

Queer Rigidity: Habit and the Limits of the Performativity Thesis

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How do you like to get off? Probably the way you always do. Not that you couldn't find a new way or a new object. You could, but this would take some effort. With effort or, alternatively, through an encounter, unforeseen, the pattern or script that gives you pleasure might change. For this change to be more than a temporary detour, however—for it to be fully incorporated into your sexual repertoire—what began as a deviation must be normalized. And the more you repeat this behavior, the more difficult it too will become to change.

It might be said that all sexual preferences, including those gathered under the rubric of sexual orientation, are species of habit, behaviors that become more and more a part of a person the more frequently they are undertaken. At least this is what many queer theorists have argued: that a person's sexuality as well as their gender, far from being pre-inscribed in the body or psyche, are the result of dynamic social practices—among them, sexual behaviors, speech acts, gestures, clothing choices—acts that sediment into identities. What appear to be fixed bodily traits or inborn sexual preferences are thus more fluid and changeable than they seem.

This argument finds one of its most sophisticated articulations in Judith Butler's influential account of sexual subject formation in *Gender Trouble*

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(1990).¹ According to the theory of performativity outlined there, the stable appearance of the sexed body and its desires is an effect of power that materializes through repetitious, discursive acts. “Gender,” Butler writes in an oft-cited passage, “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being” (G, pp. 43, 43–44). Through repetition, a person’s actions “congeal” to produce the “appearance” of a static and physical “substance.” An analogous process occurs in the case of sexual disposition, the language of which “moves from a verb formation (*to be disposed*) into a noun formation, whereupon it becomes congealed (*to have dispositions*); the language of ‘dispositions’ thus arrives as a false foundationalism, the results of affectivity being formed or ‘fixed’ through the effects of the prohibition” (G, p. 81). To see either gender identity or sexual disposition as the cause of a person’s behaviors, rather than their effect, would be to fall prey to a “false foundationalism” that confuses verbs for nouns.

Earlier theorists of sexuality had explained the actions of sexual subjects with reference to identities already possessed (that is, a person engages in homosexual sex acts because they are a homosexual). Poststructuralist theorists of the late twentieth century, however, flipped these terms around to make the case that a subject’s identity does not preexist their activities but is rather constituted in and through performative acts (that is, it is only by engaging in acts perceived to be feminine that one becomes a woman).² The philosophical claim that a person’s identity, including but not limited to their gender and sexuality, is not grounded in some material fundament or preexisting nature but emerges iteratively and relationally does not originate with the performativity thesis, however. Since at least the early nineteenth century, philosophers and psychologists of habit have argued that a person’s character is generated through activities that, the more frequently they are performed, constitute that person’s being.

Consider briefly by way of introduction William James’s argument in “The Laws of Habit” (1877), subsequently revised and included as a chapter in *The*

1. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York, 2006); hereafter abbreviated G.

2. Butler narrates this looping temporality as follows: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (G, p. 33).

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Principles of Psychology (1890). As James argues there, all living creatures are “bundles of habits,” plastic beings that take on qualities through repeated actions.³ The more often an action is undertaken, the easier it becomes to undertake, introducing a new phase of equilibrium. Although “The Laws of Habit” does not address questions of gender or sexuality, it elaborates a theory of subject formation that rivals those of queer theorists in its commitment to anti-essentialism. Taking aim at the distinction between first and second nature touted by many philosophers of his day (the former said to be essential to a person, the latter, inessential), James argues that those socially conditioned behaviors that constitute habit have the effect of “fashioning a man completely over again” (*PP*, p. 120). “‘Habit a second nature! Habit is ten times nature,’” he quotes the Duke of Wellington approvingly (*PP*, p. 120). Not unlike Butler, James argues that a person’s character takes shape through activities that “fashion” their “nature.” And like Butler, too, he turns to the rhetoric of congealment to describe how, as these activities are repeated, a person’s character will “set like plaster” (*PP*, p. 121). While separated by more than a century, these two theorists share a commitment to understanding subject-formation as a process of rigidification that occurs through dynamic interactions between self and world.

Social constructivist theories of identity are often said to have instigated a shift away from the more essentializing theories of character one finds in the nineteenth century. However, what might better be said to distinguish Butler’s performativity thesis from James’s philosophy of habit is less the essentialism than the literalism of the latter’s approach to the rigidities of selfhood. For Butler, “congealment” is a metaphor that describes the process according to which the body comes to *appear* fixed and substantial when it is really a mobile, discursive construct. In *Gender Trouble* performative acts tropologically “congeal . . . to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being.” In “The Laws of Habit,” on the other hand, a person’s character literally congeals as the matter of the body loses plasticity with age. James’s account of habit formation entails an understanding of what scientists today call neuroplasticity, the capacity of the brain to create new nervous pathways and destroy those that fall out of use. To illustrate this capacity, James cites a comparison made by the French psychologist Léon Dumont in his 1876 treatise *De l’habitude* between the formation of neural pathways and the movement of water, explaining how the latter “‘hollows out for itself a channel . . . [and] when it flows again, [takes] the path traced by itself before’” (*PP*, p. 106). And yet, as the analogy with water indicates, to suggest that habits form

3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York, 1950), 1:104; hereafter abbreviated *PP*.

according to physical laws is not to understand them as somehow predetermined or unchanging.⁴ Nor, moreover, as we will see, is it to exclude the role of norms in habit formation.

Put otherwise, that James, like many other nineteenth-century scientists, grounds habits in the materiality of the body does not make him less interested in the ways subjects take shape, contingently and relationally, in response to their milieux. In one of the essay's most well-known passages, James describes habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent" (*PP*, p. 121). While the modern concept of the social norm does not play a role in his philosophy, he observes how habit polices subjects, who remain "within the bounds of ordinance" because habit encourages the conservation of energy (*PP*, p. 121). The laws of habit, he suggests, serve to enforce class boundaries, prevent revolution, block migration, and protect national borders. While it remains unclear whether James applauds or condemns habit's fundamental conservatism, throughout the essay habit is presented as a kind of ideological gatekeeper: like it or not, habit ensures that a culture's customs and rituals, once established, are difficult to change. While old habits might be broken and new ones made, each new phase of equilibrium, it might be said, comes with a new set of (internally coherent) norms.

James's theory of habit as the enemy of social transformation goes some way as to explain why habit never became a keyword in the field of queer studies. If habits not only form in response to social norms but perpetuate and establish those norms, what could be less queer than habit? For this reason, it should be unsurprising that the word *habit* appears nowhere within the pages of *Gender Trouble* nor within the book that would follow on its heels, *Bodies That Matter* (1993).⁵ In more recent queer theory, the word crops up with greater frequency, though almost always negatively, as that to which queerness is opposed. In Elizabeth Freeman's *Beside You in Time* (2019), for example, literary characters such as Herman Melville's Bartleby and Gertrude Stein's Melanctha are appreciated for disrupting "the habits that consolidate identity."⁶ It is these characters' "refusal . . . to accede to the discipline of habit"

4. Analogies between the behavior of human and nonhuman things are common in nineteenth-century theories of habit, which verge on homology as they seek to elucidate the laws of habit that govern the physical world. Dumont's mechanical theory of habit, for instance, aspires to explain the behavior of both organic and inorganic entities.

5. See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 2011); hereafter abbreviated *BTM*. The closest Butler comes to invoking the concept of habit is in a footnote to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* that observes the relevance of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to the theory of gender performativity: "The ritual dimension of performativity," Butler writes, "is allied with the notion of the *habitus* in Pierre Bourdieu's work, something which I only came to realize after the fact of writing this text" (*G*, p. 192 n. 8).

6. Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American Nineteenth Century* (Durham, N.C., 2019), p. 146; hereafter abbreviated *BYT*.

that marks them as queer in Freeman's terms (BYT, p. 149).⁷ Within this particular North American queer-theoretical lineage, everyday habit-breaking decisions, such as a person's unusual use of their time or choice of clothing, are sometimes framed as "dangerous political gesture[s]" that "break free from the matrix," to cite madison moore's study of queer style, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018).⁸ This is because queerness within this critical tradition inheres less in the experience of social exclusion than in the conscious disruption of the stable identities said to populate the social world. Such arguments are fundamentally Butlerian, not only philosophically, in their investment in the performative nature of identity, but politically, in their suggestion that the habits that compose identities are always better dissolved than formed.

