GENDER TROUBLE

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FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY

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defends and defends against. As I will argue in the case of Kristeva, subversion thus becomes a futile gesture, entertained only in a decentered aesthetic mode which can never be translated into other cultural practices.

In the case of the incest taboo, Lacan argues that desire (as opposed to need) is instituted through law. "Ineludible" existence within the terms of the Symbolic requires both the institutionalization of desire and its dissatisfaction, the necessary consequence of the repression of the original pleasure and need associated with the maternal body. This full pleasure that haunts desire as that which it can never attain is the irrecoverable memory of pleasure before the law. Lacan is clear that that pleasure before the law is only fantasized, that it recurs in the infinite phantasms of desire. But in what sense is the phantasm, itself forbidden from the literal recovery of an original pleasure, the constitution of a fantasy of "originality" that may or may not correspond to a literal libidinal state? Indeed, to what extent is such a question decidable within the terms of Lacanian theory? A displacement or substitution can only be understood as such in relation to an original, one which in this case can never be recovered or known. This speculative origin is always speculated about from a retrospective position, from which it assumes the character of an ideal. The sanctification of this pleasurable "beyond" is instituted through the invocation of a Symbolic order that is essentially unchangeable. Indeed, one needs to read the drama of the Symbolic, of desire, of the institution of sexual difference as a self-supporting signifying economy that wields power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility. Mobilizing the distinction between what is "before" and what is "during" culture is one way to foreground cultural possibilities from the start. The "order of appearances," the founding temporality of the account, as much as it contests narrative coherence by introducing the split into the subject and the fable into desire, reconstitutes a coherence at the level of temporal exposition. As a result, this narrative strategy, revolving upon the distinction between an irrecoverable origin and a perpetually displaced present, makes all effort at recovering that origin in the name of subversion inevitably belated.

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Subversive Bodily Acts

i. The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva

Kristeva's theory of the semiotic dimensions of language at first appears to engage Lacanian premises only to expose their limits and to offer a specifically feminine locus of subversion of the paternal law within language. According to Lacan, the paternal law structures all linguistic signification, termed "the Symbolic," and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture itself. This law creates the possibility of meaningful language and, hence, meaningful experience, through the repression of primary libidinal drives, including the radical dependency of the child on the maternal body. Hence, the Symbolic becomes possible by replicating the primary relationship to the maternal body. The "subject" who emerges as a consequence of this repression becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law. The libidinal chaos characteristic of that early dependency is now fully constrained by a unitary agent whose language is structured by that law. This language, in turn, structures the world by suppressing multiple meanings (which always recall the libidinal multiplicity which characterized the primary relationship to the maternal body) and instating univocal and discrete meanings in their place.

Kristeva challenges the Lacanian narrative which assumes cultural meaning requires the repression of that primary relationship to the maternal body. She argues that the "semiotic" is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body, which not only refutes Lacan's primary premise, but serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the Symbolic. For Kristeva, the semiotic expresses that original libidinal multiplicity within the very term of culture, more precisely, within poetic language in which multiple meanings
and semantic nonclosure prevail. In effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law.

Despite her critique of Lacan, however, Kristeva's strategy of subversion proves doubtful. Her theory appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace. Although she effectively exposes the limits of Lacan's efforts to universalize the paternal law in language, she nevertheless concedes that the semiotic is invariably subordinate to the Symbolic; that it assumes its specificity within the terms of a hierarchy immune to challenge. If the semiotic promotes the possibility of the subversion, displacement, or disruption of the paternal law, what meanings can those terms have if the Symbolic always reasserts its hegemony?

The criticism of Kristeva which follows takes issue with several steps in Kristeva's argument in favor of the semiotic as a source of effective subversion. First, it is unclear whether the primary relationship to the maternal body which both Kristeva and Lacan appear to accept is a viable construct and whether it is even a knowable experience according to either of their linguistic theories. The multiple drives that characterize the semiotic constitute a prediscursive libidinal economy which necessarily makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself. Manifest in language, in poetic language in particular, this prediscursive libidinal economy becomes a locus of cultural subversion. A second problem emerges when Kristeva argues that this libidinal source of subversion cannot be maintained within the terms of culture, that its sustained presence within culture leads to psychosis and to the breakdown of cultural life itself. Kristeva thus alternately posits and denies the semiotic as an emancipatory ideal. Although she tells us that it is a dimension of language regularly repressed, she also concedes that it is a kind of language which never can be consistently maintained.

In order to assess her seemingly self-defeating theory, we need to ask how this libidinal multiplicity becomes manifest in language, and what conditions its temporary lifespan there. Moreover, Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and deflates maternity as an essentially precultral reality. Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability. To ask whether a prediscursive libidinal multiplicity is possible, we will also consider whether Kristeva claims to discover in the prediscursive maternal body itself a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause.

If we accept Kristeva's theory of primary drives, it is unclear that the subversive effects of such drives can serve, via the semiotic, as anything more than a temporary and futile disruption of the hegemony of the paternal law. I will try to show that the political strategy follows in part from her largely uncritical appropriation of drive theory. Moreover, upon a careful scrutiny of her descriptions of the semiotic function within language, it appears that Kristeva reiterates the paternal law at the level of the semiotic itself. It is, then, that it seems that Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice. In the final part of this section, I will suggest a way to recuperate drives, language, and patriarchal pretense which might serve a more effective strategy of subversion.

Kristeva's description of the semiotic proceeds through a number of problematic steps. She assumes that drives have aims prior to their emergence into language, that language invariably reproduces or sublimates these drives, and that such drives are manifest only in those linguistic expressions which disburden, as it were, the univocal requirements of signification within the Symbolic domain. She claims further that the emergence of multiplicitous drives into language is evident in the semiotic, that domain of linguistic meaning distinct from the Symbolic, which is the maternal body manifest in poetic speech. As early as Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), Kristeva argues for a necessary causal relation between the heterogeneity of drives and the plurivocal possibilities of poetic language. Differing from Lacan, she maintains that poetic language is not predicated upon a repression of primary drives. On the contrary, poetic language, she claims, is the linguistic occasion that the original, univocal terms of language and reveal an irrespressible heterogeneity of multiple sounds and meanings. Kristeva thereby contests Lacan's equation of the Symbolic with all linguistic meaning by asserting that poetic language has its own domain of meaning which does not conform to the requirements of univocal designation.

In this same work, she subscribes to a notion of free or unencashed of energy which makes itself known in language through the poetic function. She claims, for instance, that in "the intertwining of drives in language . . . we shall see the economy of poetic language" and that in this economy, "the unitary subject can no longer find his place." This poetic function is a rejection or divisive linguistic function which tends to fracture and multiply meanings; it enacts the heterogeneity of drives through the proliferation and destruction of
univocal signification. Hence, the urge toward a highly differentiated or plurivocal set of meanings appears as the revenge of drives against the rule of the Symbolic, which, in turn, is predicated upon their repression. Kristeva defines the semiotic as the multiplicity of drives manifest in language. With their insistent energy and heterogeneity, these drives disrupt the signifying function. Thus, in this early work, she defines the semiotic as "the signifying function...connected to the modality of its primary process." 1

In the essays that comprise Desire in Language (1977), Kristeva ground her definition of the semiotic more fully in psychoanalytic terms. The primary drives that the Symbolic represses and the semiotic obliquely indicates are now understood as maternal drives, not only those drives belonging to the mother, but those which characterize the dependency of the infant's body (of either sex) on the mother. In other words, "the maternal body" designates a relation of continuity rather than a discrete subject or object of desire; indeed, it designates jouissance which precedes desire and the subject/object dichotomy that desire presupposes. While the Symbolic is predicated upon the rejection of the mother, the semiotic, through rhythm, assonance, intonations, sound play, and repetition, re-preserves or recovers the maternal body in poetic speech. Even the "first echolalias of infants" and the "glossalais in psychic discourse" are manifestations of the continuity of the mother-infant relation, a heterogenous field of impulse prior to the separation/individualization of infant and mother, alike effected by the imposition of the incest taboo. 2 The separation of the mother and infant effected by the taboo is expressed linguistically as the severing of sound from sense. In Kristeva's words, "a phoneme, as distinctive element of meaning, belongs to language as Symbolic. But this same phoneme is involved in rhythmic, intonational repetitions; it thereby tends toward autonomy from meaning so as to maintain itself in a semiotic disposition near the instinctual drive's body." 3

The semiotic is described by Kristeva as destroying or eroding the Symbolic; it is said to be "before" meaning, as when a child begins to vocalize, or "after" meaning, as when a psychotic no longer uses words to signify. If the Symbolic and the semiotic are understood as two modalities of language, and if the semiotic is understood to be generally repressed by the Symbolic, then language for Kristeva is understood as a system in which the Symbolic remains hegemonic except when the semiotic disrupts its signifying process through elision, repetition, mere sound, and the multiplication of meaning through indefinitely signifying images and metaphors. In its Symbolic mode, language rests upon a severance of the relation of maternal dependency, whereby it becomes abstract (abstraction from the materiality of language and univocal; this is most apparent in quantitative or purely formal reasoning). Language is engaged in a poetic recovery of the maternal body, that diffuse materiality that resists all discrete and univocal signification. Kristeva writes:

In any poetic language, not only do the rhythmic constraints, for example, go so far as to violate certain grammatical rules of a "national language...but in recent texts, these semiotic constraints (rhythm, vocalic timbre, line as a system of disposition on the page) are accompanied by nonrecoverable syntactic elisions; it is impossible to reconstitute the particular elided syntactic category (object or verb), which makes the meaning of the utterance decidable. 4

For Kristeva, this undecidability is precisely the instinctual moment in language, its disruptive function. Poetic language thus suggests a dissolution of the coherent, signifying subject into the primary continuity which is the maternal body:

Language as Symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing insinuational drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (from whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed, insinuational, maternal element. 5

Kristeva's references to the "subject" of poetic language are not wholly appropriate, for poetic language erodes and destroys the subject, where the subject is understood as a speaking being participating in the Symbolic. Following Lacan, she maintains that the prohibition against the incestuous union with the mother is the founding law of the subject, a foundation which severs or breaks the continuous relation of maternal dependency. In creating the subject, the prohibitive law creates the domain of the Symbolic, a system of univocally signifying signs. Hence, Kristeva concludes that "poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the equivalent of incest." 6 The breaking of Symbolic language against its own founding law or, equivalently, the emergence of rupture into language from within its own interior instability, is not merely the outburst of bidimensional heterogeneity into language; it also signifies the somatic state of dependency on the maternal body prior to the individuation of the ego. Poetic language thus always indicates a return to the

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1 Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 5.
2 Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 10.
3 Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 12.
6 Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 15.
maternal terrain, where the maternal signifies both libidinal dependency and the heterogeneity of drives. In "Motherhood According to Bellini," Kristeva suggests that, because the maternal body signifies the loss of coherent and discrete identity, poetic language verges on psychosis. And in the case of a woman's semiotic expressions in language, the return to the maternal signifies a prefigural homosexuality that Kristeva also clearly associates with psychosis. Although Kristeva concedes that poetic language is sustained culturally through its participation in the Symbolic and, hence, in the norms of linguistic communicability, she fails to allow that homosexuality is capable of the same nonpsychotic social expression. The key to Kristeva's view of the psychotic nature of homosexuality is to be understood, I would suggest, in her acceptance of the structuralist assumption that homosexuality is coextensive with the founding of the Symbolic. Hence, the cathexis of homosexual desire can be achieved, according to Kristeva, only through displacements that are sanctioned within the Symbolic, such as poetic language or the act of giving birth:

By giving birth, she women enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same community differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond.¹

According to Kristeva, the act of giving birth does not successfully reestablish that continuous relation prior to individuation because the infant invariably suffers the prohibition on incest and is separated off as a discrete identity. In the case of the mother's separation from the girl-child, the result is melancholy for both, for the separation is never fully completed.

As opposed to grief or mourning, in which separation is recognized and the libido attached to the original object is successfully displaced onto a new substitute object, melancholy designates a failure to grieve in which the loss is simply internalized and, in that sense, refused. Instead of a negative attachment to the body, the maternal body is internalized as a negation, so that the girl's identity becomes itself a kind of loss, a characteristic privation of the Symbolic, challenges the mastery of the univocal signifier, and diffuses the autonomy of the subject who postures as their necessary ground. The heterogeneity of drives operates culturally as a subversive strategy to separation from the maternal body. Hence, according to Kristeva, female homosexuality is the emergence of psychosis into culture:

The homosexual-maternal facet is a whirl of words, a complete absence of meaning and seeing, it is feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes, and fantasied clinging to the maternal body as a screen against the plunge... for a woman, a paradise lost but seemingly close at hand.²

For women, however, this homosexuality is manifest in poetic language which becomes, in fact, the only form of the semiotic, besides childbirth, which can be sustained within the terms of the Symbolic. For Kristeva, then, overt homosexuality cannot be a culturally sustainable activity, for it would constitute a breaking of the incest taboo in an immediate way. And yet why is this the case? Kristeva accepts the assumption that culture is equivalent to the Symbolic, that the Symbolic is fully submerged under the "Law of the Father," and that the only modes of nonpsychotic activity are those which participate in the Symbolic to some extent. Her strategic task, then, is neither to replace the Symbolic with the semiotic nor to establish the semiotic as a rival cultural possibility, but rather to validate those experiences within the Symbolic that permit a manifestation of the borders which divide the Symbolic from the semiotic. Just as birth is understood to be a cathexis of instinctual drives for the purposes of a social teleology, so poetic production is conceived as the site in which the split between instinct and representation exists in culturally communicable form:

The speaker reaches this limit, this requisite of sociality, only by virtue of a particular, discursive practice called "poet." A woman also attains it (and in our society, especially) through the strange form of split symbolisation (threshold of language and instinctual drive, of the "symbolical" and the "semiotic") of which the act of giving birth consists.³

Hence, for Kristeva, poetry and maternity represent privileged practices within paternally sanctioned culture which permit a nonpsychotic experience of that heterogeneity and dependency characteristic of the maternal terrain. These acts of poetry reveal an instinctual heterogeneity that subsequently repudiates the Symbolic, challenges the mastery of the univocal signifier, and diffuses the autonomy of the subject who postures as their necessary ground. The heterogeneity of drives operates culturally as a subversive strategy...
of displacement, one which dislodges the hegemony of the paternal law by releasing the repressed multiplicity interior to language itself. Precisely because that instinctual heterogeneity must be re-presented in and through the paternal law, it cannot defy the incest taboo altogether, but must remain within the most fragile regions of the Symbolic. Obeying, then, to syntactical requirements, the poetic-maternal practices of displacing the paternal law always remain tenuously tethered to that law. Hence, a full-scale refusal of the Symbolic is impossible, and a discourse of "transcategorization," for Kristeva, is out of the question. At best, tactical subversions and displacements of the law challenge its self-grounding presumption. But, once again, Kristeva does not seriously challenge the structuralist assumption that the prohibitive paternal law is foundational to culture itself. Hence, the subversion of paternally sanctioned culture can not come from another version of culture, but only from within the repressed interior of culture itself, from the heterogeneity of drives that constitutes culture's fenced out vulnerable.

