TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE ELISION OF THE INTELLIGIBLE PUBLIC: PUSSY RIOT, RIOT GRRRL, AND RACE RIOTS

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1. One of three Olympic mascots performing a reaction during a Pussy Riot performance. Video still from “Putin will teach you how to love.” ..................116
ABSTRACT

Using Judith Butler’s theory of performative subversion, this thesis investigates moments where subaltern political engagement happens outside of decorous political channels. With a heavy focus on Dick Hebdige’s bricolage, the work argues that commodification works against such moments. Investigating Riot Grrrl, Pussy Riot and the death of Eric Garner, this thesis concludes that resistance’s possibilities sit in the refusal of the reproduction of societally sanctioned contingent realities.
INTRODUCTION: PERFORMATIVITY INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In May of 1991, the Washington D.C. neighborhood of Mt. Pleasants erupted into riots following the shooting of a Salvadoran man by police. Igniting tensions long dormant in the Latino community, the riot lasted well into the next morning. Following the race riot, Mecca Normal’s Jean Smith wrote friend Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile saying, “We need to start a girl riot.” Though this is certainly not a monolithic (or uncontested) origin story for the Riot Grrrl scene, the first issue of the Riot Grrrl zine was released only two months later in July of the same year.¹ There is, at least, etymological significance. On February 21st 2012, feminist punk collective Pussy Riot rushed into Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior and performed a forty second spectacle requesting Mother Mary to become a feminist. With high kicks, unplugged electric guitars and balaclavas, the scene captured the world’s attention. Five days later in Sanford, Florida an unarmed black teenager was pursued following his departure from a convenience store. He wore a hood. Two of those members of Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in Siberian labor camps following their performance. That unarmed teenager was shot and killed, once again bringing issues of gun violence and inequality to the national stage. These four events (and countless others) offer moments of particularly close scrutiny and cultural importance – not a unique or accidentally violent display of power dynamics.

The struggles of those at the margins do not exist in a cultural vacuum, and should not be studied in one. My argument is not that Pussy Riot’s cathedral performance had anything to do with the death of Trayvon Martin, but rather that the position of “movements” potentially narrows analytic perspectives on discursive resistance that may
be otherwise more fully accounted for. Now sixty years since Emmett Till was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a woman, movements for civil rights, gay rights and women’s rights are still conceived as such. We have not (and cannot) yet, as a culture, sprung (spring) for the catch-all of “human rights.” In what follows, I present case studies that have particular application to the materially differently lived lives of women and minorities in the United States and abroad. Though I risk reifying the specific struggle of some into a univocal (and isolated) endeavor, it is my intention and obligation to contribute to a theory of resistance that is mindful of the phenomenology of marginalized bodies, regardless of what tropes “account” for such relegation. I proceed from the premise that in studying the resistance of de-centered individuals under constructs of race or gender, I would potentially be reinforcing the very linguistic categories misused to oppress the bodies within them.

Of course, one cannot erase or ignore the signifiers that contribute to and constitute the de-centered body’s abjection. One also, however, cannot posit a static entity like “female” to which every body that has struggled under its title must adhere. To do so would not only ignore the diverse lived experiences of humans, but also posit a falsely univocal category. There is violence in naming and violence in theorizing for people. Despite how problematic substantive adjectives like “punk” and “abject” can be, I deploy them liberally so to include all who may find utility in what follows. Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself, however. It is important for the academy that the academic remember his or her place within it, and, of subsequent necessity, without it. Though not irreconcilable, there is tension between the contributions of the academy to the marginalized and the material betterment advocated or posited by that scholarship.
Thus, my impending foray into resistance literature, oppressive discursive spheres, questions of agency, notions of intelligibility and the de-centering of power is executed haltingly and cautiously. With too much focus on the bodies oppressed I run the risk of generating an unfaithful narrative of those studied. With too little, I forfeit the possibility of responsibility. This impasse, however, is exactly my motivation for attempting to impose a potential theoretical unity onto the struggles of those unwelcomed to the public sphere. This project, then, frames the resistance of those at the margin as an endeavor toward increased social intelligibility rather than a social movement or, uncharitably, just noise.

The following, then, to get wildly ahead of myself, is a thesis of body resistance that allows Judith Butler’s theory of performative subversion a political utility beyond the personal, transgression of discursive norms. By defining public sphere accessibility through its converse, a careful interrogation of Lozano-Reich and Cloud’s exposition of the un-civil will serve as a lens to understand the terrorizing nature of civility and centrality. Those rendered intelligible and permitted cannot help but create their own opposites, or, those traits that are not intelligible in the public sphere. These marginalized identities, then, exist in an unfortunate dichotomy. The identity of the abject exists in a robust sense, though it is rendered non-viable by the politically central. The political viability of these identities, however, seems to emerge only at the invitational whim of the centralized political powers. The tension, then, is mutually destructive: identity at the expense of publicity, and publicity at the expense of identity. This is the content gap my project could address: how the abject as such could participate alternatively in something like the public sphere. Does a punk have to sell out
to have a *public* voice? Though potentially oxymoronic, we cannot assume the tyranny of the civil to be all-encompassing lest the politically radical be statically (and perpetually) unproductive without an invitation to participate or brute force.

The best reading of Butler’s theory of performative subversion permits the abject identity to endure in an otherwise oppressive discursive realm. If the public sphere itself is similarly subject to discursive constraints and constructions, perhaps personal, private performative subversion can translate or endure a shift in scale to the public sphere. This is certainly an underlying motivation of my project. It is a wide criticism of Butler’s theory that it is non-productive, and her school’s potential for subversion is more readily understood as reactionary rather than revolutionary. With the introduction and interweaving of several key components, however, it is my intention to reconcile these two potential shortcomings into a viable form of politically subversive resistance. Social intelligibility is the most crucial construct in my theoretical framework, as I exactly correlate its increase to increased public, political viability. As I hope to illustrate with my choice of case studies, my use of Butler’s theory is not constrained just to “punk” as a group at the margins, but to any abject group or individual subverting norms to the end of not just visibility, but intelligibility. The operative distinction I employ between visibility and intelligibility is that the latter entails (in addition to visibility) understanding, political viability, and a non-removal of at least part of the previously abject identity.

Briefly, I want to contribute to Butler’s theory in a way that allows alternative means of civic and political engagement to exist productively amidst (and within) their civilizing counterparts. Put rather simplistically, this thesis would permit political weight to liberty spikes as well as to neck ties. To understand how this might work, I will first
offer a brief literature review of performativity and social intelligibility. Once so understood, one can begin to visualize a model – or critical approach – by which performativity can be utilized within a grammar of effective, subversive resistance into the political level. Out of such an understanding emerges a radically pluralistic democracy, one that could not only account for the different ways different people engage it, but also how these modes of participation account for disruptions of power and subversive resistance.

After understanding the phenomena of social intelligibility and performative subversion at the individual, private level, we can posit and hopefully observe the endurance of these constructs into the political sphere. On this account, the identity of the subaltern must remain fixed, anchored, or non-civilized on its journey from the margins to the center. Forfeiting one’s identity for the sake of participation in the public sphere would be counter-productive to a theory that accounts for pluralistic political participation. One could make oneself intelligible by making oneself over in the image of those in power, or one could start a riot. In this constraint, the difference between visibility and intelligibility is important. Butler’s theory of performative subversion is crucial here, as a discursively or tropologically constrained group may be socially present without being publicly productive. The abject can be quite visible to the center of a community while remaining politically marginalized and excluded. This, coupled with a crucial avoidance of invitation rhetoric, merits this attempt to make performative subversion a robust and productive form of resistance.

While we will explain the critical approach of this project after some scene setting, my examination of my case studies hopes to find subversive acts that – on account of
their punishment or exclusion *from* the public sphere – subvert structural boundaries into the public sphere to function and argue politically. That is, I want to find resistance that participates in the public sphere *by means of* its refusal. This is classically subversive: using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. If this sort of public, post-structural resistance proves viable, though, the master’s house would crumble *because of* the master’s disciplinary actions. Specifically, I will be examining 1) The Riot Grrrl Zine and some of the movement’s constitutive players, 2) Eric Garner and how the modern dead, black body argues in America, and 3) Pussy Riot and their contemporary international feminism.

**Communication as Social Constructionism**

Butler’s theory of performativity, while used by and useful for gender theory, is not a theory of gender before it is a phenomenological argument. A contemporary of Butler’s, Sveinsdóttir, argues from a metaphysician’s standpoint that human kind terms, terms purported to denote things like race and gender, are *conferred*. That is, a conferred property is a property that something has *by virtue* of some attitude, action, or state of subjects.5 The Euthyphro dilemma serves as a fine illustrator of this point. Is something pious in its own right, and thus, the gods favor it? Or, is something pious *because* the gods favor it? Asked rhetorically, how independent are properties like “female” or “abject” from social construction? Socrates, classically, argues with Euthyphro that piety exists robustly, independent of godly affection. Euthyphro, however, makes the opposite (and present) case, that properties exist in *and because of* a social context. Recall that for Beauvoir there is not eternal feminine, no unchanging entity that accounts for gender, there is simply female.6 Recall that Wittig’s account attributes no explanatory force to
one’s biological sex insofar as gender is concerned, attributing such assignments to their own perception. One is constructed and thus treated as a woman, therefore she is one. Socrates might respond, “According to whom?”

Sveinsdóttir calls that which supposedly informs kind designators a “grounding principle” or “tracked” property. She employs the example of a baseball strike. Are there physical properties of a strike that make it such? Yes. Are these sufficient for making a strike a strike? No. For a strike to be a strike in baseball there must be an umpire who confers the property strike. Do designators like women track anything? Is there a grounding property that makes all members of the group “woman,” women? No, clearly not for Wittig, and even for Beauvoir, one’s biological sex does not entail the past and present situation of “women,” it only entails gendered “women.” Sveinsdóttir explains further that the manifest contextual difference in the lives of different groups of women demonstrates the situated nature of gender as “deeply context-dependent.”

The baseball example is tidy, in that the umpire is the authority on the diamond. Humans subject to kind terms, however, have no such objective evaluator and assigner. Even if some authority is cited in some contexts, the existences of other contexts (i.e. women’s rights operating differently in Russia compared to other places) at best confuse the notion of authority, if not outright refuting the premise on its demonstrated universal inapplicability. Sexual behavior, familial responsibilities, or anything could be cited as the “tracked” property of designations of gender. To be sure, these properties are not static across the world, and, even more certainly, they have not remained static across time. For properties like gender, class or race to mean at all they must exist in a social world – a world of inter-subjectivity.
George Mead writes, in Alcoff and Mendieta’s book *Identities*, “Rationality means that the type of the response which we call out in others should be so called out in ourselves, and that this response should in turn take its place in determining what further thing we are going to say and do.” Meaning does not exist in an inert, pre-apprehended state as some sort of substratum. Rather, our rational capacities – as governed and allowed by a collective use of symbols – construct meaning out of the world. Indispensable from Mead’s account is the role of self-consciousness in the authoring of meaning. Meaning does not arise to the single knower; rather, symbols are ratified through the consciously self-conscious *sharing* of the symbols that allow apprehension. Consciousness exists insofar as the subject recognizes his/her objectivity as essential to the *other* – an understanding that permits meaning. Out of this newly initiated seeing and sharing of the world, communication emerges as the mechanism by which the un-apprehended is called into apprehension in a subsequently transmittable way. Slavoj Zizek writes, “Only when my self-consciousness is externalized in an object do I begin to look for it in another subject [emphasis added].”

With the mental framework that language (read: a collection of symbols that share meaning) creates and allows, we apprehend a world which we (this is a problematic pronoun in that it assumes a pre-rational referent) previously only inhabited. In this way, we exist as conscious agents only within a discursively constructed framework of knowing and being known. To reach beyond the framework that allows our knowing is thus more than impossible: it would require the fundamental resituating of the very capacity (cognition) we would have to exercise in this emancipatory pursuit. So, while our constructed grammars and mental schemata are liberating insofar as they permit our
knowing, these discursive spheres are constraining and oppressive insofar as they demand and dictate the modes of existence within them that can be communicated and comprehended. This is an inexorable terrorism inherent in our method and means of knowing: alternative and other means aren’t simply excluded; they are rendered non-existent through their non-comprehend-able nature. Laclau and Mouffe write, “Human beings socially construct their world, and it is through this construction – always precarious and incomplete – that they give to a thing its being.”¹² At all times our apprehension is through an enabling but inescapably constraining and imperfect framework. These shortcomings merit some small attention, presently.

If it is with symbols that humans are able to apprehend and share reality, that same reality is concomitantly constructed, not merely represented. Within this created realm of intelligibility, then, intelligible thoughts, objects, bodies and traits are regulated. In this state of conscious self-consciousness, recall, the subject arises only in its known relation to another as an object. This process is what Janet Borgerson explains as the Tropological Inauguration of the Subject. She writes of what the resulting discursive realm permits:

Theorists and philosophers for centuries have invoked this trope, or turning; and they have given the limiting boundary, or realm, names such as Other, power, or the unknowable, often as if inaugurating entities. In turn these hypothesized entities and their implied effects, such as, subjection or reflexivity, open as lenses onto human life processes, subjectivities, and potential actings and interactings.¹³

Our mental schemata, grammars, and symbolic interaction that allow the apprehension of reality thus inescapably create discursive worlds of know-ability which
allow certain things while they necessarily disallow others. These other things, are as other as can be. The subject, however, that which is knowable and mobilized into the object of another’s consciousness, takes its (his/her) form from language and gestures. The “individual” is, rather than a monolithic and static being in time, a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. The known subject is thus an interruption: the temporal negotiation of intelligibility, opening to mobilize his/her agency into (and through his/her use of) symbols. It is well to note that in producing an identity, this subject in formation necessarily excludes other identities not only from being intelligible but from being. To the end of a longitudinally comprehensible subjectivity, then, these gestures that create and invite the individual to be (and be able to be) apprehended are re-iterated and re-presented to (re)produce the image of a stable identity. Where these gestures and acts effectively constitute aspects of one’s identity, these acts are what Butler calls performative. Rather than a subject acting in a way representative of his/her identity, these actions construct an identity within a discursive, social world of meaning. While performance is a mode of presenting the self, performativity is a constitutive, discursive production of the self.

Of Furrows and Critical Rhetorics

If this framework allows us to understand the body not as a static identity but, rather, as a site of production, rhetorical studies are situated not only to offer an analysis of these productions, but also to contribute to a functional and pragmatic understanding of their social implications. The rhetorical nature of a subject’s negotiation of identity is a process, and a constant one. This discursive production of a self permits (or even demands) subjection, but does not foreclose the possibility of agency within those
discourses. Indeed, it is the indefinite nature of this rhetorically constitutive process that allows, politically, new senses of identity to emerge or exist at all.\textsuperscript{16} When considering subject matter like resistance, material concerns like violence and force function only insofar as the rhetorical nature of their pursuits allow. That is to say, ignorable subversion is precisely that: ignored. Likewise, senseless aggression is exactly that. When the subversive behavior of an abject body successfully (and discernibly) offers a social injunction, the rhetorician can offer not only a descriptive account of the what, but also a once and twice removed account of the why and, most important for my purposes here, the how.

Raymie McKerrow remarks on the subject of resistance, “The task of a critical rhetoric is to undermine and expose the discourse of power in order to thwart its effects in a social relation.”\textsuperscript{17} This exposure, then, gives rise to the possibility of altering the discourses that produce not just identities but a subject or subject position’s possible identifications.\textsuperscript{18} Without such an interrogation, the possibilities of the status quo remain both static and normalizing. Once the discourse of the status quo is revealed as contingent, reproducing what is gives way to the possibility of articulation what ought. This interrogation, then, does not itself represent the telos of the rhetorical critic and critical rhetoric: a reconstruction must follow a critical deconstruction for resistance to exist in a robust sense. Aligned with McKerrow’s position, Kendall Phillips argues that

What remain to be explored are the kinds of procedures through which this reconstruction is performed. In this regard, rhetoricians seem uniquely positioned to explore these kinds of re-formations of subjectivity given that such procedures
may entail not only the deployment of discourse but the invention of new positions within the discourse.\textsuperscript{19}

Writing of power and resistance, Foucault posits that, within an otherwise oppressive discursive arena, fissures, cracks, or \textit{furrows} come to be within the otherwise rigid grids of intelligibility (matrices) that permit knowledge within these systems of sense-making.\textsuperscript{20} These furrows exist \textit{between} the discursively fluid subject and the intelligible grid to which the subject adheres. Resistance, then, comes not from the outside of a constraining sphere – and how could it? It emerges, rather, \textit{from within}. Biesecker explains this subversive phenomenon, writing that resistant acts are those that . . . do not make sense within the available lines of intelligibility or discernment. That is, they do not signify (which is to say, make meaning) because they cannot be referenced within the field. Hence, resistant practices are gestures that defy translation, throw sense off track, and, thus, short-circuit the system through which sense is made. In short, resistance names the non-legible practices that are performed within the weave but are asymmetrical to it.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, as we examine the performances that constitute acts of resistance, we must pay special attention to the rhetorical nature of these acts. Phillips further buttresses this consideration by pointing out that resistance of this sort is essentially \textit{kairotic}. In the wrong places at the wrong times, these short-circuitings simply miss the mark or make no sense at all. When the timing is correct, though, a sort of \textit{catachresis} takes place. The “proper” use of a signifier can be dismantled by the signified in a way that “challenges the contours of the subject position and the proper subject form it encourages.”\textsuperscript{22} At
these moments, to be sure, a critical rhetoric (like the one being attempted here) becomes not only useful in determining what is being argued, but how it is being argued, as well.

These moments, then, justify my focus on the garnered social intelligibility of those who resist. A social movement may result from the careful and “strategic codification of these points of resistance,” but the transgressive, performative, non-normative and coalescent interruptions themselves that are of pointed and particular interest to me. If resistant acts are framed outside of something like a social movement, can a critical approach that looks to isolate increased social intelligibility account for change and argument at the political level? The above outlined rhetorical nature of resistance will fundamentally inform the approach of this thesis. Before we examine how we will examine, though, we must account for the present literature on the subject.

**Literature Review**

**Butler and Performance**

Within this constrained framework, action creates the subject. The subject arises through its deeds. Given the gendered constraints to which a subject is subjected the actor or doer of deeds is constructed by and because of the deed. Through behavior, through this “regularized and constrained repetition of norms,” some identities are produced, some are foreclosed, and all work toward sustaining the illusory natural categories (binaries) of gender. A man does not wear cologne, wrestle bears and split wood; rather, it is through these actions that the gendered subject arises as male.

Recall Wittig and Beauvoir – one is not born a woman, rather, one becomes one. Gender is situated and constructed in time through a stylized repetition of acts. Gender is not a natural fact; indeed, it is a historical situation. *Performing* specific acts makes the
subject – gendered or otherwise. In a discursive sphere in which the subject is, paradoxically, already a woman, acting as a woman makes one a woman. Because the idea of gender creates the actions that sustain the idea, the discursive framework renders the idea’s origin intelligibly unreachable – this is the locus of the post-structuralist’s endeavor, and this is incredibly important. This confusion compels subjects’ adherence to the performance of tropes, in that the limit of a subject’s imagination is constrained by the realm in which it operates. The legacy of these acts, as “renewed, revised and consolidated through time” creates the knowable, gendered body – only knowable as gendered. Gendered (for example) roles, then, become ingrained, perpetuated – rehearsed, even – over time. The gendered subject is subject to the roles previously enacted and encouraged (through citation of past authority), and in her/his participation (and how could he/she not participate?), the social code is reproduced at the same time it is authorized. The subject, neither entirely culturally scripted or a priori autonomous, “enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.” The repetition in this framework, then, codifies the animating principle of performance that sustains gender roles. Thus, gendered traits like applying lipstick and wearing long hair are not expressive, but performative. These performances effectively constitute the reality they are purported to reflect, and gender is only one such regulated trope.

Gender assignments function to present an organized subject to both oneself and the world around him/her. The tracked properties that these assignments reflect, as we have seen, are simply not real. Recall the baseball example. In the gender instance at hand, though, a strike (read: female) is a strike because it is called a strike, regardless of a grounding principle. If a structure must be enacted or performed to be real, however,
then this structure’s preceding existence does not robustly indicate its existence as a
natural fact or an ideal. Thus it is with gender; this category must be endlessly reiterated
to maintain its power and its natural illusion.

The collection of traits, actions, and gestures that generate the organized subject,
then, can become conflated (through historical iterations and subsequent authorizing)
with predicative (non-prior) effects of the subject. Regardless of their priority, these
behaviors and tropes that constitute an agents organized intelligibility are part and parcel
with that subject. This conflation makes sense. If these traits become inescapable to the
organized subject, the subject’s subsequent behaviors will very likely operate to the
larger social sphere with a confused or inverted sense of priority. If we need these
organizational qualities to exist in a sphere where we are both known and capable of
knowing, it is unsurprising that these qualifiers become mistaken for natural, true, or real.
Once this mistake is made, the compulsion to reaffirm continuously these indicators of
our natural existence pervades society and permits the re-presentation of the historically
existing social structure.

As a result of this conflation, though, organized subjectivities entail more than
confused priority. Being ascribed a gender (for a long time as deployed through a “sex”),
however, is more than just a kind term when conflated from an organizational category;
being gendered “means being ascribed a whole identity that is constructed by social
norms and which determines the course of one’s life.” An example that does not entail
social realities would be something like eye color, though even that has been historically
mobilized in oppressive ways. Being born into a realm of social intelligibility means
that one, from birth, is a subject insofar as he/she (and the implied binary is here
intentional) is subjected to the authorial identity categorizations that permit our social existence. Butler writes that “the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory form. [Sex] is what qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”

This question of predication gets messy, though, when we recall that our mental grammars exist with blind spots. For everything that we can apprehend, there still is that against which we signify. Beyond what we choose to make salient, our mental grammars dictate what we can make salient. So, there may be potential realities that simply cannot be realized or signified by the particular grammars that make up our rationality. If loose binaries like gender and sexual orientation serve to organize a subject, and these categories become reified and subsequently coerced, what of those who experience a gap between linguistic categories and felt reality? Coercion to fit neatly into a category of language, if this category is unsuccessful in corresponding fully to one’s lived experience, is tyrannical. The agency of a subject within his or her world of knowing, then, always presupposes the subject’s subordination to its rational way of knowing. The organizational categories that enable a subject’s intelligibility can also terrorize that individual’s felt experience into narrow yet necessary linguistic categories. This is the necessary point of departure for the productivity of Butler’s personal-level performative subversion, but we’ll tackle that a little later.

If, within his/her discursive sphere, a subject is born into constraints that, while necessary for social intelligibility, otherwise oppress rather than enable, the subject cannot simply shed these regulatory and organizational categories. One’s agency within a social world does not reach so far as to enable the removal of organizational tropes like
gender. To act or interact outside of such enabling conditions for social existence is to render one’s self incomprehensible. Butler writes in Excitable Speech:

If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject [emphasis added], then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question. The consequences of such an irruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is “falling apart” to the intervention of the State to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration.\(^{32}\)

Through the performance of our identity-making tropes, we actively create and constitute the social sphere to which we in turn adhere. Even though this presents a radically malleable sense of being for the oppressed agent, one cannot simply shed organizational ascriptions. Just as we create meaning socially, our very mental schemata are created in just the same way. To abandon either of these is to abandon the other and, subsequently, render the subject not only unintelligible, but destroyed.\(^{33}\) If an inescapable discursive sphere oppresses, how does the oppressed body resist? It is the central question of this thesis.

**Margins, Centers, Margins**

The above has been a largely phenomenological conversation, but it is needed to understand how we might apply a theory like Butler’s to productive, political change. The social constructivist’s model shows how our ways of knowing and being known are inextricably linked. Within this linkage, we further can see that some identities are linguistically constructed closer to felt reality than others are, as the grammar of our cognition is only so powerful. Further, in a subject’s ability to signify there is always the consequence of negation. Those with the ability to state what something is relegate those
who only approximate this signification to the margins. Through this relationship, the power of the sovereign emerges. Just as performances become reified through their historical iterations, the authority of those who signify becomes normalized and deemed natural. The power of the sovereign is always assumed by those in power to be the natural order of things.\(^{34}\)

Robert Hariman writes of marginality that “Attributing status is a social act, perhaps the quintessential social act, for status cannot exist without the cooperation of other people and can exist then without any material support, consequence or correlative.”\(^{35}\) Attributing meaning is necessarily done in a hierarchy, both phenomenologically and socially. Phenomenologically, meaning is carved out against what it is not. Socially, however, that not, rather than existing beyond apprehension, is simply relegated to a status lower than what is. For example, a physician is not a quack as much as he or she is a medical practitioner.\(^{36}\) In this way, societies are organized to have a center, a periphery or margin, and an outside. In the outside, one is no longer a member of the society; on the margins, as stated earlier, one approximates the member of the society. At the center, though, one is the ideal to the extent he or she is juxtaposed to those at the margins.

Accepting that “sociality is the foundation of thinking” a speaker operates essentially in relation to those around him/her. Symbols, then, generate meaning according to the “centrality or marginality to the society of the thinker.”\(^{37}\) Discourse from the margins, then, is always a collection of categories against which the center of a society is signified. Relegated to the margins are the “confused, inarticulate, [and] flawed.”\(^{38}\) These are necessary for the center to in turn be cogent, eloquent, and whole.
So, similar to how the subject is organized at the phenomenological level, the subject is also organized at the larger, social level.

