

## Chapter 7

# Queering the Center by Centering the Queer

## Reflections on Transsexuals and Secular Jews

Confusing yourself is a way to stay honest.

Jenny Holzer

Twentieth-century liberatory activism and theorizing have lived with and on the tension between two visions: For one the goal is to secure for the marginalized and oppressed the relief from burdens and the access to benefits reserved for the privileged, including the benefits of being thought by others and oneself to be at the center of one's society's views of what it is to be fully human. For the other the goal is to disrupt those views and the models of privileged selfhood they underwrite—to claim not the right to be, in those terms, fully human but, rather, the right to be free of a stigmatizing, normalizing apparatus to which one would not choose to conform even were one allowed and encouraged to do so. Struggles in the arenas of race, colonialism and imperialism, gender, class, and sexuality have all, in varying ways and to differing degrees, in different times and places, been pushed and pulled, shaped and molded, formed and deformed by the tensions between these two visions.

Among the perquisites of modern Eurocentric privilege are socially supported expectations that one can and will conform to certain norms of selfhood: One will be a person of integrity—whole and of a piece, someone to be counted on, stable and steady; one's beliefs, attitudes, and feelings will be explicable and coherent; one's actions will follow straightforwardly from one's intentions; one will be simultaneously solid and transparent—a block of unclouded substance.<sup>1</sup> (That the very wealthy and powerful are often allowed, or even expected, to be creatures of unpredictable caprice and inexplicable temperament is the exception that proves the rule: The acquisition and in most cases the maintenance of privilege are matters of discipline, so that flamboyant flouting can be a

1. As this description of privileged subjectivity indicates, I am deeply indebted in my thinking about issues of identity, subjectivity, and integrity by reading, listening to, and talking with Maria Lugones for fifteen years.

sign that, by one's own efforts or by the inheritance of the efforts of one's ancestors, one is so securely privileged as to be able to let the discipline go. In short, part of how one flaunts one's privilege is by acting as though one need do nothing to continue to earn it.)

As María Lugones has argued (in a talk at the University of Minnesota)<sup>2</sup>, such an ideal of integrity is not as straightforward as it may seem. The direct, unmediated route from intention to action that is one of its hallmarks is typically more apparent than real: We are taught not to see the elaborate collaboration provided to the privileged by a compliant social structure. By contrast, the necessary survival strategies of the oppressed make these marks of full, moral humanity unobtainable: Manipulation, deviousness, fickleness, and other stigmata of less than fully straightforward, solidly transparent subjectivity can be the signs not of defects of character but of the only available ways of getting by in a hostile world. If the straight roads are ones that require tolls one cannot afford to pay, and if they are laid out not to go where one needs to, then one has no choice but to find alternative routes, routes that snake around the roadblocks thrown up by those who have no interest in your getting anywhere you want to go.<sup>3</sup>

Among the coherencies that philosophers from John Locke to Derek Parfit have put at the criterial heart of personal identity is the continuity of memory. Such continuity marks what it is to be the same person throughout time, thus to be the bearer of responsibility, the maker and receiver of promises, the recipient of trust. From a wide range of causes—notably including childhood abuse—memory is subject to distortion and even erasure, making it difficult for those who have suffered such a loss to fashion a sufficiently coherent narrative of themselves to be credible. (At the extreme, such abuse can lead to the literal fracturing of the self: One of the distinguishing features of multiple personality disorder is the failure of memory across at least some of the different personalities—A has no recollection of doing what B did.)

Insufficiently noted by philosophical theorists of personal identity is the role of the memory of others in constituting selfhood. It is not just that we are the persons we remember ourselves as being: We are equally, for better or worse, the persons others remember us as being.<sup>4</sup> The others around us may be loving or arrogant,<sup>5</sup> thoughtful or careless, with their memories of us; and we can be grateful or resentful or both for being held in their memories, for being continuous with the persons they remember us as being. Persons who are forgotten or not well remembered—if those

2. For fuller working out of these ideas, see Lugones (2003a).

3. See also Hoagland (1988 and 2001) for the related argument that what is read as incompetence or unreliability on the part of subordinated people is often, in fact, sabotage.

4. The role of others in "holding us in memory," especially when we are, for a range of reasons, unable to hold ourselves, has been a central theme in the work of Hilde Lindemann (Nelson). See especially Nelson (2001) and Lindemann (2008).

5. Frye (1983c) discusses the distinction between loving and arrogant perception.

in whose memories they might have been held are dead or gone, absent-minded, or uncaring—are seen and often see themselves as diminished. And some, in order to be the persons they are becoming, or believe themselves always to have been, need to detach themselves from the memories of those who would hold them too firmly in mind, trapping them in selves that no longer fit, if they ever did. They need to reinvent themselves, to live without the coherence of a shared, remembered past.

One could argue at this point (especially with regard to the role of memory), as adherents of the first vision would, that the picture of privileged subjectivity is not in itself a problematic one: The problem is in its exclusivity. Nor are wily survival strategies inherently admirable, as much as we may admire those who manage by means of them to survive: Surely people often have to do things to survive that they would far rather not have to do. We need, on this view, to be careful not to romanticize oppression by celebrating the character traits it breeds.

Adherents of the second vision would counter that we equally ought not to celebrate ideals of humanity that have been realized literally on and through the bodies of others to whom those ideals have been denied. Privileged subjectivity is not some neutral good that just so happens to have been scarfed up by an unscrupulous few. Rather, it is a form of subjectivity well suited to unscrupulous scarfing up, that is, to a view of oneself as naturally meriting a far larger than average share of the world's benefits and a far smaller than average share of its burdens—as having, in Marilyn Frye's (1983c) terms, the right to graft onto oneself another's substance. The privileged self, on this view, is not only engorged but also diminished: It has split off and projected onto those same others the parts of itself deemed too messy or embarrassing to acknowledge. Its seamless integrity is achieved by throwing out all the parts that don't quite fit, secure in the knowledge that one can count on commandeering sufficient social resources not to need a fully stocked, even if incongruously jumbled, internal tool kit (See Anzaldúa 1987, Sherover-Marcuse 1986, and Miller 1984). Even memory works in some ways like this: The coherent remembered narrative, shared with others who hold us in mind, is an artifact of privilege in terms of both what it contains and what it omits. People do not remember everything that happens to them, and culturally available story lines help give shape to the stuff of some lives (make them “memorable”) while leaving others gappy and jerky. Narrativity *per se* may be humanly important, but we have no access to narrativity *per se*: What we have are culturally specific narratives, which facilitate the smooth telling of some lives and straitjacket, distort, or fracture others.

Resistance to the disciplining apparatus that defines privilege (even the “privilege” of full humanity) can take a romantic outlaw form, lived on what are taken explicitly, defiantly, to be the margins, shunning, insofar as possible, what is acknowledged as the center. Alternatively, in ways that will be the focus of this chapter, resistance can take the form of challenge to the stable cartographies of center and margin. Such resistance aims to

cloud the transparency of privileged subjectivity, making it visible, and visibly “queer,” by revealing the apparatus that goes into normalizing it. The status of the “normal” can, that is, be problematized, rather than either aspired to or rejected—or replaced by some competing normalizing picture.<sup>6</sup> I want to explore the possibilities for what I call “queering the center” by looking at two specific normalizing apparatuses: heteronormativity and what I call “Christiannormativity.”

# 1

As David Halperin (1995) argues in a discussion of Foucault,<sup>7</sup> heteronormativity is productively slippery: A large part of its power comes from its deployment of two mutually incompatible discourses—that of (biological) normality and that of virtue. Heterosexuality, as both unremarkably normal and markedly virtuous, is privileged indirectly: Not itself a site of inquiry, it is constructed by implicit contrast with the equally mutually incompatible characterizations of homosexuality—as sickness and as crime or sin. Arguments against one mode of stigmatization tend notoriously, in the maze of heterosexist (il)logic, to buttress the other: So, for example, arguing that gay men and lesbians don’t choose their sexuality reinforces the view of that sexuality as sick, whereas arguing that gay men and lesbians show no more signs of psychopathology than do straight people reinforces the view of their sexuality as chosen and culpable.

Heteronormativity constructs not only sexual identity but gender identity: In order properly to regulate desire it must divide the human world unambiguously into males and females (For the best known articulation of this claim, see Butler 1990). The discourses of queerness are marked by specifically gender transgressiveness, by a refusal to allow gender to remain unproblematic in a struggle for the rights of same-

6. (a) The norm-flouting I have in mind here has a political meaning at odds with that of privileged eccentricity, but the two are not always easy to distinguish, especially when class privilege accompanies, for example, a stigmatized sexual identity. The risks and costs of being “out” vary enormously, and some forms of politically progressive transgression can be more easily available to those who are otherwise comfortable and safe. Alliances between those who do not have the choice to pass, for whom strategic inventiveness is required for bare survival, and those whose transgressions are more a matter of choice are precarious—at risk on one side from the need for protective coloration that can be read as overconformity, and on the other from the possibility of playfulness that can be read as unseriousness. The responsibility for establishing trusting alliances is not, however, equally shared: Nancy Potter (1994, 2002) has argued that the burdens of creating trust properly fall disproportionately on the relatively privileged. (b) ‘Problematize’ is a word that has gotten something of a reputation as a piece of theory-jargon. I think the reputation is undeserved, as I know of no other noncumbersome way of referring to just this activity, which is a crucial one for any liberatory theorizing: the rendering problematic (questionable, in need of explanation) of some phenomenon taken to be transparent, natural, in need of neither explanation nor justification.

7. Halperin also draws on Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) discussion of the productive incoherence of heteronormative and homophobic discourses.

gendered sexual partners. Such transgressiveness can also be found in some feminist, especially lesbian feminist, attempts to redefine women (or “wimmin” or “womyn”), as something other than not-men. That is, such feminist attempts recognize both that the gender divide is predicated on the sexuality of heterosexual men (“women” = sexual objects for heterosexual male subjects) and that the male/female gender dichotomy is actually a male/not-male dichotomy (see Frye, 2000).<sup>8</sup>

There is a striking similarity between the heteronormative representation of the homosexual and the representation of the Jew in what I call “Christianormative” discourse. Analogously to the androcentrism of heteronormative gender, Christiannormativity purports to divide the world into religions (all presumed to be like Christianity except for being mistaken) while really having only two categories: Christian and not (yet) Christian. The Christian model of religion misrepresents many of the indigenous cultures that Christians have evangelized, just as heteronormativity misrepresents what it is to be a woman. Like homosexuals, Jews are not only misrepresented but abjected by the normative scheme, not properly caught in its classifications. Since the start of the Christian era Jews have been defined by their closeness to and knowledge of Christianity, just as homosexuals are defined by their closeness to and knowledge of gender difference: In both cases there is a perverse refusal/inability to act on the knowledge they all too clearly have.

