual and

academic privilege, making the adoption of political subversivism in the course of its redistribution a questionable project.

Despite its problematic political directedness, the poststructuralist conceptions of agency and subjectivity have the potential to deconstruct non-transsexual privilege, which is (amongst others) founded upon the modernist subject as an ideal political agent. As a partial conclusion, the framework of poststructuralist feminism itself might be deployed to bring out its own hegemonic tendencies and give shape to an alternative epistemological narrative that respects the radically heterogeneous directedness of subjectivation processes, and values lived experiences of, and desires for, sex/gender conformity as an intrinsically significant part of transsexual *and* non-transsexual women's lives, instead of seeing them as mere objects for re-signifying analyses. In the proceeding chapter I will further engage with the idea that a poststructuralist feminist epistemological framework might be deployed to bring out its own modernist, imperialist tendencies, simultaneously providing alternative modes of thinking about agency, subjectivity, sex/gender normativity, transsexuality and feminism.

Chapter 2

The Postsecular Turn

On the Discursive Limits of Feminist Political Agency

2.1. Introduction: Turning Towards the Postsecular

My starting point is that the postsecular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality. This statement has an important corollary – namely that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities. Subjectivity is rather a process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values, and hence also multiple forms of accountability.

– Rosi Braidotti (2008, 2) –

Positing “the postsecular turn in feminism”, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2008) points to several contemporary developments in the realm of academic feminism, including the rise of non-secular thinking that challenges the secular assumptions of dominant Western feminist discourse; the analytical uncovering of Western secularism, humanism, liberalism and modernism as *a* narrative among many possible others; and the rising importance of ethics (i.e. a concern with the question of what certain knowledges generate in the world, 10). Taken together, these developments in feminist thinking open up several foundational questions: Which subjectivities and political goals can, or cannot, be considered feminist? Which political direction must such goals take in order to be considered as such? Who determines, and has historically determined, the contents of such political direction? As Braidotti signals in the above quotation, these questions give rise to several others, together posing a severe epistemological challenge to a dominant Western feminist paradigm: How have agency, political subjectivity and ‘the feminist subject’ traditionally been defined? Which challenges does the rise of postsecular thought pose to these definitions? Which epistemological re-conceptualisations might be required, and which implications might such new epistemological definitions have for feminism as a radically heterogeneous project?

In Chapter One I aimed to answer the first set of Braidotti’s questions in relation to a Western feminist debate concerning sex/gender conformative transsexual women’s agency and subjectivity, demonstrating how a subversivist political directionality is re-enforced by prevailing social constructivist feminist discourses and constitutes the epistemological boundaries of the feminist subject-agent. It has become clear how the sex/gender norm conforming directionality of some transsexual subjectivation processes may function as a ground on which the agency and political consciousness of this particular group of subjects

can be conceptually and politically removed, or invalidated. In addition, I have demonstrated how the capacity and desire to subvert and deconstruct established sex/gender norms lies at the heart of a contemporary feminist definition of (political) agency, connecting the latter with the entertainment of an oppositional consciousness. Following this line of thinking, a sex/gender norm conforming agency must be considered either impossible, or produced by false consciousness. As becomes evident in the epigraph to this chapter, it is precisely the hegemony of these epistemological definitions that might be challenged by taking a postsecular turn on feminist thinking.

Establishing a link between two debates carried out across differential academic contexts – namely one concerning the sex/gender normative trajectories of transsexuality, conducted (primarily) internally of a Western feminist tradition; and one regarding secular and non-secular political subjectivities and perspectives, conducted across and between differing dominant and marginalised traditions of feminist thought –, I will demonstrate that both debates are concerned with a similar epistemological challenge made towards dominant feminist paradigms, arguing in favour of the productivity of a postsecular perspective that exceeds a debate on secular and non-secular modes of engagement.²⁶

In order to explicate this standpoint more accurately, it is important to further explain the parallels that emerge from my own reading of subversivism as proposed in Chapter One, and Braidotti's explanation of a postsecular intervention into the concepts of agency, political subjectivity and 'feminism' as an internally divided political, ethical and analytical project. Most importantly to the postsecular turn, so Braidotti argues, is the realisation that political agency can and must no longer be conceptualised solely as the capacity to produce counter-discourses, or counter-subjectivities; a conception that conflates a critical perspective with a negative, or negating political position (2, 19). As Wendy Brown (2009) meaningfully notes, such a negative conception posits a productive critique "as the dethroning of God"; i.e., as

²⁶ It is important to note that 'the religious' and 'the postsecular' are not necessarily the same. As postsecular analyses such as those of Asad (2003), Braidotti (2008) and Taylor (2007) demonstrate, secularism as a political ideology is not opposed to the religious, in fact accommodating various religious and spiritual moral standpoints. In the same way, postsecularism is not opposed to the secular. Rather, it is an epistemological lens that posits secularism as *a* situated political ideology rather than an actualised reality; one that appears as but one possible mode of relating to the world amongst many a variety of other viable and valuable alternatives. A religious perspective is therefore not necessarily a postsecular one, nor is a postsecular lens necessarily religious.

secular (11). A postsecular re-conceptualisation thus resides on the political recognition of those subjectivities that refuse negative critique and oppositional consciousness as the starting point for feminist consciousness, such as pious and religious subjectivities – or, I will argue, sex/gender conforming ones, in which normative discursive structures are equally affirmed, valued and embodied. The concept of agency here requires a dynamic, heterogeneous re-definition, based on the idea that different contextual discursive traditions produce different embodied subjectivities, desires, practices, sensibilities, consciousness, politics and accountabilities. This political recognition of heterogeneously centred and directed political subjectivities resultantly leads to the deconstruction of Western intellectual imperialism.

A postsecular ethical approach, then, is concerned with how such differences can be negotiated in light of a shared, sustainable futurity project. The concept of ‘sharing’ here emerges not as a pre-supposed universality, but as a radically heterogeneous assemblage of different socially constructed social horizons that are driven not necessary by a same desire for political progress, but by a certain longing for continuation and endurance, or, I suggest, survival (Braidotti, 2008, 18). Recalling Butler’s (1993) queer political ideal of “an open future of cultural possibilities” (93), Braidotti’s postsecular ethics might interrupt the linearity and singularity of such ‘open future’, moving conceptually towards a multiplicity of heterogeneous futures and social horizons, emergent from different discursive traditions. It offers a diffraction of what Valentine (2012) has framed as the progressive timeline of modernity, making an ethical intervention into the asymmetrical distribution of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ moral agencies, which follows this same singular linearity (193).

A short revisiting of Serano’s (2013) work may demonstrate in closer detail how a fruitful postsecular ethical approach to transsexual subjectivity might emerge from a juxtaposing of the religious and the transsexual subject as emergent from the same dominant feminist epistemological narrative. As an alternative to the systematic, negative dialectics of ‘gender entitlement’, Serano develops the term ‘ethical gender’. “[I]n order to be ethically gendered”, so she argues,

“... we must not presume that our own personal meanings represent fixed meanings – i.e., those that are supposedly universal and apply to all other people. Specific identities and bodies, and expressions of gender and sexuality, do not have any fixed values or meanings – their meanings can vary from place to place, and from person to person.” (Serano, 2013, 245)

The argument speaking from this quotation is clear and simple: Sex/gender performances and the meanings they generate in the world are contextual in their emergence, deployment and signification.²⁷ Any analysis perpetuating the use of a one-directional epistemological lens necessarily generates an act of epistemic violence, cutting down the lived reality of the contextual phenomenon in question to its own analytical and political horizon. An ethical enactment and embodiment of gender thus posits itself as *one* possible mode of relating to a situated established sex/gender discourse, allowing other possible modes of relation to emerge as equally valid and valuable.

I suggest that Serano's concept of ethical gender as an embodied practice of political and personal respect for the multi-directionality and various meanings of 'other' sex/gender performances, embodiments, sensibilities and subject positions that depart from 'the self' – may this be an individual; a wider discursive tradition; or a specific body of feminist academic thought – can be read in line with 'the ethical turn' in feminism, which is described by Braidotti (2008) as one of the pillars of a postsecular mode of engagement (10). As shall be discussed in more detail, such an anti-imperialist (or anti-entitlement) ethical approach not only requires a certain political humility – i.e. a politics that does not envision itself as universally viable, applicable and desirable –, but also demands a different take on analytical concepts and categories: these should not inhabit a singular political directionality, instead being adaptable to diverse contextual emergences (see also Serano, 2013, 240). The challenge posed by the postsecular, then, is how to negotiate the inevitable political directedness of feminism as both a political and an academic analytical endeavour in light of diverse, multi-directional ethical practices.

²⁷ Serano (2013) does not use the term 'performance', because she envisions Butler's theory on sex/gender performativity to approximate the argument that gender is a *performance* and a cultural artefact, thereby denying its deep and essential value for situated subjects. In addition, the idea that sex and gender are ultimately the same performative trajectory might be deployed to deny the personal and political legitimacy of transsexual people's desire for SRS: if sex/gender can be culturally performed and re-signified, the surgical modification of sex is a mere and unnecessary literalising of discourse (120-1; Prosser, 1998, 14). My own deployment of the term points to the idea that both 'femininity' (traditionally conceptualised as gender) and 'female-ness' (traditionally conceptualised as sex) are performative: they do not arise from a neutral, biological characteristic, but are brought into being through a certain interpellation of discourse, of which the materiality of the body can be seen as one possible trajectory. Here, sex and gender are not seen as cultural artefacts, but as socially and discursively regulated, material emergences. Importantly, such conceptualisation is affirmative towards the possibility of SRS as one possible technique of, or response to, interpellation.

As Serano (2013) meaningfully notes, it was precisely her encounter with a *religious* narrative that provided her with the starting point for imagining such irreconcilably heterogeneous directionalities; an encounter with a consciously exercised process of subjectivation that does not take the increasing of individual freedom as its highest goal, instead valuing accountability to an authority that transcends the self. Speaking from her personal location as a transsexual woman and an agnostic scholar, Serano levels her lived experiences of transsexual sexed/gendered selfhood in a primarily non-transsexual (queer) feminist milieu with those of spiritual and/or religious subjects amidst a primarily secular imaginary of the contemporary Western world. Both types of subjectivity emerge in relation to certain experiences of selfhood and being in the world that depart from dominant experiences of reality; both risk marginalisation and erasure; and both may be felt as deeply innate and irreconcilable with a certain prevailing feminist epistemological narrative (240-1), of which I would like to name social constructivism.²⁸ As this consideration of Serano's work demonstrates, a re-thinking of religious subjectivities and (political) agency, and their place within feminist politics, may open up the epistemological boundaries of what these concepts have traditionally come to signify within a dominant feminist discursive tradition; a gesture that far exceeds, but could emerge in example of, those postsecular interventions confined to a feminist consideration of religious subjectivity. How can a postsecular lens provide a deeper analysis of the specific hegemonic systems in which these definitions are rooted; and which critical challenges does such an analysis pose to the presumed universal validity of their analytical and political deployment?

In the subsection below, I will provide my own analysis of Raymond's and Butler's epistemological modelling of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity, arguing its epistemological boundaries are invested in, and shared by, a religious subject position. Based on this juxtaposition, I will take up Saba Mahmood's ([2005] 2012) epistemological intervention into traditional feminist conceptualisations of pious and politically religious agencies, demonstrating in the course of the second subsection how the epistemological premises and analytical reflections that flow from this intervention might be equally valuable for the development of an affirmative re-conceptualisation of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity and agency. Third, I will expand this argument by introducing Talal

²⁸ Notably, the social constructivist premise that everything is discursively constructed has the potential to deny the authenticity of both a transsexual desire to be something else than what one is socially constituted to be, and a religious belief in God as the non-constructed, transcendent origin of life itself.

Asad's (2003) work on the relation between secular agency, human(ist) suffering and the subject-in-pain, demonstrating how this modernist line of reasoning may persist within present postmodernist conceptions of transsexual sex/gender conformity, and the practice of SRS in particular. Concluding, I will come back to the question of which critical analyses of agency, political subjectivity, 'the feminist' and 'the transsexual' subject a postsecular approach might offer, questioning which alternative epistemological approach might be derived from such a critical intervention in Chapter Three.

2.2. 'Seek Ye Another Body': A Religious Imaginary of the Transsexual Subject

As suggested in the introduction, my exploration and deployment of a postsecular approach to the debate concerning sex/gender conformative transsexual women's place in feminist theory, politics and practice is based on the idea that both her subject position and that of the religious subject are shaped by the same epistemological premises. Here, I will demonstrate how both Raymond's radical lesbian-feminist and Butler's poststructuralist feminist representation of sex/gender conformative transsexual women corresponds, in fact, to a religious imaginary. I find it important to highlight the fact that this analysis is conducted in service of the argument that 'the transsexual' and 'the religious' subject share a set of negative, or absent, capacities that are attributed to them in these epistemological narratives of subjectivity, political agency and feminism – that are, the capacities to fulfil the presupposed political and personal potential of respectively a modernist and a postmodernist subject-agent. By no means do I wish to reinforce the idea that transsexual subjectivity is indeed somehow invested in a religious narrative, in which sex/gender normativity fulfils the role of a Divine authority.

The former statement (the one I aim to avoid) is characteristic of Raymond's (1979) representation, in which she explicitly links the institution of religion to the medical institution she believes transsexualism to be, answering to the promising interpellation "do not suffer now but seek ye another body!" (142). As this small remark demonstrates, religion as well as transsexuality here come to be seen as deceptive promises of the possibility to transcend suffering; a transcendence that is, according to Raymond's theory of gender, a fake one, constituted in opposition to the 'real' transcendence that can be reached through the overcoming of patriarchal sex/gender normativity by adopting a radical lesbian-feminist oppositional consciousness, which may lead to the dethroning of the patriarchal God.

On a textual level, Raymond explicitly refers to ‘the transsexual empire’ as “a new secular religion” and a “theodicy”, in which sex/gender normativity is established as a Divine goal (149). The term theodicy is usually deployed in order to point to a discourse that aims to reconcile the existence of an essentially ‘good’ God with the appearance of evil and suffering in the world. ‘Gender dissatisfaction’, I suggest, is here one of the manifestations of suffering caused by the patriarchal good/God of sex/gender normativity, to which transsexualism is the reconciliation and simultaneously the correction.²⁹ Raymond’s states:

In this theodicy, as in all religious theodicies, the surrender of selfhood is necessary to a certain extent. In the medical theodicy, transsexuals surrender themselves to the transsexual therapists and technicians. The medical order then tells transsexuals what is healthy and unhealthy (the theological equivalents of good and evil). Thus the classification function of the term *transsexualism* analyses a whole system of meaning that is endowed with an extra-ordinary power of structuring reality.” (Raymond, 1979, 2)

Conflating sex/gender normativity with ‘health’, the medical theodicy manages to raise it up to the level of a good/God that needs to be worshipped, making the performing of the religious or *lawful* subject imperative to ensure a ‘real’ meaningful state of being in the world. What this formulation suggests most strongly is Raymond’s conception of the constitution of the lawful subject – either religious or transsexual – as crucially founded upon the *surrender* of selfhood, which is presumably required in order for one to follow the law, and to assume a place within this Symbolic system with ‘extra-ordinary’ – or, I suggest, ‘extra-subjective’ – power over what reality is allowed to be, or become.³⁰

²⁹ I suggest that Raymond’s use of the term ‘secular religion’ might be considered inaccurate. If one understands the secular as a mode of engagement that aims to establish a separation between ‘the religious’ and ‘the political’, transsexualism, according to Raymond’s own analysis, clearly takes on the role of both: it is both a political ideology and practice; a belief in, and a promise of, transcendence. Raymond’s use of the term might be an attempt to refer to the context in which modern Western transsexual discourse has emerged, namely within a secularly structured society.

³⁰ Notably, Raymond’s evocation of a religious imaginary in the course of a negatively critical research into how contemporary medical discourses represent and impact female-born women’s lives, bodies and health is not confined to a transsexual context. In her earlier article “Medicine as Patriarchal Religion” (1982) Raymond already established the argument that modern medicinal discourse functions according to religious principles, based on the statement that religion is by definition patriarchal and un-feminist, because it requires the submission of the self to a given external authority.

In Chapter One, I demonstrated how Raymond's definition of selfhood is defined as a natural capacity to entertain autonomy and individuality against the forces of collectively established regulatory norms, laws and morals, thereby defining physical and political integrity as well as agency as the capacity to maintain this presumably original independence through the constant enactment of the subject's natural "social protest capacity" (145). To align oneself to the established structures of reality here appears as a betrayal of this original human integrity and its supposed pre-discursive innocence. Again adopting a religious imaginary, Raymond states that what she "[calls] an ethic of integrity is an attempt to discuss an original unity before the Fall of sex-role stereotyping" (155). In its appeal to a non-transsexual origin, this phrase connects originality to (political and moral) innocence; one that exceeds the binaries of 'good and bad' and 'men and women', and predates the world as 'we' known it, that is, ruled by certain Gods and goods, instead making an appeal to a pre-religious paradise free of discursive, social and/or divine regulation and determination.

