One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.
—Simone de Beauvoir

Strictly speaking, “women” cannot be said to exist.
—Julia Kristeva

Woman does not have a sex.
—Luce Irigaray

The deployment of sexuality . . . established this notion of sex.
—Michel Foucault

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual.
—Monique Wittig
I. “WOMEN” AS THE SUBJECT OF FEMINISM

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. But politics and representation are controversial terms. On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all.

Recently, this prevailing conception of the relation between feminist theory and politics has come under challenge from within feminist discourse. The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of “the subject” as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. The domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended.

Foucault points out that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent.¹ Juridical notions
of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms—that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even “protection” of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice. But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures. If this analysis is right, then the juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as “the subject” of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics. And the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation. This becomes politically problematic if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of “women” will be clearly self-defeating.

The question of “the subject” is crucial for politics, and for feminist politics in particular, because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not “show” once the juridical structure of politics has been established. In other words, the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of “a subject before the law” in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law’s own regulatory hegemony. It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more
fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.

Indeed, the question of women as the subject of feminism raises the possibility that there may not be a subject who stands “before” the law, awaiting representation in or by the law. Perhaps the subject, as well as the invocation of a temporal “before,” is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy. The prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structures of classical liberalism. The performative invocation of a nonhistorical “before” becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed and, thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract.

Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. As Denise Riley’s title suggests, Am I That Name? is a question produced by the very possibility of the name’s multiple significations. If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political
and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination. The notion of a universal patriarchy has been widely criticized in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists. Where those various contexts have been consulted within such theories, it has been to find “examples” or “illustrations” of a universal principle that is assumed from the start. That form of feminist theorizing has come under criticism for its efforts to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support highly Western notions of oppression, but because they tend as well to construct a “Third World” or even an “Orient” in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism. The urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism’s own claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience.

Although the claim of universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did, the notion of a generally shared conception of “women,” the corollary to that framework, has been much more difficult to displace. Certainly, there have been plenty of debates: Is there some commonality among “women” that preexists their oppression, or do “women” have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone? Is there a specificity to women’s cultures that is independent of their subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures? Are the specificity and integrity of women’s cultural or linguistic practices always specified
against and, hence, within the terms of some more dominant cultural formation? If there is a region of the “specifically feminine,” one that is both differentiated from the masculine as such and recognizable in its difference by an unmarked and, hence, presumed universality of “women”? The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the “specificity” of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute “identity” and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer.4

My suggestion is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions. Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from “women” whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics. The suggestion that feminism can seek wider representation for a subject that it itself constructs has the ironic consequence that feminist goals risk failure by refusing to take account of the constitutive powers of their own representational claims. This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for merely “strategic” purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. In this case, exclusion itself might qualify as such an unintended yet consequential meaning. By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate
a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation.

Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics—as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. As such, the critical point of departure is the historical present, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize.

Perhaps there is an opportunity at this juncture of cultural politics, a period that some would call “postfeminist,” to reflect from within a feminist perspective on the injunction to construct a subject of feminism. Within feminist political practice, a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity appears to be necessary in order to formulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds. On the other hand, it may be time to entertain a radical critique that seeks to free feminist theory from the necessity of having to construct a single or abiding ground which is invariably contested by those identity positions or anti-identity positions that it invariably excludes. Do the exclusionary practices that ground feminist theory in a notion of “women” as subject paradoxically undercut feminist goals to extend its claims to “representation”?\(^5\)

Perhaps the problem is even more serious. Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims? To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?\(^6\) If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and
identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal.

To trace the political operations that produce and conceal what qualifies as the juridical subject of feminism is precisely the task of a feminist genealogy of the category of women. In the course of this effort to question “women” as the subject of feminism, the unproblematic invocation of that category may prove to preclude the possibility of feminism as a representational politics. What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject? What relations of domination and exclusion are inadvertently sustained when representation becomes the sole focus of politics? The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, “representation” will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of “women” is nowhere presumed.

II. THE COMPULSORY ORDER OF SEX/GENDER/DESIRE

Although the unproblematic unity of “women” is often invoked to construct a solidarity of identity, a split is introduced in the feminist subject by the distinction between sex and gender. Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.7
If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.

This radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a “given” sex or a “given” gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is “sex” anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the
consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.\textsuperscript{11}

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. This construction of “sex” as the radically unconstructed will concern us again in the discussion of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism in chapter 2. At this juncture it is already clear that one way the internal stability and binary frame for sex is effectively secured is by casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain. This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender. How, then, does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production?

III. GENDER: THE CIRCULAR RUINS OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Is there “a” gender which persons are said to have, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to be, as implied in the question “What gender are you?” When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner or mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency
and transformation? Does “construction” suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual difference? How and where does the construction of gender take place? What sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to that construction? On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir suggests in The Second Sex that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed,” but implied in her formulation is an agent, a cogito, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. Is gender as variable and volitional as Beauvoir’s account seems to suggest? Can “construction” in such a case be reduced to a form of choice? Beauvoir is clear that one “becomes” a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from “sex.” There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the “one” who becomes a woman is necessarily female. If “the body is a situation,” as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.

The controversy over the meaning of construction appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism. As a consequence, one might reasonably suspect that some common linguistic restriction on thought
both forms and limits the terms of the debate. Within those terms, “the body” appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But “the body” is itself a construction, as are the myriad “bodies” that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?15

Whether gender or sex is fixed or free is a function of a discourse which, it will be suggested, seeks to set certain limits to analysis or to safeguard certain tenets of humanism as presuppositional to any analysis of gender. The locus of intractability, whether in “sex” or “gender” or in the very meaning of “construction,” provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can and cannot become mobilized through any further analysis. The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.

Although social scientists refer to gender as a “factor” or a “dimension” of an analysis, it is also applied to embodied persons
as “a mark” of biological, linguistic, and/or cultural difference. In these latter cases, gender can be understood as a signification that an (already) sexually differentiated body assumes, but even then that signification exists only in relation to another, opposing signification. Some feminist theorists claim that gender is “a relation,” indeed, a set of relations, and not an individual attribute. Others, following Beauvoir, would argue that only the feminine gender is marked, that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood.

In a move that complicates the discussion further, Luce Irigaray argues that women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the “sex” which is not “one.” Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignatable. In this sense, women are the sex which is not “one,” but multiple. In opposition to Beauvoir, for whom women are designated as the Other, Irigaray argues that both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether. For Beauvoir, women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself; for Irigaray, that particular dialectic constitutes a system that excludes an entirely different economy of signification. Women are not only represented falsely within the Sartrian frame of signifying-subject and signified-Other, but the falsity of the signification points out the entire structure of representation as inadequate. The sex which is not one, then, provides a point of departure for a criticism of hegemonic Western representation and of the
metaphysics of substance that structures the very notion of the subject.

What is the metaphysics of substance, and how does it inform thinking about the categories of sex? In the first instance, humanist conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes. A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or “core,” called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language. The universal conception of the person, however, is displaced as a point of departure for a social theory of gender by those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. This relational or contextual point of view suggests that what the person “is,” and, indeed, what gender “is,” is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.

Irigaray would maintain, however, that the feminine “sex” is a point of linguistic absence, the impossibility of a grammatically denoted substance, and, hence, the point of view that exposes that substance as an abiding and foundational illusion of a masculinist discourse. This absence is not marked as such within the masculine signifying economy—a contention that reverses Beauvoir’s argument (and Wittig’s) that the female sex is marked, while the male sex is not. For Irigaray, the female sex is not a “lack” or an “Other” that immanently and negatively defines the subject in its masculinity. On the contrary, the female sex eludes the very requirements of representation, for she is neither “Other” nor the “lack,” those categories remaining relative to the Sartrian subject, immanent to that phallogocentric scheme. Hence, for Irigaray, the feminine could never be the mark of a
subject, as Beauvoir would suggest. Further, the feminine could not be theorized in terms of a determinate relation between the masculine and the feminine within any given discourse, for discourse is not a relevant notion here. Even in their variety, discourses constitute so many modalities of phallogocentric language. The female sex is thus also the subject that is not one. The relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified. Paradoxically enough, Beauvoir prefigured this impossibility in _The Second Sex_ when she argued that men could not settle the question of women because they would then be acting as both judge and party to the case.  

The distinctions among the above positions are far from discrete; each of them can be understood to problematize the locality and meaning of both the “subject” and “gender” within the context of socially instituted gender asymmetry. The interpretive possibilities of gender are in no sense exhausted by the alternatives suggested above. The problematic circularity of a feminist inquiry into gender is underscored by the presence of positions which, on the one hand, presume that gender is a secondary characteristic of persons and those which, on the other hand, argue that the very notion of the person, positioned within language as a “subject,” is a masculinist construction and prerogative which effectively excludes the structural and semantic possibility of a feminine gender. The consequence of such sharp disagreements about the meaning of gender (indeed, whether gender is the term to be argued about at all, or whether the discursive construction of sex is, indeed, more fundamental, or perhaps women or woman and/or men and man) establishes the need for a radical rethinking of the categories of identity within the context of relations of radical gender asymmetry.

For Beauvoir, the “subject” within the existential analytic of
misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine “Other” outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly “particular,” embodied, condemned to immanence. Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects and, hence, for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject. That subject is abstract to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment and, further, projects that disavowed and disparaged embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female. This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom. Beauvoir’s analysis implicitly poses the question: Through what act of negation and disavowal does the masculine pose as a disembodied universality and the feminine get constructed as a disavowed corporeality? The dialectic of master-slave, here fully reformulated within the non-reciprocal terms of gender asymmetry, prefigures what Irigaray will later describe as the masculine signifying economy that includes both the existential subject and its Other.

Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women’s freedom, not a defining and limiting essence. The theory of embodiment informing Beauvoir’s analysis is clearly limited by the uncritical reproduction of the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body. Despite my own previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms. The preservation of that very distinction can be read as symptomatic of the very
phallogocentrism that Beauvoir underestimates. In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized.