On the one hand, the Jew is the quintessential (potential) Christian: Christianity is a matter not of birth but of choice; the paradigmatic Christian is a convert—originally, and most naturally, from Judaism.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the Jew is indelibly marked on her or his body: An extraordinary range of body parts have been taken in anti-Semitic discourse to mark Jews (Gilman 1991). Jews are both profoundly culpable for continuing to deny the divinity of Jesus and unable, no matter what we do, to shed the racial heritage of Jewishness.<sup>10</sup> This contradictoriness, as

8. Through a misreading of history and of theorists still very much alive, this connection is typically unacknowledged by queer theorists, for whom 1970s lesbian feminism exemplifies the sort of “essentialism” queer theory sets itself against.

9. In a liberal Christian society, such as the present-day United States, there is a presumption of Christian identity that works much like the presumption of heterosexuality: People are given the “benefit” of the doubt and assigned, in the absence of positive counterevidence, to the privileged category. Nor, as Jacob Hale has pointed out, is the privilege that comes of being born to Christian parents easily shed, especially since the alternatives to it that most occupy the American imaginary are racialized: Even if the question “Are you a Christian?” is typically about faith, the presumption of Christian identity is usually not. (The racializing in the U.S. of non-Christian identity has massively increased after 9/11, with the racialization of an otherwise incoherent group of people—those taken by mainstream Americans to be Muslim, Arab, or both, some of whom—Sikhs or Indian Hindus, for example—are actually neither. Note added in 2010.)

10. As Lisa Heldke has reminded me, there is a common way of resolving this tension, by dividing Jewish identity in two—the religious component and the racial or cultural component. The resolution doesn’t work, in part because it simply pushes the problem back by one step: What is the relationship between the two “components,” and how are we to characterize the second—since on any plausible notions of race or culture, Jews belong not to one but to several or many? (The problem was literally “pushed back” by the Nuremberg Laws, by which the Nazis sought to racially classify the Jews: Jewishness

in the case of heteronormative discourse, is productive: It grants to Christians the simultaneous statuses of natural (the way humans are meant to be, the default state for humanity) and especially virtuous.<sup>11</sup> Literally, of course, Christianity is not supposed to be biologically natural, as heterosexuality is, but it is part of most Christian orthodoxy to believe that everyone is loved by Jesus in the way he loves Christians: What is called for is acknowledgement of that love, not the earning of it. Heterosexuality can be seen similarly, as part of essential human nature, so that homosexuality counts as the willful denial of one's true self, just as Jewishness counts as the willful denial of God's love.

Heteronormativity and Christiannormativity both have, in addition to their dichotomizing aspect, a universalizing aspect: They both imagine a world of sameness, even as they continue to require not only objects of desire (proselytizing or sexual) but also abjected others. The emphases, on maintaining difference or striving toward sameness, may differ, but the tensions between the two animate both discourses. Although Christianity is officially universally proselytizing, there is reason to believe that Jews play a sufficiently important role in the Christian imaginary that if we didn't exist, they'd have to invent us; and certainly assimilating Jews have met with less than full cultural acceptance, often being stigmatized precisely for conforming to the norms of Christian society (see Prell 1992). Heteronormativity officially envisions a world of only heterosexuals, while similarly requiring the homosexual as a negative definition of normality; and, as Daniel Boyarin and Natalie Kampen have persuaded me, even the gender dichotomy itself contains a universalizing moment alongside the more obvious, official emphasis on ineluctable difference. Although men don't typically proselytize women into sex change (that women are important to the male imaginary seems clear), there is a strong current of mono(male)-gender utopianism, both in Pauline Christianity (see D. Boyarin 1994) and in Enlightenment thought. (Notably, in both cases, the body is meant to be transcended: It is in our minds, or our souls, that we are all really men.)

## 2

The inconsistent conjunction of sin and sickness, nature and virtue, that characterizes heteronormativity and Christiannormativity strikingly (but unsurprisingly) characterizes modern Western conceptions of subjectivity.

was defined in terms of religious observance in the grand-parental generation [Pascale Bos, personal communication].)

11. Putting the matter this way highlights the fact that Christiannormativity and Christianity are no more the same thing than are heteronormativity and heterosexuality: In both cases there are particular histories of ascendancy to centrality, which histories need to be told in tandem with the complementary histories of the corresponding stigmatized identities.

The clearest statement is perhaps Kant's ([1785] 1969, Sec. 2). The rationale for the categorical imperative—the answer to the question of why it ought to motivate us—is that only by seeing ourselves as bound by it can we see ourselves as free. Our noumenal identities, if expressible at all, are expressed through duty; the alternative is being determined by inclination—that is, by natural forces no more expressive of our freedom than are any other causal determinations. Virtue may be impossibly difficult to realize, but it is in an important sense natural, not imposed from outside. Kant is left with the problem of accounting for culpable wrongdoing: If acting freely is always acting morally, how can we hold someone responsible for acting badly? The problem is at the heart of Kant's account of the nature of morality and agency: If he allowed the possibility of acting freely in a way that didn't accord with the categorical imperative, he would have to answer the moral skeptic, who challenges the motivational charge behind the categorical imperative. The question of why we should do what duty commands would be a real one and, in Kant's terms, unanswerable, if freely, rationally, we could do otherwise. So the person who heeds not duty but inclination (who might be all of us, all of the time) is not only immoral but (contradictorily) unfree.

Epistemologically, as well, the emphasis has been less on the positive difficulty of obtaining knowledge than on the negative challenge of avoiding error—from Descartes' emphasis on resisting assent when ideas are less than fully clear and distinct, to the positivists' emphasis on the error-producing dangers of subjectivity. Both morally and epistemically the knowing subject is characterized as both generic (normal, universal) and as especially virtuous. The connection is in a sense unpuzzling: As a matter of fact most people most of the time won't be thinking in the manner argued to be the correct one, thus inescapably raising the question of what makes such thinking correct. What is it about those who do think in the privileged ways that makes their thought right for all the rest of us? The distinctively modern (i.e., liberal) answer to that question cannot be that those people are in some way special, with the authority to do the important thinking for the rest of us. Rather, they have to be seen as us—all of us—at our best, where "best" means simultaneously most natural (uncorrupted, healthy) and normatively most excellent. The two have to go together in the absence of anything other than "natural" for normative excellence to refer to.

One can, therefore, see the naturalizing moves of much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, with its characteristic problems of theoretically justifying normativity claims, as rooted in the fundamental project of liberalism—what I have elsewhere referred to as "democratizing privilege" (Scheman 1993c, p. 77). That oxymoron reflects the tension between the universalistic theories and the inequalities that theoretically ought not to exist, especially those that are uncomfortably correlated with the supposed irrelevancies of race and gender or the supposed anachronism of class. In the absence of anything to account for inequality other than what people

actually do—and can properly be held responsible for doing—the accounting has to be in terms of the wrong—or at least the less than optimally right—behavior of those who fail to prosper, without there being any independent, non-question-begging way of characterizing “wrong” or “right.” The coupling of the apparently contradictory discourses of nature and virtue (or sickness and sin) are the inevitable result of the need to maintain a normativity that cannot speak its name.<sup>12</sup>

In the work of many philosophers, notably Descartes, there is nothing to mark those who exemplify the norms—in his case, by thinking properly—from those who don’t: We are all equally capable of careful and of sloppy thought. Other philosophers, notoriously Kant ([1771] 1960, p. 81)—who thought duty and obligation meant nothing to women—have been less egalitarian: It is only some among us who actually have the capacity to reason in the ways supposed to be generically human. The rest of us have been marked by the odd conjunction of moral turpitude and natural incapacity that are taken to characterize the homosexual and the Jew. We have, that is, been characterized as constitutionally incapable of instantiating what is nonetheless supposed to be the essence we share with more privileged humans. Their generic status and the privileges that go with it require that we be essentially like them, whereas the terms of our exclusion, resting as it does on what we are, not on anything we may do, requires that we be essentially different from them.

Those of us so marked have variously struggled against such stigmatization, most often using the tools of liberalism: We have denied our alleged natural incapacity and claimed an equal share in humanity’s essential attributes. Thus, for example, Jews have sought civil emancipation, gays and lesbians have sought civil rights, and women have sought equal rights: In all cases the argument has been made that howsoever members of these groups differed from the already-fully-enfranchised, such differences were of no importance when it came to the status in question, typically that of citizen. Given the distressing hardness of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia, it has been easy for liberals to argue that doing otherwise—asserting the relevance of difference, however socially constructed; resisting offers, however genuinely goodwilled, of acceptance into the ranks of the same—is political suicide.

I do not want to minimize the truth in this argument, nor to dispute the goodwill of those who make it, but it does have the logic of a protection racket, as noted (by Peterson 1977) in relation to the discourse around male violence toward women: There are afoot very bad

12. For reasons much like these, David Halperin (1995) has called heterosexuality “the love that dare not speak its name” (i.e., that dare not name itself as one sexuality among others, needing, like them, to explain itself). Thanks to Diana Tietjens Meyers for pointing out that the discourses of normality and of virtue are not contradictory if normality is read in a normative way. The contradictoriness comes in when that normativity is occluded, camouflaging undefended, possibly indefensible, claims about excellence—when, that is, we are not supposed to be able to ask: “Says who?” or if we do, the answer is: “Nature.”



people who will do you grave harm, and your safety lies in availing yourselves of the protection we offer. What makes the offer suspicious, no matter how sincere and empirically grounded, are the connections between the protectors and those who pose the danger. Protection is problematic when one's protectors benefit from one's acceptance of the terms on which that protection is offered—feminine docility in the case of protection from male violence, and acceptance of the paradigmatic status of the privileged in the case of protection from racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia. As women are supposed to acknowledge needing men, those who are “different” are supposed to acknowledge the “honor” of being regarded as essentially the same as straight white middle-class Christian men.

The disputes currently roiling college campuses concerning “multiculturalism” illustrate the normativity of the paradigmatic. The deepest challenge of multiculturalism is to the paradigmatic centrality of the privileged: From whose vantage point is the world most accurately seen? Whose art and literature set the standards of aesthetic excellence? Whose experiences represent generically human encounters with life, death, the natural and social worlds? Shifting the center with respect to questions such as these—shifting which work is taken as most interesting, innovative, significant, worth supporting and encouraging (so taken by those who set curricula, give grants, make decisions about hiring and tenure and promotion)—has nothing to do with freedom of speech or academic freedom; but it is so profoundly threatening to those whose placement at the center has seemed to them a fact of nature that, faced with such shifts (which are, to date, minuscule), they are convinced, I suspect in some cases sincerely, that their rights must be being violated. Similarly, one finds the conviction, probably also in some cases sincere, that the shifting of norms means the abandonment of the true ones, those that can seem to come from nowhere only so long as they come from an unchallenged center, at once privileged and universal.