My above analysis demonstrates how both the transsexual and the religious subject appear to fall on the same side of a set of related hegemonic binary oppositions. Both appear as "passive, acquiescent [in their surrender of a presumably natural, original physical and political integrity], and [(medically)] manipulatable [in their desire to be recognised and protected under the patriarchal law]" (Raymond, 1979, 123) where a viable feminist subject ought to be active, resistant and autonomous. As I hope to have demonstrated, these biases are founded upon a definition of the politically conscious and capable agent as *essentially* standing apart from discourse, and *ideally* as far from it as circumstances may allow for. The desire for a proximity or affirmative connection to the law here becomes negatively defined as the product of a false consciousness. The desire to subject oneself to an authority that is not 'the self' in aim for a certain subjective change – a desire that can be observed in both transsexual and religious subjectivity – here comes to be represented as politically regressive and undesirable from a feminist perspective.

In Butler's postmodernist account, the possibility of a pre-discursive innocence or pre-religious originality is clearly refuted. The sovereign self that appears in Raymond as a 'true' transcendent ideal here comes to be seen as a 'false God'; an 'I' that assumes a god-like, all-mighty, unified individualism that it cannot accommodate according to Butler's (1990) poststructuralist definition of the subject (117). Here too, however, a religious imaginary is adopted to represent the negative, circular character of the signification process of sex,

offering queer feminist re-signification processes as the disruption of an otherwise ‘self-negating circle’ (57). Both critiquing and working with Lacan’s theory on the status of the Symbolic, Butler argues that it is the very illusionary and impossible status of Symbolic transcendence – that is, the subject’s complete embodiment of the law – that keeps its authority in place: just like the God of the Old Testament, the law produces its subjects as always already incapable of transcendence, thereby maintaining a subordinate relationship that is characterised by torture without reward or escape (57). Arguing that Lacan’s own narrative demonstrates “a romanticization or, indeed, a religious idealization of ‘failure’, humility and limitation before the law” and therefore inhabits a “slave morality”, Butler posits the question of how the circle of (religious) signification can be breached (56).

A religious perspective on the patriarchal law – or simply on moral discourse – here becomes associated with the tragic, self-defeating belief in an oppressive illusion that romanticises or idealises both passivity and human suffering. Taken the analytical importance of a conception of circular signification to Butler’s political queer feminist theory on re-signification, this representational mode must be conferred to her explanation of sex/gender performance and identity. Although it is not possible to embody sex/gender normativity – after all, all identification and subjectivation reside on the fulfilment of a fantasy (discourse) that disguises itself as the real – the constant pull to try puts the subject in a position of constant suffering, humbling it in front of the law. I suggest that this narrative risks a representation of sex/gender normativity as a false, deceiving God, portraying the religious as well as the sex/gender conformative subject as constrained, obedient, suffering, passive, limited, and necessarily invested in its own inevitable (but politically productive) failure.

Clearly, Butler’s conception of ‘worship’ as a limitation does not concur with the details of Raymond’s (1979) narrative, in which worship and control appear as synonyms for objectification, as opposed to a ‘free’ subjectivation of the feminist subject (31). Butler’s (1990) poststructuralist narrative must conceive of (feminist) subjectivation as at least partly produced in reaction to certain forms of (discursive) control. Nevertheless, it continues to position an affirmation of worship or lawfulness as antithetical to feminist agency, disruption and re-signification, which require the interruption of the circle (55). Although her argument clearly perpetuates the idea that a freedom of subject is not possible, the importance of the certain failure to embody the Symbolic is so central to the proclaimed political direction of her work that the implications of the overall statement must be taken seriously: Is the ideal

political subject-agent of gender trouble a secular one – that is, one that is capable of separating self from discourse, onto-epistemological situated-ness from political practice? Does her definition of agency as opposed to human suffering – which apparently appeals to a religious subject (or non-agent) – affirm a secularist politics? And, perhaps most importantly, do the imperatives of her own poststructuralist epistemological framework not ultimately work against such conceptions of human agency, consciousness and subjectivity?

2.3. Realising the Poststructuralist Agent: A Postsecular Turn on Butler

In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* ([2005] 2012) Saba Mahmood engages respectively with the first and the third question I have posed in the previous paragraph, albeit in the context of a completely different feminist debate. Addressing the persistent failure of feminist discourse to provide an affirmative – that is, non-judgemental – representation of pious, Islamic and Islamist women's agency and (political) subjectivities, Mahmood conducts a detailed anthropological research on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, focussing on an analytical representation of its subjects that resists the application of Western political categories and concepts. Addressing the main premises underpinning prevailing feminist misrepresentations of pious Muslim women's agency, Mahmood argues that the application of autonomy and individuality as universal to the human subject comes with a conceptual split between what is conceived of as "the subjects real desires" – that is, its desires for autonomy and individuality –, "and obligatory social conventions" – that are, regulatory discursive laws and morals (149). This opposition leads to a conception of those practices that are *not* in service of the realisation of individual autonomy as either wilfully deceptive, or as produced by a false (i.e. mislead) consciousness. This theory on the ontological direction as well as on the apparently ex-discursive fabric of 'the human' – which might be better described as the discourse of Western humanism – falsely represents certain practices, sensibilities and behaviours as either unnatural or false – such as the desire to put one's life in service of Divine or familiar others.

What this conceptualisation does not take into account, so Mahmood argues, is how certain subjects' sense of self are so closely connected to their socially prescribed performance that one cannot conceive of subject and discourse as analytically separable entities (149).

Moreover, to demand this separation in the course of a universal political project – such as 'women's emancipation', or the deconstruction of sex/gender – is to deny the existence of a

considerable diversity of discursively situated value systems through which a situated self might be conceived of, or position itself, as valuable and viable from both a political and a personal perspective. A Western humanist definition that posits agency “as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (8) may foreclose an adequate understanding of the ways in which the actualisation and embodiment of custom, tradition, transcendental will and/or normativity are in some traditions considered as the very means through which a certain political subject-agent emerges – such as is the case for the Islamist subject. The link between self-realisation and individual autonomy (i.e. self-realisation *as* the drive towards individual autonomy) is a particular political conception that is characteristic of a Western humanist liberalist discourse. The analytical application of the category of resistance as a universal human movement against discursively established norms and morals introduces a singular teleology to the unfolding of the agential human subject; a direction that is in fact particular to a very *specific* type of subject – that is, a Western, modernist, secular, humanist, liberalist one (9, 11).³¹

The oppositional character of the political categories of ‘subversion’ and ‘submission’ might here be illuminating for how the humanist and liberalist premises explained in the previous paragraphs operate in the context of a problematic analytical representation of pious Islamist women. Because the desire to entertain and actualise complete submission to the laws of God cannot be considered as the seat of a viable political consciousness (in the absence of subversion), their (political) agency must be represented as either false, or absent. This analysis concurs in detail with my own analysis of Raymond’s representation of the sex/gender conformative MTF transsexual subject, which I argued is rooted in a progressive modernist politics and must, in light of the analysis I proposed in the previous subsection, be seen as explicitly humanist, liberalist and secularist.

A poststructuralist definition of discourse, subjectivity, identity, desire and (political) agency, so Mahmood proceeds, may pose a productive intervention to their modernist counterparts,

³¹ The adjective ‘secular’ in Mahmood’s work refers to a mode of engagement with contemporary life that perpetuates the view that religious beliefs should not be the pillars of a political perspective. I suggest that a secular mode of engagement might be conceptually extended, referring to the simple premise that it is possible to separate the realm of politics from the subjective situated-ness of the political subject in the first place. Following this line of thought, the term ‘secular’ might also be used in a broader context, signifying a belief in the possibility of such a separation between the subject and the discursive tradition in which she emerges.

which risk attributing unconstrained and non-contextual autonomy, individuality and freedom of choice to the subject-agent. Going back to Foucault's theory on subjectivation, it becomes possible to argue that the subject's attributes are in fact not natural, but discursively produced, or socially constructed. 'Autonomy' appears as a situated experience of self that has no natural connection to the human in any way, existing among a wide variety of other possible experiences of self; consequentially desired processes of self-realisation; and political projects. Discourse here emerges as a constraining *and* enabling force, shaping the boundaries of the subject as well as its capacity for, and mode of, self-understanding and its relation to the world in general: the moral subject that lays at the base of a political consciousness is constituted through the subject's relation to the law. Subordination as well as subversion come to be seen as discursively constituted capacities. Moreover, it might be argued that an unconscious submission to the law lays at the base of all subjectivation processes, therefore preceding the possibility of resistance (19-20; Foucault in Mahmood, 2012, 28).

This poststructuralist definition of subjectivity – the same as adopted by Butler – allows for a less judgemental and even affirmative mode of academic engagement with normativity. Rather than entertaining an ideological separation between 'the subject' and 'the norm', it becomes possible to see how norms "are not only consolidated and/or subverted, . . . but [also] performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (22). This conception emphasises the fact that norms and morals are not merely 'carried' by the subject, but are performative in nature. Recalling Butler's theory on performative gender, this conception leads to the conclusion that they are not necessarily more oppressive than they are enabling: they can be entertained in a wide variety of modes, and enable different modes of subjectivity.

Arguing in favour of Butler's conception of embodied practices as performative of sexed/gendered and religious meanings, Mahmood makes an important intervention into Butler's work, arguing that, although her poststructuralist theory on performativity and the agential subject can be deployed to deconstruct the autonomous, liberalist, humanist agent of modernist political theories, her own work continues to privilege a liberal, or *liberatory*, political agent, demonstrating the presence of persistent intellectual remnants of a Western liberalist, humanist universalism within postmodernist discourse. Even though resistance must be seen as at least partly governed by its relation to discursive violence, the moments where it seems most closely resembling the 'old' modernist conception of self-realisation and autonomy continue to be privileged; The importance of the Symbolic horizon for the

emergence of any subjective capacity is conceptually subverted by placing emphasis on how the subject may try (in vain) to escape its confinements (21).

This re-submission of analytical materials to a singular directed political narrative, so Mahmood argues, is both politically and analytically unsound: both feminist and poststructuralist discourse are opposed to the re-naturalisation of human capacities and attributes, which is exactly what is risked in the course of a persistent political celebration of the resistant political subject within poststructuralist feminist traditions. “[I]f we accept the notion that all forms of desire are discursively organized”, so Mahmood suggests, “then it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission or recognized authority. *We cannot treat as natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics*” (15, emphasis added). The re-naturalisation of certain discursively produced impulses, desires and aspirations here appears as founded upon the pursuit of a certain feminist political ideology; a gesture that runs counter to a sound social constructivist and poststructuralist analysis, allowing “scholarship [to elide those] dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance” (14), or sex/gender non-conformative feminist politics.

2.4. The (Post) Modernist Crisis of the Suffering and Surviving Subject: Agency and the Pro-Operative Transsexual Body

As two sets of ethical practices that often fall in-between the political and analytical categories of submission and resistance – which, as my previous analyses have demonstrated, lay at the base of both modernist and postmodernist feminist understandings of (political) agency – Mahmood (2012) addresses suffering and survival, which she argues appear easily disowned in feminist poststructuralist analyses (167). In the context of queer subjectivities, Butler’s political analyses in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* seem to be at least slightly indifferent to the idea that those subject positions that are discursively constituted might also be (socially and personally) comfortable, liveable sex/gendered states of being that might in some cases be necessary to enable the subject’s survival. Recalling my analysis in Chapter One, Butler (1993) acknowledges that it would be cruel to demand the abolition of those “constitutive constraints by which *cultural viability* is achieved”, but does not take this acknowledgement as the starting point for a differentially directed political perspective or

analytical framework (79, emphasis added). Both Namaste (2000) and Prosser (1998) argue that the representational unfolding of Venus Extravaganza's death in Butler's text lacks an adequate analytical reading of her cultural (un-) viability, instead applying a purely political and subsuming philosophical reading (Namaste, 2000, 14; Prosser, 1998, 49).

Discussing this gesture as a more general tendency within poststructuralist feminist philosophy, Kolozova's (2014) argumentation concurs with this perspective on Butler's political readings, arguing that her earlier work misses a thorough consideration of the *ethical* trajectories of her sex/gender theories (73). As Kolozova (2014) suggests, however, Butler's later publication *Undoing Gender: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) makes a certain ethical turn, foregrounding the categories of 'liveability', survival and suffering, as well as their relation to 'the (discursively established) real' (73). Addressing marginalised people's lived experiences of being considered 'unreal' – a premise often laying at the base of violence directed against transsexual women (Bettcher, 2014, 398) –, Butler here stresses the importance of bringing oneself into 'the real', that is, into a discursively 'knowable reality' that may allow for, and secure, the subject's survival (Butler in Kolozova, 2014, 75).

However, I suggest that Butler persists in her emphasis on the necessity of subverting and deconstructing normative realities. She states: "To intervene *in the name of transformation* means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place" (Butler in Kolozova, 2014, 75, emphasis added). On the one hand, Butler's evocation of "the name of transformation" could be read as problematically bearing accountability to a singular political direction, in which transformation is equated with re-signification – a name established by a Western humanist, liberalist, secular postmodernist feminist discourse –, thereby continuing to dictate the political directedness of, as well as the moral intentions behind, certain practices and movements working towards integration. On the other hand, transformation can here also be read as a personal desire for material-semiotic change; for example the transsexual desire for a differently embodied and signified sexed/gendered subject position.

When read in this second mode, it becomes possible to conceive of a transsexual claim to sex/gender normativity not as a mere assimilatory movement, but as one that requires and enacts a certain intervention into the traditionally established boundaries of normativity itself

– for example refuting the biological essentialist premise that biology and sexed embodiment are fixed, un-transformable characteristics. I suggest that this second reading is indeed affirmative of the idea that differently situated processes of, and desires for, transformation may be mobilised by, inhabited, and generative of, differentially directed political and personal agencies, provided that its deployment resists submitting to the name of transformation in its first, politically one-directional deployment.³²

Mahmood's (2012) postsecular perspective challenges precisely these intellectual and politically hegemonic usages of the name of transformation, allowing practices of survival to be seen as politically and personally meaningful and affirmative within the discursive traditions to which they correspond without having to be accountable to a dominant feminist discourse in the last instance.³³ Following this argument, the re-subsuming of particular practices under the authority of a philosophical system or political ideology – in this case respectively poststructuralism and queer postmodernist feminism –, or the tendency to look for the subversivist potential in such practices, “[embracing] such movements [that is, those that do not follow the imperatives of ‘the feminist subject’ as it is commonly defined within dominant feminist discourses] as forms of feminism, thus enfolding them into a liberal imaginary”, is ultimately a form of epistemic violence (155).

Arguing along these lines, Prosser (1998) states that “Butler figures Venus as subversive for the same reasons that Butler claims she is killed [i.e. her pre-operative transsexual body], and

³² This short analysis might be productively deployed to further explicate my conception of Stone's work. On the one hand, the idea that the affirmative distribution of feminist agency might be mobilised through a more adequate understanding of the ways in which transsexual people transform the normative sexed/gendered categories to which they lay claim is in itself not harmful to those subjects aspiring to their integration into sex/gender normativity: their completed claims might indeed signify a certain intervention into the biological essentialist premises of such categories. On the other hand, the requirement that those transsexual subjects must remain *visibly* non-normative in order to fulfil such transformative potential may perpetuate a violent imperative of transsexual difference and enhanced political responsibility: it subsumes one name of transformation – that is, transsexuality – under the authority of another – namely that of a postmodernist, queer re-signification of sex/gender normativity.

³³ Kolozova (2014) argues that analytical concepts and categories should only be accountable to heterogeneous experiences of lived reality, taking this accountability as a point of unification – or “radically universal solidarity” – for various feminist discourses (8-9). ‘Determination-in-the-last-instance’ here appears as a concept that points to a concept's final authority (Laruelle, 1996, 121-162).

considers indicative of hegemonic constraint the desires that, if realised might have kept Venus at least from this instance of violence [i.e. the desire for a normative alignment of gender performance and sexed physicality], is not only strikingly ironic, *it verges on critical perversity*” (49, emphasis added). Among others, Prosser here demonstrates how a situated desire for sex/gender normativity *in the name of suffering and survival* runs a risk of being overlooked and devalued when analysed by, and therefore subsumed under, a subversivist framework of analysis. In light of Chapter One, it becomes clear how transsexuality itself might be posited as politically and morally regenerative when subsumed under a subversivist political paradigm, rather than being seen as a specific, contextual ethical practice emerging in response to a situated and discursively regulated lived reality, and indeed as one of many possible seats of feminist agency and consciousness.