The discursive construction of “the body” and its separation from “freedom” in Beauvoir fails to mark along the axis of gender the very mind-body distinction that is supposed to illuminate the persistence of gender asymmetry. Officially, Beauvoir contends that the female body is marked within masculinist discourse, whereby the masculine body, in its conflation with the universal, remains unmarked. Irigaray clearly suggests that both marker and marked are maintained within a masculinist mode of signification in which the female body is “marked off,” as it were, from the domain of the signifiable. In post-Hegelian terms, she is “cancelled,” but not preserved. On Irigaray’s reading, Beauvoir’s claim that woman “is sex” is reversed to mean that she is not the sex she is designated to be, but, rather, the masculine sex encore (and en corps) parading in the mode of otherness. For Irigaray, that phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplifying desire. Instead of a self-limiting linguistic gesture that grants alterity or difference to women, phallogocentrism offers a name to eclipse the feminine and take its place.
IV. THEORIZING THE BINARY, THE UNITARY, AND BEYOND

Beauvoir and Irigaray clearly differ over the fundamental structures by which gender asymmetry is reproduced; Beauvoir turns to the failed reciprocity of an asymmetrical dialectic, while Irigaray suggests that the dialectic itself is the monologic elaboration of a masculinist signifying economy. Although Irigaray clearly broadens the scope of feminist critique by exposing the epistemological, ontological, and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy, the power of her analysis is undercut precisely by its globalizing reach. Is it possible to identify a monolithic as well as a monologic masculinist economy that traverses the array of cultural and historical contexts in which sexual difference takes place? Is the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression itself a kind of epistemological imperialism, one which is not ameliorated by the simple elaboration of cultural differences as “examples” of the selfsame phallogocentrism? The effort to include “Other” cultures as variegated amplifications of a global phallogocentrism constitutes an appropriative act that risks a repetition of the self-aggrandizing gesture of phallogocentrism, colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into question.23

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. It can operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination, to name but a few. And clearly, listing the varieties
of oppression, as I began to do, assumes their discrete, sequential coexistence along a horizontal axis that does not describe their convergences within the social field. A vertical model is similarly insufficient; oppressions cannot be summarily ranked, causally related, distributed among planes of “originality” and “derivativeness.”

Indeed, the field of power structured in part by the imperializing gesture of dialectical appropriation exceeds and encompasses the axis of sexual difference, offering a mapping of intersecting differentials which cannot be summarily hierarchized either within the terms of phallogocentrism or any other candidate for the position of “primary condition of oppression.” Rather than an exclusive tactic of masculinist signifying economies, dialectical appropriation and suppression of the Other is one tactic among many, deployed centrally but not exclusively in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain.

The contemporary feminist debates over essentialism raise the question of the universality of female identity and masculinist oppression in other ways. Universalistic claims are based on a common or shared epistemological standpoint, understood as the articulated consciousness or shared structures of oppression or in the ostensibly transcultural structures of femininity, maternity, sexuality, and/or écriture féminine. The opening discussion in this chapter argued that this globalizing gesture has spawned a number of criticisms from women who claim that the category of “women” is normative and exclusionary and is invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact. In other words, the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of “women” are constructed.

Some efforts have been made to formulate coalitional politics which do not assume in advance what the content of “women” will be. They propose instead a set of dialogic encounters by
which variously positioned women articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition. Clearly, the value of coalitional politics is not to be underestimated, but the very form of coalition, of an emerging and unpredictable assemblage of positions, cannot be figured in advance. Despite the clearly democratizing impulse that motivates coalition building, the coalitional theorist can inadvertently reinsert herself as sovereign of the process by trying to assert an ideal form for coalitional structures in advance, one that will effectively guarantee unity as the outcome. Related efforts to determine what is and is not the true shape of a dialogue, what constitutes a subject-position, and, most importantly, when “unity” has been reached, can impede the self-shaping and self-limiting dynamics of coalition.

The insistence in advance on coalitional “unity” as a goal assumes that solidarity, whatever its price, is a prerequisite for political action. But what sort of politics demands that kind of advance purchase on unity? Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact. Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often tortuous process of democratization. The very notion of “dialogue” is culturally specific and historically bound, and while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not. The power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated. Otherwise, the model of dialogue risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes “agreement” and “unity” and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought. It would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of “women” that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become
complete. The assumption of its essential incompleteness permits that category to serve as a permanently available site of contested meanings. The definitional incompleteness of the category might then serve as a normative ideal relieved of coercive force.

Is “unity” necessary for effective political action? Is the premature insistence on the goal of unity precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks? Certain forms of acknowledged fragmentation might facilitate coalitional action precisely because the “unity” of the category of women is neither presupposed nor desired. Does “unity” set up an exclusionary norm of solidarity at the level of identity that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim? Without the presupposition or goal of “unity,” which is, in either case, always instituted at a conceptual level, provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity. Without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of “women” for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot.

This antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that “identity” is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. Because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal. Moreover, when agreed-upon identities or agreed-upon dialogic structures, through which already established identities are communicated, no longer constitute the theme or subject of politics, then identities can come into being
and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. Certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view. Coalitional politics requires neither an expanded category of “women” nor an internally multiplicitous self that offers its complexity at once.

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.

V. IDENTITY, SEX, AND THE METAPHYSICS OF SUBSTANCE

What can be meant by “identity,” then, and what grounds the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent? More importantly, how do these assumptions inform the discourses on “gender identity”? It would be wrong to think that the discussion of “identity” ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that “persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning. Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of “the person” has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is “in” remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for
language, or moral deliberation. Although that literature is not examined here, one premise of such inquiries is the focus of critical exploration and inversion. Whereas the question of what constitutes “personal identity” within philosophical accounts almost always centers on the question of what internal feature of the person establishes the continuity or self-identity of the person through time, the question here will be: To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is “identity” a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.

“Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.

The notion that there might be a “truth” of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory
practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.” The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist”—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. “Follow” in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.

Before such disordered practices are considered, however, it seems crucial to understand the “matrix of intelligibility.” Is it singular? Of what is it composed? What is the peculiar alliance presumed to exist between a system of compulsory heterosexuality and the discursive categories that establish the identity concepts of sex? If “identity” is an effect of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity, construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality? Would that explanation return us to yet another totalizing frame in which compulsory heterosexuality merely takes the place of phallocentrism as the monolithic cause of gender oppression?

Within the spectrum of French feminist and poststructuralist theory, very different regimes of power are understood to
produce the identity concepts of sex. Consider the divergence between those positions, such as Irigaray’s, that claim there is only one sex, the masculine, that elaborates itself in and through the production of the “Other,” and those positions, Foucault’s, for instance, that assume that the category of sex, whether masculine or feminine, is a production of a diffuse regulatory economy of sexuality. Consider also Wittig’s argument that the category of sex is, under the conditions of compulsory heterosexuality, always feminine (the masculine remaining unmarked and, hence, synonymous with the “universal”). Wittig concurs, however paradoxically, with Foucault in claiming that the category of sex would itself disappear and, indeed, dissipate through the disruption and displacement of heterosexual hegemony.

The various explanatory models offered here suggest the very different ways in which the category of sex is understood depending on how the field of power is articulated. Is it possible to maintain the complexity of these fields of power and think through their productive capacities together? On the one hand, Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference suggests that women can never be understood on the model of a “subject” within the conventional representational systems of Western culture precisely because they constitute the fetish of representation and, hence, the unrepresentable as such. Women can never “be,” according to this ontology of substances, precisely because they are the relation of difference, the excluded, by which that domain marks itself off. Women are also a “difference” that cannot be understood as the simple negation or “Other” of the always-already-masculine subject. As discussed earlier, they are neither the subject nor its Other, but a difference from the economy of binary opposition, itself a ruse for a monologic elaboration of the masculine.

Central to each of these views, however, is the notion that sex appears within hegemonic language as a substance, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being. This appearance is
achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that “being” a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible. For Irigaray, grammar can never be a true index of gender relations precisely because it supports the substantial model of gender as a binary relation between two positive and representable terms. In Irigaray’s view, the substantive grammar of gender, which assumes men and women as well as their attributes of masculine and feminine, is an example of a binary that effectively masks the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism, silencing the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity. For Foucault, the substantive grammar of sex imposes an artificial binary relation between the sexes, as well as an artificial internal coherence within each term of that binary. The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies.

For Wittig, the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality; occasionally, she claims that the overthrow of compulsory heterosexuality will inaugurate a true humanism of “the person” freed from the shackles of sex. In other contexts, she suggests that the profusion and diffusion of a non-phallocentric erotic economy will dispel the illusion of sex, gender, and identity. At yet other textual moments it seems that “the lesbian” emerges as a third gender that promises to transcend the binary restriction on sex imposed by the system of compulsory heterosexuality. In her defense of the “cognitive subject,” Wittig appears to have no metaphysical quarrel with hegemonic modes of signification or representation; indeed, the subject, with its attribute of self-determination, appears to be the rehabilitation of the agent of existential choice under the name of the lesbian: “the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex . . . the lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories
of sex.” She does not criticize “the subject” as invariably masculine according to the rules of an inevitably patriarchal Symbolic, but proposes in its place the equivalent of a lesbian subject as language-user.

The identification of women with “sex,” for Beauvoir as for Wittig, is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men. Thus, the destruction of the category of sex would be the destruction of an attribute, sex, that has, through a misogynist gesture of synecdoche, come to take the place of the person, the self-determining cogito. In other words, only men are “persons,” and there is no gender but the feminine:

Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the “masculine” not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general.