This relation between heterogeneous drives and the paternal law produces an exceedingly problematic view of psychosis. On the one hand, it designates female homosexuality as a culturally unintelligible practice, inherently psychotic: on the other hand, it mandates maternity as a compulsory defense against libidinal chaos. Although Kristeva does not make either claim explicitly, both implications follow from her views on the law, language, and drives. Consider that for Kristeva poetic language breaks the incest taboo and, as such, emerges always on psychosis. As a return to the maternal body and a concomitant de-individualization of the ego, poetic language becomes especially threatening when uttered by women. The poetic then contests not only the incest taboo, but the taboo against homosexuality as well. Poetic language is thus, for women, both displaced maternal dependency and, because that dependency is libidinal, displaced homosexuality.

For Kristeva, the unmedicated cathexis of female homosexual desire leads unequivocally to psychosis. Hence, one can satisfy this drive only through a series of displacements: the incorporation of maternal identity— that is, by becoming a mother oneself—or through poetic language which manifests obliquely the heterogeneity of drives characteristic of maternal dependency. As the only socially sanctioned and, hence, nonpsychotic displacements for homosexual desire, both maternity and poetry constitute melancholic experiences for women appropriately acculturated into heterosexuality. The heterosexual poet-mother suffers interminably from the displacement of the homosexual cathexis. And yet, the consummation of this desire would lead to the psychotic unraveling of identity, according to Kristeva—the presumption being that, for women, heterosexuality and coherence are indissolubly linked in.

How are we to understand this constitution of lesbian experience as the site of an irretrievable self-loss? Kristeva clearly takes heterosexuality to be prerequisite to kinship and to culture. Consequently, she identifies lesbian experience as the psychic alternative to the acceptance of paternally sanctioned laws. And yet why is lesbianism constituted as psychosis? From what cultural perspective is lesbianism constructed as a site of fatal self-loss, and psychosis?

By projecting the lesbian as "Other" to culture, and characterizing lesbian speech as the psychotic "whirl of words," Kristeva constructs lesbian sexuality as intrinsically unintelligible. This tactical dismissal and reduction of lesbian experience performed in the name of the law positions Kristeva within the orbit of paternal-heterosexual privilege. The paternal law which protects her from this radical incoherence is precisely the mechanism that produces the construct of lesbianism as a site of irrationality. Significantly, this description of lesbian experience is effected from the outside and tells us more about the fantasies that a fearful heterosexual culture produces to defend against its own homosexual possibilities than about lesbian experience itself.

In claiming that lesbianism designates a loss of self, Kristeva appears to be delivering a psychoanalytic truth about the repression necessary for individuation. The fear of such a "regression" to homosexuality is, then, a fear of losing cultural sanction and privilege altogether. Although Kristeva claims that this loss designates a place prior to culture, there is no reason to understand it as a new or unacknowledged cultural form. In other words, Kristeva prefers to explain lesbian experience as a regressive libidinal state prior to acculturation itself, rather than to take up the challenge that lesbianism offers to her restricted view of paternally sanctioned cultural laws. Is the fear encoded in the construction of the lesbian as psychotic the result of a developmentally necessitated repression, or is it, rather, the fear of losing cultural legitimacy and, hence, being cast, not outside or prior to culture, but outside cultural legitimacy, still within culture, but culturally "out-lawed"?

Kristeva describes both the maternal body and lesbian experience from a position of sanctioned heterosexuality that fails to acknowledge its own fear of losing that sanction. Her reification of the paternal law not only represses female homosexuality, but denies the varied meanings and possibilities of motherhood as a cultural practice. But cultural subversion is not really Kristeva's concern, for subversion, when it appears, emerges from beneath the surface of culture only
inevitably to return there. Although the semiotic is a possibility of language that escapes the paternal law, it remains inevitably within or, indeed, beneath the territory of that law. Hence, poetic language and the pleasures of maternity constitute local displacements of the paternal law, temporary subversions which finally submit to the law, against which they initially rebel. By relegating the source of subversion to a site outside of culture itself, Kristeva appears to foreclose the possibility of subversion as an effective or realizable cultural practice. Pleasure beyond the paternal law can be imagined only together with its inevitable impossibility.

Kristeva's theory of thwarted subversion is premised on her problematic view of the relation among drives, language, and the law. Her postulation of a subversive multiplicity of drives raises a number of epistemological and political questions. In the first place, if these drives are manifest only in language or cultural forms already determined as Symbolic, then how is it that we can verify their pre-Symbolic, onological status? Kristeva argues that poetic language gives us access to these drives in their fundamental multiplicity, but this answer is not fully satisfactory. Since poetic language is said to depend upon the prior existence of these multiplicitious drives, we cannot, then, in circular fashion, justify the postulated existence of these drives through recourse to poetic language. If drives must first be repressed for language to exist, and if we can attribute meaning only to that which is representable in language, then to attribute meaning to drives prior to their emergence into language is impossible. Similarly, to attribute a causality to drives which facilitates their transformative action into language and by which language itself is to be explained cannot reasonably be done within the confines of language itself. In other words, we know these drives as "causes" only in and through their effects, and, as such, we have no reason for not identifying drives with their effects. It follows that either (a) drives and their representations are coextensive or (b) representations preexist the drives themselves. This last alternative is, I would argue, an important one to consider, for how do we know that the instinctual object of Kristeva's discourse is not a construction of the discourse itself? And what grounds do we have for positing this object, this multiplicitious field, as prior to its signification? If poetic language must participate in the Symbolic in order to be culturally communicable, and if Kristeva's own theoretical texts are emblematic of the Symbolic, then where are we to find a convincing "outside" to this domain? Her postulation of a pre-discursivereal multiplicity becomes all the more problematic when we discover that maternal drives are considered part of a "biological destiny" and are themselves manifestations of "a non-symbolic, non-paternal causality." This pre-Symbolic, non-paternal causality is, for Kristeva, a semiotic, maternal causality, or, more specifically, a theological conception of maternal instincts:

Material compulsion, spurn of a memory belonging to the species that either binds together or splits apart to perpetuate itself, series of markers with no other significance than the eternal return of the life-death biological cycle. How can we valorize this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory? Heraclitus' flux, Epicurus' atoms, the whirling dust of caloric, Arab and Indian mystics, and the stippled drawings of psychics—all seem better metaphors than the theory of Being, the logos, and its laws.

Here, the repressed maternal body is not only the locus of multiple drives, but the bearer of a biological ideology as well, one which, it seems, makes itself evident in the early stages of Western philosophy, in non-Western religious beliefs and practices, in aesthetic representations produced by psychotic or near-psychotic states, and even in avant-garde artistic practices. But why are we to assume that these various cultural expressions manifest the self-same principle of maternal heterogeneity? Kristeva simply subordinates each of these cultural moments to the same principle. Consequently, the semiotic represents any cultural effort to displace the logos (which, curiously, the contrasts with Heraclitus' flux), where the logos represents the univocal signer, the law of identity. Her opposition between the semiotic and the Symbolic seduces here to a metaphysical quarrel between the principle of multiplicity that escapes the charge of contradiction and a principle of identity based on the suppression of that multiplicity. Oddly, that very principle of multiplicity that Kristeva everywhere defends operates in much the same manner as a principle of identity. Note the way in which all manner of things "primitive" and "Oriental" are summarily subordinated to the principle of the maternal body. Surely, her description warrants only the charge of Orientalism, but raises the very significant question of whether, ironically, multiplicity has become a univocal signer.

Her aspiration of a teleological aim to maternal drives prior to their formation in language or culture raises a number of questions about Kristeva's political program. Although she clearly sees subservive and disruptive potential in those semiotic expressions that challenge the hegemony of the paternal law, it is less clear in what precisely this subversion consists. If the law is understood to rest on a constructed ground, beneath which lurks the repressed maternal terrain, what
concrete cultural options emerge within the terms of culture as a consequence of this revelation. Overtly, the multiplicity associated with the maternal ibdinal economy has the force to disperse the universality of the paternal signifier and seemingly to create the possibility of other cultural expressions no longer tightly constrained by the law of non-contradiction is this disruptive activity the opening of a field of significations, or is it the manifestation of a biological archaism which operates according to a natural and "preparenatal" causality? If Kristeva believed the former were the case (and she does not, then she would be interested in a displacement of the paternal law in favor of a proliferating field of cultural possibilities. But instead, she prescribes a return to a principle of maternal heterogeneity which proves to be a closed concept, indeed, a heterogeneity confounded by a teleology both unilinear and univocal. Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female ibdinal drive that constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality. Here Kristeva reifies maternity and then promotes this relocation as the disruptive potential of the semiotic. As a result, the paternal law, understood as the ground of univocal signification, is displaced by an equally univocal signifier, the principle of the maternal body which remains self-identical in its teleology regardless of its "multiplicitous" manifestations.

Insofar as Kristeva conceptualizes this maternal instinct as having an ontological status prior to the paternal law, she fails to consider the way in which that very law might well be the cause of the very desire it is said to express. Rather than the manifestation of a preparenatal causality, these desires might attune to maternity as a social practice required and recapitulated by the exigencies of kinship. Kristeva accepts Levi-Strauss' analysis of the exchange of women as prerequisite for the consolidation of kinship bonds. She understands this exchange, however, as the cultural moment in which the maternal body is repressed, rather than as a mechanism for the compulsory cultural construction of the female body as a maternal body. Indeed, we might understand the exchange of women as imposing a compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce. According to Gayle Rubin's reading of Lévi-Strauss, kinship effects a "sculpting of... sexuality" such that the desire to give birth is the result of social practice, which require and produce such desires in order to effect their reproductive ends.

What grounds, then, does Kristeva have for inquiring a maternal teleology to the female body prior to its emergence into culture? To pose the question in this way is already to question the distinction between the Symbolic and the semiotic on which her conception of

the maternal body is premised. The maternal body in its originary signification is considered by Kristeva to be prior to signification itself; hence, it becomes impossible within her framework to consider the maternal itself as a signification, open to cultural variability. Her argument makes clear that maternal drives constitute those primary processes that language invariably represents. But, what happens to her argument could be recast within an even more encompassing framework: What cultural configuration of language, indeed, of discourse, generates the trope of a pre-discursive ibdinal multiplicity, and for what purposes?

By restricting the paternal law to a prohibitive or repressive function, Kristeva fails to understand the paternal mechanisms by which affectivity itself is generated. The law that is said to be the semiotic may well be the governing principle of the semiotic itself, with the result that what passes as "maternal instinct" may well be a culturally constructed desire which is interpreted through a naturalistic vocabulary. And if that desire is constructed according to a law of kinship which requires the heterosexual production and reproduction of desire, then the vocabulary of naturalistic affect effectively renders that "paternal law" invisible. What Kristeva's pre-parenatal causality would then appear as a pre-parenatal causality under the guise of the governmental or more specifically maternal causality.

Significantly, the figure of the maternal body and the teleology of its instincts as a self-identical and insistent metaphysical principle— as archaism of a collective, sex-specific biological constitution—bases itself on a universal conception of the female sex. And this sex, conceived as both origin and causality, poses as a principle of pure generativity. Indeed, for Kristeva, it is equated with poetics itself, that activity of making upheld in Plato's Symposium as an act of birth and poetic conception as once. But is it generative truly an uncaused cause, and does it begin the narrative that takes all of humanity under the force of the incest taboo and into language? Does the pre-parenatal causality whereby Kristeva speaks signify a primary female economy of pleasure and meaning? Can we reverse the very order of this causality and understand this semiotic economy as a production of a prior discourse?

In the final chapter of Foucault's first volume of The History of Sexuality, he cautions against using the category of sex as a "fictitious unity...[and] causal principle" and argues that the fictitious category of sex facilitates a reversal of causal relations such that "sex" is understood to cause the structure and meaning of desire:
the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conduct, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified."

For Foucault, the body is not "sexed" in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an "idea" of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is an historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity. As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce "sex" as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis.

Foucault's framework suggests a way to solve some of the epistemological and political difficulties that follow from Kristeva's view of the female body. We can understand Kristeva's assertion of a "pre-paternal causality" as fundamentally inverted. Whereas Kristeva postulates a maternal body prior to discourse that exerts its own causal force in the structure of drives, Foucault would doubtless argue that the discursive production of the maternal body as prediscursive is a tactic in the self-amplification and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. In these terms, the maternal body would no longer be understood as the hidden ground of all significance, the tactic cause of all culture. It would be understood, rather, as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire.

