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Anonymous Temporality and Gender

Rereading Merleau-Ponty

MEGAN M. BURKE

THIS ESSAY PROVIDES A FEMINIST reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of anonymity in order to show that it is a critical resource for a feminist account of gender. For Merleau-Ponty, anonymity is a structure of temporality that is prior to the cogito; it is a time that actualizes the reflective self. It gestures away from ontological commitments rooted in presence and calls attention to how senses inform and actualize one's reflective experience, which illuminates how it is that certain habits become sedimented or deeply rooted into the structure of one's lived experience. As such, anonymity provides a useful framework for understanding how and in what ways gender normativity is taken up and resisted in experience. Yet feminist readings of Merleau-Ponty and anonymity are divided. On the one hand, there is a strong criticism of his work in general and anonymity in particular and, on the other hand, there is an effort to recuperate aspects of his project, including anonymity. Four examples can help frame this disparate feminist reception of his work:

1. Merleau-Ponty neglects sexual difference. For example, Elizabeth Grosz suggests, "Merleau-Ponty leaves out—indeed, is unable to address—the questions of sexual difference, the question of what kind of human body he is discussing, what kind of perceptual functions, and what kind of sexual desire result from the sexual morphology and particularity of the subject" (Grosz 1994, 10).

2. Anonymity neglects sexual difference. Shannon Sullivan is representative of this point, claiming, “Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the anonymous or impersonal body . . . leads one to overlook” difference; “Merleau-Ponty fails to realize” difference; “He is wrong” (Sullivan 2001, 71).
3. Anonymity illuminates sexual difference. For Silvia Stoller “[W]ith the help of Merleau-Ponty . . . sexual difference presupposes an anonymous sexuality which underlies gender identifications,” making anonymity important to a phenomenological account of sexual difference (Stoller 2013).
4. Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied subjectivity provides insight into the lived experience of femininity. Feminist analyses of female body comportment, such as those of Iris Marion Young and Sandra Bartky, suggest that gender is a process of sedimentation (Young 1990; Bartky 1990). More specifically, they suggest gender becomes a lived experience through the repetition of particular behaviors and actions such that they become a deeply habituated part of one’s being in the world.

While the feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are important insofar as they caution against the acceptance of universal claims about existence, they also overlook anonymity’s relationship to time. Given that Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of anonymity is temporal through and through, this oversight is problematic. Without an account of anonymity as a kind of temporality, we miss the value of anonymity and the further insight that can be drawn from it in relation to gender. In what follows, then, I propose a solution to the disparate reception of his work. I suggest that reading anonymity as a structure of temporality illuminates how gender is taken up in lived experience. And, I suggest that anonymity can provide a strong account of gender normativity when one understands the parallels between sedimentation and anonymity with respect to temporality. By showing the strong connection between sedimentation and anonymous temporality, I suggest that it is ontologically and politically helpful to understand gender as a lived time.

In the first section of this paper, I will address the main criticisms of anonymity provided by Shannon Sullivan and Luce Irigaray, while also paying attention to those from Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Beata Stawarska. For Sullivan, Grosz, and Butler, Merleau-Ponty’s anonymous body is a neutral body, a body that fails to account for gender differences. Irigaray and Stawarska suggest that anonymity is the mark of patriarchy, making ethical and ontological solipsism fundamental to Merleau-Ponty’s work. In each of these cases, anonymity provides nothing useful for and is, in fact, a detriment to feminist projects.

In the second section of this paper, I turn to Stoller’s positive reading of anonymity. For Stoller, anonymity is a political and ethical resource that challenges gender norms because it can allow for transformation in one’s

gendered existence. Stoller begins to think of anonymity in relation to time, claiming that it is a certain modality of time that creates the indeterminacy of gender. Stoller, however, is not adamant that anonymity must be understood fundamentally as a mode of temporality, which brings me to my own reading of anonymity.

I suggest that it is necessary to read anonymity as a kind of temporality and I show that the only resources Merleau-Ponty provides are those that make anonymity recognizable as temporality. My reading of anonymity leads me to suggest, in the final section, that anonymous temporality and temporality itself are vital resources for a phenomenological account of gender. Here I argue that seeing anonymity as temporality provides a more robust account of the experience and existence of gender such that the notion of anonymity becomes central to a phenomenology of gender. In understanding gender as temporality, I claim that it is possible to understand both the phenomenon and violence of gender normativity and the potential path for its subversion.

ANONYMITY AS THE MASCULINE UNIVERSAL

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty refers to anonymity in several ways; the anonymous body, the prepersonal, the impersonal, “an original past,” natural time, an “absolute past of nature, “primordial silence,” “pre-history,” and “a past which has never been present” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 252, 137/160, 184/214, 240/277, 252). These terms demonstrate what anonymity is for Merleau-Ponty: a certain kind of temporality, a lived time that is prior to the present, a generative time before the history of the “I.” Yet the feminist literature on anonymity neglects this complexity and its direct relationship to time. Instead, it reads anonymity as the impersonal or a shared generality of human existence. Shannon Sullivan, for instance, in *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, provides the following account of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of anonymity: “[B]eneath that personal level is a level of existence in which there is a commonality between and a quasi-indifferentiation from other bodies. . . . Complementary to the characterization of anonymous existence as pre-personal is Merleau-Ponty’s description of it as impersonal” (Sullivan 2001, 69–70). The standout feature of anonymity, Sullivan suggests, is its impersonal structure. It is the place prior to which my body and self are noticeably different than that of an other such that anonymity is a pure shared existence. “As the word ‘anonymous’ indicates, my bodily structure is unnameable in that it cannot be completely claimed as uniquely mine” (Sullivan 2001, 70). Citing Merleau-Ponty, Sullivan supports her own point: “my existence is impersonal because the other’s ‘living body has the same structure as mine” (Sullivan 2001, 70).