Hence, Wittig calls for the destruction of “sex” so that women can assume the status of a universal subject. On the way toward that destruction, “women” must assume both a particular and a universal point of view. As a subject who can realize concrete universality through freedom, Wittig’s lesbian confirms rather than contests the normative promise of humanist ideals premised on the metaphysics of substance. In this respect, Wittig is distinguished from Irigaray, not only in terms of the now familiar oppositions between essentialism and materialism, but in terms of the adherence to a metaphysics of substance that confirms the normative model of humanism as the framework for feminism. Where it seems that Wittig has subscribed to a radical project of lesbian emancipation and enforced a distinction between “lesbian” and “woman,” she does this through the
defense of the pregendered “person,” characterized as freedom. This move not only confirms the presocial status of human freedom, but subscribes to that metaphysics of substance that is responsible for the production and naturalization of the category of sex itself.

The metaphysics of substance is a phrase that is associated with Nietzsche within the contemporary criticism of philosophical discourse. In a commentary on Nietzsche, Michel Haar argues that a number of philosophical ontologies have been trapped within certain illusions of “Being” and “Substance” that are fostered by the belief that the grammatical formulation of subject and predicate reflects the prior ontological reality of substance and attribute. These constructs, argues Haar, constitute the artificial philosophical means by which simplicity, order, and identity are effectively instituted. In no sense, however, do they reveal or represent some true order of things. For our purposes, this Nietzschean criticism becomes instructive when it is applied to the psychological categories that govern much popular and theoretical thinking about gender identity. According to Haar, the critique of the metaphysics of substance implies a critique of the very notion of the psychological person as a substantive thing:

The destruction of logic by means of its genealogy brings with it as well the ruin of the psychological categories founded upon this logic. All psychological categories (the ego, the individual, the person) derive from the illusion of substantial identity. But this illusion goes back basically to a superstition that deceives not only common sense but also philosophers—namely, the belief in language and, more precisely, in the truth of grammatical categories. It was grammar (the structure of subject and predicate) that inspired Descartes’ certainty that “I” is the subject of “think,” whereas it is rather the thoughts that come to “me”: at bottom, faith in grammar simply conveys
the will to be the “cause” of one’s thoughts. The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality.31

Wittig provides an alternative critique by showing that persons cannot be signified within language without the mark of gender. She provides a political analysis of the grammar of gender in French. According to Wittig, gender not only designates persons, “qualifies” them, as it were, but constitutes a conceptual episteme by which binary gender is universalized. Although French gives gender to all sorts of nouns other than persons, Wittig argues that her analysis has consequences for English as well. At the outset of “The Mark of Gender” (1984), she writes:

The mark of gender, according to grammarians, concerns substantives. They talk about it in terms of function. If they question its meaning, they may joke about it, calling gender a “fictive sex.” . . . as far as the categories of the person are concerned, both [English and French] are bearers of gender to the same extent. Both indeed give way to a primitive ontological concept that enforces in language a division of beings into sexes. . . . As an ontological concept that deals with the nature of Being, along with a whole nebula of other primitive concepts belonging to the same line of thought, gender seems to belong primarily to philosophy.32

For gender to “belong to philosophy” is, for Wittig, to belong to “that body of self-evident concepts without which philosophers believe they cannot develop a line of reasoning and which for them go without saying, for they exist prior to any thought, any social order, in nature.”33 Wittig’s view is corroborated by that popular discourse on gender identity that
uncritically employs the inflectional attribution of “being” to genders and to “sexualities.” The unproblematic claim to “be” a woman and “be” heterosexual would be symptomatic of that metaphysics of gender substances. In the case of both “men” and “women,” this claim tends to subordinate the notion of gender under that of identity and to lead to the conclusion that a person is a gender and is one in virtue of his or her sex, psychic sense of self, and various expressions of that psychic self, the most salient being that of sexual desire. In such a prefeminist context, gender, naively (rather than critically) confused with sex, serves as a unifying principle of the embodied self and maintains that unity over and against an “opposite sex” whose structure is presumed to maintain a parallel but oppositional internal coherence among sex, gender, and desire. The articulation “I feel like a woman” by a female or “I feel like a man” by a male presupposes that in neither case is the claim meaninglessly redundant. Although it might appear unproblematic to be a given anatomy (although we shall later consider the way in which that project is also fraught with difficulty), the experience of a gendered psychic disposition or cultural identity is considered an achievement. Thus, “I feel like a woman” is true to the extent that Aretha Franklin’s invocation of the defining Other is assumed: “You make me feel like a natural woman.” This achievement requires a differentiation from the opposite gender. Hence, one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair.

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender—where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self—and desire—where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both
a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire. The metaphysical unity of the three is assumed to be truly known and expressed in a differentiating desire for an oppositional gender—that is, in a form of oppositional heterosexuality. Whether as a naturalistic paradigm which establishes a causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire, or as an authentic-expressive paradigm in which some true self is said to be revealed simultaneously or successively in sex, gender, and desire, here “the old dream of symmetry,” as Irigaray has called it, is presupposed, reified, and rationalized.

This rough sketch of gender gives us a clue to understanding the political reasons for the substantializing view of gender. The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire.

The strategic displacement of that binary relation and the metaphysics of substance on which it relies presuppose that the categories of female and male, woman and man, are similarly produced within the binary frame. Foucault implicitly subscribes to such an explanation. In the closing chapter of the first volume of The History of Sexuality and in his brief but significant introduction to Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Journals of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite, Foucault suggests that the category of sex,
prior to any categorization of sexual difference, is itself constructed through a historically specific mode of sexuality. The tactical production of the discrete and binary categorization of sex conceals the strategic aims of that very apparatus of production by postulating “sex” as “a cause” of sexual experience, behavior, and desire. Foucault’s genealogical inquiry exposes this ostensible “cause” as “an effect,” the production of a given regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the discrete categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within any discursive account of sexuality.

Foucault’s introduction to the journals of the hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin, suggests that the genealogical critique of these reified categories of sex is the inadvertent consequence of sexual practices that cannot be accounted for within the medicolegal discourse of a naturalized heterosexuality. Herculine is not an “identity,” but the sexual impossibility of an identity. Although male and female anatomical elements are jointly distributed in and on this body, that is not the true source of scandal. The linguistic conventions that produce intelligible gendered selves find their limit in Herculine precisely because she/he occasions a convergence and disorganization of the rules that govern sex/gender/desire. Herculine deploys and redistributes the terms of a binary system, but that very redistribution disrupts and proliferates those terms outside the binary itself. According to Foucault, Herculine is not categorizable within the gender binary as it stands; the disconcerting convergence of heterosexuality and homosexuality in her/his person are only occasioned, but never caused, by his/her anatomical discontinuity. Foucault’s appropriation of Herculine is suspect, but his analysis implies the interesting belief that sexual heterogeneity (paradoxically foreclosed by a naturalized “hetero”-sexuality) implies a critique of the metaphysics of substance as it informs the identitarian categories of sex. Foucault imagines Herculine’s experience as “a world of pleasures in which grins hang about without the cat.”
Smiles, happinesses, pleasures, and desires are figured here as qualities without an abiding substance to which they are said to adhere. As free-floating attributes, they suggest the possibility of a gendered experience that cannot be grasped through the substantializing and hierarchizing grammar of nouns (res extensa) and adjectives (attributes, essential and accidental). Through his cursory reading of Herculine, Foucault proposes an ontology of accidental attributes that exposes the postulation of identity as a culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy, a regulatory fiction.

If it is possible to speak of a “man” with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a “man” with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender. But once we dispense with the priority of “man” and “woman” as abiding substances, then it is no longer possible to subordinate dissonant gendered features as so many secondary and accidental characteristics of a gender ontology that is fundamentally intact. If the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then it seems that gender as substance, the viability of man and woman as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility.

The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self, what the psychiatrist Robert Stoller refers to as a “gender core,” is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence. As a result, the exposure of this fictive production is conditioned by the deregulated play of attributes that resist assimilation into the ready made framework of primary nouns and subordinate adjectives. It is of course always possible to argue that dissonant adjectives work retroactively to redefine the substantive identities they are said to
modify and, hence, to expand the substantive categories of
gender to include possibilities that they previously excluded.
But if these substances are nothing other than the coherences
contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it
would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an
artificial effect, but essentially superfluous.

In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of
free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive
effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by
the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the
inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender
proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is
purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though
not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.
The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the
metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of
Nietzsche’s claim in On the Genealogy of Morals that “there is no
‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely
a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” In an
application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or
condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender
identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is per-
formatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to
be its results.

VI. LANGUAGE, POWER, AND THE STRATEGIES
OF DISPLACEMENT

A great deal of feminist theory and literature has nevertheless
assumed that there is a “doer” behind the deed. Without an
agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no poten-
tial to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within
society. Wittig’s radical feminist theory occupies an ambiguous
position within the continuum of theories on the question of
the subject. On the one hand, Wittig appears to dispute the metaphysics of substance, but on the other hand, she retains the human subject, the individual, as the metaphysical locus of agency. While Wittig’s humanism clearly presupposes that there is a doer behind the deed, her theory nevertheless delineates the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture, disputed the temporality of those explanations that would confuse “cause” with “result.” In a phrase that suggests the intertextual space that links Wittig with Foucault (and reveals the traces of the Marxist notion of reification in both of their theories), she writes:

A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the mark imposed by the oppressor; the “myth of woman,” plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, this mark does not preexist oppression . . . 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 “imaginary formation.”

Because this production of “nature” operates in accord with the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality, the emergence of homosexual desire, in her view, transcends the categories of sex: “If desire could liberate itself, it would have nothing to do with the preliminary marking by sexes.”

Wittig refers to “sex” as a mark that is somehow applied by an institutionalized heterosexuality, a mark that can be erased or obfuscated through practices that effectively contest that institution. Her view, of course, differs radically from Irigaray’s. The latter would understand the “mark” of gender to be part of the hegemonic signifying economy of the masculine that
operates through the self-elaborating mechanisms of specularization that have virtually determined the field of ontology within the Western philosophical tradition. For Wittig, language is an instrument or tool that is in no way misogynist in its structures, but only in its applications. For Irigaray, the possibility of another language or signifying economy is the only chance at escaping the “mark” of gender which, for the feminine, is nothing but the phallogocentric erasure of the female sex. Whereas Irigaray seeks to expose the ostensible “binary” relation between the sexes as a masculinist ruse that excludes the feminine altogether, Wittig argues that positions like Irigaray’s reconsolidate the binary between masculine and feminine and recirculate a mythic notion of the feminine. Clearly drawing on Beauvoir’s critique of the myth of the feminine in The Second Sex, Wittig asserts, “there is no ‘feminine writing.’”