The liberal strategy is to leave unchallenged the paradigmatic status of the privileged, but to argue that it does not in theory, and ought not in practice, entail the exclusion or even the marginalization of others: The others are, in all the respects that ought to matter, essentially the same as the privileged. If this argument were a good one, then shifting in the other direction ought not to matter: It ought to be unproblematic to put at the center some groups previously relegated to the margins, to say not that black people are just like white people except that their skin is darker, but that white people are just like black people except that their skin is lighter.<sup>13</sup> But, as the near hysteria around “political correctness”

13. The specific example is Elizabeth V. Spelman's (1988, p. 12), and she makes the general point especially well. See also Sarah Hoagland's (1988 and 2002) refusal to take up the question of whether or not women ought to have equal rights, since it presupposes the rights of men as the unquestionable norm against which women need to stake a claim.

indicates, such shifts are hardly unproblematic: Being the standard of comparison is a very big deal, no matter how liberally others are deemed to measure up to it.<sup>14</sup>

For the remainder of this chapter I want to work at “queering the centers” of heteronormativity and Christiannormativity by juxtaposing two subject positions, neither of which makes sense in the respective normative terms: the transsexual and the secular Jew. The juxtaposition is in part fortuitous: I am a secular Jew, and I have for some time been trying to figure out what that means; and, as a born-female feminist, I have been pressed to understand the experiences and perspectives of those whose attempts to deconstruct gender have an embodied literalness absent in my own life. Furthermore, living outside the norms exacts disruptions of memory and integrity for transsexuals and secular Jews significantly more than for homosexuals and religious Jews. With such experiences at the center, I want to ask what it is to live an intelligible and admirable life—what the structures of subjectivity look like from perspectives other than those of normalizing privilege. The question is an explicitly transcendental one: It starts from what I take as the fact that such lives are lived, hence livable, and asks after the conditions of that possibility.<sup>15</sup>

My hope is that starting from the intelligibility of the normatively unintelligible can serve to uncover the problematic assumptions that make secular Jews and transsexuals incoherent, assumptions that sustain both the status of the normatively coherent (including, in the case of gender, me) and the larger hierarchies in which those identities are embedded. I want to argue that placement at the intelligible center is always a matter of history, of the playing out of privilege and power, and is always contestable. One reason for the contestation is to lead us beyond the impasse between the two visions with which I began—both of which, as usually understood, tacitly accept the structures of normalization, whether by claiming one’s rightful, central place in them or by defining oneself as outside of or marginal to them. Relocating the gaze to a place of normative incoherence can help to destabilize the center, upsetting the claims of those who reside there to that combination of naturalness and virtue that characterizes normativity.

14. For an excellent discussion of paradigm case reasoning and its role in the maintenance of privilege (as well as its difference from “essentialism”), see Marilyn Frye (2000).

15. Marcia Hagen (in conversation) drew my attention to the historical specificity of the unintelligibility of secular Jewish identity, by pointing out the persistence in Canada, for one generation more than in the United States, of a vibrant secular Yiddish culture. My discussion is grounded in post-World War II U.S. culture, where the terms that governed assimilationist possibilities joined with the memory of the Holocaust to make impossible the thinking of Jewishness in anything like racial terms. And, in the American imaginary, religion was the only remaining possibility. (I wonder if the centrality of distinct Québécois identity, however problematic, to Canadian thinking helps to provide conceptual space lacking in the United States.)

## 3

As our (modern Western) world is now, failure to conform to the norms of gender is socially stigmatizing to an unbearable extent: To be human just is to be male or female, a girl or a boy or a man or a woman. Those who cannot readily be classified by everyone they encounter are not only subject to physically violent assaults but, perhaps even more wounding, are taken to be impossible to relate to humanly, as though one cannot use the pronoun 'you' with anyone to whom one cannot with total assurance apply either 'she' or 'he.' Those who are not stably, unambiguously one or the other are, as Susan Stryker puts it (1994, p. 240), "monsters."<sup>16</sup> In such a world, boundary blurring carries psychic costs no one can be asked to pay, and the apparently conservative gender-boundary-preserving choices (surgical, hormonal, and behavioral) of many transsexuals have to be read in full appreciation of what the real options are.

One need not downplay the oppression of women to acknowledge that a certain sort of privilege, one essential for social validation as human, attaches to being located squarely on one side or the other of the gender divide.<sup>17</sup> Those of us who, as stably female-gendered feminists, would choose to see that boundary blurred to oblivion need to learn how to see and be seen as allies by those whose lives it slices through. The work of blurring that boundary is being taken on by a growing number of theorists and activists who are variously resisting the imperatives of gender conformity, including the imperative that transsexuals move decisively from one side to the other (see, e.g., Bornstein 1994, Feinberg 1999, Gabriel 1995, Stone 1991, and Stryker 1994). To the extent that the social construction of gender is against the interests of all feminists, it ought to fall to those of us who occupy positions of relative safety and privilege to complicate our own locations, to explore the costs of our comfort, and to help imagine a world in which it would be safe to be non-, ambiguously, or multiply gendered.<sup>18</sup>

16. Thanks to Jacob Hale for stressing the importance of this point. The monster Stryker (1994) has most particularly in mind is *Frankenstein's*, but the figure of the monster—as "unnatural" because created, a "creature"—is central to her discussion of what she calls "transgender rage." See also Feinberg (1993) for a harrowing and moving portrayal of the experiences of a "he-she," and Frye (1983c) for a discussion of the extent to which gender ascription shapes our responses to each other.

17. Analogous work is being done around race and the experiences of those who are not readily racially classifiable—in particular, those of mixed race (see, for example, Camper 1994 and Zack 1995). There are, of course, enormous differences: Miscegenation provides an all too easily imagined answer to the question of how someone "came to look like that," and looking and otherwise seeming more white is more a matter of privilege for people of color than looking and otherwise seeming more male is for women (though in some circumstances the former can be more problematic and the latter more privileging than is usually acknowledged).

18. Being "stably female-gendered" is not an all-or-nothing thing: The dividing line of gender slices through at least the edges of many lives. In our culture's terms, as a feminist and a philosopher even I may not be a best paradigm case, and certainly many others are even less so—notably lesbians, who are routinely told, and often, especially as children, believe, that they are not "real women." And certainly not all feminists share the desire to end gender as we know it—one may, for example, be more concerned to fight for the recognition of one's identity as a woman despite one's gender-role nonconformity or one's

My own gender identity has never been a source of confusion, nor have I puzzled over what it means to say that I am a woman, and this certainty has been untouched by my increasing inability to define gender.<sup>19</sup> My certainty is partially grounded in my relatively easy conformity with heteronormativity: As theorists as diverse as Catharine MacKinnon (1990) and Judith Butler (1990) have argued, sexual identity, particularly as it is shaped within the structures of compulsory heterosexuality, grounds, rather than depends upon, gender difference. My questioning of heterosexuality (including my own), along with the other norms of gender, came rather late in my life (after adolescence) and in communities that tended toward an empirical stability (if not essentialism) concerning who women were: Lesbians, for example, were woman-identified and woman-loving, not “not-women.”<sup>20</sup>

I was, therefore, initially puzzled by how to understand the claim of (most) male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals to be women—how, that is, to make their claims (their lives and experiences) intelligible.<sup>21</sup> My inability

less than stereotypical appearance. My appeal here is to those feminists who do share the desire to radically transform the meaning of gender, if not to eliminate it altogether, and who have the privilege of at least sufficient gender conformity to, for example, use a women's restroom without being hassled. Obviously, the challenge will be different depending on one's circumstances: I'm addressing most directly those who, like me, have lived close enough to the center never to have directly experienced the knife-edge of the gender divide.

19. I share this confusion with many if not most feminist theorists. Kessler and McKenna's (1978) book played an important role in moving us away from the premature sense of intelligibility expressed in the sex/gender distinction of most 1970s feminist theory. As I will argue, this confusion is entirely appropriate at this point in history: We have good reason to distrust *any* conceptually coherent account of gender.

20. (a) Jacob Hale (1996), in a discussion of Monique Wittig's claim that lesbians are not women, provides a subtle and complex (Austinian) analysis of the diverse meanings of “real woman”, along with a persuasive argument that any understanding of gender or sexuality has to proceed by way of an understanding of the margins: It is in the experiences and perspectives of those who inhabit the boundaries that the contours of a contested conceptual space are articulated. I have, of course, been surrounded by sophisticated discussions about the ways in which women are not born but made, and made specifically by patriarchy for its ends—but underlying those discussions has been a virtually untouched dualism dividing those who were slated to be made into women from those who were not, along with a sense of the centrality of that constructed identity even for those who in many ways rejected it. (b) The impetus to explore these issues came largely from an invitation to a conference on “Sissies and Tomboys,” held on February 10, 1995, at the Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies, City University of New York Graduate Center. I was invited by the organizer, Matt Rottnek, whose confidence that I did, despite my skepticism, have something to say about these questions, led to my beginning to pull these thoughts together. I was enormously helped, in preparing for the conference, by several of the programs (including Leslie Feinberg's plenary address) in “Differently Gendered Lives: A Week of Programs About Transgender and Transsexual Experiences,” sponsored by the University of Minnesota Office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Programs, and held on campus from January 28 to February 3, 1995.

21. Sarah Hoagland (1988) and Jan Binder (personal communication) have helped me to see the political implications lurking in questions of intelligibility: Who has to make themselves intelligible to whom, in what terms, for what reasons, against what forms of resistance, with what resources? Heteronormativity requires for intelligibility that one be one gender or the other: But some transsexuals are beginning to resist this requirement, in particular as enforced by “medical, psychotherapeutic, and juridical institutions” that police the gender boundary (Stryker 1994, p. 252), and hence no longer to identify as women (or men), plain and simple (Bornstein 1994; Stone, quoted in Gabriel 1995; Stryker 1994; Jacob Hale, correspondence; Susan Kimberley in discussion at the University of Minnesota conference).

to understand seemed to come from the fact that, despite my own unshakeable sense of being a woman, there was nothing I could point to as constituting my gender identity when I abstracted from a lifetime of unambiguous gender ascription on the part of others and an unambiguously female body. Surely, it seemed to me, if there was something independent of social role and body that male-to-female transsexuals could recognize as their gender identity, I should be able to find whatever it was in my own sense of identity—but there simply didn't seem to be anything like that there. (I was reminded of Hume's inability to find in himself a substantial Cartesian self.) Whatever they meant when they said they were women, it didn't seem to be what I meant. What, then, did they mean? And how, to put a Wittgensteinian spin on the question, were they able to mean it?

For various reasons, reinforced by Leslie Feinberg's eloquent politics of solidarity (1999 and in her plenary address to the Minnesota conference, see fn 20b), I found myself moving away from the feminist suspicion that lay behind that puzzlement, a suspicion that tended to see male-to-female transsexuals as men, with typical male arrogance, claiming female identity; and female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals as self-hating, male-identified women. Those analyses singularly failed to fit the people whose voices I was hearing and reading, especially those who were seriously concerned about being allies in feminist struggles. Nor did those analyses fit with a commitment I thought I had to the deconstruction of gender (in reality, not just in theory).