As suggested previously, this realisation leads me to the conclusion that those arguments in favour of the enfolding of the transsexual subject within a queer postmodernist feminist framework, such as proposed by Stone, insufficiently challenge these violent mechanisms as well as the unmarked humanist, liberalist, secular premises upon which they function. As this third subsection proceeds, I will argue that a postsecular analysis of the relation between the suffering and surviving subject on the one hand, and a dominant Western conception of agency on the other, might be deployed to challenge the exclusion of the ‘pro-operative’ transsexual subject from feminist theory, politics and practice. By using the word ‘pro-operative’ I mean to point to both the suffering pre-operative subject, that seeks to overcome this suffering through body modification, and the post-operative subject, whose body history carries the emotional pain of having been ‘incorrectly’ sexed, as well as the physical pain of having one’s sex surgically re-assigned. Drawing upon Talal Asad’s (2003) postsecular analyses, I will suggest that there exist a deeper epistemological link between the subject in pain and the postmodernist agent, explicating how this link operates through feminist representations of the sex/gender conformative (pro-operative) MTF transsexual subject.

In *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003) Asad writes extensively on the relationship between pain and suffering on the one hand, and a Western modernist narrative of subversivism and agency on the other. Addressing the persistent focus on the political category of resistance within the Western academia, Asad explains that it is not so much this “romance of resistance” that concerns him, but the *singularity* that characterises the dominant definitions of agency that reside behind it – that is, agency defined as a strive for

autonomy, freedom, empowerment and even pleasure as both the ontological properties of the subject and the necessary directionality of its agentic actions (73, 79). The diverse contexts in which the concept of agency is deployed, even in the context of Western scholarship, demonstrates that agency has many ‘faces’, each emerging from their own spacial, temporal and cultural context (78): the agency of the patient, the soldier or the political prisoner (etc.) are clearly operational through a wide variety of practices, desires and meanings. “Although [these] various usages of agency have very different implications that do not all hang together”, so Asad continues, “cultural theory tends to reduce them to the metaphysical idea of a conscious agent-subject having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: *that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain*” (78-9, emphasis added). Disempowerment here becomes defined as the absence of autonomy and individual freedom; a lacking capacity to fulfil the subject’s ontological potentials and, therefore, its suffering. Pain, then, functions as an obstacle to the subject’s capacity for self-realisation.

According to Asad, the concepts of pain and suffering appear epistemologically closely connected to an explicitly secular conception of agency. Suffering, in its secular definition, can be seen as both the antidote of agency (self-empowerment, self-fulfilment and self-realisation), and may in its broader emergence be conceptualised as the cause that necessitates the imposition of secular agency (67). The idea that pain and suffering need to be overcome appears as an important pillar of humanist thinking, even if in reality the pain and suffering of some is necessitated by the operational processes of humanism as a universalising ideology (100-124). The ‘afflicted body’ here appears as a crippled agent that is no longer capable of unconstrained action; a capacity that is resultantly attributed to the non-afflicted, ‘whole’ body (68). The suffering body in pain (whether physical, mental or both) here comes to be seen as a passive object or victim that is tortured by external forces, as opposed to the active and self-owning agent-subject (79). The subject-in-pain can no longer be seen *as* a subject, its rational capacities to self-own interrupted by external interventions.

One of the most cited feminist works on the subject of pain, suffering, political agency and subjectivity is that of Elaine Scarry (1985), in which she argues that pain is a personal experience that exceeds discourse and language, thereby presenting itself as an extra-discursive and therefore hyper-real event that can be deployed for strategic political usage, such as practices of torture. Because pain presents itself as more real than any other

experience of lived reality – which is resultantly constituted as ‘mattering less’ in the face of pain –, it can be deployed to place the subject out of its own discursive context, depriving it of its social, moral and political consciousness (Scarry in Asad, 2003, 80-1). Asad (2003) takes issue with this argument, suggesting that there is no reason to assume that pain, as one embodied lived experience among many others, should stand out as being extra-discursive, or for that matter anti-social, or radically individualistic. Among others, he suggests that pain is communicated in a variety of ways, all of which are linguistically, discursively and culturally specific. The assumption that an individual experience of pain can somehow be separated from the ways in which it is lived and inhabited in a situated discursive, social and cultural context runs counter to any postmodernist theory of subjectivity, perhaps giving into a traditional modernist Cartesian split between body and mind, in which physical and mental pain somehow come to be seen as radically separated (80-1). Rather than being extra-discursive or anti-social, Asad states that pain is always already a relation: it is constituted at least partly by discourse – just like any attribute of the embodied subject –, and is lived and perceived as a social relation. According to this alternative perspective, pain can establish a connection between a situated subject and the world as it is lived by this subject, but is simultaneously experienced in accordance to any prior relations that have constituted the particular subject-agent that lives and endures its own situated suffering of pain as an embodied experience (82).³⁴

In the context of Raymond’s work, it becomes possible to see how a particular, desired conception of pain as a politically transformative social relation in fact lays at the base of her argument. Stating that transsexual people’s silence with regard to the physical pain of SRS – something which Raymond perceives as generically present among her research participants – cannot signify anything else than an excessive denial of the physical reality of the self, she argues that transsexual people’s affirmation of, and desire for, SRS signals that transsexualism is a masochistic practice (143). First of all, this statement demonstrates that Raymond conceives of pain as having to be articulated in a particular way – that is, outwardly vocally and in a presumably rejectionist mode – in order to be representative of genuine agency. Secondly, Raymond’s formulation suggests that she perceives pain as an experience

³⁴ When seen in light of a poststructuralist conception of sex/gender, it becomes possible to see how the suggestion that any experience that is felt as deeply internal (whether it is pain, sex or gender) can be split up in an extra-discursive physical component (let’s say, sex) and a discursively embedded, mental one (let’s say, gender), runs counter to any postmodernist conception of the subject (see Butler, 1993).

that has the very particular power to pull the subject towards the reality of herself – an interpellation to which the transsexual subject does clearly not respond, resulting in a subject position that is out-of-reality, pathological and unreasonable, or perhaps even unhealthy, and insane.

Pain here comes to be conceptualised as both external and passive, a conception that Asad challenges by asserting that both physical and mental pain can, and are, lived as practical relations to the world as well as to others, emerging as both constraining *and* performative forces of subjectivation (83). Giving various examples of situations in which pain is lived as a social and constitutive relationship – such as women who consciously shape their subject positions as mothers by choosing to give birth without pain relief (88); rape survivors that enable their own healing processes through the production of autobiographical narratives regarding their trauma (83); the performance of *ta'ziyya* “Islamic mourning rituals”, in which religious subject's assume their place in a particular Islamic tradition by mimicking the suffering of the Prophet's family through acts of flagellation; or simply the active pursuit to entertain ‘the fear of God’ in the course of constituting a religious, pious self (90) –, Asad argues that the conception of pain and suffering as passive, impassionate feelings is discursively situated within a Western secular humanist tradition, and exists among a wide variety of different conceptualisations that lead to differently directed agential practices.

How may this analysis relate to a more adequate conception of how the pro-operative transsexual subject is positioned within a dominant Western feminist paradigm? Revisiting Asad's consideration of autobiography as a self-healing practice, he asserts that such practices require the possibility that they be adequately understood, and enable a social response: autobiography functions within a particular discursive tradition, corresponding to situated conceptions of cultural viability that allow the subject's survival and healing. This argument concurs with Prosser's (1998) conception of transsexual autobiography as a self-healing practice, in which he stresses the importance of an established discursive narrative on sex/gender and sexual difference that might serve as an object of reference and agential negotiation (9, 11). Agency in this conception is not a rejection of normative discursive traditions, but becomes defined as the capacity to relate to these and deploy them as a source to generate situated viability.

With regard to the physical aspects of viable ethical practices, it becomes possible to see how the secular concept of agency is connected to a certain perception of the subject's vicissitudes. Privileging the 'whole' non-transsexual subject-agent over a presumably afflicted, fragmented and suffering transsexual subject, Raymond as well as Jeffreys see the pre-operative transsexual subject as a suffering non-agent, and the post-operative subject as irrevocably psychologically and physically mutilated (see Jeffreys, 2014, 58-79). The fact that this (mis-) conception is carried across a gap of more than thirty years of feminist scholarship may highlight the pervasive and continuing reach of the secularist and modernist premises addressed in Asad's work.

A postmodernist representation, then, can be equally considered as favouring (although not necessarily condemning) a non-surgically embodied subject-agent.³⁵ Following the premises of Valentine's (2012) research on anti-SRS sensibilities within queer postmodernist feminist discourse, it becomes possible to see how the political categories of integrity, sanity, insanity and pathology might be said to persist within a postmodernist representation of pro-operative transsexual subjectivity. By asking 'why one would choose to do 'this' (SRS) to their body', the body's original sanity and unity is emphasised, positioning body modification as an intervention into this whole-ness. Moreover, by assuming the phrase that 'somebody *is doing something* to someone/something else', a split between the agent behind the action and the body as afflicted object is constituted, conceptualising transsexual body modification as a pathological act of violence against the self. In addition, this pursuit of the Cartesian split – which is in fact fiercely rejected within postmodernist sex/gender theories – falsely positions the subject and the body as two different entities (see also Asad, 2003, 81).

As Mahmood (2012) elaborately argues, similar conceptualisations falsely position the body as the carrier of externally produced meanings, obscuring the ways in which the body itself

³⁵As Prosser (1998) argues, a queer postmodernist lens allows for at least two readings of the transsexual body, one in which it literalises discourse on the surface of the body, and one in which it de-literalises the meaning of the body itself (14). The first reading clearly corresponds to Butler's (1993) famous argument that the sexed body does *not* exist before nor beyond language, and can therefore acquire a different shape through mere discursive re-signification – perhaps leading to a favouring of non-surgical transgender embodiment, identity and subjectivity, as various authors have suggested (Bettcher, 2014, 385; Prosser, 1998, 44, 201; Serano, 2013, 120-1; Valentine, 2012, 202). The second reading posits the post-surgical transsexual body as a revolutionary postmodernist text that embodies and exemplifies the process of re-signification, perpetuating a more general liberalist take on body modification.

appears as the producer and generator of meaning and subjectivity (29). Asad (2003) suggests that this definition of agency, in which “the search for what pleases one” appears to be conducted separately from one’s physical embodiment, seems to be “marked by a lack of adequate attention to *the limits of the human body as a site of agency* – and in particular by an inadequate sensitivity to the different ways [in which] an agent engages with pain and suffering” (68, emphasis added). This short quotation suggests that the limits or boundaries of the human body can indeed appear as a site of affirmative agency, in which pain and suffering are negotiated in a variety of ways that do not necessarily follow a secular logic that demands the increasing of pleasure, or even the decreasing of pain.

I suggest that this affirmative conceptualisation of agential bodily practices might be deployed to envision how the surgical modification of sex can be conceived of as affirmatively agential, practically participating in an on-going negotiation of the constraining and enabling forces of normative sex/gender discourses. As transsexual woman and trans-disciplinary scholar Eva Hayward (2006) argues, transsexual surgery can be conceptualised as exactly that which Asad describes as commonly escaping attention in social theory, namely a practice that is situated upon the possibility to rework the limits or margins of the body, enabling a different relationship to the discourse-specific reality in which such a body is embedded. Hence, body modification does not ‘free’ the subject from the limitations of a sexed (and therefore discursively inscribed and regulated) body – such as might be the case in a liberalist postmodernist narrative. Rather, it enables the generation of new margins, allowing the subject to enter the real on different material-semiotic terms (182, 186).

In establishing this conception, Hayward resists a representation that conceives of transsexuality as a desire for (mythical) wholeness, as well as one that posits it as a split between internal and external forces (182). Both these trends can be said to operate through a postmodernist rejection of sex/gender conformity (here conceived of as the pursuit of a mythical wholeness), as well as through a dominant Western conception of pain and suffering as external forces that somehow afflict the agential capacities of the subject. Instead, Hayward proposes to conceive of pain and suffering as being *of* the body, rather than something that is being done *to* it, or as an absence of its presumably original capacities:

What I find disconcerting about this description of the transsexual is not the trouble of containment; it is the limiting of the body to containment alone. To be comfortable in one’s own body is not *only* to be

restricted, limited, contained, or constrained, or not this alone. It is to be able to live out the body's vicissitudes – its (our) [on-going] process of materialization. The body (trans or not) is not a clear, coherent and positive integrity. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between wrong body and right body, or between fragmentation and wholeness. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as coherent transformation, de-centred certainty, or limited possibility. Transsexuals do not transcend gender and sex. (Hayward, 2006, 182-3)

In this quotation several important points are being brought forward. First of all, Hayward proposes an affirmative perspective on 'containment', that is, the body as the material source, effect and generator of discursive inscription, suggesting that the constraint nature (i.e. the social constructed-ness and determination) of the body's vicissitudes cannot merely be seen as a 'trap', but also opens up certain possibilities of being in the world that might feel comfortable to the sexed/gendered subject, even though they cannot be epistemologically conceived of as 'natural'. Secondly, Hayward argues against a binary logic that privileges *either* fragmentation (Butler) *or* wholeness (Raymond) as the 'right' formation of body and subject, instead arguing that the body itself has certain material limits that give rise to certain constraints as well as expanding possibilities. Letting go of this binary conception, it becomes possible to see how the post-operative transsexual body is constituted as a 'meaningful integrity', but not as 'a clear, coherent' whole (see also 181). This narration makes it possible to see transsexual body modification as an affirmative change in the material-semiotic structures of the body-subject without necessarily essentializing either trajectory:

Changeability is intrinsic to the transsexual body, at once its subject, its substance and its limit. Our bodies are scarred, marked and reworked into a liveable 'gender trouble', sex trouble, or uneven epidermis. Transsexuals survive not because we become whole, but because we embody the reach and possibility of our layered experience – we have no choice. This is all to say, the transsexual body, my body, is a body created out of necessity, ingenuity and survival – to carry the heft of social identity, I, like many transsexuals, may desire some mythic wholeness, but what is truly intact for me, what I live, what I must be part of, is a body pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, flesh, history and bone. (Hayward, 2006, 183)

I suggest that the poststructuralist definition of the subject is explicitly present here, moving conceptually from a whole, natural modernist subject towards a postmodernist subject that is discursively, socially and culturally constituted and comes to be known – both to itself and to others – within a certain discursive tradition. The adjustment made here on a liberalist queer

conception, however, is the idea that one's sexed/gendered desires, feelings and aspirations are the products of 'free choice'. As Hayward argues here – in line with Valentine (2012, 192) – a transsexual desire towards sex/gender conformity is *not* a choice, but emerges in the context of a necessary strive for survival. In line with Asad's (2003) assertion that the subject's negotiation of pain, suffering and survival needs to be recognised by others in order to appear as viable within its own discursive tradition (83), Hayward (2006) suggests that transsexual subjectivity demands a discursive readability that does not transcend – or, I suggest, deconstruct – sex and gender (183). A “liveable gender trouble”, perhaps as opposed to Butler's (for some) unliveable variant, is a trouble that emerges from a material-semiotic position that enables the subject's constitution, recognition and survival within a particular discursive tradition, or lived reality.

Engaging with the work of moral philosopher Susan R. Wolf, Asad (2003) offers a surprisingly relevant perspective upon the desire for discursively enabled 'sanity', as opposed to an equally constituted 'insanity' or 'un-liveability', that Butler (1993) herself argues is part of the Symbolic's regulatory principles (xxiii).³⁶ The desire to be sane, so Asad argues,

... is thus not the desire for another form of control; it is rather a desire that one's self be connected to the world in a certain way – we could even say it is the desire that one's self be controlled by the world in certain ways and not in others'. This notion of sanity presupposes knowing the world practically and being known practically by it, a world of accumulation probabilities rather than constant certainties. It allows us to think of moral agency in terms of people's habitual engagement with the world in which they live, so that one kind of moral insanity occurs precisely when the pain they known in this world is suddenly no longer an object of practical knowledge. (Wolf in Asad, 2003, 73)

I suggest that this analysis is highly informative of the critiques transsexual authors have articulated with regard to Butler's project, and postmodernist scholarship in general. In a world that is practically governed by sexual difference, the desire for coherent sex/gender embodiment and a discursively 'readable' sexed/gendered identification can well be understood. Given Butler's (1990) own assertion that one cannot escape “the construction one is invariable in” (31), the idea that one *is* controlled by this world in one way or the other appears inescapable. Agency, then, appears as the capacity to regulate and modify the workings of such control to the capacities that are contextually available, or, as Braidotti

³⁶ Butler (1993) states: “the symbolic . . . [secures] the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic [un-livability]” (xxiii).