Wittig is clearly attuned to the power of language to subordinate and exclude women. As a “materialist,” however, she considers language to be “another order of materiality,” an institution that can be radically transformed. Language ranks among the concrete and contingent practices and institutions maintained by the choices of individuals and, hence, weakened by the collective actions of choosing individuals. The linguistic fiction of “sex,” she argues, is a category produced and circulated by the system of compulsory heterosexuality in an effort to restrict the production of identities along the axis of heterosexual desire. In some of her work, both male and female homosexuality, as well as other positions independent of the heterosexual contract, provide the occasion either for the overthrow or the proliferation of the category of sex. In The Lesbian Body and elsewhere, however, Wittig appears to take issue with genitally organized sexuality per se and to call for an alternative economy of pleasures which would both contest the construction of female subjectivity marked by women’s supposedly distinctive reproductive function. Here the proliferation of
pleasures outside the reproductive economy suggests both a specifically feminine form of erotic diffusion, understood as a counterstrategy to the reproductive construction of genality. In a sense, The Lesbian Body can be understood, for Wittig, as an “inverted” reading of Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, in which he argues for the developmental superiority of genital sexuality over and against the less restricted and more diffuse infantile sexuality. Only the “invert,” the medical classification invoked by Freud for “the homosexual,” fails to “achieve” the genital norm. In waging a political critique against genality, Wittig appears to deploy “inversion” as a critical reading practice, valorising precisely those features of an undeveloped sexuality designated by Freud and effectively inaugurating a “post-genital politics.” Indeed, the notion of development can be read only as normalization within the heterosexual matrix. And yet, is this the only reading of Freud possible? And to what extent is Wittig’s practice of “inversion” committed to the very model of normalization that she seeks to dismantle? In other words, if the model of a more diffuse and antigenital sexuality serves as the singular, oppositional alternative to the hegemonic structure of sexuality, to what extent is that binary relation fated to reproduce itself endlessly? What possibility exists for the disruption of the oppositional binary itself?

Wittig’s oppositional relationship to psychoanalysis produces the unexpected consequence that her theory presumes precisely that psychoanalytic theory of development, now fully “inverted,” that she seeks to overcome. Polymorphous perversity, assumed to exist prior to the marking by sex, is valorised as the telos of human sexuality. One possible feminist psychoanalytic response to Wittig might argue that she both undertheorizes and underestimates the meaning and function of the language in which “the mark of gender” occurs. She understands that marking practice as contingent, radically variable, and even dispensable. The status of a primary prohibition in Lacanian theory
operates more forcefully and less contingently than the notion of a regulatory practice in Foucault or a materialist account of a system of heterosexist oppression in Wittig.

In Lacan, as in Irigaray’s post-Lacanian reformulation of Freud, sexual difference is not a simple binary that retains the metaphysics of substance as its foundation. The masculine “subject” is a fictive construction produced by the law that prohibits incest and forces an infinite displacement of a heterosexualizing desire. The feminine is never a mark of the subject; the feminine could not be an “attribute” of a gender. Rather, the feminine is the signification of lack, signified by the Symbolic, a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference. The masculine linguistic position undergoes individuation and heterosexualization required by the founding prohibitions of the Symbolic law, the law of the Father. The incest taboo that bars the son from the mother and thereby instates the kinship relation between them is a law enacted “in the name of the Father.” Similarly, the law that refuses the girl’s desire for both her mother and father requires that she take up the emblem of maternity and perpetuate the rules of kinship. Both masculine and feminine positions are thus instituted through prohibitive laws that produce culturally intelligible genders, but only through the production of an unconscious sexuality that reemerges in the domain of the imaginary.48

The feminist appropriation of sexual difference, whether written in opposition to the phallogocentrism of Lacan (Irigaray) or as a critical reelaboration of Lacan, attempts to theorize the feminine, not as an expression of the metaphysics of substance, but as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion. The feminine as the repudiated/excluded within that system constitutes the possibility of a critique and disruption of that hegemonic conceptual scheme. The works of Jacqueline Rose49 and Jane Gallop50 underscore in different ways the constructed status
of sexual difference, the inherent instability of that construction, and the dual consequentiality of a prohibition that at once institutes a sexual identity and provides for the exposure of that construction’s tenuous ground. Although Wittig and other materialist feminists within the French context would argue that sexual difference is an unthinking replication of a reified set of sexed polarities, these criticisms neglect the critical dimension of the unconscious which, as a site of repressed sexuality, reemerges within the discourse of the subject as the very impossibility of its coherence. As Rose points out very clearly, the construction of a coherent sexual identity along the disjunctive axis of the feminine/masculine is bound to fail; the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed reveal not only that “identity” is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious (the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him).

The differences between the materialist and Lacanian (and post-Lacanian) positions emerge in a normative quarrel over whether there is a retrievable sexuality either “before” or “outside” the law in the mode of the unconscious or “after” the law as a postgenital sexuality. Paradoxically, the normative trope of polymorphous perversity is understood to characterize both views of alternative sexuality. There is no agreement, however, on the manner of delimiting that “law” or set of “laws.” The psychoanalytic critique succeeds in giving an account of the construction of “the subject”—and perhaps also the illusion of substance—within the matrix of normative gender relations. In her existential-materialist mode, Wittig presumes the subject, the person, to have a presocial and pregendered integrity. On the other hand, “the paternal Law” in Lacan, as well as the monologic mastery of phallogocentrism in Irigaray, bear the mark of a monotheistic singularity that is perhaps less
unitary and culturally universal than the guiding structuralist assumptions of the account presume.52

But the quarrel seems also to turn on the articulation of a temporal trope of a subversive sexuality that flourishes prior to the imposition of a law, after its overthrow, or during its reign as a constant challenge to its authority. Here it seems wise to reinvoké Foucault who, in claiming that sexuality and power are coextensive, implicitly refutes the postulation of a subversive or emancipatory sexuality which could be free of the law. We can press the argument further by pointing out that “the before” of the law and “the after” are discursively and performatively instituted modes of temporality that are invoked within the terms of a normative framework which asserts that subversion, destabilization, or displacement requires a sexuality that somehow escapes the hegemonic prohibitions on sex. For Foucault, those prohibitions are invariably and inadvertently productive in the sense that “the subject” who is supposed to be founded and produced in and through those prohibitions does not have access to a sexuality that is in some sense “outside,” “before,” or “after” power itself. Power, rather than the law, encompasses both the juridical (prohibitive and regulatory) and the productive (inadvertently generative) functions of differential relations. Hence, the sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity. The productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of “subjects” that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible.

The feminist norm of a postgenital sexuality became the object of significant criticism from feminist theorists of sexuality, some of whom have sought a specifically feminist and/or lesbian appropriation of Foucault. This utopian notion of a sexuality freed from heterosexual constructs, a sexuality beyond
“sex,” failed to acknowledge the ways in which power relations continue to construct sexuality for women even within the terms of a “liberated” heterosexuality or lesbianism. The same criticism is waged against the notion of a specifically feminine sexual pleasure that is radically differentiated from phallic sexuality. Irigaray’s occasional efforts to derive a specific feminine sexuality from a specific female anatomy have been the focus of anti-essentialist arguments for some time. The return to biology as the ground of a specific feminine sexuality or meaning seems to defeat the feminist premise that biology is not destiny. But whether feminine sexuality is articulated here through a discourse of biology for purely strategic reasons, or whether it is, in fact, a feminist return to biological essentialism, the characterization of female sexuality as radically distinct from a phallic organization of sexuality remains problematic. Women who fail either to recognize that sexuality as their own or understand their sexuality as partially constructed within the terms of the phallic economy are potentially written off within the terms of that theory as “male-identified” or “unenlightened.” Indeed, it is often unclear within Irigaray’s text whether sexuality is culturally constructed, or whether it is only culturally constructed within the terms of the phallus. In other words, is specifically feminine pleasure “outside” of culture as its pre-history or as its utopian future? If so, of what use is such a notion for negotiating the contemporary struggles of sexuality within the terms of its construction?

The pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice has effectively argued that sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions. The emergence of a sexuality constructed (not determined) in these terms within lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual contexts is, therefore, not a sign of a masculine identification in some reductive sense. It is not the failed project
of criticizing phallogocentrism or heterosexual hegemony, as if a political critique could effectively undo the cultural construction of the feminist critic’s sexuality. If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is “before,” “outside,” or “beyond” power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement. In the place of a “male-identified” sexuality in which “male” serves as the cause and irreducible meaning of that sexuality, we might develop a notion of sexuality constructed in terms of phallic relations of power that replay and redistribute the possibilities of that phallicism precisely through the subversive operation of “identification” that are, within the power field of sexuality, inevitable. If “identifications,” following Jacqueline Rose, can be exposed as phantasmatic, then it must be possible to enact an identification that displays its phantasmatic structure. If there is no radical repudiation of a culturally constructed sexuality, what is left is the question of how to acknowledge and “do” the construction one is invariably in. Are there forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction, and, hence, consolidation of the law (the anachronistic notion of “male identification” that ought to be discarded from a feminist vocabulary)? What possibilities of gender configurations exist among the various emergent and occasionally convergent matrices of cultural intelligibility that govern gendered life?

Within the terms of feminist sexual theory, it is clear that the presence of power dynamics within sexuality is in no sense the same as the simple consolidation or augmentation of a
heterosexist or phallogocentric power regime. The “presence” of so-called heterosexual conventions within homosexual contexts as well as the proliferation of specifically gay discourses of sexual difference, as in the case of “butch” and “femme” as historical identities of sexual style, cannot be explained as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities. And neither can they be understood as the pernicious insistence of heterosexist constructs within gay sexuality and identity. The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original,” discussed in the final sections of chapter 3 of this text, reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original. Even if heterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse from which to do gender at all, the question remains: What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?