**Consensus Problematized**

Resistance writing, then, operates essentially within the social world of those resisting. This is problematic, as even a simple definition of terms can be irresponsibly glossed over or left up to those in power. Three components seem indispensable, however: those resisting, those against whom/which a resistor resists, and those who determine these previous two labels. The first two are pragmatic concerns, the third, however, is both an indicator of the postmodern academy and (in all likelihood) a function of the second above concern: those against whom a resistor resists. The very recognition of this interplay problematizes the agency of any author attempting to write about resistance, and this thesis is not immune. Consensus as a situation is obviously and inherently problematic. Consensus as a concept necessitates its converse: disagreement, but the concept’s very definition does not permit disagreement. When the concept is deployed beyond a dyad, then, an internal undecidability impedes any moral component to consensus.\(^{39}\) This concept, then, is not an ethical concern, but rather a question of centrality.

When examining resistance, then, the very position of resist-or and resist-ed is terrorizing. The self, bodies, and agency all become even more problematic when just naming agents is understood as potentially fascist. Campbell and Biesecker have engaged this problem of speaking for and from the margins,\(^{40}\) as have Alcoff, Mohanty, and Haraway.\(^{41}\) The category of “feminist” resistance is at this point in the academy as problematic as ever. According to the 100\(^{th}\) NCA National Convention program, six
papers presented in 2014 address the Russian activist group Pussy Riot. Half of these focus on strategic uses of the body and social movement, while the other half problematize such characterizations through a focus on polysemy and metonymy in domestic and international discourse. Consensus, after all, is a tricky concept. Characterizations of the group as anti-capitalist feminist punk artists are prominent in American media, but other contexts can yield other, very different narratives.  

Jude Davies’ essay The Future of “No Future” weaves together the postmodern academy’s awareness of consensus as a reproducer of the status quo and the impossibility of a monolithic conception of “punk” resistance. Davies’ work is not only a responsible and enlightening take on postmodernity, but also one of the few theoretically robust examinations of punk rock I have ever encountered. Writing about consensus as a concept, Davies says,

It can be confined to a particular group, who defend their privileges by resisting change. It can also be used of society as a whole, as in Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, where bourgeois rule is sustained by force plus consent. In both cases, the term consensus implies but conceals a dissenting position, an other which it excludes.

Consensus as a problematic category informs Davies’ essay, entirely. Moving deftly from the postmodern refusal of meta-narrative to the problematic nature of identity, Davies shows how punk resistance in particular does not permit bourgeois hegemony a “monopoly over the construction of identity.” That is the subversive nature of “punk” resistance: it refuses and repudiates the “language of our oppressors.” The political utility of such a maneuver, however, is paltry. Short of a violent new world order, such a
refusal certainly counts as resistance, but does not entail the public-ity this thesis attempts to attribute to the marginal identity.

With consensus problematic for both the narrative coherence of the marginalized and the univocal oppositional tendency of such communities, the antagonistic strategies must be examined *themselves*, lest one risk the preservation of the status quo. Resistance must be studied as acts grounded in themselves. If one were to employ a conventional grammar when naming resisting groups or describing resistance as a movement, one risks tacit compliance with a dominant group’s power. Utilizing only the grammars of the oppressed, however, similarly may reinforce that against which the group resists. In a word, resistance must be studied performatively. In this way, actors and agents are not subject to the potential tyranny of naming, and the resisted power does not control the discourse.47 This will be developed much further later as the critical approach of this thesis. With the notion of consensus problematized, however, acts of resistance can be seen as attempts at disrupting that perceived status quo that marginalizes. In an oppressive discursive framework, those who do not consent, resist.

*Resistance*

It is ironic given the above discussion to posit a definition of resistance or a conception of it. Some sense of how the term operates in the academy, however, is indispensable in a project like this one. Conveniently, Hollander and Einwohner’s *Conceptualizing Resistance* has engages the term’s various deployments in the academy, if not the problematic nature of defining it, itself.48 Hollander and Einwohner cite regularly Jim Scott’s germinal *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, so I feel not irresponsible starting with their typology. Scott’s work on everyday resistance – among
others’ – is absolutely indispensable when examining the struggles of the marginalized.\textsuperscript{49}

As will become clear later, personal subversive maneuvers, even when acknowledged only by those subverting, are powerful, potent forms of resistance.

Hollander and Einwohner digest current academic uses of \textit{resistance} down to several key questions. Their essay, after all, seeks to clarify rather than adjudicate “between different definitions of resistance . . . to move beyond definitional debates – which, we fear, may ultimately be futile – and focus instead on the analytically important aspects of resistance.”\textsuperscript{50} Their approach, then, is compatible with our forthcoming \textit{performative} examination of resistance. To start, their work delineates different modes (e.g. symbolic and material), scales, levels of coordination, goals, and targets of \textit{political} resistance. They posit \textit{identity-based} resistance as distinct from political resistance.\textsuperscript{51} This thesis, indebted to works like this one, examines the intersection of these two forms of resistance. If one’s identity is a political barrier, what Hollander and Einwohner call identity-based resistance \textit{is} political resistance, albeit one order removed. If identity is discursively re-presented over time, the dismantling of the structures of these discourses provides a more sure opportunity for pluralist public participation. I hope.

Davies offers only the following meager unification of what \textit{punk} means: “An oppositional tendency, with a network of resistances to authority, to work, and to conventional politics.”\textsuperscript{52} The first and third of these are of incredible importance for this thesis, as is the present need to offer a more concrete idea of how resistance will be understood for the project. Hollander and Einwohner offer, beyond the above variables of and within resistance, a seven-part typology of the concept. The list includes Overt, Covert, Unwitting, Target-defined, Externally-defined, Missed, and Attempted
Resistance. Overt resistance merits no further explanation here, but Covert, Unwitting, and Missed Resistance merit attention, presently. Covert resistance is unnoticed (and unpunished) by its target, but those in the know recognize its presence and potency. This typology cites those “culturally aware observers” who might discern these acts. Unwitting resistance, however, is a resistant act only insofar as it is perceived that way. That is, these acts lack intent. Those “targeted” by these acts object to them on some grounds, feel in danger on account of their being-perceived, or simply thrive in a paranoid state. Examples abound, but this typology cites Carr’s work on the “tomboy” look for young women. Critical to bear in mind, here, is that this type of resistance is reified by the offended party – not the perceived resistor. Missed resistance, though, is intended by the de-centered body, but only noticed by those resisted. Put simply, this sort of resistance cannot (by definition) be known to anyone other than the parties involved. This typology cites secret societies as a potential example, but to approach such an example is to defeat this category. The academic utility of this category remains a mystery to me, but it provides, along with covert and unwitting resistance, our theoretical starting point for this thesis’ operative mode of resistance.

This typology then, while extraordinarily useful and elegant, excludes personal-level subversive behavior from its categories of resistance if those acts are not recognized by a third party or their target. This is problematic for two reasons. One, if resistant acts are defined categorically by their oppositional tendency, then demanding exterior recognition in order for resistance not to “miss” requires the author-ization already problematized above. Two, the categories target and observer are only so robust. What if, within an oppressive discursive sphere, a de-centered body refuses that which
constrains? Can an entire social way of knowing and being known fit tidily into the category “target” but still be unrecognized by a third party? On Hollander and Einwohner’s typology, maybe not. According to Judith Butler, however, maybe so. Butler calls this sustaining and resistant act *performative subversion*.

**Performative Subversion**

The emancipatory potential that arises out of an otherwise bleak structure of oppressive but inescapable subjectivity is as follows: “At the moment an individual is subject to gender norms, he or she becomes a gendered subject who can resist those norms. Subjection and agency are, therefore, inextricably intertwined.” A resistance that does not jeopardize the intelligibility of the subject is something Butler calls *performative subversion*. Janet Borgerson writes, “[R]epeated representations, imposed codes of behavior, or organizational cultures . . . endlessly re-create normative values and identities . . . which constitute the subject.” If one, while maintaining social intelligibility, begins to subtly and slowly re-create and re-iterate these behaviors, the actual “reality” that these gestures are purported only to represent may shift or elide, as well. In this way, the oppressed subject maintains social viability while weakening his or her subjection to gendered norms that constrain. In these behaviors, not only does the oppressed subject find means of expanding otherwise limited ways of being in a social world, but he/she also demonstrates the conventional – not natural – nature of the structures that oppress. In imperfectly re-creating anticipated re-presentations of “realities” like gender, a subject’s agency exists most robustly between the structure to which one is adhering (for the maintenance of identity) and the performance which constitutes the longevity of that structure. As the subversive agent performs, he or she
iterates the “discourse of the social structure in ways that may stray from their former ideal discursive type.”57 This straying, however, must always be sly enough to maintain identification as a re-iteration or re-presentation of the same discourse.

The shedding of organizational tropes like gender would go beyond social death to social nothingness. This is not the abandonment of a character trait, but of a socially understandable character. The compulsion to adhere (even liminally) to a gender binary is thus rooted in the compulsion to adhere to a socially (not naturally) created structure. Butler writes, “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them.”58 Even so, for the sake of a social sphere’s existence, those within it are always subjected to the regulatory tropes out of which they (the subjects) are enabled. To stray from these, or, to perform one’s gender wrong, is to initiate a series of punishments aimed and the maintenance of the socially understandable body – no matter the anxiety of that body in such a state of intelligibility. To reiterate, this is the importance of Butler’s theory: it enables those who experience a gap between the linguistic categories that enable them and their own felt reality. Butler’s work is for the anxious, the square pegs in the round holes, those rendered voiceless by their social existence. In revealing oppressive structures to be rooted in convention rather than reality, Butler provides the intellectual resources for negotiating and combating ungenerous norms. In a social world that otherwise precludes the articulation of those constrained by the linguistic category gender, a means of survival, a voice, and an avenue of resistance arises out of Butler’s work. My question, then, is if this process can achieve productivity beyond personal transgressive behaviors.
A brief digression is warranted before I continue, as a critique of Butler’s work provides a tidy point of departure for the following sections.

**Critique and Clarification**

Martha Nussbaum, a wildly prolific scholar in her own right, penned a scathing (and delightful) critique of Butler’s work in 1999. Nussbaum writes that Butler “cannot escape the humiliating structures without ceasing to be [intelligible within them], so the best [she] can do is mock, and use the language of subordination stingingly.” While this is meant to be (and admitted to being) an ungenerous reading of Butler’s work, Nussbaum’s bottom line is this: a resistance that must presuppose the oppressive nature of its environment as an enabling condition can never be productive. It is a critique that cannot be ignored in this review.

The existence of a grammar, on Butler’s model, is inherently limiting. Within the mental schemata that permits and constrains one’s intelligible realm, the constitutive framework of this permission is, itself, terrorizing and tyrannical. Within a grammar, there are things disallowed. This is not as simple as saying, “there are rules which can be broken,” rather, it is saying that within a grammatical operating system there are un-executable commands and an un-thinkable outside. To the deconstruction of the historically oppressive, conventional grammars function to perpetuate the historically ratified, in that the expression of the truly radical is impeded by the domineering tyranny of what convention permits as intelligible. Dismantling the status quo is achieved either subversively or noisily. With this thesis and the subsequent case studies, we have an intersection of the two that provides an opportunity to see the revolutionary potential in each. Where Nussbaum would have post-structuralist theorists work more specifically
toward votes, education and shelter for the oppressed, Butler would rather interrogate the *entire structure* that gives rise to oppression. This is what it means for a subject’s agency to presuppose its own subjection. An organized and intelligible subject is enabled through its re-presentation of social norms. To question these enabling conditions one necessarily has to admit to being subjected to it and by it. In the presupposition of this constraining power, though, the ability to carve out an identity, even if ultimately rooted in the oppressive regime one so longs to escape, permits an ease of being previously unavailable.

For this resistance to be viable, though, the organized subject must exercise agency in the space that exists between anticipated re-presentations of the “natural” that one is subverting and the subsequent yet “prior” structure, itself. As long as the subsequent representation approximates the existing structure enough to be accepted as the same as it was, this re-iteration slowly erodes the existing and oppressive kind-type. It is this exposure of the structure as unnatural and not ideal that liberates the constrained subject and constitutes a sort of Post-Structuralist resistance. In the absence of a perfect linguistic fit within an enforced discursive sphere, the oppressed subject can intervene into the constitutive re-articulations of the regime to which he/she is subjected.

By enabling the enlarging of potential avenues for the gendered subject, Butler’s resistance allows the oppressed subject to negotiate those norms that constitute a real source of pain for real people. If the oppressed subject can act to transform the grammar of intelligibility within which the subject operates, the modes of recognizing and being recognized shift, also. This elision toward more inclusive means of perceiving a subject allows the weakening of social categories which subjugate. In the absence of what was
subjugation, the subject acts more freely. Ridding the anxiety and voiceless-ness of those ill-suited for our gendered binary entails their material betterment, as “an experienced gap between the categories supplied by language and felt reality” can be excruciating. It is not as tangible a good as medicine or shelter, but it creates a vehicle of resistance for those who feel not at home with their enforced linguistic constructions. Ignoring excluded and un-legitimated ways of being relegates those outside of them not only to the un-signified, but also to the un-grieved and the un-grieve-able. Cognitive limitations within a discursive sphere prohibit the recognition of the genuine other: that which exists outside of one’s intelligible world. Because of this, an avenue of resistance, for it to be recognizable (or beneficial) as such must operate for and on behalf of the oppressed. The subaltern cannot simply shed his or her abject status, as the unraveling of the intelligible subject relegates one to the asylum, not the public sphere. Butler’s theory then allows the endurance of the abject identity while permitting the weakening of that abjectness. The question now, however, is whether Butler’s theory can be politically productive in the public sphere. Can performative subversion as a theory endure the scale shift from the personal to the political?

**Noteworthy and Influential Endeavors**

Though deployed earlier to argue this project as a rhetorician’s, Phillips’ work on the rhetorical maneuver offers a clear and very carefully argued public utility of Butler’s theory. Beyond parodist subversion, Phillips’ maneuver offers subjects the discursive ability to recall and re-deploy alternative subject positions to “invent new subject forms.” Beyond simply exposing the contentious nature of subject positions and identities, Phillips’ work presents political utility subsequent to the exposure. Though it
is not a theory of political resistance or subversion into the public sphere, this model lends an applied utility to performative subversion upon which this project hopes to expand. The rhetorical maneuver is a “resource by which the subject may redirect the agency of its position against the very relations of power/knowledge that seek to position it.” This resource functions, essentially, through a subject’s violation of expectation by the introduction (into the present context) of a previously acquired subject position (acquired from another context). This purposeful re-presentation of self can be deployed strategically to strategic ends. For the purposes of this project, however, the assumption of a politically stable and viable alternative subjectivity to which the abject can turn undercuts the very telos of the project. That is, to subvert the public sphere while maintaining the abject identity.

Speaking of this very challenge, Kathy Dow Magnus notes that Butler’s writing leaves unclear the extent to which “the subject can successfully transform the terms of social discourse.” Without recourse to an alternate and otherwise acceptable subjectivity to unsettle social proscriptions, the resisting subject must attempt to subvert her/his restrictions. While the extent to which this is possible may remain unclear (or deeply context-dependent) the possibility of this social transformation occurs only when the conditions that produce and limit subjectivities “prove malleable.” Though this may appear tautological, the critical approach of this project hinges upon those acts that could affect such a structural transformation – though we will visit that shortly.

If subversion entails a utility posterior to its own act only when the subverted structure proves malleable, the mundane acts (performatives) must be examined as pieces of the larger, political act’s arsenal. While we have already provided some account of
performative subversion as the “bringing into relief” the constructed nature of social constructs, this undermining of assumption or troubling of certainties, if it is to endure a scale shift to the political, must be accompanied by some larger, sense-making mechanism. To this end, Chris Brickell offers a model that accounts for “new means of understanding and enacting” gender, citing a nudging of acceptable frames toward new, less constraining modes of performing masculinity. Those actors undertaking those newly permissible gendered roles maintain social viability because they do so without fracturing the “jointly inhabitable mental world” that collective inter-subjectivity presupposes. This stability translates into the “macrolevel” through a sort of capillary action into hegemonic masculinities. These re-presented masculinities, then, refuse traditional patterns of masculine dominance while still remaining socially organized as “masculine.”

Here the iterative appeal to authority clearly allows these elided representations of gender to substantively change the reality they are purported only to represent robustly at the public, not just private level. Unfortunately, the base mechanism for this elegance is the fact that new masculinities appeal to historical ones by means of their already being assumed to be masculinities. It is the same dilemma found in Phillips’ rhetorical maneuver. If the subversive identity is already nominally identified as that into which it attempts to subvert – albeit an elided or altered version – the process does not entail the sort of politically potent subversive model sought, here. Though all the above cases offer important understandings of Butler’s thought, none provide the resources for the successful subversion of the abject into the public sphere by way of their own and the public sphere’s discursive constitutions, themselves. Though not strictly Butlerian, a case
offered by Guidry and Sawyer portrays a model very similar to what this project is attempting.

**Contentious Pluralism**

Through four carefully examined case studies, Guidry and Sawyer offer a vision of the public sphere as a political process they call *Contentious Pluralism*.70 This process, on their account, is “a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democracy.”71 In order for democracy to exist and function at all *per se*, the process of contentious pluralism subverts “the means, mechanisms and ideologies of political exclusion.”72

Viewing democracy as a process, this work champions apolitical, marginalized bodies and how they come (eventually) to argue in the public sphere. Theirs is an argument for the continuous renewal of democracy’s promise in the face of the public sphere being an “arena of propertied, white, middle-class males.”73 Through legal procedures, with fiery rhetoric, and in subversive behaviors, subaltern groups create alternative political realities that target and dismantle power relationships that obscure implicit assumptions of inclusion in the public sphere. Theirs is a truly remarkable work, and it is the goal of this thesis to offer a model quite similar in its intentions and subject matter. Their work even posits the problem of democracy’s failure to deliver on its promises its own potential solution. This is quite similar to the discursive constraints that oppress a de-centered body being the very arsenal from which performative subversion draws. My aim, however, is not to draft an account of these procedural widenings of the public sphere. Whereas the democratizing process of contentious pluralism frames subaltern bodies in something like a social movement, my contribution to Butler’s theory, rather, frames de-centered bodies as attaining social intelligibility.
This, to be very clear, is an argument about state legitimizable politics and not an argument about the acts of subaltern resistance and subversion themselves. The case studies presented by Guidry and Sawyer are not only remarkably understood but remarkable in themselves. I distance my contribution from this theory at a juncture logically posterior to these resistant acts, at the point of acceptance into the wider body politic. This may (understandably) sound ironic. What is even more radical than contentious pluralism – itself a radical and difficult reality to achieve and maintain – is political subversion into an otherwise statically oppressive discursive regime.

Invitational Rhetoric

Essential to contentious pluralism is the notion of competing publics being engaged and recognized in a civil manner. Elsewise, the end result of a wider public sphere could not be achieved. In this case, Guidry & Sawyer’s use of the term operates very similarly to how Foss & Griffin deploy it for their theory of invitational rhetoric. This conception allows contentious publics to interact genuinely as others. In this there is not a will to persuade so much as to understand the recalcitrant distinctness of alterity. Offered by Foss & Griffin as only one of very many modes of rhetorical prowess, it presents a genuinely radical notion of civil engagement in the face of a radical pluralistic society. Contentious pluralism posits contention as a state on a liminal scale between the civil and the confrontational. If the contention is to bolster and develop democracy, it slides closer to the civil. Focused on an interactional speech politics, value is found in the other when the other is respected as such. It would seem, then, that this sort of rhetoric is of supreme utility to a theory of resistance, in that it, when implemented, offers
politico-rhetorical avenues for those who resist. Unfortunately, the very notion of resistance seems to undermine the reality of such a rhetoric.

The civil, as active here, is a site of contradiction: its existence forecloses its enabling conditions. That is, where the de-centered most needs invitational rhetoric’s conception of civility, that very need already assumes this sort of rhetoric’s absence. Guidry & Sawyer skirt this problem by positing civility after resistance occurs, though even then an absorption into the larger body politic always requires at least a small gesture of invitation. That, in fact, is why this extension of Butler’s theory attempts to show how the abject body can argue in subversion – and in a subversion not posited only as a means to the end of a robust regime change. The task of contentious pluralism is “to construct a ‘civil’ society in which conflict is recognized but channeled through public politics into a means of developing practices of transparency and accountability that monitor both the state and private actors.”

The political reality which necessitates this sort of civility, though, does not also ensure such understanding rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric requires an ethic of charity that, were it in place, would preclude resistance rhetoric all together. Lozano-Reich & Cloud recognize this contradiction, as well, and deploy an alternative use of the term “civil” as a means of illustration.

**On Being and Not Being Civilized**

Through a semantic subversion of the adjective “civilized,” Lozano-Reich and Cloud present and problematize the verb civilized as something done by the center to those at the margins. When what is civil is what qualifies a body for participation in the public sphere, those outside such civility are relegated to the private sphere. Such constructs (read something like white, male, or propertied) not only determine who
counts in the polity, but also restrict the publicity of those outside these constructs. Speaking or acting outside an accepted code of conduct is sooner charged with indecorum than with validity. By reinforcing the correctness or acceptability of those who are civil, sovereign power posits the inherent inferiority of those who are deemed uncivil.

When resisting systems of oppression, then, the civilizing mission of the center must be examined one step further. Beyond determining who is or is not civil, the center determines *what behavior* is civil. That which is acceptable in the public sphere is in no way immutable and eternal. If this *what* is simply not a part of a subaltern identity, this identity would have to collapse in order to participate in the public sphere. Here is our final reason for examining resistance performatively: if public level subversion works, we can frame these acts as steps toward the social intelligibility of the de-centered, rather than steps toward the *civil-*ization of the de-centered body.

Beyond strategic uses of the body, the following case studies show a unique sort of body rhetoric that does not rely on invitational rhetoric – even in the seemingly necessary form of simple acknowledgment. These bodies argue politically and publicly, though they are not permitted in the public sphere. There is no invitation or acknowledgment by central power as the de-centered become socially intelligible. The argument for contentious pluralism is a good one and a valid and real one. My contribution attempts to show, however, an alternative avenue for political engagement that is perhaps even more subversive, in that it removes sovereign agency altogether and still functions. Guidry and Sawyer posit a longitudinal optimism around the “development” of democratic and non-democratic societies, alike. As actors in this
interplay, their case studies embody Sparks’ ethic of political courage. The case studies to follow, here, however, demonstrate what happens when courage simply isn’t enough. This thesis is an attempt to show what happens when central power differentials simply don’t accept (willingly) a “transformative imagination of democracy that builds a new world from within the old one.” Indeed it is through the sovereign’s very refusal to entertain publics in contention that the de-centered becomes an organized bundle of tropes, or socially intelligible. Rather than contentious pluralism forcing the public central to expand, this thesis sees the subaltern subverting exclusion, breaking the boundaries of the public sphere and co-opting the sovereign’s very refusal of publicity to argue, nonetheless. What is most subversive is out of the politically and publicly central’s hands.

**Critical Approach**

In these case studies, purposefully disparate as they are, I will be looking for two things. First, I want to find ways in which the bodies in question engage in acts of subversion. I mean this to be fairly straight-forward. In some way (and I will expand on this shortly) these resistant acts operate outside of traditional avenues of civic or political engagement. Instead of contesting a system that oppresses (and thereby participating in it), these case studies sabotage the systems from within. I think there is a legitimating aspect to this project, in that it may put into relief how unorthodox, disciplined, or impossible acts may function in a political realm that does not permit them. Second, and one order extrapolated, I want to engage how these subversive acts argue because of the acts’ refusal into the public sphere. In contributing to Butler’s theory of subversion, to reiterate, I intend to isolate resistant acts that acquire their argumentative potency through
the same gestures by which they are refused. Both of the above will require some teasing out.

To the first point, there are many different sorts of subversive acts, all with varying and varied effects. Within these, subversive acts can displace or resignify norms are important for this project. There are of course others, but these operate uniquely for Butler in that they can be deployed to “destabilize the naturalized categories of identity.” This disruption-as-exposure of assumptions about the “natural” (status quo) creates a rift or weakness within the norms at play that, according to Butler, is to be pursued. This moment, this locus, these exigencies are the focus of this first part of my approach. In finding these subversions we are likely to find central anxiety at the demonstrated contingency of central assumption. When a subversive act de-identifies the subject from her/his subject position, this act problematizes the social intelligibility of the subject and the strategic relations that constitute the subject’s discursive arena. Thus, in recognizing and disrupting disciplinary rhetoric, the subversive subject opens up avenues and resources for re-signifying her or his political reality.

To the second point, it is likely that in the face of subversive political action, marginalized groups will simply be silenced. Even more, they may not be heard in the first place. Unique to this project’s approach, that is, studying resistant acts performatively, we may be able to see how this expected disciplining actually entails public argument. Speech acts can re-signify words with purposeful, performative measures, and it is a goal of this project to frame how performative acts could re-situate an entire discursive sphere, itself. Social norms that constitute a subject do more than just constitute: they determine “who may count as a subject in the first place.”
Moments of discursive play, then, function productively because of their disruptive nature. Were such acts operative by another means, they could be ignored. It is the refusal of Pussy Riot into the solea that created the solea itself as the stage. This refusal then necessarily manifests itself in their removal from the Cathedral of Christ. If the subversion was not by means of its very refusal, the possibility of political productivity forecloses itself. If we adhere to the social structures that we, ourselves, performatively constitute, we can re-present and re-create discursive constructs with changed material consequences. Brickell writes, “Structures condition, although do not wholly determine, the production of subjects, while through their action, these subjects are implicated in reproducing or resisting the structures that require continuous reinforcement to remain stable.”