(2008) phrases it, as a mode of self-styling that emerges through a constant negotiation of dominant norms and values (2). As the previous quotation by Asad demonstrates, such an affirmation of ‘the real’ in its emergent formation is not necessarily essentialist in nature – it does not provide a fixity or naturalisation of situated meaning. Rather, it is a conception in which subjectivity emerges from *within* the limits of the body-subject that allow for different probabilities and possibilities of materialisation and realisation. The last phrase might serve as a warning for the dangers of a feminist discourse that fails to practically engage with lived experiences and heterogeneous realities of sex/gender normativity: an ethical turn might very well be necessary to counter the possibilities of moral insanity, ‘critical perversity’ and epistemic violence that may rise from an academic neglect of situated, cultural viability as *a* possible seat of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity and feminist agency.

Coupling this analysis back to Butler’s queer political subject, Hayward’s (2006) perspective does clearly not comply with her political gesture against the domestication of the queer subject. Conceptualising signification as an affirmative process that may include re-embodiment – rather than, I suggest, a broader re-signification of sex/gender discourse –, Hayward argues that sex/gender conformative transsexual practices allow for a healing movement that allows the subject to move towards itself through itself; to come home to the imagined ‘elsewhere’ that lies within, rather than outside, the subject’s discursively situated material-semiotic possibilities (182).

‘Coherence’ here appears *as* embodiment, pointing to the idea not that embodiment is itself coherent in nature, but that there exists a certain coherence of experiences that are lived by a specific embodied subject, or a continuous ‘I’: “[‘I’] am always *of* my tissue”, so Hayward argues, “even in its [on-going] transformation” (183). This same tendency to re-affirm a certain sense of coherence across the multi-directional (yet not ‘open’) possibilities of the postmodernist body-subject persists throughout Kolozova’s (2014) work. Arguing that “it is possible to conceive of a unity for a [non-unitary] subject without reintroducing the classical idea and ideal of the autonomous subject”, she suggests that to say that the subject inhabits a certain coherence, continuity or unity is simply to say that its survival and continuation is constituted upon its connection to a wider social, cultural and discursive reality, in which its viability becomes possible (72). This conception is concurrent with a poststructuralist paradigm, but departs with the singular and hegemonic political directedness of a subversivist

politics that, as I hope to have demonstrated, continues to haunt contemporary postmodernist feminist representations of transsexual sex/gender conformity.

2.5. Conclusion

In this second chapter, I have demonstrated how a postsecular mode of analysis can situate the analytical and political premises of postmodernist subversivism within an explicitly Western humanist, liberalist and secular discourse. This situating of otherwise free-floating analytical concepts and political categories demonstrates how subversivism and its resultant definitions of agency, subjectivity and discourse must be conceived of as *one* possible direction that situated processes of subjectivation can take among a variety of meaningful and viable others.

This argumentation leads to the idea that a set of different, transparent analytical tools is needed in the course of a sound poststructuralist feminist analysis of differentially situated and directed ethical genders, sexes, embodiments, subject positions and politics that do not inhabit the unmarked imperialist premises of feminism as a presupposed singular political project, or moral discourse. An adequate poststructuralist analysis will show how different frameworks of cultural viability lead to different processes of agential negotiation in the course of the subject's flourishing, suffering and survival.

Demonstrating how the hegemonic trajectories of a humanist, liberalist, secular(ist) epistemological engagement devalue and obscure the agency and (political) subjectivity of both the religious and the sex/gender conformative transsexual subject, I have argued that a postsecular intervention may benefit academic integrity when its representations of both are concerned. In order to bring this potential to the forefront, I have shown how a postsecular intervention into the naturalised relation between secular agency, pain and suffering cannot only reveal postmodernism's prevailing discomfort with the pro-operative transsexual subject to be based on a singular Western perception of embodied ethical practices and physicality, but also provides a useful starting point to re-imagine this relationship in a more affirmative and ethically responsible mode, positing situated experiences and practices of suffering and survival as agential, relational and transformative lived and situated relations.

Furthermore, I have argued that the postsecular turn in feminism requires a radical re-thinking and re-situating of academic feminist concepts and categories on an analytical as well as

political level. In the proceeding chapter I will further explicate what such a different postsecular epistemological framework might look like, as well as what it may do to a conception of ‘feminism’ as a politically directed realm of interdisciplinary and cross-directional theory and practice.

Chapter 3

Situated Agencies

Towards an Affirmation of the Limited Concept and the Real of Feminist Solidarity

3.1. Introduction: Situating Knowledge, Knowing (Real) Situations

So, I think my problem, and ‘our’ problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful account of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.

– Donna Haraway (1988, 579) –

In her well-known article “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988) Donna Haraway discusses the problem of objective knowledge production within feminist discourses. Caught between empirical successor science projects and postmodernist radical constructivism, so she argues, feminist sciences are at the risk of either perpetuating a belief in the privileged perspective of the marginalised (i.e. true objectivity can be reached by adopting the ‘right’ perspective), or falling prey to an annihilating relativism (any sense of objectivity is a phantasm, 580). Positioning herself against both tendencies, Haraway stresses the validity of a postmodernist social constructivist approach in the course of a radical contextualisation of all knowledge claims, simultaneously suggesting that a no-nonsense commitment to ‘a real world’³⁷ – which demands a certain situated conception of objectivity, or localised validity of meaning – is needed to mobilise earthwide feminist connectivity and solidarity (584). Combining these two important premises, she argues in favour of a mode of knowledge production that makes explicit the particularity of the perspective that enables its situated emergence, affirming the contextual situated-ness, locality and partiality of its own claim to meaning and truth (581). When such situated-ness is adequately accounted for it becomes possible to see such a knowledge claim as, indeed, objective in its inhabitancy of *a* relation to *a* particular facet of reality (582). Situated knowledges, then, are knowledges that transparently emerge from, and are accountable to, a particular, localised, limited and embodied perspective on the world as it is heterogeneously lived, inhabited and experienced.

Adopting the concept of situated knowledges by means of an analytical lens to review the content of the previous two chapters, I suggest that the perspective articulated by Raymond

³⁷ Notably, any notion of ‘the real’ is highly contested within postmodernist thinking. As this chapter develops, I will unpack this debate, drawing upon the academic practice of non-philosophy (Laruelle, 1996; Kolozova, 2014).

might be said to approximate in certain instances the logic of a successor science, in which the historically marginalised radical lesbian-feminist subject assumes the authoritative position that was traditionally occupied by the patriarchal subject.³⁸ Butler's poststructuralist queer feminist framework, then, does *not* entertain an annihilating relativist perspective on sex/gender inhabitancies, but has a blind spot concerning the material-semiotic technologies through which its political directionality of subversivism emerges, foreclosing an affirmative commitment to the lived realities of differently situated and desiring subjects – such as sex/gender conformative transsexual ones.³⁹ By making visible the liberalist, humanist, secularist and modernist structures residing behind subversivist definitions of agential subjectivity and political consciousness, a postsecular intervention contributes to the situatedness of a poststructuralist paradigm as well as to its capacity to commit and be accountable to localised, situated emergences, experiences and perceptions of 'a real world'. For the concept of agency, this means it is opened up to a radical heterogeneity of contextual internal limits. Quoting Asad, Mahmood states:

. . . I am not interested in offering *a* theory of agency, but rather I insist that the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammars of concepts within which it resides. My argument in brief is that we should keep the meaning of agency open and allow it to emerge from 'within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relation to people, things, and oneself' (T. Asad 2003, 78). (Mahmood, 2013, 34)

³⁸ Recalling my analysis of Raymond's (1979) argument, what takes place here is a shift in authority – that of patriarchy is replaced by that of radical lesbian-feminism –, but not the terms of its very formation – a certain group of subjects grants itself with the authority to determine and police the boundaries of what 'women' are, or can be. The 'successor' principle within Raymond's argument resides in her claim that *her* definition of the subject category of women is not only more accurate, but also explicitly more progressive, escaping the pull of 'old questions' (i.e. what is a woman, and what is a feminist?) by settling the question once and for all – i.e. by defining women and feminists as seemingly objectively definable female-born subjects (114).

³⁹ In the epigraph Haraway addresses the 'semiotic technologies' of knowledge production, pointing to the technological, discursive and analytical operations residing behind the practice of knowledge production. In the previous chapters, I have argued that a certain mode of material embodiment resides behind such operations – such as a non-transsexual embodiment, which may generate a particular perspective on sex, gender and transsexuality. In order to emphasise this element, I have chosen the term 'material-semiotic technologies', which I suggest concurs with Haraway's (1988) own perception of embodied locality as crucially entangled with the practice of knowledge production (580).

In this quotation, it becomes clear that a postsecular intervention into traditional modernist and postmodernist definitions of agency which are commonly deployed within academia does *not* function according to an oppositional consciousness or counter-discourse, instead seeking to increase epistemological transparency, ethical accountability and, following Haraway's theory of situated knowledges, academic objectivity. In this chapter I will position this epistemological approach of *situated agencies* as a situated knowledges project, expanding upon the argument that it can add to the situated-ness of feminist inquiry as made in Chapter Two. In addition, I will demonstrate which practical and political advantages *and* critical challenges its commitment to a heterogeneous notion of 'the real' might pose to feminism as a political discourse that persists in its strive for an earthwide project of connectivity and solidarity (Haraway, 1988, 584). Central will be the question of how this approach can give way to a more affirmative analytical and political perspective upon the subjectivities and agencies of sex/gender conformative transsexual women, as well as which epistemological and political changes such a perspective may require from academic feminist discourses.

In the first part of this chapter, the question of how situated agencies might be put to the task of coming to an affirmative understanding of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity and agency will be explored, demonstrating how this epistemological approach exceeds its own potential as a merely *reflexive* tool – a capacity that has been demonstrated in Chapter Two. My consideration of this question will begin with an unpacking of Mahmood's (2012) concepts of 'habitus' and 'practical mimesis' in terms of their potential to come to an affirmative representation of sex/gender normativity in its transsexual deployment. I will then provide a practical and exemplifying deployment of this epistemological framework, taking those life-narratives that appeared most problematic to Butler's analysis as my research objects, namely those of three sex/gender conformative transsexual women as represented in Jennie Livingstone's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). By no means aiming to provide a thorough analysis of the documentary and its representational politics, my purpose here is to demonstrate which different insights my approach of situated agencies could offer in comparison to the analytical and political narrative that Butler has drawn from this work, resisting epistemic violence and placing emphasis on how lived experiences and pursuits of sex/gender conformity may emerge as situated instances of a local reality.

In the second part, I will engage with an important question that arises in the course of the first, namely how an ethical approach to heterogeneously directed processes of (political)

subjectivation may relate to the political and moral directionality of feminism itself: if certain norm conformative practices either implicitly or explicitly re-enforce mechanisms of normative violence, then how can a feminist response be articulated without itself giving in to a gesture of epistemic violence by invalidating certain situated agencies in the process of coming to a justified political statement? Rooting my exploration of this question in the work of Katerina Kolozova (2014) and that of non-philosophy's founding father François Laruelle (1996), I will here propose a critical intervention into Haraway's theory of situated knowledges, aiming to put my own epistemological framework of situated agencies on the map as a related yet differential approach to the feminist practice of knowledge production. Notably, this last section will be concerned with a more general positioning of my approach within feminist epistemological and methodological frameworks. In addition, I will foreground Laruelle's concept of 'sexed gender' in terms of its particular potential to come to a different conceptualisation of sex/gender conformative transsexual women's agencies and subjectivities, explicating how this concept can connect the specific project conducted in this thesis to a wider conception of feminist solidarity.

3.2. Affirming the Normative: Towards a Habitual Conception of Sex⁴⁰

In Chapter One I argued that Mahmood's postsecular intervention into a widely accepted feminist understanding of agency, subjectivity and political consciousness may be deployed to subject certain postmodernist concepts and categories to a radical analysis of their own historical-contextual contingency, thereby deconstructing the hegemony of a subversivist political directionality. I will now demonstrate how a postsecular approach may generate an affirmative feminist perspective on the inhabitancy of embodied sex/gender normativity by positing it as a possible trajectory of situated subjective agency. Coming to a more adequate analytical understanding of practical conformity, I will argue that this approach urges an accountable, respective and ethical academic commitment to how a desire for, and inhabitancy of, sex/gender conformity and normativity might be perceived and lived as essential instances of 'the real'.

⁴⁰ My use of the term 'habitual' refers to the concept of 'habitus' as coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 52-65) and explained and expanded upon by Mahmood (2014, 136-139).

In Chapters One and Two it became clear that a poststructuralist definition of agency based on Foucault's theory on moral subjectivation locates it within those practices through which the subject comes to negotiate her 'self' with the very discourse by which she is brought – and brings herself – into being. Such practices, through which agential negotiation is enacted, may be called 'ethical practices', in which the term 'ethical' is deployed to refer to the idea that a negotiation of moral discourse is at stake (Mahmood, 2012, 28). Notably, ethical practices are discursively constrained, informed and regulated by virtue of their necessary entertainment of a *relation* to discursively established morals, norms and laws, even if this relation is characterised by disidentification, with a political potential that is clearly implied in Butler's reading of the Foucauldian subject:

This means that what is called agency can never be understood as a controlling or original authorship over [the] signifying chain, and it cannot be the power, arguing with the real once installed and constituted in and by that chain, to set a sure course for its future. . . . [Rather, it should be conceptualised as] the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where 'to be constituted' means 'to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime' the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose. (Butler, 1993, 166-7)

Agency here comes to be seen as a force that is specifically generated by the constitutive power of the hegemonic signifier, and answers to its interpellation to cite, repeat or mime the norms, morals and laws that constitute the discourse. Most importantly, agency can here *not* be seen as "arguing with the real", which is installed and constituted by discourse itself. Rather, agency emerges as a force *of* the real, rather than one generating its deconstruction. In the last sentence of this quotation, however, Butler emphasises the idea that the possibility of repetition – or mimesis – in itself disrupts the idea of 'identity' as a discursively established ideal whose realisation is both desirable and phantasmic. The possibility of mimesis demonstrates that identity as a transcendent discursive ideal – which presents itself as the very antidote to mimesis – *can* and must be mimetically approached in order for its authority to persist. Concluding, agency is here defined as the necessary mimesis of discursively established norms, which in Butler's work makes a strategic appeal to the revelation of those same norms as non-transcendental and constructed.⁴¹

⁴¹ The political technique of mimicry that lays at the base of Butler's deployment of the term finds its origins in the works of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray and the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, who both

Notably, Butler's definition of mimesis is strongly invested in a political narrative of subversivism and deconstruction. Although working with the same Foucauldian definition of subjectivity and agency, Mahmood (2012) proposes a different take on the concept of mimesis, adopting the concepts of 'practical mimesis' and 'habitus' as deployed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Starting from the premise that the subject as well as the body – which might in light of Butler's (1993) argument be conceived of as one – are brought into being through their imperative citation and mimesis of discourse, Bourdieu argues that such practical mimesis takes place on an unconscious level, or, I emphasise, is evoked prior to the emergence of a (political) consciousness. Being concerned with precisely those repetitions of discourse that make the subject viable to itself as well as to others within its own discursive context, practical mimesis appears prior to the emergence of what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus'; the individual, internal structure of the subject (Bourdieu, 1990, 55, 59-60; Bourdieu in Mahmood, 2012, 138).