If we accept Foucault's framework, we are compelled to re-examine the maternal libidinal economy as a product of an historically specific organization of sexuality. Moreover, the discourse of sexuality, itself suffused by power relations, becomes the true ground of the trope of the prediscursive maternal body. Kristeva's formulation suffers a thoroughgoing reversal: The Symbolic and the semiotic are no longer interpreted as those dimensions of language which follow upon the repression or manifestation of the maternal libidinal economy. This very economy is understood instead as a reification that both extends and conceals the institution of motherhood as compulsory for women. Indeed, when the desires that maintain the institution of motherhood are transvalued as pre-paternal and pre-cultural drives, then the institution gains a permanent legitimation in the invariant structures of the female body. Indeed, the clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity. Kristeva, safeguarding that law of a biologically necessitated maternity as a subversive operation that pre-exists the paternal law itself, aids in the systematic production of its invisibility and, consequently, the illusion of its inevitability.

Because Kristeva restricts herself to an exclusively prohibitive conception of the paternal law, she is unable to account for the ways in which the paternal law generates certain desires in the form of natural drives. The female body that she seeks to express is itself a construct produced by the very law it is supposed to undermine. In no way do these criticisms of Kristeva's conception of the paternal law necessarily invalidate her general position that culture or the Symbolic is predicated upon a repudiation of women's bodies. I want to suggest, however, that any theory that asserts that signification is predicated upon the denial or repression of a female principle ought to consider whether that femaleness is really external to the cultural norms by which it is repressed. In other words, on my reading, the repression of the feminine does not require that the agency of repression and the object of repression be ontologically distinct. Indeed, repression may be understood to produce the object that it comes to deny. That production may well be an elaboration of the agency of repression itself. As Foucault makes clear, the culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of repression is prohibitive and generative at once and makes the problematic of "liberation" especially acute. The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, positing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation. In order to avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed, it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtext of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.

ii. Foucault, Herculine, and the Politics of Sexual Discontinuity

Foucault's genealogical critique has provided a way to criticize those Lacanian and neo-Lacanian theories that cast culturally marginal forms of sexuality as culturally unintelligible. Writing within
the terms of a disillusionment with the notion of a libidinal Eros, Foucault understands sexuality as saturated with power and offers a critical view of theories that lay claim to a sexuality before or after the law. When we consider, however, those textual occasions on which Foucault criticizes the categories of sex and the power regime of sexuality, it is clear that his own theory of a more unacknowledged emancipatory ideal that proves increasingly difficult to maintain, even within the strictures of his own critical apparatus.

Foucault's theory of sexuality offered in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* is in some ways contradicted by his short but significant introduction to the journals he published of Hercule Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite. Hercule was assigned the sex of "femelle" at birth. In her early twenties, after a series of confessions to doctors and priests, she was legally compelled to change her sex to "male." The journals that Foucault claims to have found are published in this collection, along with the medical and legal documents that discuss the basis on which the designation of her "true sex" was decided. A satiric short story by the German writer, Oscar Panizza, is also included. Foucault supplies an introduction to the English translation of the text in which he questions whether the notion of a true sex is necessary. At first, this question appears to be continuous with the critical genealogy of the category of "sex" he offers toward the conclusion of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality.* However, the journals and their introduction offer an occasion to consider Foucault's reading of Hercule against his theory of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I.* Although he argues in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality is conjunctive with power, he fails to recognize the concrete relations of power that both construct and condemn Hercule's sexuality. Indeed, he appears to romanticize her world of pleasures as the "happy limbo of a non-identity" (xiii), a world that exceeds the categories of sex and identity. The reemergence of a discourse on sexual difference and the categories of sex within Hercule's own autobiographical writings will lead to an alternative reading of Herculine against Foucault's romanticized appropriation and refusal of her text.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality,* Foucault argues that the univocal construct of "sex" (one is one's sex and, therefore, not the other) is (a) produced in the service of the social regulation and control of sexuality and (b) conceals and artificially unifies a variety of disparate and unrelated sexual functions and thus (c) poses within discourse as a cause, an interior essence which both produces and renders intelligible all manner of sensation, pleasure, and desire as sex-specific. In other words, bodily pleasures are not merely causally reducible to this ostensibly sex-specific essence, but they become readily interpretable as manifestations or signs of this "sex."*

In opposition to this false construction of "sex" as both univocal and causal, Foucault engages a reverse-discourse which treats "sex" as an effect rather than an origin. In the place of "sex" as an original and continuous cause and signification of bodily pleasures, he proposes "sexuality" as an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces "sex" as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, perpetuate power-relations. One way in which power is both perpetuated and concealed is through the establishment of an external or arbitrary relation between power, desire, and sex, conceived as an effect but thwarted by its own antithetic effect: self-expression. The use of this juridical model assumes that the relation between power and sexuality is not only ontologically distinct, but that power always and only works to subdue or liberate a sex which is fundamentally intact, self-sufficient, and other than power itself. When "sex" is essentialized in this way, it becomes ontologically immunized from the power relations and from its own historicity. As a result, the analysis of sexuality is collapsed into the analysis of "sex," and any inquiry into the historical production of the category of "sex" itself is precluded by this inverted and falsifying causality. According to Foucault, "sex" must not only be recontextualized within the terms of sexuality, but juridical power must be reconceived as a construction produced by a generative power which, in turn, conceals the mechanism of its own productivity.

the notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the model that power is the relation to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irrecusable agency which power tries to test it can to dominate. (154)

Foucault explicitly takes a stand against emancipatory or liberating models of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality* because they subscribe to a juridical model that does not acknowledge the historical production of "sex" as a category, that is, as a mystifying "effect" of power relations. His ostensible problem, as a cause, an interior essence which both produces and renders intelligible all manner of sensation, pleasure, and desire as sex-specific. In other words, bodily pleasures are not
of departure, Foucault understands his own project to be an inquiry into how the category of "sex" and sexual difference are constructed within discourse as necessary features of bodily identity. The juridical model of law which structures the feminist emancipatory model presumes, in his view, that the subject of emancipation, "the sexed body" in some sense, is not itself in need of a critical deconstruction. As Foucault remarks about some humanist efforts at prison reform, the criminal subject who gets emancipated may be even more deeply shackled than the humanist originally thought. To be sexed, for Foucault, is to be subjected to a set of social regulations, to have the law that directs those regulations reside both as the formative principle of one's sex, gender, pleasures, and desires and as the hermeneutic principle of self-interprestation. The category of sex is thus inevitably regulative, and any analysis which makes that category presuppositional uncritically extends and further legitimates that regulative strategy as a power/knowledge regime.

In editing and publishing the journals of Herculine Barbin, Foucault is clearly trying to show how an hermaphroditic or intersexed body implicitly exposes and refutes the regulative strategies of sexual categorization. Because he thinks that "sex" unifies bodily functions and meanings that have no necessary relationship with one another, he predicts that the disappearance of "sex" results in a happy dispersal of these various functions, meanings, organs, somatic and physiological processes as well as in the proliferation of pleasures outside of the framework of intelligibility enforced by univocal sexuals within a binary relation. The sexual world in which Herculine resides, according to Foucault, is one in which bodily pleasures do not immediately signify "sex" as their primary cause and ultimate meaning; it is a world, he claims, in which "grins hung about without the cat" (xiii). Indeed, these pleasures are clearly transcendent the regulation imposed upon them, and here we see Foucault's sentimental indulgence in the very emancipatory discourse his analysis in The History of Sexuality was meant to displace. According to this Foucalsitan model of emancipatory sexual politics, the overthrow of "sex" results in the release of a primary sexual multiplicity, a notion not so far afield from the psychoanalytic postulation of primary polymorphism or Marcuse's notion of an original and creative bisexual Eros subsequently repressed by an instrumentalist culture.

The significant difference between Foucault's position in the first volume of The History of Sexuality and in his introduction to Herculine Barbin is already to be found as an unresolved tension within the

History of Sexuality itself (he refers there to "bucolic" and "innocent" pleasures of intergenerational sexual exchange that exist prior to the imposition of various regulative strategies [31]). On the one hand, Foucault wants to argue that there is no "sex" in itself which is not produced by complex interactions of discourse and power, and yet there does seem to be a "multiplicity of pleasures" in itself which is not the effect of any specific discourse/power exchange. In other words, Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality "before the law," indeed, a sexuality waiting for emancipation from the shackles of "sex." On the other hand, Foucault officially insists that sexuality and power are coextensive and that we must not think that by saying yes to sex we say no to power. In his antijuridical and anti-emancipatory mode, the "official" Foucault argues that sexuality is always situated within matrices of power, that it is always produced or constructed within specific historical practices, both discursive and institutional, and that recourse to a sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics.

The journals of Herculine provide the opportunity to read Foucault against himself, or, perhaps more appropriately, to expose the constitutive contradiction of this kind of anti-emancipatory call for sexual freedom. Herculine, called Alexina throughout the text, narrates a story about her tragic plight as one who lives a life of unjust victimization, deceit, longing, and inevitable dissatisfaction. From the time she was a young girl, she reports, she was different from the other girls. This difference is a cause for alternating states of anxiety and self-importance through the story, but it is there as tacit knowledge before the law becomes an explicit actor in the story. Although Herculine does not report directly on her anatomy in the journals, the medical reports that Foucault publishes along with Herculine's own text suggest that Herculine might reasonably be said to have what is described as either a small penis or an enlarged clitoris, that there one might expect to find a vagina one finds a "cul-de-sac," as the doctors put it, and, further, that she doesn't appear to have identifiably female breasts. There seems also to be some capacity for ejaculation that is not fully accounted for within the medical documents. Herculine never refers to anatomy as such, but relates her predication in terms of a natural mistake, a metaphysical homelessness, a state of inextinguishable desire, and a radical solidarity that, before her suicide, is transformed into a full-blown rage, first directed toward men, but finally toward the world as such.

Herculine relates in elliptical terms her relations with the girls at school, the "mothers" at the convent, and finally her most passionate
attachment with Sara who becomes her lover. Plagued first with guilt and then with some unspecified genital ailment, Herculeine exposes her secret to a doctor and then to a priest, a set of confessional acts that effectively force her separation from Sara. Authorities confer and effect her legal transformation into a man whereupon she is legally obligated to dress in men's clothing and to exercise the various rights of men in society. Written in a sentimental and melodramatic tone, the journals report a sense of perpetual crisis that culminates in suicide. One could argue that prior to the legal transformation of Alexa into a man, she was free to enjoy those pleasures that are effectively free of the juridical and regulatory pressures of the category of "sex." Indeed, Foucault appears to think that the journals provide insight into pre-legalized field of pleasure prior to the imposition of the law of univocal sex.

His reading, however, constitutes a radical misreading of the way in which those pleasures are always already embedded in the pervasive but inarticulate law and, indeed, generated by the very law they are said to defy.

The temptation to romanticize Herculeine's sexuality as the upstart play of pleasures prior to the imposition and restrictions of "sex" surely ought to be refused. It still remains possible, however, to ask the alternative Foucaultian question: What social practices and conventions produce sexuality in this form? In pursuing the question, we have, I think, the opportunity; and that is to understand something about (a) the productive capacity of power—that is, the way in which regulative strategies produce the subjects they come to subjugate; and (b) the specific mechanism by which power produces sexuality in the context of this autobiographical narrative. The question of sexual difference reemerges in a new light when we dispense with the metaphysical reification of multiplex sexuality and inquire in the case of Herculeine into the concrete narrative structures and political and cultural conventions that produce and regulate the tender kisses, the diffuse pleasures, and the thwarted and transgressive thrills of Herculeine's sexual world.

Among the various matrices of power that produce sexuality between Herculeine and her partners are, dearly, the conventions of female homosexuality both encouraged and condemned by the convent and its supporting religious ideology. One thing about Herculeine we know is that she reads, and reads a good deal, that her nineteenth-century French education involved schooling in the classics as well as French Romanticism, and that her own narrative takes place within an established set of literary conventions. Indeed, these conventions produce and interpret for us this sexuality that both Foucault and Herculeine take to be outside of all convention. Romantic and sentimental narratives of impossible loves seem also to produce all manner of desire and suffering in this text, and so Christian legend about ill-fated saints, Greek myths about suicidal androgyne and, obviously, the Christ figure itself. Whether "before" the law as a multiplex sexuality or "outside" the law as an unnatural transgression, those positioning are invariably "inside" discourses which disavow sexuality and then conceals that production through a configuring of a courageous and rebellious sexuality "outside" of the text itself.

The effort to explain Herculeine's sexual relations with men through recourse to the masculine component of her biological doubleness is, of course, the constant temptation of the text. If Herculeine desires a girl, then perhaps there is evidence in hormonal or chromosomal structures or in the anatome of the person prior to the imposition of the law of univocal sex to suggest a more discrete, masculine sex that subsequently generates heterosexual capacity and desire. The pleasures, the desires, the acts—do they not in some sense emanate from the biological body, and is there not some way of understanding that emanation as both causally necessitated by that body and expressive of its sex-specificity? Perhaps because Herculeine's body is hermaphroditic, the struggle to separate conceptually the description of her primary sexual characteristics from her gender identity (her sense of her own gender which, by the way, is ever-shifting and far from clear) and the directionality and objects of her desire is especially difficult. She herself presumes at various points that her body is the cause of her gender confusion and her/er transgressive pleasures, as if they were both result and manifestation of an essence which somehow falls outside the natural/metaphysical order of things. But real narrative. The question of her/anomalous body as the cause of her desire, her trouble, her affairs and confession, we might read this body, here fully textualized, as a sign of an irresolvable ambivalence produced by the juridical discourse on univocal sex. In the place of univocity, we fail to discover multiplicity, as Foucault would have us do; instead, we confront a fatal ambivalence, produced by the prohibitive law, which for all its effects of happy dispersal nevertheless culminates in Herculeine's suicide.