In this sense, anonymity is read as a layer beneath my personal self, a layer that becomes a universal ground.

The consequences of this universal ground are indeed troubling from a feminist perspective, as positing a universal ground for bodies denies sexual difference. For Sullivan, claiming similarity to another's body means that I privilege myself as the site of perception; I become the site for establishing similarity and fail to perceive how another may differ from me. Ultimately, the problem with anonymity is this:

[B]ecause the body is an anonymous body that has no particularity—such as that provided by gender, sexuality, class, race, age, culture, nationality, individual experiences, upbringing, and more—Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective dialogue often turns out to be a solipsistic subject's monologue that includes an elimination of others in its very "communication" with them. Because the particularities have been overlooked, Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity is built upon the domination of others (Sullivan 1997, 1).

Consequently, Sullivan claims that Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied subjectivity fails to provide an ethical account of intersubjectivity precisely because subjectivity is rooted in the anonymous universal, one that is saturated with domination. While humans may share a physiological structure, this is not only an insufficient starting point for intersubjectivity, but it is also a dangerous one. Human bodies are not neutral. Sometimes, Sullivan claims, human bodies can provide a departure point for shared meaning in the world, but our concrete situations most often mean that we do not have similar worlds in common. For instance, as Iris Marion Young shows in "Throwing Like a Girl," female body comportment means that girls and women have inhibited bodily motility whereas men are encouraged to take up space (Young 1990). The implications this has on women's lived experience are, as Young shows, detrimental; women are immobilized in time and space. When the body is understood as a neutral place, we fail to see the differences that gender makes on one's living body. Sullivan suggests another example: "The meaning of food, hunger, and eating . . . are likely to be very different for the anorexic and nonanorexic" (Sullivan 2001, 71). Thus, Sullivan concludes, "Neglecting this fact," of the concreteness of my bodily structure and its extension in the world, "as Merleau-Ponty's notion of the anonymous or impersonal body tends to do, leads one to overlook the different habits incorporated into bodily structures and thus the different meanings that bodily gestures have as a result" (Sullivan 2001, 71). This oversight forbids recognition of concrete situations, which means we also miss the structures that create these situations.

Ultimately, as Grosz points out in *Volatile Bodies*, Merleau-Ponty is "unaware of the masculinity and phallogentrism of" his analysis "of the lived body"

such that the “question of what other types of human experience, what other modalities of perception, what other relations . . . cannot be raised in the terms he develops” (Grosz 1994, 110). His account of subjectivity, then, is nothing more than the singular vision of the masculine subject. Judith Butler’s reading corroborates this view, claiming that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of lived experience rests upon heteronormativity: his “descriptions of sexuality” are “tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality. Not only does he assume that sexual relations are heterosexual, but that the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body” (Butler 1981, 86). For Butler, because this tacit heteronormativity structures his account of the lived experience of sexuality, the reference to the anonymous body is actually an account of the masculine subject.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray draws similar conclusions in her reading of Merleau-Ponty by suggesting that he, like other male philosophers before him, continues to occupy the throne of the masculine universal, consuming and making invisible the feminine other. This invisibility of the feminine other, of sexual difference, results in the masculine subject’s negation of alterity. In other words, there is no recognition of sexual difference and therefore there is no recognition of the feminine subject position. In denying the ontological status of difference, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the only way for two different seers to recognize one another would be for them to assimilate to the same world. Consequently, we would become the same:

Within this world, movement is such that it would take extraordinary luck for two seers to catch sight of each other, find each other on the track of the same circle and cross paths, or look at each other as they walk in parallel lines. Or might it happen that they see each other’s eyes? Another possibility which is highly unlikely. For this to come about, it would have to happen that two seers assimilated the “universal Word,” its effects, the world, in exactly the same way, and that they found each other at the same point space and time. An unlikely stroke of luck or chance? Or of grace? *Which makes us identical at a given moment* (Irigaray 1993, 182; emphasis mine).

For Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty’s ontological commitments rely on the logic of the same. Beata Stawarska shares similar claims against and raises concerns over Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in general, but also of anonymity in particular. She suggests that Merleau-Ponty not only brackets gender in his ontology, “but also self/other specificity” in the emphasis of an ontological anonymity, thus “establishing a homogenous enclosed philosophical system, which threatens to reduce alterity to sameness” (Stawarska 2006, 104). As the impersonal, then, anonymity fails to address the ways in which sexual difference structures

our being in the world. The covering over of this difference means that Merleau-Ponty's ontology provides no ethical resources for feminist work.