In approaching these three case studies this way, it is my intention to attempt to craft a somewhat unified account of how performative subversion – as used and outlined here and in later chapters – garners a public utility. What is the mechanism that would allow performative subversion the utility sought here? I mean this in direct opposition to anything like invitational rhetoric discussed above. This is not to say that all three cases will exhibit the same sort of performative elixir; quite to the contrary, it seems likely that each case study will behave uniquely in this framework. At its mildest, the elixir may be (and Butler’s certainly would support this) that in repetition, existing subversive subject positions (acts) become less and less uncommon and remarkable. In this way, the understanding of the agency of a previously subaltern group constitutes its newfound political viability. The existing kind-type erodes and genuinely becomes transvalued in
the public eye. For the sake of this project, however, I intend to develop a more robust and observable elixir to the public than repetition.

One way to find the boundary of the public sphere is to break it. The centripetal mobility of the de-centered can be tolerated by sovereign power up until it breaks a barrier into the public. If the public sphere is, itself, a discursive arena sustained performatively, then such a breaking of boundary interrupts the iterations and representations that constitute that which is considered (and accepted as) public. The fact that prevailing cultural force so readily asserts itself through the punishment of the transgressive suggests an anxiety indicative of a falsely reified state – not a natural one. There is nothing natural about structures that sustain gender-discriminantly and race-related barriers to public engagement. This is the categorical difference between social movement and movement toward social intelligibility: the former charts how an oppressed group goes about being accepted into the wider body politic, while the latter provides an avenue for understanding how a body structurally barred from public participation argues amidst that structure, anyhow. A model like this suggests a way that – just as Butler’s personal level subversion can provide the mental resources for material betterment – the de-centered body can performatively subvert its way into the public sphere.

*Riot Grrrl*

“I won’t stop talking. I am a girl you have no control over. There is not a gag big enough to handle this mouth.” – Kathleen Hanna

In my attempt to contribute to this sort of radically performative public-but-not-publicly-sanctioned theory of resistance, I have chosen three case studies. First, I will examine the Riot Grrrl manifesto, bands, culture, and impact on third wave feminism in
the United States. Though Riot Grrrl was not attacked or punished for breaking the boundary of the public sphere, its very existence is indication of its members’ status as refused. Specifically, this case study will allow us to examine the re-deployment of ungenerous norms through (short of something like self-immolation) the literal – and resistant – marking of always already marked bodies. That which anchors the abject identity of Riot Grrrl is this very performance of abjection toward the end of undoing and unraveling it. In a subculture defined by its oppositional tendency, Riot Grrrl as a movement dismantled from the inside what at the time was an incredibly male, white, and violent manner of rebellion. It is problematic to assert a monolithic “riot grrrl,” as should have been sufficiently problematized of the genre as a whole earlier, but this section will rely on a heavy focus on Kathleen Hanna’s music and cultural critique.

**Race Riots**

“Till’s body became, in the hands of Milam and Bryant, a rhetorical text, one more installment in the brutal, yet thoroughly American, story of racial violence.” - Harold & DeLuca, 2005

I am purposely inserting a case study of Eric Garner between my other two. The other two have clear connections to feminist and gender theory, and represent invaluable work toward those ends. The presently attempted project, however, is one of politically productive performative subversion not relegated rigidly to tropes like gender. This second case study offers a look at another socially regulated trope, race, and an understanding of just how dangerous the breaking (inversion) of enforced norms can be. Unfortunately, as I write this thesis, there is a growing body of possible study of how the dead, black body argues in America. Thus, though I use Harold & DeLuca’s brilliant piece as an initial model, this case study will extend, sadly, to bodies beyond Till’s. Being accused of simply whistling at a white woman, Till was murdered. Till’s death
represents another clear departure from the other two case studies, but that, again, is purposeful. To ensure a performative elision of the public sphere that permits the uncivilized body to participate, there must be an identity anchor. It is unfortunate and devastating that Till’s mechanism was in death. His body resistance, even in death, is profoundly and hauntingly powerful. Till provides perhaps the ultimate example of the civilizing nature of sovereign power – only after his agency is wholly removed can his body argue. A performative, posthumous elision of the public sphere is something genuinely hard to write about for me. This case study distresses me. If this extension of Butler’s work permits political viability without the agency of one’s oppressor permitting it, Till’s story is the unhappiest mode of illustration. Though separated by more than two decades, the killing of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, at the hands of the police is hauntingly similar.

**Pussy Riot**

“Perhaps they think that it would be good to put us in prison because we speak out against Putin and his regime. They don’t say so, because they aren’t allowed to. Their mouths are sewn shut.” - Nadezhda Tolokonnikova

My third case study, Pussy Riot, is the most problematic but potentially most promising of these three for the illustration of what *could* be a mode of public performative subversion. It is problematic because of cultural polysemy, but it is promising because it very readily lends itself to performative subversion *and* argument *by disciplining*. In utilizing the very discursive constraints they sought to contest, this performance broke the boundary of the public sphere in such a way that could not be ignored. By genuflecting to Mary during the performance and by physically being where women are not allowed unless being wed, these women problematized their political boundaries by performing them. Given the notoriety this group achieved in America
following their actions, during their prison sentence and after their release, this seems to illustrate clearly how the abject body argues by means of its very refusal in the public sphere.

**Predictions, Hopes, and Justifications**

All three of these studies embody the inherent tyranny in naming resistors and those resisted. The first two case studies are not so problematic at this point in our contemporary United States, but Pussy Riot is almost certainly viewed differently in Russia compared to how they are perceived domestically. For this reason and those listed above, the act of resistance is the subject of this investigation. Placed purposely third of three, the chapter on Pussy Riot offers what I hope to be the most fertile ground for the development of this model. In this case, the potential for polysemy works in favor of such an effort, as a model of body rhetoric (among imaginable others) will provide one avenue of understanding and creating their narrative in the academy. The second chapter on Riot Grrrl will hopefully inform how feminist body rhetoric can be better understood and viewed in the Pussy Riot case. Further, my third chapter on Eric Garner will also help to inform the chapter on Pussy Riot through its examination of just how dangerous the inversion of norms can be. Though all three case studies stand to be robust on their own and in their own right, the first two will certainly lead up to and contribute to our understanding of the third. Unlike Pussy Riot, however, the Riot Grrrl movement has managed to avoid the sort of national spotlight that tends to commoditize otherwiseubversive groups and behaviors. In light of this, perhaps the next chapter will prove to be the most robust.
Further, this project, though it is sparse in public sphere literature, may allow a 
better understanding of how the identity of the de-centered can endure in the face of 
sovereign power. In a world where the capture and dissemination of events are as 
meaningful as the events themselves, performances in particular can reach a wider 
audience as such than ever. The implications this has for public sphere literature are at 
this point unclear, but the possibility seems real for this to contribute to something like 
fuller and more pluralistic political bodies. Abbie Hoffman was particularly versed in 
utilizing the pseudo-event to co-opt mainstream media for his own (productive) 
purposes.89 Creating a channel for his potentially unpopular political opinions through 
popular media coverage, Hoffman certainly subverted political barriers. Kathleen 
Hanna’s own marking of her societally marked body, Pussy Riot’s guerilla venue strategy, 
and Garner’s posthumous infiltration into the public sphere all display this sort of non-
civilized argument. Though this is a project in resistance, these public sphere 
applications and implications for the de-centered may end up resonating.

Finally, and perhaps most excitingly for me as an author, this thesis just may 
permit an understanding of how performative subversion may be granted a political 
utility, even in the face of necessitated subordination and alleged non-productivity. 
Looking at these case studies without the longitudinal assumptions of social movement 
precludes assumptions of how these “movements” may result in a widened public sphere. 
The oppositional nature of these case studies (and resistance, in general) provides an 
opportunity to examine how the refused body argues – if it can – in the public sphere. As 
an experiment, the women’s suffrage movement in America could be attempted to be 
framed this way. That is, rather than examining the movement as a social movement
with goals and strategies, one could examine the movement as an endeavor toward social intelligibility. One could argue that the female body (politic) is more intelligible in the public sphere now than when Riot Grrrl was making waves, but largely I argue our issues, today, closely mirror their issues in the 1990s. Of course, the question looms large whether social intelligibility entails or engenders publicity. Is subversion enough to spark the centripetal mobility of the de-centered? Is Pussy Riot understood at all responsibly in contemporary academic dialogues? Are we entering a new era of civil rights discourse? Do these discourses affect or determine how bodies argue? According to Hollander & Einwohner, “Powerless people rarely have the resources or opportunity to resist openly against their superordinates.” What arsenal (if any) arises out of such powerlessness, and how might this constitute covert resistance that results in public argument? These are all daunting (to say the least) questions. With these and others in mind, let us begin.

“Riot Grrrl emerged as an American-based movement comprised of young punks who were fed up with the overwhelming maleness of punk rock, as well as being feminists who were fed up with sexism in general.” –Alison Jacques

“The thing I really like about punk is that anything anyone writes about it is wrong.”  
– Ted Castle

Questions of agency predicate conversations of ethics. Constrained by systems of oppression rooted in systems of meaning-making, subaltern or constrained persons exist with categorically different avenues of agency than those in power. This power may be sovereign or more subtle. Indeed, in its subtlety, power is its most potent. In a discursive regime that semantically and structurally privileges one sort of regulated body over the other, the question of public, political participation is categorically different depending upon which camp one falls. Questions of ethics, then, do not obtain laterally across society. Indeed, there is much conversation right now about the efficacy and efficiency of “riot” as a category of protest surrounding a Staten Island grand jury’s non-indictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo following the death of Eric Garner. While my next chapter will focus on the subject matter of that case, the one at hand shares its central assumptions. When decorous avenues for change are inefficient if not inert, and the very voices needed to make that change are relegated to noise, the “riot” is a rhetorically salient act that, especially with this work’s forthcoming homophony, creates or takes advantage of a structural furrow – a kairotic moment of political potential energy. For this reason, the trope of “riot” is of considerable purchase in an examination of performative subversion.

At this moment in America, Pussy Riot is a widely known name, or at least news ticker buzz word. At this moment as well, increasing polarization and conversation is
emerging from, for the sake of this work, race riots in Ferguson, Staten Island, and (increasingly) the national stage at large. And at this moment in America, Kathleen Hanna can be found on news programs and blogs as a sort of anachronistic spokesperson of the swelling visibility women’s rights conversations have achieved over the past decade. From cat-calling prompting the documentation of aggressors, to slut-shaming giving way to the emergence of the SlutWalk, issues central to and indispensable from the Riot Grrrl movement have found their way into the public consciousness and fringe political arena. These two examples, at least, begin to demonstrate the subversive behavior and subject elision I investigate with this thesis. Hanna can be seen everywhere from Rolling Stone to NPR, but that current exposure is dwarfed by the extant and growing literature base on Riot Grrrl and (regrettably) the persistence of the injuries the movement combated. Despite all of this, however, while Hanna’s is perhaps the most widely circulated name of the late 80’s and early 90’s exigence, those associated with Riot Grrrl have not enjoyed the same proliferation of the names associated with my other case studies. In other words, there is a wealth of available materials written by those in close proximity to the actual events by those, themselves, involved. This is noteworthy for a few reasons, but has special relevance to the danger of commodification.

For this argument of subversive resistance, social intelligibility serves two purposes: One, the discursive limits of one’s identity offer the arsenal of one’s resistance. This is a phenomenological and prior claim, in that the constrained subject cannot act with tropes beyond his/her active social reality. To combat the tyranny of a gender binary or the social knowledge control that generates two, liminal biological sexes, one
does not simply step outside of this framework. If that subject is to retain a social existence and maintain the illusion of a stable subject, that subject simply cannot. This is a question of both tactic (in a predicated sense) as well as possibility in a prior sense. The SlutWalk is a controversial but illustrative example, as it demonstrates an agency actually enabled by its attempted silencing. The body, as a discursive formation, is enabled by its subjection to a linguistic regime. If, in a social world of meaning, the designation “girl” is the limit of one’s social intelligibility, start a girl riot. This suffices for now, but will be revisited below. With this reliance on social intelligibility for the stable subject’s arsenal of performative resistance, though, the notion entails a subsequent danger for public argument and political participation. As a constrained subject endeavors to elide her intelligibility toward political viability, cultural dilution of that visibility could actually work against that cause. Subversive potency is lost when it arrives pre-packaged.

What I am seeking in my chapters are kairotic moments where a mechanism other than time works to corrode or elide the “reality” of an existing subject toward public, political argument. Where a constrained subject may be relegated to the private sphere, I am trying to find moments where performances of resistance are rendered especially effective. If these performances are translated into digestible, widely-disseminated commodities, the subversive potential so sought by the resistance is foreclosed in a reinforcing of the regulated and relegated social identity so fought against. Beyond my subsequent chapters, the subsequent female musicians in the America immediately following Riot Grrrl may have worked toward the visibility of this camp, but perhaps at the expense of their subversive potential. For example, while Alanis Morissette, Liz
Phair and the boom of female rock and roll musicians that informed the latter part of the 90’s were indeed angry, their having been packaged as pop commodities rendered them edgily non-threatening. It is a sad irony.

By avoiding (or at least fighting hard against) commodification, Riot Grrrl offers this project a uniquely subversive case study – one I argue has produced some of its desired outcomes. What remains to be argued is how and under what circumstances the framework of performative subversion has brought this about. Again, whether it is simply a raised consciousness or in fact the elided subject position of “woman” in today’s America, she now includes and entails the public, political argument of what Riot Grrrl espoused. Without question, especially in today’s hyper-mediated world of information exchange, some tropes of these arguments have in fact been commoditized. We live in a world quite different than Riot Grrrl’s, at least regarding information exchange. The local-level exchange of physical zines does not permit the sort of commodification that, for example, Facebook does. Indeed, in our world a turn of phrase can turn trite in a number of hours. Beyoncé projected the word “Feminist” behind her during a performance at the Video Music Awards in 2014. Miley Cyrus tweeted how much Kathleen Hanna inspires her, and Hanna responded with an offer of collaboration. These exchanges, while doubtlessly sincere, are still products of what Riot Grrrl made possible, what the exigence made thinkable, and what the subject position – as elided through Riot Grrrl – is today. Beyoncé’s husband still raps about domestic abuse (on one of her own songs, no less). Miley Cyrus, though Vice’s Noisey offers a careful and actually enlightening comparison of her and Hanna’s feminism and performance, still
“performs” the trope of “Slut” quite differently than Hanna did – though I’ll visit that later.  

First, I’ll make a bit of noise, myself.

This argument, as stated in a previous chapter, operates from the premise that subaltern arguments which reach the public sphere, or at least a public sphere, are refused. If publicity is a meaningful category, the critical deconstructions of the decorous or “civilized” tropes that constitute it tacitly reinforce the notion that that public is the public. Indeed, this is why my case studies focus on performatives, but the qualifier of “dominant” publics similarly works toward resolving this concern. These dominant publics, then, are those with powers, positions and privileges that have been normalized and simply assumed to be natural. To ensure that the dominant public is that which is being interrogated and (hopefully) subverted, my contribution to Butler’s theory of performative subversion highlights two nodes of particular importance. I have already alluded to the first, refusal. The second, and equally important, is anxiety. My argument is not that a dominant public refuses an argument because it is vetted and deemed indecorous or inappropriate. Rather, the very existence of arguments that even potentially undermine, say, white male dominance in the punk underground or an oppressive domination of female gendered bodies in America, reveal the contingent nature of such constructs of domination. The anxiety this brings about, then, results in the refusal. As a matter of predication, it is a fear of loss of status – not a fear of the empowerment of others – that motivates such refusal. At least, so this framework suggests.

So in arguing that either the female, punk body in Riot Grrrl performatively subverted the discursive construction of a dominant public, or that the punk body elided
its own subject position, I argue that the dominant public so argued against experiences an *anxiety*. When the dominant nature of a public is revealed as a contingent arrangement, this troubling motivates a return to the status quo. Indeed, some abject classism, sexism or racism may be the manifestation of this anxiety, but its root is in the non-naturalization of power. A dominant public, then, reacts out of this anxiety in acts of refusal. On my argument, here, what makes Riot Grrrl successfully subversive is that, ultimately, the “movement” argued strategically by means of this refusal. In what follows, I will employ artifacts ranging from (and not limited to) lyrics to zines to demonstrate the existence of the dominant anxiety requisite for my argumentative framework. Following that, I will resituate the recent conversation surrounding the “reclamation” of the word slut. Instead of a question of ownership, solely, I argue for an understanding of the signifier that is rooted in sovereign anxiety and, subsequently, as a discursive performance of re-signification that 1) is entailed by Butler’s account of the constrained subject, and 2) strategically potent toward the elision of a subject position.105

**Refusal/Anxiety**

“To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a figure of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ideologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.”

– Judith Butler

“And when He/She says that i am not a real feminist because i used to be a stripper, i reply, “Well, motherfucker, this world doesn’t make any sense. But i do exist. Deal with it. Deal with my existence [sic].” – Kathleen Hanna

The Riot Grrrl movement/scene/exigence/happening/reality is and was, itself, a tricky concept to categorize. A better place than some to start, though, is with the Riot Grrrl manifesto, published in the zine *Bikini Kill*, issue two. The last tenet (and probably the most widely circulated of the seventeen) reads “BECAUSE I believe with my
wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real. ¹⁰⁸ It is perhaps a certain valence of such a force that my essay attempts to get a handle on. Two other tenets, similarly stylized as justifications, are of crucial importance, here, as they are the seeds of subsequent anxiety.

Third on the list reads “BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings,” and the fourth continues, “BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.”¹⁰⁹ Both of these have considerable purchase for Butler’s paradigm of subjection and domination. Indeed, born into a linguistic system, and thus being subjected to it, is nobody’s active choice. While all subjects within such a discursive realm (or say, punk underground) are subject to the consequences of resultant mental schemata, these discursive realities do not exist in parity with all members. It is in this third tenet that the root of much subsequent anxiety is planted.

As warned earlier, the seizure of “meaning” is something with broadly-reaching, social consequence. Those “means of production” included the interpersonal, the mediated, and the performed. Interpersonally, Riot Grrrl communication, as opposed to an informatics of domination that encouraged the “J” word, sought a space where inter-girl animosity and power was eliminated.¹¹⁰ While performing with Bikini Kill, Hanna would deliberately deploy the phrase, “Girls to the Front!” as a way of not only supplanting the male punk as the dominant public, but also empowering those under such domination.¹¹¹ Most importantly here though, is the Riot Grrrl’s seizure of its own means of circulation. As a means of distributing information, fanzines or “zines” served two
primary purposes. First, the zine meant that information was regulated deliberately, and on a very small scale. Second, and as a consequence of that, while Riot Grrrl fliers clearly advocated the creation and distribution of zines, the cover of the very first Riot Grrrl zine instructed, “please read and dis-tribute to your pals.” The same cover featured a triumphant and stern looking photograph of who almost certainly is Madonna. The qualifier of “pal,” here is important, especially when coupled with the third tenet in the Manifesto’s directive to take over the means of production. Printed on a March 17th, 1994 handbill (ironically enough) from band Heavens to Betsy, the band laments (toward the mid-decade “death” of Riot Grrrl) the loss of this self-determination and dissemination – without doubt a motivation for the Riot in the first place. Reprinted, the reverse of the bill reads “and also, the bombardment of media attention on riot grrrl made everybody crazy and took away our control of so many things. our image was sold and sold and sold until we didn’t even know what we looked like anymore.” Though the Riot Grrrl “identity” was never static or prescriptive, its initial fluidity was not nearly so bleak. As power is relegated to the margins, non-participation with the dominant public and its media actually served to bolster Riot Grrrl’s subversive potential, initially.

An excerpt from Riot Grrrl number 4 reads, “Clarity of agenda is not really something that is important to me. RIOT GRRRL is a total concept. there is no editor and there is no concrete vision or expectation, or there shouldn’t be.” As an exigence of community rather than agenda (or perhaps, as its agenda) Riot Grrrl, to the dominant public, existed as a sort of non-signified – one to which the public dramatically and anxiously wanted to define. Even with just a definition, a sort of control is reclaimed. A brief return to Butler sheds light on this, and clarifies my position.
On Butler’s account, the subject, while always capable of linguistic play and parody to the end of resistance, is most truly and completely free in moments of discursive free play. In these moments, entirely precarious, the subject would become un-subjected to a discursive arena, even its edifying components and enabling conditions. If achieved, this fleeting state is liberating. With this understanding, the early activities of the Riot Grrrl, namely the above listed controls over discourse and dissemination, as well as over female space (both psychic and physical, e.g. “Girls to the Front!”), offer a productive and potent piece of this picture of political subversion. When coupled with the refusal to speak to bigger and outsider media, this gender trouble performs elements of this free-play, as the subject, now performing masculine (dictating the ranks in a venue) and “feminine” (making use of traditionally private sphere means of production, i.e. scissors and paste) “roles” destabilizes the gendered trope in the bundle that constitutes her intelligibility. In this troubling, then, resides the root of the anxious.

To be clear, though, and it was never unclear to the Grrrls, this was not a movement for boys. The semantic removal of “girl” from the movement, while some attribute to a guttural expression of discontent, I argue was an indication of the feminist-wave-free-play in which Riot Grrrl was situated. Johanna Fateman writes that “Riot grrrl, in a conscious response to second-wave feminists’ rejection of the word “girl,” reclaimed it with pride – and also in parody.” While I will take issue with the function of reclamations later, her point is sound. Couched between two eras, two understandings, no less, of the female body and its place in America, this stylizing erased the gendered subject’s distinctness (no longer relegated by the signifier “girl”) while not sacrificing the moniker and identity under which half of our population has endured. Such a sacrifice
would have completely undermined the movement’s existence. A free-play that accounts for the historical baggage of a signifier is far from genuine, discursive free-play, but this move is rhetorically brilliant. It enabled a movement, unsure of its future, to “save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.” This maneuver accounted for those constrained under the signifier, while not subjecting the movement (at least immediately) to the same, historically oppressive discursive regime.

The undecided, un-decoded, and un-disciplined nature of the sub-cultural style is described and investigated at length by Dick Hebdige. His work investigates not just how subcultural style functions, but how it is received by a dominant public. The first edition of Hebdige’s book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, was published in 1979 – in noteworthy proximity to the “spirit of ’77.” While there is no univocal origin story for the emergence of punk as a subcultural style or countercultural scene, the emergence of the Sex Pistols is, if not exhaustive, a tidy point of departure. Beyond just a map legend or dichotomous key to what the “kids” are doing these days, the work offers careful and critical analysis of the function of style in a subculture. His work performs this in many ways, but of serious note for this project are his dealings with linguistic expectation and ideologies. Writing about the emergent and shocking punk scene, he construes their “subculture” as a “determination . . . to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms.” A careful counter-historian, his brief but massive record accounts for beats, mods, teddy boys, punks, Rastafarians and hipsters – and then some. Interspersed throughout his thorough description of the subcultural style of these groups, he explains how such styles function. His preferred body of scholarship for the task is
found in Althusser, Saussure, and Barthes. My incorporation of Butler’s phenomenology (itself making the rounds in the early nineteen nineties) with the Riot Grrrl movement provides a framework that is not only useful, but also timely, as many feminist questions examined by Butler’s early scholarship were themselves mirrored or echoed in the Riot Grrrl exigence. That being said, though, her work is absolutely a conveniently well-researched amalgam of the thought Hebdige was able to synthesize in such close proximity to the punks (mods, etc.) about whom he wrote. To the present point of anxiety, though, Hebdige articulates a two-pronged account of how a dominant public copes with such a noisy exigence.

I can do no better, here, than briefly (though at length) re-present a block quote from Hebdige’s work. Writing of the sort of linguistic play that informs this project, Hebdige quotes John Mepham:

> Distinctions and identities may be so deeply embedded in our discourse and thought about the world whether this be because of their role in our practical lives, or because they are cognitively powerful and are an important aspect of the way in which we appear to make sense of our experience, that the theoretical challenge to them can be quite startling.

In this idea there resides the seed of a dominant public’s anxiety as shown earlier in the third tenet of the Riot Grrrl Manifesto. Hebdige continues with a block quote, and I, again, can do no better than to emulate this style,

> New . . . developments which are both dramatic and ‘meaningless’ within the consensually validated norms, pose a challenge to the normative world. They
render problematic not only how the . . . world is defined, but how it ought to be.

They ‘breach’ our expectancies . . .

These consensually validated norms structure ways of knowing and being known that in turn become normalized. When such norms are revealed as contingent, a dominant public will seek to re-normalize and naturalize that contingency. This process for Hebdige is bipartite. As alluded to in the introduction of this chapter, one is commodification and the other, a sort of trivialization or denial. The former is a more passive diffusion of subcultural potency, while the latter represents an active position of the dominant public. Both forms, however, serve to weaken or confuse a subculture’s deviant behavior. These processes represent a sort of civil-izing, but without even the benefit of public participation – just mockery. A powerful entity that necessarily situates such sexy and dangerous exigencies into a normalized framework of meaning is the media, and any such re-situation is necessarily an act of power. For these reasons and those above, then, Riot Grrrl fought against big media, no matter how anxious.