If one follows Herculeine's narrative self-exposition, itself a kind of confessional production of the self, it seems that her dénouement is one of ambivalence from the outset, that her sexuality recapitulates the ambivalent structure of its production, conveyed in part as the institutional injunction to pursue the love of various "sisters" and "mothers" of the extended convent family and the absolute prohibition against carrying that love too far. Foucault inadvertently
suggests that Herculeine's "happy limbo of a non-identity" was made possible by an historically specific formation of sexuality, namely, "her sequestered existence among the almost exclusive company of women." This "strange happiness," as he describes it, was at once "obligatory and forbidden" within the confines of convent conventions. His clear suggestion here is that this homosexual environment, structured as it is by an eroticized taboo, was one in which this "happy limbo of a non-identity" is subtly promoted. Foucault then swiftly retracts the suggestion of Herculeine as participating in a practice of female homosexual conventions, insisting that "non-identity" rather than a variety of female identities is at play. For Herculeine to occupy the discursive position of "the female homosexual" would be for Foucault to engage the category of sex—precisely what Foucault wants Herculeine's narrative to persuade us to reject.

But perhaps Foucault does want to have it both ways; indeed, he wants implicitly to suggest that nonidentity is what is produced in homosexual contexts—namely, that homosexuality is instrumental to the overthrow of the category of sex. Note in Foucault's following description of Herculeine's pleasures how the category of sex is at once invoked and refused: The school and the convent "foster the tender pleasures that sexual nonidentity discovers and provokes when it goes astray in the midst of all those bodies that are similar to one another" (xiv). Here Foucault assumes that the likenesses of these bodies condition the happy limbo of their nonidentity, a difficult formulation to accept both logically and historically, but also as an adequate description of Herculeine. Is it the awareness of their likeness that conditions the sexual play of the young women in the convent, or is it, rather, the eroticized presence of the law forbidding homosexuality that produces these transgressive pleasures in the compulsory mode of a confessional? Herculeine maintains her own discourse of sexual difference even within this ostensibly homosexual context; she not only enjoys her difference from the young women she desires, and yet this difference is not a simple reproduction of the heterosexual matrix for desire. She knows that her position in that exchange is transgressive, that she is a "surfer" of a masculine prerogative, as she puts it, and that she contests that privilege even as she replicates it.

The language of usurpation suggests a participation in the very categories from which she feels inevitably distanced, suggesting also the denaturalized and fluid possibilities of such categories once they are no longer linked causally or expressively to the presumed fixity of sex. Herculeine's anatomy does not fall outside the categories of sex, but confines and redistributes the constitutive elements of those categories; indeed, the free play of attributes has the effect of exposing the illusive character of sex as an abiding substantive substrate to which these various attributes are presumed to adhere. Moreover, Herculeine's sexuality constitutes a set of gender transgressions which challenge the very distinction between heterosexual and lesbian erotic exchange, underscoring the points of their ambiguous convergence and redistribution.

But it seems we are compelled to ask, is there not, even at the level of a discursively constituted sexual ambiguity, some questions of "sex" and, indeed, of its relation to "power" that set limits on the free play of sexual categories? In other words, how free is that play, whether conceived as a prediscursive libidinal multiplicity or as a discursively constituted multiplicity? Foucault's original objection to the category of sex is that it imposes the artifice of unity and unities on a set of ontologically disparate sexual functions and elements. In an almost Rousseauian move, Foucault constructs the binary of an artificial cultural law that reduces and distorts what we might well understand as a natural heterogeneity. Herculeine herself refers to her sexuality as "this incessant struggle of nature against reason" (103). A cursory examination of these disparate "elements," however, suggests their thorough medicalization as "functions," "sensations," even "drives." Hence, the heterogeneity to which Foucault appeals is itself constituted by the very medical discourse that he positions as the repressive juridical law. But what is this heterogeneity that Foucault seems to prize, and what purpose does it serve?
On the cover of the French edition, he remarks that Plutarch understood illustrious persons to constitute parallel lives which in some sense travel infinite lines that eventually meet in eternity. He remarks that there are some lives that veer off the track of infinity and threaten to disappear into an obscurity that can never be recovered—lives that do not follow the "straight" path, as it were, into an eternal community of greatness, but deviate and threaten to become fully irrecoverable. "That would be the inverse of Plutarch," he writes, "lives at parallel points that nothing can bring back together" (my translation). Here the textual reference is most clearly to the separation of Herculine, the adopted male name (though with a curiously feminine ending), and Alexina, the name that designated Herculine in the female mode. But it is also a reference to Herculine and Sara, her lover, who are quite literally separated and whose paths quite obviously diverge. But perhaps Herculine is in some sense also parallel to Foucault, parallel precisely in the sense in which divergent lifelines, which are in no sense "straight," might well be. Indeed, perhaps Herculine and Foucault are parallel, not in any literal sense, but in their very contestation of the literal as such, especially as it applies to the categories of sex.

Foucault's suggestion in the preface that there are bodies which are in some sense "similar" to each other disregards the hermaphroditic distinctness of Herculine's body, as well as her own presentation of herself as very much unlike the women she desires. Indeed, after some manner of sexual exchange, Herculine engages the language of appropriation and triumph, avowing Sara as her eternal property when she remarks, "From that moment on, Sara belonged to me...!!" (31). So why would Foucault resist the very text that he wants to use in order to make such a claim? In the one interview Foucault gave on homosexuality, James O' Higgins, the interviewer, remarks that "there is a growing tendency in American intellectual circles, particularly among radical feminists, to distinguish between male and female homosexuality," a position, he argues, that claims that very different things happen physically in the two sorts of encounters and that lesbians tend to prefer monogamy and the like while gay men generally do not. Foucault responds by laughing, suggested by the bracketed "(Laugh)," and he says, "All I can do is explode with laughter." This explosive laughter, we may remember, also followed Foucault's reading of Borges, reported in the preface to The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses):

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of

my thought... breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other."

The passage is, of course, from the Chinese encyclopedia which confounds the Aristotelian distinction between universal categories and particular instances. But there is also the "shattering laughter" of Pierre Riveire whose murderous destruction of his family, or, perhaps, for Foucault, of the family, seems quite literally to negate the categories of kinship and, by extension, of sex. And there is, of course, Bataille's now famous laughter which, Derrida tells us in Writing and Difference, designates that excess which escapes the conceptual mastery of Hegel's dialectic. Foucault, then, seems to laugh precisely because the question instates the very binary that he seeks to displace, that dreamy binary of Same and Other that has plagued not only the legacy of dialectics, but the dialectic of sex as well. But then there is, of course, the laugh of Medusa, which, Hélène Cixous tells us, shatters the placid surface constituted by the petrifying gaze and which exposes the dialectic of Same and Other as taking place through the axis of sexual difference. In a gesture that resonates self-consciously with the tale of Medusa, Herculine herself writes of "the cold fixity of my gaze...[that] seems to freeze" (105) those who encounter it.

But it is, of course, Irigaray who exposes this dialectic of Same and Other as a false binary, the illusion of a symmetrical difference which consolidates the metaphysical economy of phallogocentrism, the economy of the same. In her view, Other as well as the Same are marked as masculine; the Other is but the negative elaboration of the masculine subject with the result that the female sex is unrepresentable—that is, it is the sex which, within this signifying economy, is not one. But it is not one also in the sense that it eludes the univocal signification characteristic of the Symbolic, and because it is not a substantive identity, but always and only an undetermined relation of difference to the economy which renders it absent. It is not "one" in the sense that it is multiple and diffuse in its pleasures and its signifying mode. Indeed, perhaps Herculine's apparently multiplicitous pleasures would qualify for the mark of the feminine in its polyvalence and in its refusal to submit to the reductive efforts of univocal signification.

But let us not forget Herculine's relation to the laugh which seems to appear twice, first in the fear of being laughed at (23) and later as a laugh of scorn that she directs against the doctor, for whom she...
loves respect after he fails to tell the appropriate authorities the natural irregularity that has been revealed to him (71). For Herculine, then, laughter appears to designate either humiliation or scorn, two positions unambiguously related to a damming law, subjected to it either as its instrument or object. Herculine does not fall outside the jurisdiction of that law, even here exile is understood on the model of punishment. On the very first page, she reports that her "place was not marked out [pas marquée] in this world that shamed me." And she articulates the early sense of objection that is least exacted first as a devoted daughter or lover to be likened to a "dog" or a "slave," and then finally in a full and fatal form as she is expelled and expelled herself from the domain of all human beings. From this prudential isolation, she claims to soar above both sexes, but her anger is most fully directed against men, whose "rage" she sought to usurp in her intimacy with Sara and whom she now indicts without restraint as those who somehow forbid her the possibility of love.

At the beginning of the narrative, she offers two one-sentence paragraphs "parallel" to one another which suggest a melancholic incorporation of the lost father, a postponement of the anger of abandonment through the structural instatement of that negativity into her identity and desire. Before she tells us that she herself was abandoned by her mother quickly and without advance notice, she tells us that for reasons unnoted she spent a few years in a house for abandoned and orphaned children. She refers to the "poor-creatures, deprived from their cradle of a mother's love." In the next sentence she refers to this instigation as a "refuge [asile] of suffering and affection," and in the following sentence refers to her father "whose sudden death tore away... from the tender affection of my mother" (4). Although her own abandon is twice deflected here through the pity for others who are suddenly rendered motherless, she establishes an identification through that deflection, one that later reappears as the joint plight of father and daughter cut off from the maternal care. The deflections of desire are semantically compounded, as it were, as Herculine proceeds to fall in love with "mother" after "mother" and then falls in love with various mothers' "daughters," which scandalizes all manner of mother. Indeed, she vacillates between being the object of everyone's adoration and excite-ment and an object of scorn and abandonment, the split consequence of a melancholic structure left to feed on itself without intervention. If melancholy involves self-recrimination, as Frenz argues, and that recrimination is a kind of negative narcissism (attending to the self, even if only in the mode of berating that self), then Herculine can be understood to be constantly falling into the opposition between negative and positive narcissism, at once avowing her/herself as the most abandoned and neglected creature on earth but also as the one who casts a spell of enchantment on everyone who comes near her, indeed, one who is better for all women than any "man" (107).

She refers to the hospital for orphaned children as that early "refuge of suffering," an abode that she figures as the object of her close of the narrative as the "refuge of the tomb." Just as that early refuge provides a magical communion and identification with the phantom father, so the tomb of death is already occupied by the very father whom she hopes death will let her meet: "The sight of the tomb reconciles me to life," she writes. "It makes me feel an indefinite tenderness for the one whose bones are lying there beneath my feet [là à mes pieds]" (109). But this love, formulated as a kind of solidarity against the abandoning mother, is itself in no way purified of the anger of abandonment: The father "beneath [hier] feet" is ever enraged to become the totaler of men over whom she soars, and whom she claims to dominate (107), and toward whom she directs her laugh of disdain. Earlier she remarks about the doctor who discovered her/ her anomalous condition, "I wished he were a hundred feet underground!" (69).

Herculine's ambivalence here implies the limits of Foucault's theory of the "happy limb of a non-identity." Almost prefiguring the place Herculine will assume for Foucault, she wonders whether she is not "the playing of an impossible dream" (79). Herculine’s sexual disposition is one of ambivalence from the outset, and, as argued earlier, her sexuality recapitulates the ambivalent structure of that production, consoled in part as far as her sexuality is not outside the law, but is the ambivalent production of the law, one in which the very notion of prohibition spans the psychoanalytic and institutional terrains. Her confessions, as well as her desires, are subjected and defense at once. In other words, the love prohibited by death or abandonment, or both, is a love that takes prohibition to be its condition and its aim.

After submitting to the law, Herculine becomes a juridically sanctioned subject as a "mais," and yet the gender category proves unstable in her own references to Ovid's Metamorphoses suggest. Her heteroglossic discourse challenge the viability of the notion of a "person" who might be said to preexist gender or exchange one gender for the other. If she is not actively constituted by others, she condemns herself (even calls herself a "judge" [106]), revealing that the juridical law in effect is much greater than the empirical law that
effects is her gender conversion. Indeed, Herculeine can never embody that law precisely because she cannot provide the occasion by which that law naturalizes itself in the symbolic structures of anatomy. In other words, the law is not simply a cultural imposition on an otherwise natural heterogeneity; the law requires conformity to its own notion of "nature" and gains its legitimacy through the binary and asymmetrical naturalization of bodies in which the Phallus, though clearly not identical with the penis, nevertheless deploys the penis as its naturalized instrument and sign.

Herculeine's pleasures and desires are in no way the bucolic innocence that thrives and proliferates prior to the imposition of a juridical law. Neither does she fully fall outside the signifying economy of masculinity. She is "outside" the law, but the law maintains that "outside" within itself. In effect, she embodies the law, not as an entitled subject, but as an enacted testimony to the law's uncanny capacity to produce only those rebellions that it can guarantee will—out of fidelity—defeat themselves and those subjects who, utterly subjected, have no choice but to reiterate the law of their genesis.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Within The History of Sexuality, Volume I, Foucault appears to locate the quest for identity within the context of juridical forms of power that become fully articulate with the advent of the sexual sciences, including psychoanalysis, toward the end of the nineteenth century. Although Foucault revised his historiography of sex at the outset of The Use of Pleasure (L'Usage des plaisirs) and sought to discover the repressive/generative rules of subject-formation in early Greek and Roman texts, his philosophical project to expose the regulatory production of identity-effects remained constant. A contemporary example of this quest for identity can be found in recent developments in cell biology, an example that inadvertently confirms the continuing applicability of a Foucaultian critique.

One place to interrogate the universality of sex in the recent controversy over the master gene that researchers at MIT in late 1987 claim to have discovered as the secret and certain determinant of sex. With the use of highly sophisticated technological means, the master gene, which constitutes a specific DNA sequence on the Y chromosome, was discovered by Dr. David Page and his colleagues and named "TDF" or testis-determining factor. In the publication of its findings in Cell (No. 51), Dr. Page claimed to have discovered "the binary switch upon which hinges all sexually dimorphic characteristics." Let us then consider the claims of this discovery and see why the unsettling questions regarding the decidability of sex continue to be asked.