These criticisms of anonymity are helpful insofar as they caution us against neutral and universal claims. Such skepticism is both understandable and necessary in a world in which gender differences matter. It is certainly not the case that my body is the same as my brother's in regard to our situation in the world. Thus, an account of gendered experiences, gendered bodies, and the structures that create these situations is indeed crucial. But from these criticisms, it seems that Merleau-Ponty does not provide any resources to give such an account.

ANONYMITY AS INDETERMINACY

In defense of anonymity, Stoller points to several failures in the claim that anonymity denies gender difference. In "Reflections on Merleau-Ponty Skepticism," Silvia Stoller challenges Sullivan's treatment of the anonymous body as a neutral site. Given that "for Merleau-Ponty the human subject is always a situated subject—and this applies also to its anonymous mode of being"—the equation of anonymity with neutrality is "unfounded" (Stoller 2000, 176). Instead, Stoller reads anonymity as "the anonymous collectivity . . . a sort of existence of numerous person" (Stoller 2000, 176). Citing Merleau-Ponty, she points out that anonymity is a "dual being"; it is the place where the other and I are "two sides of one and the same phenomenon" (Stoller 2000, 176). And furthermore, asymmetry characterizes the two insofar as Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the other is different from me. As Stoller points out, Merleau-Ponty affirms difference between the other and me when he says, "[I]t would be hypocritical to pretend that I seek the welfare of another *as if it were mine*" (Stoller 2000, 177). Ultimately, Stoller claims, it is not that Merleau-Ponty wants to negate differences; but rather, he wants to know of their emergence in the world and in one's style of being.

As a means to build her defense of anonymity, Stoller's most recent work seeks to provide a positive reading of anonymity. Rather than reading anonymity solely as the impersonal, Stoller reads anonymity as indeterminacy. In "The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Post-structuralist Feminism," Stoller suggests that for Merleau-Ponty anonymity is an indeterminacy that characterizes and underlies all of human existence. For Stoller, thinking anonymity as indeterminacy is a way to think about a form of intersubjective indifference and social generality. She says, "This is a sphere of social generality . . . in which I and the other are not yet distinguished"; "In our everyday communication we meet hundreds of people, women and men and other gendered beings," but "we are seldom directed to them by way of consciously identifying their gender" (Stoller forthcoming). Ultimately, she

wants to emphasize, through anonymity, that there are moments when a part of my gendered “I” may not be central to my experience—there are some moments in which another’s gender remains indeterminate or anonymous to us.

In other work, Stoller tries to build on this account of anonymity as indeterminacy by raising the issue of time. She argues that, although Merleau-Ponty relates anonymity to sexuality most clearly, “anonymity is not restricted to the issue of sexuality and sexual being,” and so “it may also be applied to the issue of temporality” (Stoller 2011, 84). Stoller seeks to address what anonymous temporality is and arrives at the following conclusion:

According to Merleau-Ponty, “there is” temporality that is not yet named or determined, but that underlies all our specific temporal experiences, women’s and men’s. Merleau-Ponty calls this ‘primordial temporality’. . . . Like anonymous sexuality, anonymous temporality is a latent sphere of temporality that underlies the different time experiences of genders. It is a sphere of temporal generality in which genders do share even as they have their specific time experiences. . . . However, this sort of temporality is different from that which can be identified as the temporality of women and men. (Stoller 2011, 87)

From here, she returns to anonymous temporality as the indeterminate and therefore a polymorphous resource of gendered experience: “[F]rom the premise that determinations are marked by a constitutive instability, there can grow a fundamental hope of other determinations” (Stoller forthcoming). That is, if one is not always already marked by a determined gender, then there is a time to become gender differently.

In relation to gender, however, I find this reading of anonymity unconvincing. While I do not disagree that anonymity can be characterized by indeterminacy, it does not follow that this alleviates the reality of gender from our experience. Yet Stoller’s turn to time starts to underscore a critical character of anonymity that does not appear in other feminist work. In this latter respect, Stoller’s account is more sufficient than Sullivan’s insofar as Stoller acknowledges a relationship between anonymity and temporality. But still, even in making this turn to the temporal, Stoller does not adequately characterize anonymity. If this is a temporality that is different from the time of being a man or a woman, then what does it do to our understanding of gender? Does this really mean, as Stoller suggests, that there is a time in life when gender does not exist? It seems that Stoller fails to understand the difference between anonymous temporality and anonymity in the experience of life.

Thus, an account of anonymous temporality is still needed. While Stoller argues that it is possible to understand anonymity in temporal terms, I argue that anonymity is essentially temporal.¹ Only by understanding anonymity in this way can we fully account for what anonymity is and why it is an abundant

resource for feminism. In what follows, I will provide a reading of anonymity to show why it is not a level beneath the personal in the sense of a hierarchical suppression, but a dimension of time that is never present to the personal body, one's "I." As such, it is vital to conceive of anonymity as "the past that has never been present" (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 252). This allows us to see another side of anonymity, a side that relates to sedimentation and the invisible formation of gendered habits. Ultimately, sedimentation can only be understood in relation to anonymity. It is through anonymous temporality that gender becomes a sedimented style of being, a style that is saturated with difference. This account will give us more insight and a more sufficient understanding of why the aforementioned criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are unfounded. At the same time, however, this account will, as Stoller first suggests, also show why anonymity allows us to see a surplus of being that can be a political resource for feminism.