Perhaps the most enduring, if also controversial, claim of *Gender Trouble* has been that because gender and sexual identities take on the appearance of stability through performative acts, those same acts can be politically mobilized to reveal the actual instability of the identities they compose. This argument is made most forcefully and memorably by Butler through the example of drag, wherein the self-consciously performative actions of drag performers expose the stability of sex to be "fiction" and, as such, "establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be" (G, pp. 173, xxiii–iv). But this argument is made more consistently, if more subtly, in figural language that presents the stability of sex as a harmful illusion: "'Congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice," Butler writes in their influential reading of Simone de Beauvoir's phrase, "'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'" (G, pp. 43, 199 n. 34). Remarking upon "the globby abjection of a term like *congealment*," Michael Snedicker drolly observes that stability becomes "within Butler's rhetoric, not just melancholic but potentially disgusting, a sort of ontological aspic."⁹ Indeed, today an almost guttural aversion to stability pervades the field of queer theory, which follows Butler in preferring the ontological metaphors of fluidity and liquidity to those of rigidity and solidity because, as one recent theorist has put it, "they call attention to the movement and materiality of the body while also evacuating a stable 'I.'"¹⁰

7. In her discussion of habit, Freeman gives Marcel Mauss's concept of *habitus* a Butlerian spin when she defines it as "the learned disposition of the body that allows culture to feel like nature" (BYT, p. 5). For his elaboration on the notion of *habitus*, see Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70–88.

8. madison moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven, Conn., 2018), pp. 4, 45.

9. Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis, 2008), p. 6.

10. Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York, 2018), p. 29; hereafter abbreviated *SE*. I borrow the term *ontological metaphor* from George

In the decade following the publication of *Gender Trouble*, as the field of queer studies was just starting to congeal, a range of scholars expressed discontent with what Brad Epps described as queer theory's "fetish of fluidity."¹¹ In 2001, Epps wondered whether a fascination with "movement against, beyond, or away from rules and regulations, norms and conventions, borders and limits" had prevented queer studies scholars from reckoning with their own disciplinary and cultural norms.¹² Three years earlier, Jay Prosser observed the role of the trans body in figuring such movement: in treating transness as a metaphor for gender fluidity, he argued, Butler and other queer theorists risked denying the reality of those who experience transition not as a revelation of the discursive fiction of gender but as proof of its material reality.¹³ And one year before Prosser, in one of the most powerful critiques of queer theory's fetish for the infinitely malleable, Cathy Cohen argued that in aligning queerness with the "fluid movement among and between forms of sexual behavior," queer studies fails to account for some of the most violent forms of sexual oppression.¹⁴ "In queer politics," Cohen observes as if coming directly off a reading of *Gender Trouble*, which she later cites, "sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day, even from act to act."¹⁵ But the fluid is not always antinormative, Cohen shows, nor is the rigid necessarily normative: although the desire of a Black single mother might be exclusively heterosexual, for example, she faces constant discrimination for her sexuality, which is pathologized as excessive, irresponsible, and destructive. In opposing the supposed fluidity of queerness to the supposed rigidity of heterosexuality,

Lakoff and Mark Johnson's study in the philosophy of language, which broadly argues that the metaphors one chooses to describe a thing will reveal some aspects of that thing and hide others. What Lakoff and Johnson call ontological metaphors project human experience of physical states (for example, solidity or liquidity) onto entities (as in the phrase, "the fluidity of desire"). As they point out, "ontological metaphors like these 'are so natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena. The fact that they are metaphorical never occurs to most of us.'" (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago, 2003], p. 28).

11. See Brad Epps, "The Fetish of Fluidity," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago, 2001), pp. 412–31.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

13. Prosser criticizes what he describes as "queer theory's own incapacity to sustain the body as a literal category," arguing that "in transsexuality sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle its theory of gender performativity" (Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* [New York, 1998], p. 27).

14. Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3 (May 1997): 438.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 439. Cohen's critique of queer theory is focused on "the class privilege which allows for such fluidity" (p. 450).

the field of queer theory thus risks dismissing as “normative” marginalized sexual identities that might be the focus of a truly “queer” politics.¹⁶

Even when queer theory’s critical stance toward normativity has been questioned, the negative value of rigidity stubbornly persists. In the introduction to their special issue “Queer Theory Without Antinormativity” (2015), the editors Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson wonder whether, in “transmogrifying norms into rules and imperatives,” queer theorists risk to “immobilize the activity of norms.”¹⁷ In calling for a more open and dynamic conception of the norm, Wiegman and Wilson harken back to the nineteenth century, when the word *normal* referred not to a unbending social standard but a state of lively adaptability inclusive of variation.¹⁸ As historians have shown, it was not until the late twentieth century that norms would become associated with cultural dominance and social exclusion—the “highly rigid regulatory frame[s]” against which early queer theorists would take their aim.¹⁹ Wiegman and Wilson aptly demonstrate how a commitment to antinormativity has led some queer thinkers to “project stability and immobility onto normativity,” a concept that may be more fluid than it seems.²⁰ What gets lost in their account, however, is the extent to which, when

16. A few more critiques are worth mentioning here. In 1994, the feminist theorist Biddy Martin argued that the field of queer studies relied on presenting feminism and the female body as a “fixity, constraint, or . . . a fixed ground” in order to establish itself as dynamic and new (Biddy Martin, “Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias,” *Diacritics* 24 [Summer–Autumn 1994]: 104). And in 2014, in his study of gay Manila, Bobby Benedicto developed a “critique of the idealization of movement in the study of nonnormative sexualities,” remarking how “normative systems . . . are understood as mechanisms of stricture, constraint, and discipline” (Bobby Benedicto, *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene* [Minneapolis, 2014], p. 6). Finally, in an essay I only discovered upon completing the final edits on this piece, but which shares many of my same concerns, Lisa Downing makes a powerful case that, within both queer theory and psychoanalysis, “privileging the ideal of fluidity leads to a concomitant stigmatization of the idea of fixity, establishing an unhelpful binary (fluidity or fixity) in a body of thought that usually attempts to deconstruct such dualities” (Lisa Downing, “Perversion and the Problem of Fluidity and Fixity,” in *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson [Austin, Tex., 2017], p. 124).

17. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 14.

18. I rely here on the work of Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens, who indicate that the word *normal* “was first used in its modern sense in France in comparative anatomy, around 1820” (Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens, *Normality: A Critical Genealogy* [Chicago, 2017], p. 3). For more on how the notion of the norm functioned in the history of biology, see Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (Boston, 1978).

19. Cryle and Stephens stress the significance of Michel Foucault’s work for this new, regulatory conception of the norm. On how Foucault’s theory of normalization would be interpreted by Butler and other antinormative queer theorists, see Annamarie Jagose, “The Trouble with Antinormativity,” *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 26–47.

20. Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction,” p. 13.

early queer theorists projected rigidity onto norms, they were working to disassociate themselves from the *fixation* and *adhesiveness* of which they themselves had been accused.²¹ Indeed, the origins of queer theory may lay in this magical reversal of ontological metaphors: at some point, the disturbing rigidity that once defined sexual pathology was shifted over to the (hetero)norm, and the healthy dynamism once associated with norms became a property of the queer.

What would a queer theory look like that did not—like the pathologizing discourses that generated its key term—project rigidity onto others in order to legitimize its own ethical good? If, as Sigmund Freud once postulated, “a perversion has the characteristics of *exclusiveness* and *fixation*,” do not such perversions characterize *all* sexual subjects, who return, sometimes normally, sometimes pathologically, to the same objects and scenes?²² And does it not remain the task of queer theory to critically interrogate such distinctions in the first place? In what follows, I ask what the concept of habit might have to offer queer theory in a moment when Butler’s performativity thesis and its politics of subversion have been so fully absorbed as to have become almost imperceptible. I discover in nineteenth-century writing about habit a conception of rigidity other than that of the fantasy of a stable identity requiring deconstruction. The Foucauldian understanding of subject formation that subverts the performativity thesis highlights how identity categories regulate and control the subjects they describe—an insight not to be dismissed. But the fact that identities are produced through power-laden acts certainly does not

21. Observe here the sharp reversal enacted in Tim Dean’s statement that “*the process of normalization itself is what’s pathological*, since normalization ‘fixes’ desire and generates the exclusiveness of sexual orientation as its symptom” (Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* [Chicago, 2000], p. 237). On the association of homosexuality with fixation in psychoanalytic discourse, see Michael Ferguson, “Fixation and Regression in the Psychoanalytic Theory of Homosexuality: A Critical Evaluation,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 27, nos. 3–4 (1994): 309–27. On the use of the term *adhesiveness* to describe same-sex relations in nineteenth-century phrenology and beyond, see Michael Lynch, “‘Here Is Adhesiveness’: From Friendship to Homosexuality,” *Victorian Studies* 29 (Autumn 1985): 67–96. Up until his death in 1991, Lynch was working on a book-length study of homosexuality as a history of too-rigid attachments, to be entitled *Age of Adhesiveness*.

22. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in vol. 7 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et al. (London, 1986): 161; my emphasis. I am inspired here by the work of Joyce McDougall and Teresa de Lauretis. According to McDougall, “Freud early drew attention to the fact that we are all perverts under the skin where the pervert-polymorph childish parts of ourselves are hidden” (Joyce McDougall, *A Plea for A Measure of Abnormality* [New York, 1992], p. 54). Likewise, de Lauretis argues that in Freud “the ‘normal’ is conceived only by approximation, is more a projection than an actual state of being, while perversion and neurosis (the repressed form of perversion) are the actual forms and contents of sexuality” (Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* [Bloomington, Ind., 1994], p. xii; hereafter abbreviated P).

make those identities, or the habits that compose them, any easier to shift. Leo Bersani once wrote that “since deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from *within* the desire.”²³ It is my wager that nineteenth-century theories of habit give us a path to such a test. For they push us to confront the rigidities that render our erotic practices and their gendered concerns hard to change in the face of the recognition that there is nothing natural or inevitable about them.

In his study of habit across nineteenth-century English literary culture, Sean O’Toole observes that the term *habit* “crystallizes a tension between what one *is* and what one *does*.”²⁴ This tension is framed quite differently by nineteenth-century philosophers of habit than by contemporary queer theorists. Where the latter tend to lament the congealment of otherwise dynamic activities (what one does) into identities (what one is), the former approach habit formation more descriptively, as the process through which a person becomes who they are. In so doing, they cultivate what O’Toole calls an “unmoralized” conception of habit, one that explains how habits govern “shifts in perception and awareness that voluntary thought or introspection could never provide.”²⁵ In Félix Ravaisson’s *De l’habitude* (1838)—the text that will form the focus of my discussion of habit—habit is not the disturbingly rigid “effect” of prohibitory discourse, a “false stabilization” of something that is really more dynamic (G, p. 172). Ravaisson’s treatise thus allows us to explore a possibility overlooked in performative theories of gender and sexuality: that the rigidity of our desires, behaviors, and dispositions (whether temporary or enduring) is real rather than fictional, and that a propensity toward crystallization is immanent to desire itself.

This article is divided into two parts. The first examines how ontological metaphors of fluidity and rigidity are mobilized by Butler and other North American queer theorists to present stable elements of personhood not only as undesirable but as apparitional, giving rise to a *dual-aspect metaphysics* that holds the rigid to be both phenomenologically and ethically specious. My point is not that this metaphysics is somehow wrong. In many ways, it is a convincing account of how ideology of gender and sexuality work, and I include myself in those that have found Butler’s work useful for explaining why the gender binary, and the structure of compulsory heterosexuality it turns

23. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 6. I unpack this complex phrase at greater length in S. Pearl Brilmyer, “Deconstruction” *differences* 34, no. 1 (2023): 79–88.

24. Sean O’Toole, *Habit in the English Novel, 1850–1900: Lived Environments, Practices of the Self* (New York, 2013), p. 3.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

upon, feels natural and inevitable when it is not. The “critical ontology of ourselves” I attempt in this section, however, puts pressure on the ethical hierarchies that structure this queer-theoretical lineage.²⁶ What this intellectual tradition cannot fully explain, I suggest, is how our desires actually do become fixated on particular objects or aims—as well as why, when our desires loosen, this loosening does not often occur intentionally, including from the kind of consciousness raising that tends to motivate scholarship on performativity.

My second section then turns to examine the theory of habit articulated by Ravaissan as a possible antidote to the dominant queer theoretical paradigm outlined in section one. I explain in rather slow and detailed terms the account of habit formation formulated in *De l'habitude*, and I ask what this account might have to offer contemporary queer studies.²⁷ I argue that Ravaissan's study offers a useful set of terms—among them, *necessity*, *crystallization*, and *milieu*—for understanding the limits of desire's flexibility without approaching desire as an ahistorical or biologically predetermined drive. In dialogue with Ravaissan, I read the figures of fluidity and rigidity that punctuate the history of sexual theory from Freud to Butler as symptoms of what I call, borrowing a metaphor from mineralogy, the *crystal-habit* function of desire.

Queer Theory's Dual-Aspect Metaphysics

If queer theory had a favorite state of matter, it would probably be the liquid for its tendency to connote openness, indeterminacy of meaning, and the potential for change.²⁸ Metaphors of solidity, on the other hand, indicate the apparitional quality of identities that are said to be less rigid and stable than they appear. Borrowing a term from philosophy, I refer to this bifurcation of the world into rigid (appearance) and fluid (reality) as queer theory's *dual-aspect metaphysics*. A dual-aspect (not dualist) metaphysics names a metaphysical system that has two *aspects*, one that appears to us and one that does not appear to us. As opposed to dualism, which distinguishes ontologically

26. Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” trans. Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Porter et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 47.

27. See Felix Ravaissan, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (New York, 2008); hereafter abbreviated *OH*.

28. As Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank hypothesize in an article whose grammar I mime here, one reason that cultural theorists so often invoke the “infinitely malleable” is that they believe it will better help them to account for variety and difference (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” *Critical Inquiry* [Winter 1995]: 516). As they argue, however, such accounts risk trivializing difference in their failure to account for the chunkier, sometimes categorical differences that shape affective experience.

between two kinds of substances or things, dual-aspect theory approaches the distinction between appearance and reality as one of perspective.²⁹ While queer theorists rarely make explicit metaphysical claims, I argue that their arguments implicitly rely on such a theory when they suggest that gender and sexuality appear to us as rigidly material, although they are in reality dynamic and discursive.

Since its inception, queer theory has had the difficult task of explaining why it is that gender and sexuality appear like fixed identities and dispositions when they are actually dynamic, social practices. We saw previously how Butler accounts for this duality in *Gender Trouble*: by arguing that a person's activities "congeal over time" through performative repetitions in order "to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being." In the book that followed closely on its heels, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler would expand the theory of performativity to account not only for the nature of the sexed body and its desires but for the nature of physical reality more broadly. *Bodies That Matter* proposes "a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (BTM, p. 9). In the place of *Gender Trouble*'s more localized argument about the discursive construction of sex then, *Bodies That Matter* makes a much more sweeping philosophical claim: that all corporeality, indeed all matter, is less stable than it appears.³⁰

A few questions arise here. *Gender Trouble* argued that a person's sex, while it appears to be a "natural sort of being," is "regulatory ideal [that] is then exposed as a norm and a fiction" (G, p. 173). But while the ideals that regulate bodies may be fictional (in the sense that they are products of the human mind) as well as normative (in the sense they are drawn from a collective understanding of what is normal), are the gendered bodies that such regulatory ideals generate somehow unreal? And what of desire, that elusive, but very much corporeal, phenomenon? Is this too always less rigid than it seems, or does desire become, throughout time and experience, actually more

29. Henry Allison's view of Immanuel Kant's metaphysics is typically understood as *dual aspect* (though he prefers the term *two-aspect*), as is Dale Jacquette's interpretation of Arthur Schopenhauer. See Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven, Conn., 2004), and Dale Jacquette, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005).

30. Vicki Kirby and Karen Barad have turned to the field of quantum physics to further develop the metaphysical claims made by Butler in *Bodies That Matter* about the performative quality of all matter. See Vicki Kirby, "When All That Is Solid Melts into Language: Judith Butler and the Question of Matter," *International Journal of Gender and Sexuality Studies* 7 (Oct. 2002): 265–80 and *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, N.C., 2011), and Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C., 2007).

precise, giving rise to that phenomenon we call *disposition*? Desires no doubt form through social, cultural, and historical experience. But does the fact that our desires are socially constructed make their rigidity—their tendency to return to experiences already known and enjoyed—any less real? Why should we take such rigidity to be fictional? Butler's implicit answers to these questions turn around the concept of constraint.

Readers of *Gender Trouble* will recall that the book staged an original dialogue between psychoanalytic conceptions of the ego as founded on prohibition with Foucauldian theories of the productive nature of power in order to argue that cultural norms and regulations, such as the taboo on homosexuality, produce the very subjects they attempt to organize and control. In so doing, the book revealed the shared investment of these two theoretical traditions in narrating the process of subject formation in terms of the gradual rigidification of bodies and desires as they encounter some kind of outward constraint. Consider Freud's description in *The Ego and the Id* of the ego as "a precipitate [*Niederschlag*] of abandoned object-cathexes" whose character forms in response to past losses.³¹ Or Michel Foucault's claim in *The History of Sexuality* that "scattered sexualities rigidified [*se fixent*], became stuck [*se épinglées*] to an age, a place, a type of practice" as a result of power.³² Sonja Ruehl has observed that for Foucault "categories have a rigidifying effect" in that they form the subjects they appear merely to describe.³³ The most famous example of this in Foucault is the homosexual, who becomes a "species" as a result of scientific discourses that transform a diverse collection of acts into a unified identity (see *I*, p. 44). Freud narrates the process of subject formation with regard to the psychic structure of the individual and his culture—Foucault, with regard to the more impersonal level of historical epistemology. In reading them alongside one another, Butler masterfully demonstrated how, despite their many differences, Freud and Foucault were both committed to understand how seemingly rigid genders and sexualities congeal out of otherwise dynamic activities. For both, congealment results from the subject's encounter with some kind of taboo, law, regulation, or norm that—never a force of pure negation—is always productive. Folding these insights about

31. Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in vol. 19 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, p. 29.

32. Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 48; hereafter abbreviated *I*. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* employs similar metaphors as it traces the emergence of an atomistic conception of the body as an "object" that is "composed of solids" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York City, 1995], p. 155).

33. Sonja Ruehl, "Inverts and Experts: Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Identity," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York, 2014), p. 167.

power and prohibition into her theory of performativity, Butler maintains that “constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity” (*BTM*, pp. 94–95).

The impact of this Freudian-Foucauldian mashup on the field of queer studies is hard to understate. Indeed, it is so deeply imbedded in our theoretical routines as to have become entirely unremarkable. In what remains of this section, I explore two recent instances of queer theory’s dual-aspect metaphysics—one more Freudian and one more Foucauldian—to demonstrate how Butler’s (and, by proxy, Freud’s and Foucault’s) metaphorical language lives on in contemporary queer theoretical discussions of sexual subject-formation. The point is not to chide anyone for making some kind of philosophical mistake. Rather, I simply wish to draw attention to the enduring Butlerianism of our contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality, as well as to put pressure on the metaphysical and ethical assumptions that motivate such readings. In the cases to be discussed, sexual subjects form through a process of rigidification through which a fluid or otherwise malleable substance congeals as it encounters generic, cultural molds that constrain its movement. While the word *queer* is not always explicitly defined within these studies, it holds a privileged position within this metaphysics: it names those whose exclusion from gender and sexual norms confers upon them a special ability to reveal the fictional nature of these all-too-rigid forms.

In her psychoanalytically informed study, *Sensual Excess* (2018), Amber Jamilla Musser affirms the fluidity of feminized subjects that have been denied stability though their association with racialized flesh. Musser takes the concept of the flesh from Hortense Spillers, whose influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” revealed how the Black subject under slavery is deprived of its gender along with other identifying and individuating features: “Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’” Spillers writes there, “that zero degree of social conceptualization.”³⁴ To Spillers’s largely negatively defined notion of flesh Musser attributes an affirmative, generative property. Musser has two terms for this property: *permeable selfhood* and *liquidity*. Where permeable selfhood “enables pleasure and mobility through its valorization of porosity,” “liquidity indexes flesh’s mutability and asks us to look toward verbs rather than nouns for rewriting sensuality” (*SE*, pp. 28, 14). Through turns of phrase such as “the mobility of the flesh” and the “instability of the flesh,” Musser emphasizes the disruptive, subversive potential of those who have been reduced to flesh in modern racial-sexual discourse (*SE*, p. 14).

34. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Dia-critics* 17 (Summer 1987): 67.

Musser, we have just seen, borrows the concept of the flesh from Spillers. But where in Spillers's essay, the flesh—far from beyond signification—is covered in “undecipherable markings” whose traumatic, indexical meaning is not erased, but rather “hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color,” Musser insists on the capacity of the flesh to disrupt or undo meaning entirely through its motility.³⁵ Her elaboration of the concept of the flesh is thus Butlerian in nature, as becomes apparent in her positive recoding of the flesh as something that is fluid and multiple, not only the product of power, but a potential source of its subversion. Recall here Butler's analysis of the language of sexual disposition, which “arrives as a false foundationalism, the results of affectivity being formed or ‘fixed’ through the effects of the prohibition.” This occurs, on the level of language, Butler argues, when the verb form of *to be disposed* is transposed into to a noun, *disposition*. In Musser's theorization of liquidity as tending “toward verbs rather than nouns” one can hear an answer to Butler's claim that the materiality of the body is continually sedimented through discourse. Through readings of artworks that—like Butler's drag example—“illustrat[e] the mobility that underlies liquidity,” Musser applauds the “performance of the refusal of fixity” in contemporary art practices (*SE*, pp. 105, 28).³⁶

35. *Ibid.*, p. 67. That the flesh is never itself beyond signification but is misperceived as such by those incapable of interpreting its language is likewise indicated in Spiller's phrase “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (p. 67). Spillers's earlier essay “Formalism Comes to Harlem” likewise resists the suggestion that Blackness undoes all signification by identifying a “logic of literary form” at work in works of twentieth-century African American literature that can and should be mapped (Spillers, “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16 [Summer 1982]: 60). I read this essay, along with “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,” as two inter-related attempts to account for the specificity of Black meaning-making (misperceived as formlessness) and as resistant to the idea that Black artistic production has no “grammar” whatsoever.

36. Musser's invocation of “verbs” here likewise harkens back to Spillers, who once stated that “black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb” (Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black, White, and in Color* [Chicago, 2003], p. 74). Where the quotation from Spillers stresses the lack of agency afforded to Black women, *Sensual Excess* is interested in how Black women's alignment with the flesh might become a source of agency. My point here is not that Musser misreads Spillers. Rather, it is that she cultivates an implicitly Butlerian interpretation of her work, one that has consequences for our understanding of the problem of the exclusion of Black women from systems of meaning-making. The concept of liquidity has been taken up by various scholars working at the intersection of Black studies and performance studies; within this lineage, Fred Moten's work on performativity is an important touchstone; see Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, 2003). R. A. Judy, for example, turns to Moten to argue that while capitalist modernity consistently works to transform Black labor into “Negro liquidity,” “performative practices of blackness” have the potential to disrupt this process through their “parodic” and “mimetic” re-signification of this liquidity (R. A. Judy, “The Unfungible Flow of Liquid Blackness,” *liquid blackness* 5 [Apr. 2021]: 29, 35).

Where Musser engages Freud and other psychoanalytic theorists to “call attention to the movement and materiality of the body,” Benjamin Kahan’s *The Book of Minor Perverts* (2019) looks to Butler’s other key source text, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, to narrate the history of homosexuality as a shift from fluid to rigid conceptions of the body (*SE*, p. 29). In the late nineteenth century, Kahan argues, bodies “were remarkably porous, impressionable, and mutable.”³⁷ Later, in the twentieth century, however, we see the “forging [of] a stable vessel in which to domicile sexual personhood” (*BMP*, p. 45). The emergence of the homosexual entails the historical construction of desires “as unchanging and immutable, as rooted in and through the body, forging a sturdy foundation for sexual identity” (*BMP*, p. 58). Throughout *The Book of Minor Perverts* not only Foucault’s claims but his metaphors are omnipresent: Foucault famously narrates how what had hitherto been understood as an act or practice, sodomy, becomes “solidified” in the body of the invert at the end of the nineteenth century (*I*, p. 48). Likewise, Kahan narrates how the birth of the homosexual entails a gradual “solidification of the body” (*BMP*, p. 45). Differently than Musser, who suggests that “refusal of stability offers the basis for an ethics,” Kahan does not promote an ethics according to which such solidification can or should be undone, preferring to remain at the level of historical description (*SE*, p. 29). Still, it is hard not to feel a tinge of political lament in the claim, however descriptive, that “conceptions of an unstable, open body” give way “to one that is solid, biologized, and impermeable,” “an ironclad container of sexuality” (*BMP*, p. 45).

Or is it political hope? At the very end of his career, Foucault called for a new economy of bodily pleasures that would destabilize and rearrange traditional sexual roles.³⁸ His scholarly shift in focus from the historical conditions for the production of sexual identity toward the political potential of new sexual arrangements through practices such as sadomasochism has at times been interpreted to suggest that attention to the former logically leads to the latter. Dustin Friedman captures the essence of this line of thinking in his book *Before Queer Theory* (2019), when he suggests that the value of research into the history of sexuality lies in its demonstration that sexual identities and the feelings that accompany those identities “are not absolute and unquestionable but historically contingent, and therefore can be imagined

37. Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago, 2019), p. 45; hereafter abbreviated *BMP*.

38. See Foucault, “An Ethics of Pleasure,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York, 1996), pp. 371–81.

differently.”³⁹ A Butlerian version of this claim animates Freeman’s *Beside You in Time*, which argues that although all subjects are disciplined by “dominant temporalities,” they can also “tap into other rhythms” through a practice she calls “sense-methods” (BYT, p. 8). “Sense-methods” transform the “sensorium and the physical habits that give rise to it” by resisting and rearranging biopower’s “temporalizing address to the body” (BYT, p. 7). In Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” for example, “habit organizes time” for the lawyer character who uses the interrogative “would” to request work from Bartleby; “Bartleby’s ‘would’” in his famous line “I would prefer not to,” on the other hand, “interrupts the ‘would’ of habitual repetition” (BYT, p. 130).