Yet even with the motivation of solidarity, I still just did not understand. But that motivation—and the political thinking it engendered—did lead me to what it ought not have taken me so long to see: I was keeping to myself the position of unproblematic, paradigmatic subject, puzzling over how to understand some especially recalcitrant object. To put it in Wittgensteinian terms, I was finding one sort of phenomenon to be maddeningly opaque because I was taking another sort of phenomenon to be transparent. I couldn't understand the gender identity of transsexuals in part because I thought I understood my own—or, more accurately, could take it for granted, as not in need of understanding. (Wittgenstein suggested that part of the reason we were hopelessly puzzled about how it was possible to figure out what other people were thinking and feeling was that we thought there was nothing to figure out in our own case.)<sup>22</sup>

The very overdetermination of my gender identity, the congruence of body, socialization, desire, and sense of self—the fact that everything pointed the same way—was what made it hard to see what was going

22. Not only my Wittgensteinian philosophical bent ought to have alerted me sooner to what I was doing, since it was precisely what feminists of color had accused white feminists of doing: taking for ourselves the position of the paradigmatic, making of others objects of investigation and knowledge. (note added in 2010)

on, hard, in fact, to see that anything was “going on” at all.<sup>23</sup> I am (unlike very many diverse nontranssexual women, who for all sorts of reasons do not conform in so many particulars to the norms of femaleness) so close to the paradigmatic center that I am in a very bad position to see how the apparatus works, to get a feel for how diverse forces could push and pull one in different directions. I may not like the forces that construct gender identity, but their tugs on my body and psyche tend more to hold me in place than to unbalance me: I don’t know them, as others do, by the strains they exact in the attempt to stand erect. Clearly what I needed to do was to problematize my own gender identity.

Easier said than done.

#### 4

By contrast, I don’t have to work at finding my Jewish identity problematic. Unlike my gender identity, my Jewishness, though a central and unquestionable part of who I am, is a puzzle to me. Not only, as with gender, can’t I define it, but I can’t figure out what it means to say of me that I am a Jew, nor what I might be conforming to in order to count as one. Although I have no doubt about it, or about its centrality to who I am, I am genuinely puzzled about how to understand it—and, unlike my gender, it does seem to need to be understood. That is, although the ways I live gender make its operations unproblematically transparent to me, as invisible as the air, the ways I live Jewishness are maddeningly opaque. But opacity, of course, is also visibility: Again, in Wittgensteinian terms, what seems to get in the way of seeing clearly is what we need to be looking at, and recognizing as what we need to know. In my case there is a rich set of mostly familial experiences that inform my sense of Jewishness, in ways that link it with my rationalism, my respect for science, my judgmentalism, my sense of humor and irony, and (most centrally) my passionately internationalist, socialist sense of justice. But my awareness of how less-than-fully shared these commitments are among Jews, along with the absence in my life of a community that takes these as constitutive even of one way of being Jewish, makes such experiences, and the identity they ground, seem not to be an answer to the question of what I know about myself when I know myself to be, specifically, Jewish.<sup>24</sup>

23. Aside from being a feminist, a philosopher, and an adult-onset bisexual (and having loved math and logic), my only major failures to conform to the norms of femaleness are that I have never been pregnant and I am not a mother. But I managed to leave those options at least hypothetically open until this summer, so never confronted the implications for my inclusion as a “real woman.” I am writing the final draft of this chapter while recuperating from a total hysterectomy, surgery that removed not only the possibility of pregnancy but the internal organs most definitive of my femaleness. The timing is coincidental, but suggestive.

24. Irena Klepfisz’s (1990) account of her experience of a vanishing Yiddish culture in New York helped give me a sense of what it would be like to have a community-based sense of secular Jewish identity.

Nowadays in the United States, the questions to which “Jewish” is the correct answer are almost always questions about religion. Being Jewish here and now is one identity in a contrastive set that includes Christian (with all the subsets thereof), Buddhist, Muslim, and so on. Forms of Christianity, most centrally forms of mainstream Protestantism, are the paradigm cases of religions in the United States, so Judaism is distinguished by its most noteworthy distinguishing features from a Christian perspective: Its adherents go not to church but to synagogue or temple, and they go not on Sunday but on Saturday or on Friday night. If you’re in the hospital (one place you’re likely to be asked your religion) and take a turn for the worse, they’ll send for a rabbi, not for a priest, minister, or pastor. For some Jews this religious way of thinking about what sort of identity Jewish identity is may work reasonably well (though I think even for observant Jews there has been a problematic “Christianizing” of identity in, for example, the moving of religious observance for all family members from the home to the synagogue). But it makes no sense at all to secular Jews like me (as, for different reasons, I suspect it makes no sense to Buddhists, among others).

I don’t have a religion: I’m a life-long atheist on increasingly principled moral grounds; I know very little about Jewish religious observance and feel comfortable with less; and though I know I had religious ancestors, among them my paternal grandparents, what I share with them, as with other Jews, does not feel to me to be a religion. Religion is rather what estranges me from many other Jews, for much the same reason as it estranges me from Christians and others: I am nonreligious, even anti-religious, about as deeply as I am Jewish.

But I am Jewish. No one, actually, would dispute this, even though many people would insist on misrepresenting it. So far as anyone knows (albeit, as is the case for most European Jews, this is not very far), I have only Jewish ancestors, and that settles it. Were I to deny that I was Jewish, I would be accused (rightly, I think) of self-hatred, of internalized anti-Semitism. As I was growing up I was told (apocryphally, perhaps—my mother’s source was the film *Gentleman’s Agreement*) that Einstein said he would consider himself Jewish as long as there was anti-Semitism in the world, and certainly by the definitions of anti-Semites I am Jewish. That is surely part of it: Disaffiliation is dishonorable.

But that isn’t—or shouldn’t be—all there is to Jewish identity, even for the most secular. Surely, it seems, the Nazis and their ilk ought not to be the arbiters of our identity. What is it I know about myself when I know that I am a Jew?

As with questions about gender identity, part of my questioning comes from trying to understand someone who claims to share this identity with me but who seems clearly not to have it in the same way that I do. In the case of Jewish identity my questions have concerned converts—in

particular, converts to Judaism.<sup>25</sup> In Christian normative terms, individual faith and knowledge are at the heart of identity, and conversion to Judaism is a religious process, governed by rabbis and requiring large amounts of religious instruction. The consequence is that converts to Judaism are intelligible as Jews in a way that I am not. Christianity is quintessentially a religion for converts: Being born a Christian may make you one in the sense that you are part of a Christian community, but to be a “real” Christian you have to acknowledge for yourself the place of Christ in your life, and being born to a Christian family merely makes that more likely. Similarly, converts to Judaism know a lot more about Judaism as a religion than I do, which also makes them more intelligible on Christian terms: One can’t be a real Christian if one is ignorant of creedally appropriate interpretations of scripture, for example. If it is hard for me to understand how one can be a woman other than by being born female, it is all too easy to understand how one can be a Jew having been born something else. But that’s not how I am a Jew.

Problematically, the Jewishness of converts is intelligible, even to me, in a way that my own is not, since theirs, unlike mine, fits the conceptual framework of Christian normativity. Part of that framework is that there be a definite “there” there, typically involving confirmation (as it is called) by a designated authority. And part of my problem is that, were I required to submit to such confirmation, I would surely fail. The rabbinical authorities charged with deciding who will get to become a Jew decide on grounds that have no connection to my own Jewishness. I am not, of course, required to be so confirmed: Those same authorities, specifically as they interpret the Israeli Law of Return, would unquestionably include me (having a Jewish mother is sufficient). But even so, their authority feels irrelevant to me. Rabbis are religious authorities, and my Jewishness is not a religious identity.

Contemporary Jewish thinking is deeply concerned with what it is to be an authentic Jew: In particular, there are those who deny the possibilities of authentic nonreligious identity after the Holocaust, or of authentic diasporic Jewish identity after the founding of the state of Israel<sup>26</sup>

25. As in the case of gender, I respond differently to people who “go the other way,” who give up the identity they share with me for another: female-to-male transsexuals and Jewish converts, especially to Christianity. I feel abandoned, as though someone I thought was “on my side” had gone over, if not exactly to the enemy, then to the class of others who historically have oppressed us. I’m learning, largely through listening to and reading Leslie Feinberg and, more recently, reading and corresponding with Jacob Hale, to think and feel differently about FTM transsexuals, but it is harder for me to accept Jews who convert to Christianity. The difference, I think, is that although it is no part of sexism to get women to defect and become men (not, at least, in this world and in bodily form; see Boyarin [1994] for an argument that Pauline Christianity does envision women’s becoming spiritually men), it is at the heart of orthodox Christianity to get others, most especially Jews, to defect and become Christians. If there is anything I think is essential to Jewish identity in Christian cultures, it is the resistance to Christian proselytizing. At the very least, a convert can be held accountable by Jews, as an FTM transsexual can be held accountable by women, for conscientiously dealing with newly acquired Christian—or male—privilege.

26. Natalie Kampen has pointed out to me the importance of the idea of authenticity to Jewish identity, and the relation to similar discussions concerning, for example, black or Chicano identity. The



(Goldberg and Krausz 1993). And though no one would deny that I am a Jew, there are many who would question the authenticity of my Jewish identity, who would claim that as a Jew I have obligations I am turning my back on. I, too, am tempted to make similar claims on others: It seems to me profoundly un-Jewish to be a Republican or to oppose affirmative action or, for that matter, to oppose the rights of Palestinians to self-determination. Unlike the rabbis, I have no power to enforce my claims, but what is it that grounds my making them: What do I mean by them? What am I doing in attempting to police the boundaries of an identity I find unintelligible? And how might figuring that out help me to understand my temptations to police the boundaries of an identity I find all too intelligible?<sup>27</sup>

## 5

When I bring the murkiness of my Jewish identity together with the suspicious transparency of my gender identity, one question that suggests itself is: Who cares? To whom does it matter, and why, that I have the identities that I do, and that I do or do not share them with certain others? Another, related question is: Who gets to decide, and on what grounds? How are some people counted in and others out? These are, I think, better—more useful, more practically pressing—questions than the ones I started with, namely: What can a transsexual mean when she says she is a woman, and what can I mean when I say I am a Jew?