Consider not only that the ambiguities and incoherences within and among heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual practices are suppressed and redescribed within the reified framework of the disjunctive and asymmetrical binary of masculine/feminine, but that these cultural configurations of gender confusion operate as sites for intervention, exposure, and displacement of these reifications. In other words, the “unity” of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality. The force of this practice is, through an exclusionary
apparatus of production, to restrict the relative meanings of “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “bisexuality” as well as the subversive sites of their convergence and resignification. That the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped—as if it could be. If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?

If there is no recourse to a “person,” a “sex,” or a “sexuality” that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity? What possibilities exist by virtue of the constructed character of sex and gender? Whereas Foucault is ambiguous about the precise character of the “regulatory practices” that produce the category of sex, and Wittig appears to invest the full responsibility of the construction to sexual reproduction and its instrument, compulsory heterosexuality, yet other discourses converge to produce this categorial fiction for reasons not always clear or consistent with one another. The power relations that infuse the biological sciences are not easily reduced, and the medico-legal alliance emerging in nineteenth-century Europe has spawned categorial fictions that could not be anticipated in advance. The very complexity of the discursive map that constructs gender appears to hold out the promise of an inadvertent and generative convergence of these discursive and regulatory structures. If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing.
Clearly this project does not propose to lay out within traditional philosophical terms an ontology of gender whereby the meaning of being a woman or a man is elucidated within the terms of phenomenology. The presumption here is that the “being” of gender is an effect, an object of a genealogical investigation that maps out the political parameters of its construction in the mode of ontology. To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the “real” and the “authentic” as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization.

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a telos that governs the process of acculturation and construction. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which
has been a part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies.

The following chapter investigates some aspects of the psychoanalytic structuralist account of sexual difference and the construction of sexuality with respect to its power to contest the regulatory regimes outlined here as well as its role in uncritically reproducing those regimes. The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression. The final chapter considers the very notion of “the body,” not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained. No longer believable as an interior “truth” of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not “to be”), one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings. This text continues, then, as an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.
I. THE BODY POLITICS OF JULIA KRISTEVA

Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic dimension 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.¹ 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 repudiating 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 relation 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 terms 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 occasionally 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. Though 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 delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality. Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability. In asking whether a prediscursive libidinal multiplicity is possible, we will also consider whether what Kristeva claims to discover in the prediscursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause.

Even 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 how the failure of her political strategy follows in part from her largely uncritical appropriation of drive theory. Moreover, upon careful scrutiny of her descriptions of the semiotic function
within language, it appears that Kristeva reinstates the paternal law at the level of the semiotic itself. In the end, 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 reconceptualize the relation between drives, language, and patriarchal prerogative 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 represses or sublimates these drives, and that such drives are manifest only in those linguistic expressions which disobey, 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 on which drives break apart the usual, univocal terms of language and reveal an irrepressible 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 modality of meaning which does not conform to the requirements of univocal designation.

In this same work, she subscribes to a notion of free or uncathcted energy which makes itself known in language through the poetic function. She claims, for instance, that “in the intermingling 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 [sic] place.”

This poetic function is a rejective 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] primary process.”

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 that 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-presents or recovers the maternal body in poetic speech. Even the “first echolalias of infants” and the “glossalalias in psychotic discourse” are manifestations of the continuity of the mother-infant relation, a heterogeneous field of impulse prior to the separation/individuation of infant and mother, alike effected by the imposition of the incest taboo. 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.”

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 (abstracted from the materiality of language) and univocal; this is most apparent in quantitative or purely formal reasoning. In its semiotic mode, 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 timbres in Symbolist work, but also graphic 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.

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 instinctual 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, instinctual, maternal element.7

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 relations of maternal dependency. In creating the subject, the prohibitive law creates the domain of the Symbolic or language as a system of univocally signifying signs. Hence, Kristeva concludes that “poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the equivalent of incest.”8 The breaking of Symbolic language against its own founding law or, equivalently, the emergence of rupture into language from within its own interior instinctuality, is not merely the outburst of libidinal 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 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 prediscursive 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 heterosexuality 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, the women enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity 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.9

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 or lack.

The alleged psychosis of homosexuality, then, consists in its
thorough break with the paternal law and with the grounding of
the female “ego,” tenuous though it may be, in the melancholic
response to separation from the maternal body. Hence, accord-
ing 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 woman, a paradise
lost but seemingly close at hand.10

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 break-
ing of the incest taboo in an unmediated way. And yet why is
this the case?

Kristeva accepts the assumption that culture is equivalent to
the Symbolic, that the Symbolic is fully subsumed 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 div-
ide 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 “art.” A woman also attains it (and in our society, especially) through the strange form of split symbolization (threshold of language and instinctual drive, of the “symbolic” and the “semiotic”) of which the act of giving birth consists.11

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 poesis reveal an instinctual heterogeneity that subsequently exposes the repressed ground 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 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. Obedient, 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 “emancipation,” 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 concealed foundation.

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, verges always on psychosis. As a return to the maternal body and a concomitant deindividuation 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 unmediated 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 coherent selfhood are indissolubly linked.
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 psychotic 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 fusion, 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 not 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 repudiates 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 that 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 ontological 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 multiplicitous 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 transformation 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 multiplicitous field, as prior to 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 prediscursive corporeal 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, nonpaternal causality.” This pre-Symbolic, nonpaternal causality is, for Kristeva, a semiotic, maternal causality, or, more specifically, a teleological conception of maternal instincts:

Material compulsion, spasm 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 verbalize this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory? Heraclitus’ flux, Epicurus’ atoms, the whirling dust of cabalic, Arab and Indian mystics, and the stippled drawings of psychedelics—all
seem better metaphors than the theory of Being, the logos, and its laws.\textsuperscript{13}

Here, the repressed maternal body is not only the locus of multiple drives, but the bearer of a biological teleology 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 selfsame 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, she contrasts with Heraclitus’ flux), where the logos represents the univocal signifier, the law of identity. Her opposition between the semiotic and the Symbolic reduces here to a metaphysical quarrel between the principle of multiplicity that escapes the charge of non-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 not only the charge of Orientalism, but raises the very significant question of whether, ironically, multiplicity has become a univocal signifier.

Her ascription of a teleological aim to maternal drives prior to their constitution in language or culture raises a number of questions about Kristeva’s political program. Although she clearly sees subversive 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? Ostensibly, the multiplicity associated with the maternal libidinal economy has the force to disperse the univocity of the paternal signifier and seemingly to create the possibility of other cultural expressions no longer tightly constrained by the law of non-contradiction. But 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 “prepaternal” 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 confined 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 libidinal drive that constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality. Here Kristeva reifies maternity and then promotes this reification 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 repress. Rather than the manifestation of a prepatal causality, these desires might attest to maternity as a social practice required and recapitulated by the exigencies of kinship. Kristeva accepts Lévi-Strauss’s 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 practices which require and produce such desires in order to effect their reproductive ends.  

What grounds, then, does Kristeva have for imputing 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 represses or sublimates. But perhaps 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 libidinal 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 repress 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 for Kristeva is a pre-paternal causality would then appear as a patern al causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality.

Significantly, the figuration of the maternal body and the teleology of its instincts as a self-identical and insistent metaphysical principle—an archaism of a collective, sex-specific biological constitution—bases itself on a univocal 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 poesis itself, that activity of making upheld in Plato’s Symposium as an act of birth and poetic conception at once.15 But is female generativity 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-paternal causality whereof 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, conducts, 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.16

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 “prepaternal causality” as fundamentally inverted. Whereas Kristeva posits 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 signification, the tacit 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 redescribe 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 reversa: 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 transvaluated 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, posing 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 subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.

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 liberatory 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 maintains an 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 Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite. Herculine was assigned the sex of “female” at birth. In her early twenties, after a series of confessions to doctors and priests, she was
legally compelled to change h/er 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 h/er “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 Herculine against his theory of sexuality in The History of Sexuality, Volume I. Although he argues in The History of Sexuality that sexuality is coextensive with power, he fails to recognize the concrete relations of power that both construct and condemn Herculine’s sexuality. Indeed, he appears to romanticize h/er world of pleasures as the “happy limbo of a non-identity” (xiii), a world that exceeds the categories of sex and of identity. The reemergence of a discourse on sexual difference and the categories of sex within Herculine’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 then (c) postures 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 the 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 the misnomer of “sex” as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, to 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, conceived as repression or domination, and sex, conceived as a brave but thwarted energy waiting for release or authentic self-expression. The use of this juridical model presumes 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 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 representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate. (154)

Foucault explicitly takes a stand against emancipatory or
liberationist 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 with feminism seems also to emerge here: Where feminist analysis takes the category of sex and, thus, according to him, the binary restriction on gender, as its point 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-interpretation. 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 sexes 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 are pleasures that clearly transcend 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 Foucaultian 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 polymorphousness 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 anti-juridical 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 h/er tragic plight as one who lives a life of unjust victimization, deceit, longing, and inevitable dissatisfaction. From the time s/he was a young girl, s/he reports, s/he 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 h/er 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 where 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 h/er predicament in terms of a natural mistake, a metaphysical homelessness, a state of insatiable desire, and a radical solitariness that, before h/er suicide, is transformed into a full-blown rage, first directed toward men, but finally toward the world as such.

Herculine relates in elliptical terms h/er relations with the girls at school, the “mothers” at the convent, and finally h/er most passionate attachment with Sara who becomes h/er lover. Plagued first with guilt and then with some unspecified genital ailment, Herculine exposes h/er secret to a doctor and then a
priest, a set of confessional acts that effectively force h/her separation from Sara. Authorities confer and effect h/her legal transformation into a man whereupon s/he 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 Alexina into a man, s/he 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 precisely that unregulated field of pleasures 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 Herculine’s sexuality as the utopian 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 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 multiplicitous sexuality and inquire in the case of Herculine 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 Herculine’s sexual world.