According to Page's article, "The Sex-Determining Region of the Human Y Chromosome Encodes a Finger Protein," samples of DNA were taken from a highly unusual group of people, some of whom had XX chromosomes, but had been medically designated as males, and some of whom had XY chromosomal constitution, but had been medically designated as female. He does not tell us exactly on what basis they had been designated contrary to the chromosomal findings, but we are left to presume that obvious primary and secondary characteristics suggested that those were, indeed, the appropriate designations. Page and his coworkers made the following hypothesis: There must be some stretch of DNA, which cannot be seen under the usual microscopic conditions, that determines the male sex, and this stretch of DNA must have been moved somehow from the Y chromosome, its usual location, to some other chromosome, where one would not expect to find it. Only if we could presume (a) this undetectable DNA sequence and (b) prove its translocatability, could we understand why it is that an XX male had no detectable Y chromosome, but was, in fact, still male. Similarly, we could explain the curious presence of the Y chromosome on females precisely because that stretch of DNA had somehow been misplaced.

Although the pool that Page and his researchers used to come up with this finding was limited, the speculation on which they base their research, in part, is that a good ten percent of the population has chromosomal variations that do not fit neatly into the XX-female and XY-male set of categories. Hence, the discovery of the "master-gene" is considered to be a more certain basis for understanding sex-determination and, hence, sex-difference, than previous chromosomal criteria could provide.

Unfortunately for Page, there was one persistent problem that haunted the claims made on behalf of the discovery of the DNA sequence. Exactly the same stretch of DNA said to determine maleness was, in fact, found to be present on the X chromosomes of females. Page first responded to this curious discovery by claiming that perhaps it was not the presence of the gene sequence in males versus its absence in females that was determining, but that it was active in males and passive in females (Aristotle lived!). But this suggestion remains hypothetical and, according to Anne Fausto-Sterling, Page and his coworkers failed to mention in that Cell article that the individuals from whom the gene samples were taken were far from unambiguous in their anatomical and reproductive const"
the four XX males whom they studied were all sterile (no sperm production), had small testes which totally lacked germ cells, i.e., precursor cells for sperm. They also had high hormone levels and low testosterone levels. Presumably they were classified as males because of their external genitalia and the presence of testes... Similarly... both of the XY females' external genitalia were normal, [but] their ovaries lacked germ cells. (328)

Clearly these are cases in which the component parts of sex do not add up to the recognizable coherence or unity that is usually designated by the category of sex. This incoherence troubles Page's argument as well, for it is unclear why we should agree at the outset that these are XX-males and XY-females, when it is precisely the designation of male and female that is under question and that is implicitly already decided by the recourse to external genitalia. Indeed, a external genitalia were sufficient as a criterion by which to determine sex, then the experimental research into the master gene would hardly be necessary at all.

But consider a different kind of problem with the way in which that particular hypothesis is formulated, tested, and validated. Notice that Page and his coworkers correlate sex-determination with male-determination, and with testis-determination. Geneticists Eva Eicher and Linda L. Washburn in the Annual Review of Genetics suggest that ovary-determination is never considered in the literature on sex-determination and that male/female is always conceptualized in terms of the absence of the sex-determining factor or of the presence of another factor. As absent or passive, it is definitively disqualiﬁed as an object of study. Eicher and Washburn suggest, however, that it is active and that a causal prejudice, indeed, a set of gendered assumptions about sex, and about what might make such an inquiry valuable, skew and limit the research into sex-determination. Fausto-Sterling quotes Eicher and Washburn:

Some investigators have overemphasized the hypothesis that the Y chromosome is involved in testis-determination by presenting the induction of testicular tissue as an active (gene-directed, dominant) event while presenting the induction of ovarian tissue as a passive (automatistic) event. Certainly, the induction of ovarian tissue is as much an active, genetically directed developmental process as the induction of testicular tissue, or for that matter, the induction of any cellular differentiation process. Almost nothing has been written about genes involved in the induction of ovarian tissu from the undifferentiated gonad. (325)

In related fashion, the entire field of embryology has come under criticism for its focus on the central role of the nucleus in cell differentiation. Feminist critics of the field of molecular cell biology have argued against its nuclear/centric assumptions. As opposed to a research orientation that seeks to establish the nucleus of a fully differentiated cell as the master or director of the development of a complete and well-formed new organism, a research program is suggested that would reframe the nucleus as something which gains its meaning and control only within its cellular context. According to Fausto-Sterling, "the question to ask is not how a cell nucleus changes during differentiation, but, rather, how the dynamic nuclear-cellular interactions alter during differentiation." (323–4)

The structure of Page's inquiry turns squarely within the general trends of molecular cell biology. The framework suggests a refusal from the outset to consider that these individuals implicitly challenge the descriptive force of the available categories of sex. What he pursues is that of the "binary switch" goes started, not whether the description of bodies in terms of binary sex is adequate to the task at hand. Moreover, the concentration on the "master gene" suggests that femaleness ought to be understood as the possession or absence of maleness or, at best, the presence of a passivity that, in men, would invariably be active. This claim is, of course, made within the research context in which active ovarian contributions to sex differentiation have never been strongly considered. The conclusion here is not that valid and demonstrable claims cannot be made about sex-determination, but rather that cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex-determination. The task of distinguishing sex from gender becomes all the more difﬁcult once we understand that gendered meanings frame the hypotheses and the reasoning of these biomedical inquiries that seek to establish "sex" for us as it is prior to the cultural meanings that it acquires. Indeed, the task is even more complicated when we realize that the language of biology participates in other kinds of languages and reproduces that cultural sedimentation in the objects it purports to discover and neutrally describe.

Is it not purely cultural convention to which Page and others refer when they decide that an anatomically ambiguous XX individual is male, a convention that takes gender to be the deﬁnitive "sign" of sex? One might argue that the discontinuities in these inferences cannot be resolved through recourse to a single determinant and that sex, as a category that comprises a variety of elements, functions, and chromosomal and hormonal dimensions, no longer operates within
the binary framework that we take for granted. The point here is not to seek recourse to the exceptions, the bizarre, in order merely to relativize the claims made in behalf of normal sexual life. As Freud suggests in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, however, it is the exception, the strange, that gives us the clue to how the mundane and taken-for-granted world of sexual meanings is constituted. Only from a self-consiously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted. The presuppositions that we make about sexed bodies, about them being one or the other, about the meanings that are said to inhere in them or to follow from being sexed in such a way are suddenly and significantly upset by those examples that fail to comply with the categories that naturalize and stabilize that field of bodies for us within the terms of cultural conventions. Hence, the strange, the incoherent, that which falls "outside," gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently.

Although we may not immediately agree with the analysis that Foucault supplies—namely, that the category of sex is constructed in the service of a system of regulatory and reproductive sexuality—it is interesting to note that Page designates the external genitalia, those anatomical parts essential to the symbolization of reproductive sexuality, as the unambiguous and a priori determinants of sex assignment. One might well argue that Page's inquiry is beset by two discourses that, in this instance, conflict: the cultural discourse that takes external genitalia to be the sure sign of sex, and does that in the service of reproductive interests, and the discourse that seeks to establish the male principle as active and monocular, if not autogenic. The desire to determine sex once and for all, and to determine it as one sex rather than the other, thus seems to issue from the social organization of sexual reproduction through the construction of the clear and unequivocal identities and positions of sexed bodies with respect to each other.

Because within the framework of reproductive sexualty the male body is usually figured as the active agent, the problem with Page's inquiry is, in a sense, to reconcile the discourse of reproduction with the discourse of masculinity, two discourses that usually work together culturally, but in this instance have come apart. Interesting, then, is Page's willingness to settle on the active DNA sequence as the last word, in effect giving the principle of masculine activity priority over the discourse of reproduction.

This priority, however, would constitute only an appearance, according to the theory of Monique Wittig. The category of sex belongs to a system of compulsory heterosexuality that clearly operates through a system of compulsory sexual reproduction. In Wittig's view, to which we now turn, "masculine" and "feminine," "male" and "female" exist only within the heterosexual matrix; indeed, they are the naturalized terms that keep that matrix concealed and, hence, protected from a radical critique.

iii. Monique Wittig: Bodily Disintegration and Fictive Sex

Language itself cheapens reality upon the social body—Monique Wittig

Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." The phrase is odd, even nonsensical, for how can one become a woman if one wasn't a woman all along? And who is this "one" who does the becoming? Is there some human who becomes its gender at some point in time? Is it fair to assume that this human was not its gender before it became its gender? How does one "become" its gender? What is the moment or mechanism of gender construction? And, perhaps most pertinently, when does this mechanism of sex work on the cultural scene to transform the human subject into a gendered subject?

Are there ever humans who are not, as it were, always already gendered? The mark of gender appears to "quality" bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, "is it a boy or a girl?" is answered. Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted. If gender is always there, determining in advance what qualifies as the human, how can we speak of a human who becomes its gender, as if gender were a postscript or a cultural afterthought?

Beauvoir, of course, meant merely to suggest that the category of women is a variable cultural accomplishment, a set of meanings that are taken on or taken up within a cultural field, and that no one is born with a gender—gender is always acquired. On the other hand, Beauvoir was willing to affirm that one is born with a sex, as a sex, sexed, and that being sexed and being human are coextensive and simultaneous; sex is an analytic attribute of the human; there is no human who is not sexed; sex qualifies the human as a necessary attribute. But sex does not cause gender, and gender cannot be understood to reflect or express sex; indeed, for Beauvoir, sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed—or so she thought—gender is the variable cultural construction of sex,
the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexual body.

Beauvoir's theory implied seemingly radical consequences, ones that she herself did not entertain. For instance, if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, "woman" need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and "man" need not interpret male bodies. This radical formulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different genders, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two. If sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex. Consider the further consequence that if gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort. If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex. Indeed, gender would be a kind of cultural/corporeal action that requires a new vocabulary that institutes and proliferates present participles of various kinds, resignifying and expansive categories that resist both the binary and the instantiating grammatical restrictions on gender. But how would such a project become culturally conceivable and avoid the fate of an impossible and vain utopian project?

"One is not a woman." Monique Wittig echoed that phrase in an article by the same name, published in Feminist Issues (1:1). But what sort of echo and re-presentation of Beauvoir does Monique Wittig offer? Two of her claims both recall Beauvoir and set Wittig apart from her: one, that the category of sex is neither invariant nor natural, but is a specifically political use of the category of nature that serves the purposes of reproductive sexuality. In other words, there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality. Hence, for Wittig, there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of "sex" is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural. The second rather counter-intuitive claim that Wittig makes is the following: a woman, she argues, only exists as a term that stabilizes and consolidates a binary and oppositional relation to a man; that relation, she argues, is heterosexual sexuality. A lesbian, she claims, in refusing heterosexuality is no longer defined in terms of that oppositional relation. Indeed, a lesbian, she maintains, wanes the opposition between woman and man; a lesbian is neither a woman nor a man. But further, a lesbian has no sex; she is beyond the categories of sex. Through the lesbian refusal of those categories (pronouns are a problem here) the contingent cultural constitution of those categories and the tacit yet abiding presumption of the heterosexual matrix. Hence, for Wittig, we might say, one is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born male, one becomes male; one becomes female; but even more radically, one can, if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man. Indeed, the lesbian appears to be a third gender or, as I shall show, a category exposes (pronouns are a problem here) the contingent cultural constitution of those categories and the tacit yet abiding presumption of the heterosexual matrix. Wittig argues that the linguistic discrimination of "sex" secures the political and cultural operation of compulsory heterosexuality. This relation of heterosexuality, she argues, is neither reciprocal nor binary in the usual sense; "sex" is already female, and there is only one sex, the feminine. To be male is not to be "sexed"; to be "sexed" is always a way of becoming patently and literally, and males within this system participate in the form of the universal person. For Wittig, "female sex" does not imply any other sex, as in a "male sex." The "female sex" implies only itself, enmeshed as it were, in sex, trapped in what Beauvoir called the circle of incommensurability. Because "sex" is a political and cultural interpretation of the body, there is no sex/gender distinction along conventional lines; gender is built into sex, and sex proves to have been gender from the start. Wittig argues that within this set of compulsory social relations, women become ontologically suffused with sex; they are the sex, and, conversely, sex is necessarily feminine.

Wittig understands "sex" to be discursively produced and circulated by a system of significations oppressive to women, gays, and lesbians. She refuses to take part in this signifying system or to believe in the viability of taking up a relation of opposition within the system; to invoke a part of it is to invoke and confirm the entirety of it. As a result, the political task she formulates is to overthrow the entire discourse on sex, indeed, to overthrow the very grammar that institutes gender—or "fictive sex"—as an essential attribute of humans and objects alike (especially pronounced in French). Through her theory and fiction she calls for a radical reorganization of the description of bodies and sexualities without end, consistently, without recourse to the pronoun-differentiations that regulate and distribute rights of speech within the matrix of gender.
Wittgen understands discursive categories like "sex" as abstractions forcibly imposed upon the social field, ones that produce a second-order or reified "reality." Although it appears that individuals have a "direct perception" of sex, taken as an objective datum of experience, Wittgen argues that such an object has been violently shaped into such a datum and that the history and mechanisms of that violent shaping no longer appears with that object. Hence, "sex" is the reality-effect of a violent process that is concealed by that very effect. All that appears is "sex," and so "sex" is perceived to be the totality of what is, uncoursed, but only because the cause is nowhere to be seen. Wittgen realizes that her position is counterintuitive, but the political cultivation of intuition is precisely what she wants to elucidate, expose, and challenge:

"Sex is taken as an "immediate given," a "sensible given," physical features, belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an "imagination," which reinterprets physical features as others (or even by a social system), through the network of relationships in which they are perceived."