ANONYMITY AS TIME

So far, my suggestion has been that there has yet to be a sufficient feminist treatment of anonymity. In this section, I return to the question of anonymity to claim that anonymity is necessarily a temporality of a distinct kind. I will provide an account of what this temporality is, how it relates to the personal body and personal time, and the ontological commitments that stem from the relationship between anonymous temporality and personal temporality. To recover the insight into anonymity, we must first show how the concept emerges from an experience of a certain temporal dimension of existence.

From the very beginning of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the anonymous aspect of our being and of our reflections in relation to time as a specific response to the Western philosophical legacies that favor certainty and the ever-present thinking "I." His dissatisfaction with preceding philosophical inquiries is generally oriented around the same critique: "We must not merely settle into a reflective attitude or into an unassailable *Cogito*, but also reflect upon this reflection, *understand the natural situation it is aware of replacing and that thereby belongs to its definition*" (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 63; emphasis mine). Within philosophy, whether from Descartes, Kant, or Husserl, Merleau-Ponty denies the universal constituting power of Cartesian *cogito* and their respective commitments to the certainty of the present, a temporality where the "experience of a being is established once and for all" (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 46). Instead, his project entails a philosophical account of the past, which is incompatible with a philosophy of consciousness and presence. Merleau-Ponty aims to account for the "strange relations woven between the parts of the landscape, or from the landscape to me as an embodied subject, relations by which a perceived object can condense

within itself an entire scene or become the *imago* of an entire segment of life” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 53). These strange relations are our sensing, or our embodied communication with the world, a communication without which we would not have a world at all. Sensing makes the world pregnant with meaning.

Ultimately, strange relations are what make the Cartesian *cogito* assailable. They are present in our relationship with the world, but they are not present to my “I.” Rather, “I” am formed in and through them such that they are not directly present to me, but are rather a background for the emergence of the *cogito*. And so, “We must attempt to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 69). In this respect, a subject is never purely present to herself; rather, there is an uncertain strangeness at the heart of existence.

In “Part One: The Body,” this “somewhere” of strange relations is the body. Using the well-known phantom limb example, Merleau-Ponty suggests that, in some way, we all have phantom limbs. That is, when an amputee senses his amputated arm it is not a pathological response, but is instead the response of his past being in the world, a past world that was lived with two arms. “What refuses the mutilation or the deficiency in us is an I that is engaged in a certain physical and inter-human world. . . . To have a phantom limb is to remain open to all of the actions of which the arm alone is capable and to stay within the practical field that one had prior to the mutilation” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 83–84). One cannot sever one’s past lived experience just by severing an arm. “I” have limbs that extend out to the world, whether physical, emotional, etc., in order to have the world “I” have. Thus, when an amputee experiences the phantom limb it is the incorporation of past bodily habits into his present being. The body, then, is the place in which I am able to have a world, a place where strange, phantom relations take place so that I can give meaning to my world.

However, phantom relations do not and cannot characterize all of our being or else we would never have a present time. Instead, they are a repressed past from which our first-person existence springs forth, and in so far as they precede the “I,” they are impersonal. So unlike Sullivan’s claim of the impersonal as neutral, the impersonal is a different time for my being. It is not my “I,” and therefore it is not personal. Rather, “my life is made up of two rhythms,” two temporalities, and an “almost impersonal existence thus appears around our personal existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 86). We can relate these two temporalities to what he calls “two distinct layers,” of the body, “the habitual body and that of the actual body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 84). The habitual body is not neutral or acultural; it is a repository of habitual experience. Thus, the time of strange relations is the almost impersonal existence, a repressed past of my habitual body, whereas my “I” lies within the present personal temporality of my actual body. This past, as Alia Al-Saji suggests, is

“the generative” time of the “divisions, of experience, of things, and ideas” that are my personal time (Al-Saji 2008, 48).

It is here in this distinction between these moments or rhythms of being that Merleau-Ponty begins to use the language of anonymity in relation to the almost impersonal, habitual body. He says,

Just as we speak of a repression in the restricted sense when I preserve through time one of the momentary worlds that I have passed through and that I make into the form of my entire life, so too can we say that my organism—as a pre-personal adhesion to the general form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence—plays the role of an *innate complex* beneath the level of my personal life. (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 86)

The anonymous here, as a level beneath the personal, must not be read in a hierarchical way. It is a level beneath only in so far as it underlies my present. It is not less than the personal level, but informs the personal level in a phantom-like way such that this “level” is not a spatial dimension; *it is a time* that haunts my personal body. The phantom limb exemplifies this haunting of the “I”—while one of my arms may be missing, the sensation of the arm haunts me in so far as my “I” has actualized in relation to me having two arms. Perceiving the world with two arms is my habitual experience of the world such that “I” continue to exist in the world as if I had two limbs, just as “I” had two limbs in my past. Thus, the anonymous is the time of a repressed past, a time that informs the personal time of my present “I.”