The claim that the breaking of habits can be achieved through a rearrangement of the senses finds direct expression in the late work of Foucault. But it is also a Butlerian move—key, as we have seen, to their theorization of drag (likewise indebted to Foucault) as capable of destabilizing the regulatory regimes of gender and sexual ideology through performative repetitions. Freeman, for her part, does not substantially engage with Butler in *Beside You in Time*. (When she does, it is to distinguish her concept of sense-methods from Butler’s theory of performativity).⁴⁰ But even when Butler’s work is not directly cited, as I hope to have shown throughout this section, the field of queer studies continues to profit from their sense of queerness as that which moves against the (only apparently) rigid to realize a world better because more fluid.

Two lines of inquiry arise from my analysis of the performativity thesis and its legacy here: (1) Does the claim that an identity (such as homosexuality) gets “stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice” mean that the desires, feelings, and erotic practices that characterize that identity might not have gotten stuck in that way—or never have gotten stuck at all? Put otherwise, to what extent can arguments for the cultural or historical contingency of identity categories be taken as philosophical proof of the malleability of the beings those categories describe? (2) Is it actually the case that bodies and desires tend toward fluidity but are prevented from maintaining that fluidity as a result of their encounter with rigid social or cultural frames? Put otherwise, is the becoming rigid of gender and sexuality something that subjects are always subjected to in the form of an outwardly imposed constraint, and, as such, is it something they can inwardly resist, such as through force of will?

39. Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore, 2019), p. 2.

40. The nature of this difference remains vague, given the characterization of a sense-method as that which “does not always refer to or result in a stable social form but instead *moves*” (BYT, p. 12).

How, moreover, should one distinguish between the (involuntary?) acts that give rise to identities and the (voluntary?) acts that subversively undo them?

Both Freud and Foucault have been thought (rightly or wrongly, it doesn't really matter here) to indicate the malleability of the subject and her or his desires, and with it, therapeutic and/or political hope about the ability to actively transform the habits that bodies settle into—a hope consolidated in the modern field of queer studies within the figure of *queerness*.⁴¹ Why, however, should we accept that the behaviors we group under the terms *gender* and *sexuality* (as opposed to our ideas about gender and sexuality) are less rigid than they appear, rather than attempt to understand the mechanisms through which that rigidity, frustratingly or enjoyably, arises? My second and final section attempts to answer these questions by turning to the theory of habit developed by Ravaissou.

Necessities of Attraction and Desire

The notion that a propensity toward the rigid inheres in desire itself and is not merely an effect of prohibition is one of the premises of Ravaissou's *Of Habit*, which draws together strands of empiricist and idealist philosophy to develop a theory of habit as a law of being. We saw in the previous section how the performativity thesis institutes a dual-aspect metaphysics that relies on a philosophical distinction between stable appearances and an underlying, dynamic reality. *Of Habit*, by contrast, attributes a greater degree of reality to the shapes and patterns that the body settles into through repeated acts, linking together the real and the ideal without presenting one as the phenomenal flipside of its noumenal other. Through the process of habit formation, Ravaissou argues, "*idea becomes being*" (*OH*, p. 55). His theory of habit thus explains, rather than explains away, the rigidities of desire, offering an alternative to queer theories that understand a person's gender expression or sexual disposition as only apparently rigid.

A small caveat is perhaps necessary here: Ravaissou's philosophy is limited in its lack of attention to the way that habits take on value in the social field, emerging out of collectively held ideas about the good or the bad, the normal or the perverse. Read in tandem with more recent thinking in semiotics and psychoanalysis, however, his thinking—far from foreclosing attention to the psychic power of norms—draws attention to the way in which our desire to persist in our being entails the absorption of social and cultural ideas

41. Kadji Amin has made a related argument about *trans*, which he argues becomes a har-binger of hope when positioned as proof of the truth of ontological malleability of sex itself. See Kadji Amin, "Trans* Plasticity and the Ontology of Race and Species," *Social Text* 38 (June 2020): 49–71.

(normative and otherwise) within the body. A reckoning with his work thus has the potential to contribute to emerging conceptions of gender in the field of trans studies not “as a kind of performance but as a kind of embodiment,”⁴² as well as to deepen psychoanalytic understandings of desire as plagued by what Freud called a “susceptibility to fixation.”⁴³ A recognition of this fundamental susceptibility in all sexual subjects is a crucial first step to interrupting the long history of pathologization of fixity in psychoanalytic, sexological, as well as queer-theoretical accounts of gender and sexuality.

In what I take to be one of the most significant lines of Ravaissou’s short thesis, he writes: “Habit is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire” (*OH*, p. 57). As we will see, Ravaissou’s theory of habit as a “necessity of attraction and desire” leads him to present the process of subject formation not as a molding of otherwise fluid bodies in response to outward agents but as a propensity toward crystallization immanent to desire itself. Before we can understand Ravaissou’s theory of habit, however, we must first understand his theory of desire. Today, we tend to think of desire as one aspect of life rather than its “nature.” Ravaissou, however, understands desire to be the nature of all being. In line with many of his Romantic contemporaries, and anticipating the claims of Freudian psychoanalysis, he posits that “nature lies wholly in desire” (*OH*, p. 71). Emmanuel Blondel observes that “Ravaissou will conserve the term *desire* for the ground of being, and not for a particular state of being.”⁴⁴ For Ravaissou, all being has a tendency toward habit formation because it is grounded in desire, which he defines as “a primordial instinct, in which the goal of the act is fused with the act itself” (*OH*, p. 61). In desire, object and aim come together. And in desire, as we will see, energy is conserved through its crystallization into habit.

Let us further unpack Ravaissou’s suggestive phrase: “Habit is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire.” Desire, Ravaissou suggests here, does not need to encounter a principle of

42. Grace E. Lavery, *Pleasure and Efficacy: Of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques* (Princeton, N.J., 2023), p. 4. Lavery coins the term “*trans realism*” in an attempt to “introduce into trans theoretical writing a term responsive to the ontologies of trans life absent the categories of parody and drag and to orient us away from the descriptions of trans as instability, fuckery, or interstitiality” (p. 5). Habit is central to certain trans techniques for enacting behavioral shifts, such as the lowering of one’s voice through practice.

43. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1973), s.v. “Adhesiveness of the Libido,” p. 12. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define “Adhesiveness of the Libido” as “the libido’s variable capacity for fixation to an object or at a stage, and for the variable facility with which it can shift its cathexes once these have become established” (p. 12).

44. Sinclair, *Being Inclined: Félix Ravaissou’s Philosophy of Habit* (New York, 2019), p. 39 n. 56.

constraint, such as a prohibition, in order to be either activated or formed. What's more, desire is notably not negatively generated (say, by the absence of an object). It is a positive presence that is, in itself, limited.⁴⁵ Various of Ravaissan's contemporaries understood desire in the former, negative way, that is, as the psychological effect of a lack produced by the absence of the source of a sensation.⁴⁶ Ravaissan, on the other hand, argues that what we experience when a sensation we crave dissipates is not desire but "an impotence of desire" (*OH*, p. 51). Desire is impotent because all being is limited by itself, by its own inertia: "The universal law, the fundamental character of a being, is the tendency to persist in its way of being" (*OH*, p. 27). It is the nature of all beings to attempt to persist in their current state (whether that state is a blissful high or just a lack of irritation). One would be remiss to call this drive to persist *survival*. Desire seeks not the extension of life (indeed, in its prioritization of the present over the future—think here of substance addiction—it can actually hinder it) but rather the maintenance of sensory equilibrium.

It might seem counterintuitive to conceive of desire in such "conservative" terms, that is, in terms of stability rather than disruption, but Ravaissan understands desire as a principle of nature that returns, time and time again, to the pleasures of the same. What Ravaissan calls desire's "impotence" is thrown into relief when something that was previously enabling a sensibility's persistence is taken away:

Whenever a sensation is not painful, to the degree that it is prolonged or repeated—to the degree, consequently, that it fades away—it becomes more and more of a need. Increasingly, if the impression that is necessary to provoke the sensation no longer occurs, one's distress and unease reveal an impotence of desire in the realm of sensibility. [*OH*, p. 51]

This passage begins to articulate what Ravaissan will call the "double law of habit," which explains how actions (voluntary or involuntary) can crystallize into the being of character (*OH*, p. 37). Through repetition, actions become more and more a part of our being. This happens, curiously perhaps, through

45. Ravaissan's conception of desire thus cuts across the distinction sometimes set up between *desire* and *drive* in psychoanalysis. For Suzanne Barnard, for example, "while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive *surplus*" (Suzanne Barnard, "Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other Jouisance," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Barnard and Bruce Fink [Albany, N.Y., 2002], p. 173).