Among the various matrices of power that produce sexuality
between Herculine and h/er partners are, clearly, the conventions of female homosexuality both encouraged and condemned by the convent and its supporting religious ideology. One thing about Herculine we know is that s/he reads, and reads a good deal, that h/er nineteenth-century French education involved schooling in the classics as well as French Romanticism, and that h/er 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 Herculine 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 do Christian legends about ill-fated saints, Greek myths about suicidal androgynes, and, obviously, the Christ figure itself. Whether “before” the law as a multiplicitous sexuality or “outside” the law as an unnatural transgression, those positionings are invariably “inside” a discourse which produces sexuality and then conceals that production through a configuring of a courageous and rebellious sexuality “outside” of the text itself.

The effort to explain Herculine’s sexual relations with young girls through recourse to the masculine component of h/er biological doubleness is, of course, the constant temptation of the text. If Herculine desires a girl, then perhaps there is evidence in hormonal or chromosomal structures or in the anatomical presence of the imperforate penis 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 Herculine’s body is hermaphroditic, the struggle to separate conceptually the description of h/er primary sexual characteristics from h/er gender identity (h/er sense of h/er own gender which, by the way, is ever-shifting
and far from clear) and the directionality and objects of h/er desire is especially difficult. S/he herself presumes at various points that h/er body is the cause of h/er gender confusion and h/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 rather than understand h/er anomalous body as the cause of h/er desire, h/er trouble, h/er 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 Herculine’s suicide.

If one follows Herculine’s narrative self-exposition, itself a kind of confessional production of the self, it seems that h/er sexual disposition is one of ambivalence from the outset, that h/er sexuality recapitulates the ambivalent structure of its production, construed in part as the institutional injunction to pursue the love of the various “sisters” and “mothers” of the extended convent family and the absolute prohibition against carrying that love too far. Foucault inadvertently suggests that Herculine’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 Herculine as participating in a practice of female homosexual conventions, insisting that “non-identity” rather than a variety of female identities is at play. For Herculine to occupy the discursive position
of “the female homosexual” would be for Foucault to engage the category of sex—precisely what Foucault wants Herculine’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 Herculine’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 Herculine. 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? Herculine maintains h/er own discourse of sexual difference even within this ostensibly homosexual context: s/he notes and enjoys h/er difference from the young women s/he desires, and yet this difference is not a simple reproduction of the heterosexual matrix for desire. S/he knows that her position in that exchange is transgressive, that she is a “usurper” of a masculine prerogative, as s/he puts it, and that s/he contests that privilege even as s/he replicates it.

The language of usurpation suggests a participation in the very categories from which s/he 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. Herculine’s anatomy does not fall outside the categories of sex, but confuses and redistributes the constitutive elements of those categories; indeed, the free
play of attributes has the effect of exposing the illusory character of sex as an abiding substantive substrate to which these various attributes are presumed to adhere. Moreover, Herculine’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 univocity 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. Herculine 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?

If Foucault contends that sexual nonidentity is promoted in homosexual contexts, he would seem to identify heterosexual contexts as precisely those in which identity is constituted. We know already that he understands the category of sex and of identity generally to be the effect and instrument of a regulatory sexual regime, but it is less clear whether that regulation is reproductive or heterosexual, or something else.
Does that regulation of sexuality produce male and female identities within a symmetrical binary relation? If homosexuality produces sexual nonidentity, when homosexuality itself no longer relies on identities being like one another; indeed, homosexuality could no longer be described as such. But if homosexuality is meant to designate the place of an unnameable libidinal heterogeneity, perhaps we can ask whether this is, instead, a love that either cannot or dare not speak its name? In other words, Foucault, who gave only one interview on homosexuality and has always resisted the confessional moment in his own work, nevertheless presents Herculine’s confession to us in an unabashedly didactic mode. Is this a displaced confession that presumes a continuity or parallel between his life and hers?

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, h/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 h/er own presentation of h/erself as very much unlike the women s/he 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 . . .!!!” (51). 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 “[Laughs],” and he says, “All I can do is explode with laughter.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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 Rivière 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 that 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 dreary 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, the 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 s/he directs against the doctor, for whom s/he loses respect after he fails to tell the appropriate authorities of 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 damning law, subjected to it either as its instrument or object. Herculine does not fall outside the jurisdiction of that law; even h/er exile is understood on the model of punishment. On the very first page, s/he reports that h/er “place was not marked out [pas marquée] in this world that shunned me.” And s/he articulates the early sense of abjection that is later enacted 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 s/he is expelled and expels h/erself from the domain of all human beings. From this presuicidal isolation, s/he claims to soar above both sexes, but h/er anger is most fully directed against men, whose “title” s/he sought to usurp in h/er intimacy with Sara and whom s/he now indicts without restraint as those who somehow forbid h/er the possibility of love.

At the beginning of the narrative, s/he 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 h/er identity and desire. Before s/he tells us that s/he h/erself was abandoned by h/er mother quickly and without advance notice, s/he tells us that for reasons unstated s/he spent a few years in a house for abandoned and orphaned children. S/he refers to the “poor creatures, deprived from their cradle of a mother’s love.” In the next sentence s/he refers to this institution as a “refuge [asile] of suffering and affliction,” and in the following sentence refers to h/er father “whom a sudden death tore away . . . from the tender affection of
my mother” (4). Although h/er own abandonment is twice deflected here through the pity for others who are suddenly rendered motherless, s/he establishes an identification through that deflection, one that later reappears as the joint plight of father and daughter cut off from the maternal caress. 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, s/he vacillates between being the object of everyone’s adoration and excitement 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 Freud argues, and if 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 h/erself 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 h/er, indeed, one who is better for all women than any “man” (107).

S/he refers to the hospital for orphaned children as that early “refuge of suffering,” an abode that s/he figuratively reencounters at the 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 s/he hopes death will let h/er meet: “The sight of the tomb reconciles me to life,” she writes. “It makes me feel an indefinable 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 [h/er] feet” is earlier enlarged to become the totality of men over whom s/he soars, and whom
s/he claims to dominate (107), and toward whom s/he directs h/er laugh of disdain. Earlier s/he remarks about the doctor who discovered h/er 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 limbo of a non-identity.” Almost prefiguring the place Herculine will assume for Foucault, s/he wonders whether s/he is not “the plaything of an impossible dream” (79). Herculine’s sexual disposition is one of ambivalence from the outset, and, as argued earlier, h/er sexuality recapitulates the ambivalent structure of its production, construed in part as the institutional injunction to pursue the love of the various “sisters” and “mothers” of the extended convent family and the absolute prohibition against carrying that love too far. H/er 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. H/er confessions, as well as h/er desires, are subjection and defiance 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 “man,” and yet the gender category proves less fluid than h/er own references to Ovid’s Metamorphoses suggest. H/er heteroglossic discourse challenges the viability of the notion of a “person” who might be said to preexist gender or exchange one gender for the other. If s/he is not actively condemned by others, s/he condemns h/erself (even calls h/erself a “judge” [106]), revealing that the juridical law in effect is much greater than the empirical law that effects h/er gender conversion. Indeed, Herculine can never embody that law precisely because s/he 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.

Herculine’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 s/he fully fall outside the signifying economy of masculinity. S/he is “outside” the law, but the law maintains this “outside” within itself. In effect, s/he 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 univocity of sex is 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 his 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 lives!). 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 constitutions. I quote from her article, “Life in the XY Corral”:

> 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 sperms. 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, if external genitalia were sufficient as a criterion by which to determine or assign 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 conflate 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 femaleness is always conceptualized in terms of the absence of the male-determining factor or of the passive presence of that factor. As absent or passive, it is definitionally disqualified as an object of study. Eicher and Washburn suggest, however, that it is active and that a cultural 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 (automatic) 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 tissue 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 nucleocentric 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 reconceive 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-cytoplasmic interactions alter during differentiation” (323–24).

The structure of Page’s inquiry fits 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; the question he pursues is that of how the “binary switch” gets 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 presence 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 hypothesis and the reasoning of those 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 a purely cultural convention to which Page and others refer when they decide that an anatomically ambiguous XX individual is male, a convention that takes genitalia to be the definitive “sign” of sex? One might argue that the discontinuities in these instances 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-consciously 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 signs of sex, and does that in the service of reproductive interests, and the discourse that seeks to establish the male principle as active and monocalusal, if not autogenetic. 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 sexuality 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 masculine activity, 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 casts sheaves of 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” a gender? What is the moment or mechanism of gender construction? And, perhaps most pertinently, when does this mechanism arrive 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 “qualify” bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, “is it a boy or 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, delimiting 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 sexed 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, resignifiable and expansive categories that resist both the binary and substantializing 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 born 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 lesbian is not a woman. 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 heterosexuality. A lesbian, she claims, in refusing heterosexuality is no longer defined in terms of that oppositional relation. Indeed, a lesbian, she maintains, transcends the binary 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, the lesbian exposes (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 female, 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 that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description.

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 always 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 particular and relative, and males within this system participate in the form of the universal person. For Wittig, then, the “female sex” does not imply some 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 immanence. 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 their 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 reformist or subversive position 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 recourse to sex and, consequently, without recourse to the pronomial differentiations that regulate and distribute rights of speech within the matrix of gender.

Wittig 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, Wittig argues that such an object has been violently shaped into such a datum and that the history and mechanism of that violent shaping no longer appears with that object. Therefore, “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, uncaused, but only because the cause is nowhere to be seen. Wittig 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 “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as others but marked 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” denotes an historically contingent epistemic regime, a language that forms perception by forcibly shaping the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived.