As Al-Saji points out, the most intriguing discussion of this anonymous past is found in the chapter, “Sensing.” Here, Merleau-Ponty unravels the different temporal horizons that make up my existence and provides an “account of sensory life” that “allows us to glimpse a different structure of bodily temporality, one that involves an irreducible sense of pastness” (Al-Saji 2008, 47). Beginning with a challenge to the Cartesian subject of presence, Merleau-Ponty’s concern is with “the world . . . not perfectly explicit in front of us” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 215). More specifically, he suggests that it is impossible for a perception to belong to pure being; rather, perception is informed by a history such that “sensation is a reconstitution, it presupposes in me the sedimentations of previous constitutions” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 221). These sedimentations arise, he says, from “an atmosphere of generality,” of anonymity, which is prior to my present “I.” That is, they emerge from sensing, prereflective moments that actualize my reflective self. And since sensing happens before reflection, I am unable to know, reflectively, these sedimentations. Instead, I feel them, I sense them unfold onto my being. They arise from a past, even from who “I” was in the past. As such, anonymity is a different temporality than the time of my “I.” Here we have two distinct

structures of temporality where anonymous time is prior to my intellectual determinations of a perception, my personal time. Or, anonymous time is the generative past of my present. It is only a level beneath me in so far as they are before the *cogito*. In other words, my “I,” *my* present happens at a time after sensing, but is nevertheless continuously informed by my sensing. It is not “I” who perceives, *since “I” am a time beyond sensing*, but rather “one perceives in me” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 223). Anonymous temporality is not absolutely prior to my personal time, but it is a generative time of my personal body.

Unlike Sullivan’s claim that this general existence is a neutral, universal layer of the subject, here we find quite a different account. General existence, the prepersonal atmosphere beneath my “I,” is a time without a linear self; it is the time that gives us the ability to build meanings and have intentionality. It is the sensing of the world that precedes the sensible. The affectivity here is “an opening onto the rhythmic differences of the world . . . a dynamic and dialogical affectivity that modulates its openness in response to the world” (Al-Saji 2008, 53). This generative past that is anonymous temporality actualizes one’s personal temporality, but only insofar as it is a forgotten past, a past that can never be captured by the *cogito*. In Al-Saji’s words, “It registers within experience as an original forgetting or blindspot that does not derive from, and cannot be overcome in, direct perception” (Al-Saji 2007, 184).

It is not, then, that Merleau-Ponty seeks to deny difference or others in our world, but rather he asks the question of how we make determinations about them and how we form our very own personal “I.” And furthermore, anonymous temporality is not a time of a solipsistic subject, a time without others. Rather, it is the world unfolding in me. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, “I experience sensation as a modality of a general existence, already destined to a physical world, which flows through me without my being its author” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 224).

This generality that characterizes anonymity decenters the authority of the *cogito*. It suggests that there is a fallacy to a philosophy of presence and to the Cartesian *cogito* only insofar as they demand a forgetting of the past. For Merleau-Ponty, the transparency of the Cartesian *cogito* is an impossibility because there is always a past that creates an opacity to the present. There is always a past that haunts “me.” What is at stake here, then, is a philosophical method that does not posit all time and all experience in the constituting subject; rather, there is a time of strange relations with the world, or as Al-Saji suggests, “a deeper sensory difference that can only be adequately conceived as ‘original past’” (Al-Saji 2008, 69).² Thus, reflection, my personal time, always draws upon a prereflective, anonymous time, “a past that has never been present” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 252).

GENDER: HABIT, SURPLUS, TIME

So far, I have suggested that it is necessary to think of anonymity as a structure of temporality distinct from the *cogito*. In what follows, I claim that this emphasis on anonymous temporality provides insight into two different feminist conceptualizations of gender: gender as habit and gender as surplus. Both of these offer invaluable resources for understanding what gender is. Yet, I will suggest that we need to look to a third understanding of gender, gender as lived time, for a richer account of the origination of gender habits and subversion.

Young and Bartky claim that gender norms are internalized and sedimented such that they become a part of one's bodily situation. They both show the seemingly natural style of gendered existence that results from the incorporation of gendered habits into one's being, habits that are taken up and lived prior to reflection on them. For Young, this is the habit of femininity as inhibited intentionality and a restricted spatiality such that women do not use their bodies in expansive ways. It is the habit of throwing like a girl. For Bartky, femininity is the habit of domination, typified by the "fashion-beauty complex" and sexual objectification, which make woman into a being who is rooted in her immanence, but always alienated from her physical body (Bartky 1990, 39–40). Here, gender as habit allows us to understand the way in which bodies are shaped into particular gendered beings.

This is also precisely what motivated Beauvoir to write *The Second Sex*: "If the female function is not enough to define woman, and if we also reject the explanation of the 'eternal feminine,' but if we accept, even temporarily, that there are women on the earth, we then have to ask: What is a woman?" (Beauvoir 2010, 4). Beauvoir's inquiring, and indeed her project, poses the question of the anonymous source of femininity. If it is not what is present to us, what is it? How do these beings we call women come to be present? What kind of past makes them present? In other words, it is not just a question of what habits encourage the process of becoming a woman, but is also a question of anonymous temporality.