Following this line of thinking, sex and gender – as well as religion – can be seen as instances of habitus: being part of a particular discursive tradition which is constitutive of a particular subject as well as her social, cultural and discursive context, or 'habitat', the inhabitancy of these trajectories might appear imperative to a situated subject in order for her to be constituted and recognised as viable, conscious and agentive within a given discursive tradition. This conceptualisation may allow for a conception of sex/gender in which their shared trajectory can be seen as both discursively constituted *and* ontological, essential and innate to a given subject. Much like Kolozova's (2014) argument discussed in Chapter One, a given essence of sex/gender must here be conceived of as discursively inscribed *within* the internal structures that constitute the subject, instead of being forced *upon* her, which would assume the possibility to posit the subject before discourse. Sex/gender can here be conceived of as strictly innate and ontologically directional of – though not natural to, nor determinant of – a situated process of subjectivation (25). The ontological character of habitus is emphasised by Bourdieu, who argues that a habitus consists of that which "is 'learned by the body' . . . not [as] something that one *has*, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one *is*" (Bourdieu in Mahmood, 2012, 138, emphasis added). The subject emerges as *being* of a

conceptualise mimicry as the strategic approximation of dominant discourse in the course of survival, simultaneously displacing its normative authority by demonstrating its constructed nature, which is revealed by the possibility of simulation (Irigaray and Bhabha in Butler, 1993, 11, 207, 209).

certain sex/gender rather than as *having* (acquired) one; an ontological condition that appears inevitable within a certain discursive tradition, and that cannot be (politically) brandished.⁴²

Bourdieu's (1990) theory of *practical* mimesis may free the concept of agency from a subversivist singularity of (political) direction – such as advocated by Butler's conception of *strategic* mimesis –, and demonstrates how the desire for a given sex/gender conformity can be conceptualised as innate and essential to a certain individual without risking an appeal to biological essentialist determination (55).⁴³ However, his claim that the repetition of sex/gender normativity merely takes place on an *unconscious* level runs a risk of perpetuating some kind of social determinism. Arguing that the habitus tends to direct the subject's choices towards those experiences that reinforce its present state, Bourdieu states that change and challenge are systematically and habitually averted. This “non-conscious, unwilling avoidance” results from either more general conditions of existence (of which he names spatial segregation), or socially imposed ones (61). Although a balanced epistemological perspective could account for the interactions between these two types of conditional structures and avoid a strictly biological or cultural deterministic interpretation of this statement, a change of habitus appears structurally and ontologically (yet not necessarily naturally) out of reach.

⁴² Bourdieu's definition of habitus has been extensively critiqued for perpetuating a form of social determinism, amongst others by Judith Butler (1999). Discussing his argument that the performative power of language resides within the cultural establishment of its authority, Butler argues that this conception overlooks the ways in which language can be deployed to constitutive *and* re-constitute cultural, social and discursive authority, such as is the case in the course of her own queer political project (122-126). Mahmood's critique on the concept is similar, although put to the use of a differently directed analytical and political project.

⁴³ Bourdieu (1990) states: “[T]he *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production – and only those. Through the *habitus*, the structure of which it is the product governs practice, not along the paths of mechanical determinism, but within the constraints and limits initially set on the inventions. This finite yet strictly limited generative capacity is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies . . . of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society” (55). This conception is very similar to Butler's assertion that social construction and agency are not opposed to, but generative of, each other. Moreover, this quotation demonstrates the potential of Bourdieu's work to imagine trajectories such as freedom, happiness, suffering and agency as situated, localised, “conditioned and conditional” emergences (55).

To rephrase this partial conclusion in the specific context of a transsexual pursuit of sex/gender conformity, it might be said that although a conceptualisation of habitual sex/gender may allow for a representation that resists both the idea that such desires are ‘false constructs’ and the accusation that their articulation necessarily presents an objectionable case of biological essentialism, it would ultimately lead to the rejection of the idea that a given subject could actively oppose the sex/gender habitus that was inscribed upon her in the first place. The social deterministic statement that the habitus is merely unconsciously acquired limits the directionality of agency in yet a different way, namely as necessarily and inescapably following an instance of discursively imposed normativity.

Formulating exactly this observation, Mahmood (2012) makes a critical intervention into Bourdieu’s deployment of the concept (138). Considering the ethical practices conducted by her own research participants in their active pursuit of a pious subjectivity, she suggests that a certain habitus can be *actively* acquired by means of repetitive actions that are *consciously* enacted. By means of a small example, she explicates that praying five times a day and wearing the Islamic veil were at first instance not experienced as natural or innate to her research participants. Aiming at the conscious inhabitancy of such religious norms, however, conscious repetition eventually enabled them to feel these practices as essential and even vital to the continuation of their spiritual and embodied existence and survival (139). What this observation demonstrates is that ontology – in the meaning of a certain state of being that is essential to the existence of the subject *as* subject – is not determined by origin – whether conceptualised as ‘birth origin’ or ‘discursive origin’ – and can in fact be agentially realised, materialised and put into place by a self-styling subject-agent.

In this more affirmative re-conceptualisation of Bourdieu’s concept, the role of the body as both produced by, and generative of, a given habitus is emphasised. “One result of Bourdieu’s neglect of the manner and process by which a person comes to acquire a habitus”, so Mahmood proceeds,

. . . is that we lose a sense of how specific conceptions of the self (there may be different ones that inhabit the space of a single culture) require different kinds of bodily capacities. In contrast, the Aristotelian notion of habitus [that provides a focus on the relation between habitus and the pedagogical techniques through which it might be internalised by the subject] forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does

not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world. (Mahmood, 2012, 139)

I suggest that this argument could be summarised as follows: The ways in which the self is perceived are discursively informed – after all, the self is produced within discourse, and not before, or outside of it. Certain situated conceptions of self, then, require certain bodily capacities – that is, they require the subject's capacity to be and act in the world in a certain way; a capacity that is at least partly enabled – or restricted – by a particular bodily form. Bodily form itself can here no longer be conceived of as merely expressive of social and discursive structures, but is generative and co-constitutive of these structures. This premise comes with the understanding that a particular bodily form that corresponds to certain discursive norms and imperatives is as likely to be constraining as it is enabling, potentially providing a situated self with the capacities to live, persist, survive and even flourish in the world. In addition, the first sentence of this quotation demonstrates that there is not *one* specific conception of self that directly correlates with a single discursive tradition; an assumption that would lead to the conclusion that all subjects within a given tradition would necessarily perceive themselves in the same way, and desire the same capacities and bodily formations. The habitus is a personal internal structure that is informed by the subject's radically local, partial and situated context of emergence and persistence.

This conceptualisation of both habitus and bodily form might provide an affirmative perspective upon a transsexual pursuit of sex/gender conformity, including the practice of SRS. Emerging from a particular, situated conception of self that arises through and within a discursive tradition that is seated upon dimorphic, binary sexual difference, the realisation of a transsexual desire for those social capacities that are enabled by a particular bodily form might allow for a situated subject to act, persist and survive within the world as it emerges from this particular perception. Moreover, it becomes possible to see how a transsexual desire for sex/gender conformity does not have to be conceived of as making such desire imperative for *all* sexed/gendered subjects: individually differently situated subjects can hold different conceptions of self, which require different bodily forms and worldly capacities, even within the same discursive tradition (see also Bettcher, 2014, 401).

SRS could here be conceived of as an ethical practice that agentially negotiates a given conception of self with an established sex/gender norm, (re-) styling the subject's internal

structures, capacities, worldly opportunities and relations. The adjective ‘ethical’ here comes to signify the inhabitancy of a particular relation to moral, normative sex/gender discourses; one that is generated by the particular formation of the situated moral and (self-) conscious subject. I suggest that SRS can here no longer be seen as purely expressive of hegemonic sex/gender morals and norms, but as the ethical negotiation of such norms by a situated self: it is a practice generated by, as well as constitutive of, a situated and embodied form of sex/gender conformity that aspires to the inhabitancy of, but is precisely not authorised by, established sex/gender normativity. In order to describe similar acts in which an interpellation of normative laws “[leads] to the further articulation of the *habitus*” outside of normativity’s ‘official’ authority, Butler (1999) has adopted Bourdieu’s term of ‘regulated improvisation’, laying emphasis on its potential to disrupt normativity’s very structures (125). Refraining from placing such political stress, my own approach to such practices of regulated improvisation would emphasise their function, relevance and necessity for the situated subjectivation and survival of a particular subject-agent.

Notably, Mahmood’s specific theory on ethical practice has been deployed in a different context of trans embodiment and subjectivity. Applying her theory to an analysis of trans men’s use of certain non-surgical techniques of embodiment, such as the practice of packing,⁴⁴ anthropologists Evelyn Blackwood and Ryan Plis (2012) observe that, although the majority of their research participants did not consider the surgical modification of their genitals to be essential to their own felt possession of, and entitlement to, male-ness, masculinity and manhood, they considered the technique of packing – which makes their bodies readable to situated others as male according to normative sex/gender standards – to grant them a certain confidence and comfortability in social contexts that would ‘normatively’ only be inhabited by non-trans subjects (189). In other words, the practice of packing does not *enable* male/masculine sex/gender identification, which was already present regardless of the practice. Moreover, it is also not strictly *expressive* of such identification, because the identification itself was at first instance perceived as standing loose from its enactment. Rather, the practice of packing allowed these subjects to live out their embodied subjectivities

⁴⁴ Packing refers to a practice in which the presence of a penis is suggested by means of a material but non-surgical intervention into a particular structure of embodiment that would have otherwise not been capable of culturally assuming the normative category of male sex. Following Blackwood and Plis, I here use the term trans in order not to impose my own definitions of transgender and transsexual upon their research participants, whose personal conceptions of sex and gender are not addressed, and remain unknown to me.

in a broader social context in a way that was perceived as comfortable, socially coherent and considerably safe. Moreover, the practice of packing was *consciously* deployed to train the inhabitancy of a situated, socially and discursively embedded male subject position, cultivating the capacity to be, and present as, socially comfortably and non-transsexually male, thereby strengthening a personal and public claim on *habitual* manhood (202).

What this example demonstrates is how a certain habitus of sex can be trained and inhabited through a set of ethical, self-styling practices that correspond to normative moral discourses on sex/gender, inhabiting a self-constitutional agency. Mahmood's epistemological approach here allows for a conception of these self-styling practices as sex/gender conformative, agentive and transformative. However, Blackwood and Plis deploy the affirmative potential of this perspective in order to create a hegemonic binary opposition between transgender and transsexual discourses:

The crafting of gender demonstrated here by a small group of transmen from the Midwest offers a substantive addition to the rewriting of *transgender* discourses that diverge from the 'transsexual' discourses dominated by the psychological and medical communities. Rather than seeing biology and surgical corrections or reconstructions of one's biology as defining sex and gender identities, these transmen regard their social presentation of gender and their ability to invoke cultural genitals as definitive of who they are. Technology has allowed transmen the freedom and flexibility to move beyond their biology, redefining their gender and their bodies on their terms." (Blackwood and Plis, 2012, 202-3)

Although clearly meant to oppose the violent pathologization of transgender and transsexual people by medical discourse, the authors here negatively define the pro-operative transsexual subject as dominated (i.e. deprived of personal agency) and rigidly biological reductionist, as opposed to a more free and flexible transgender subject-agent that transcends his biology through cultural re-inscription. They adopt an affirmative approach to look at non-surgical sex/gender conformative practices enacted by a small group of people belonging to a very particular category of trans subjects in order to make a generalised point about the requirement of genital SRS, thereby expressing a politically invested separation between cultural re-inscription and surgical re-formation that in fact departs from the requirements made by two of their six research participants, who did have genital SRS (186). I suggest that this deployment of Mahmood's framework does not manage to avoid the utterance of hegemonic knowledge claims and fails to take into account differently situated, directed,

desiring, and sexed/gendered subjects – such as pro-operative sex/gender conformative transsexual women.

To explain in more detail how Mahmood's epistemological approach could be extended towards the establishment of an affirmative perspective on pro-operative transsexual sex/gender conformity, the academic practice of medical anthropologist Eric D. Plemons (2014) might be illustrative. Examining how the deployment of 'sex' as a normative material-semiotic category takes place within the medico-surgical practice of SRS, Plemons explicitly argues for an approach that posits SRS as a "lived and material practice", rather than as a mere expressive component of a presumably oppressive moral discourse that seeks to normalise embodied sex/gender performances, which would obscure the agential trajectories that may constitute the practice in its situated emergence (38).

The two main components guiding the re-assigning of sex, so he observes, are 'function' and 'aesthetics'. The first trajectory needs to be re-defined in the re-assigning process, as the primary normative function attributed to sex – that is, reproduction – falls away. Apart from sexual functionality, the *social* functions of sex are here integrated into post-operative genital formations, which are styled to accommodate certain social capacities – such as the capacity to urinate in a culturally appropriate manner in the company of others. "Reading these aspects of social life as anatomical properties", so Plemons suggests, "literally acts to suture notions of gender into the materiality of sex" (50). Bodily form here emerges not as merely expressive of guiding norms and morals, but as generating the possibility of their very emergence. The re-assignment of sex comes with a re-signification of sexual functionality, demonstrating how SRS may be posited as a situated negotiation of sex/gender normativity on the one hand, and a transsexual desire for sex/gender conformity on the other.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ In addition, a literal fusion of sex/gender takes place here, positing sex as a social, gendered trajectory. This premise concurs with Butler's (1990) overall argument that sex in fact *is* gender, that is, a normative material-semiotic category (8). The question I pose here is whether this argument may also function the other way around, as my interpretation of Plemons' analysis seems to suggest: if gender is a material-semiotic category, can the capacity to live out some instances of gender then not also require a certain material, bodily formation, or *sexed* gender? I suggest that for *some* situated processes of subjectivation – such as those of a pro-operative sex/gender conformative transsexual subject – this might be the case.

Apart from the agencies of situated surgeons which reside behind the re-signification of sex as a social and physical function, Plemons observes that the agencies of those transsexual subjects desiring SRS are also co-constitutive of the practice: “The benefits of enhanced self-esteem or the personal peace that comes from an integrated and socially legible body are used to justify many surgical procedures. Patients’ desires to feel at home in their bodies drive the narratives and practice of cosmetic surgery” (46). Recalling Prosser’s politics of home as discussed in Chapter One, feeling at home in one’s body might come to be seen as the capacity to occupy a position in the world that is both physically and socially comfortable and safe, but also as the possibility to integrate and inhabit a given habitus through an agential and practical mimesis of sex/gender normativity. Following this line of thought, SRS might allow for the comfortable inhabitancy of a certain discursively constructed yet innate habitus, enabling a desired process of subjectivation that is resistant to biological and social determinism, but affirmative of biological and social situated-ness.

3.3. From ‘Heaven the Vagina’ to Situated Goddesses: Conceptualising Finite Freedom, Meaningful Suffering and Limited Happiness

I would like to put the previously outlined epistemological framework to the task of providing an affirmative re-analysis of those life narratives that appeared most controversial to Butler’s theory of *strategic* mimesis, namely those of the sex/gender conformative transsexual women represented in Livingstone’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). Notably, Butler’s own analysis is mainly concerned with Venus’ person, whose eventual murder appears as a poignant example of the deadly power of the Symbolic and the negative consequences of too serious an identification with it (90). In my own analysis I aim to read Venus’ story as narrated in this documentary next to other present representations of normative transsexual femininity, female-ness and womanhood, arguing these narratives can tell a situated story of transsexual sex/gender conformative sensibilities, desires and identifications. By demonstrating how my approach of situated agencies may provide different entry points into this narrative, resisting a subsuming of articulated practices of sex/gender conformity under a subversivist academic political agenda, I aim to show how this approach might be more accountable to a situated emergence of a ‘real world’, affirming both the radical heterogeneity of such emergences and foregrounding survival as a situated and differentially directed analytical category.

In its representation of the lives of members of a nightclub that is primarily inhabited by poor, homosexual people of colour, *Paris is Burning* represents many life stories that demonstrate an open, visible and vocalised negotiation of normative and subversive sex/gender identifications.⁴⁶ The directionality of Venus' story, however, departs from these narratives by articulating the desire for – and in fact an already felt inhabitancy of – a normative and heterosexual subject position. Venus states:

I don't feel like there is anything man-ish about me. Except maybe what I might have between me down there. Which is my little personal thing, so. I guess that's why I want my sex change, to make myself complete; I want a car. I want to be with the man I love. I want a nice home, away from New York, up the Peekskills, or maybe in Florida somewhere far where no one knows me. I want my sex change; I wanna get married in church, in white. (Venus in Livingstone, 1990)

Butler's (1993) account of this narration could be summarised as follows: Venus is a drag actor who responds to the interpellations of a normative, hegemonic heterosexual law, demonstrating how drag-as-mimesis is not necessarily subversive and can also be 'uncritically' norm reinforcing (84-5). Venus' conformative response to this interpellation does not only give way to a position of non-agency, but is also inadequate in its reading of established power relations: she ends up strangled under a bed in a cheap hotel, presumably (in light of her earlier experiences with a similar threat) murdered by either a lover or a customer that did not know she was a pre-operative transsexual woman, and killed her in anger of this discovery (89). Butler concludes that Venus' life story demonstrates how "denaturalization in the service of a perpetual [re-idealization]" does not suffice to displace the law's interpellations and even reinforces its violent effects (88-9).