One way of framing the shift from the earlier questions to the later ones is by way of a Wittgensteinian account of why the earlier ones seem so intractable. The focus on what we mean (rather than on what we do and why, as though we can answer the one without the other) usually leads to one of three possibilities, or to an oscillation among them. The first is some form of privileged access essentialism: Femaleness or Jewishness is just there, an abstractable part of one's overall identity, a definite, discernible something. Aside from the well-known problems both with privileged access and with essentialism, a serious problem with this approach, from my perspective, is that it leaves me out: If being a woman

concern revolves around a subordinated community's fears in relation to the dominant community: for example, that those members most acceptable to the white or Christian world will be assimilated, while the others are increasingly stigmatized. It is an understandable response to such (realistic) fears to accuse the more "acceptable" of being inauthentic; but, as María Lugones argued in a talk at a Philosophy, Interpretation, and Culture (PIC) conference at Binghamton University (in April 1994), it's misguided and self-defeating, reinforcing the oppressor's logic.

27. Thanks to Diana Tietjens Meyers, Lisa Heldke, and Jacob Hale for pointing out to me that, in earlier versions of this chapter, I had (repeatedly, even after being warned) succumbed to these temptations. Rather than claim finally to have overcome them, I would note here that such lapsing into the perquisites of privileged subjectivity is not only a demographic but an occupational hazard, and the effort to give up identity policing needs to be an ongoing one. (This chapter may be finished, but its author is a work in progress.)

or a Jew consists in a particular inner state, knowable independently of the body or the history one happens to have or of how one is regarded by others, then I fail to be one. And though I am willing to consider forgoing paradigmatic status, I do think any definition of either women or Jews that simply leaves me out is quite likely to be wrong.

The second possibility is expert essentialism. On this view, such identities are complex and not necessarily introspectively accessible, but, by exercising some combination of scientific and legislative authority, experts can make determinations. This view does in fact capture much about current practice. There are in both cases experts who are in the business of making such determinations, though, as I've argued above about Jewishness, they do so in ways that I and many others find troubling. The situation is even clearer when we look at the experts who determine gender, especially as this is done in the case of transsexuals.<sup>28</sup> The physicians and psychiatrists who have had the authority to decide who is "really" gendered differently than they are biologically sexed have tended (though this is changing, as transsexual activists are gaining some influence with the medical establishment) to reinforce precisely the gender stereotypes feminists have attempted to undermine: To be a woman in their terms has meant to be feminine. There has also been (though this too is changing) a conflation of gender and sexual identity: A real woman is supposed to be heterosexual.

Also, curiously, in the case of gender, though not in the case of Jewishness, the experts insist on the inbornness of gender identity, even when it is discordant with biological sex. Those who would convert to Judaism do not have to demonstrate to the rabbis that they have "really" been Jewish all along—one can quite openly be a convert. But, as Kate Bornstein (1994, p. 62) sardonically notes, the only way to be a "certified" transsexual is to deny that you are one—that is, to convince the doctors (and agree to try to convince the rest of the world) that you are and always have been what you clearly are not, namely, simply and straightforwardly a woman (or a man). Since you cannot have had a history that is congruent with such an identity, you are left without a past (Feinberg 1999). As I argued above, it is not only in our own memories but in the memories of others that our selves take shape, and the institutionalization of transsexuality functions as a theft of selfhood, in making a transsexual life not only closeted but literally untellable, incoherent.

The theft is premeditated, carried out with malice aforethought. The illusion of the naturalness of sex and gender requires that we not see what the magician is up to before the impossible being—a newly born adult man or woman—emerges from beneath the surgical drape. Our

28. For a discussion of another site of expert determination of sex/gender, that of sex-assignment at birth in cases of genital ambiguity, see Kessler (1990): Feminist suspicions about the phallocentrism of the sex/gender system are reinforced by her argument that the determining factor for sex-assignment is the presence or absence of a "good-enough" penis.

(nontranssexual) comfort requires that we fail to acknowledge transsexuals as such, seeing what the surgery and the hormones and the scripted behavior intend for us to see: a “natural” man or woman. If the illusion fails—perhaps because those who “rise up from the operating tables of [their] rebirth . . . are something more, and something other, than the creatures [their] makers intended [them] to be” (Stryker 1994, p. 242)—we respond to the affront to that comfort by seeing the transsexual as, to quote the term Stryker uses and appropriates, a “monster.”

“The transsexual body,” as Stryker points out, “is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (1994 p. 238). But so are the bodies of women who attempt to stave off aging by multiple plastic surgeries. So, especially since my hysterectomy, is my body. And none of us, for reasons as natural and unnatural as the full complexities of our lives, is the shape we were when we were born. We are all creatures, as Stryker (1994, p. 240) reminds us, in the face of our unwillingness to remember, not just in our mortal corporeality but in the constructedness of our psyches and our bodies. The illusion of the naturalness of bodies and psyches that conform to the dictates of heteronormativity is maintained when identity boundaries are policed by experts committed to keeping their work under wraps. Even when the experts are facilitating the crossing of sex and gender boundaries, they do so in ways that attempt to do as little damage as possible to the clarity of the lines: They may be crossed, but they are not to be blurred.

A third possibility for how it is that an identity can be claimed—privileged access voluntarism—has, in the face of the inadequacies of the other two, seemed very attractive, especially to some transgendered people. On a privileged access voluntarist account, one is, a woman if one says one is, and the claim means whatever one takes it to mean: It is not up to anyone else to tell me whether or not I am a woman, nor is there some particular essential property I have to have in order to be one; being a woman might in fact mean something quite different to me from what it means to you. The problem with this picture is that, in appearing to give the individual everything, it in fact gives nothing at all. As Wittgenstein has argued, meaning cannot be a private matter: A word means what it does not because I have joined it in my mind to an idea or an image (as Locke would have it) but because there exists a set of social practices in which I participate, in terms of which I can get the meaning right or wrong. Allowing that ‘woman’ means whatever anyone who applies it to herself takes it to mean gives the freedom of self-naming at the cost of there being any point to the activity, any content to the chosen name, any reason for saying that one is a woman, rather than a man—or, for that matter, a car or a chrysanthemum.<sup>29</sup>

29. See Nelson (2002). Also, Leon J. Goldstein’s chapter, “Thoughts on Jewish Identity” (especially p. 81), in Goldberg and Krausz (1993), similarly rejects the coherence of the idea of Jews as simply self-identifying. For a Wittgensteinian argument against the metaphysics of privileged access, see Chapter 1.

In practice, of course, naming oneself a woman is neither capricious nor unconnected to cultural meaning, even if, for some people—as Kate Bornstein suggested in a radio interview—what is really intended is that one is not a man, in a world in which there are simply no other conceptually allowable alternatives. On this view at least some MTFs are—or would be if conceptual space allowed—not women but something else altogether. It will also be true that for those transsexuals who do think of themselves as women, the associations with womanhood that seem especially resonant may well be idiosyncratic, and there is no reason why they cannot pick and choose among them—why, that is, transsexuals should not have the same freedom as born women to embrace some aspects of womanhood and vehemently reject others. But once we drop the idea that there is a specific something (knowable either internally or to experts) in which being a woman consists, while holding onto the idea that there has to be some substantive, shareable content to the assertion, we have moved toward my second set of questions, those concerning who cares and who gets to decide.

The shift to this latter set of questions hinges on seeing meaning as something that we do, not something that we discover, as the introspective essentialist would have it. Both the expert essentialist and the privileged access voluntarist seem to recognize this fact, but in different ways they obscure the practices involved—the latter by making those practices empty, and the former by granting to experts a problematically unquestionable authority. To take seriously the idea that meaning is something we do is to raise questions about who “we” are and why and how we do what we do; it holds us accountable for how we mean what we say.<sup>30</sup>

I know myself to be a woman and a Jew because of how I was named at birth: Neither of them seems to come from anything that I have done. But what do I now do when I take these identities to be in this way given, and what is my role in maintaining systems that identify people at birth? Such a role can seem quite troubling. Susan Stryker experiences rage at the moment of “nonconsensual gendering” (in which she sees herself as complicit) at the birth of her lover’s daughter: “A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence” (1994, p. 250). The complexity of her rage is in that dilemma: It is not as though, in the world we know, one would better treat a child by withholding gender, since, in the world we know, one would be withholding personhood.

30. The metaphysical underpinnings of the idea that social classifications (such as race and gender) are the real products of social actions—in other words, that constructivism is compatible with realism—are being developed in detail by Michael Root (see Root 2000).

Recognition of the oppressive nonconsensuality of natal gendering need not obviate the significance of the feminist insistence on the specific oppressiveness of female, in contrast to male, gendering, although emphasizing one rather than the other has led to political and conceptual conflict. Such conflict has emerged in the political antagonism between (some) transsexual women and men and (some) feminists, especially (some) lesbian separatists, conflict that emerges in differing understandings of the meaning of “women-only” spaces. As Sarah Hoagland has reminded me, separatists were concerned with the creation of new meaning within self-defined spaces, not with the boundaries that marked off those spaces: Attention circulated within lesbian space, rather than being focused on those on the outside, following Marilyn Frye’s (1983*d*) definition of lesbians as women whose attention was drawn to other women. Furthermore, as Anne Leighton pointed out to me, many lesbians, especially separatists, were more than ready to acknowledge transsexuals as such, as (another species of) “impossible beings.”<sup>31</sup> Nor, of course, is “woman” a category lesbian separatists have had any particular fondness for, let alone any desire to maintain the clarity and distinctness of. Self-identified women, I am told, have never been asked to submit to tests aimed at “proving” their womanhood as a condition of entry to “women-only” spaces such as the Michigan Women’s Music Festival. Why, then, the battles over the inclusion in such spaces of (those who identify as) MTF transsexuals?