This never-present past means that personal temporality, the lived time of my "I," is very superficial. There are always relations, sensations, and habits at work prior to myself as an "I." And this past emerges right in and through my body. I develop habits of sensing that generate what Beauvoir terms a "general arrangement" of possible relations (Beauvoir 2010, 341). If we are to think about this in regard to my gendered "I," it means that underlying my determinations about my gendered self are habituations that inform my gendered style of being, my gendered style of relating to the world. Anonymous temporality, then, is the time of the sedimentation of gendered habits. To use Beauvoirian language, it is the time of becoming a woman. I am a woman, but only insofar as I have a past that actualizes the claim, "I am a woman." But it is a past that is so anonymous

to me, but so rooted in me as a gendered being, that I take myself as a gendered self, as a “woman” or as a “man” as naturally given.

The relationship between anonymous temporality and sedimentation becomes more evident if we consider that anonymous temporality establishes a general arrangement for the personal body. Given this, it is possible to see how gender normativity is rooted in the anonymous level. Gender is not an object that is consciously given over to us. It is taken up by us and lived by us, and in this living we establish a way of relating to the world as an “I.” Although she does not discuss it in terms of time, this is precisely what Sara Heinämaa refers to in her phenomenological account of gender when she says, “The body is ultimately understood as a system—or better as a sedimentation—of values and meanings, created by *former* bodily acts, postures, gestures, and movement” (Heinämaa 1997, 302; emphasis mine). Another way of stating Heinämaa’s position is to say that gender emerges from anonymous temporality insofar as it originates in a past that I cannot recall; it is something that “I” already do, that “I” already am. In other words, this conceptualization of gender as habit draws on anonymous temporality to make the claim that gender is a matter of sedimentation in one’s lived body.

Anonymity, then, is the temporality of sedimentation. It is the sensing that generates particular gendered *cogitos*. That is, sensory experiences, whether vision, touch, or the sensation of bodily movement, materialize a gendered “I” such that anonymous temporality is the time of the sedimentation of gendered norms. And insofar as sedimentation occurs in anonymous temporality it becomes possible to understand why and how it is that gender comes to be a habit that is ordinarily done prereflectively. That is, “I” do femininity not because I think about it, but because it is how “I” actualize, how “I” come to think and be in the world. In this sense, anonymity illuminates how it is that gender becomes habit; existing prior to reflective experience means gender is deeply embedded or sedimented into one’s “I.” Not only does this show that gender is always present in one’s “I,” but also shows why it is that gender normativity is so difficult to undo.

Stoller’s account of anonymity as indeterminacy, however, argues for an understanding of gender as surplus. As Stoller points out, the anonymous is an excess; it “represents a *surplus* which makes different experiences possible” (Stoller 2013). Stoller suggests that this is Judith Butler’s insight in *Gender Trouble*: gender is never fully determined as there are always bodies and experiences that exceed given gender norms. For Butler, and for Stoller, the fact that feminists always use an “embarrassed ‘etc.’” to characterize the feminist subject—gender, race, class, age, sex, etc . . .—draws attention to the failure of identity (Butler 1990; 143; Stoller 2013). The “etc.” shows us how gender identity is always already implicated in uncertainty and indeterminability. In this respect, indeterminacy characterizes gender.

For Stoller, seeing gender in this way provides a positive political project for feminism. It means that the determination of a fixed gender, of gender normativity, is always in question. More specifically,

When something is instable in itself, it need not be compelled to remain so. This opens the door to a kind of ethics, which stipulates the instability of determination, and assumes that another determination is *basically* possible. The determination itself points to further possible determinations, and in regard to the issue of gender: it means that living a specific gender is not set down once and for all. Every gender has the option of taking on another gender identity. (Stoller 2013)

Similar to Butler's politics of subversion through gender performativity, where gender normativity entails an exclusion that generates an excess, Stoller claims that the anonymous, as a surplus, underscores the indeterminate character of gender, and consequently should be read as a rich ethical and political resource for feminism. Gender is never merely normative and a process of habituation. Gender is a surplus of possibility.

This notion of gender as surplus is quite compelling as it explains why it is that gender norms shift and suggests that subjects are never purely bound violently to normative practices. But, it is only through a temporality that is different from my personal temporality that indeterminacy can emerge. Given the plurality of sensible givens in anonymity, anonymity is a time in which different meanings are generated. Different sensings can unfold in me such that my gendered existence may actualize differently. Similar to gender as habit, gender as surplus draws on anonymous temporality. In other words, the anonymous body does not just make the body formative to who I am, but insofar as anonymous time enfolds the emergence of my "I," my self is at once more than just the "I."