⁴⁶ The main subject of *Paris is Burning* is concerned with a situated emergence of ball culture in New York City. Being part of underground sex/gender non-normative culture, the first ball is dated as early as 1869 in Harlem, providing a stage for people to perform a sex, gender, but also a race or cultural/social subject position of choice, in which those performances most closely resembling the established norms constitutive of the category at issue were rewarded with trophies and ball room fame. Structured as 'houses' led by 'mothers' who care for their respective 'children', the balls also provide a certain alternative domestic environment. Notably, ball culture perpetuated an explicitly racist beauty ideal, privileging white performances over those of colour. In 1960 the first ball especially staged for people of colour was organised, giving rise to the establishment of a house led by the black drag performer Pepper LaBeija, who stars in Livingstone's documentary. *Paris is Burning* was the first documentary to take ball culture as its subject, gaining much attention within (queer) feminist literature (Geczy and Karaminas, 2013, 116-7).

As I suggested earlier, there are no good analytical reasons to position Venus' incorporation and inhabitancy of sex/gender norms as somehow more mimetic than any other subjective performance of female-ness, femininity or womanhood. As such, the exemplifying use of MTF transsexual subjectivity as somehow demonstrative of gender-as-drag, gender-as-performative, or gender-as-constructed is highly suspect of perpetuating a politically invested onto-epistemological asymmetry between transsexual and non-transsexual subjectivation (see also Plemons, 2014, 38). Secondly, I would argue that Butler's suggestive reading of Venus *as* a drag actor – or, closer to the vocabulary used in the documentary, as a drag queen – somehow reinforces the idea that Venus cannot be a 'real woman' because of that 'which she might have between her down there'. This is an observation which Butler's overall argumentation ultimately seems to reject, as her political project is precisely aimed at the deconstruction of the category of 'real women'. Hence the deployment of this category in the course of forming a political argument in the name of subversivism seems uncanny.

Ultimately, Butler's (1993) argument is not that material sexual difference is a mere discursive construct, but rather that it does not exist apart from discursive inscription (xi). This is in fact an observation that Venus herself seems to make very adequately: even though she does not *feel* like there is anything masculine or male about her, that 'what she might have between her down there' cannot *socially* or culturally be read as *not* 'man-like'. However, so she proceeds, that part of her is 'personal'; she keeps it away from public knowledge and visibility because she knows that the materiality of her sex cannot exist separately from its normative signification. This separation between her personal sense of self (a feminine woman), her intimate genital physicality (according to both society and herself, male) and her public self-presentation and recognition (a feminine, female woman) gives her a feeling of incompleteness and danger. In order to overcome this life- and self-threatening discrepancy, she desires to have her physical sex aligned in accordance to established sex/gender norms. This, so she concludes, would make her complete; there would be nothing in-between her and herself ('what I got between me'), and nothing between her and her social situated-ness (she would no longer have to keep secret her 'little personal thing').

What is at stake here is in fact a very correct reading made by Venus of how a discursively constructed sex/gender normativity functions: despite her coherently feminine and female sexed/gendered identification and presentation, the physical shape of her genitals is at odds with whom she knows herself to be, as well as with whom she is known to be by her social

environment; it burdens her subject position with a lurking possibility of rupture and deconstruction. Situated within a certain discursive context, her genitals stand in-between her and her own conception of her embodied person, as well as in-between her and her social environment's general recognition of this conception. Resultantly, her genitals stand in-between her and the life-direction she so desires. It is for her not possible to be a 'complete woman' – that is, one with a car; a husband; a home; a respectable religion; and a vagina – if the change that anyone might come to know her secret persists, disrupting her conception of reality.

Of course, Butler correctly notes that these desired directionalities are heavily invested in hegemonic and even patriarchal discourses: they are generated by a situated ideal of heterosexual, middle-class and cissexual womanhood. The intersectional character of these desires becomes even clearer in Octavia's (another sex/gender conformative transsexual woman represented in the documentary) formulation: "I want a normal, happy life. Whether it is being married and adopting children or being famous and rich" (Octavia in Livingstone, 1990). As an obvious observation, being 'famous and rich' cannot be conceived of as strictly 'normal' from any perspective here. Rather, Octavia's notion of living a 'normal and happy' life can be defined as living within reach of the opportunities that are made available to white, middle-class, cissexual women. The notion of whiteness as a normative ideal is emphasised here by the visual presence of Octavia's role model – a white cissexual woman. Her formulation, in which 'normal' comes to constitute a wide terrain of experiences and opportunities enjoyed by a certain category of white, middle class, heterosexual cissexual people, demonstrates how 'normal' is a very particular, situated discursive construction, rather than something that can be more generally known or lived.

Octavia's phrasing of these normative ideals, however, does not signify a passive social and/or biological determination: She thinks she can make those opportunities available to herself *through* her body, and the way her body affects others. The way she looks, so she argues, will enable her to be a woman in whose reach such opportunities exist. Venus' earlier mentioned formulation suggests that she too conceives of her body as the material from which potential opportunities may arise: if she would have her sex change, those desired modes of being (i.e. being heterosexual, normatively religious and normatively sexed/gendered) might become available to her, resultantly producing her as more easily passing as white; unmarked

by ‘other’ differences, her racial difference seems to shift to the background at least in her own reading of her subject position.⁴⁷

By no means does her formulation give shape to a passive, suffering position: “I wanna be a complete woman I *want* this, this is what I want. And I’m gonna go for it” (Venus in Livingstone, 1990). The role that her body takes on as both the means and the destination – going out with men and sometimes fulfilling sexual favours might grant her with the opportunity to become a post-operative, married woman – is by Venus herself very clearly defined as normative. Women, so she argues, deploy their sexuality all the time to achieve things, whether within the confines of marriage, or on the street. Although an academic analysis would emphasise the localised specificity of Venus’ experiences, her own formulation is worth considering: it signals a desire for normative self-representation and a normative sex/gender position as well as an agential one, in which one’s sexed/gendered being is a trajectory of social and worldly potential, and survival. Discussing Venus’ eventual death, her friend Angie notes:

[B]ut that was Venus. She always took a chance, she always went into a stranger’s car, she always . . . did what she wanted, to get what she wanted; . . . but that’s part of life. That’s part of being a transsexual in New York City and surviving. (Angie in Livingstone, 1990)

The force of survival here appears most strongly, and perhaps curiously, present in light of Venus’ death: in Angie’s formulation, her death is part of ‘being a transsexual in New York City and surviving’. Thus, her own survival of, and living through, Venus’ death appears as integral to her being transsexual in New York City. What this narrative demonstrates is a reality of life lived under the constant threat of death, mobilising an agency of survival (and not subversion) that these women share across their particular locations; an agency rooted within a shared reality of ‘being transsexual’ in a particular time and place. As mentioned in Chapter One, Namaste (2000) emphasises a similar point, offering the opinion it is not Venus that is the subject of a ‘tragic misreading of power’, but rather Butler herself, whose deployment of her life story as an allegory for the failure of normative identification does not

⁴⁷ In a different part of the documentary, Venus remarks that she would like to be a rich white girl, because they ‘get what they want’. As soon as she gets to the articulation of what *she* wants, however, her desire for whiteness shifts to the background. I suggest that this mechanism signals that her desire to be white is of a more pragmatic nature – she desires the privilege rather than the actual embodied formation, such as this is clearly not the case when her pursuit of normatively sexed womanhood is concerned.

give way to an adequate understanding of how particular material-semiotic technologies of survival correspond to forms of everyday violence encountered by poor transsexual women of colour, especially those working on the street (13).⁴⁸

Butler herself emphasises several times that an agentive appropriation of sex, gender and/or racial normativity can serve the means of practical survival. However, she favours those modes of survival that shy away from a ‘too literal’ inhabitancy of sex/gender normativity and a too rigid stability of identification. Juxtaposing two different narratives of survival, Livingstone (1990) represents Pepper’s story – a non-transsexual gay man that is being interviewed on the subject of SRS. Expressing the opinion that a transsexual desire for “heaven the vagina” mainly arises from being treated badly by society as a black homosexual man, Pepper argues that the vagina serves as a false promise of transcendence, based on the false assumption that one would be treated better as a ‘real’ – that is, a sex/gender normative – woman than as a sex/gender non-conforming gay man, such as himself (Pepper in Livingstone, 1990).

The perspective that Pepper articulates here is in fact quite similar to both Raymond’s and Butler’s standpoints: (female) sex is a false, religious-like promise of transcendence that enables an undesired static state of being – “Because, if you decide later on in life to change your mind. Once it’s gone, it’s gone” – and just in generally take’s “it a little too far” (Pepper in Livingstone, 1990).⁴⁹ Pepper’s here articulated desire to be able to ‘change his mind’ in terms of sex/gender inhabitancy, as well as the assumption that a male-born sex allows him to do so where a surgically modified female sex could not, signifies a privileging of birth sex as presumably more dynamic in character than a sex produced by SRS; a belief that strongly concurs with Raymond’s (1979) argument that “the falseness of this [transsexuality] lies not in the desire for a different selfhood . . . but rather in the fact that transcendent be-ing . . . is sought where only cyclic and static being . . . can be found” (170). In Pepper’s account too,

⁴⁸ For an elaborate analysis of emergences of violence against trans people in the public sphere, see also Namaste’s more ethnographical work (2000, 135-156).

⁴⁹ In Pepper’s account, ‘it’ comes to stand for a feminine and/or female sex/gender performance. Translating this statement to a poststructuralist representation, however, ‘it’ could point to the status of sex as a normative signifier, “[portraying] transsexuals as being semiotically-challenged individuals who take signifiers a little too seriously and therefore wind up ‘literalizing’, ‘essentializing’ and literally embodying aspects of the gender system at the same time that they simultaneously reveal gender’s constructed nature” (Serano, 2013, 120-1).

transsexuality comes to be seen as a promise of transcendence that results in a trap of static fixity; a risk which both he and Raymond apparently do not see perpetuated by the imperative to hold on to one's sex of birth. In Butler's account too, the trap of static, normative, non-queer identification appears confined to transsexual inhabitations of sex/gender, and is apparently not present within non-transsexual queer performances of reality. Rather than making the argument that Pepper's account is necessarily violent towards transsexuality, I suggest that his situated articulation of non-transsexual sex/gender non-conformity as a mode of survival and a way to success must not be taken as a universal argument regarding the value and validity of transsexual sex/gender conformity in a more general sense, such as I suggested earlier with regard to the work of Blackwood and Plis.

Pepper's account is followed by that of Brooke – a post-operative transsexual woman. She narrates:

I have had a transsexualism operation. I am no longer a man. I am a woman. I feel great. I am very happy. And I feel like the part of my life that was a secret is now closed. I can close the closet door and there are no more skeletons in there. And I am as free as the wind that is blowing out on this beach. (Brooke in Livingstone, 1990)

Of course, an analysis that would posit transsexual surgery as a transcendence of earthly trouble haunts this quotation from the outset. 'True freedom' seems to be achieved through the materialisation of a 'right', 'natural' sex that has the potential to free the subject from the constraints of discursive, social or cultural constraints – like the wind, the self has become a natural force. Speaking from a poststructuralist perspective, this can of course not be the case: the transsexual subject as well as her material-semiotic possibilities must be conceived of as discursively constituted, just as this is the case for any other subject. However, the feeling of being *of* a certain desired sex; of being comfortably embodied and embedded within a situated manifestation of the world; and of being happy and free, can all be conceived of as lived experiences that are constitutive of a certain situated reality.

Of course, these sensibilities are situated, limited and constrained. This is also emphasised by Brooke herself, who states that only the presence of some obscene amounts of money could enable her current materialisation. Livingstone's last shot of Brooke dancing on the beach, singing "I am my own special creation", suggests an element of personal striving, agency and

victory over some material-semiotic limitations that worked across Brooke's previous subject position, whose re-working have now enabled her to be a *differently* delineated 'creation'. I suggest that indeed, SRS must here be conceived of as a technique of self-creation within, and constituted by, certain discursively situated, socially, culturally and contextually determined structures. It is a creation generated by, and constitutive of, a certain 'I' that suffers and survives yet another constituted and regulated form of situated being in the world, changing the terms, shapes and formations of its limitations and possibilities in, or connections to, a situated experience of 'the real world'. It is an auto-poiesis or self-styling that emerges from a continuing negotiation of the normative and the moral through a set of differentially situated, ethical practices (Braidotti, 2008, 2).

Continuing this revisiting of Braidotti's account, she argues that different material-semiotic processes of sexed/gendered (or religious and non-religious) becoming produce different kinds of (feminist) accountability. Revisiting the previous analysis, it is important to note that, from a feminist perspective, these women's desires, aspirations and situated experiences of reality are informed by several asymmetrical power structures that could be described as perpetuating normative violence. Venus' opinion that women's sexuality is generically deployed as a medium of exchange, and her idea that 'being complete' is being white, middle-class, heterosexual, married, cissexual and Christian; Octavia's similar idea that 'being normal' is being white, heterosexual, cissexual and middle- or high-class, and her aspiration to turn her physical beauty into a financial and social opportunity; Brooke's statement that one can be anything as long as the right amounts of money are present, and her belief that being non-normatively sexed/gendered is opposed to being free, are all examples of sensibilities and common knowledges that are generative of desires and aspirations which are organised, constructed and regulated by asymmetrical power relations based on the hegemonic organisation of physical, cultural and social differences.

Yet, are they any more discursively enforced than Pepper's belief that wanting to be a woman can only arise from an opportunistic spirit, and his idea that a fluid sex/gender performance allows one to be adaptable to changing opportunities in life; a fluidity that somehow considers surgical modification as 'going too far'? Both sets of sensibilities are shaped by situated experiences of a certain reality in which one lives and relates to a wider social context; both are organised by hegemonic binary oppositions, and the real-life effects of discursively enforced structures; both negotiate certain norms and morals in a process of self-constitution

that is both fluid and static at the same time. In both cases, norms are being transgressed – for Pepper those of gender performance and sexuality, and for the women those of sexed embodiment, class and status – in the name of survival and continuation of a certain ‘I’ (see also Hayward, 2006, 183). For Pepper such survival is enabled through the affirmation of a non-transsexual gender-queer mode of being and becoming, and for the women through the pursuit of a cissexual, heterosexual sex/gender conformity.

Notably, this analysis does not have to refute the importance of deconstructing patriarchal power structures in the course of a feminist project. What it emphasises, however, is that such structures create different limitations and opportunities across heterogeneous contexts, and that not every life lived across this structural web is either founded upon, or generative of, the capacity or the desire to deconstruct or re-signify its foundational strands. Most importantly, this is *not* because certain subjects which are situated within – and are weaving to sustain – this web lack agency and a critical perspective. Rather, different positions within the web allow for different perspectives, agencies and politics to arise, some of which are directed towards its re-structuring, others working to appropriate and strengthen those existing structures that are conceived of as needed in order not to fall from life itself.

3.4. Distributive Agency: The Ethical Question in Postsecular Feminism

In the previous two subsections, I have explicated what an ethical approach to transsexual sex/gender conformity and normativity might look like. As both Plemons’ and my own analysis have demonstrated, such ethical perspectives on situated practices of sex/gender conformity might conceive of the agencies residing behind them as *distributive*: it is no longer possible to conceive of these practices as generated by one discrete, autonomous individual agent. Rather, they are constituted by a diverse assemblage of agentive capacities: the discursive structures that shape a certain habitus; the forces of social, inter-subjective encounters; and those highly singular and personal phenomena that shape a particular subject’s situated-ness.⁵⁰ In Plemons’ study of SRS, for example, established normative

⁵⁰ Social and political theorist Diana Coole describes the ‘agentic capacities’ making up the concept of distributive agency as follows: “At one pole [of the spectrum of agentic capacities] I envisage pre-personal, non-cognitive bodily processes; at the other, transpersonal, intersubjective processes that instantiate an interworld. Between them are singularities: phenomena with a relatively individual or collective identity” (Coole in Bennett, 2010, 30). Given my above analysis, I suggest that the habitus could be conceived of as such a pre-personal or

sex/gender discourses, social and inter-subjective encounters, transsexual patients and surgeons all have a stake in how the practice is produced, regulated and enacted, as well as which kinds of situated realities it might generate. In my own analysis, the agentic negotiation that *is* transsexual sex/gender conformity between normative discourses, and financial, social and embodied specificity and relationality was emphasised, locating agency within the capacity to mobilise, transform and re-distribute one's situated subjective limits and opportunities in the world.