The interpersonal politics of such encounters are complex and surely not to be resolved by an armchair observer. But, aside from echoing Kate Bornstein’s (1994) admonition that lesbian separatists are hardly the most politically savvy choice of adversary for transsexuals (and vice versa), I would like to introduce a possibly helpful piece of terminology to get at what I think separatists have in mind when they use such problematic terms as ‘womyn-born-womyn’ to exclude MTF transsexuals. A major reason for the existence of separatist space is to engage in the activity of self-naming and self-creation, and it is clearly inconsistent with such an aim to allow the definitions of the heteropatriarchy to determine who is to be allowed in. (The use of ‘womyn’ indicates that the identity in question is specifically not the one with which one was labeled at birth, whereas the people to whom it is intended to apply are precisely those who were so labeled.) But separatism exists against the recognition of the Adamistic

31. One of the best articulations of what it is to be an “impossible being” is, in fact, Marilyn Frye’s, in her *tour de force* essay “To Be and Be Seen” (1983*d*): In the logic of patriarchy, it must, she demonstrates, be impossible to see women as lesbians see them. That she starts this essay by quoting Sarah Hoagland on the conceptual impossibility of lesbians further reinforces the point that lesbian separatist suspicion of MTF transsexuals need not rest on an essentialist or biologicistic account of who women are. Both Frye (1988) and Hoagland (1988) are clear on the constructedness of female identity and on the inextricability of that construction from the subordinating projects of male domination. They are also both insistent that the focus of lesbian attention is on other lesbians, not on the borders that might be taken to define either “lesbian” or “woman.” (See, especially, Hoagland’s [1988, p.70] refusal to define “lesbian” in part because of her refusal to engage in what she takes to be the diversionary activity of boundary marking.)

assumption that men have a natural right to name anything they deem worth naming, and of the fact that wresting that supposed right from them requires vigilance. It also starts from the recognition of the specific harms that flow from the natal ascription of femaleness in a misogynist world. To get at the importance of these concerns, I suggest the term 'perinatally pinked', which refers to the condition of having been named female around the time of birth: by chromosome-testing or ultrasound visualization beforehand, by visual inspection at birth, or by surgical "correction" shortly after birth (see Kessler 1990).<sup>32</sup> Separatist space (and other feminist practices that recognize the separatist impulses that inform even non-separatist-identified female self-assertion; see Frye 1983c) can be seen as a space of healing from having been perinatally pinked, and from living in a world in which being so marked makes one a target for subordination and abuse. Being in the company of others who, like one, were perinatally pinked, and creating collectively with them the affirmative identity of "womyn," is for many separatists of the utmost importance to their survival in such a world. That MTF transsexuals were not perinatally pinked is a simple statement of fact, and it in no way diminishes the oppressiveness of their experiences of gendering—nor, importantly, does it preclude separatists' support of their claim to inclusion in the category of women. That category is one that operates in heteropatriarchal space—the space that requires unambiguous gender-ascription for intelligibility—and in such space many lesbians are natural allies in the struggle to fight the harassment (or worse) that targets those who visibly fail to conform to gender norms.<sup>33</sup>

32. 'Perinatally pinked' suggests, of course, another meaning, one that in this context demands at least acknowledgment: as a description of the circumcised penis of the Jewish male. For discussion of the ramifications of this way of inscribing Jewishness on the male body—that is, in a way that can be read (cannot but be read?) as feminizing—see D. Boyarin (1995), who in turn quotes Geller (1993) quoting Spinoza to this effect.

33. (a) Many thanks to separatists at the Fall 1995 meeting of the Midwest Society for Women in Philosophy—especially Marilyn Frye, Sarah Hoagland, and Anne Leighton—for helping me to understand a separatist point of view on the dispute between MTF transsexuals and separatists, particularly focusing on admission to the Michigan Women's Music Festival. They are not responsible for 'perinatally pinked', nor am I certain of whether they would agree on its usefulness. I've been helped in understanding transsexual women's arguments against their exclusion from the Michigan festival by reading letters and articles in several issues of *TransSisters*, especially Issue No. 7 (1995), and of *Transsexual News Telegraph*. (b) It was also helpful to read in both publications about the controversy over the exclusion from the New Woman's Conference of pre- or nonoperative MTF transsexuals. The argument is made that it is a conference for those who share a very specific experience: that of having "lived socially as a man at some time, . . . currently living socially as a woman, and [having] had genital surgery that resulted in making her genitals appear more female than they originally were" (*TransSisters* 7: 11). In that same issue, both a letter writer, Riawa Smith, and the editor, Davina Anne Gabriel, suggest, what was apparently decided on, that the conference should change its name to reflect better just whom it is intended for, rather than using a name ("New Woman") that others feel an equal need and right to claim. (c) As with my suggestion about 'perinatally pinked', the idea here is that different people will find that different parts of their complex identities and histories are especially salient and, in particular, define a space of safety and refuge—of home, in one of the senses of that loaded word; and that such identities and spaces are vitally important but, as Riawa Smith echoes Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983), not to be confused with the space of activist politics, even as they make such politics possible, by providing a space both of refuge and of wild imagining.

If heteronormativity requires natively ascribed gender as the sign of intelligibility, Christian normativity tends to make the natal ascription of identity unintelligible. Abstract individualism, a distinctively Christian view of persons, views group identity as properly a matter of choice, and as subordinate to one's unmarked humanity in constituting identity (see Lafer 1993). In practice, of course, individuals are hardly unmarked at birth, and not only by gender: The obvious additional natal mark is race, and, as argued above, all sorts of deviations from normality get labeled inborn. But identities thought of as inborn are seen not as a matter of group membership but as traits inhering in individuals. Group membership is meant to come later, and to be chosen. So the only intelligible way to be born a Jew is if Jewishness can be seen as a "trait," or a cluster of traits—a ground of intelligibility that anti-Semitic discourse has been only too happy to provide.

But what if we resist the dictates of Christian normativity on this point, and insist on the intelligibility of being born a member of the Jewish people? Can we find in such an exercise a way of thinking that makes better sense of what it is to be born a male or a female (see Boyarin 1994), where one criterion for "better sense" is the greater intelligibility of those who come later to dispute the gender membership into which they were born?

One thing to note is that Jewishness would not be the sort of identity it is if some people were not born into it: It is in this way not (or not just) a religious identity. Being born Jewish is not the only way to be Jewish, nor is it necessary for born Jews to be thought of as more authentic or "real" Jews than converts (though often they are). What is true is that born Jews have certain histories that converts do not, though it is important to keep in mind just how diverse those histories are, including not only the wide range of different experiences of Jewishness but also the possibility of not knowing for most of one's life that one is Jewish: Discovering that one is means discovering something about one's own history. (You may, for example, have been born to Jewish parents and adopted by Christians and discover your Jewishness when discovering your birth parents. Note that in the reverse situation, it would be wrong to say that you would discover you were Christian.)

Part of the difficulty involved in thinking about Jewishness is acknowledging the importance of history, along with group identity. Ignoring or theoretically deconstructing the role of history—of the given, the unchosen—leads to the sort of arrogating voluntarism I discussed above. The denial of the relevance of the body and of history (often, confusedly, in the name of anti-essentialism) also seems to me to be both masculinist and Christian, insofar as both those discourses privilege the mind over the body, the chosen over the given.<sup>34</sup> That some of us confront some of

34. Having had these thoughts rather inchoately for a long time, I was excited to find them developed in scholarly detail in Boyarin (1994), where he discusses the implications of Paul's proclaiming

our identities as ineluctable, as constitutive of who we are, as something about ourselves we cannot change, is to say something about how certain experiences are socially constructed; it is not to be committed to essentialism.

To speak of Jewishness as paradigmatically unchosen has, of course, an additional resonance, since to be Jewish is to be “chosen.” That is, it is God who gets to do the choosing; one is chosen whether one chooses to be or not. Jewish atheists are in general a peculiar breed: We are given to having deeply disputatious relationships with the God we don’t believe in, often centered on just what He had it in mind to choose us for. My own sense is that we were chosen to be canaries. Just as one sends canaries down mines to see if the air is safe to breathe—if it will kill anything, it will kill a canary—so Jews are, over the long run, a good test of the oppressiveness of a social environment (at least in those parts of the world where Jews have historically lived). Sooner or later those who are committed to ideologies of domination and subordination will reveal themselves as anti-Semites.

Thus, the quintessentially Jewish injunction that “none is free so long as any are oppressed” is for Jews a literal truth, no matter how hard individuals or groups may work at denying it, whether by assimilating within a Christian culture or by militarizing the state of Israel: A canary on steroids is still a canary. Affluent conservative American Jews may think that their interests lie in opposing affirmative action and other efforts to undo anti-black racism, but they are mistaken. The Black-Jewish alliance of the civil rights era may have been romanticized, but it had its roots in a deep truth: Racists are also anti-Semites, and Jews have no business consorting with them, even if they allow us into their subdivisions, universities, and country clubs. Our mortgages, degrees, and membership cards will not make us safe: The world will not be truly safe for the Jews until it is safe for everyone, and we forget that at our peril (See chapter 4).

A consequence of this notion of chosenness is that power is a misguided and ultimately ineffective response to danger.<sup>35</sup> Precisely because one cares about an imperiled identity, one has to resist the temptation to protect it with fortified barricades. Thus, one can think of conversion to Judaism not in the context of Rabbinic law (although for those for whom religious faith is at the heart of their Jewishness, chosen or otherwise, Rabbinic law will be something to engage, perhaps, as it has always been engaged, disputatiously) or of the intricacies of the Israeli Law of Return, but in the terms Ruth used in following Naomi: “Thy people shall be my people.”

in Galatians that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

35. See Boyarin and Boyarin (1993), to which, along with conversations with Daniel Boyarin, I am deeply indebted for pulling together these ideas.



Conversion to Judaism is more like marrying into a family than it is like conversion to Christianity, including analogous problems around the policing of families by, for example, the social and legal restrictions of marriage. A notion of family that broke free of such restrictions would function like the notion of “my people” that Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin (1993) call “diasporic”—nonpoliced, not shored up by apparatuses of institutionalized power. Belonging to such a family or a people would mean being related in some complex amalgam of chosen and unchosen bonds to a group, some of whom are born members, others of whom are, we might say, “naturalized.”<sup>36</sup>

The term is both precisely right and deeply wrong. It is deeply wrong in its association with citizenship, that most quintessentially state-regulated of identities.<sup>37</sup> Its very suggestive rightness lies in its making evident the fact that “natural” is something one can become (there is a process that produces it), and in its marking a contrast that distinguishes collectivities that at least some members are born into from those that are wholly chosen. Being a born member of such a collectivity is, importantly, a matter of genealogy—that is, of history, not of essential traits: There is no suggestion that the whole shebang (the *ganze megillah*) is anything other than a social construction. A further important feature of such collectivities is that one shares one’s membership in them with others with whom one would not choose to be associated and whom one cannot expel.

What happens when we bring these reflections on Jewish identity to the questions about sex and gender identity as raised by, specifically, MTF transsexuals? If we push the analogy, the fact that there are born women is constitutive of the category “woman,” just as the fact that there are born Jews is constitutive of the category “Jew.” What counts, of course, is not who one’s parents (or mother) are but how one is enrolled into the sex/gender system at birth. The category “woman,” however, can also include variously “naturalized” members, where naturalization has to do with a deeply felt identification with at least some (and almost certainly only some) earlier members, a feeling that one is in some sense “like them.” (When identity is officially regulated, those who are not officially naturalized have the status, as it were, of undocumented aliens—an apt description of not-officially-certified transsexuals, caught in a position in which they are unable to acquire usable driver’s licenses or other forms of identification (Feinberg 1999).) Such identification has to be acknowledged by at least some earlier members, as one cannot become a Jew without the acknowledgment of at least some already-Jews, though not necessarily by all of them, and not necessarily by born members (see

36. Thanks to Michael Root for suggesting the use of ‘naturalized citizen’ in the context of thinking about transsexual identity change. Judith Shapiro (1991, 259–60) makes similar use of the term.

37. See Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) for an argument that the particularism of Jewish identity is morally defensible only if *not* coupled with state power.

Kasher 1993). Those who are “naturalized” women are no less women than those who are born female, though the category would not be what it is were no one born into it.