46. Ravaissan refers to Maine de Biran's treatise *The Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*, trans. Margaret Donaldson Boehm (1802; Westport, Conn., 1970). For an excellent discussion of Ravaissan's relation to Biran, see Carlisle, "Between Freedom and Necessity: Félix Ravaissan on Habit and the Moral Life" *Inquiry* 53, no. 2 (2008): 123–45.

the dulling of sensation: the more we repeat an action, the more the sensations that are produced by those actions fade away; when that sensation is taken away, however, there is an equal and opposite reaction; we experience another sensation, often an uncomfortable or unpleasurable one, that reveals an imbalance in our equilibrium and which we strive to eliminate in order to continue to feel the same.

Let me elaborate in more schematic terms Ravaisson's "double law": (1) the more we repeat an action, the easier that action becomes; and (2) the more we experience a sensation, the less we feel it. In Ravaisson's words:

The continuity or the repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured. [*OH*, p. 49]

Put yet more simply, the more we move, the less we feel. And the less we feel, the more easily we move. You lift a weight. It's a bit painful and tiring to do so. But after repeating the movement in the same fashion over longer intervals of time, the uncomfortable sensations diminish (law 1). As the muscle becomes stronger, moreover, the movement becomes easier (law 2). To this "obscure activity"—that activity through which our being (physical and mental) is forged and maintained—Ravaisson gives the name *habit* (*OH*, p. 51). As the ground of all being, moreover, desire is "habitual tendency itself."⁴⁷

To understand desire as "habitual tendency itself" is to conceptualize it quite differently than Butler's inheritors. For the latter, it is in the nature of desire, and perhaps bodily experience more generally, to be fluid, and what blocks it from its movement is something constraining.⁴⁸ In Ravaisson, however, desire always already tends toward the rigid. As the ground of being, desire goes with what it knows. Fascinated with past states—not unlike Freud's

47. Sinclair, *Being Inclined*, p. 39.

48. Foucault critiques what he calls the "repressive hypothesis" for positing a naturalistic notion of desire that assumes that desire could somehow be liberated from repression; see Foucault, *An Introduction*. Sedgwick makes the case that Foucault's own work at times reaffirms the duality of express/repress by setting up an opposition between the subversive and the hegemonic; see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C., 2003), pp. 9–13. Complicating Sedgwick's remarks, Lynne Huffer convincingly argues that Sedgwick's claims are less applicable to Foucault himself than to Foucault-inspired queer theory; see Lynne Huffer, "Foucault and Sedgwick: The Repressive Hypothesis Revisited" *Foucault Studies* 14 (Sept. 2012): 20–40. Along similar lines, Annamarie Jagose contends that in *Gender Trouble* Butler "covertly buys back into the repressive hypothesis so roundly debunked in *The History of Sexuality*" (Jagose, "The Trouble with Antinormativity," p. 40).

concept of the drive, which it anticipates by almost a century—desire in this prepsychoanalytic account attempts to return to an earlier state through repetition. What is fluid is instead the world it encounters (its “milieu of change”), to which it must unfortunately adapt in order to keep things the same (*OH*, p. 31; trans. mod.). That desire prefers the rigid to the fluid does not mean that desire never changes, however. To the contrary, this is what Ravaissou’s double law explains: how desire—and, along with it, a person’s being (including, but not limited to, their sexual disposition)—can be changed through activities, both willed and unwilled, as all organisms strive to persist in their way of being.

An earlier generation of French philosophers, including Denis Diderot, Pierre Jean George Cabanis, and Antoine Destutt de Tracy, had conceptualized habit in terms of a permanent acquisition of traits that supplemented, but did not fundamentally transform, an organism’s nature. Ravaissou, differently, insists on the power of habit to transform nature.⁴⁹ He describes habit in Spinozan terms as a “*natured* nature, the product and successive revelation of *naturing* nature” (*OH*, p. 59). In refusing to distinguish between the innate and the acquired, Ravaissou can be seen to move in lockstep with Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, whose belief in the heritability of acquired characters led him to argue that new bodily properties and organs could arise out of habitual behaviors (as in his famous example of the giraffe’s neck, which becomes longer through stretching).⁵⁰ Though unconcerned with questions of speciation or even sexual reproduction, Ravaissou, like Lamarck, speculates that some of our most fundamental “instincts” might have originated as willed actions: “habit leads voluntary movements to the same state,” as “the most involuntary functions of our life,” he explains, by “transforming them into instincts” (*OH*, pp. 67, 65–67).⁵¹ An act of will, if it is repeated, can be usurped by an “inclination or tendency” that “no longer awaits the commandments of the will

49. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for their suggestions with regard to Ravaissou’s relationship with earlier French theorists of habit. On Ravaissou’s relation to medieval and early modern theories of habit, see Carlisle, “The Question of Habit in Theology and Philosophy: From Hexis to Plasticity,” *Body & Society* 19, nos. 2–3 (2013): 30–57. On the reception of Ravaissou’s theory of habit in later nineteenth- and twentieth-century French philosophy, see Sinclair, *Being Inclined*, pp. 62–94.

50. See Jean-Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet de Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Samuel Roger Elliott (New York, 2011).

51. In his influential 1867 report on nineteenth-century French philosophy, Ravaissou refers to Lamarck directly when he notes that recent scientific work appears “to explain to a certain degree, by a gradual transformation of intellectual and voluntary acts, the generation of instincts; a theory formerly proposed, without the support of sufficient experiential proofs by Lamarck, and renewed very recently by Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin” (quoted in Sinclair, *Being Inclined*, p. 102). For more on Ravaissou’s theory of instinct, see pp. 98–104.

but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will and consciousness" (*OH*, p. 51). This is how an "*idea becomes being*" (*OH*, p. 55).

That many of our instincts may have emerged via the mechanism of habit does not make them "unnatural," however. Theorists of performativity, we have seen, tend to emphasize how certain habit-breaking acts reveal the unnatural quality of what seems like nature. Ravaissou, however, as we have just seen, is less interested in denaturalizing nature than in redefining it qua habit. To understand the essence of nature as desire, and, following this, to understand desire as habitual tendency itself, obviates the need to expose the stability of nature as a ruse. Within this framework, nature is a process of restabilization. As inclinations rigidify into instincts, they become more deeply inscribed in the corporeality of our being: "Such inclinations, such ideas, become more and more the form, the way of being, even the very being of these organs" (*OH*, p. 57).

The process though which a willed action becomes an inclination is not unidirectional, however. If a person is stopped from regularly performing an action, that action will require increased effort to initiate. If this happens, the acts that previously flowed through the groves of inclination are sent back to the realm of the will:

It is by a succession of imperceptible degrees that inclinations take over from acts of will. It is also by an imperceptible degradation that these inclinations, born from custom, often decline if custom comes to be interrupted, and that the movements removed from the will return to its sphere after some time. The transition between these two states cannot be sensed; its dividing line is everywhere and nowhere. [*OH*, p. 57]

The inclinations that compose habit, if they fall out of use, can "degrad[e]" into willed actions, thus requiring "effort." Within Ravaissou's vocabulary, "effort" names the "element of sensation" that arises in "consciousness of movement" (*OH*, p. 49; trans. mod.). It names the heightened (typically uncomfortable) sensation that arises when one resists an inclination and thus transforms habit. And yet, in a strange twist of logic, effort is not a sign of freedom. Rather, as Ravaissou argues, freedom is experienced most profoundly when the consciousness required by effort is absent, when "habit comes to replace reflection" (*OH*, p. 55). This is a curious account of freedom. Here freedom names not a state of willing (nor also the capacity to will) but rather that state in which the will has been rendered moot because *all resistance has been eliminated*. In this state, which Ravaissou also describes as one of pure

compulsion, “subject and object are confounded,” as we become a kind of thing to ourselves (*OH*, p. 55).

Renewed attention to habit, I will argue in closing, opens up another path for queer studies than does the performativity thesis, which turns upon a categorical distinction between voluntariness and compulsion, even as it attempts to trouble that distinction. We have seen how certain queer theorists privilege the disruption of habits that produce the illusion of a stable “nature.” A key source text for this critical habit is *Gender Trouble*, which argues that the “disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality” (*G*, p. 172). This is where queerness tends to come in: it names the capacity of certain subjects to reveal the falsity of this “stabilization,” a stabilization that is compulsory heterosexuality’s “effect.” Within this theoretical lineage, queerness names not an unwilling exclusion (from heteronormativity or the gender binary it turns upon), but the conversion of this exclusion into a form of agency.