Is there a “physical” body prior to the perceptually perceived body? 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 erogenous 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 Wittig textually enacts 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 dictate what “unifies” and renders coherent the body as a sexed body. In her theory and fiction, Wittig 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 Wittig’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 structuralist assumption of a set of universal signifying structures prior to the speaking subject that orchestrate the formation of that subject and his or her speech. In her view, there are historically contingent structures characterized as 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, Wittig argues, is to assume the position
of the authoritative, 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 Wittig, 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 sexual difference has created this appearance of natural division. The “naming” of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/perceptual construction of bodies in accord with principles of sexual difference. Hence, Wittig concludes, “we are compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us . . . ‘men’ and ‘women’ are political categories, and not natural facts.”

“Sex,” the category, compels “sex,” the social configuration of bodies, through what Wittig calls a coerced contract. Hence, the category of “sex” is a name that enslaves. Language “casts sheaves of reality upon the social body,” but these sheaves are not easily discarded. She continues: “stamping it and violently shaping it.” Wittig argues that the “straight mind,” evident in the discourses 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.”\(^{32}\) 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.”\(^ {33}\) 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 the subject 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.”\(^ {34}\)

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 “I” because as a woman, the speaker is “particular” (relative, interested, perspectival), and the invocation of the “I” presumes the capacity to speak for and as the universal human: “a relative subject is inconceivable, a relative subject could not speak at all.”35 Relying on the assumption that all speaking presupposes and implicitly invokes the entirety of language, Wittig describes the speaking subject as one who, in the act of saying “I,” “reappropriates language as a whole, 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.”36

Wittig continues with a startling speculation on the nature of language and “being” that situates her own political project within the traditional discourse of ontotheology. 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 on them which deform them as partial or relative beings. Since this discarding follows upon the exercise of a full invocation of “I,” women speak their way out of their gender. 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” assumes the totality of language and, hence, speaks potentially from all positions—that is, in a universal mode. “Gender . . . works upon this ontological fact to annul it,” she writes, assuming the primary principle of equal access to the universal to qualify as that “ontological fact.”

This principle of equal access, however, is itself grounded in an ontological presumption 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 différence, 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 does 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 plenitude. 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.”39 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 recourse to 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 Djuna Barnes, Marcel Proust, and Natalie Sarraute. The literary text as war machine 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 re-establish the unity of language as indissoluble form and content: “through literature . . . words come back to us whole again”\textsuperscript{45}, “language exists as a paradise made of visible, audible, palpable, palatable words.”\textsuperscript{46} Above all, literary works offer Wittig the occasion to experiment with pronouns that within systems of compulsory meaning conflate the masculine with the universal and invariably particularize the feminine. In Les Guérillères,\textsuperscript{47} she seeks to eliminate any he-they (il-ils) 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 categories of sex obsolete in language.”\textsuperscript{48}

In a self-consciously defiant imperialist strategy, Wittig argues that only by taking up the universal and absolute point of view, effectively lesbianizing the entire world, can the compulsory order of heterosexuality be destroyed. The j/e 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 heterosexist episteme by a reverse discourse of equal reach and power. The point is not to assume the position of 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 relation-
ship of equality with other speaking subjects. 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 speak-
ing 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.

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 reality, except through its effects,
whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a 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 hetero-
sexual 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 resignifying heterosexuality itself are refused 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 conception 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 resignificatory relationships to heterosexual cultural configurations. Wittig’s view refuses the possibility, 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 heterosexuality 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 queens, butches, femmes, girls, even the parodic reappropriation of dyke, queer, and fag redeploy 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 its 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 accusation assumes that the feminine belongs to women, an assumption surely suspect.

Within lesbian contexts, the “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 distinctness 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 “replicas” 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 break-down 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 disempowering and denaturalizing effects of a specifically gay deployment of heterosexual constructs. The presence of these norms not only constitute 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 transvaluation 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 materiality and representation 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 “On the Social Contract,” she understands the institution of heterosexuality as the founding basis of the male-dominated 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 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 refigures 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 sexed bodies, Wittig’s own language enacts an alternative disfiguring and refiguring 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.

If 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 sexuality, this set of acts outside of the reproductive matrix produces the body itself as an incoherent 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 disintegration 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—notions that on the surface seem antithetical to feminist aims. 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 binarisms 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 wars waged among women, are textual waged among women, 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 political 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 man nor woman truly describes. This is not the figure of the androgyne 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 women, Wittig’s lesbian-feminism appears to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women and implicitly to assume 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 heterosexuality’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 refutes
the radical disjunction between heterosexual and homosexual economies that Wittig promotes, 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 qualify over 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 construct “the real.” Excluded from 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 deprives itself of the capacity of resignify the very heterosexual constructs 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 is 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 render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic.
IV. BODILY INSCRIPTIONS, PERFORMATIVE SUBVERSIONS

“Garbo ‘got in drag’ whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a man’s arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck . . . bear the weight of her thrown-back head . . . How resplendent seems the art of acting! It is all impersonation, whether the sex underneath is true or not.”

—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 epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped. In the case of feminism, politics is ostensibly shaped to express the interests, the perspectives, of “women.” But is there a political shape to “women,” as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is 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 forces with strategic interests 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 body” that pre-exists the acquisition of its sexed 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 cultural constructed body, however, ought to
question “the body” as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse. There are Christian and Cartesian precedents to such views which, prior to the emergence of vitalistic biologies in the nineteenth century, understand “the body” as so much inert matter, signifying nothing or, more specifically, signifying a profane void, the fallen state: deception, sin, the premonitional metaphorics of hell and the eternal feminine. There are many occasions in both Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s work where “the body” is figured as a mute facticity, anticipating some meaning that can be attributed only by a transcendent consciousness, understood in Cartesian terms as radically immaterial. But what establishes this dualism for us? What separates off “the body” as indifferent to signification, and signification itself as the act of a radically disembodied consciousness or, rather, the act that radically disembodies that consciousness? To what extent is that Cartesian dualism presupposed in phenomenology adapted to the structuralist frame in which mind/body is redescribed as culture/nature? With respect to gender discourse, to what extent do these problematic dualisms still operate within the very descriptions that are supposed to lead us out of that binarism and its implicit hierarchy? How are the contours of the body clearly marked as the taken-for-granted ground or surface upon which gender significations are inscribed, a mere facticity devoid of value, prior to signification?

Wittig suggests that a culturally specific epistemic a priori establishes the naturalness of “sex.” But by what enigmatic means has “the body” been accepted as a prima facie given that admits of no genealogy? Even within Foucault’s essay on the very theme of genealogy, the body is figured as a surface and the scene of a cultural inscription: “the body is the inscribed surface of events.” The task of genealogy, he claims, is “to expose a body totally imprinted by history.” His sentence continues, however, by referring to the goal of “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 disintegration” (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 is, for 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 sacrificial destruction. 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 metaphors 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 prediscursive 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 precategorical source of disruption is refused, is it 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 structuring of the social field. This signifying practice effects a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility.

Mary Douglas’s Purity 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 instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies:

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy 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.55

Although Douglas clearly subscribes to a structuralist distinction between an inherently unruly nature and an order imposed by cultural means, the “untidiness” to which she refers can be redescribed as a region of cultural unruliness 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 that 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 poststructuralist 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 inhere 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 type 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.56

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.57 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 homophobic signifying systems the dangers that permeable bodily boundaries present to the social order as such. Douglas 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?”

Douglas suggests that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system as such 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 unsanctioned by the hegemonic order, male homosexuality would, within 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 untidy nature. Paradoxically, homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophobic 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 reinscribe 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 Wittig’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 regulatory practices within which bodily contours are constructed constitutes precisely the genealogy of “the body” in its discreteness that might further radicalize Foucault’s theory.

Significantly, Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in Powers of Horror begins to suggest the uses of this structuralist notion of a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion. The “abject” 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-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject. Kristeva writes:

\textit{nausea} makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer 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 \textit{myself}, I spit \textit{myself} out, I abject \textit{myself} within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself.

The boundary of the body as well 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 differentiation. Young’s appropriation of Kristeva shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate “identities” founded on the instituting of the “Other” or a set of Others through exclusion and domination. What constitutes through division 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 confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model 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 filth that it fears.

Regardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial distinctions 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 strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. 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 fixity 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 figuration 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 performatives

In Discipline and Punish Foucault challenges the language of internalization as it operates in the service of the disciplinary regime of the subjection 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 crimino-logy. In a sense, Discipline and Punish can be read as Foucault’s effort to rewrite 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 incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body; there the law is manifest 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 subjectivates. Foucault writes:
It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within, the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those that are punished. (my emphasis)

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 signification 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.”

The redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body implies a corollary redescription 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 figuration of the body? We have already considered the incest taboo and the prior taboo against homosexuality as the generative moments of gender identity, the prohibitions that produce identity along the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality. The 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. The construction of 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 disaggregation 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, it 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 constitute 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 institutes 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 “cause” 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 its sex or of 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, my 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 heterosexuality, 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 reframed. The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that 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 distinct from the gender of the performance, 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 its 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. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness 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 unities 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 distinctness 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 a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a “figure” in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions 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 recon-textualization; 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 history 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 ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost it humor.70

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 domesticated 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 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.

Wittig understands gender as the workings of “sex,” where “sex” is an obligatory 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 “project,” 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 situation 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 neither an “essence” 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 reified 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 originators, 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 reexperiencing 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 parodic 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 performativeness 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 masculinist domination 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.
CONCLUSION: FROM PARODY TO POLITICS

I began with the speculative question of whether feminist politics could do without a “subject” in the category of women. At stake is not whether it still makes sense, strategically or transitionally, to refer to women in order to make representational claims in their behalf. The feminist “we” is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent. The tenuous or phantasmatic status of the “we,” however, is not cause for despair or, at least, it is not only cause for despair. The radical instability of the category sets into question the foundational restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only of genders and bodies, but of politics itself.

The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for
political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a “doer behind the deed,” but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed. This is not a return to an existential theory of the self as constituted through its acts, for the existential theory maintains a prediscursive structure for both the self and its acts. It is precisely the discursively variable construction of each in and through the other that has interested me here.