Taken from issue three of Cupsize, a Riot Grrrl affiliated zine, page seven pictures a mid-century white couple, seated very close to a console television set. The scene evokes a sense of domestic ease that, even if it is a historical mis-remembering, indicates a “simple” time in America. Pasted onto the console’s screen, however, are the words “Riot Grrrls at 10 o’clock.” The cut and paste maneuver effectively performs the media’s (and by implication a dominant public’s) proclivity to re-situate a radical exigence into otherwise civil and accepted systems of meaning. Indeed, the television set is an effective means of communicating the frustration a Riot Grrrl must have felt at this, as Hanna can be seen on many occasions performing with Bikini Kill in front of a banner
that reads “Turn Off Your TV!” Initially a political statement, the phrase turned later into an act of self-defense.

On the same page, the author, unfortunately left anonymous, offers three quotes and then a three page apologia for Riot Grrrl’s reluctance toward the media. The cover, while cropped in the scan that made Darms’ volume possible, appears to read winter 95 in the upper left corner. If that is the case, this work would have been written near the “death” of Riot Grrrl, in full knowledge of the harms the media did to the movement. Quoting a Jordana Robinson, the page reads that the media operates with “signifiers, stereotypes and summaries. that’s how a story is built to get the audience’s attention. . . also the media likes to use spokespeople or symbols and rg doesn’t lend itself well to that.” The piece continues, with a careful acknowledgment of the lamentable binary that faces subcultural style: publicity at the expense of identity, and identity at the expense of publicity. This is not the same time my project has invoked this dilemma, and, indeed, it is a motivation for my argument in the first place. If a subaltern group could subvert such colonizing channels, the constrained identity could persist while enjoying material betterment. My later discussion of the pejorative “Slut” contributes to my arguing that this, indeed, happened.

Our author continues, writing “any representation of Riot Grrrl to a mass audience loses a subject to write about.” Less phenomenological, the writer continues with a formal argument, writing “the space limitations and structural dictates of journalistic writing effectively rule out and chance of really communication what Riot Grrrl is about.” The piece is filled with admissions of guilt and adamant protest, alike. The author acknowledges that “Yes, it sucks” that Riot Grrrl’s “form and content” render it
unavailable to many audiences, but qualifies the statement with “I don’t think . . . that all
forms of grrrl activism are similarly disabled.” In defining Riot Grrrl, one forecloses
its potency, as such a definition-from-without necessarily subjects the exigence to an
external, anxious need for signification. Cleverly, though, the author deploys a rhetorical
maneuver, re-positioning the signifier (now widely known) Riot Grrrl, with “forms of
grrrl activism.” The vague reference to activism coupled with the even vaguer
designation of forms incites a play and emergence of identity while refusing outright
signification. The author goes on to conclude, optimistically, “Yeah, come on,
Intervention Grrrl-Style Now and Forever!” An obvious nod to “Revolution Grrrl
Style, Now,” the line permanently opens the possibility of linguistic play with the term
“intervention,” and permits its endurance indefinitely. Some writers, though, did not
share this optimism.

Alison Jacques in her essay “You Can Run but You Can’t Hide” is clearly aware
of how problematic a press blackout is. She evokes the dangers (realities) of
commodification with the line “The scene itself disappears, or continues on as a neutered,
mass-marketed style movement.” Her gendered language is ironically regrettable, but
foreshadows her argument that “millions more” girls might pay attention if the
“Revolution Grrrl Style” were televised. Jacques’ piece, though, is a responsible
account of dominant groups’ labeling and re-definition of the radical. The mainstream
media further eroded the potency of Riot Grrrl by attributing the stylized “rrr” to a host of
prominent female figures from athletes to other, non-affiliated musicians. A from-
without and wide deployment of the term meant to garner agency to a myopic and
reductive (any female that is visible in the press) picture of the word’s referents not only
weakens the word’s subversive potential, but reinforces the dominant public’s subjugation of the grrrl’s bodies. On a brighter note, Bikini Kill’s *Suck My Left One* maybe worked to erode the potency of the hyper-masculinist term, but such depletion hardly obtains laterally.

A more explicit commodification that worked alongside dominant anxiety was the repackaging and distribution of the physical style, itself. Hebdige writes of *bricoleurs*, or those subverting discursive norms to convey different, new realities. The mods, harkening back to the greasers that preceded them, sharpened combs – understood generally as objects of narcissism – into shanks, objects of newly inaugurated violence.134 Similarly stripped of connotation, only this time fifteen years later, were the Doc Martens and fishnets. Riot Grrrls and non-affiliated punk girls, in general, attempted to “short-circuit the mechanism of appropriation” by conflating the sexual and obscene, the aggressive and the alluring.135 Anyone breathing in the nineties, however, may attest to how quickly this Ghost World aesthetic was repackaged and re-circulated.136

Such anxiety, though, was not exclusively made manifest in fashion or in media-subjection. In *Bikini Kill* issue one, Tobi Vail, drummer in the eponymously named band, writes on the hidden, structural oppression of women in an underground music scene. The reality of many “band girlfriends” or “band moms,” as they become so relegated by their gender, is pretty crappy. You get introduced as accessory to your chosen provider, subsequently recognized only as such by members of that community, and still coerced (internally or externally) to stand at the front for yet another droll performance for yet another precious weekend night. On Vail’s account, in particular, a patriarchal model of knowledge control emerges as boys feel compelled to make sure that the women at the
bottom of this funnel of knowledge “memorize the important details for future reference.” Her flagship example is of Yoko Ono. The trope of “breaking up the Beatles” is deployed exceptionally widely in popular culture, and why shouldn’t it be? The Beatles were the greatest band that ever lived, weren’t they? Vail’s argument is so glaringly true as to cause a moment’s pause. On the one hand, the deployment of this trope from a band boy to a band girl effectively relegates her body out of participation (public) and into the audience (private), insofar as the trope implies tacit agreement with the premise “don’t break up the band.” On the other hand, this premise gets reinforced in such a way as to normalize it, reducing one’s ability even to question the now patently obvious good that is “the band.” What band? It doesn’t matter, but it doesn’t include her. Faced with the unthinkable reality that The Beatles could have in fact been a bummer of a scene at that point for John Lennon, Ono, rather than a politically radical and wholly welcomed introduction to the latter part of a career marked by collaboration and political protest, is remembered as the villain. Equating The Beatles with univocal patriarchy sounds trite, but the line “I’d rather see you dead little girl than to be with another man/you better keep your head, little girl” from 1965’s Rubber Soul is at mildest merely “patriarchal.” Immediately after admitting his ownership is more important than her life, Lennon implores the subject to “keep your head,” you know, be reasonable. The threat is disgusting. Though wildly controversial in its own right, 1972’s “Woman is The [N] of the World” is at least an imperfect (and potentially dangerous) admission of remorse. I digress. Anyhow, Vail concludes her piece with “I think maybe Bikini Kill is going to write your favorite song.” If this story about knowledge control and the historical vilification of empowered women informed that song, it could have been
1991’s Rebel Girl. The verse mimes a call and response perfectly indicative of band boy anxiety: “that girl thinks she’s the queen of the neighborhood/I’ve got news for you: SHE IS.”

The entrenched paradox (or fatalism) goes beyond the identity/publicity binary. If the public sphere is breached by the subaltern in a meaningful way, anxiety results and incurs refusal. Entailed in this anxiety, I argue, are the incorporation forms of commodification laid out above. There is clearly a reason why the pejorative “sellout” is biting in the underground. For many bands it means just money, itself a potentially neutral category, but for more idea-driven bands like Bikini Kill, it would mean an erasure of the bands very enabling conditions. To subvert this arrangement, I argue that a currently misunderstood tactic that made use of the word “Slut” allowed elements of the Riot Grrrl to argue publicly by means of their very refusal from the public.

Refusal/Slut

The turn of phrase, by means of their refusal means differently, here, than it will in subsequent case studies, but, as a formal condition in this argument, it functions the same way presently as it will, later. Here, I employ the qualifier insofar as it showcases an argument from and toward social intelligibility. As mentioned earlier, such an argument utilizes extant discursive constraints as matters of both tactic and resource. While there is certainly interplay between the two (as will become clear shortly), the tropes must be understood initially as conceptually distinct. As a matter of tactic, the historical authority of a term like “Slut” renders it meaningful as a signifier, even in moments of ungrounded context. As a matter of resource, one cannot introduce impossible words into worlds of knowledge. Foucault, with regrettably gendered
language, writes that linguistic systems that enable a subject “are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested, and imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group [sic].”

Though in my first chapter I take issue with some of Kendall Phillips’ “rhetorical maneuver,” his article’s inclusion of a metaphor authored by Felix Guattari is insightful to this end. Guattari writes, “One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette.”

Agency in an oppressive social world is not removed; rather, it is accessible with the creative invention of what constitutes that world. With this notion of invention in mind, I’ll turn now to what I argue is the regulatory fiction of “Slut.”

Butler writes that gender is itself a regulatory ideal. The notion of binary and exhaustive gender identities is itself a fiction. Moreover, the identities themselves are simulacra – imitable copies with no original. If internalized as a normative “good,” the “correct” performance of one’s (or a better, more correct someone else’s) gender enables a social life amenable to a trope that has been rendered largely indispensable to social existence. In such an arrangement, the comparatively easier burden of social life serves to reinforce such regulation as natural. Though not quite as ontological, I argue that slut, itself similarly activated in social life, operates as a similar disciplinary ideal. Wald & Gottlieb write that “[Women’s] identifications within musical subcultures [was] more restricted to traditional roles, their social function . . . reduced to [the] binary of ‘virgin’ or ‘whore.’” This woeful lack of vocabulary on behalf of those who impose it is very, very important, as this argument of subversion necessitates recognizable speech. This, I argue is where slut comes in.
Counter my claim, there exists a current and wide discussion of “reclaiming” the word. Even my knee-jerk reaction to this is of two minds, as are the camps involved. One the one hand, isn't such a hateful word beyond redemption? What motivates a desire for reclamation over the desire for erasure? On the other hand, though, doesn’t Butler suggest that “queer” as a pejorative has some promise? As an utterance, if the word only cites an authorized meaning (for the sake of intelligibility) instead of repeat it, does that leave open avenues for reclamation? Butler leaves open the possibility for the resignification and revaluation of the term, as future generations not subject to its psychic violence may use it as a rallying cry, effectively garnering the very agency it sought once to erase. I, too, leave open this possibility, but only in the most bookish and snobbish way. I enjoy the idea of re-signification and subversion – obviously – but the capacity for harm a word with a negative historical valence has forecloses my ability to advocate its “reclamation.” Indeed, the notion of reclamation, to me, seems to obscure the potency of this rhetorical act. Hanna’s writing the term across her stomach and knuckles did not reclaim the lexical reality of “slut,” but it did work towards a body rhetoric of performative subversion.

A reclamation, it seems to me, implies a binary. This term is still theirs or this term is now ours. I find this problematic. If the term implies a polarization so that it may be understood, all subsequent remarks toward anything like progress become null. Is the end of reclamation the end of the specter of a word’s hurtful past? This does not hold. Inseparable from the notion of reclamation is this specter of a word’s past. If one wishes to eliminate the injuries of that past, the word must maintain at least the authority of that past while its present re-signification obtains a more optimistic referent. All this being
said, though, the very potency of reclamation resides in the reclaimer’s ability to utilize the historical purchase of the word. Perhaps my arguments are invalid, as I am no logician, but it seems to me that conversations of reclamation lead to the ends of either total annihilation of a term, or its ensured endurance as a hurtful specter – if only a specter.

I may be reading my own biases into a recent (2013) interview with Hanna on the subject, but so goes this project. Hanna, conscious of the problematic at hand, explains the marking of her body as a way of pre-emptively curtailing the insult. Beyond self-defense, though, (recall the profoundly small vocabulary levied against “unruly” women) this effectively silenced the dominant voice, one that would otherwise work to colonize Hanna’s body. Beyond silence, the prominence of the marking “SLUT” demands an interrogation from the subject who would deploy it: if one’s arsenal is taken away, one generally attempts to replace it. Such an optimism may be grasping at straws, especially in light of how big media so characterized and belittled the Grrrls, but there is subversive potential in even that element of the act. The re-deployment of silencing is potent.

Beyond just curtailing an insult, though, such a marking was a performance that worked toward a performative subversion. In her anticipation of the insult, Hanna’s inscription functions further as a re-inscription or a re-marking of how society, punk, and the male gaze had already marked her. This functions rhetorically in many ways, but two are of note, here. First, the making explicit of society’s marking generates a moment that reveals that marking as contingent. Second, the explicitness of this re-signification demystifies sexual deviance as a trope generally relegated to the private sphere, and a meaningfully regulatory category at all. Thus, the contingency of a historical relegation
out of the public sphere is revealed, and the power that would deny that contingency is 
emasculated. As a question of discursive availability, then, the arsenal that is “slut” is 
one not only recognizable by a dominant public, but indeed an arrow out of their quiver. 
As a question of tactic, then, “slut” obtains potency in concert with its very discursive 
availability. Beyond this pairing, though, in her making explicit of an inexplicit 
regulation Hanna’s refusal of the private sphere functioned by means of another 
historically private reality: pain.

Hannah Arendt writes that pain, while a universally and undeniably known state, 
“is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all.”147 Beyond an 
affective noise, it is indeed impossible to make explicit such a state.148 Elaine Scarry’s 
work, The Body in Pain, also affirms pain’s private nature, but leaves room for its 
articulation.149 She goes on to argue that the communication of the reality of pain is itself 
a powerful and persuasive rhetorical maneuver. Young Cheon Cho, from whom I 
discovered this literature, argues that if pain can be made explicit, then that rhetorical 
availability carries much purchase. His chosen case study is the rhetoric of self-
immolation, and his term for the political participation of the subaltern in this framework 
is self-concretization.150 His is a brilliant dissertation, and indeed, the body rhetoric of 
self-immolation is the ultimate rhetorical move, one exclusive to and enabled by the body 
in pain. The unique potency of Hanna’s performance, then, may rest in her explicit 
marking of otherwise unspoken and relegated physical and psychic pain. It is perhaps the 
most serious example of troubling naturalized assumptions this chapter has examined. 
With not only the material reality of sexual abuse, but also the psychic damage from a 
social world that privatizes it, Kathleen Hanna’s performance did not serve to reclaim
anything. Rather, to make explicit the assumptions that make “natural” the contingent, Hanna’s inscription generated the grounds for an argument that was not only groundbreaking to the dominant public, but also profoundly subversive in its ability to circulate publicly. Kristen Schilt argues that the bodily inscription of words like “slut” offered a vehicle for “placing taboo subjects like sexual abuse out in the open,” and then sadly qualifies that this tactic, with the attention it did receive, was never interrogated by big media as a tactic. As an argument about the social realities that cause this psychic and physical pain, though, this chapter may offer a framework for understand, regardless of intent, why the trope of “slut reclamation” has reached a critical mass twenty years after the fact, or why Riot Grrrl, while decidedly not a commoditized product or a household name, have achieved a political, public level of argument.

A Conclusion, for now

Though two more case studies and an entire chapter of implications remain to be written and examined, the framework employed here – that of political argument by means of refusal – at least appears to obtain. We do, in fact, live in an America where Beyonce projects the word “Feminist” behind her, and Miley Cyrus tweets a photograph of Kathleen Hanna. Has the public sphere (itself a discursive reality) been elided? Has the very position of the subject position of “woman” undergone an elision toward political enfranchisement? Both of these seem obvious, though the question of this project’s utility remains. Though implications will come later, it does seem that with today’s Mileys, yesterday’s Morissettes, and Riot Grrrl’s Hannas, the gendered body in American music media seems to have subverted previous constraints to the ends of not just material betterment but public argument at the political level.
Recall that *Noisey* article mentioned earlier. Emma Garland writes, “But if you think about it, there really isn’t that much difference between Miley Cyrus and Kathleen Hanna. They’re both controversial feminist figures with a penchant for performing in their pants. They’re both unapologetic in the face of relentless criticism. The latter wrote a song called ‘I Like Fucking,’ the former reinvented her career based almost entirely on that statement.”

Garland’s sense of humor is either non-existent, or absolutely delightful. To her claim, though, it seems to me that there is a categorically different sort of agency available to Miley Cyrus than was available to Kathleen Hanna. Is this indicative of a simply different public now than then? Sure. Does this show a change in the signification woman or feminist? Maybe. Whatever one’s perception (or material reality), Hanna’s riot, beyond being clearly and obviously wildly influential, was performed from a place not of celebrity, but of pain. Davies reminds his reader that the demise of a subcultural group like punk, by commodification or a more purposeful and pregnant demise, does not indicate “failure.” Indeed, the inevitability of dissolution looks to be what enables a sub-culture to be a meaningful category in the first place.

I am tempted to make the move, or at least the conjecture, that the subversive reality that Riot Grrrl was could only be realized as it became commoditized, re-signified, and recycled into the “angry women in rock” scene, and then into mainstream popular culture, from there. This move, while attractive (and not ruled out) risks further erasing the agency of those who did not hide behind the privilege of a stage, or the allure of radio sensibilities. To do so would maybe even contradict the existence of this chapter, absent a fair amount of novel theorizing. I will say, though, without the reprinting of those ephemeral, handmade testaments to the grrrls fed up with the super-ordinate scene, their
story may have actually receded into history. With Darms’ compiling, printing, and wide
distributing of the *Riot Grrrl Collection*, though it necessarily erodes the initial potency
of the artifacts it displays, it is a vehicle for which this author is grateful, and
contemporary feminism is undeniably informed.
“WE CAN’T BREATHE”: THE ASSUMED PRECARITY IN AND OF NEW MODES OF SIGNIFICATION

Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler’s book “Dispossession: The Performative in the Political” offers a digestible and conversational account of performativity in the public sphere.\(^\text{154}\) Of particular note is how their work accounts for the political nature of marginal arguments. Theirs is an endeavor quite germane to my own, and my chapter relies upon and is indebted to that very work. At its first iteration, I intended this work to be a re-treading of Harold and DeLuca’s work on the case of Emmett Till.\(^\text{155}\) Held in Butler’s framework of performative subversion, their work, I would argue, illustrates too vividly the possibility of public argument by means of that argument’s (or body’s) very refusal. Indeed, it illustrates just how dangerous the violation of norms can be. As mentioned earlier, if within Butler’s framework such refusal indicates or ratifies the troubling of contingent authority, refusal resulting in the removal of the arguing subject entirely is the unhappiest illustration of this possibility. While still indebted to Harold and DeLuca, to be sure, there is a current urgency to the project, one that has not permitted me to examine even a recent past. From Ferguson, Missouri to Staten Island, New York, and Sanford, Florida to Cleveland, Ohio a grim, chilling, and exigent scene is cast in sharp relief. Put as mildly as possible, black bodies have a fundamentally different relationship to police in America than white bodies do. Just as my previous (and subsequent) chapters foreground the different material and social realities of differently gendered bodies in America and abroad, this present endeavor employs the framework through the trope or regulatory schematic of race.

An unsettling reality – indeed, one that obscures the larger, structural reality of racial oppression in America – is the circumstantial and incidental appeal to the citation
of authority. Such an appeal necessarily tolerates and submits to historically ratified notions of civilian and police decorum – a history of legal violence against many groups of people. To nod to the previous chapter, Riot Grrrl would not exist without the ungenerous status quo that necessitated it (and subsequently reacted against it). However, if you’ve never been subject to patriarchal oppression, it is a juvenile knee-jerk reaction to deny its existence entirely. In this chapter, though, the bodies were not performing against their abjection, they simply were living. The status quo was interrupted not by a performance, but by its own reality being displayed against itself.

Whether it is a dogmatic clinging to the status quo, a refusal to grieve marginalized bodies, or a failure to critically interrogate a system that bears a likeness to Mbembe’s Necropolitics, some voices have celebrated the non-indictments of Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo, following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, two unarmed black males. Law enforcement itself entails a precarious subjectivity. Of such a position, many defenders point out its difficulty, nobility and danger. With exigencies like the war on drugs and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 ramping up militarization of the institution, however, Salon’s Tim Donovan argues that militarization coupled with an ethos of unquestionability is a dangerous and deadly pairing. The recent (and distant) killings of unarmed black men and women across America seem to be a testament to the sentiment. Perhaps the Editorial Board at the New York Times puts it best, writing “Any police department that tolerates such conduct, and whose officers are unable or unwilling to defuse such confrontations without killing people, needs to be reformed.” A disheartening article in the same paper displays and details the large number of similar killings over the past several decades – in New York City alone.
With particular attention to the metonymy of the shift from Garner’s last words “I can’t breathe” to the headline of the New Yorker that reads “We Can’t Breathe,” this chapter works toward what Butler and Athanasiou call “new modes of signification.” These modes, whatever they may be, seek to enter “forms of collectivity that oppose forms of dispossession that systematically jettison populations from modes of collective belonging and justice.”^160 Butler’s work on intelligibility couples with her work on subversion to explain and account for the rhetorical salience of this potential new, precarious mode of signification. It is this speech act, “We Can’t Breathe,” I argue, that might enable the performative subversion of the marginal into the political.

This case study lacks the strategy and intentionality of its peers in this thesis. In order to understand how such a difference may be reconciled, I will return briefly to Mckerrow’s call for critical rhetoric: to thwart the effects of power in social relations.^161 If the contingency of social reality is shown, that reality’s inherent power becomes mutable. What the cellphone video of Garner shows is the mundane reality of how black bodies are “seen” in America. What the cellphone video of Garner does is trouble the grid of intelligibility that renders certain bodies as always already threatening. By meditating and disseminating the scene, what is “seen” is a display of the grid, itself, not what that grid so plainly creates and construes as natural. So, while this chapter does not examine a strategic example of subversive behavior, it does offer a glimpse into how the power at work in a dominant public may be thwarted. The same anxiety erupts at the revelation of contingency, so while intentionality is absent, the subsequent circulation from the structural furrow is the same.
Intelligibility Matrices, Schematic Racism

“But what the trial and its horrific conclusions teach us is that there is no simple recourse to the visible, to visible evidence, that it still and always calls to be read, that it is already a reading, and that in order to establish the injury on the basis of the visual evidence, an aggressive reading of the evidence is necessary.”

Judith Butler, 1993

Though Butler is most widely known for her work on gender performativity, her phenomenological inquiry has not been limited to that trope. A pertinent example is found in her 1993 essay, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia.”

Prompted by the question of the excessive force used against Rodney King, a construction worker pulled over following a high-speed car chase, the work bears an uncanny and unnerving similarity to the Eric Garner case. Though over two decades separate the incidents, Butler’s writing on King is haunting. In the face of clear, third party video evidence in both cases, the aggressors remained either acquitted after trial or simply unindicted. Examined against the Eric Garner case, Butler’s reader is compelled simply to exchange Garner’s for King’s name in the following sentence:

How could this video be used as evidence that the body being beaten [strangled] was itself the source of danger, the threat of violence, and, further, that the beaten body of Rodney King bore an intention to injure, and to injure precisely those police who either wielded the baton against him or stood encircling him?\(^{164}\)

There are two important differences, however, between these cases. First, the officers involved in the killing of Eric Garner offered an illegal and violent technique to a non-violent “offender.” While excessive and brutal, the baton bashes against King were not prohibited \(per \ se\). It was their number and duration, however, which became problematic. The offenses in question are categorically different, while the abuses bear visual similarities. While my above pages leave open the role of overall militarization of the
police and merely begins from a premise of institutional and systemic racism, Butler 
takes the King brutality and the subsequent acquittal of his aggressors as an opportunity 
to paint a clearer picture of how such systematic injustices operate, and the media through 
which they do. A brief examination of her analysis provides this chapter a point of 
departure into the case of Eric Garner. Additionally, it offers an operative frame by 
which these cases are understood not just as police brutality, but as racially motivated 
police brutality.165

In the cases of both King and Garner, the viewer is left wondering, in what ways 
are the unarmed black bodies shown interpreted as dangerous, violent, and somehow 
deserving of brute force? Given a mental schematic that determines the horizon of 
intelligibility within a social reality, Butler has argued this field struggles to operate 
without the regulation and demarcation of gender. Similarly, this field is “not neutral to 
the question of race.”166 When evidentiary explanations simply evaporate, Butler looks 
instead to the discursive arena, itself, that produces the perception of these bodies. 
Though two decades separate these instances of brutality, both video recordings display 
incidents of violence (one nearly lethal, one lethal) later ratified as acceptable through 
process of law. It is this sort of selfsame author-ization by which a dominant public 
retains its stature and obscures the arrangements fundamental contingency. Through the 
operative schematic, these bodies are “visible” as threatening. What is “seen,” though, 
are bodies being threatened.

Tropologically similar to Hanna’s argument regarding her body as always already 
marked by the term slut, Garner’s body was marked as threatening before (thus the 
gathered officers), during (thus the participation of those gathered in his subduing), and,
as the non-indictment of Pantaleo apparently declares, after his being killed. One may argue, if firmly committed to such a dangerous argument, that Rodney King’s body was marked by his drunk driving – itself a danger to those in proximity, but such a (flimsy) commitment does not hold up to Garner’s standing on the street corner, previously accused of selling cigarettes. This scene performs, then, the iteration and re-iteration that animates the purported reality by which and through which Garner’s body is constituted as a threat. Buttressing this schematic racism with the motivator, “White Paranoia,” Butler’s examination of the King video shows how it constitutes and propagates racist violence. Regarding the King case, Butler’s argument makes clear the tropological iterability of King-as-a-threat within his intelligible horizon. Put another way, the “evidence” of the King case at different, mediated levels of examination repeatedly construed his body as threatening. If not construed through such a matrix of intelligibility, Butler argues that King’s body lay on the ground, unarmed and unthreatening. King was subject to upwards of thirty baton blows from several officers, even after Taser wires appear in the Holliday video.