An important disanalogy is that conversion to Judaism tends to be much more a matter of choice than does sex or gender change, and conversion may well have been preceded by a long period of quite comfortable identification as, say, Christian. The disanalogy marks a deep difference in how different identities work: One need not be recognized as Jewish or non-Jewish in order to be intelligible, and we have the conceptual space to narrate a history that goes between them.<sup>38</sup> But the disanalogy reflects aspects of gender practice that we might want to think about changing: That is, thinking about sex/gender identity as more analogous in these ways to Jewish identity might help us to imagine a less oppressive way of “doing gender.” The experiences of transsexual people tend to be quite different from the experiences of converts to Judaism—but that may be due to aspects of our sex/gender system that could be imagined otherwise.

There are, I think, other advantages to pushing this analogy. It is less constraining of identity than are the operations of those who expertly police the gender divide: The significance of natal assignment is not to pick out the “real” women from the others but, rather, to note that there would be no categories of the sort that genders are if some people were not assigned to them at birth. There would, that is, be no such thing as a woman to believe that one was if there were not people who were assigned female at birth, just as there would be no such thing as Jewishness to convert to if there were not people who were Jewish from birth. (Again, the same is not true of Christianity.) To deny this conceptual role to natal assignment—to think of gender as more like Christianity, as a system of categories that people sort themselves into based on their own self-identifications—is to ignore the ways in which, as a matter of historical fact, no less real for being contingent and alterable, gender is socially constructed and, hence, the ways in which it functions in people’s lives. (Part of the quarrel of lesbian separatists with transsexuals is a disagreement about how gender works. For many separatists, gender is a social imposition that places them in a threatened category: women are created as the objects of misogyny; whereas for many transsexuals gender is an inner identity that needs to be asserted in the face of social mislabeling. I want to suggest that both these conceptualizations are too restrictive to get at all the complex ways in which gender works, though each captures an aspect of gender that is, for some purposes, especially salient.)

38. See Gordon Lafer (1993) for the suggestion that traditionally Jewishness was much “deeper” and more connected to what made one socially intelligible. Also, as Diana Tietjens Meyers has reminded me, it is Judaism, the religion, to which converts convert, leaving that murky identity—“Jewishness”—still murky. It is both unclear and, in some communities and families, a matter of real dispute as to whether or not one can “become Jewish,” and, if so, just what that means.

Whether or not, or to what extent, the sex/gender system is disrupted by the gender experiences of transsexuals depends on the extent to which those experiences are thought of as paradigmatic. The irony is that in order to support transsexual claims to clear, stable, and unambiguous gender identities, those identities must themselves remain marginal. Only a system that takes natively gendered persons as paradigmatic—that maintains the illusion of the normality of “natural” gendering—can have the solidity to ground *anyone’s* unambiguous gender claims. The more important it is for transsexuals to claim a stable and unproblematic gender, the more conceptually dependent they are on their own marginality, as rare exceptions to a fundamentally natural dichotomy. The extent of this importance varies enormously from person to person—as it does for nontranssexuals. But it is a feature, surely alterable, of present-day Western cultures that stable and unproblematic gender identities are expected of everyone—so that those who resist claiming and enacting one such identity live the perilous lives of “outlaws.” A sex/gender system in which, by contrast, not only natal members are paradigmatic, in which paradigm status can be shared with transsexuals, would be much more like the system that underwrites Jewish identity: full of ambiguity, unclarity, and vagueness. (In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein tried to disabuse us of the Fregean conviction that ambiguous, unclear, vague concepts were not concepts at all: Having been so disabused, we can contemplate the possibility that we have reason in some cases not just to tolerate but to prefer ambiguity, unclarity, and vagueness.)

It is also, I would argue, an advantage to the analogy that it highlights the differences between the relationships of MTF and FTM transsexuals to the born members of their respective genders. Analogizing specifically womanness with Jewishness (an exercise that has, of course, a long and exceedingly complicated history) draws attention to anti-Semitism and misogyny as parts of the social world in which those categories have meaning and in the light of which they are lived. It helps us make sense of the particular anxieties felt by some Jews and some women about the possibility that core definitions of those identities will shift if the boundaries are not policed; and it can help, if not to allay those anxieties, at least to suggest that they are counterproductive. So long as I have no say (and given what sort of category “woman” is, I can have no say) about whether Margaret Thatcher is a woman, it avails me nothing politically to try to keep Kate Bornstein or Sandy Stone or Susan Stryker from being one. Ironically, it is the fact that some people are born women that provides one of the strongest arguments against attempts to police the boundaries of womanhood.

The analogy also shifts the question What is it to be a woman (or a Jew)?—as though there were something there, in me, to be discovered—to, instead, How did I get to be one? How was I claimed or assigned? How was I chosen—by whom and for what? And, having been chosen, to whom do I have what responsibilities, with whom is my fate tied and

how? Conversion to Judaism is not, like conversion to Christianity, a matter between an individual and God or an individual and an institutionalized church. It is a matter of joining a “people,” of coming to share their history, and their fate. An MTF transsexual may be no more a feminist than Phyllis Schlafly, but she is no more immune to sexism and no less accountable for her failure to identify with the struggle against it.

Such accountability will mean different things to different ones of us and different things to each of us at different times. But one thing it always means is a recognition of and active resistance to the misogyny and anti-Semitism that are part of the inherited histories and contemporary realities of women and Jews. (And a failure of accountability is a moral failure, not an identity test: One has failed to be, in this instance a good person, not a “good Jew” or a “good woman,” still less a “real” woman or Jew.) Resistance entails not just fighting the attacks but, equally, refusing the benefits that are advertised as coming with closeting, silence, collaboration, or disaffiliation. I would regard it as profoundly dishonorable to pass—as there is frequent occasion to do—as an “honorary” man or Christian. The emphasis is on the “honorary”: It is no dishonor to be taken to be a man or a Christian; what is dishonorable is to let stand the implication that one is therefore more worth respecting than if one were a woman or a Jew. (As a woman currently monogamously involved with a man, I regard it as dishonorable to pass, in this sense, as a heterosexual, which is rather different from identifying as a bisexual.)<sup>39</sup>

Resistance is connected to solidarity, which is a matter of identifying *with*, rather than *as* (Diamond 1993). As such, it can bind different groups rather than divide them, but typically it does primarily bind groups—and individuals, insofar as they are members of groups. Daniel Boyarin (1994, p. 257), in his deeply suggestive articulation of what he calls “diasporic identity,” makes this point: Such identity is particularist but not isolationist. (See also Boyarin and Boyarin 1993) As nonhegemonic others (he has in mind primarily, of course, diasporic Jews), we live in larger, diverse communities to which we are deeply bound and to which we are responsible in part as a condition of our group identity. Solidarity, identifying with, is at the heart of the Passover seder, and in some traditions, such as the socialist ones of my family, the celebration of the liberation of “our people” is inseparable from a rededication to solidarity with all the continuing liberation struggles in the world. Similarly, I think, AIDS has

39. Thanks to Jacob Hale for pressing me on the need to think about passing as a man from the perspective of an FTM transsexual. What is important, as he pointed out, is grappling seriously with the male privilege that one acquires. What counts as the avoidance of “honorary” status is not always clear. For example, if I teach my classes and attend meetings on the high holy days, I am in effect setting myself apart from those “other” Jews who won’t conform to the “normal” (i.e., Christian) calendar; but it feels dishonest to stay home, since neither synagogue attendance nor any other way of specifically marking the new year has any place in my life. Is it a matter of solidarity not to treat those days like any others in support of those faculty, staff, and students who—in the face of lack of cooperation or understanding—do observe the holidays?

come to play a role in lesbian identity, not because lesbians are at particular risk of HIV infection—which, course, they are not—but as an expression of solidarity with gay men who are, a solidarity that is at once “natural” (grounded in shared resistance to homophobia) and conscientiously chosen: My sense is that AIDS-related politics has greatly increased the numbers of lesbians who identify with gay men, and that lesbian identity has, as a consequence, been reshaped. Whom one identifies with is inseparable from what one identifies as.

## 6

I have (despite my recurrent temptations) no real interest in policing the boundaries of either womanhood or Jewishness, nor is it a job I want anyone else to do: Both identities are better left undefined—or, more strongly, incoherent and confused. If the meaning of identity, like the meaning of anything else, is a matter of the practices that shape it, then it would be both intellectually mistaken and politically unwise to give either of these identities more clarity and coherence than are warranted by their structuring practices. And those practices are a mess—a jumble of oppression and resistance, history and imagination, drudgery and heroism: If meaning is use, ‘woman’ and ‘Jew’ have been and continue to be put to such a dizzying variety of contradictory uses that any coherent account of either would have to be untrue. Furthermore, and importantly, it may well be incoherent identities, those that do not fit into the available taxonomies, that bear particularly liberatory potential. María Lugones (1990*b*) has been articulating this vision in, for example, arguing for the embracing of “multiplicitous” identities lived across worlds and in what, following Victor Turner, she refers to as “anti-structure—places of creative liminality” (see also Lugones 1994).

What does that leave us with as a way of finding identity intelligible? Family resemblance, for one: Male-to-female transsexuals or Jewish converts see in my identity—or the identity of some other women or Jews, born or not, perhaps very different from me—a variation of what they feel or want themselves to be; they look at some of us and see kin. (Talk of family is notoriously dangerous, as white feminists are reminded about the talk of “sisterhood,” and as Jacob Hale has reminded me again. But, aside from its Wittgensteinian implications, I think it’s worth engaging with—carefully. It helps to remember that family resemblance, like any other form of resemblance, is only very weakly transitive; and one thing we know about relatives is that they can cause us to be related to people we cannot imagine having as kin. But, imagine it or not, we do.) What I see when I look back is not a simple matter. I may look at a MTF transsexual and see not a woman but a man who, with stereotypically masculine arrogance, claims both the right to define what it is to be a woman and the right to take anything he wants, even if it’s my identity.

Increasingly, this is not what I see, and the change has to do both with my looking more carefully—seeing, for example, the ways in which the oppressiveness of gender affects those who inhabit its unnameable borders at least as much as it affects those who live near the center of the female side—and with a growing feminist consciousness among transsexuals.

Part of being careful about the use of familial imagery involves displacing its role as a primary site of heteronormativity. Using the family in counter-normative ways is one sort of response to the reactionary deployment of family rhetoric: Rather than rejecting the family (as image or social arrangement), we can “queer” it. David Halperin (1995) proposes ‘queer’ as a term not for a particular identity, constructed, as all identities are, by complex amalgams of normalizing and stigmatizing practices, but for positionality: as a flexible strategy of resistance to the practices of heteronormativity.<sup>40</sup> Such flexibility is suggested, he argues, by the flexible illogic of heteronormativity: It is strategically better suited than any affirmation of, say, positive gay identity to slipping over, under, around, or through the stigmatizing net. Queer identity, so conceived, is a slap in the face to the illusory “straightness” of heterosexuality, an illusion maintained by diverting attention away from those who are supposed to be the unmarked “normals” and toward the crafty maneuvering of those who try to live lives they can respect in the face of contradictory imputations of sickness and sin.