The notion that queerness concerns the “reworking of abjection into political agency” (*BTM*, p. xxviii) is perhaps *the* dominant understanding of queerness today, grounding most arguments in the field (such as Musser’s argument that “fleshiness claws back at objectification” through a “summoning [of] . . . agency” [*SE*, p. 53]). While Butler is careful not to suggest that where some performative acts are willful, others are compulsory, when, building on Foucault’s notion of “‘reverse’ discourse” as well as activist uses of the term *queer* (*I*, p. 101), they define “agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes,” they pave the way for later queer theorists to frame queerness itself as the intentional disruption of otherwise compulsory norms and, in some cases, to map the conceptual opposition between compulsion and voluntariness onto that between *straight* and *queer* (*G*, p. xxvi).⁵²

Consider here the central argument of Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* (2014), which goes as far as to suggest that the will itself is queer because it resists the force of compulsion. One of the most frequently discussed scenes throughout Ahmed’s book is the scene of education in which the queer will of the child is said to undergo a “straightening,” as teachers instill “habits

52. Sedgwick has argued that when engagements with *Gender Trouble* focus on the drag example they risk reducing performativity to its theatrical, voluntary meaning, eliding many other (nonvoluntaristic) senses of the performative that Butler also intends; see Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” *GLQ* 1 (Nov. 1993): 2. Other readers of Butler are less sympathetic: Joan Copjec worries that in voiding sex of substance *Gender Trouble* risks installing a “confident voluntarism” (Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* [Brooklyn, N.Y., 2015], p. 202); Lee Edelman critiques Butler for forwarding what he sees as a liberal version of politics that “conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity” (Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [Durham, N.C., 2004], p. 14).

of will” within them.⁵³ For Ahmed, habit is a key disciplinary technology through which this straightening takes place: it is “through habit [that] the will can be directed in the right way, so that it does right of its own accord” (WS, p. 73). What though, one might ask, renders the will of one person (say, the child in the educational setting) queer and that of another (say, the educator) straight? Is there some kind of inherent difference between these two kinds of wills (is one expressive and the other repressive)? Or is the latter not a will at all but rather the imposition of a norm or rule upon a will? Rather than explain the difference, Ahmed metaphorizes it throughout the book through the figures of the *bent* and the *straight*. Borrowing an image from Foucault’s discussion of orthopedics in *Discipline and Punish*, Ahmed analogizes the will of the child to a “wayward tree” forced to take on a “correct” position by “straightening rod” (WS, p. 72). Elsewhere, she borrows from ancient Roman poet Lucretius, whose notion of *the swerve* is said to register the queerness of the will: “The word ‘queer,’” Ahmed writes with reference to *De rerum natura*, as well as Eve Sedgwick’s etymologization of *queer*, “derives from the Indo-European word ‘twerk,’ to turn or to twist, also related to the word ‘thwart[,]’ to transverse, perverse, or cross. That this word came to describe sexual subjects is no accident: those who do not follow the straight line, who to borrow Lucretius’s terms, ‘snap the bonds of fate,’ are the perverts: swerving rather than straightening, deviating from the right course. To queer the will is to show how the will has already been given a queer potential” (WS, p. 11). Ahmed’s presentation of queer not only as deviant but intentionally so adds a Butlerian spin to the Sedgwickian theorization of queerness as “continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*.”⁵⁴ But where Butler would later recognize—and distance herself from—the “occasional voluntarism of [their earlier] view of performativity” (G, p. xxv), Ahmed embraces the voluntaristic strains of the performativity thesis in order to institute a new duality, that between straight actors, who instill habits, and queer actors, who pose a willful challenge to the habitual.

Already in 1992, Sedgwick observed that the “concept of habit has dropped out of theorized use” in favor of more “glamorizing paradigms oriented around absolutes of compulsion/voluntarism.”⁵⁵ *Willful Subjects* is a product of this larger historical shift. It demonstrates what happens when a dismissal of habit comes to take the place of a theory of habit: a liberal theory of the subject that can only understand queerness in terms of freedom of

53. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, N.C., 2014), p. 73; hereafter abbreviated WS. The philosopher John Locke, for example, is said to believe “that the moral aim [of education] is to install the right habits in the child” (p. 73).

54. Sedgwick, “Foreword: T Times,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993), p. xiii.

55. Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” in *Tendencies*, pp. 138, 138–39.

self-expression. For Ahmed, habits are the result of externally imposed constraints that restrict individual freedom. Thus, her metaphorical tree, “already bent,” is “straightened” upon the application of a restrictive force from the outside: “The will is understood here as . . . the potential not to be determined from without” (WS, p. 10). Within Ravaissan’s theory of habit, by contrast, it bears repeating, “habit is not an external necessity of constraint.” In his philosophy, voluntary and involuntary forces, moreover, are not categorically distinct (one emerging from inside, the other from outside) but controvertible: “The transition between these two states cannot be sensed; its dividing line is everywhere and nowhere.”

When Ravaissan attempts to describe this transition, he often turns to the word *milieu*, which can be translated into English as both *middle* and *medium*. Ravaissan draws on both senses of the word when he explains how in habit formation—as inclination takes over from the will—an “immediate intelligence in which nothing separates the subject and object of thought” emerges out of “les milieux des oppositions”—a phrase that Clare Carlisle and Marc Sinclair render as “the middle ground between opposing terms” (OH, pp. 55, 54, 55). In habit, he explains, “the extremities touch one another, and the contraries merge” (OH, p. 75).

But *habit* names more than the middle ground between subject and object, voluntary and involuntary. It also concerns the *medium* through which the organism lives. In *Of Habit*, the line between inside and outside the organism shifts as milieux change the composition of the self. The self is not merely determined by its medium from the outside in, however. “Le caractère général de la vie,” Ravaissan writes, “c’est donc qu’au milieu du monde elle forme un monde à part” (OH, p. 28). Carlisle and Sinclair translate this line succinctly as follows: “The general character of life is that in the milieu of the world it forms a world apart” (OH, p. 29). Observe how, within this dense phrase, life is both *in the middle of the world* (“au milieu du monde”), and yet also *forms a world apart* (“un monde à part”). From within the world, life creates its own world, separating itself from its surroundings as it incorporates—in and through habit—aspects of the milieu into itself: “Habit is the dividing line [*commune limite*], or the middle term [*terme moyen*], between will and nature; but it is a moving middle term, a dividing line that is always moving [*une limite qui se déplace sans cesse*]” (OH, p. 59).

Within the realm of queer theory, metaphors of congealment often depict the formation of sexual subjects in response to externally imposed molds. The intentional, deviating action of queerness, however, ruptures these molds, revealing their unnecessary or unnatural nature. In *Of Habit*, however, subjects rigidify in relation to milieux that do not obstruct movement but rather instigate it as they force beings who prefer to remain static to adapt to their

ever-shifting context. About halfway through the treatise, Ravaisson introduces an analogy between the process of habit formation in organic beings such as humans and the formation of crystals, whose “obscure instincts” operate with greater necessity than those of the human. He writes:

The analogy of habit penetrates its secret and delivers its sense over to us. All the way down to the confused and multiple life of the zoophyte, down to plants, even down to crystals, it is thus possible to trace, in this light, the last rays of thought and activity as they are dispersed and dissolved without yet being extinguished, far from any possible reflection, in the vague desires of the most obscure instincts. [OH, p. 67]

Notice how this passage moves further and further down the “great chain of being” from human beings to microorganisms to plants until it reaches the crystal, which is said to act with the least “possible reflection.” And yet, despite its base status, the crystal represents for Ravaisson not the low point but rather the apex of habit. This is because “the most elementary mode of existence, with the most perfect organization, is like the final moment of habit, realized and substantiated in space in a physical form” (OH, p. 67). Ravaisson cites Johann Gottfried Herder’s observation that the “‘crystal shoots with more promptitude and regularity than the bee constructs its comb, or the spider her web” (OH, p. 123 n. 55). The crystal is a notorious figure of symmetry and perfection. But let us not forget that all crystals are prone to spontaneously develop flaws in their structure, which are then replicated in each layer of growth: “‘defects, defects, defects,’” the solid-state chemist Geoffrey Ozin reminds, “‘there is no such thing as a perfect crystal.’”⁵⁶ It is these naturally occurring imperfections or errors that instigate growth and new patterns of formation, as Ravaisson, an archeologist and historian of sculpture, may have known.

Ravaisson’s crystal analogy elucidates what I will call the “crystal habit” function of desire, the propensity of desires to become rigid and yet contain within that rigidity a certain asymmetry or imperfection that allows them to accrete according to environmentally contingent, but not entirely disorganized, patterns each time, giving rise to stable qualities. Since at least the early nineteenth century, French and German minerologists have used the term *habitus* to describe a crystal’s external shape as it arises in concert with its environment (in English the term *habit* is not applied to crystals until

56. G. A. Ozin, “Teaching (Nano)Materials,” in Ozin et al., *Nanochemistry: A Chemical Approach to Nanomaterials* (Cambridge, 2009), p. xlii.

the later nineteenth century). Minerologists speak of cubic crystals, dodecahedral, dusty or fibrous, capillary or granular, among many other kinds, crystal forms indexed in the nineteenth-century engraving below (fig. 1). These terms are still used by minerologists today to categorize a crystal's general pattern of formation, including the proportions of its bounding sides and surface textures. Notably, a single species of mineral does not always form according to a single habit (fluorite, for example, does not crystallize only according to a cubic habit but might also take on an octahedral or botryoidal form). In fact, very few mineral species are limited to just one habit. They may also form in aggregate with two or more habits in one crystal. The habits that a crystal takes are thus not entirely determined by the nature of the mineral nor also by some other internal mechanism; rather crystal habits are the result of the encounter of a mineral with its environment, which does not merely limit it but instigates its growth through conditions such as heat and pressure. As such, the term *crystal habit* does not refer to the fundamental structure of a crystal but rather to the observable shape that results from the ever-shifting border of the mineral and its milieu.