The attribution of threat and danger in King’s case were reproduced or re-iterated through the same evidence’s interpretation by the Simi Valley jury’s decision, as well as a questionable contextualization of the video by the defense attorneys. Contributing to a racist regime of possibility for King’s body, the violence perpetrated against him is perceived (and was enacted) out of a social, historical paradigm. Such a paradigm, one that Frantz Fanon describes as a schema constructed “by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, [and] stories” constitutes the black male body through his difference. Motivated by that white paranoia, this interpretative
horizon transfers the violence of the police officers onto the site of that violence, King’s body, so that the violent intention in question splits “off from the body who wields it and attributes it to the body who receives it.” So described, the unarmed black body becomes a site of in-corporated paranoia – a site of projected uncertainty, schematized as already threatening and, thus, subsequently subdued.

A historico-racial schema, then, is ratified in such acts of violence so long as they are paired with authorial acceptances such as non-indictments and acquittals. Such ratification works to obscure the very contingency of such an interpretive field, while ensuring an instance of its continued production. In the absence of the “aggressive counter-reading” of such events (read: killings), such a racial codification and re-codification of certain bodies’ relationships to a dominant public reinforces hegemony. As a “historically self-renewing practice of reading,” uncritical interpretations of such brutality are complicit in – if not essential to – its propagation. Indeed, Eric Garner’s death offers bleak insight into the field of visibility that haunts, enables, and extinguishes subaltern bodies. Eric Garner’s exposure to police violence, his subsequent death, and that violence’s ultimate codification performs exactly the sort of production Butler wrote about in 1993. Lest this be construed this as an accident of a system deployed to protect public bodies, the maneuver used to kill Eric Garner is prohibited by its own authority. Pantaleo’s non-indictment, however, performs a dark and divergent reality. While mine may be a controversial stance, I argue that the captured video of Eric Garner’s chokehold death depicts a violent and unprovoked attack – not an act of self-defense, and not an act of public safety. Authority paired with unquestionability, as mentioned earlier, is a dangerous arrangement. Because of this logic, though, and indeed the matrix of
intelligibility that permits (and is reinforced by) the treatment of certain bodies like this, the resistant acts here studied may be most subversive when their own refusal entails their publicity. It is a dismal optimism at work, here, but the rhetorical move “We Can’t Breathe” that emerged from this killing may work toward the realization of Butler and Athanasiou’s call for freer, less dominated modes of signification.

A major caveat looms, however, that prevents my departure into this case study. There is a categorical and dangerous difference between the agency of feminist (for example) performance, and the post hoc rhetorical salience of a silenced body, and I fear the qualifier “unhappiest” used above is not quite sufficient or responsible. The anxious violence perpetrated upon performers like Kathleen Hanna and the penal system’s punishment of Pussy Riot, both psychic and physical, still permitted the punished agency to act. That violence, while by the nature of its existence assured the salience of the acts it punished, punished non-lethally. The sort of violence in question, here, assures no such leniency. Mine is a study that attempts to account for the publicity of subaltern argument, not to attribute rhetorical force to some bodies only when dead, and to other bodies only when oppressed. That very categorization risks the reinforcement of the very logic (neo-colonial or otherwise) that constrains in the first place. While this caveat is primarily for authorial care, it allows also a digression that revisits Butler’s notion of free play.

If in moments of discursive unintelligibility or “free play” we are least constrained and thus most free, the very notion of resistance seems to suggest or gesture its own foreclosure. To elaborate, the idea of resistance necessitates a resistor and a resisted. Elaborated upon earlier, this is why performatives – those acts that constitute a subject – are of particular note and utility here. If Butler’s framework permits the
endurance of abject identity while structural furrows may yet still be exploited, those performatives themselves must be of primary focus, lest in criticism we require (and contribute to) domination’s reinforcement. I will elaborate on this before addressing a particular performative, the haunting and relevant speech act, “We Can’t Breathe.”

A Twofold Problematic: The Insufficiency of “All Lives Matter”

“One reason the chant ‘Black Lives Matter’ is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized.” Judith Butler, 2015

Interviewed by George Yancy for the New York Times in 2015, Butler continues her now long standing work on such schematic racism. A concept not yet broached by this project, but now essential to this discussion is that of grievability. In the face of violence both local and global, those lives made to live rather than let to die appear fundamentally grievable. Those let to die, either by condoned and re-iterated brutality at the hands of law enforcement, incarceration or other forms of disposability appear ungrievable to and against a dominant public. Butler’s position is controversial to say the least, and a difficult one, to be sure. The iterated and re-iterated relationship that black bodies have to law enforcement in America, though, appears at odds with that institution’s ratification of techniques and uses of force. Yancy begins his interview with a brief distillation of grievability, saying, “In the wake of the recent killings of unarmed black men and women by police, and the failure to prosecute the killers, the message being sent to black communities is that they don’t matter, that they are ‘disposable.'”

Beyond just sending a message, though, the course of the interview contends that a perceptual grid, a mental schematic, a matrix of intelligibility is being normalized, extended, and reinforced. A social reality is being maintained when the disproportionate amount of incarcerated African Americans remains unquestioned by
power, and this reality is being augmented when “lawful” operations like stop and frisk routinely detain minority bodies at alarming high rates.\textsuperscript{179}

Out of such a racist scheme of interpellation and intelligibility, though, as has been the case throughout this project, arises the opportunity for performances of resistance. In gathering on the street, a place where de-centered bodies are subject to coercion and violence, a crowd performs its demand for equality. In performing the speech act, “Black Lives Matter,” a crowd interrogates the status quo. Stating the self-evident-yet-unrealized, a crowd performs a showing-forth of what otherwise remains acceptably obscured.\textsuperscript{180} It is the resistant potential in such acts that leads to a first problematic – one taken up at length by Butler. In the same way that an “egalitarian” may woefully refuse the adjective “feminist,” the claim “All Lives Matter” forecloses the very truth it means to speak (or for the “egalitarian”, not to speak). Though it is a positively base level problematic, its rhetorical force deserves examination. “Black Lives Matter,” as just mentioned performs its salience through its patent and regrettable incongruity to the status quo. Such a furrow in a perceptual grid, such a break in the order of things performs its own importance. Indeed, one might even argue there is power in this argument by nature of its apparent refusal. The speech act “All Lives Matter,” while unquestionably true, simply is not a productive act. Butler writes simply, “It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.”\textsuperscript{181}

So the first problematic of such a speech act is its very necessity. Lives, after all, all lives, are supposed to be things that matter. The second problematic that such a
powerful, necessary, and pragmatic rhetorical move exposes is potentially critical and contrary-to this project. My contribution, here, has relied upon *performatives* of resistance, lest I be compelled to reinforce resisted and resistant designations—themselves violent. Enabling, yes, but constraining nonetheless. In the course of her interview with Yancy, then, Butler concedes that a speech act like “Black Lives Matter” is necessary. In order for ungrievable reality to be countered, those groups so subjected must be foregrounded in any resistant effort.\(^{182}\) This potentially contradicts Butler’s (and this project’s) commitment to discursive free play as something to be cherished. Indeed, the removal of the historical subject is dangerous and to be avoided, but projects like tolerance and acceptance risk reinforcing and reproducing the violent logic of intelligibility that renders a group merely “tolerable” in the first place. Recall that Riot Grrrl appealed to the ratified and recognizable signifier “Girl” while initiating identity free play through this stylization. Though perhaps not entirely novel, this move works toward the new modes of signification so sought by Butler and Athanasiou. The latter writes,

> Even though we are compelled to reiterate the norms by which we are produced as present subjects, this very reiteration poses a certain risk, for if we reinstate presence in a different or catachrestic way, we might put our social existence at risk (that is, we risk desubjectivization). But we might also start to performatively displace and reconfigure the contours of what matters, appears, and can be assumed as one’s own intelligible presence.\(^{183}\)

So then, do racist fields of visibility both foreclose *and* demand the necessity of “Black Lives Matter?” Does such a pragmatic step risk reinforcing the very logic to
which it calls attention? It seems as a pragmatist, Butler as interviewed by Yancy deems the speech act both necessary and powerful. She writes, “For on the streets we see a complex set of solidarities across color lines that seek to show what a concrete and living sense of bodies that matter can be.”

This complex set of solidarities, to be sure, cannot be dismantled by the false dilemma of dominating logic versus unintelligibility. This set, in all its complexity, in its inability to be readily signified and simplified, is perhaps a starting point for its potency. Though the course of her interview focuses primarily on the speech act, “Black Lives Matter,” her logic, when paired with that of dispossession, permits something like a self-precaritization. The shift in scale to the first person plural of “We Can’t Breathe” enables an ethics of vulnerability both to and because of the other. This vulnerability, explored more fully shortly, stands in contrast to the idea of a unitary and self-sufficient subject – an idea essential to the maintenance of dominant publics’ power.

Dispossession; The Essential Other

“For if we are beings who can be deprived of place, livelihood, shelter, food, and protection, if we can lose our citizenship, our homes, and our rights, then we are fundamentally dependent on those powers that alternately sustain or deprive us, and that hold a certain power over our very survival.”

Judith Butler

Dispossession, conceptually, follows from the premise that ethical and political responsibilities emerge only when the idea of a sovereign and unitary subject is challenged. A basic and enabling political premise, dispossession is that state of social being where a subject exists in awareness of her/his own impossibility without the other. As described in the first chapter of this project, the “central” as a meaningful category collapses without the marginal, the human the inhuman, the male the female, and so on. These differentiated linguistic categories with arbitrary levels of material relevance,
though, do entail differently allocated material benefits like resources, freedom from violence, and property. This failure of resources to obtain laterally troubles the sort of “given-ness” of those bodies that matter. Acting and interacting only with a horizon of intelligibility, linguistic (and material) resources necessarily relegate as they enable. Thus, precarity is not only an existential reality of our social condition, but also a state of induced inequality and destitution. Athanasiou writes of this scene, “The univocal category of the human is perpetually troubled and haunted by the quivering humanity of those living, differing . . . [and] mattering . . . elsewhere.” The failure to recognize the necessary precarity of social living, then, contributes to the dominance of a dominant public. The dispossessed subject is one who “avows the differentiated social bonds by which [she/he] is constituted and to which [she/he] is obligated.”

Dispossession, then, is a two-faceted reality. First, the dispossessed subject, as one removed from conventional notion of self-possession and autonomy, is one radically and potently enabled to question and resist domination. Second, less optimistically, is the form of suffering constituted by such displacement or colonization. Here again, the arsenal of subaltern resistance arises out of its discursive reality. The call of Butler and Athanasiou’s book, then, is to “Consider how to summon recognition without perpetuating and intensifying the established terms of recognizability [we] seek to oppose.” Put more succinctly later in their work, how does one work “within and against” a system of hegemony? How does one negotiate a sense of self while working within and against ungenerous norms of that self’s intelligibility?

Informing Butler’s logic of dispossession is Frantz Fanon’s account of the colonized subject. Especially in a framework of resistance, his account illuminates the
specter of the colonized body as it is always and already perceived. He writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The time had long since passed when a Negro priest was an occasion for wonder. We had physicians, professors, statesmen. Yes, but something out of the ordinary still clung to such cases. ‘We have a Senegalese history teacher. He is quite bright . . . Our doctor is colored. He is very gentle.’”¹⁹¹ The linguistic resources of Fanon’s discursive sphere tie him to an anachronistic perception. A sort of over-explanation is always at work, a verbal accounting for an unspoken yet pervasive archetype. What compels the always necessary couplet? What demands an adjective of reassurance? The “out of the ordinary” nature of these cases is animated by the schematic sort of racism mentioned earlier. We do well to remember that, speaking of then Presidential candidate Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Joseph Biden both offered the adjective “articulate” during the 2008 presidential campaign.¹⁹²

Indeed, the qualifier of gentle for a physician is uncontroversial in a vacuum. Such vacuums, though, are absent in a postcolonial context. The same sort of compelled reassurance is at work – grimly – in the legal treatment of unarmed black bodies as dangerous, threatening, and deadly. Athanasiou writes that this racist way of seeing and knowing is a “discursive byproduct of the colonialist historical condition, knowledge, and imagination.”¹⁹³ Within such a linguistic arena, the norms of recognition function inescapably less generously for certain bodies. This contingent arrangement, then, animates conditions of recognition for some, while instituting conditions of survival for others. The recognition of a subject, as has been established above, necessarily takes place within an interpretative framework. If such a framework is informed by historical injury and colonization, its norms do not reveal a sovereign subject, but dictate the
horizon in which one is possible. A subject’s very existence is thus “fundamentally dependent upon terms that one never chose in order to emerge as an intelligible being.”

“Look! A Negro!” An unfortunate example of such an interpellation is found in Fanon’s work, and cited in several of Butler’s. Fanon’s self-identity is not translated through a neutral social lens. He is subjected to the historical purchase of a linguistic category, even before he speaks. To the subject that wields such an interpellation (a young boy already equipped with racist schemata), Fanon himself the object of such a call, is subsequently understood through that linguistic schematic. Fanon writes of such an incident, “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, [and] clad in mourning.” Is it this distortion, this recoloring, that permits the “visibility” of Eric Garner’s unarmed body as a threat?

“I Can’t Breathe”

A cellphone video just shy of three minutes long captures the events of July 17th, 2014. Eric Garner is shown arguing with police officers, declaring his innocence, resisting arrest, and, finally, being put into an illegal chokehold that proved fatal. The details of the jury’s decision-making have not been made public, but depending upon the evidence deemed salient, Garner’s arguing, his statement “this stops today,” and his refrain “don’t touch me, please” may all indicate “resistance.” Given such an interpretation, force may be warranted. Rather, force may be legally permitted. The rhetorical moment in question, though, comes as Garner says “don’t touch me” for the third time. At this point, with two officers in his immediate proximity and at least an additional five a few paces away, Garner’s body becomes a site – somehow – that
demands lethal and *illegally* lethal force. The chokehold is the first physical contact an officer makes.

In the process of bringing him to the pavement, Garner remains held in the illegal chokehold for around twelve seconds. As his last words are repeated, four officers apply pressure to his now prostrate body, and Pantaleo’s hold now shifts to press Garner’s face into the concrete. Onlookers and Garner are heard gasping. There is a hard edit in the cellphone footage, so the timing of the next scene is inexact, but an officer can subsequently be heard asking Garner’s body, “Are you alright? Hey guy! Hey guy!”

Upon the apparent realization that the answer is no, the gathered crowd is asked to “back up” and “back off.” What explains this sadistic irony?

The responsive body is (apparently) construed as a threat, as ratified by Garner’s treatment as such. That same body, subsequently the site of violence, is *still* construed as a threat – this time by its prior attribution of physical violence, thus meriting Garner’s being pressed into the pavement. Once these disciplinary acts have satisfied the gathered officers, only then does the ironic question of “Are you alright?” come. Garner’s vitality, then, is not the source of his being construed-as-threatening; indeed, his life must be maintained for the legal authority that permits such treatment to continue obtaining. The scene turned from business-as-usual to an immediate vacation of all bystanders once this necessary element was found to be missing. Athanasiou writes of how such treatment means, “The juridical discourse of culpability works to recycle the pernicious potential of the injurious speech act [racist interpellation] while downplaying the matrix of intelligibility that has generated and enabled it.”

For the sake of such a schematic’s maintenance, then, Garner’s now lifeless body must *continue* to be treated within the
authorial arena of law enforcement. Here then is the disconnect, the moment of outrage, and the spark of resistance. Within a juridical realm of intelligibility, Garner’s life cannot be taken by those who protect and serve it. Their authority loses its author-ization in the event of such a tragedy. Their subsequent and necessary reconciliation comes, as we know, in the form of Pantaleo’s non-indictment. So long as existed legal norms of recognition refuse to be interrogated by extra-legal norms of grievability, the schematic holds and its social consequences are propagated. The status quo is maintained, but unbelievably so. With the video evidence and the haunting potency of Garner’s last words, the gulf between what is “visible” in the video and what is “seen” in the video is irreconcilable and outrageous. The grand jury’s decision makes visible (or perpetuates the apparent reality of) only the reconciliation of criminal behavior. Without such an enabling frame, though, what is apparent is an act of brutality. Gene Demby writes of the visible facts of the case: “What constitutes ‘excessive force?’ What constitutes a ‘chokehold?’ What happened before the cell phone video began recording Eric Garner? And what matters more: the previous 10 minutes or the previous 40 years?” He may have asked about the previous 400.

While the “riot” is a rhetorically potent and vivid instance of resistance, the simple gathering and showing-forth of oppressed bodies is itself such a performative. Burdened with the unequal distribution of political resources and precarity, the very act of coming together resists a marginalizing logic and shows forth an agency that works toward refiguring and eliding the horizon of what is and what matters or counts as political participation. If bodies are subject to violence on the street, there is rhetorical salience to occupying it. The performance of such a re-figuring, then, is what makes the
speech act “Black Lives Matter” so potent. An act of resistance that is self-evident yet materially unrealized demands an interrogation of a dominant public, not an avenue within it. Thus, if the speech act “I Can’t Breathe” describes Eric Garner’s affective state, the speech act “We Can’t Breathe” becomes a performative act of resistance to the ungrievability being communicated by ratified police conduct.

Self-Precaritization: From “I Can’t Breathe” to “We Can’t Breathe”

“But the fact that I feel a foreigner in the worlds of the schizophrenic or the sexual cripple in no way diminishes their reality.” Frantz Fanon

It could be liberal, white, academic guilt, or it could be a dominant public’s difficulty not making subaltern struggle somehow, miraculously about them after all. It could be both. These two frames are not exhaustive, and are probably not mutually exclusive. Put simply, though, if a person of privilege adopts the phrase “I Can’t Breathe,” or, potentially even more dangerously, “We Can’t Breathe,” this act of “solidarity” is a potentially problematic one. In the first case, the singular subject risks erasure as her/his refrain is coopted. In the second case, the plural subject risks not foregrounding those subject to injury. Indeed, the availability of taking the opportunity to align oneself to such a speech act may foreclose its very potency. Indeed, if schematic anti-black racism in America is to be destroyed, the phrase “We Can’t Breathe” is damaged if white voices are included in its subject, and understood as such: an inclusion. Recalling Butler’s pragmatism in her interview with Yancy.

Though it would be impossible to determine the motivation behind every protestor’s sign, chant, or shirt that refrains “We Can’t Breathe,” one manifestation of the plural’s potency rests in its potential ability to challenge the idea of the unitary subject – a crucial step in militating against certain bodies’ exclusion from a Universal like “All
Lives Matter.” If a self-apparent truism fails to obtain materially (a reality towards which these legal killings gesture) then those with the opportunity to align themselves with “We Can’t Breathe” must condemn a system of intelligibility (not offer an act of solidarity) to resist in a way that does not re-affirm the structures against which the “We” struggles. A pluralization that aligns an “ally” then, may work to re-inscribe historically injurious interpellations. A pluralization that extends to subjectivity, itself, may offer an interrogation of not just unfortunate interpellations, but the very linguistic, political, and social resources that sustain them. This interrogation may target colonialism, police violence, police initiatives like the war on drugs, or any number of initiatives that generate a way of “seeing” subjects. The best reading of “We Can’t Breathe,” then, is one that bears a clear citation to the historical metonymy of Garner’s killing while not re-inscribing historically injurious ways of seeing and being seen. The “we” in that statement, then, must be so large as to be a structural indictment.

If the existential condition of dispossession can’t not include precarity, as Butler argues, a real and robust pre-condition emerges for political and ethical behavior. The argument is perhaps best understood through its criticism. If we are fundamentally fragmented subjects, that is, not univocal but enabled only by our social relations, a shallow argument may conclude that it is then impossible to give an account of oneself. If I am not a singular, liberal subject, what possibility exists for personal responsibility? It is a half-baked rejoinder, but it readily enables a reply. Butler writes, “[I]f it is precisely by virtue of its relations to others that it is opaque to itself, and if those relations to others are precisely the venue for its ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it sustains some of its most
important ethical bonds.” The idea of a univocal subject cannot be reconciled with the reality that no subject born into a discursive arena actively chooses that arena. Those subjects enabled in a linguistically central way, may more readily assume a sovereignty of self. In this way, the idea of a unitary subject serves a form of power, as its converse, dispossession, “marks the limits of self-sufficiency and … establishes us as relational and interdependent beings.” The inability to breathe, the awareness of precarity as a social reality and enabling condition for subjectivity, then, gestures toward a new mode of signification. This mode more readily signals the existential collapse of the self without the other, rather than the induced collapse of the other for the sake of the self.

Žižek writes that “The formula of pathetic identification ‘I am . . .’ (or ‘We all are . . .’) only functions within certain limits, beyond which it turns into obscenity.” His commentary is on the rhetorical move “Je suis Charlie,” a cry structurally similar to “We Can’t Breathe.” The obscenity emerges, on his argument, against the fact that a declaration like “We are all in Gaza” fails to obtain so literally that simple attempts at identification fall flat. Though his critique is of the role of ideology in Western society, the focus on the same rhetorical metonymy is instructive. If the refrain “We Can’t Breathe” is a simple deployment of pathos, one may respond to such an identification saying, “Yes, you can.” To avoid slippage into obscenity, this phrase must be understood as an “insurrection at the level of ontology.” Athanasiou writes that such a rhetorical move is “the constant questioning of conditions in which the human is determined by normative and normalizing regimes of intelligibility in terms of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, [and] class.” In a less obscured way, this appears congruent to Fanon’s plea, “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”
Understood as such, then, “We Can’t Breathe” allows an affective state of suffering to be understood as a social condition. The pronoun “We” implies inclusion while it remains without referent. The “we” in the statement, then, functions as an all-encompassing account; it is inclusive of those marginal as well as those central. The cry performs discontent at the same time it indicts the “unitary” subject, effectively condemning an instance and the structure in a system of injury. The material instance, the discursive arena that gives rise to it, and the ordinariness of their interplay are called out all at once. The message communicated by Pantaleo’s non-indictment is that Garner’s death is an instance of the status quo. The legal recourse chosen to ratify the scene, the grand jury, becomes the citational authority it relies on, further perpetuating the ordinariness of certain bodies’ induced precarity. The extra-legal performative “We Can’t Breathe,” though, interrupts this logic figuratively. The gathering of bodies in public spaces – those spaces in which bodies are subject to induced precarity – interrupts the logic, physically. This political maneuver, so performed outside of civil-izing political arenas, works toward the elision of not just who counts as political, but what sorts of political actions can be understood as such. The subject position of those subjected to racist schemata of intelligibility refuses the entrenchment offered by initiatives like toleration. This performative elision works toward the publicity of its performers through decidedly un-author-ized and un-civil-ized avenues. Understood broadly, performativity in this regard is that sort of constitutive process wherein a political subject is produced. As Butler puts it, “performativity names that unauthorized exercise of a right to existence that propels the precarious into political life.” That propulsion, that subversion, is the object of my inquiry.
Initial Implications

The brutal, documented, and ratified killing of Eric Garner offers a clear glimpse into the “visibility” of author-ized police conduct. This much is uncontested: Garner’s death was determined with the help of video evidence to be in line with the *status quo* of juridical discourse. A reading of the same visual text, though, has left a different camp of its viewers (now protestors) concerned and not complicit in the legal ratification of Garner’s death. This gulf of visibility, as it is subsequently performed by the rhetorical move, “We Can’t Breathe,” shows forth a public argument. The argument, unfortunately, is the self-evidence of lives being things that matter. If we are to understand the plural-izaton of Garner’s last words as a structural indictment of a system of perceived and realized abuses, then the cry performs an act of resistance to a schematic, of which a dominant public is necessarily indicted. This second-order resistance runs a lower risk of reifying the resistor/resisted dyad this project is attempting to avoid. Indeed, while solidarity risks concretizing identities understood by and through injury, this understanding of “We Can’t Breathe” generates a space through which convention, normativity, and the normalization of life can be interrogated. ²¹⁰

Such an interrogation can reveal the contingency of such regimes of normativity, exposing the opportunity for not only radically re-understood ways of being-in-community, but also for the troubling of historical citations of “natural” power. In the face of inequitable distributions of precarity, one can ask why certain lives “are more possible for imagination, eligible for recognition, thinkable, and livable than others.”²¹¹ When this questioning emerges from a gathered crowd, the crowd engages in the performative process of eliding both what counts as “politics” and who counts as
“political.” The Eric Garner case is particularly striking example of such injustice generating resistance, but it is hardly unique. The all-too-visible video footage portrays in sharp relief the apparent difference between what is “visible” in a matrix of intelligibility and what is “seen” outside of that frame. By means of Garner’s grievability being refused, his agency argues a grim, challenging, and mundanely-radical political point. Whatever visual schematic construes differently different bodies, and entails material difference, must be always questioned lest it be tacitly normalized.