This indeterminacy may seem to be at odds with the sedimentation of gender. For instance, if gender is indeterminate because it operates at the anonymous level, then how is it that gender becomes rooted in a lived experience? Anonymous temporality reveals that one's sensory experience is indeterminate until it becomes habitual or sedimented. Sedimentation is what generates my claim as a particular kind of gendered person. At the same time, however, even when "I" become habitual, lived experience can interrupt this habituation shifting who "I" am and what "I" do. Of course, it is not just any lived experience that can interrupt "my" habituation. It is experience that draws awareness to "my" history, to how I have become who "I" am. Gender becomes sedimentation when "I" do it automatically; it becomes surplus when what "I" do automatically is existentially shaken and disrupted.

In either instance, however—thinking of gender as sedimentation or as surplus—gender is being understood as lived time. And if we are to following this and think of gender as time, then it becomes possible to articulate the affective experience of gender—how it is unconsciously lived as a forgotten past, and when and how “I” consciously feel it, in *my* present, in a confrontation with normativity. At the same time, we can articulate a positive political project for undoing the violence of gender norms. This also suggests the possibility of a phenomenological account of normativity, an account that is rooted in experience and the body rather than external disciplinary practices of gender.

To elaborate on this dual character of anonymity, it is instructive to draw on Al-Saji’s notion of anonymous time as an immemorial time. (Al-Saji 2007). To most, gender is immemorial. It unfolds in us without our conscious experience of it. Gender registers within our experience, but ordinarily in a forgotten sense. While I, in my personal time, may call myself a woman, a man, or claim some other gendered identity, ordinarily I do not directly perceive my gender; it is, rather, a memory that I cannot recall. It is a memory that I cannot make fully present. That is, I do not know my gendered habits until I gain some distance from or have to confront them through an experience (direct discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, etc.) that draws them into my personal time. Prior to this distance or confrontation, they are anonymous. Gender is a forgotten sedimentation in anonymous temporality. In other words, gender is immemorial. It cannot be captured by my “I,” but continually haunts my temporal structure. This is why it is so hard to draw the line between the natural and the cultural. If my gendered style of being precedes me then it certainly seems *as if* I was born as such. “I” have always thrown like a girl. “I” have always had inhibited intentionality and restricted spatiality in my being as a girl or woman in the world. But “I” am only this way insofar as I cannot recall my past. So, when we think of gender as immemorial it is possible to see why gender norms unfold in our lives in insidious ways and why we come to feel them as natural. They are phantom-like relations with our world and others that we take up in order to form a concrete, personal situation. The temporality of gender is the duration of becoming a gendered “I.”

This lived time is also immemorial in another sense. As immemorial, gender is never fixed, never memorialized. The prepersonal body of anonymous temporality undoes my “I” in the very moments of its being, and the new “I” forms a new past. Anonymous temporality does not flow in a unidirectional way toward the personal body such that it only establishes one sedimented way of being in the world. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, “By sensation I grasp, on the fringe of my own personal life and my own acts, a life of a given consciousness from which these latter emerge, the life of my eyes, my hands, my ears, *which are so many natural selves*” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 254; emphasis mine). That is, my “I” is never fully determined or purely singular because my senses, my “anonymous

functions,” are a bouquet of sensations waiting to be actualized (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 224). Because my body does not sense in the singular, but senses with my eyes, my nose, my heartbeat, my “I” can actualize differently. For example, taking up new practices, such as yoga, martial arts, or a sport, practices that all require the use of senses in ways different than ordinary behaviors, often transform one’s reflective consciousness and even one’s sense of self as a gendered “I.” This would be, for instance, to take Young’s example, the case if all girls were taught to throw a baseball in the same way and with the same fervor that boys are. The same would also be the case for more violent experiences such as street harassment or sexual assault where different sensory functions are heightened, forming a different relationship to one’s gendered existence in the world.

Of course, these are two different kinds of experiences of confrontation. The positive experience of developing a practice that challenges, consciously or not, the limitations of gender normativity is in no way like an experience of violence that is a consequence of the very violence of gender normativity. But, both experiences of confrontation can result in a mourning of gender normativity—the recognition and experience that there is a limitation, a violence, in my being that “I” was not aware of—which can lead to a shift in one’s style of gender. The new actualization may be negative—“my” experience of shame after sexual assault further propels me into thinking that I was responsible, resulting in a further sedimentation into patriarchal gender normativity; or it may be positive—learning to throw a ball and subvert the bodily limitations of patriarchal femininity, or finding a political identity through the experience of oppression. And while, unfortunately, under patriarchy, it is more common for women and other marginalized gendered persons to have a negative confrontation with gender normativity, even these negative experiences can lead one to actualize one’s gendered self in a different and possibly, subversive manner. In other words, though “I” can be paralyzed by gender normativity, “I” can also challenge it depending on my situation. Ultimately, this immemorial character in how one’s “I” actualizes means that gender is unstable. My many natural selves can undo and remake my current gendered actuality.