"Physical features" appear to be in some sense there on the far side of language, unmarked by a social system. It is unclear, however, that these features could be named in a way that would not reproduce the reductive operation of the categories of sex. These numerous features gain social meaning and unification through their articulation within the category of sex. In other words, "sex" imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes. As both discursive and perceptual, "sex" belongs to a natural order, but what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived.

Is there a "bodily" perception of sex or is it a discursive construct? An impossible question to decide. Not only is the gathering of attributes under the category of sex suspect, but so is the very discrimination of the "features" themselves. That penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth, are named sexual parts is both a restriction of the ergogenus body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole. Indeed, the "unity" imposed upon the body by the category of sex is a "disunity," a fragmentation and compartmentalization, and a reduction of erotogeneity. No wonder, then, that Wittgen et al. encode the "overthrow" of the category of sex through a destruction and fragmentation of the sexed body in The Lesbian Body. As "sex" fragments the body, so the lesbian overthrow of "sex" targets as models of domination those sexually differentiated norms of bodily integrity that distill what "unifies" and renders coherent the body as a sexed body. In her theory and fiction, Wittgen shows that the "integrity" and "unity" of the body, often thought to be positive ideals, serve the purposes of fragmentation, restriction, and domination.

Language gains the power to create "the socially real" through the locutionary acts of speaking subjects. There appear to be two levels of reality, two orders of ontology, in Wittgen's theory. Socially constituted ontology emerges from a more fundamental ontology that appears to be pre-social and pre-discursive. Whereas "sex" belongs to a discursively constituted reality (second-order), there is a pre-social ontology that accounts for the constitution of the discursive itself. She clearly refuses the structurist assumption of a set of universal and signifying structures prior to the speaking subject that orchesrate the formation of that subject and his or her speech. In her view, there are historically contingent structures characterized by heterosexual and compulsory that distribute the rights of full and authoritative speech to males and deny them to females. But this socially constituted asymmetry disguises and violates a pre-social ontology of unified and equal persons.

The task for women, Wittgen argues, is to assume the position of the authoritarian, speaking subject—which is in some sense their ontologically grounded "right"—and to overthrow both the category of sex and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin. Language, for Wittgen, is a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as "facts." Collectively considered, the repeated practice of naming "sex" denotes an historically contingent epistemologic regime that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived. As both discursive and perceptual, "sex" belongs to a natural order, but what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived.
of the human sciences, "oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men" because they "take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality." Discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression—that is, take for granted the speaking subject's own impossibility or unintelligibility. This presumptive heterosexuality, she argues, functions within discourse to communicate a threat: "you will be straight or you will not be." Women, lesbians, and gay men, she argues, cannot assume the position of the speaking subject within the linguistic system of compulsory heterosexuality. To speak within the system is to be deprived of the possibility of speech; hence, to speak at all in that context is a performative contradiction, the linguistic assertion of a self that cannot "be" within the language that asserts it.

The power Wittig accords to this "system" of language is enormous. Concepts, categories, and abstractions, she argues, can effect a physical and material violence against the bodies they claim to organize and interpret: "There is nothing abstract about the power that sciences and theories have to act materially and actually upon our bodies and minds, even if the discourse that produces it is abstract. It is one of the forms of domination, its very expression, as Marx said, I would say, rather, one of its exercises. All of the oppressed know this power and have had to deal with it." The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression. Language works neither magically nor inexorably: "there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real." Language assumes and alters its power to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions. The asymmetrical structure of language that identifies who speaks for and as the universal with the male and identifies the female speaker as "particular" and "interested" is in no sense intrinsic to particular languages or to language itself. These asymmetrical positions cannot be understood to follow from the "nature" of men or women, for, as Beauvoir established, no such "nature" exists: "One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men. It does not happen, it must be done. It is an act, a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another. It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics."

Although Irigaray argues that "the subject is always already masculine," Wittig disputes the notion that "the subject" is exclusively masculine territory. The very plastiCity of language, for her, resists the fixing of the subject position as masculine. Indeed, the presumption of an absolute speaking subject is, for Wittig, the political goal for women, which, if achieved, will effectively dissolve the category of "women" altogether. A woman cannot use the first person singular as a cause as a woman, the speaker is "particular" (relative, interested, perspective), and the invocation of the "I" presumes the capacity to speak for and as the universal human: a "relative subjectivity is inescapable, a relative subject could not speak at all." Relating on the assumption that all speaking presupposes and implicitly invokes the entirety of language, Wittig describes the speaking subject as one proceeding from oneself alone, with the power to use all language. This absolute grounding of the speaking "I" assumes god-like dimensions within Wittig's discussion. This privilege to speak "I" establishes a sovereign self, a center of absolute plenitude and power; speaking establishes "the supreme act of subjectivity." This coming into subjectivity is the effective overthrow of sex and, hence, the feminine: "no woman can say I without being for herself a total subject—that is, ungendered, universal, whole." Wittig continues with a startling speculation on the nature of language and "being" that situates her own political project within the traditional discourse of ontomethology. In her view, the primary ontology of language gives every person the same opportunity to establish subjectivity. The practical task that women face in trying to establish subjectivity through speech depends on their collective ability to cast off the reifications of sex imposed upon them to form a new, equal ontology. The social reifications of sex can be understood to mask or distort a prior ontological reality, that reality being the equal opportunity of all persons, prior to the marking by sex, to exercise language in the assertion of subjectivity. In speaking, the "I" renounces the power of a specific, real access to the universal to qualify as that "ontological," this principle of equal access, however, is itself grounded in an ontological presupposition of the unity of speaking beings in a Being that is prior to sexed being. Gender, she argues, "tries to accomplish the division of Being," but "Being as being is not divided." Here the coherent assertion of the "I" presupposes not only the totality of language, but the unity of being.
If nowhere else quite so plainly, Wittig places herself here within the traditional discourse of the philosophical pursuit of presence, Being, radical and uninterrupted plenitude. In distinction from a Derridean position that would understand all signification to rely on an operational difference, Wittig argues that speaking requires and invokes a seamless identity of all things. This foundationalist fiction gives her a point of departure by which to criticize existing social institutions. The critical question remains, however, what contingent social relations do that presumption of being, authority, and universal subjecthood serve? Why value the usurpation of that authoritarian notion of the subject? Why not pursue the decentering of the subject and its universalizing epistemic strategies? Although Wittig criticizes "the straight mind" for universalizing its point of view, it appears that she not only universalizes "the" straight mind, but fails to consider the totalitarian consequences of such a theory of sovereign speech acts. Politically, the division of being—a violence against the field of ontological plenitude, in her view—into the distinction between the universal and the particular conditions a relation of subjection. Domination must be understood as the denial of a prior and primary unity of all persons in a prelinguistic being. Domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second-order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that becomes social reality.

Paradoxically, Wittig nowhere entertains an Aristophanic myth about the original unity of genders, for gender is a divisive principle, a tool of subjection, one that resists the very notion of unity. Significantly, her novels follow a narrative strategy of disintegration, suggesting that the binary formulation of sex needs to fragment and proliferate to the point where the binary itself is revealed as contingent. The free play of attributes or "physical features" is never an absolute destruction, for the ontological field distorted by gender is one of continuous plentitude. Wittig criticizes "the straight mind" for being unable to liberate itself from the thought of "difference." In temporary alliance with Deleuze and Guattari, Wittig opposes psychoanalysis as a science predicated on an economy of "lack" and "negation." In "Paradigm," an early essay, Wittig considers that the overthrow of the system of binary sex might initiate a cultural field of many sexes. In that essay she refers to Anti-Oedipus: "For us there are, not one or two sexes, but many (cf. Guattari/Deleuze), as many sexes as there are individuals." The limitless proliferation of sexes, however, logically entails the negation of sex as such. If the number of sexes corresponds to the number of existing individuals, sex would no longer have any general application as a term: one's sex would be a radically singular property and would no longer be able to operate as a useful or descriptive generalization.

The metaphors of destruction, overthrow, and violence that work in Wittig's theory and fiction have a difficult ontological status. Although linguistic categories shape reality in a "violent" way, creating social fictions in the name of the real, there appears to be a truer reality, an ontological field of unity against which these social fictions are measured. Wittig refuses the distinction between an "abstract" concept and a "material" reality, arguing that concepts are formed and circulated within the materiality of language and that that language works in a material way to construct the social world. On the other hand, these "constructions" are understood as distortions and reifications to be judged against a prior ontological field of radical unity and plenitude. Constructs are thus "real" to the extent that they are fictive phenomena that gain power within discourse. These constructs are disempowered, however, through locutionary acts that implicitly seek to recontextualize the universality of language and the unity of Being. Wittig argues that "it is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine," even "a perfect war machine." The main strategy of this war is for women, lesbians, and gay men—all of whom have been particularized through an identification with "sex"—to preempt the position of the speaking subject and its invocation of the universal point of view. The question of how a particular and relative subject can speak his or her way out of the category of sex directs Wittig's various considerations of Dyana Barnes, Marcel Proust, and Natalie Sarraute. The literary text as work of art is, in each instance, directed against the hierarchical division of gender, the splitting of universal and particular in the name of a recovery of a prior and essential unity of those terms. To universalize the point of view of women is simultaneously to destroy the category of women and to establish the possibility of a new humanism. Destruction is thus always restoration—that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology. Literary works, however, maintain a privileged access to this primary field of ontological abundance. The split between form and content corresponds to the artificial philosophical distinction between abstract, universal thought and concrete, material reality. Just as Wittig invokes Bakhtin to establish concepts as material realities, so she invokes literary language more generally to reestablish the univocity of language as indissoluble form and content: "through literature...words come back to us whole again"; "language exists as a paradise.
made of visible, audible, palatable words."" Above all, literary works often Wittig the occasion to experiment with pronouns that within systems of compulsory meaning confine the masculine with the universal and invariably particularize the feminine. In Les Chrétiennes,6 she seeks to eliminate any he-they (il-li) conjunctions, indeed, any "he" (il), and to offer elles as standing for the general, the universal. "The goal of this approach," she writes, "is not to feminize the world but to make the category of sex obsolete in language."43 In a self-consciously defiant imperialist strategy, Wittig argues that only by taking up the universal and absolute point of view, effectively lesboizing the entire world, can the compulsory order of heterosexuality be destroyed. The il of The Lesbian Body is supposed to establish the lesbian, not as a split subject, but as the sovereign subject who can wage war linguistically against a "world" that has constituted a semantic and syntactic assault against the lesbian. Her point is not to call attention to the presence of rights of "women" or "lesbians" as individuals, but to counter the globalizing homosexist episteme by a recursive discourse of equal reach and power. The point is not to assume or establish the speaking subject in order to be a recognized individual within a set of reciprocal linguistic relations; rather, the speaking subject becomes more than the individual, becomes an absolute perspective that imposes its categories on the entire linguistic field, known as the "world." Only a war strategy that rivals the proportions of compulsory heterosexuality, Wittig argues, will operate effectively to challenge the latter's epistemic hegemony.

In its ideal sense, speaking is, for Wittig, a potent act, an assertion of sovereignty that simultaneously implies a relationship of equality with other speaking subjects.4 This ideal or primary "contract" of language operates at an implicit level. Language has a dual possibility. It can be used to assert a true and inclusive universality of persons, or it can institute a hierarchy in which only some persons are eligible to speak and others, by virtue of their exclusion from the universal point of view, cannot "speak" without simultaneously deauthorizing that speech. Prior to this asymmetrical relation to speech, however, is an ideal social contract, one in which every first-person speech act presupposes and affirms an absolute reciprocity among speaking subjects—Wittig's version of the ideal speech situation. Distorting and concealing that ideal reciprocity, however, is the heterosexual contract, the focus of Wittig's most recent theoretical work, although present in her theoretical essays all along.44 Unspoken but always operative, the heterosexual contract cannot be reduced to any of its empirical appearances. Wittig writes:

I confront a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in a concretizing discourse, a discourse whose very existence lies in the mind of people, in the way that affects their whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real.

As in Lacan, the idealization of heterosexuality appears even within Wittig's own formulation to exercise a control over the bodies of practicing heterosexuals that is finally impossible, indeed, that is bound to falter on its own impossibility. Wittig appears to believe that only the radical departure from heterosexual contexts—namely becoming lesbian or gay—can bring about the downfall of this heterosexual regime. But this political consequence follows only if one understands all participation in heterosexuality to be a repetition and consolidation of heterosexual oppression. The possibilities of resisting heterosexuality are precisely precisely because heterosexuality is understood as a total system that requires a thoroughgoing displacement. The political options that follow from such a totalizing view of heterosexist power are (a) radical conformity or (b) radical revolution.

Assuming the systemic integrity of heterosexuality is extremely problematic both for Wittig's understanding of heterosexual practice and for her conceptions of homosexuality and lesbianism. As radically "outside" the heterosexual matrix, homosexuality is conceived as radically unconditioned by heterosexual norms. This purification of homosexuality, a kind of lesbian modernism, is currently contested by numerous lesbian and gay discourses that understand lesbian and gay culture as embedded in the larger structures of heterosexuality even as they are positioned in subversive or resignifying relationships to heterosexual cultural configurations. Wittig's view that heterosexuality is possible, it seems, of a volitional or optional heterosexuality; yet, even if heterosexuality is presented as obligatory or presumptive, it does not follow that all heterosexual acts are radically determined. Further, Wittig's radical disjunction between straight and gay replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself characterizes as the divisive philosophical gesture of the straight mind.