Just as the video of Rodney King’s treatment revealed the gulf between how his body was seen and how it was made visible, so did the recording of Garner. Just as Till’s open casket performed a condemnation of his brutal demise, so did the video of Garner display the accepted, ungrievable nature of his treatment. With evidence of a differently configured lens of intelligibility for black bodies, the unsettling of that lens enacts a political arena as it gives rise to its political actors. As Riot Grrrl materialized a political machine in spite of patriarchal normalization, the protest of Garner’s death performatively constitutes an avenue by which the logic of that killing may be dismantled. By means of a historically ratified system of refusal and relegation, that authority can be questioned by the extralegal gathering of those bodies so subjected.
“PUTIN WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO LOVE”:
PUSSY RIOT’S AFFECTIVE ASSURANCE AGAINST CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

The spectacle that made Pussy Riot famous is three years old at the time of this writing. Though ancient by current standards of the information age, the performance still remains poignant, timely, and provocative. Pussy Riot’s careful orchestration of the Punk Prayer’s stage, players, taping and subsequent circulation solidified the punks as a veritable cultural force. To call the prayer a success, of course, is problematic and ironic given the reality of their two year prison sentence. Three years removed, however, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina can be seen quite publicly with the political platform sought by their performance. Now rock star champions of human rights and prison reform, the pair can be seen on lecture tours and speaking engagements the world over. The very name Pussy Riot carries now some degree of familiarity all over the globe. Reinvigorating this international visibility in February of 2014, the group staged a unique protest at the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Arrested only once, but flogged repeatedly, Pussy Riot once again took the international spotlight. Following this affair, two videos were widely circulated, both of which featured footage from Pussy Riot’s activities at the games. The first shows raw footage of Pussy Riot assembling, beginning to sing a song “Putin will teach you how to love,” and promptly being beaten by Cossacks, a sort of old guard volunteer police force at the games. Those gathered are sprayed with pepper spray, wrestled to ground and forced to stop performing. The second video, incorporating this same footage amid lots more, is overdubbed with the recorded and polished version of the same song. It shows a now familiar Pussy Riot: an
angry group dancing, shouting, fist-pumping and miming with electric guitars all over 
Sochi, under all sorts of Olympic signage. 

I argue below that Pussy Riot’s performances at Sochi enact a constitutive political force in an otherwise de-policitized arena populated by largely apolitical actors. Put another way, this is performativity. Though the Winter Games accrued their fair share of controversy, Putin signed and authorized a decree that banned all protests and non-Olympic gatherings during the duration of the games.\textsuperscript{212} With well-wishes from the International Olympic Committee to adhere to the non-political nature of sport, Russia effectively generated a structural constraint for any political message. The resultant agency of athletes and protestors alike becomes hampered by both fear of physical violence and fear of indecorum. In such an attempted apolitical environment, “protest” itself would become a reality with truncated resources and avenues. As a result, the invitational rhetoric of a “protest zone” necessarily subjects protestors to civilizing modes of decorum. 

Mirroring the way a discursive structure generates the opportunities for its dismantling, decorum as a meaningful category necessarily makes itself vulnerable to the strategic use of indecorum. In an overly simplistic sense, \textit{kairos} is the category under which such strategy falls. At a larger and prior level to that of appropriateness, Michael Leff argues that decorum is a “flexible principle that coordinates particular discourses as they simultaneously build internal coherence, refer to a context of facts and circumstances, and stretch outward to alter perception of that context.”\textsuperscript{213} He can easily be read alongside the gender performativity texts of Butler, as the heterosexual matrix generates and regenerates social notions of behavior and the “natural.” If the kairotic
nature of performances within decorous avenues sustains those avenues, then the kairotic nature of deviance within those avenues troubles both them and the realities they generate.

Unsurprisingly, Pussy Riot did not submit to such civilizing channels. Their strategic dichotomy between the unedited Sochi video and their produced Sochi video rendered such cultural dilution difficult. Beyond just that, though, the dichotomy played a crucial role in the protest, itself. Put in the framework of performativity, I argue that Pussy Riot once again propelled itself into public political consequence while managing to remain subversive. The social construction of Pussy Riot as a subversive force depends on the rhetoricity of Sochi as a site as well as the affective assurance against commodification leant by the affective persuasion achieved by the video dyad.

**Pussy Riot in 2015: A Timely Unification**

On December 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, Nadya and Masha of Pussy Riot appeared at Vice Magazine’s 20\textsuperscript{th} birthday party. The event, only one day removed from the Times Square protests surrounding the non-indictment of officer Pantaleo, offered these now famous members of the collective a unique political opportunity. True to their earlier form, the video recording and distribution of their performance is undoubtedly more important than its “live” elements. This is not to say that Vice’s birthday was ill-attended, rather that Pussy Riot’s “performance” was more akin to Bernays’ pseudoevent or DeLuca’s image event than a rock show.\textsuperscript{214} Introduced by an invisible but clearly excited emcee, Masha is shown first on stage, reading from a phone about Pussy Riot’s involvement in the previous evening’s protests. She says, “I might not have the right to talk about American problems, but I think that the murder [sic] is murder everywhere. And murder should not be met with indifference.”\textsuperscript{215} The crowd roars.
Nadya takes to the microphone and, also reading from a phone, tells the audience that she has no story to tell, only a “quote from 1970” to share. She proceeds to “sing” a line from Neil Young’s *Ohio*, “What if you knew her, and found her dead in the ground/how can you run when you know?” The crowd offers another round of applause at the deciding moment between Pussy Riot as punk band and Pussy Riot as performance artists. Nadya is a fierce leader and a powerful figure, but a singer she is not. I don’t intimately know the typical Vice Magazine audience or its familiarity with Neil Young or the Kent State killings, but the scene is bizarre. The duo continues and introduces a third woman, Sasha Klokova, and declares that she is a “part of us.” Presumably this means she is a member of Pussy Riot, but the “us” is ambiguous. The three of them count off and shout “Shut It Down!” – a phrase heard at the Times Square protests the night before. Regarding Pantaleo’s non-indictment, the phrase performed a call to action.

Lastly, Sasha performs with Vice’s house band Le Tigre’s *Deceptacon*, Kathleen Hanna’s earliest hit single with the band. Nadya and Masha have left the stage. While positively bizarre, the scene offers a strange unification of this thesis’ case studies. The causes of Hanna, Garner and Pussy Riot come to a strange point of collision. This point is shared also with Hebdige’s earlier concerns about the incorporation and commodification of subcultural style. Clearly a media event for a counter-cultural but still capitalist enterprise, does such a polished platform preclude Pussy Riot’s political potency?

Two months following the release of this video, the duo released a professionally shot and hauntingly powerful new video – one in tribute to Eric Garner. At first glance, the scene is as bizarre as the one described above. The song, “I Can’t Breathe” features
Richard Hell (of Television, The Heartbreakers, The Voidoids, etc.), Sasha, from their cover of Deceptacon, and members of both Miike Snow and The Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

Taking a departure from what has become expected of Pussy Riot, though, the screaming vocals are gone, the driving punk rhythms are missing, and Sasha’s vocals are in English. The grinding, deliberate beat acccents the refrain “It’s getting dark in New York City,” and Hell’s vocals (brought out of retirement) recite the last words of Eric Garner as the song becomes louder, more dissonant and clangingly industrial. Pussy Riot describes the song as the “beat of a heart before it’s about to stop.”

To bring the point home, Nadya and Masha are filmed in one continuous shot being buried alive in Russian prison garb. Masha breaks character just once, removing dirt from her nose and mouth as invisible hands shovel dirt into their grave. The break is contrasted against Nadya’s stoic posture as their grave is filled, instilling a very real sense of suffocation in the viewer. The camera pans out while the song concludes, but still focuses on what is now an indistinct mound of dirt. Without invoking a first person plural, the video performs it while maintaining Garner as referent. To be frank, it is a powerful four and a half minutes that borders on being hard to watch. In a recent climate of blurry cellphone videos depicting extreme violence or death at the hands of police, the crystal clear and conscious depiction of the two calls out in the viewer any complacency as-such. The now polished and make-up-clad image of Pussy Riot is self-consciously juxtaposed to newly abrasive rhythms, asphyxiation, state violence, and (enthymematic) death. The two have clearly overcome their earlier hesitation about aligning themselves with American problems, but their attire still clearly situates them as internationally involved. If Vice’s birthday portrayed the two as caricatures of themselves, “I Can’t
"Breathe" works to restore the initial anger, discontent, violence and affective suffering that initially captured the world’s attention. Pitchfork, the bastion of taste-making that it is, released an interview with the duo on February 18th.²¹⁹ Though the language barrier stifles their prose, the two write of “I Can’t Breathe” that “It truly was inspired by what happened in the U.S., but it has an attitude forged in the Russia we are living in today, in which we are trying so desperately to do something useful.”²²⁰

In a Salon article entitled “Stop calling corporate pop stars ‘subversive,’” Scott Timberg employs contemporary examples of Hebdige’s insight. Taking aim at our society of spectacle, Timberg writes how PR and marketing teams now co-opt the once edgy into a “hip consumerism.”²²¹ Citing the social realities of Duchamp and Wilde, he argues that subversion used to require “real risk,” something alien to today’s liberal deployment of the term. In our world of commodity and capital, there is a real need for (and real consequences without) the “genuinely subversive.”²²² His examples include Charlie Hebdo, the satirist magazine mentioned last chapter, Ai Weiwei, the political artist who recently installed a piece on political dissidents (including Pussy Riot) at Alcatraz, and Pussy Riot, those contemporary figureheads of human rights discussed here. He writes self-consciously of his three examples,

All of these people have paid in very serious ways for their, um, subversive activities. Vladimir Putin put members of Pussy Riot in jail and sent some of them to penal colonies. The Chinese government, which can’t seem to figure out if it wants to be a democracy or a new kind of autocratic capitalism, has imprisoned Ai and put him under house arrest. (The artist’s father was a poet imprisoned for three years by Chiang Kai-Shek and ended up cleaning toilets.) And of course,
members of Charlie Hebdo’s staff — writers, editors, political cartoonists — were killed by religious fanatics in January.223

The insertion of his “um” calls attention to the potentially flimsy nature of Timberg’s argument against the “subversive” nature of pop musicians or ironists. The impasse is fairly apparent: while Lady Gaga is described as subversive, don’t we mean another thing entirely when we describe someone like, say, Abbie Hoffman as such? The question is fair. The article’s recourse to describing its referents as “genuine,” further performs this quandary. A point of happy departure, though, rests in this project’s theoretical framework. Butler’s theory of performative subversion is itself a constitutive and longitudinal process. The subject position or “subversive” person in question enacts imperfect repetitions of anticipated norms, eventually elided or expanding the historically authorized, socially intelligible self. Beyond the liberally deployed adjective, being subversive is itself a force of motion. Timberg’s “genuine” examples, though he doesn’t invoke Butler’s framework, do seem like good candidates.

He continues, “When bourgeois norms are weakened, it’s usually just PR anyway.”224 As his examples simply are subversive without immediate recourse to Butler’s theory, (and he does, he says “we need them”) is there an operative distinction otherwise to be made apart from the messy (as Hebdige writes) interests of capital? The imprisonment of Pussy Riot and Ai Weiwei and the slaughtering of the Charlie Hebdo staff point to at least some notion of pain in Timberg’s definition. The “I Can’t Breathe” music video certainly obtains this qualification. Recall from earlier in this project that Butler’s subversion is ratified by its disciplining; otherwise, performances (like those of pop musicians?) could be ignored. These performances would either not pose a threat to
If the performances in question did not in fact violate the discursive boundaries of a dominant public, there would be no need for punishment. My next (and final) chapter will make more of this, but for now it seems safe to say that an activist group like Pussy Riot utilizes its disciplining to further (and concretize) its argument. It seems a focus on affect, then, may be essential to understanding the way(s) in which subaltern and truly (not commercially) subversive groups cultivate, maintain, and generate subversive potential. Dr. Caitlin Bruce eloquently and insightfully examines this very phenomenon. In her article, “The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protest and Transnational Iconicity” she contends that the international adoption of the balaclava as a marker of protest is more than solidarity: it enacts (and circulates) an argument by means of affect. Her coupling of affect with circulation is crucial to my below argument about Pussy Riot’s performance at Sochi, though a serious caveat looms regarding the prolonged potency of such resistance in the face of global dissemination. Invoking once again Hebdige’s concerns about commodification, I argue that the Sochi video dyad resists cultural dilution on account of its affective circulation.

**Affect Generation, Affect Argumentation**

Pussy Riot’s now iconic performance at the Cathedral of Christ in Moscow has enjoyed an afterlife far more important than its progenitor of a mere forty seconds. The scene now widely described is disarmingly simple on the surface. Women clad in bright colors and balaclavas rush the soleas of the Cathedral of Christ on February 21st, 2012, they make the sign of the cross, genuflect to Mary, pump their fists and kick their legs while performing their plea for Mother Mary to “put Putin away” and become a
feminist. They are shortly removed from the Cathedral, forced into hiding, eventually brought to trial, and sentenced to two years of incarceration. Again, the scene is now quite familiar. Indeed it is the ordinariness of the protest to Western eyes that may have cemented it as important. In the West, two years punishment for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” seems draconian. This only compounds when coupled with its referent’s mere forty second reality. While this is certainly a latent American tendency to other-ize the former Soviet Union, there is clearly something more and something more rhetorical about this performance, given the prolonged and vivacious afterlife it so enjoys. This is not to discredit the above (and forthcoming) discussions of other performances by the group, but rather to understand the potency of this act’s extra-ordinariness in the context within which it was set. Hebdige employed *bricolage*, this project uses performativity, and Dr. Caitlin Bruce makes sense of it with an appeal to affect generation.227

By definition, affect operates extra-linguistically.228 Though affect resists symbolic representation in a strict sense, Bruce’s work marries persuasive machinery elegantly with iconicity, examining a “supercharged image that enables multiple claims and performances of solidarity and identification to take place.”229 The referential non-rigidity with which an icon gains energy in its circulation is a pragmatic take on the notion of discursive free-play, as Bruce argues that the image of the balaclava enables anonymity as well as identification. Subversively similar to the *bricolage* of riot grrrl, Pussy Riot’s iconography deliberately and aggressively subverts a regulatory gaze. The balaclava performs an oppressively ascribed feminine interchangeability while it generates the global potential for organizing under its icon. Thus, regulatory schemata
regarding “women” become their own undoing as the presumed image of generalizable womanhood elides and gestures from subjugation toward an uncertain and uncontrolled political force. As the torn fishnets and combat boots of early riot grrrl performed an act of violence on the male gaze, the interchangeability of the bright balaclava performs a revolutionary force inherently difficult to control and know, much less regulate.

Bruce’s essay, while clearly a study of Pussy Riot’s subversive potential, also situates her within a current debate in our discipline. Affect being necessarily extra-linguistic, it presents something of an impasse to the critical rhetorician. Raymie McKerrow, for example, has been wildly influential in the field, and this thesis enjoys the fruits of his labors. While thoroughly grateful and consciously indebted to McKerrow, Christian Lundberg has recently questioned the reliance upon meaning that so permeates McKerrow’s Critical Rhetoric. Lundberg explores the Lacanian account of the pre-linguistic proto-structure that essentially enables the course of discursive examination – itself a category prior to meaning. In dealing with the unconscious, we may be dealing with affect. While the scope of Butler’s larger scholarship is itself psychoanalytic, I do not mean to introduce the corpus so much as qualify rhetoric’s varied deployment of “affect.” Dave Tell, for instance, recently explored the “mechanical” rhetoric of modern architecture, quoting from Le Corbusier’s argument that architecture ought to “use elements of striking our senses, of satisfying our visual desires.” Though these elements became symbolic with the postmodern turn, in modernity Le Corbusier believed these elements functioned extra-linguistically.

Most in line with my subsequent treatment of Bruce’s work is Young Cheon Cho’s account of self-immolation in the public sphere. In this act (indeed, the final
rhetorical act) the subaltern body becomes public and self-concretized in its ultimate refusal of decorum.\textsuperscript{235} The pain so demonstrated, though, must have an extra-linguistic quality, if the argument of the subaltern becomes tenable after such an act. Before the very public suffering of self-immolation, that self must have had no voice - else he/she may have employed it. Thus, the role of pain in the public sphere must operate through some extra-linguistic effects (though this may be read as a pathetic appeal) else that, too, would still not provide publicity. Either way, at mildest the event of pain in the public sphere physically performs the psychic (and physical) pain levied by a dominant public against a marginal group. That the performance of pain can strike us seems to evidence a use of suffering beyond (or before) symbolic reading.\textsuperscript{236}

**The Balaclava**

If the iconicity of the balaclava generates an affective uncertainty and unease at the same time it permits a polysemous and interspatial site of resistance, then Pussy Riot’s balaclava functions as more than just a solidarity enabler: it is (and Pussy Riot is) a locus of political performativity capable of generating political arenas as well as political players. As mentioned earlier in this project, this sort of subversion into political productivity that resists decorum or civil-izing processes arises as a twofold strategy. On the one hand, it is a question of availability. Limited to a discursive arena determined by preexisting linguistic resources, an oppressed party’s only means of resistance may be to start a pussy riot. The basic tenet of social constructivism and Butler’s performativity is that structure predicates agency interactively. Norms, institutions, conventions and identities become products of wider social structures while their adherents actively reproduce those enabling structures. The violent and shocking redeployment of such a
gendered adjectival or “anatomical” term is, in a prior sense, a matter of arsenal. On the other hand, the anxiety manifest when contingent power is revealed as such, the resultant punishment of the resisting party is evidence of this tactic’s effectiveness and potency beyond its availability. Bruce writes,

Pussy Riot’s name was chosen precisely to gesture to femininity in revolt rather than a passive reservoir for meaning and a static object of representation. A member explained in 2011: “A [pussy is] a female sex organ, which is supposed to be receiving and shapeless. [As Pussy Riot it] suddenly starts a radical rebellion against the cultural order, which tries to constantly define it and show its appropriate place.” As a feminist project, Pussy Riot’s raison d’être has been to cause, quite simply, a riot around, within, and from spaces of femininity. Of Pussy Riot’s violent disciplining, Bruce continues, adding that the “anxiety around the balaclava in the United States [can be seen as] evidence of the fraught role of femininity in public culture as well as in public address studies.” She here explicitly references the disciplinary treatment of protestors during New York’s Global Day of Action protests on August 17th, 2012 the day Pussy Riot’s verdict was delivered. Her characterization, however, obtains even more seriously with the Russian reception and treatment of Pussy Riot, though femininity in public address studies could be replaced with simple femininity in the public. Andrey Makarychev writes that “authorities in Russia are clearly disoriented by the playful and creative protests. Perhaps, it is the protesters’ depoliticized language strategies that most effectively deconstruct Putin’s leadership, by desacralizing his authority.” Makarychev’s quote is a succinct apologia for this framework. This is the performative nature of Pussy Riot: the political body is
constituted by these atypically “political” performances and circulations. Bruce’s focus on the iconicity of the balaclava provides a point of contact with the global politicization of Pussy Riot’s platform – itself subject to the very polysemy that permits it as a rallying point.

The context in which Pussy Riot’s initial performance occurred further ensured the prayer’s prolonged afterlife. Indeed, the Cathedral of Christ is and was a rich rhetorical site. As a stage, it ensured the initial political propulsion so continued by the balaclava’s iconicity. The Cathedral, as a structure, is a “discursive and geographic” intersection of history, uses, solidarities and public memory. The space was destroyed under Stalin, rebuilt before the turn of the century, and now (apparently) symbolizes Putin’s conflation of church and state. Within the Cathedral, Pussy Riot performed on the soleas, an area where women are permitted only when being wed. Their protest focusing on the marriage of church and state, this stage within their stage ensures a particularly biting potency. Ensuring the performance’s success, though, is Pussy Riot’s genuflection to Mary paired with the signum crucis. The use of religious idiom in a religiously and politically charged space animated their political performative and made clear that the prayer was not mere noise. As argued earlier, Pussy Riot’s punishment further ratifies their success.

But if the rhetorical nature of the stage helped to generate the initial potency of the balaclava’s iconicity, itself circulated by affective means, is this interplay the sine qua non of Pussy Riot’s potency? Can the iconicity exist without the transnational context it generates and sustains? “I Can’t Breathe” as a Pussy Riot song seems to stand on obvious rhetorical footing. Masha Alyokhina declaring that murder is murder
everywhere following the Times Square protests of Pantaleo’s non-indictment stands similarly, while the subsequent performance of Deceptacon may be more questionable. Appropriating an electro-punk tune from a now defunct but wildly influential feminist project for Vice Magazine’s birthday party appears to lack the “genuine” subversive nature Timberg heralds above. While certainly noteworthy, this sort of proliferation lacks the affective magnification that challenges and reshapes perceptions of a dominant public. 242

The performance at Vice was not simply a stunt – its timely announcement foreshadows the collaboration with Hell, itself a powerful and important political work. The performance of the Le Tigre track invokes a recent and powerful herstory. A full-on cultural dilution may be something like a privileged, white, liberal male academic donning a balaclava, declaring “I am Pussy Riot!” and shouting through the hallways of his academic building. To such a performance, we must hope his colleagues would reply, “No, you are not.” While I mean this mostly as a self-conscious caricature, if my reader reads the non-rhetoricity of an academic building as a site of unrest in the described scene, I may enjoy the ambiguity rather than clarify it. I may. This is all to say that Bruce is correct when she asserts the “double-edged” nature of transnational iconicity. On the one hand, the balaclava as an icon enables public enactments of solidarity and protest in a variety of contexts with a variety of aberrant valences. This generates the potency and unpredictability that fundamentally makes Pussy Riot a radical and genuinely subversive cultural exigence. On the other hand, the same dynamic circulation risks reducing the balaclava to a commodity – one donned or bought in the interest of decontextualized fashion or capital. As many contextualizations are made possible by the icons affective
magnetism, this reality necessarily entails the rhetorical “is not” that is the dilution, weakening, or ideological appropriation of what could be or once was Pussy Riot.

**Ideological Appropriation, Cultural Commodity**

Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture* weds elegantly with how Butler’s theory of subversion is currently being used. As performative subversion is itself a constitutive process, the process takes place necessarily within a social world of meaning-making and meaning-maintenance. Indeed, so long as social reality makes sense, that sense-making compels its own reassurance. Where Butler makes much of the “contingency” of social arrangements, Hebdige prefers the term “arbitrary.” Despite the decidedly un-natural nature of linguistic distinctions and the differential allocations of precarity they entail, such distinctions are essential to the ordinariness of everyday social existence. If it is these very distinctions that provide the foundation for a socially intelligible identity or a socially viable reality, the disruption of such ideological categories is “profoundly disorienting” to a dominant public. Pussy Riot’s consciously gendered performances generate their political potential for this very reason. The simple disruption of social order is certainly a practical source of disorder, but the real potency of such violations of norms resides in the revealed contingency of those norms, themselves. Norm violation may be inconvenient for a dominant public, but norm unmasking is potentially catastrophic. Hebdige writes,

> Notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with ideas of social order. The limits of acceptable linguistic expression are prescribed by a number of apparently universal taboos. These taboos guarantee the continuing “transparency” (the taken-for-grantedness) of meaning.
When a performative interrupts this “transparency,” the socially author-ized repetition of contingency masqueraded as nature loses its un-questionability. Unsurprisingly, such aberrant performances are fodder for the “is not” edge of Bruce’s caveat, as that which disrupts a social reality generates the anxiety that would normalize it. Signs and symbols (from prayers to balaclavas) order and maintain a discursive arena. When certain objects within this discourse, say, the balacla, are deployed into new positions within it, those objects generate new meanings and possibilities. While structurally dependent upon the regime that produced the object’s significance, the re-located object, say, a prayer, achieves a special subversive potency. The historical citation of the newly-located sign compels attention, insofar as the sign is intelligible, but the ratified meaning within a discourse is now absent. With that attention, the subversive re-allocation is ratified as potent by attempts to render the new aberration intelligible to the dominant public – the same party such subcultural exigencies target. Hebdige calls this play *bricolage*. He writes,

> At the risk of sounding melodramatic, we could use Umberto Eco’s phrase “semiotic guerilla warfare” to describe these subversive practices. The war may be conducted at a level beneath the consciousness of the individual members of a spectacular subculture . . . but with the emergence of such a group, “war – and it is Surrealism’s war – is declared on a world of surfaces.”

On Hebdige’s account, such a war is combated through one of two forms of cultural incorporation. If the subversive rift can be re-deployed into and within an existing dominant public’s ideology and system of meaning-making, its subversive potential loses the qualifier of “genuine” so sought by Timberg, above. Such
incorporation happens either by commodity or ideology.\textsuperscript{248} The commodity form is most readily applicable to Pussy Riot. When performing at the Sochi Olympics, the group once again appeared with unplugged guitars, balaclavas, bright dresses and tights, and their recognizable fist pumps and high kicks. Once the balaclava becomes \textit{sought} as a communication of subaltern resistance, it necessarily communicates as a commodity. A transnational icon, to be sure, but its iconicity functions as mediated through the balaclava-as-product. There is a tricky and potentially problematic line to be drawn between commercial exploitation and subversive creativity. While I mean to ascribe no fatalism, Hebdige is astute when he writes that “Indeed, the creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity, and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion [sic] of subculture’s subversive power.”\textsuperscript{249} I will return to this point, shortly (and necessarily).