Heinämaa, though, believes the anonymous is characterized by the singular. She claims, “[T]he anonymous subject . . . is not plural but singular . . . it is *someone* who sees in me or along with me. . . . Thus there is no multiplicity or generality of subjects but rather a couple or a pair: me and an unspecified, nameless, or unnamed singular, someone else in me” (Heinämaa 2011, 49). Heinämaa suggests that this pair—I and someone—is always and only a pair. There is an interdependence between them such that “I” integrate the acts of someone, and the someone is rooted in me. But such a reading fails to account for the evident plurality of the someone of anonymity. As Merleau-Ponty says, anonymous temporality is the time of “*so many natural selves*” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 254; emphasis mine). It is my natural selves—my senses, the life of my anonymous

functions of my hands, my eyes, my sense of smell, my heartbeat—that interact with my personal time such that the someone in this case, is in fact plural. This plurality is most explicitly captured when Merleau-Ponty discusses sensation: “It can be said that our *senses* literally interrogate things and that the things respond to them;” “I have *senses* and . . . they give me access to the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012b, 333 and 225). This plurality is further supported by the ambiguity of the French indefinite pronoun *on*, which can translate as one *or* as we or they. When he says, “[*J*]e devrais dire qu’*on* perçoit et non pas que je perçoit,” it is necessary to be attentive to the ambiguity in the pronoun here, especially given the frequent references to my senses as plural (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 249). Additionally, *on* can refer to general values and customs, which further illuminates the plurality of the pronoun. In this way, anonymous temporality as the lived time of my senses cannot be seen as singular. Because anonymity is a time prior to the *cogito*, it is a time prior to my singular self. In this immemorial time, one’s senses unfold in their plurality. In terms of gender, it is only from sensing that different gendered experiences can actualize.

Anonymous temporality can be understood as the temporal force that informs my gendered existence as an “I.” I lay claim to myself as a woman because the senses actualize the world for me in a particular way, and these senses becomes habituated in such a way that I can continue to lay claim to myself, in the structure of personal temporality, as this woman that I am now. Or, my habituated senses can be disrupted in such a way that who I am now as a gendered being may shift. Understanding this interplay between repetition and alteration, habituation and interruption, or determinacy and indeterminacy means that gender is neither a time of unconstrained play and pure plurality nor a time reducible to one’s past or present. Gender is a becoming, and in this sense one’s “I” may become normative or may become otherwise.

In other words, the reason that being a woman must constantly be practiced and maintained through habits is because there can be shifts in our experience of the world such that woman becomes a vulnerable category of my “I.” Our gendered experience in time makes a difference in who we become. Understanding gender as time, then, and specifically understanding gender in anonymity, improves upon the notions of gender as sedimentation and gender as surplus not because it challenges these conceptions, but insofar as it gives an account of the temporal force that gives rise to them. Without time, sedimentation and surplus have no hold upon our experiences and our world. In other words, anonymity is a time in which gender becomes. It is not that anonymity is without gender, but that anonymity provides a temporal framework for understanding the way in which gender seems to be natural and why it is that gender normativity is so difficult to undo. As rooted in “me,” gender is always a part of my “I,” my personal time, but as generated by anonymity, it is always prior to “me,” hence “I” never see it for the oppression that it is. It seems, then,

that despite the tensions among feminist readings, it is important that feminists lay claim to the notion of anonymous temporality as it provides a helpful way into understanding how gender comes to be embedded in our lived experience.

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's notion of anonymity provides a framework for understanding gender as time that is ontologically instructive. Gender is time insofar as it is through anonymous time that the personal time of my gendered "I" actualizes. This conceptualization of gender illuminates the deep violence that gender normativity is. If gender normativity is temporal, then becoming woman is the sedimentation of normative violence at the level of the sense; it is a violence that is taken up and lived by my personal body. I am not suggesting that anonymity alone accounts for the hold and constraint that gender has upon our lived experience. But, anonymity adds a deep corporeal component to an account of gender normativity. Anonymity shows why and how gender is both deeply felt and prereflective. With a past "I" cannot recall, gender normativity is difficult to see, understand, and resist; but nonetheless, it is a past that "I" carry deep within my body such that from the structure of anonymity it is possible to give an embodied account of gender normativity, an account that takes lived experience as primary. But given that anonymity sheds light on the instability of gender, it also has liberatory potential for feminist concerns. It reveals the importance of cultivating new practices, habits, and visibly challenging oppressive norms as a means to destabilize the sedimentation of norms. New practices can renew perceptual experience such that how "I" did gender in the past does not solidify "me" as a gendered person in the future. Thus, undoing past sedimentations through a confrontation with normative practices and behaviors is key to actualizing a new "I." Thinking of gender as temporality, through Merleau-Ponty's structure of anonymous temporality, shows that gender normativity may bind the "I" to a certain present, but this bind does not guarantee a particular future.

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NOTES

1. Leonard Lawlor and Alia Al-Saji both support this claim of reading anonymity as a kind of temporality. See Lawlor, *Thinking through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 95–108. See Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present': Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal," in *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 41–71.

2. Al-Saji also notes that this nonlinear past in the *Phenomenology of Perception* “can also be linked to what Merleau-Ponty will later call a ‘vertical past’ that disrupts the serial or linear order of time in *The Visible and the Invisible*” (see 42). Merleau-Ponty continues his critique of a philosophy of constituting consciousness in his lectures on institution and passivity. “Are we this immediate presence to everything before which the things that are possible are all equal? . . . This whole analysis” of the life of a consciousness “presupposes a prior reduction of our life to the ‘thought of . . .’ living.” See *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2012), 5

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