The question of locating “agency” is usually associated with the viability of the “subject,” where the “subject” is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or, if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness. On such a model, “culture” and “discourse” mire the subject, but do not constitute that subject. This move to qualify and enmire the preexisting subject has appeared necessary to establish a point of agency that is not fully determined by that culture and discourse. And yet, this kind of reasoning falsely presumes (a) agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive “I,” even if that “I” is found in the midst of a discursive convergence, and (b) that to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by discourse, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency.

Even within the theories that maintain a highly qualified or situated subject, the subject still encounters its discursively constituted environment in an oppositional epistemological frame. The culturally enmired subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity. In Beauvoir, for example, there is an “I” that does its gender, that becomes its gender, but that “I,” invariably associated with its gender, is nevertheless a point of agency never fully identifiable with its gender. That cogito is never fully of the cultural world that it negotiates, no matter the narrowness of the
ontological distance that separates that subject from its cultural predicates. The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed “etc.” at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete. This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated “etc.” that so often occurs at the end of such lines? This is a sign of exhaustion as well as of the illimitable process of signification itself. It is the supplément, the excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all. This illimitable et cetera, however, offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing.

If identity is asserted through a process of signification, if identity is always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses, then the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an “I” that preexists signification. In other words, the enabling conditions for an assertion of “I” are provided by the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of that pronoun, the practices that establish the terms of intelligibility by which that pronoun can circulate. Language is not an exterior medium or instrument into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self. The Hegelian model of self-recognition that has been appropriated by Marx, Lukacs, and a variety of contemporary liberatory discourses presupposes a potential adequation between the “I” that confronts its world, including its language, as an object, and the “I” that finds itself as an object in that world. But the subject/object dichotomy, which here belongs to the tradition of Western epistemology, conditions the very problematic of identity that it seeks to solve.

What discursive tradition establishes the “I” and its “Other” in an epistemological confrontation that subsequently decides
where and how questions of knowability and agency are to be determined? What kinds of agency are foreclosed through the positing of an epistemological subject precisely because the rules and practices that govern the invocation of that subject and regulate its agency in advance are ruled out as sites of analysis and critical intervention? That the epistemological point of departure is in no sense inevitable is naively and pervasively confirmed by the mundane operations of ordinary language—widely documented within anthropology—that regard the subject/object dichotomy as a strange and contingent, if not violent, philosophical imposition. The language of appropriation, instrumentality, and distanciation germane to the epistemological mode also belong to a strategy of domination that pits the “I” against an “Other” and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other.

As part of the epistemological inheritance of contemporary political discourses of identity, this binary opposition is a strategic move within a given set of signifying practices, one that establishes the “I” in and through this opposition and which reifies that opposition as a necessity, concealing the discursive apparatus by which the binary itself is constituted. The shift from an epistemological account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of signification permits an analysis that takes the epistemological mode itself as one possible and contingent signifying practice. Further, the question of agency is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work. In other words, what is signified as an identity is not signified at a given point in time after which it is simply there as an inert piece of entitative language. Clearly, identities can appear as so many inert substantives; indeed, epistemological models tend to take this appearance as their point of theoretical departure. However, the substantive “I” only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to
naturalize its effects. Further, to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible practices of identity. Indeed, to understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life. Abstractly considered, language refers to an open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested. As historically specific organizations of language, discourses present themselves in the plural, coexisting within temporal frames, and instituting unpredictable and inadvertent convergences from which specific modalities of discursive possibilities are engendered.

As a process, signification harbors within itself what the epistemological discourse refers to as “agency.” The rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an “I,” rules that are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, operate through repetition. Indeed, when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency,” then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only
within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence. There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains “integrity” prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there.

What constitutes a subversive repetition within signifying practices of gender? I have argued (“I” deploy the grammar that governs the genre of the philosophical conclusion, but note that it is the grammar itself that deploys and enables this “I,” even as the “I” that insists itself here repeats, redeploy, and—as the critics will determine—contests the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted) that, for instance, within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as “the real” and the “factic,” the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural inscription. And yet gender is not written on the body as the torturing instrument of writing in Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” inscribes itself unintelligibly on the flesh of the accused. The question is not: what meaning does that inscription carry within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meeting between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible? The “real” and the “sexually factic” are phantasmatic constructions—illusions of
substance—that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can. What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic—a failed copy, as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. And yet this failure to become “real” and to embody “the natural” is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman.” The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.

I have tried to suggest that the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed
necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible “sex” ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of “agency” that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the constituted status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism. Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.

This theoretical inquiry has attempted to locate the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identity. This effort, however, can only be accomplished through the introduction of a set of questions that extend the very notion of the political. How to disrupt the foundations that cover over alternative cultural configurations of gender? How
to destabilize and render in their phantasmatic dimension the “premises” of identity politics?

This task has required a critical genealogy of the naturalization of sex and of bodies in general. It has also demanded a reconsideration of the figure of the body as mute, prior to culture, awaiting signification, a figure that cross-checks with the figure of the feminine, awaiting the inscription-as-incision of the masculine signifier for entrance into language and culture. From a political analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, it has been necessary to question the construction of sex as binary, as a hierarchical binary. From the point of view of gender as enacted, questions have emerged over the fixity of gender identity as an interior depth that is said to be externalized in various forms of “expression.” The implicit construction of the primary heterosexual construction of desire is shown to persist even as it appears in the mode of primary bisexuality. Strategies of exclusion and hierarchy are also shown to persist in the formulation of the sex/gender distinction and its recourse to “sex” as the prediscursive as well as the priority of sexuality to culture and, in particular, the cultural construction of sexuality as the prediscursive. Finally, the epistemological paradigm that presumes the priority of the doer to the deed establishes a global and globalizing subject who disavows its own locality as well as the conditions for local intervention.

If taken as the grounds of feminist theory or politics, these “effects” of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality are not only misdescribed as foundations, but the signifying practices that enable this metaleptic misdescription remain outside the purview of a feminist critique of gender relations. To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the “I” that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or,
indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility. Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground.

The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very “subjects” that it hopes to represent and liberate. The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility qua possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible. If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. What other local strategies for engaging the “unnatural” might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?
6. I use the term *heterosexual matrix* throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the “heterosexual contract” and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.

7. For a discussion of the sex/gender distinction in structuralist anthropology and feminist appropriations and criticisms of that formulation, see chapter 2, section i, “Structuralism’s Critical Exchange.”


13. Ibid., p. 38.


15. Note the extent to which phenomenological theories such as Sartre's, Merleau Ponty's, and Beauvoir's tend to use the term embodiment. Drawn as it is from theological contexts, the term tends to figure "the" body as a mode of incarnation and, hence, to preserve the external and dualistic relationship between a signifying immateriality and the materiality of the body itself.


19. See my "Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's Second Sex."

20. The normative ideal of the body as both a "situation" and an "instrumentality" is embraced by both Beauvoir with respect to gender and Frantz Fanon with respect to race. Fanon concludes his analysis of colonization through recourse to the body as an instrument of freedom, where freedom is, in Cartesian fashion, equated with a consciousness capable of doubt: "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks [New York: Grove Press, 1967], p. 323, originally published as Peau noire, masques blancs [Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1952]).

21. The radical ontological disjunction in Sartre between consciousness and the body is part of the Cartesian inheritance of his philosophy. Significantly, it is Descartes' distinction that Hegel implicitly interrogates at the outset of the "Master-Slave" section of The Phenomenology of Spirit. Beauvoir's analysis of the masculine Subject and the feminine Other is clearly situated in Hegel's dialectic and in the Sartrian reformulation of that dialectic in the section on sadism and masochism in Being and Nothingness. Critical of the very possibility of a "synthesis" of consciousness and the body, Sartre effectively returns to the Cartesian problematic that Hegel sought to overcome. Beauvoir insists that the body can be the instrument and situation of freedom and that sex can be the occasion for a gender that is not a reification, but a modality of freedom. At first this appears to be a synthesis of body and consciousness, where consciousness is understood as the condition of freedom. The question that remains, however, is whether this synthesis requires and maintains the ontological distinction between body and mind of which it is composed and, by association, the hierarchy of mind over body and of masculine over feminine.


23. Gayatri Spivak most pointedly elaborates this particular kind of binary explanation as a colonizing act of marginalization. In a critique of the "self-presentation of the cognizing supra-historical self," which is characteristic of the epistemic imperialism of the philosophical cogito, she locates politics in the production of knowledge that creates and censors the margins that constitute, through exclusion, the contingent intelligibility of that subject's given knowledge-regime: "I call 'politics as such' the prohibition of marginality that is implicit in the production of any explanation. From that point of view, the choice of particular binary oppositions ... is no mere intellectual strategy. It is, in each case, the condition of the possibility for centralization (with appropriate apologies) and, correspondingly, marginalization" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia," in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics [New York: Routledge, 1987], p. 113).


25. For a fuller elaboration of the unrepresentability of women in phallocentric discourse, see Luce Irigaray, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine," in Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Irigaray appears to revise this argument in her discussion of "the feminine gender" in Sexes et parentés.
Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* occasioned an important shift in my own thinking about the constructed status of lesbian sexuality.  


3. Subversive Bodily Acts  


3. Ibid., p. 25.  


5. Ibid., p. 135.  

6. Ibid., p. 134.  

7. Ibid., p. 136.  

8. Ibid.  

9. Ibid., p. 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 “procreancy . . . of the spirit,” he writes that it is the specific capacity of the poet. Hence, poetic creations are understood as sublimated reproductive desire.  


18. “The notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, 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 sexed 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.


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), p. 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 closer parallels to the displacement of the speaking subject by the semiotic/unconscious 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 decenters 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 hearer as a potential speaker. Wittig concludes the essay with the following: "the paradise 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 Pouvoirs de l'horreur (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1980). Assimilating Douglas' insights to her own reformulation of Lacan, Kristeva writes, "Difilement 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 agglomerat-