As stated above, an affirmative epistemological perspective on situated ethical practices might at times be difficult to negotiate in light of a *feminist* moral or political discourse. Including practices that might affirmatively correspond to those norms perpetuating violent asymmetrical power relations, the question rises of how academic feminism may respond to those practices which must be considered ethical in their situated relation to a given moral discourse, but that might – from a feminist perspective – turn out not to be so ethical at all. Bringing the concept of distributive agency to the forefront in order to explore the *political* implications of the ethical approach proposed in this thesis, I would like to quote the work of political ecologist Jane Bennett (2010) at length:

In the world of distributive agency, a hesitant attitude toward assigning singular blame becomes a presumptive virtue. Of course, . . . [political and moral outrage] will not and should not disappear, but a politics devoted too exclusively to moral condemnation and not enough to a cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities can do little good. A moralized politics of good and evil, of singular agents who must be made to pay for their sins . . . becomes unethical to the degree that it legitimates vengeance and elevates violence to the tool of final resort. An understanding of agency as distributive and confederate thus invokes the need to detach ethics from moralism and to produce guides to action appropriate to a world of vital, crosscutting forces. . . . It is ultimately a matter of political judgment what is more needed today: should we acknowledge the distributive power of human-non-human assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hope of enhancing the accountability of specific humans? (Bennett, 2010, 38)

pre-political-consciousness bodily process, whereas the social, inter-subjective aspects of normative sexual difference might be equated to the second dimension accounted for here. Last, Mahmood's suggestion that the habitus is not unilaterally produced by discursive structures, but also by highly personal phenomena that are accountable for the vast heterogeneity of situated instances of habitus could be seen as parallel to the singularity of situated agentic capacities and the practices to which they give rise.

Urging a conceptual separation between ethics and morals, a framework of situated agencies based on Mahmood's postsecular interventions perpetuates an increased accountability to "vital, crosscutting forces" that work across both the subject and her situated experience of the world. Notably, the idea that certain practices and phenomena are not straightforwardly produced by a given moral agency that can and should be politically and morally condemned for this production – such is clearly the case in Raymond's condemnation of transsexualism as produced by a patriarchal agency – results in a more shattered and less clear-cut representation of moral and political responsibility and accountability. In Butler's (1993) account, the idea that sex/gender normativity might be part of the internal structures of the subject – thereby making political intervention potentially cruel and violent – also makes itself present, simultaneously allowing itself to be overshadowed by her development of a desirable course of action for the queer political subject, perhaps indeed in a gesture of strategic understatement (58). As an approach of situated agencies obviously resists such strategies, the important question of how a political project of feminist solidarity might be negotiated here, will be central to this subsection. If those ethical practices that are being observed do implicitly or explicitly affirm and re-enforce those norms, laws and morals that might be posited as explicitly patriarchal or otherwise normatively violent, then where can an academic feminist intervention into these trajectories reside without giving rise to a project that violently deconstructs the validity of certain situated agencies in the process? What is 'feminism' after a postsecular epistemological intervention?

Following Mahmood's argument that all practices, beliefs, desires and sensibilities emerge as ethical responses to a particular discursively established moral discourse, a situated ethical practice should be considered within the particular context of its emergence, instead of being subjected to a judgement that finds its discursive constitution in a *different* moral framework. If one accepts the idea that academic feminism itself is a very particular discursive tradition that has its roots in a primarily white, Western middle-class, it should not be deployed as an evolutionary framework to measure the political and ethical worth of 'other' ethical practices and agencies, if it were not to become itself a 'successor science', or oppressive counter-hegemonic system.

Mahmood's explicit suggestion is to separate the trajectories of analytical and political engagement. 'Feminism' here comes to be seen ideally not as a moral discourse, but as a heterogeneous assemblage of ethical responses to differently situated moral discourses that all

have a stake in the making visible of asymmetrical power relations. Each political feminist project, so she proceeds, should thus be given shape in relation and response to a particular situated moral discourse, leading to a differential emergence of situated feminisms that are produced by situated agencies, subjects and discourses (38, 196). In order to allow for such political responses to be truly ethical – that is, accountably relational to a complicated, web-like moral structure – the suspension of political judgement and projection are imperative in the course of analytical engagement:

I want to note that for me the problem lies not so much in the *usage* (which presumes that the law can be put to a different *use*, one serving the interests of the minority instead of the majority) as in the structure of sensitivities, affects, and commitments (which I gloss as ‘ethical sensibilities’) upon which the language of public order rests and to which it gives expression . . . (Mahmood, 2009, 149)

What becomes clear here is a favouring of analytical rigour over political directed-ness. As Mahmood herself argues, however, this does not mean political directionality ought to be ruled out of academic work altogether. Rather, these two domains of inquiry should be conceived of not as each other’s hegemonic opposites, but as complementary modes of engagement.

Explicitly responding to Mahmood’s argument, Butler (2009) strongly positions herself against the assumption that analytical and political judgement *can* be separated: “we do not merely shift from an evaluative position to a descriptive one (though I can see why taking a descriptive tone might work to defuse polemics on all sides), but rather seek to show that every description is already committed to an evaluative framework, prior to the question of any explicit or posterior judgement” (105). The argument made here is that, although the postponement of judgement might appear strategic or even favourable, Butler conceives of it as impossible. Any epistemological approach, so she suggests precisely along the lines of Mahmood’s own argumentation, is always already rooted within a particular discursive tradition, entailing certain ‘sensitivities, affects, and commitments’ of its own. To put it more simply: a framework of situated agencies is founded upon the desire for a non-hegemonic, cross-contextual conversation on subjectivity, agency, ethics and politics. This desire logically emerges within its own particular context, rather than presenting a neutral, or innocent

gesture: judgement is always already implicated in analytical description.⁵¹ It is thus not possible to separate the political and the analytical, because the political must be conceived of as already being fully present *within* the analytical.

3.5. Towards a Solidarity of the Real: A Practice of Non-Philosophical Situated Knowledges

I suggest that Butler's critical intervention into Mahmood's postsecular approach – or, in fact, her reinforcement of its own epistemological premises – may demonstrate once more how a poststructuralist perspective can in fact bolster feminist objectivity, as suggested by Haraway. However, if the political has made a legitimate and inevitable re-appearance within feminist academic engagement, then how can she be negotiated in light of an ethical approach to situated practices? Under which names does feminist solidarity emerge, and on whose authority is such a project articulated and determined? Can the political exist separately from the moral – taken that it was precisely the separation between the moral and the ethical that enables the legacy of the postsecular turn to conceive of the normative as a trajectory that can be affirmatively inhabited by an agential subject? Discussing the more general epistemological premises of situated agencies and the points where it may depart from Haraway's situated knowledges, I will come back to how this framework relates specifically to the subject of sex/gender conformative transsexual agency and subjectivity in my consideration of Laruelle's (2014) concept of 'sexed gender'.

Haraway (1988) states that it is not necessarily the presence of political directionality – such as her own call for earthwide feminist solidarity – that is problematic, but rather the establishment of conversations which are forcefully conducted under the authority of *one* hegemonic discourse. Universality in politics, so she suggests, is “[reductionist] only when one language . . . must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions” (580). In Chapter Two, I have argued elaborately that Butler's invocation of 'the name of transformation' runs the risk of being deployed as such a reductionist language, translating situated processes of subjectivation, survival and transformation itself to a one-directional queer politics. It is precisely with regard to a resurfacing of the name of deconstruction and its

⁵¹ This argument has been made most notably by feminist postcolonial critique Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), who argues that all representations necessarily exist of a *portraying* and a politically '*speaking for*' aspect, something that led to pervasive gestures of epistemic violence in the course of dominant feminist representations of subaltern women.

important counterpart of oppositional consciousness that I would like to locate a problematic trajectory within Haraway's theory of situated knowledges itself. Presenting an oppositional chart of her own feminist theory of objectivity (right column) versus existing alternatives (left column, 588), Haraway notes:

universal rationality	ethnophilosophies
common language	heteroglossia
new organon	deconstruction
unified field theory	oppositional positioning
world system	local knowledges
master theory	webbed accounts

The first two points of departure which are addressed here concur with the premises of a postsecular approach: they evolve around the ideas that philosophical systems appear and have value within the specific, situated discursive traditions in which they emerge (ethnophilosophy), and that situated discourses and systems of meaning can have internal differences (heteroglossia). The last two premises relate to the similar ideas that knowledge has value within a specific local context (local knowledges), and that the cross-contextual translation of such knowledges should follow a web-like movement in which certain localities are connected to others (webbed accounts), rather than following linear, systematic movements, which are governed by hegemonic principles.

In the middle of this chart, however, exactly those two political premises that a postsecular approach takes issue with can be observed: the political directionality of deconstruction – which I have aimed to situate as a product of Western liberalist, humanist, modernist and secularist hegemony throughout this thesis – and oppositional positioning – which may define oppositional consciousness as the seat of critical engagement, requiring the deconstruction of normativity and conformity, and ‘the dethroning of God’. In the proceeding paragraphs, I will explore how these two premises might be developed differently without letting go of feminist solidarity as a final political goal, demonstrating how my own approach of situated agencies manages to hold on to the necessary separation of the moral and the ethical without annihilating the political trajectories of academic feminist engagement. In addition, I will propose a (most certainly problematic) name under which such solidarity might gather,

namely that of ‘the Real’ (world). The theoretical practice of non-philosophy as developed by Laruelle (1996) will be central to this argument.⁵²

Much in line with Haraway’s argument, Laruelle (1996) argues that philosophical systems and academic theories tend to wield authority over radically heterogeneous emergences of ‘the real world’, and are bound to represent themselves as *the* new all-encompassing framework through which reality can be understood, thereby perpetuating a progressive, ideological and totalitarian line of reasoning (45). In order to move beyond the imposition of such authoritative successor sciences that refuse a no-nonsense commitment to the real world, Laruelle makes a radical – and easily misunderstood – proposition. Instead of applying a certain system of meaning to lived experiences of reality, so he argues, all theoretical and philosophical concepts should be accountable to, and determined by, an instance of the Real (15). Moreover, this correlation should be the *only* authority to which thought is accountable, no longer allowing it to be conducted in the name of certain philosophical or intellectual system, or tradition. In its ideal unilateral correlation to the Real, so he concludes, thought should be *unified*, working towards a democracy of thinking in which each experience is taken at face value (5, 45, 56).

I would like to start unpacking Laruelle’s proposition by considering his deployment of ‘the Real’ as the one name under which a project of radical democracy may emerge. ‘The Real’ and even ‘reality’ represent most contested concepts within postmodernist academic thinking, something of which Haraway’s air-quoting of ‘a real world’ in the epigraph might be demonstrative. Following a social constructivist, poststructuralist line of thinking, there is no such thing as a unitary ‘real’, because reality itself is produced by discourse and thus eternally subjected to change and re-constitution. Moreover, from a postsecular perspective it could be added that different discursive traditions produce different realities. ‘The real world’ can thus never be seen as *one* world which can be universally experienced and perceived, thereby complicating the possibility to make her the subject of a conversation carried across different discursive contexts (solidarity), which would require a shared point of reference. ‘The Real’ – especially when capitalised – is thus traditionally seen as a name of hegemony, aspiring to

⁵² I deploy the term ‘theoretical practice’ because Laruelle (1996) himself has explicitly rejected the terms ‘method’ and ‘methodology’, and firmly positions himself as not in the business of creating new frameworks of ontological perception (179-80, 175). Rather, he addresses non-philosophy as a “theoretical usage”, or practice (175).

false transcendence and domination. In Butler's (1993) work, the Real comes to stand for the patriarchal law, assuming the status of God. Addressing Slavoj Žižek's invocation of the Real as a rock resisting poststructuralist deconstruction and discursive (re-) signification, she argues that his deployment of the rock has a religious component to it: "The law as rock is to be found in the Hebrew prayer in which God is 'my rock and my redeemer', a phrase that suggests that the 'rock' is the unnamable Yahweh, the principle of monotheism" (150). Laruelle, who occasionally refers to the Real as 'the One', also hints at this religious imaginary. How does his invocation of the Real as 'the' name of democracy and solidarity differ from such hegemonic usages?

First of all, his deployment of the Real as a *unifying* principle radically departs from its potential status as a *unitary* one. Emphasising the radical heterogeneity and irreducibility of situated lived experiences, Laruelle's conception of the Real might best be described as a dense fabric woven out of various – but not infinite – strands that each come to stand for a given, singular experience (45). Each of these strands correlates unilaterally to a certain instance of reality; a relationality which unifies all strands in their heterogeneous, situated and local emergence. The unilateral aspect of this relation must be emphasised: although all experiences might be said to be 'the Real', the Real must never be reduced to a single experience, which would assume a violating and totalitarian universality (180). I suggest that Laruelle's conception of the singular and unilateral character of heterogeneous experiences and emergences of reality might be productively read together with Haraway's theory of situated knowledges: scientific objectivity increases along with the capacity to follow a single strand of reality and to 'stick' with the situated context in which a certain knowledge claim emerges as yet another strand which unilaterally correlates to an instance of lived reality (see also Haraway, 1994).⁵³

In a feminist context Kolozova (2014) has argued that the deployment of a non-philosophical approach should enable feminists "to conceive of a radically universal solidarity . . . that

⁵³ Also in line with Haraway's theory, Laruelle (1996) suggests that the most important shift in postmodernist philosophy has been the idea that (academic) thought does not merely *describe* certain pre-existing phenomena, but has an active role in their situated manifestation, thereby deconstruction thought's auto-positional gestures (172). Haraway's theoretical perspective would add to this that – as the process of knowledge production literally *matters* in the course of earthly and material manifestation – such process of co-constitution should be localised and politically accounted for all the way down.

unilaterally correlates with the real of women's [experiences of] subjugation and gendered violence" (8-9). When considered in light of Haraway's statement regarding the possibility of non-reductionist universality, I suggest that a solidarity gathered under the name of the Real as a shared translational principle would resist hegemonic, unitary, ideological and totalitarian thinking, instead appealing to a unification of academic thought in the name of those experiences that constitute the Real of asymmetrical power relations, violence and oppression, corresponding to a political project of radical feminist solidarity that resists unitary moralism and respects the irreducibility and heterogeneity of situated ethical practices.

In the course of establishing their respective non-philosophical projects, both Laruelle and Kolozova take issue with a philosophical tradition of postmodernist deconstruction, arguing it has made unthinkable the presence of the Real *within* academic thought and theory, arguing in favour of both its non-existence within thought (the Real cannot be known) and its continuation 'behind' it (the Real *escapes* human thought).⁵⁴ By failing to dissolve the binary opposition between 'the unthinkable Real' and reality as it is lived and experienced deconstructive philosophies have merely displaced the auto-positional character of their content, which continues to wield an unmarked and un-situated authority over heterogeneous experiences of reality (Laruelle, 1996, 173; Kolozova, 2014, 56).⁵⁵

Philosophical thinking, so Laruelle states, "has undoubtedly gained and produced new affects in this way, a new mode of survival, but it is spared . . . from having to change 'basis' or 'terrain'" (173-4). In the context of Butler's development of queer performativity, such

⁵⁴ This argument is in fact supported by Butler's (1993) own specific formulation of her standpoint: "This trauma [the trauma of being unable to signify reality without discursive mediation] subsists as the permanent possibility of disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality. It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of 'reality' fails to include. The real constitutes the contingency or lack in any discursive formation" (143). 'The Real' here persists as a force residing in a somewhat frustrated and potentially disrupting state of affairs behind discursive signification, emphasising the fact that 'the Real' *does* exist, but cannot be represented, or thought.

⁵⁵ It is in this sense that Laruelle critiques the postmodernist deployment of the concept of performativity, arguing that it signifies an academic practice "in which the signifying value and the action value, as well as the sense and the operation, the signified and the practice [of certain statements] are identified" without making explicit how this process of identification is in itself supported by certain philosophical decisions, thereby failing to show how such processes are in themselves performative of the phenomenon in question. The internal limits of the concept itself remain unexplored, allowing it to be presented as a transcendental category (175).

creation of new modes of surviving might indeed be productively located, continuously rooted, however, in a certain tradition of philosophical sublimation and non-normative ideology that is posited above a vast heterogeneity of other experiences of reality and subsequently differential modes of survival. The ‘basis or terrain’ that has not been changed in her engagement with the politics of survival, then, is the authoritative force to which academic inquiry should be accountable *in the last instance*, that is, in Butler’s case, a poststructuralist queer political framework.

The shift in terrain proposed by both Laruelle and Kolozova, then, is the positing of the Real as the basis, the terrain, and the authoritative object and subject of *all* (feminist) thought. The concept of ‘practice’ appears central here: in its unilateral correlation to reality, practice always already “indicates itself as sufficient outside of any philosophical decision, even any scientific objectification” (Laruelle, 1996, 179). Re-formulating this premise in the context of Mahmood’s approach to agency and subjectivity, ethical practices emerge as correlational to the moral discourse to which they respond and by which they are generated, presenting themselves as performances of the Real. (Academic) thought which is developed in relation to their unilateral correlation here serves as an “immanent organon” – that is, as localised and non-transcendental in its claim to a situated truth (178).