My own conviction is that the radical disjunction posited by Wittig between heterosexuality and homosexuality is simply not true, that there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexual within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships. Further, there are other power/discourse centers that construct and structure both gay and straight sexuality; heterosexuality is not the only compulsory display of power.
that informs sexuality. The ideal of a coherent heterosexuality that Wittig describes as the norm and standard of the heterosexual contract is an impossible ideal, a "fetish," as she herself points out. A psychoanalytic elaboration might contend that this impossibility is exposed in virtue of the complexity and resistance of an unconscious sexuality that is not always already heterosexual. In this sense, heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. Indeed, I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself, as an alternative gay/lesbian perspective.

Clearly, the norm of compulsory heterosexuality does operate with the force and violence that Wittig describes, but my own position is that this is not the only way that it operates. For Wittig, the strategies for political resistance to normative heterosexuality are fairly direct. Only the array of embodied persons who are not engaged in a heterosexual relationship within the confines of the family which takes reproduction to be the end or telos of sexuality are, in effect, actively contesting the categories of sex or, at least, not in compliance with the normative presuppositions and purposes of that set of categories. To be lesbian or gay is, for Wittig, no longer to know one's sex, to be engaged in a confusion and proliferation of categories that make sex an impossible category of identity. As emancipatory as this sounds, Wittig's proposal overrides those discourses within gay and lesbian culture that proliferate specifically gay sexual identities by appropriating and redeploying the categories of sex. The terms queers, butches, femmes, girls, even the parodic reappropriation of dyke, queer, and fag reposition and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity. All of these terms might be understood as symptomatic of "the straight mind," modes of identifying with the oppressor's version of the identity of the oppressed. On the other hand, lesbian has surely been partially reclaimed from it historical meanings, and parodic categories serve the purposes of denaturalizing sex itself. When the neighborhood gay restaurant closes for vacation, the owners put out a sign explaining that "she's overworked and needs a rest." This very gay appropriation of the feminine works to multiply possible sites of application of the term, to reveal the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, and to destabilize and mobilize the sign. Is this a colonizing "appropriation" of the feminine? My sense is no.

That assumption assumes that the feminine belongs to women, an assumption surely suspect.

Within lesbian contexts of "identification" with masculinity that appears as butch identity is not a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that "being a girl" contextualizes and resignifies "masculinity" in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible "female body." It is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire. In other words, the object [and clearly, there is not just one] of lesbian-femme desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay. Similarly, some heterosexual or bisexual women may well prefer that the relation of "figure" to "ground" work in the opposite direction—that is, they may prefer that their girls be boys. In that case, the perception of "feminine" identity would be juxtaposed on the "male body" as ground, but both terms would, through the juxtaposition, lose their internal stability and distinctiveness from each other. Clearly, this way of thinking about gendered exchanges of desire admits of much greater complexity, for the play of masculine and feminine, as well as the inversion of ground to figure can constitute a highly complex and structured production of desire. Significantly, both the sexed body as "ground" and the butch or femme identity as "figure" can shift, invert, and create erotic havoc of various sorts. Neither can lay claim to "the real," although either can qualify as an object of belief, depending on the dynamic of the sexual exchange. The idea that butch and femme are in some sense "relics" or "copies" of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance.

Although Wittig does not discuss the meaning of butch/femme identities, her notion of fictive sex suggests a similar dissimulation of a natural or original notion of gendered coherence assumed to exist among sexed bodies, gender identities, and sexualities. Implicit in Wittig's description of sex as a fictive category is the notion that
the various components of "sex" may well disaggregate. In such a breakdown of bodily coherence, the category of sex could no longer operate descriptively in any given cultural domain. If the category of "sex" is established through repeated acts, then conversely, the social action of bodies within the cultural field can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category.

For power to be withdrawn, power itself would have to be understood as the retractable operation of volition; indeed, the heterosexual contract would be understood to be sustained through a series of choices, just as the social contract in Locke or Rousseau is understood to presuppose the rational choice or deliberate will of those it is said to govern. If power is not reduced to volition, however, and the classical liberal and existential model of freedom is refused, then power-relations can be understood, as I think they ought to be, as constraining and constituting the very possibilities of volition. Hence, power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed.

Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence.

Whereas Wittig clearly envisions lesbianism to be a full-scale refusal of heterosexuality, I would argue that even that refusal constitutes an engagement and, ultimately, a radical dependence on the very terms that lesbianism purports to transcend. If sexuality and power are coextensive, and if lesbian sexuality is no more and no less constructed than other modes of sexuality, then there is no promise of limitless pleasure after the shackles of the category of sex have been thrown off. The structuring presence of heterosexual constructs within gay and lesbian sexuality does not mean that those constructs determine gay and lesbian sexuality nor that gay and lesbian sexuality are derivable or reducible to those constructs. Indeed, consider the dis-empowering and denaturalizing effects of a specifically gay deployment of heterosexual constructs. The presence of these norms not only constitutes a site of power that cannot be refused, but they can and do become the site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality. Wittig calls for a position beyond sex that returns her theory to a problematic humanism based in a problematic metaphysics of presence. And yet, her literary works appear to enact a different kind of political strategy than the one for which she explicitly calls in her theoretical essays. In The Lesbian Body and in Les Guérillères, the narrative strategy through which political transformation is articulated makes use of redeployment and revaluation time and again both to make use of originally oppressive terms and to deprive them of their legitimating functions.

Although Wittig herself is a "materialist," the term has a specific meaning within her theoretical framework. She wants to overcome the split between materialism and generation that characterizes "straight" thinking. Materialism implies neither a reduction of ideas to matter nor the view of theory as a reflection of its economic base, strictly conceived. Wittig's materialism takes social institutions and practices, in particular, the institution of heterosexuality, as the basis of critical analysis. In "The Straight Mind" and "The Social Contract," she understands the institution of heterosexuality as the foundational basis of the male-dominant social orders. "Nature" and the domain of materiality are ideas, ideological constructs, produced by these social institutions to support the political interests of the heterosexual contract. In this sense, Wittig is a classic idealist for whom nature is understood as a mental representation. A language of compulsory meanings produces this representation of nature to further the political strategy of sexual domination and to rationalize the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

Unlike Beauvoir, Wittig sees nature not as a resistant materiality, a medium, surface, or as an object; it is an "idea" generated and sustained for the purposes of social control. The very elasticity of the ostensible materiality of the body is shown in The Lesbian Body as language figures and refrages the parts of the body into radically new social configurations of form (and antiform). Like those mundane and scientific languages that circulate the idea of "nature" and so produce the naturalized conception of discretely sexual bodies, Wittig's own language enacts an alternative disfiguring and refuguring of bodies. Her aim is to expose the idea of a natural body as a construction and to offer a deconstructive/reconstructive set of strategies for configuring bodies to contest the power of heterosexuality. The very shape and form of bodies, their unifying principle, their composite parts, are always figured by a language imbued with political interests. For Wittig, the political challenge is to seize language as the means of representation and production, to treat it as an instrument that invariably constructs the field of bodies and that ought to be used to deconstruct and reconstruct bodies outside the oppressive categories of sex.

The multiplication of gender possibilities expose and disrupt the binary reifications of gender, what is the nature of such a subversive enactment? How can such an enactment constitute a subversion? In The Lesbian Body, the act of love-making literally tears the bodies of its partners apart. As lesbian sexual, this set of acts outside of the reproductive matrix produces the body itself as an inchoherent center of attributes, gestures, and desires. And in Wittig's Les Guérillères,
the same kind of disintegrating effect, even violence, emerges in the struggle between the "women" and their oppressors. In that context, Wittig clearly distances herself from those who would defend the notion of a "specifically feminine" pleasure, writing, or identity; she all but mocks those who would hold up the "circle" as their emblem. For Wittig, the task is not to prefer the feminine side of the binary to the masculine, but to displace the binary as such through a specifically lesbian disintegration of its constitutive categories.

The displacement appears literal in the fictional text, as does the violent struggle in Les Guérillères. Wittig's texts have been criticized for this use of violence and force—notes that on the surface seem antithetical to feminine sensibilities. But note that Wittig's narrative strategy is not to identify the feminine through a strategy of differentiation or exclusion from the masculine. Such a strategy consolidates hierarchy and binaries through a transvaluation of values by which women now represent the domain of positive value. In contrast to a strategy that consolidates women's identity through an exclusionary process of differentiation, Wittig offers a strategy of reappropriation and subversive redeployment of precisely those "values" that originally appeared to belong to the masculine domain. One might well object that Wittig has assimilated masculine values or, indeed, that she is "male-identified," but the very notion of "identification" reemerges in the context of this literary production as immeasurably more complex than the uncritical use of that term suggests. The violence and struggle in her text is, significantly, recontextualized, no longer sustaining the same meanings that it has in oppressive contexts. It is neither a simple "turning of the tables" in which women now wage violence against men, nor a simple internalization of masculine norms such that women now wage violence against themselves. The violence of the text has the identity and coherence of the category of sex as its target, a lifeless construct, a construct out to deaden the body. Because that category is the naturalized construct that makes the institution of normative heterosexuality seem inevitable, Wittig's textual violence is enacted against that institution, and not primarily for its heterosexuality, but for its compulsoriness.

Note as well that the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are constructs, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or "fetishes," not natural categories, but political ones (categories that prove that recourse to the "natural" in such contexts is always political). Hence, the body which is torn apart, the war waged among women, are textual violence, the deconstruction of constructs that are always already a kind of violence against the body's possibilities.

But here we might ask: What is left when the body rendered coherent through the category of sex is disaggregated, rendered chaotic? Can this body be re-membered, be put back together again? Are there possibilities of agency that do not require the coherent reassembling of this construct? Wittig's text not only deconstructs sex and offers a way to disintegrate the false unity designated by sex, but enacts as well a kind of diffuse corporeal agency generated from a number of different centers of power. Indeed, the source of personal and moral agency comes not from within the individual, but in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies in which identity itself is ever-shifting, indeed, where identity itself is constructed, disintegrated, and recirculated only within the context of a dynamic field of cultural relations. To be a woman is, then, for Wittig as well as for Beauvoir, to become a woman, but because this process is in no sense fixed, it is possible to become a being whom neither biology nor language truly describes. This is not the figure of the androgynous nor some hypothetical "third gender," nor is it a transcendence of the binary. Instead, it is an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense. The force of Wittig's fiction, its linguistic challenge, is to offer an experience beyond the categories of identity, an erotic struggle to create new categories from the ruins of the old, new ways of being a body within the cultural field, and whole new languages of description.

In response to Beauvoir's notion "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one," Wittig claims that instead of becoming a woman, one (anyone?) can become a lesbian. By refusing the category of woman, Wittig's lesbian-feminism appears to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women and implicitly to argue that lesbianism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism. This kind of separatist prescriptivism is surely no longer viable. But even if it were politically desirable, what criteria would be used to decide the question of sexual "identity"?

If to become a lesbian is an act, a leave-taking of heterosexuality, a self-naming that contests the compulsory meanings of heterosexual ty's women and men, what is to keep the name of lesbian from becoming an equally compulsory category? What qualifies as a lesbian? Does anyone know? If a lesbian refuses the radical disjunction between heterosexual and homosexual consciousness, does she promote, is that lesbian no longer a lesbian? And if it is an "act" that founds the identity as a performative accomplishment of sexuality, are there certain kinds of acts that quality others as foundational? Can one do the act with a "straight mind"? Can one understand
Lesbian sexuality not only as a contestation of the category of "sex." of "women," of "natural bodies," but also of "lesbian"?

Interestingly, Wittig suggests a necessary relationship between the homosexual point of view and that of figurative language, as if to be a homosexual is to contest the compulsory syntax and semantics that constitute the real, the homosexual point of view, if there is one, might well understand the real as constituted through a set of exclusions, margins that do not appear, absences that do not figure. What a tragic mistake, then, to construct a gay/lesbian identity through the same exclusionary means, as if the excluded were not, precisely through its exclusion, always presupposed and, indeed, required for the construction of that identity. Such an exclusion, paradoxically, institutes precisely the relation of radical dependency it seeks to overcome: Lesbianism would then require heterosexuality. Lesbianism that defines itself in radical exclusion from heterosexuality derives itself of the capacity to imagine the very heterosexual conventions and structures by which it is partially and inevitably constituted. As a result, that lesbian strategy would consolidate compulsory heterosexuality in its oppressive forms.

The more insidious and effective strategy it seems to be a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest "sex," but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of "identity" in order to reorder that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic.

iv. Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions

"Garbo 'get in drag' whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever the melted in or out of a man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-decked neck... that weight of her thrown-back head..." Parker Tyler, "The Garbo Image," quoted in Esther Newton, Mother Camp.

Categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics. These constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemological departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped. In the case of Garbo's public persona, and of all the celebrity figures, the weight of the thrown-back head, the shape of her neck, the setting of her hair. . . . How repellent seems the act of acting! It is all impersonation, whether the sex underneath is true or not."

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that identity shaped, and is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface, or site of cultural inscription? What circumscribes that site as "the female body"? Is "the body" or "the sexed body" the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is "the body," itself shaped by political processes and cultural strategies in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex?

The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of the acquisition of the signification of its sexual significance. This "body" often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as "external" to that body. Any theory of the culturally created body, however, ought to precisely describe the relation of radical dependency it seeks to overcome: Lesbianism would then require heterosexuality. Lesbianism that defines itself in radical exclusion from heterosexuality derives itself of the capacity to imagine the very heterosexual conventions and structures by which it is partially and inevitably constituted. As a result, that lesbian strategy would consolidate compulsory heterosexuality in its oppressive forms.

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"history"—here clearly understood on the model of Freud's "civilization"—as the "destruction of the body" (148). Forces and impulses with multiple directionalities are precisely that which history both destroys and preserves through the entstehung (historical event) of inscription. As a "volume in perpetual and disconnection" (148), the body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history. And history is the creation of values and meanings by a signifying practice that requires the subjection of the body. This corporeal destruction is necessary to produce the speaking subject and its significations. This is a body, described through the language of surface and force, weakened through a "single drama" of domination, inscription, and creation (150). This is not the modus vivendi of one kind of history rather than another, but, as Foucault, "history" (148) in its essential and repressive gesture.