The second form of incorporation, ideological, is a bit more nuanced than the first. Commodification makes sense, as to be sold, something must at some level be controllable. Ideological incorporation, though, evades such a convenient tell. In and beyond the Academy, however, there have been many attempts to reduce Pussy Riot to pretty faces, digestible figureheads of the Russian opposition Imaginary. Cynically, Pussy Riot can be controlled and diluted as soon as it can be made sense of. To be sure, efforts like my own that explain the \textit{how} and the \textit{why} of such subversive “success” could unfortunately be read as germane to such incorporation. I am partial to the upshot of Bruce’s argument though, Pussy Riot is an international force. Hebdige writes that ideological incorporation can happen by way of radical other-ization or by mundane trivialization.
Though many reactions to Pussy Riot have gestured toward radical othering or minute domestication, the women seem at the same time too human to be objectified, and too dangerous to be tamed. What is it that has allowed Pussy Riot to affect a political power while retaining its subversive energy? Pussy Riot released two videos from their protests at Sochi, both depicting them wearing the same sorts of dresses and balaclavas their punk prayer made famous. Also familiar were the unplugged electric guitars, the fist pumps and the overdubbed punk rock music. These structural similarities coupled with Pussy Riot’s extant cultural prevalence are susceptible to both Bruce’s and Hebdige’s worries about dilution. To Bruce’s decontextualization caveat, Pussy Riot risks the potency of its Cathedral of Christ performance in re-presenting the same tactic to the same sort of mediated global audience. To Hebdige’s worry about incorporation, Pussy Riot risks losing their potency if their performance at the Olympics renders them *mere* hooligans. Rather than politically subversive, Pussy Riot could appear pedantic – clinging to shock tactics. If (as stated above) Pussy Riot does in fact remain a real subversive force, I argue below that the spatial and temporal rhetoricity of the Sochi Olympics paired with the affective argument enacted by the video dyad to constitute a performative subversion, not a cultural commodification. Pussy Riot’s protests at Sochi generated a political arena as well as political bodies where, before that performance, those gathered were not viewed as such. This is the constitutive element of performativity.

“Not to let Politics Interfere” The *in situ* Rhetoricity of Sochi

If the affective magnetism of the balaclava allows solidarity in a variety of contexts, that context plays a crucial role in whether an icon is amplified or diluted. The
Cathedral of Christ was an obvious rhetorical stage, but the 2014 Winter Games were even more powerful.\textsuperscript{250} For the purposes of my argument, the site was a confluence of three key rhetorical realities. First, the Olympics are and have been a site of gendered controversy for some time. Just as the Cathedral of Christ rendered the bodies within it aberrant by its fraught history and existence, the Olympics have entailed troubling contestations of gender, identity, competition and exclusion over time. Second, in the months preceding the event, anti-propaganda laws targeting the LGBTQ community in Russia gained national attention for their construction (and punishment) of “deviant” behavior. Third, many human rights issues haunted the exigence of Sochi itself regarding the treatment of workers and athletes during the construction and duration of the games. The “strategic” release of political prisoners before the games, too, added to potency of this temporally, spatially, and ideologically salient site. With focuses drifting from prison reform to gender equality to political freedom, Pussy Riot found in 2014 a domestic opportunity with a global audience.

At least since the 1960’s, the Olympics has been a contested site of gender identity and normativity. Now (in)famously, the East German women’s swim team won an incredible 11 of 13 events at the 1976 games in Montreal.\textsuperscript{251} Four years earlier in Munich, East Germany took third place overall, earning fewer medals than only The United States and the entire Soviet Union. Until East Germany ceased to be in 1989, it had subjected its Olympic athletes to unethical, forced, and illegal rounds of testosterone in the name of communism’s superiority.\textsuperscript{252} Before it is a political maneuver, though, this is fundamentally one of gender and sexual identity, who counts as a political body and what sorts of bodies (be)come grievable. Having received so many male hormones,
shot putter Heidi Krieger even opted for a sex change in 1997. Becoming legally known as Andreas, Krieger says the state sponsored doping system “killed Heidi.” The gender(ed) politics of this regime are incredibly nuanced. How does forced hormonal therapy interact with a theory of gender performativity? Who decides what bodies are subject to deceit and destruction? Infertility, cancer and heart problems plague and plagued those subject to this treatment. This chapter does not offer those answers. These very questions, though, do indicate the female body as regulated, disciplined and, ultimately, harmed at and in the Olympics as a temporal and spatial site.

Thisgendered contestation continues into today’s Olympics. Fitting with many of Butler’s themes found in the first chapter of this work, tidy and binary sex categories are, rather than natural and exhaustive, disciplinary structures readily subject to the anxiety that accompanies their troubling. While gender divisions can generate uses of pleasure for those who fit and identify typically within them, the assumed reality for the basis of those distinctions is more contingent than its wide deployment otherwise indicates. Take for example the case of Caster Semenya: beyond her gender, as she certainly identifies as and was raised a woman, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) called into question the purity of her “sex.” Her androgen count was atypical. The rhetoric of the quite public “debacle,” however, was not concerned with the presence of hormones, but the nature of her “real” sex. A dehumanizing media field day followed in the wake of a dominant public’s bio-linguistic schematic being rendered visibly contingent. The “transparent” nature of presumed sexual distinction crumbles upon close inspection.

In both of the above Olympic cases, the female body is rendered a site of discipline, fitting either to the dominant public of a communist state or the dominant
public of the IOC. Rendered malleable by force or forcibly malleable, the gendered body as a site of contention is a long-standing reality in the Olympics as both an institution and a physical space. The members of Pussy Riot, themselves performing the regulation of women’s bodies in Russian society, achieve unique and subversive salience against this institutional and spatially kairotic backdrop. Augmenting this salience is the recent political and legal climate in Russia concerning the LGBTQ community.

Though more localized similar laws preceded it, in June of 2013 a federal law was passed that prohibits the “propaganda” of non-traditional sexual relationships to minors in Russia. With rhetoric that appeals to “tradition” and societal norms, the ban reframes human rights as themselves politically contingent on human behavior. Further, it reifies non-normative sexual activity as “the antithesis of Russia’s traditional values as an Orthodox Christian and non-Western civilization.” Unsurprisingly, the legal codification of such discipline has resulted in an intense marginalization of LGBTQ persons. Publicly out figures or those suspected of engaging in “non-traditional” behavior have lost jobs, endured violence, and in some cases lost their lives to “popular moral regulation.” The coupling of a violent moral crusade with state sanctioned relegation of certain bodies results in a dearth of resources and material destitution for those humans on the law’s injurious side. The primary vehicle for this discrimination is the intentionally vague but firmly understood ambiguity of “traditional values” in the tension between perceived moral values and fundamental human rights. The authoritative appeal to tradition and institution now codified into law, this blatant human rights violation is now successfully framed as a defense against deviant sexual mores. The conflation of church and state, indeed painted here in very sharp relief, was the
object of protest during Pussy Riot’s first famous performance in the Cathedral of Christ. With this legislation looming over Sochi as host of the Winter Olympics, Pussy Riot seized a rhetorically potent stage with an unprecedented international audience. Indeed, the months leading up to the Sochi Olympics entailed a fair amount of international media controversy. Topics from worker’s rights to inordinate government spending haunted the construction of the village and venues. Through similar appeals to tradition and normality, though, these controversies resulted in relatively few acts of protest. Johan Ekberg argues that the interplay of the Games’ decorous structure and the subsequently constrained agency of its competitors effectively created an Olympics in line with the “national interest of the Russian state.” Under direction from the IOC “not to let politics interfere with the Olympics,” a perfunctory zone of protest was designated some twelve kilometers away from the nearest Olympic venue.

Nevertheless, there were protests. On the milder end, several Swedish athletes were seen sporting rainbow-colored headphones during competition. One member of team USA sported a rainbow-colored cellphone case. Every act of protest more overt than these, however, from holding signs to waving rainbow flags, was met with police force. Not all interactions were brutal, and one cannot say whether it was the spirit of the games or the threat of physical force that may have dissuaded many others. What’s more, though, a refusal to engage the controversy in protest could be read as a political statement of equality, as openly bisexual Dutch speed skater Ireen Wust refused to speak of the “propaganda” ban as she enjoyed her third consecutive Olympic gold medal at Sochi. Not all out athletes opted for rhetorical silence, however, as Austria’s Daniela Iraschko-Stolz said “I don’t think it’s a good idea to make protests here; no one cares.”
She later said that simply performing well was itself a statement, potentially aligning her with Wust’s refusal. Given the rhetorical potency of the Olympics’ fraught history with sex and gender, Russia’s draconian propaganda laws, and the structural silence instilled into the 2014 Winter Games, Pussy Riot’s stage was strategic and rhetorical.

“Putin Will Teach You How to Love”

On February 19th, 2014, video surfaced of six Pussy Rioters in familiar garb, though initially without balaclavas. Nadya and Masha were clearly visible in the front of the small group as they approached a large advertisement for the Olympics. Donning their balaclavas, the lot “performed” for merely seconds before some dozen Cossacks rushed in. Brandishing pepper spray and horse whips, these volunteer security officials flogged those gathered before throwing some to the ground. The interruption left three members hospitalized. Historically aligned with (or “descended” from) czarist horsemen, the Cossacks were once revered as talented horsemen who “spearheaded imperial Russia’s expansion.” Today, and especially during the Sochi Olympics, however, the group enjoys a gray area between vigilante discipline and official law enforcement. Whatever their role, they put an early (and forcible) end to Pussy Riot’s Olympic performance. Though some witnesses were questioned, no arrests were made on either side. Though its limited focus on Russian history is an obvious poverty of this project, this extra-legal disciplining of deviant groups was at least permitted by authorities during the Olympics, and, as shown above, encouraged by the federal anti-propaganda laws.

This video, instead of being released by Pussy Riot, surfaced and was circulated via various news outlets. Without explicit authorial intent apparent, one outlet
included the word “fail” in their titling of the video, presenting a mundane and patronizing account of the attempted performance. Though the incorrectness of this characterization will be argued shortly, this video’s obvious departure from that of the performance at the Cathedral is striking. Several edits, spliced footage from elsewhere, and an overdubbed well-recorded soundtrack created a frantic, urgent, and strategic picture of the Orthodox Church’s reaction to an argument framed in The Church’s own terms. The physical aspects of the stage aside, Pussy Riot can be seen genuflecting to Mary and crossing themselves while the overdubbed music floats between Orthodox chant and raucous shouting. While there were many moving parts to this initial “success” of Pussy Riot, such strategy was key. In contrast, this first Sochi video portrays the ugly and unexciting reality of subversive performance in Putin’s Russia.

Though the group is initially shown determined and stern, the brute reality of being flogged and thrown to the ground interrupted the narrative viewers anticipated. In her closing statement during the initial Pussy Riot trial, Masha states quite confidently in the face of impending imprisonment, “I am not afraid of you. I am not afraid of falsehood and fictitiousness, of sloppily-disguised deception, in the verdict of this ‘so-called’ court. Because all you can deprive me of is ‘so-called’ freedom.” And indeed, this narrative of defiance in the face of punishment is both powerful and persuasive. In this first Sochi video, though, we see such commitment being beaten, pepper-sprayed, knocked down and kicked. Nobody intervenes. There is little fighting back. The scene ends with Pussy Riot retrieving its electric guitar from the trash can where it was placed and departing. The video is deflating, to say the least. It, too, borders on being difficult to watch. A mundane reality is being broadcast: Pussy Riot has been understood largely
by way of its strategic mediation and circulation, and now in absence of their authorial care the video performs the charge from critics that these women are mere hooligans—naive, and not to be taken seriously. With a cast of all male Cossacks, the video performs the gendered disciplining so refused by the very bodies being beaten. It is the complex intersection of reality, mediated reality, rhetorical suffering, material pain, psychic power and “brute” reality. The way Pussy Riot shortly reclaimed authorial agency, however, gestures toward a larger picture of affective intensity. Pussy Riot’s subsequent argument is not only circulated by affective magnetism, but, in a prior and strategic sense, created by it in the first place. The morning after this footage arose, it could be found incorporated impeccably into Pussy Riot’s newest music video, “Putin will teach you how to love.”

The opening scene and chords of “Putin will teach you how to love” are bleak. A rocky beach gives way to breaking waves as ominous and delicate notes punctuate the otherwise silent opener. In a breaking wave, several balaclavas can be briefly seen and half submerged. As the opening guitar riff kicks in, Pussy Riot emerges from the waves and storms the beach. The frantic pace of the song is matched by the video’s edits. Facing the uncertain future gestured by the first video, this second clip has both Pussy Riot and their audience back in familiar territory. The scene is recognizable: overdubbed pre-recorded punk music, fist pumps, high kicks, balaclavas and bright dresses. Less than sixty seconds into the video it becomes clear how strategic the group had been. Clips of Pussy Riot members being beaten and bloodied punctuate the clips of performance. Olympic rings and advertisements are seen throughout. A costumed Olympic mascot even appears several times. His or her face covered by a giant cartoon’s
mask, the cutesy lack of affect generates a comical resemblance to the rioters themselves. Their scenes together are perhaps the most subversive in the video. As the reality of how brutal the attempts to silence Pussy Riot becomes clear, the scene flashes back again and again to the group dancing with an actual em-body-ment (caricature?) of the games. It is an impressive and powerful indication of just how strategic the video is. The very reality the Cossacks are subsequently and repeatedly trying to eliminate is Pussy Riot’s visibility at the Sochi Olympic Games.

Fig. 1: One of three Olympic mascots performing a reaction during a Pussy Riot performance. Video still from “Putin will teach you how to love.”

That exact reality is shown interspersed among the Cossack’s violent blows. This renders the attacks materially painful but effectively useless. The subsequent rhetoricity of Pussy Riot’s very presence reduces the Cossack’s whips to an anxious performance of a losing battle already lost. Indeed, the video depicts Putin’s Russia as backwards and violent, stamping out the few bursts of color found in the Sochi so presented. Unfortunately for
the Kremlin, the strategic incorporation of Olympic imagery couples with its unique rhetoricity for Pussy Riot in a way that renders the group’s performance once again unignorable. As their genuflection to Mary in the Cathedral of Christ performed an anchoring of the group to their audience in a non-dismissible way, this strategy visually anchors Pussy Riot to perhaps the most widely recognized international institutions on the globe.

The violence captured in the first video and re-incorporated into the second both ratifies Pussy Riot’s salience and generates an affective response that further intensifies their argument. Were Pussy Riot not breaking the boundary of the dominant public sphere, there would be no anxious compulsion to punish. The recording and dissemination of the fact that they were punished, however, serves to bolster affectively the international support of their now decidedly international audience. The irony of Russia’s attempt to silence Pussy Riot at Sochi then, is that it gave the group (and the world) this twofold assurance of Pussy Riot’s success. The rhetorical potency of their Sochi protests rests in this display of affective suffering. Julia Ioffe, Senior Editor at New Republic, points out the one thing that Pussy Riot forgot in “Putin will teach you how to love.” She writes, “Weirdly, though, Pussy Riot does not thank the Interior Ministry representatives at Sochi – all those cops and Cossacks – for providing such great, natural, illustrative footage. They couldn’t have done it without them.”

Though many, many news outlets reported this story, her short analysis stands out remarkably.

**Against Commodification**

The fact that Pussy Riot’s violent reception both indicates their successful subversion and ensures their affective circulation is critical. Indeed without their being
punished, they would have had to have been deemed ignorable. Beyond this, however, the affective argument to which their being beaten contributes ensures that their performance remains what Timberg denotes as “genuine.”272 In the highly mediated environment within which Pussy Riot’s mediations thrive, the risk of commodification and cultural dilution is great. Recall Bruce’s caveat; while the magnetism of Pussy Riot’s signature garb generates a potent polyvalence, the opportunity to attain meaning in a variety of contexts entails the opportunity to lose meaning in those same spaces. Put rather simplistically, the shtick could get old. Even worse, the shtick could get sold.

Hebdige’s concerns marry with Bruce’s in a very real way. Pussy Riot’s garb is certainly bricolage. The tights, the balaclava and the bright dresses are all strategically worn to disrupt prevailing discursive codes and to interrupt social normativity. When appropriated outside of Pussy Riot, however, it seems that the fashion would forfeit its meaning without the possibility of punishment. This finds Hebdige’s concern amplified to the international scale by Bruce’s. This is why the Sochi video needs the rhetorically powerful Cossack whippings, and this is how Pussy Riot remains a subversive social and political force, despite a Vice Magazine birthday party.

Put simply, Pussy Riot is smarter than to have relied on some accidental circumstance to ensure the video’s success. The group has demonstrated a gift for the careful mediation and circulation of their performances, themselves carefully constructed. So the strategy at play must be understood as one of self-conscious acceptance of a brutal material reality. The temporary acquiescence to extreme physical violence is captured and circulated so to mirror the non-temporary psychic (and physical) violence against which Pussy Riot fights. When recorded and disseminated, the attack provides a locus
for the video’s subsequent affective magnetism and argument. Expressed in a sentence, though, Pussy Riot achieves their potency on account of their willingness to brave the rhetoricity of their stage.

**Social Constructivism in Conclusion**

It is a widely levied criticism against Butler that her theory of performative subversion necessitates subjection to ungenerous norms.\(^{273}\) Indeed if, as an enabling principle, one must remain subjected in order to resist, it seems initially a fair criticism. That being said, any account of subversion implies and entails a dismantling from within. As a matter of arsenal, a dominant public’s indexes are potent on account of their discursive sanctity. The exigence of the “punk” in general offers an easy depiction of this strategy. Of course the punk remains enabled by the discursive realities it refuses; there can be no center without its relative margins. In a way, yes, subjection is required, but within these arrangements exist real and robust resources for vitality. So “braving the rhetoricity of their stage” is Pussy Riot’s strategic and dangerous targeting of the institutions, spaces, taboos and modes of decorum that otherwise maintain and make sacred existing social order and intelligibility. Without such an ungenerous social arena, Pussy Riot would have nothing to combat. Without such readily levied punishments, it wouldn’t be so clear that the group is hitting a nerve with its national and international audiences.

The rhetoricity of the spatial and temporal structure that was the Sochi Olympics equipped the resultant agency for resistance. For how criticized the 2014 Winter Games were, there were relatively few blatant acts of protest.\(^{274}\) If agency exists always in interplay with its enabling structure, the climate of Sochi was effectively disciplinary.
Without a cause, though, there can be no rebel. The discursive subjection of the subjected becomes a *given*, then, when resistance is performed. What ensures genuine and successful subversion, though, is a making-use of that stage. Political performatives take place within structural furrows and within kairotic exigencies. As a constitutive process, performative subversion is necessarily longitudinal, as the maintenance of social intelligibility requires small elisions. These small elisions from a more precarious subject position constitute through time a more politically able subject under the same though previously injurious descriptor. What is remarkable about Pussy Riot is that their subversion into political viability happened quite quickly, with isolated (but disseminated) circumstances.

A stage does not argue without an actor. Pain cannot argue in a vacuum, and *bricolage* cannot make sense without a world of sense to disrupt. The strategic utilization of one’s discursive arena (oppressive or otherwise), however, risks its utility as its scope increases and circulates. By ensuring their platform includes the blatant portrayal (and reception) of state violence, Pussy Riot maintains a subversive potency rendered unable to be commoditized. It seems to me that one cannot make material suffering and its affective ability to argue “cool.” Portraying their own live burial, Pussy Riot’s most recent “I Can’t Breathe” video seems acutely aware of the power of such imagery. It is the same power that ensured the success of the Sochi video dyad. The affective response that the first video calls out ratifies the success of Pussy Riot’s performative subversion as it generates the video’s rhetorical potency. What’s more, the raw footage depicting physical violence combats potential commodification. The graphic reality of Pussy Riot in Sochi renders the group and the group’s image difficult to coopt. The kairotic
exigence, rhetorical stage and affective argument form a strategic resistance that simply will not be replicated with the simple donning of a balaclava. If this weaving of Butler, Bruce and Hebdige holds, then Pussy Riot resists commodification by its uses of affect – the very thing that ensures its subversive potency. Their violation of sacred social codes couples with their acceptance and redistribution of their violent punishment to further a platform that, despite efforts from many directions, effects a radical political avenue that continues to remain both raucous and uncivilized.

We are well to remember that dominant discourses, practices and legislation do change in time. One could look to the past and read an optimistic, ameliorative bent to the progression of social realities. With some historic confidence garnered, one may draw hopes of a future along a similar trajectory. As mentioned at the very outset of this thesis, though, the alleviation of social ills has historically happened with the careful dedication, struggle and sacrifice of marginalized groups. To posit any sort of inclusive eventuality would be to erase the struggles of so many. It would imagine a future where individual action was less important than the slow burn of collective consciousness raising. Put another way, it would excuse inactivity. Pussy Riot operates in an environment without such an optimistic eventuality, as laws, norms, and even international institutions like the Olympics are in opposition to wider understandings of human rights.

What is so important about the group is their relatively immediate “ascent” into the discursive dealings of a global public. One may argue that their work does not entail their subversion into the public of Putin’s Russia, but by way of their international presence, even the Kremlin’s sphere is not unaffected. From Pussy Riot’s initial
performance, attempting to effect a platform for the separation of church and state in Russia, one can see the group now decidedly enjoying that platform with an international audience. In Sochi especially, in two minutes of carefully and strategically prepared footage, the group concretizes their identity as they perform their abjection. Putin’s Russia is rendered backwards as Pussy Riot upends social mores, refiguring the who’s who in violating “appropriateness.” Decorum is leveraged against itself. What makes Butler’s framework so appropriate is its focus on the utility of injurious speech and norms. Pussy Riot’s ability to exploit anxiety by way of that which enables it renders the group especially subversive.

Claudia Rankine’s recent book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, offers a contemporary account of dispossessed peoples and bodies. Its prose is clear and difficult, thought-provoking and heartbreaking. In it she offers an eloquent account of the uses of injury. She writes,

> Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.

I can offer no better account than Rankine’s, at length. She continues,

> For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts.

Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present.
Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please.²⁷⁶

The welcomed caress of the Cossack’s whips, the pairing of pain and performance, and the perfect timing in an imperfect scene rendered Pussy Riot more than merely noise.

The insanity of their “please,” their uses of pain, and their “genuine” subversion enacted an immediate political arena, inhabited by immediately inaugurated political players – all in the face of a strict, multi-scale, and policed apolitical environment. The recognition of Rankine’s “please” creates the opportunity for resistance. That please’s utter insanity resists utterly the ideological appropriation of a dominant public.

Decorous political channels require time, and lots of it. Successful social movements require time, and even more, strategic uses of it. If the framework of performative subversion holds in my examination of Pussy Riot (and in my preceding three, as well) the opportunity arises for not only scholarly deconstruction and critical theorizing, but also real, tactical direction for those marginalized toward the reallocation of unevenly distributed precarity.
CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE ELISION
OF THE INTELLIGIBLE PUBLIC

“It is in thought – the profound, immobile problematizing of social structures, norms, beliefs, etc. – that the dissenter produces the most dramatic possibility of democracy.” Kendall Phillips

The personal, private utility of performative subversion permits the constrained subject to persist in a social world on that subject’s own terms. Parodic performance, private transgressions, and deliberate *bricolage* allow the subaltern subject a levity of being in an otherwise disciplined social reality. Indeed the very existence of a dominant public entails these sorts of oppositional performances, as without them no such meaningful distinction could be made. The sustained influence of a dominant public is, recall Hariman’s argument, in part allowed by such a prescribed distinction between the center and the margin. This discursive and subsequently material differential is an important starting point if my previous chapters are to be anything more than elaborate explorations of some of Butler’s implications.

Private, subversive acts, while personal, operate necessarily in social relation with other such actions. The constitutive process of performativity, then, while personal and embedded within an otherwise regulatory or constraining discursive arena, necessarily interacts with the intelligible sociality that arena enables and permits. Agency *always* depends on its enabling structure, and that structure is *never not* affected by such interaction. This is a crucial point for Butler’s work on gender performativity. The structures that constrain narrow conceptions of an intelligible binary become only stronger the more they become reproduced by the agencies they fundamentally constrain. Of this ontological condition of action, Butler writes,

*In all the talk about the social construction of the subject, we have perhaps overlooked the fact that the very being of the self is dependent not just on the*
existence of the Other—in its singularity, as Levinas would have it, though surely that—but also on the possibility that the normative horizon within which the Other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical opening. This opening calls into question the limits of established regimes of truth, where a certain risking of the self becomes, as Levinas claims, the sign of virtue.279

As persons are always constructed as people in a necessarily social existence, the notion of the pre-social biological human essence itself becomes problematic. Indeed biology is undeniable, but as a meaningful category, distinctions like those found in an imagined and gender(ed) binary are meaningful only insofar as they exist in concert with one another. The same, crucial distinction follows from the dominant/non-dominant public distinction as well as delineations of “race” as a social construct.

Out of such constraints arise the possibilities of resistance. Such resistance, then, is necessarily personal while inextricably political. If the mechanism of this interaction between structure, agency, and social intelligibility can be isolated, I argue that my previous case studies have been illustrous of that mechanism’s ameliorative bent. Let us bear in mind the following and haphazard sentence: The interrogation and subversion of these linguistic and political categories allows the revelation of contingency that produces the dominant anxiety that inspires punishment back into social order that enables and signifies subversion into the political.

Butler and Athanasiou’s notion of dispossession is of critical importance. On the one hand, the dispossessed subject accesses and acquires the power relegated to the margins. On the other hand, it is this structural subjugation as marginal that entails the
differential allocation of precarity that manifests materially burdened lives. Unburdened by decorous constraints, new possibilities emerge for resistance and agency, but differently allocated precarity entails a lesser access to material benefits, whether such benefits are the freedom from police brutality, freedom to visit a hospitalized spouse, freedom to display one’s art, or freedom to exist outside a regulatory gaze. While some benefits like marriage are certainly not univocal goods (Judith Butler herself argues against the hetero-normalizing disciplinary institution), freedom from violence seems a less controversial candidate. The personal utility of performative subversion, thus, plays an essential role in performative politics – though this much is uncontroversial. Starting from that premise, this thesis has attempted to study moments where propulsion into the political happens without the foreclosure of marginal identity at the hands of a dominant public. Such foreclosure could happen by way of submission to civilizing constraints, cultural or ideological commodification, or, most dramatically, a forfeiture of social intelligibility. This forfeiture could render a subject either completely un-recognizable or entirely too recognizable.280

Though this is now well-worn territory, the most basic implication the above case studies generate is the pervasive nature of the discursive. It is fashionably poststructuralist to posit the ubiquity of “text,” and this thesis certainly falls partial to that position. As discursively constituted (and constrained) social beings, the constraints that enable our agency are radically contingent while they remain reproducingly “concrete.” Hanna’s inscription of the designator “Slut” anchors the intelligibility of her argument while it risks – through the very deployment of its argumentative potency – the reinforcement of its gendered sexual discipline. Though not an argumentative tactic, the
non-indictment of law enforcement officers following the fatal shootings of black men functions similarly. The legal sanction of such action reinforces the contingent reality of schematic and violent state racism. Such non-indictment reinforces a narrative of ungrievability, rendering black bodies visible and interpretable as threats to-be-disciplined rather than persons. Regulatory fictions like “Slut” and regulatory racist violence both function to perpetuate a social, discursive reality with vastly different allocations of material well-being.