The question of who is queer (along with the related question of whether queer is a useful and appropriate identity for gay men and, even more controversially, lesbians) has taken on some of the controversy that surrounds questions about who is a woman or who is a Jew. With the ascendancy of queer theory in some parts of the academic and cultural worlds it has become chic to be queer, and many gay men and (perhaps) more lesbians have felt that their identities—and, more important, their histories and struggles—were being ripped off.<sup>41</sup> As Halperin puts it, in a caveat: “Lesbians and gay men can now look forward to a new round of condescension and dismissal at the hands of the trendy and glamorously unspecified sexual outlaws who call themselves ‘queer’ and who can claim the radical chic attached to a sexually transgressive identity without, of course, having to do anything icky with their bodies in order to earn it” (1995, p. 65).

I want to argue for the claiming of queer identity as an important liberatory strategy—in part because of the challenge it poses to the paradigmatic status of privileged subjectivity—while maintaining the tension between the boundary-shiftness of queerness and respect for the

40. For a related discussion of positionality as a way of thinking about identity that escapes essentialism without becoming empty, see Alcoff (1988).

41. For discussions of related phenomena, see Zita (1992) on “male lesbians,” Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) on “the jew” [*sic*], and Kaminsky (1993) on exile.

historically and personally specific experiences of those who have “found themselves” (with the mix of activity and passivity that term implies) in identities whose boundaries they encountered as given and fixed, whether as a matter of internal certainty or of unyielding social decree.<sup>42</sup>

The symbolic appropriation of marginalized, oppressed, or stigmatized identities is the flip side of the expert policing of identity boundaries. The policing of boundaries requires definitive statements of who is or is not a “real” Jew or woman or homosexual, whether in the name of valorizing and defending the category or of keeping those in it from getting out. Symbolic appropriation often displaces those who have been thus defined—who may, in part because of such policing, regard those identities as central to their senses of self—in favor of others whose nonliteral (i.e., nonbodily) identifications become what it is to be a “real” Jew or woman or queer. Some male Jungians talk this way about their anima, and it is the suspicion (no doubt in at least some, though I suspect not many, cases well founded) that this attitude characterizes MTF transsexuals that is behind much of the feminist resistance to acknowledging MTFs as women. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin (1993) have explored the phenomenon of the (lowercase) “jew”: the outsider and nonconformist in the European imagination—the *real* Jew, realer for not being confined by a limited and limiting history.<sup>43</sup> There are good reasons to resist this symbolic appropriation of identity, even as it seems to be made possible by—and positively to further—the breaking down of confining definitions.

But there are equally good reasons for encouraging creatively playful, politically serious border transgressing on the part of those who could, given what seem to be the facts about them, safely reside on the more privileged side.<sup>44</sup> Adrienne Rich, writing in the 1970s, articulated a conception of lesbian identity that has affinities with queerness, and it met with similar resistance (see Zita 1981 and the discussion in Rich 1986). Rather than focusing on the specificities of the experiences of some women, Rich wrote about—and to—the lesbian in every woman: “It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack” (1979a, p. 201). The “lesbian continuum” encouraged any woman to find and identify with her own rebelliousness against heteropatriarchy (Rich 1986). The concern of Rich’s critics was that such expansiveness drew attention away from the radical core of

42. The arguments here are related to those concerning how to think about racial identity: There are both scientific and political reasons to argue that race is unreal, but doing so obscures the histories and in many cases the antiracist politics of those whose lived experience of race is very real indeed. See, for example, DuBois (1966), Appiah (1986), and Outlaw (1992).

43. Daniel Boyarin (1994, 224ff.) is explicit about the parallels between this erasure of the specificity of Jews and “the post-structuralist deconstruction of the sign ‘woman’.”

44. In a video performance piece entitled “Cornered,” Adrian Piper (1988) confronts presumptively white viewers with the challenge to acknowledge that, at least by the terms of the “one drop rule,” many of them, especially those whose ancestors came to the U.S. many generations ago, are actually black, and to consider claiming that identity.

lesbian identity—an embodied erotic connection to other women. Rich wasn't advocating the position I referred to above as privileged access voluntarism, so the problem isn't that "lesbian" becomes contentless; rather it's that the specific transgressiveness of lesbianism is lost if the sexual is downplayed. The dispute is over which practices will be taken as constituting the language game, and, consequently, which family resemblances will emerge as salient.

It was Rich's strategy—as it is the strategy of queer theorists—to be expansive about the practices that constitute lesbian identity, in part as a means of destabilizing those that constitute heterosexual identity. Such destabilization is not just conceptual: Heteronormativity (akin to Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality) functions in part through the quotidian complicity of those who cannot imagine—or desire—an alternative. Similarly, in poems such as "Transcendental Etude" and "Sibling Mysteries," Rich (1978) reminds women of mother/child eroticism and of the unnaturalness of abandoning a woman's body for a man's: She is "queering" (women's) heterosexuality, in a way similar to Michael Warner's (1993) discussion in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Queerness is not meant to contrast with straightness so much as to displace it, to reveal its inherent contradictions and instabilities. Thus, queer readings of canonical texts are not attempts to demonstrate that some hitherto believed-to-be-straight author was really gay but are, rather, subversions of our reading practices, disruptions of our imputations to authors of the sort of straightforward, transparent integrity that characterizes privileged subjectivity.

Other theorists have urged the privileged to find in themselves the shreds and patches of transgressive identities. María Lugones (1987) suggests that "world"-travel—the movement into a social world in which one is marked as other, something the oppressed and marginalized have to do for survival—can be embarked on "playfully" by those among the privileged who have the courage and the loving commitment to learn how they are seen by those in whose eyes their privilege marks them as other. Sandra Harding (1991, p. 288) urges those who are privileged to learn to think out of "traitorous" identities, conscientiously disloyal to their privilege. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin (1993) suggest diasporic identity as an alternative to nationalist identity: a history- and body-laden sense of identity (a sense that these particular others are "my people")—is viable (nonracist) only when it is uncoupled from state power.

Strategies of "queering the center" will vary as the identities in question are variously constructed, policed, and transgressively lived—in particular, as one or the other side of the oxymoronic natural incapacity/willful refusal construction is dominant. Womanhood and Jewishness are illustrative of these differences. Part of heteronormativity is the assumption that gender is not chosen but "natural": given and immutable, either inscribed on the body or, even if in some "deviant" cases at odds with it,



set one way or the other at a very early age. As I noted above, the medical control of transsexual experience has served to reinforce, rather than to undermine, the fixity of gender. In the face of this rigidity, it can be liberatory to blur the boundary (both by straddling and by openly crossing it), to argue for the ways in which gender is neither definite nor fixed. Doing so need not, as many feminists have worried, undermine the intelligibility and efficacy of feminist politics, for which the undeniable reality and oppressiveness of sex/gender systems, however historically mutable or even arbitrary, are grounds enough. It can also be important to claim the power of self-naming, including the power of boundary setting. But the “selves” that do the naming need not be confined to those who in the dominant view of things count as women: A politics of solidarity can underwrite transgressive boundary *marking*, as well as blurring or straddling.

Jewishness, on the other hand, is aberrant in a Christian normative culture in being paradigmatically a matter not of choice but, as Daniel Boyarin puts it, of “genealogy” (1994, 236–246). From a Jewish perspective, postmodern anti-essentialist arguments can sound suspiciously Protestant, resting, as they often do, on the idea that any identity at all is “nothing but” a social construction, and that taking oneself to be anything as a matter of birth is bad faith. Furthermore, the conflation of givenness (i.e., the denial of voluntarism) and essentialism is a mistake, as is the opposition between givenness and social construction: Jewishness is no less socially constructed for being heritable.<sup>45</sup>

It is important, I think, to assert Jewishness specifically as an identity that is paradigmatically not a matter of choice—that is, to resist not only the assimilation of individual Jews into Christian culture but the assimilation of Jewish identity itself. (The term ‘Judeo-Christian’ is an example of such assimilation: Not only does it amalgamate Jewishness with Christianity, but it makes Jewishness out to be the larval form, important not in its own right but as a precursor to Christianity.) Concerning gender and sexual identity, I would argue that, although a case can be made for more body-based, less voluntaristic conceptions than are currently popular in gender studies, given the fit between such a view and that of heteropatriarchy, the dangers probably outweigh the benefits. But, tentatively, I have suggested that some ways of thinking about Jewish identity can provide a helpful model for breaking the hold on us of the rigidities of gender identity, by providing a middle way between the supposed dichotomy of either unproblematically natural or ungrounded and arbitrary.<sup>46</sup>

45. These are among the clarifications being developed by Michael Root.

46. After completing this chapter I encountered a paper of Jonathan Boyarin’s (1995) in which he makes a similar argument, by way of a specifically Jewish intervention into a dispute he stages between Charles Taylor and Judith Butler concerning identity. I have also just begun to learn about the emerging conversation among Jewish feminists concerning the nature of Jewish identity: As with other identities, it is helpfully articulated from its own, in this case gendered, margins. (See Peskowitz and Levitt 1988.)

There is no single answer to the question of whether an explicitly, flexibly constructionist, or a historically given, body-based view of identity is more politically progressive. (I am assuming, of course, that in some sense there is no “fact of the matter” that questions concerning categorization do not admit of nonstrategic answers: That is, on the metaphysical level, I am assuming some version of social constructionism.) It depends on who is asserting what sort of identity when and where and why, in the face of what other sorts of assertions, especially those that have authoritative standing. My suggestion is that here and now there are good reasons to queer the centers of both heteronormative and Christian normative discursive practices and that such queering can proceed by way of exploring the ways in which some of us live as impossible beings, emphasizing those aspects of our lives that render us impossible: the shape-shifting of the transsexual and the unchosen givenness of the secular Jew. Against the normative backgrounds of essentialized gender and chosen religion, such emphases move the two identities onto a shared middle ground of complex—and normatively unintelligible—mixtures of givenness and choice.

In these ways and others—in articulations of *mestizaje* (see Anzaldúa 1987) or exhortations to become “world”-travelers (Lugones 1987), and in diverse invocations of trickster subjectivities (see Haraway 1991, p.199; Gates 1988)—the experiences of variously marginalized people provide alternative models of subjectivity, less seamless and transparent, less coherent and solid, than those of privilege. Each of them is grounded in the specificities of the experiences of historically particular groups, but all suggest that taking such experiences as paradigmatic of the human can both shatter the illusions of the naturalness of privilege and offer ways out of the constraints of its normativities. The point is not to generate legions of chic lesbian or mestiza or black or American Indian or Jewish wannabes, but to offer alternative, variously queer, provisional paradigms in relation to which each of us tells our own, shifting stories. The issue, then, is not who is or is not really whatever, but who can be counted on when they come for any one of us: The solid ground is not identity but loyalty and solidarity.

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