Turning towards the subject of transsexual sex/gender conformity, Laruelle (2014) himself explicitly discusses the subject of sex and gender in his introduction to Kolozova’s book. Suggesting that prevailing postmodernist theories of sex and gender are lingering in between idealism, materialism and empiricism, he argues that one ought to come to the Real of sex, that is, to recognise people’s lived experiences of sex *as* realities, which are irreducible to theoretical, philosophical, moral and political frameworks. Talking specifically in the context of postmodernist deconstructions of sex as an extra-discursive physical material, Laruelle argues in favour of an approach that resists both biological essentialism and cultural relativism: “Avoiding thinking either in positivist terms about sex (anatomy, psychology, sociology) or within the horizon of the empty Idea of gender is necessary” (xi). By means of an alternative concept he proposes the notion of ‘sexed gender’, in which the entanglement of embodied and semiotic categories that produce the sexed/gendered subject is brought to the forefront (x-xi). I suggest that the concept of ‘sexed gender’ holds close proximity to Plemons’ earlier addressed work on the practice of SRS as an agential negotiation between sex as a normative category on the one hand, and its social-conformative functionality on the

other, which here might be conceived of as a re-sexing, re-habituating and re-materialising of gender itself. A poststructuralist perspective on the crucial entanglement of sex/gender as one normative material-semiotic category may here be freed from its singular directionality, working towards the suggestion that not only is sex gendered, but gender can also be sexed in a specific and situated manner.

Returning to Haraway's oppositional chart, the rejected construction of a 'new organon' might be more adequately replaced by a radical heterogeneity of immanent organons, instead of by the one-directional political name of deconstructing. Such an approach would make an appeal towards a unified theory that does not function according to a negative binary dialectic – something which can clearly not be said of Haraway's proposed 'oppositional positioning' – and builds up universal solidarity based on the *one* name that is not one but many: the name of the Real. Situated agencies, then, is neither a methodology nor a theory, nor does it necessarily oppose deconstruction as a situated methodology. Rather, it is an epistemological approach to lived and situated performances of reality that works against the auto-positionality of knowledge claims, advocating respect for the inherent value of situated practices and experiences that do not need academic justification, but may benefit from an analytical understanding that lays the base for the shaping of an ethical political project of feminism.

With regard to the subject of transsexual sex/gender conformity and its position within feminist academia, situated performances, experiences, practices and inhabitancies of sex/gender must be seen as gaining value and validity through their relation to a situated emergence of the Real – may this relation be characterised by subversion, or conformity. Sex/gender conformative transsexuality here comes to be seen as a situated desire for a particular sexed gender, enabling a particular relationality to the world in its material and discursively invested emergence. A feminist political perspective here appears not as intrinsic to transsexuality per se, but as a possible directionality that transsexual inhabitancy may acquire in the course of situated, worldly subjectivation.

3.6. Conclusion

Concluding, the postsecular concept of habitus provides a new mode of thinking about the inhabitancy of normative trajectories – such as sex/gender, but also race and religion – as

enabled by agential, embodied, ethical practices that are developed in response to the moral, normative and lawful imperatives of a given discursive tradition. This conception of agency as locatable within the inhabitancy of a certain discursively informed and subjectively enacted essence or innate trajectory allows a feminist perspective on transsexuality to break with both biological essentialist and social constructivist premises, allowing certain situated emergences of agency, experiences of essence, and enactments of habitus to be seen as inherently valid and valuable within their own specific contexts without risking the appeal to a universalist theory that supports the ontological determinacy of sex, gender, agency and subjectivity.

In line with Haraway's situated knowledges, an approach of situated agencies makes the radical situated-ness of both the force and the content of knowledge production imperative, urging thought to correspond to heterogeneous embodied experiences of, and perspectives on, reality. A postsecular intervention, then, demonstrates how 'deconstruction' and 'oppositional consciousness' should no longer be implied in the course of increasing this framework's potential to generate 'objective' – that is, situated – knowledge claims, keeping the categories of political consciousness, strategies and sensibilities radically open to situational emergences.

A non-philosophical approach provides the alternatives of heterogeneous, immanent organs and multi-directional consciousness that unilaterally correlate to the Real, which here comes to be seen as a radically democratic fabric consistent of heterogeneous strands of situated realities, experiences and practices. The name of the Real here emerges as a unifying yet non-unitary principle that may form the base for a non-hegemonic, democratic project of feminist solidarity, simultaneously increasing academic thought's accountability to lived reality and resultantly its capacity to generate situated objectivity.

Feminism, after a triple intervention made by applying a postsecular framework, a theory of situated knowledges, and a non-philosophical research practice, appears as radically divided in its applications and perspectives, yet re-unified in its correlation to heterogeneous experiences of the asymmetrical distribution of power. For sex/gender conformative transsexuality, this means that a transsexual inhabitancy of sex-as-a-norm – or sexed gender – should not be burdened with an increased political judgement, and must be seen as an agential and situated negotiation between a given self and her discursive context. Giving itself to academic thought in its situated emergence, a feminist analysis should be accountable to this

emergence in the last instance, deconstructing and critiquing those forces that seek to marginalise those lived experiences which gather under this particular name of survival and persistence without deconstructing the very agencies residing behind them as politically invalid, incorrect or uncritical.

Conclusion

Feminist Aspirations

Affirming the Real of Sex/Gender Conformative Transsexual Women's Agency

In this thesis I have provided an elaborate overview of two prevailing social constructivist representations of transsexual women's agency and political subjectivity, namely a radical lesbian-feminist and a poststructuralist queer feminist narrative, as represented by respectively Janice G. Raymond and Judith Butler. Although articulated in the course of two radically differential feminist projects, the political and analytical theories of both authors are demonstratively directed towards the deconstructions and dethroning of sex and gender normativity, thereby conceptualising agency as the capacity to resist, subvert and reject discursively enforced norms, morals and laws.

In Raymond's representation, this narration leads to – and is indeed put in service of – the invalidation of transsexual people's agencies and political subjectivities, arguing that their ontological properties are deeply and inescapably invested in patriarchal discourse by virtue of desiring and realising the surgical re-inscription of an otherwise non-normative gender. Connecting agency to a determinant and fixed ontological trajectory, non-transsexuality here appears as the only legitimate seat of righteous feminist consciousness and affirmative political action. Moreover, following a radical lesbian-feminist conception of 'the feminist subject' as female-born – which I suggest is representative of yet another form of ontological determinism perpetuated within this narrative –, the agencies and subjectivities of transsexual women – which are here defined as 'transsexually-constructed' women that will inescapably always be men – are increasingly devaluated and defined as ontologically un-feminist. Appealing to a notion of the whole, non-operative, and above all individualistic and autonomous subject-agent whose natural and ontologically determined directionality is to resist the discursive structures that regulate and constitute her, this representational narrative is heavily invested in a political imaginary of the modernist subject.

Breaking with such modernist definitions of agency and subjectivity, Butler's highly influential poststructuralist social constructivist framework, as developed in her publications *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, posits these subjective trajectories as produced by discursive laws and interpellations. Agency here comes to be seen as a discursively constituted capacity, clearing conceptual space to conceive of normative conformations as, indeed, agential. Political agency, however, becomes conceptualised as the capacity to respond to the law in a way that demonstrates and subverts its non-transcendental, constructed authority, giving rise to the queer feminist political subject. Although not clearly dismissive of transsexuality per se, a transsexual desire for sex/gender conformity here comes to be seen as

sourced by false consciousness. Although the possibility of developing a feminist agency is here not connected to any particular ontological status, I have suggested that Butler's rejection of situated desires for sex/gender conformity and an increased political charging of transsexual subjectivity is demonstrative of a prevailing non-transsexual privilege perpetuated through an instance of academic hegemony. Moreover, an increased political responsibility weighs heavily on the subject positions of transsexual *women*, due to Butler's politically invested deployment of psychoanalytical discourse, in which femininity itself appears as *the* site of either political contestation or patriarchal reinforcement. The poststructuralist queer feminist agent appears as a postmodernist subject that enacts the subversion and transgression of, as well as rebellion and resistance against, sex/gender normativity, disavowing a desire for sex/gender conformity as following the false promise of transcendence that is generated by modernist discourse.

Addressing Sandy Stone's counter-narrative developed in response to Raymond's radical lesbian-feminist representation, it becomes clear how a deployment of the latter mentioned postmodernist premises against a modernist disavowal of transsexual women's political agencies might be successful in its overcoming of ontological asymmetry, but fails to deconstruct the hegemony of subversivism as the *only* possible directionality of feminist agency and a viable political consciousness. Although working against such political hegemony, Julia Serano's intervention into both narratives re-evokes the legacies of the autonomous, liberal modernist subject-agent, appealing to an innocent and less rigorous mode of analytical engagement with those discursive constructions that inform agency itself. Dealing with these ambivalences – which requires a delicate balancing of analytical and political goals – the works of Jay Prosser, Viviane Namaste and Katerina Kolozova demonstrate that it might be possible to separate a productive poststructuralist analytical framework from its one-directional political premises, deploying it to come to an adequate, situated understanding of transsexual sex/gender conformity, and giving way to conceptions of transsexual women's agency and political subjectivity that escape their definitions as fake, duped, or confined to acts of re-activated rebellion.

Demonstrating how both Raymond's and Butler's onto-epistemological representations of 'the transsexual subject' are invested in a religious imaginary by presenting sex/gender normativity as a (false) promise of transcendence and divinity, as well as how their critique of sex/gender conformative transsexual agency might resemble a Western secularist disavowal

of religious agency and political subjectivity, I have argued that the imperatives of what Rosi Braidotti has called the postsecular turn in feminism might be adequately deployed to make an affirmative intervention into the debate presented in Chapter One. Saba Mahmood's critical analysis of the concept of agency and its deployment within traditional Western feminist academic discourses demonstrates how agency has come to be universally conceived of as the capacity to resist and subvert discursively established norms. Firmly rooting such conception within an explicitly Western, humanist and liberalist discursive tradition, Mahmood argues that the epistemological definition of agency should be opened up for different personal and political teloi; an argument that I suggested could equally apply to a differently situated debate regarding the political and agential trajectories of transsexual subjectivation.

Furthermore, Talal Asad's postsecular inquiry into the constitutive relationship between a Western secularist definition of agency on the one hand, and its hegemonic assumptions regarding the suffering subject, or the subject-in-pain, on the other, demonstrates how a politically invested category of suffering might come to devalue the agencies of some, while elevating those of others. Being subsumed under the category of the suffering subject, a pro-operative transsexual subject falls outside of such secular definition of the (politically viable) subject-agent, something which might be considered demonstrative of the universalist and even modernist remnants perpetuated by those numerous *postmodernist* representations of trans embodiment and subjectivity that draw the line of 'positive' agency at surgical intervention. Demonstrating how different experiences and conceptions of pain and suffering generate a multiplicity of ways in which the body, the subject and the world might come to be lived and inhabited, Asad challenges the universal deployment of a Western secularist conception of agency, opening up possibilities to conceive of pain and suffering as potential sides of affirmative transformation and agency.

Both Mahmood's and Asad's postsecular analyses demonstrate how commonly deployed definitions of agency as opposed to discursive, normative, moral and lawful constraint as well as to submission, pain, and suffering are not universal, but discursively situated and specific, arguing instead for a more transparent and open conceptualisation of the concept. Apart from their reflective potential, I have further developed the idea that their alternative approaches may provide the basis for a more affirmative approach to norm conforming agencies and subjectivities, as well as to the embodied trajectories of pain and suffering as potentially

generative of healing and survival capacities, thereby providing interesting starting points for an affirmative reformulating of sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity.

In the course of this project I have suggested that Mahmood's concepts of habitus and practical mimesis might oppose respectively a non-agential definition of situated inhabitanancies of sex/gender norms and the political hegemony of strategic mimesis in the course of poststructuralist subversivism. In addition, my exploration of the concept of habitus has provided one possible way out of an exhausted debate between biological essentialist and social constructivist definitions of transsexuality, demonstrating how habitual structures can be considered discursively constituted as well as essential, innate and ontological to a given subject. Further explicating how habitus has not *one* characteristic emergence even within a single discursive tradition, this inquiry has demonstrated how an affirmative approach to sex/gender conformity does not have to be generalising, or devaluating towards situated emergences of sex/gender non-conformity. Again, the category of survival appears central to an understanding of practical mimesis not as a politic or moral trajectory, but rather as a name under which certain ethical practices might gather.

Deploying situated agencies in the course of my own analysis of *Paris is Burning*, I have demonstrated how my approach can make agency visible there where it was previously rendered either invisible or politically regressive, foregrounding survival as meaningfully generative of situated lived experiences, desires and felt senses of self. Emphasising how situated processes of subjectivation and survival take place in response to the radically localised context of a situated subject-agent, I have shown how different frameworks of transformation – may they be non-normative or conformative – emerge as personally and academically meaningful within their own context, rather than providing starting points for generalised theorisation, or politicisation. Being mobilised through the deployment of an ethical approach that separates situated practice from moral discourse and political judgement, an approach of situated agencies and the related notion of distributive agency might bring the moral premises of feminism itself into crisis, especially when situated agencies might emerge as mobilised by, conducted across, or even constitutive of, asymmetrical and/or patriarchal power structures.

Answering to a persistent call for political accountability and feminist solidarity, I have proposed not only a situated academic practice of Donna Haraway's situated knowledges in

the course of decreasing universalism and increasing situated objectivity, but also a substitution of the name of deconstruction that persists within her theory with the non-philosophical concept of ‘the Real’, under which a radical heterogeneity of situated realities might gather in the course of a universal but non-universalising feminist project of solidarity.

What kind of new, viable feminist agencies and political subject positions do the imperatives of postsecular feminist inquiry open up for sex/gender conformative transsexual women? First of all, I think the inquiry presented in this thesis has demonstrated how a postsecular epistemological framework may conceptualise conformity as an affirmative category under which situated ethical practices and processes of survival and transformation gather, positing it as one of the various possible names of personal and political agency and consciousness. Survival here emerges next to the traditional analytical categories of submission and subversion, bringing these names back to a horizontal level of engagement with the Real as it is heterogeneously lived, experienced, inhabited and (re-) directed. Sex/gender conformative transsexual subjectivity here emerges as founded upon, as well as generative of, situated and agential processes of transformation, which are aimed at the inhabitancy of a certain norm.

Notably, there are no elements to this subjectivation process that appear *necessarily* feminist – that is, there is nothing about being transsexual that makes being feminist imperative, just as this is not the case for any other category of subjectivation. Rather, feminism here comes to be seen as a term representative of various directionalities that may be assumed in response to those asymmetrical power structures that appear oppressive to a given subject in a given context. Turning the original research question around – what does the conceptualisation of sex/gender conformative transsexual women’s agency and political subjectivity *as* viable and valuable do to the imperatives of contemporary academic feminist discourses? –, feminism must here be reformulated as either an internally divided concept under which several emergences of non-patriarchal thought, practice and politics gather, or a specific academic approach that opposes the perpetuation of hegemonic gestures *within* academic knowledge production. To both formulations, the Real may present itself as an unlimited concept encompassing heterogeneous experiences and formations of those situated realities to which both lived experience and academic research practice may unilaterally correlate.

Laruelle’s conceptualisation of sexed gender may offer ways to conceive of gender as a way in which a certain habitus is inhabited, lived and embodied, corresponding to an experienced

reality of sex that does not hold any generalising truth value, but is rather constitutive of the Real of a certain subjectivation process, self-representation and felt sense of self. Taken together with the Real of sexual difference as it is experienced and etched within our contemporary realities, sexed gender points to the way in which gender is lived within this relation, assuming a subversivist *or* conformative directionality in its correspondence to situated instances of suffering and survival, which come together under the radically heterogeneous name of the Real.

Redirecting – or de-directing – poststructuralist conceptions of the postmodernist subject-agent by means of a postsecular intervention, situated agencies present a radically situated and *situating* poststructuralist epistemological framework that can aspire to an increased objective of situated knowledges. Taking out the last hegemonic imperative premises of this latter theory – that are, deconstruction and oppositional consciousness – both a postsecular and non-philosophical intervention enable situated agencies to rise above its own political project, allowing for a radical solidarity of heterogeneous directionalities, political and personal subjectivation processes. Perhaps, it is only through the conscious untangling of its analytical approaches from their political foundations – an always already failing exercise of de-directionality – that knowledge production can aspire to a truly feminist objective epistemological and methodological framework, rejecting epistemological violence and intellectual hegemony both outside *and* within its own disciplinary boundaries. Getting to the Real of sex/gender conformative transsexual women's agency might entail getting closer to the Real of feminism, presenting both in their radical heterogeneous emergences, and providing new points of connection in the web that is called life.

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