Thus, even in passive day-to-day existence, scripts are coded, followed, and reinforced to the point of illusory neutrality and naturalness. All subjects so enabled in a discursive arena are subject to the limits of its intelligible horizon, and thus, active or passive participants in the machinations of power that they affect and by which they are affected. All performances of a subject, then, become essentially rhetorical as soon as one accepts the premise that we are discursively constituted social subjects. On the resisting and oppressing ends, then, rhetorical strategies are always already at play. Identities are being negotiated within the intelligible realm the enables and is maintained by those subsequent identities. In performing their constraints and opportunities, groups like Pussy Riot take advantage of and generate a critical and revolutionary moment.

This leads me to a uniquely instructive area of study. As performativity operates rhetorically, always, its causes and uses can be interrogated and utilized. By causes, of course, I mean those structures which enable agencies. By uses, I mean how such an enabling can work, and what such an enabling can do. The above example from Hanna serves as a good example. The existence of a political utility entails some mechanism of
its usefulness. Though the following are certainly at play in (and essential to) my case studies, a clear delineation of their functioning serve my concluding thoughts well.

Given the purposely re-deployed gender(ed) constraints seen in Pussy Riot’s and Riot Grrrl’s media, the mechanism of subversion appears as a twofold moment. The first node of this moment arrives in the simple non-fulfillment of anticipated social performance. Butler maintains that a component of identity (say, gender) comes to be (falsely) perceived as natural by a “stylized repetition of acts.” This stylization reaches beyond personal, mundane behavior into institutions like marriage and sex-specific bathrooms, generating and maintaining binary and “natural” conventions. Performances that refuse the expectation of a dominant discourse, in so doing, render that expectation one of convention, not nature, problematizing the taboo or decorum. Recall from my first chapter that resistance which further inscribes the logic of the dominant party’s domination is counter-productive. Reinforcing oppositional binary parties forecloses my project’s potency. In attacking an expectation, however, the oppressive or constraining convention (religious, social, legal, etc.) becomes a non-naturalized locus of radical possibility. The existence of an anticipated adherence and reproduction of social order necessarily generates the opportunity to interrupt this anticipation, generating the space for a resistant event in the anticipating structure. This troubling of anticipatory certainty would not qualify as “free play” given the fact that there still is a discursive construction being combated (that of anticipated adherence – and all other intersections of one’s intelligible identity), but this does gesture that direction. In failing to meet a dominant public’s prescribed expectation (and this expectation can become internalized and passed along in very many ways) the act is met with (if it is strategically salient) anxiety.
The seamless yet arbitrary coherence of social norms and expectations is good for those in power. Indeed, Gramsci argues that even those not in power enjoy this facet of hegemony. If the moment generated by not meeting such expectation is properly seized, therein rests the second node of subversion. In the moment of unrealized expectation, the resisting party enjoys a radical possibility. Such potential, though, can be quite destructive. Too far unrecognizable, the subject forfeits its position as such. If the subject is altogether too recognizable, he/she risks reinforcing the discursive constraints that render him/her intelligible that way in the first place. I have discussed at length the arsenal/strategy distinction with ungenerous norms, but it is essential to this second node of subversion in the interruptive moment. If one uses a discursive constraint against itself – say, starting a pussy riot – the irruption generates yet another twofold strategy.

First, in operating with an otherwise constraining signifier or social compulsion, the resisting subject ensures its recognition as such. This performs an anchoring effect, permitting the constrained subject to retain the descriptor under which he/she resists while still able to shed the materially oppressive consequences of submitting to that expectation. Thus, instead of reinforcing binary opposition, the resisting party ensures intelligibility-from-the-margins by means of its tactics. Such anchoring, to get to the second fold of this twofold strategy, permits subversion when it adequately and recognizably stirs dominant anxieties. For example, Hanna contested the fraught role of femininity in punk and the public by deliberately violating the very norms she sought to eliminate. Forcing men to the back of the venue, she performed a reconciliation of societal expectation, using the very anxiety “Girls to the Front!” revealed to ratify her
technique as necessary. Such anxiety manifest itself in edifying ways like Hanna’s being held down and having an entire beer poured onto her nose at her own show.\textsuperscript{283} The strategy enabled by an otherwise bleak scene is the further rallying and ratification that follows such an act of imagined discipline.

In such an example, we find the inspiration for the title of this thesis. The elision, while often understood to be the simple removal of a letter or syllable or even an entire passage from a larger whole, can play another, more constitutive role. Elision as a poetic device works to accommodate a series of vowels between feet in verse. When performed aloud, the reader would maintain the meter of the poem while, technically speaking, there are more syllables than appropriate between feet. Elision of a subject position, I argue, entails the marginal body’s acquisition of central publicity. In other words, elision enacts political viability without invitational rhetoric. Forgive this brief tangent, but while functionally this is a removal of sorts, the elision generates a new signified both within the parameters of the meter and without. Outside the parameters of the verse, the elision is not a word, but inside the verse, it performs a linguistic role that preserves the stability of a meter while it functions necessarily outside of it. A particularly striking example is found in the first line of Catullus 5, probably his most famous poem. The line opens,

\begin{displayquote}
Let us live, my Lesbia, and love    \\
Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
\end{displayquote}

This poem’s meter being hendecasyllabic, each line fits eleven syllables. If one foot of a line ends with a vowel, and the next begins with one, the former foot forfeits its concluding vowel to, instead, elide into the next foot. Counting thirteen syllables in Catullus’ first line, two are elided. Given the above parameters, “Lesbia atque amemus” becomes Lesbi/at qu/amemus. Beyond a stylistic device and fodder for the silver-
tongued, this elision offers a rhetorical function to the line, one that only the line-as-elided can perform. “Amemus” is the first person plural imperative of the verb “to love,” so while it is often translate in this poem without reintroducing its referent, its literal definition is “Let us love.” Lesbia, the impetus for and receiver of Catullus’ affection, becomes vocally combined with the shared act of loving, itself. The reader only comes to a full stop after the suffix “-mus,” indicating the plural number of the conjugation. So delivered, Catullus constructs the young lady as essentially loving and, given the mirrored plural imperative “vivamus,” living only insofar as she loves Catullus.

Readable as both clever and sadistic, the elision performs an extra-literal role in this line, one that functions beyond and within the limits of its horizon. Elision exceeds the horizon of its intelligible sphere while remaining entirely recognizable within it. Performative elision, then, works within ungenerous norms by means of their un-generosity. But now back to Kathleen Hanna.

A performative elision, then, is not just the function of an agent, but of a structure as well. Interpellating the “Girls to the Front,” is a political maneuver that inaugurates an apolitical rock club into a newly charged, radical political space. Where there may have been apolitical girls, grrrls now gathered at the foot of the stage. Where there was the tacit reproduction of a machismo punk scenario, there was now a political arena negotiating the current status and desired future of the genre. Pussy Riot took to the chapel, the very site where the separation of church and state collapses on itself. Protestors shouting “We Can’t Breathe” took to the streets – the very place where bodies are most precarious and susceptible to police violence. The performative elision contests not only who counts as political, but also where counts as political. In such a refusal of
civilizing channels, such a strategy bears incredible potency. The constitutive element of performativity exceeds its enabling structure while it functions necessarily and recognizably within it.

Of course, this illustration (and utility) hinges upon a dominant public sphere itself being a discursive construction. With the fashionable assumption staked earlier regarding the ubiquity of text, I am quite comfortable with the premise. Performativity as a resistant act, then, is essentially rhetorical. That rhetoric, in turn, can marry with the handful of above circumstances to create political propulsion. So what then, we must ask, is the praxis at which we have arrived? A fair question past due for an answer, but wanting one last qualifying paragraph.

The terms counter-public and counterculture have been used infrequently if at all in this work. I have opted much more readily for designators like “subculture” and “style.” Not just the title of Hebdige’s work, a subculture, opposed a counterculture, implies and relies upon the continued dominance of a dominant culture. While oppositional like a counterculture, the subculture is activated and sustained by its relationship to its superordinate scene. Negotiating a world of contingent meaning-making, the bricoleurs intentionally and brilliantly disrupt the internal coherence of social worlds in the re-appropriation and re-signification of the everyday. Without retreading the splintering paths of subjection and domination that result from such a claim, an unimaginative reading of bricolage and even private, transgressive subversion can appear fatalistically apolitical. What the above reading of Catullus offers this framework, then, is an example of when the performative offers something essentially unavailable within conventional constraints, but recognizable and efficacious within them.
It is this spark that inspired this work, and the same spark to which we must zealously attend if this framework can be used toward the subaltern’s political propulsion.

In sobering clarity, Claudia Rankine writes of the recent abundance of case studies like my third chapter, “Because white men can’t police their imagination black men are dying.” What has been conventional, and what has become pervasive in recent media is fundamentally racist. African American men and women are schematically construed as threatening, and the disciplining of those threats is met widely with legally sanctioned ambivalence. The policing Rankine advocates, however, begins to gesture toward Butler’s new modes of signification. The deaths of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and (quite recently) Walter Scott all indicate the always already of how law enforcement (or neighborhood watch, in Martin’s case) perceives African Americans in the United States. Whether a threat is being imagined where none exists, or whether our collective imagination as a nation is coded by racist scripts, the scene plays out with an alarming familiarity of late. Lethal force meets a human displaying no life-threatening action. If law enforcement as an institution and cultural script permits and reinforces such behaviors, the Walter Scott case may offer some step toward this schematic’s dismantling. Michael Slager, the officer who shot and killed Scott, has been charged with murder, but only after an incredible video surfaced of his “fearing for his life.” Far short of an ability to imagine differently, this video simply presents a clear and indefensible case – though Slager is yet to stand trial.

The Slager case does not offer a potential strategy of resistance like the Pantaleo case may. Even the Pantaleo case is categorically different than my other two case studies, as its nod toward new signification in “We Can’t Breathe” is an example of the
circulation that may work to show the doings of power in oppressive social arrangements. Indeed, what is visible in the recent deluge of high-visibility killings is sickening. In the cases where that visibility still reinforces the status quo by way of non-indictment, the assumed precarity of the call “We Can’t Breathe” may work toward policing (or liberating) the imaginations of those at the helm of such an institution. In a political arena where what is seen is naturalized, and the contingent allocation of precarity is taken for granted, the radical re-interrogation of the “visible” is an essential component in the subversion of such structures. What we can take from the cases of Garner and others, then, is that in taking control of some means of production – whether that be the circulation of a newly-seen “visibility,” or the performative shift from “I” to “We Can’t Breathe” – the workings of a dominant discourse will never work on behalf the marginalized. Coupling this need for radical authorship with one of the first tenets of Riot Grrrl, we can begin to formulate potential political capacities for the subaltern in the framework of this thesis.

Riot Grrrl tenet number three reads, “BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.” Seizing the means of discursive construction is essentially performative, unbound by naturalized expectation of the subaltern, essentially subversive (sub-cultural), and elegantly applicable to all three case studies examined here. It follows so surely from the premise of an ungenerous discursive arena that a new arena must be constructed. To ensure that effort’s potency as well as poignancy, it must be anchored to the contingent norms it seeks to destabilize. Intentionally avoiding press (and subsequent commodification), Riot Grrrl created and circulated its own resource, the zine. Sacrificing widespread dissemination for control
over the production of their own world of meaning, Riot Grrrl operates from a premise of injurious speech while dismantling its potency from within. The seventh tenet continues, “BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standards of what is or isn’t ‘good’ music or punk rock or ‘good’ writing AND THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy and define our own visions.” The purposive opting out of dominant discourse to cultivate the means of its dismantling from within is the model of performative subversion. Unique to this case study is the unavailability of self-authored, mass-mediated circulations of sub-discourse. Riot Grrrl’s interrogation of what is seen and what is visible circulated internally, though instantiations of the ethos have become – while watered down – common in contemporary media. If Pussy Riot can be seen quite immediately (comparatively) with the platform their performances sought, Riot Grrrl more closely resembles the private, transgressive model of performative subversion. Slow, longitudinal elisions in the expectation of “girl” have generated now national talking points of what it means to be a feminist.

The other two case studies being quite contemporary, seizing the means of production entails a radically potent social element. The ability for many now to capture and disseminate what is seen against what is visible in a schematic sense entails the potential to greatly and genuinely accelerate the slow, personal practice of performative subversion. As pain argues as ratification of subversion’s success, empathy functions as the elixir to the public sphere. Explain what it is like to wake up subject to police misconduct in America and win the intellectual support of an ally. Show what it is like, and command a newly offered national consciousness. The subversion here described uses that gulf of experience to make plain the discrepancy between the world of the seen
and the schematic enablers of the visible. If tropes like race and gender are parts of a bundle that, without which, the human subject is rendered less socially intelligible (or not at all), then the performance of that intelligibility’s subjection becomes an inherently political force. Instead of relying on the invitation of a dominant public after such demonstration, though, the strategic utilization of anxieties troubles that public’s dominance, rendering it infiltrated. Pussy Riot have proven several times that even as they risk the genre they continue to employ, their ability to perform, capture, and disseminate their reality to a wider (and newly inaugurated international) public has propelled the group from fringe resistance to transnational icons, themselves.

This is not to say that in any of the above case studies I have offered a how-to or an illustrated guide to subverting ungenerous discourses of power. In arguing for the role of a dominant public’s anxiety in the face of un-decoded resistance, though, I posit that one can observe moments where and when the subaltern effects publicity in the very uses of constraints necessarily levied by a dominant public. A system of meaning making, with all of its discourses and identities, functions to maintain its meaning in the face of disruption. The Riot Grrrl case study offers an account of how resistance functions by denying such maintenance and signification to a dominant public. Through attempts to avoid dominant signification and subsequent incorporation, Riot Grrrl leveraged dominant anxiety against itself. My next study offered one avenue for performing a new system of meaning-making, one that potentially reallocates ungenerous distributions of precarity. “We Can’t Breathe” operates necessarily to dismantle white paranoia in favor of the ethical possibilities enabled by the “subject’s opacity to itself.” The final case
study examined the strategic implementation of this framework to effect the publicity sought.

**Future Directions**

Kendall Phillips’ recent work in The Quarterly Journal of Speech seeks to reconfigure dissent’s “possibilities.” His work is noteworthy here for several reasons, but most of all for his research question, “What conditions . . . exist within the dominant structures of regular, habitual discourse to allow for the emergence of divergent statements and, most importantly, what are the consequences of their emergence?” In the tradition of Foucault, Phillips’ work focuses not on the strategies of the dissenter, but the preconditions that give rise to their possibility. He writes of “eventalizing” dissension where I write of “performatives” of resistance. Both strategies fight ideological incorporation into dominant narratives, as the most potent resistance rests in those moments that approach free play, where radical possibility remains open. It is in these moments, these furrows so exploited, that Phillips finds “The possibility that what we have now, the way we live, might not be necessary or essential.” Thought, or this moment of undecided potentiality, precedes the tactical performance of contingency argued above. Phillips concludes with the musing that “If scholars of rhetoric have a role in considering the dissenter it may well be in working to promote and provoke dissent in its most disruptive, singular, and thoughtful mode.”

Perhaps in the discursive arsenal and in the constitutive performances examined above the critical scholar may find tactics that could endure reproduction. Perhaps the activist may find ability to interrogate his or her ways of knowing *within* a fundamentally ungenerous discourse, and begin to dismantle its injurious components. Perhaps an
awareness of the ethical implications of a subject’s addressability may generate less constraining discourses. If our symbols perform a constitutive role in the world, and not merely one of representation, it must surely take incredible moments to disrupt them – what Phillips calls the moment of thought. Though his work on the subject remains anticipated at the time of this writing, Michael Hyde writes of such interruption as an ontological phenomenon. Like Butler, Hyde’s work works to interrupt the “limits of established regimes of truth.”

He writes in an early manuscript, “The interruption—that-we-are is never without the dimension of otherness that informs the self’s being; but neither is it ever without all the other people who can call us into question in the name of promoting justice.”

In the framework presented here, that “us” collapses into “all the other people” in, beyond a personal indictment, a structural one.

If, as I have argued, that resistant potential is found most surely where a dominant public cannot coopt that resistance’s discourse, the disruption of semantic order becomes at once the precondition for and an indication of the subaltern’s capacity in the public sphere. The understanding lends a much more serious and subversive valence to the line used earlier in this work, “The thing I really like about punk is that anything anyone writes about it is wrong.” A failure to articulate is not the same as an inability to articulate. Unlikely, unexpected, or even impossible articulations of self or society may be fundamentally more comprehensible with serious inquiry into their generative, discursive arenas. The ways a public thinks about itself and interacts with itself are not immutable, and those ways simply do change. The subaltern’s ability to perform the contingency of a regime of meaning is a powerful precondition for the possibility of elided public participation and the materiality entailed therein.
Endnotes


8 Sveinsdóttir, 719.

9 Sveinsdóttir, 723.

10 George Mead, “The Self,” Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality. eds Linda Alcoff, and Eduardo Mendieta, 1 edi


22 Phillips, 316.


26 Ibid, 523.

27 Ibid, 526.


33 Herstein, 49.


36 Ibid

37 Ibid, 48.
38 Ibid, 43.


44 Ibid, 7.


50 Hollander & Einwohner, 534-535.


52 Davies, 3-4.
53 Hollander & Einwohner, 545.


56 Borgerson, 71.

57 Herstein, 60.


59 Nussbaum, 44.


61 Borgerson, 63-79.

62 Herstein, 43-73.

63 McGowan.

64 Phillips, 329.

65 Ibid.


69 Ibid.


71 Ibid, 273.

72 Ibid, 274.

73 Ibid, 275.
I am terrified of this being read as something like, “women’s suffrage was given to women by men.” Such movements persisted and succeeded because of decades of dedication and sacrifice by their proponents. To say that the success of any social movement relies on the welcoming hand of the oppressor is not my intention at all. In fact, it is a dangerous and cowardly position to take. What I mean to argue, on the contrary, is that some acts of resistance subvert discursive constraints so robustly on account of their refusals. In the cases to be studied, I hope to show that these refusals actually permit (unwittingly) the political viability of the acts through the garnering of social intelligibility.

Guidry & Sawyer, 285.

Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 222.


Guidry & Sawyer, 286.

Brickell, 33.

Butler, Gender Trouble, 139.

Recall, it is the rhetorical nature of the subject position that allows this sort of identity play.

Phillips, 324.

Magnus, 92.

Brickell, 37.


Hollander & Einwohner, 539.

Davies, 3.


In marching under the banner, “Slut,” those marching accrue the very agency the accusation would seek to erase. Similarly, in reversing a power dynamic previously taken for granted, the harassed woman who photographs a cat-caller inverts a power dynamic by means of its very performance.


While it isn’t my joke to propagate, the fake band name *Kathleen Hanna Montana* has made some wide rounds thanks to these tweets in question.

104 Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution, 528.

105 I feel compelled to qualify that such an elision (read: a subjective shift, a gathering of points of identification, some of which political) is, in this framework, assumed to be a good. This maneuver works toward the publicity so here sought, and ensures the abject subject (at least her/his identity as such) is not civilized.


107 Excerpt from Bikini Kill 2 re-printed in:

Fateman, Johanna, and Kathleen Hanna. The Riot Grrrl Collection. Edited by Lisa Darms. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013. 136. Further, the scholarly prerogative to insert [sic] is probably a colonizing maneuver, the irony of which in this context is not lost on this author.

108 Ibid, 143.

109 Ibid.

110 “Jealousy” often stylized as “The ‘J’ Word” is so presented as to convey its danger – exactly akin to more socially recognized pejoratives associated with race. In this associative elision, some authority is garnered. This almost mirrors the Rhetorical Maneuver of Kendall Phillips, but in this case it is a recourse to a subject position in which only some members of the constrained party participate.


The film compiles interview as well as concert footage to the end of showcasing and explaining this tactic. The physically abusive nature of punk shows was exactly mirrored by the psychically abusive nature of the male punks, themselves. In this tactic, and indeed this glimpse into what Bikini Kill was as a performance, we see the inherent danger and incredible bravery that was the “experiment” of “Girls to the Front!” The segment features NPR music critic Ann Powers, as she reveals that “Men could be in the room, but men could never dominate the room. It was a flip of the script that blew peoples’ minds . . . All of that incredibly rich stuff that made punk what it was had been just tamped down by the boy mosh pit, you know?”

112 Fateman & Hanna, 31.

Ibid, 46.


Fateman & Hanna, 13.

Ibid, 143. This is an excerpt from the ninth tenet of the Manifesto.


Ibid, 19.

If it sounds like I’m gushing, I am.


Ibid, 95-97.


Anderson, *Singer*.

Fateman & Hanna, 309.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Jacques, 46.

Ibid, 50.

Hebdige, 94.

Jacques, 49.

Hebdige, 104.

Davies, 23.
To break the fourth wall for a moment, Vail’s passage floored me. I had so many emotions.


Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*, 43.


Ibid, 114.


Cho, 84.

Schilt, 9.

Garland, *Aren’t All That Different*

Davies, 14.


Harold & DeLuca, *Behold*,


Butler & Athanasiou, xi.

McKerrow, 89.


Ibid.

Ibid, 15.

Verdicts like Ethan Couch’s offer a stark contrast to the fate of those not even alive to make it to court. Couch’s was the Affluenza defense of 2013. Ethan is white, and after killing four people was sentenced to probation. See “Texas Teen Ethan Couch Gets 10 Years’ Probation for Driving Drunk, Killing 4” - CNN.com.” CNN.


Ibid, 21.


Ibid, 22.
Recall that if it is by such interpellations subjects may exist at all, how can one account for the removal of material violence without shedding the historically oppressed identity?


Ibid.

Ibid.


Butler, What’s Wrong?

Ibid.

Ibid.

Butler & Athanasiou, 15.

Butler, What’s Wrong?

Butler & Athanasiou, 4.

Ibid, ix.

Ibid, 32-33.

Ibid, ix.

Ibid, 88.


193 Butler & Athanasiou, 78.

194 Ibid, 79.

195 Fanon, 82, 84. See also Butler & Athanasiou, 79-80.

196 Butler & Athanasiou, 80.

197 Fanon, 86.


200 Butler & Athanasiou, 110.


202 Ibid.


204 Butler & Athanasiou, 3.

205 “LRB · Slavoj Žižek · In the Grey Zone.” *London Review of Books*. http://www.lrb.co.uk/2015/02/05/slavoj-zizek/in-the-grey-zone.

206 Butler & Athanasiou, 119.

207 Ibid.

208 Fanon, 181.

Ibid, 185.

Ibid, 86.


Delicath, John W., and Kevin Michael DeLuca. “Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentative Practice: The Case of Radical Environmental Groups.” Argumentation 17, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 315–33.


Ibid. Sasha is from the band Jack Wood.

Hebdige, Subculture.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

It is because of the inversion of this platform/message dynamic that I do not think The Dixie Chicks were “subversive.” An early criticism of this project was levied in this regard following a very, very early presentation of the idea.


Bruce, 48.

Ibid, 45.

Ibid, 49.


Cho, *The Politics of Suffering*

Ibid, 87.

I am operating fundamentally from a premise of not enjoying the display of pain— even deserved pain. This may be a personal commitment not shared by many, but it is needed for the argument that suffering communicates in a more nuanced way than through the symbol of “justice.”


Ibid, 48.


Bruce, 50-51.

Riot, 49.

Bruce, 49-50.

Hebdige, 91.
Ibid.

Ibid.

Hebdige, 104.


Ibid, 92-96.

Ibid, 95.

A thorough account of Russian politics and history is absent in this paper. It is likely the largest poverty of this effort, in that it renders me susceptible to criticism about Western propensities to identify with anti-Russian sentiments, specific message and context aside. Nevertheless, I fully believe in at least the possible utility of these pages.


Ibid.


Ibid, 22-23.


Ibid, 6.

Ibid, 7.


Ibid, 27.

Ibid.


Lee.

The Telegraph, Sky News, The Wall Street Journal, Vice Magazine and more have their own versions of the video online.


Riot, 111.

See Figure 1. Screen grab from “Putin will teach you how to love.” *Pussy Riot - Putin Will Teach You How to Love / Путин Научит Тебя Любить Родину,* 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjI0KYl9gWs&feature=youtube_gdata_player.


Timberg.

Nussbaum, *The Professor of Parody.*

Ekberg.


Ibid, 49.

Hariman, *Status*.


Butler & Athanasiou, 69.


Hebdige, 15-16.

Hanna, *On Reclaiming*.


Rankine, *Citizen*, 135.


Fateman & Hanna, 143.

Ibid.


Ibid, 70.

Ibid.


Davies, 3.
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