Although Foucault writes, "Nothing in man [sic]—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition, or for understanding other men [sic]" (153), he nevertheless points to the constancy of cultural inscription as a "single drama" that acts on the body. If the creation of values, that historical mode of signification, requires the destruction of the body, much as the instrument of torture in Kafka's In the Penal Colony destroys the body on which it writes, then there must be a body prior to that inscription, stable and self-identical, subject to that arschna destructive. In a sense, for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that medium must itself be destroyed—that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values. Within the metaphysics of this notion of cultural values is the figure-of history as a relentless writing instrument, and the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for "culture" to emerge.

By maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality prior to signification and form. Because this distinction operates as essential to the task of genealogy as he defines it, the distinction itself is precluded as an object of genealogical investigation. Occasionally in his analysis of Herculine, Foucault subscribes to a prescriptive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed upon that body by a power regime, understood as a vicissitude of "history." If the presumption of some kind of precategorial source of disruption is refused, it is still possible to give a genealogical account of the demarcation of the body as such as a signifying practice? This demarcation is not

initiated by a reified history or by a subject. This marking is the result of a diffuse and active structure of the social field. This signifying practice effects a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility.

Mary Douglas' Parity and Danger suggests that the very contours of "the body" are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence. Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of insatting and naturalizing certain roles, regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies:

ideas about separating, purifying, decontaminating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently amoral experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. From this!

Although Douglas clearly subscribes to a structuralist distinction between an inherently unruly nature and an order imposed by cultural means, the "undistinctness" to which she refers can be redescribed as a region of cultural unrest and disorder. Assuming the inevitably binary structure of the nature/culture distinction, Douglas cannot point toward an alternative configuration of culture in which such distinctions become malleable or proliferate beyond the binary frame. Her analysis, however, provides a possible point of departure for understanding the relationship by which social taboos institute and maintain the boundaries of the body as such. Her analysis suggests that what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but what the surface, the skin, is systemically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become, within her analysis, the limits of the social per se. A post-structuralist appropriation of her view might well understand the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially hegemonic. In a variety of cultures, she maintains, there are pollution powers which inher in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is a sign of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined. A polluting person is always in the wrong. He [sic] has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which
should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone."

In a sense, Simon Watney has identified the contemporary construction of "the polluting person" as the person with AIDS in his Policing Desire: AIDS, Pornography, and the Media. Not only is the illness figured as the "gay disease," but throughout the media's hysterical and homophobic response to the illness there is a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual by virtue of the boundary-trespass that is homosexuality and the disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution. That the disease is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids suggests within the sensationalist graphics of homophbic signifying systems the dangers that permeable bodily boundaries present to the social order as such. Douglass remarks that "the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious," and she asks a question which one might have expected to read in Foucault: "Why should bodily margins be thought to be specifically invested with power and danger?"

Douglass suggests that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is a social body for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment. Since anal and oral sex among men clearly establishes certain kinds of bodily permeabilities, the hegemonic order, male homosexuality would, within a such a hegemonic point of view, constitute a site of danger and pollution, prior to and regardless of the cultural presence of AIDS. Similarly, the "polluted" status of lesbians, regardless of their low-risk status with respect to AIDS, brings into relief the dangers of their bodily exchanges. Significantly, being "outside" the hegemonic order does not signify being "in" a state of filthy and unhygienic nature. Paradoxically, homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophbic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural.

The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability. Those sexual practices in both homosexual and heterosexual contexts that open surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively re-inscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines. Anal sex among men is an example, as is the radical re-membering of the body in Wittgen's The Lesbian Body. Douglas alludes to "a kind of sex pollution which expresses a desire to keep the body (physical and social) intact," suggesting that the naturalized notion of "the body is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries. Further, the rites of passage that govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities. The deregulation of such exchanges accordingly disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all. Indeed, the critical inquiry that traces the regulative practices within which bodily contours are constructed constitutes precisely the genealogy of "the body" in its differentness that might further radicalize Foucault's theory.

Significantly, Kristeva's discussion of abjection in The Powers of Horror begins to suggest the use of this structuralist notion of a boundary-containing taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion. The "object" designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other." This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the "not-one" as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject. Kristeva writes:

"moue" makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who profiteer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.

The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness. As Iris Young has suggested in her use of Kristeva to understand sexism, homophobia, and racism, the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an "expulsion" followed by a "repulsion" that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/ race/sexuality axes of domination. Young's appropriation of Kristeva shows how the operating definition can consolidate "identities" founded on the instituting of the "Other" or a set of Others through exclusion and domination. What constitutes through domination the "inner" and "outer" worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is conditioned by those excocentential passages in which the inner effectively
becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the underbelly by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit. For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental flux that it fears. Regardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial disjunctions of inner and outer, they remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired. "Inner" and "outer" make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that serves for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural norms that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the object. Hence, "inner" and "outer" constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the "inner" world no longer designates a topos, then the internal flux of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect. The critical question is not how did that identity become internalized? as if internalization were a process or a mechanism that might be descriptively reconstructed. Rather, the question is: From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? In what language is "inner space" figured? What kind of fiction is it, and through what figure of the body is it signified? How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?

From Interiority to Gender Performances

In Discipline and Punish Foucault challenges the language of internalization as it operates in the service of the disciplinary regime of the subject and subjectivation of criminals. Although Foucault objected to what he understood to be the psychoanalytic belief in the "inner" truth of sex in The History of Sexuality, he turns to a criticism of the doctrine of internalization for separate purposes in the context of his history of criminology. In a sense, Discipline and Punish can be read as Foucault’s effort to revise Nietzsche’s doctrine of internalization in On the Genealogy of Morals on the model of inscription. In the context of prisoners, Foucault writes, the strategy has been not to enforce a repression of their desires, but to compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence, style, and necessity. That law is not literally internalized, but inscribed upon, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body. To say the law is manifested as the essence of their selves, the meaning of their soul, their conscience, the law of their desire. In effect, the law is at once fully manifest and fully latent, for it never appears as external to the bodies it subjects and subjugates. Foucault writes:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, and it is produced, permanently around, upon, within, the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those that are punished (my emphasis).44

The figure of the interior soul understood as "within" the body is signified through its inscription on the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility. The effect of a structuring inner space is produced through the insigification of a body as a vital and sacred enclosure. The soul is precisely what the body lacks, hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which is the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed on the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such. In Foucault’s terms, the soul is not imprisoned by or within the body, as some Christian imagery would suggest, but "the soul is the prison of the body."45

The rediscription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body implies a correlative redefinition of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body’s surface, the construction of the gendered body through a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences. But what determines the manifest and latent text of the body politic? What is the prohibitive law that generates the corporeal stylization of gender, the fantasied and fantastic figuring of the body? We have already considered the incest taboo and the prior tabo against homosexuality as the generative moments of gender identity, the prohibitions that produce identity along the culturally intelligible grid of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality. That disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain. This coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does
not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. When the disorganization and disintegration of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe.

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so insinuates the "integrity" of the subject. In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. If the "core" of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the "self" of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view. The displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological "core" precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of the body or its true identity.

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America,* anthropologist Esther Newton suggests that the "structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place." I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. Newton writes:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my outside appearance is feminine, but my essence (inside [the body]) is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance outside [my body, no gender] is masculine but my essence (inside [myself]) is feminine." Both claims to truth contradict one another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity.

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexual sexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the "imitation" and the "original" is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. Moreover, it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification—that is, the original meanings accorded to gender—and subsequent gender experience might be retracted. The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender it is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distant from the gender of the performer, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what in critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. In deed, part of the pleasure, the goddess of the performance is in the recognition of
a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal units that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their discontinuities and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity.

The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of an Other who is always already a "figure" in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal-cultural-historical of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.

According to Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," the imitation that mocks the notion of an original is characteristic of pastiche rather than parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of mimicry, without parody's interior motive, without the satirical insult, without laughter, without that still later, feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its homos.23

The loss of the sense of "the normal," however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when "the normal," "the original" is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become cataclyzed and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context of opposition and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered. What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire.

If the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface? Sartre would perhaps have called this act "a style of being," Foucault, "a stylistics of existence." And in my earlier reading of Beauvoir, I suggest that gendered bodies are so many "styles of the flesh." These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.

Writing understands gender as the workings of "sex," where "sex" is an oblique injunction for the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize itself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this, not once or twice, but as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. The notion of a "pretext," however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term strategy better suggests the constitution of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what "humanizes" individuals within
contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. Because there is nothing an "evidence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; 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; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress.

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a "natural sex" or a "real woman" or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in refined form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their origins, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible "cause" to be an "effect"?

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperience of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject.

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; "the internal" is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a "ground" will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time. The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground." The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a periodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.

If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativity is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality.

Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible.
Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* occasioned an important shift in my own thinking about the constructed status of lesbian sexuality.


49. Peter Dews suggests in *The Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987) that Lacan's appropriation of the symbolic from Lévi-Strauss involves a considerable narrowing of the concept: "In Lacan's adaptation of Lévi-Strauss, which transforms the latter's multiple 'symbolic systems' into a single symbolic order, [he] neglects of the possibilities of systems of meaning promoting or masking relations of force remains" (p. 105).

3. Subversive Bodily Acts


3. Ibid., p. 25.


5. Ibid., p. 135.

6. Ibid., p. 134.

7. Ibid., p. 136.

8. Ibid., p. 136.

9. Ibid., pp. 239.

10. Ibid., pp. 239–240.


12. Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 239.

13. Ibid., p. 239.


15. See Plato's *Symposium*, 209a: Of the "proocheia . . . of the spirit," he writes that it is the specific capacity of the poet. Hence, poetic creations are understood as sublime precreative desire.


18. "The notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conduct, sensations, pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle" Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, p. 154. See chapter 3, section i, where the passage is quoted.


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25. Wittig notes that "English compared to French has the reputation of being almost genderless, while French passes for a very gendered language. It is true that strictly speaking, English does not apply the mark of gender to inanimate objects, to things or nonhuman beings. But as far as the categories of the person are concerned, both languages are bearers of gender to the same extent" ("The Mark of Gender," Feminist Issues, Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall 1985, p. 3).

26. Although Wittig herself does not argue the point, her theory might account for the violence enacted against sexual subjects—women, lesbians, gay men, to name a few—as the violent enforcement of a category violently constructed. In other words, sexual crimes against these bodies effectively reduce them to their "sex," thereby reaffirming and enforcing the reduction of the category itself. Because discourse is not restricted to writing or speaking, but is also social action, even violent social action, we ought also to understand rape, sexual violence, "queer-bashing" as the category of sex in action.


28. Ibid., p. 17.

29. Wittig, "The Mark of Gender," p. 4


32. Ibid., p. 106.


34. Ibid., p. 5.

35. Ibid., p. 6.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Monique Wittig, "Paradigm," in Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts, eds. Elaine Marks and George Stambolian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 111-119. Consider the radical difference, however, between Wittig's acceptance of the use of language that valorizes the speaking subject as autonomous and universal and Deleuze's Nietzschean effort to displace the speaking "I" as the center of linguistic power. Although both are critical of psychoanalysis, Deleuze's critique of the subject through recourse to the will-to-power sustains close parallels to the displacement of the speaking subject by the semiotics/memories within Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse. For Wittig, it appears that sexuality and desire are self-determined articulations of the individual subject, whereas for both Deleuze and his psychoanalytic opponents, desire of necessity displaces and demarcates the subject. "Far from presupposing a subject," Deleuze argues, "desire cannot be attained except at the point where someone is deprived, of the power of saying 'I.'" Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1987], p. 89.

40. She credits the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on a number of occasions for this insight.


43. See Wittig, "The Trojan Horse."


46. "The Place of Action," p. 135. In this essay, Wittig distinguishes between a "first" and "second" contract within society: The first is one of radical reciprocity between speaking subjects who exchange words that "guarantee" the entire and exclusive disposition of language to everyone (135); the second contract is one in which words operate to exert a force of domination over others, indeed, to deprive others of the right and social capacity for speech. In this "debased" form of reciprocity, Wittig argues, individuality itself is erased through being addressed in a language that precludes the bearer as a potential speaker. Wittig concludes the essay with the following: "the paradigm of the social contract exists only in literature, where the tropisms, by their violence, are able to counter any reduction of the 'I' to a common denominator, to tear open the closely woven material of the commonplaces, and to continually prevent their organization into a system of compulsory meaning" (139).


51. See Wittig, "The Straight Mind," and "One is Not Born a Woman."


56. Ibid., p. 113.


59. Ibid., p. 121.

60. Ibid., p. 140.

61. Foucault's essay "A Preface to Transgression" (in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice) does provide an interesting juxtaposition with Douglas' notion of body boundaries constituted by incest taboos. Originally written in honor of Georges Bataille, this essay explores in part the metaphorical "dirt" of transgressive pleasures and the association of the forbidden orifice with the dirt-covered tomb. See pp. 46-48.

62. Kristeva discusses Mary Douglas work in a short section of The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), originally published as Pouvoir de l'Horreur (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1980). Animating Douglas's insights to her own reformulation of Lacan, Kristeva writes, "Delitement is what is jettisoned from the symbolic system. It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomerate...of individuals and, in short, constitutes a classification system or a structure" (p. 65).

63. Ibid., p. 3.

64. Iris Marion Young, "Abjection and Oppression: Unconscious Dynamics of Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia," paper presented at the Northwestern University, 1988. The paper will be published in the York Press. It will also be included as part of a larger chapter in her forthcoming The Politics of Difference.


67. Ibid., p. 30.

68. See the chapter "Role Models" in Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

69. Ibid., p. 103.