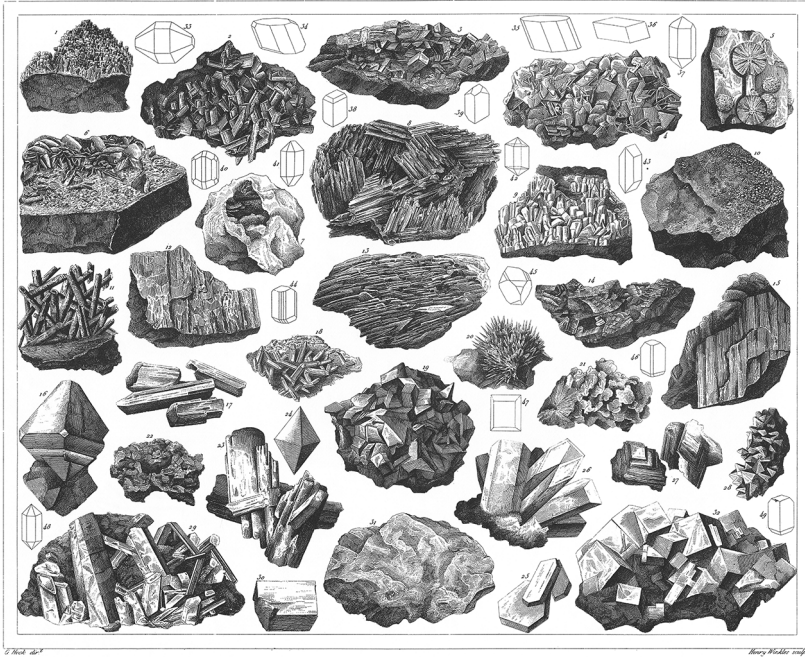


FIGURE 1. Minerals and their crystalline forms. Engraving by Henry Winkles. In J. G. Heck, *Bilder-Atlas zum Conversations-Lexicon. Ikonographische Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (Leipzig, 1849), plate 324.

Crystal habits are not natural kinds. They are categories created by scientists to approximate and predict crystal behavior. But the fact that crystal habits (1) are human constructions, (2) are generic forms to which no individual crystal will always adhere, and (3) are environmentally contingent does not rid them of descriptive, and at times, predictive, force.⁵⁷ Nor, moreover, does it mean that the rigid form that a crystal takes is somehow fictional because it is not predetermined. Habits, we might then generalize, in both rocks and humans, are the contingent product of the encounter between a being driven by repetition and its ever-changing milieu, an encounter through which a tendency is introduced that, while founded on error, takes shape according to a general pattern. The American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce once defined habit as that which ensures that “a man, or an animal, or a vine, or a crystallizable chemical substance . . . will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon a considerable proportion of the occasions).”⁵⁸ Within the realm of human sexuality, we call such tendencies dispositions.

Teresa de Lauretis has turned to Peirce’s concept of habit to describe what she calls “sexual structuring,” the process according to which sexual patterns emerge via repetition compulsions that drive the sexual subject to return to the same erotic objects and scenes (see *P*).⁵⁹ These repetitions give rise to a body semiotic through which the world takes on meaning and through which the subject interprets all new experiences. For de Lauretis, who follows Peirce in introducing semiotics to habit theory, habit is the mechanism through which this semiotic takes shape. It explains how “a subject touched by the practice of signs, a subject physically implicated or bodily engaged in the production of meaning,” comes to take on “a somatic disposition at once abstract and concrete, the crystallized form of past muscular/mental effort.”⁶⁰ In de Lauretis’s account, sexuality, though it is “relatively open-ended,” is also “overdetermined by vicissitudes and contingencies in the subject’s internal *and* external worlds” (*P*, p. 261). These vicissitudes and contingencies generate perversions and neuroses that are at once “the negative or nether side of sexuality” and “the actual forms and contents of sexuality” (*P*, p. xii).

57. The nineteenth-century French minerologist August Bravais proposed one of the first plausible mathematical theories for describing and predicting how crystal habits form in relation to growth environments.

58. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*, vol. 5 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), p. 376.

59. De Lauretis first elaborates the concept in *Practice of Love*, but the seeds for this concept can be found in her discussion of habit in de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

60. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

In “Habit Changes” (1994), de Lauretis distanced herself from the phrase “queer theory” she had coined just a few years earlier, expressing concern with the way that “excluded, abjected, queer bodies” had been incorporated into a “redemptive, political project” that legitimizes them as “bodies that matter.”⁶¹ “What troubles gender identity,” she goes on to argue in a 2011 essay, are not intentionally subversive acts but rather “bad habits,” which she describes as “the repressed, unconscious dimensions of the sexual . . . the destructive and self-destructive aspects of sexuality that personal identity seldom avows and the political discourse on gender must elide or deny altogether.”⁶² Reading de Lauretis alongside Ravaissan allows for a recognition of how habits take on value in the social field (among other ways, through notions such as good or bad habits) but without seeking to eliminate negative value altogether through discourses of inclusion, normality, or health. Where Butlerian queer studies, in its rush to defend the pathologized, risks positivizing queerness as not only intentional but ethical, de Lauretis asks us to consider whether such value reversals, such as the revaluation of queerness as good, efface—that is, remove from critical analysis—the negative elements of sexuality that are its “actual forms and contents” (*P*, p. xii).

De Lauretis’s thinking about habit represents a path not taken by queer theory. Indeed, her work is almost never cited in the field. Perhaps this is because, for her, queer subjects are no more fluid, willful, or conscious than any other. Within much contemporary queer theory, subjects deserve to be called queer when they resist the force of habit, asserting their wills over and against the force of (social) compulsion. In the work of de Lauretis, however, another version of queerness emerges, one that reinvigorates the long-time association of queerness with fixation and adhesion. In her work, habits are not the enemy of all that is queer. This is because, first, no one—straight or gay, cis or trans—can resist the force of habit (habit is the mechanism through which all sexual subjects attain structure) and, second, because if anything can be called queer in this process, it is those actions that one undertakes—compulsively and repetitively—in order to feel the same even when they do not aid one’s survival. (As anyone who has experienced a life-altering change of context will know, a person’s repetition compulsions cannot be understood separately from milieu, which not only determines whether they are perceived as good or bad but whether they are enabling or disabling.)

61. De Lauretis, “Habit Changes,” *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 302, 303. In this essay, de Lauretis likewise positions her book *The Practice of Love* not as a work of “queer theory,” but as “a study of sexuality or, if you will (though it does sound pretentious), a theory of sexuality” (p. 297).

62. De Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” *GLQ* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): 253.

Ironically perhaps, queerness has more than survived, raising the question of whether *queer* remains an accurate term for the behaviors it is typically used to describe. If one subscribes to a liberal view of the subject that emphasizes freedom of self-expression, the word *queer* surely retains not only descriptive but political force. In North America, among other places, *queer* has largely become a positive self-nomination that, while certainly not celebrated by everyone, has been normalized as one identity among others. Ravaissou's theory of habit, though it rarely zooms out to the level of larger society, might help to explain why: any act that deviates from the norm (whether of an individual or a larger aggregate), while it might at first be out of sync with those norms, might, through effort or other repetitive means, be normalized. *Of Habit* has its limitations for those interested in constructing a politics attentive to the social mechanisms through which some habits come to be perceived as bad or good, queer or normal. And it will be completely useless to those whose political maneuverings turn upon a simple reversal of such valuations. At the same time, it offers a compelling account of what constitutes the foundation of change itself—habit—without an understanding of which one cannot hope to affect change beyond the righteous imposition of a will.

To read *Of Habit* is to step back, both historically and philosophically, from models of sexual subject formation in which subjects become rigid only lamentably as a result of their encounter with social constraints. Instead, it asks how desires crystallize according to patterns of formation that remain open to modulation through deviations generated in and through milieux. A pattern might take shape subtractively, by a wearing down of the barriers that prevent a desire to emerge, or accretively, through the patient elaboration of a structure for a desire to inhabit. It has become a scholarly habit of queer theory to privilege the breaking over the making of such patterns. But what is desire if not a pattern materialized in the body, a tendency toward the rigid, which, although it will inevitably be surprised or disappointed, seeks the pleasures of the same?