GENDER TROUBLE

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity

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Routledge
New York and London

Think how words are gendered, as well as binary

Preface (1999)

Ten years ago I completed the manuscript of *Gender Trouble* and sent it to Routledge for publication. I did not know that the text would have as wide an audience as it has had, nor did I know that it would constitute a provocative "intervention" in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory. The life of the text has exceeded my intentions, and that is surely in part the result of the changing context of its reception. As I wrote it, I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as I understood the text to be part of feminism itself. I was writing in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs. There was and remains warrant for such a mode of criticism and to distinguish between self-criticism that promises a more democratic and inclusive life for the movement and criticism that seeks to undermine it altogether. Of course, it is always possible to misread the former as the latter, but I would hope that that will not be done in the case of *Gender Trouble*.

In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity. It was and remains my view that any feminist theory

Feminist Studies

Critiquing idea of "natural" even as it applies to

that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences. It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. In particular, I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original. The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. One might wonder what use "opening up possibilities" finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is "impossible," illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.

Gender Trouble sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions. The text also sought to undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimate minority gendered and sexual practices. This doesn't mean that all minority practices are to be condoned or celebrated, but it does mean that we ought to be able to think them before we come to any kinds of conclusions about them. What worried me most were the ways that the panic in the face of such practices rendered them unthinkable. Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?

Some of these kinds of presumptions were found in what was called "French Feminism" at the time, and they enjoyed great popularity among literary scholars and some social theorists. Even as I opposed what I took to be the heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism, I also drew from French poststructuralism to make my points. My work in *Gender Trouble* turned out to be one of cultural trans-

Critiquing the way "truth" has been used to delegitimize minority practices

lation. Poststructuralist theory was brought to bear on U.S. theories of gender and the political predicaments of feminism. If in some of its guises, poststructuralism appears as a formalism, aloof from questions of social context and political aim, that has not been the case with its more recent American appropriations. Indeed, my point was not to "apply" poststructuralism to feminism, but to subject those theories to a specifically feminist reformulation. Whereas some defenders of poststructuralist formalism express dismay at the avowedly "thematic" orientation it receives in works such as *Gender Trouble*, the critiques of poststructuralism within the cultural Left have expressed strong skepticism toward the claim that anything politically progressive can come of its premises. In both accounts, however, poststructuralism is considered something unified, pure, and monolithic. In recent years, however, that theory, or set of theories, has migrated into gender and sexuality studies, postcolonial and race studies. It has lost the formalism of its earlier instance and acquired a new and transplanted life in the domain of cultural theory. There are continuing debates about whether my own work or the work of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or Slavoj Žižek belongs to cultural studies or critical theory, but perhaps such questions simply show that the strong distinction between the two enterprises has broken down. There will be theorists who claim that all of the above belong to cultural studies, and there will be cultural studies practitioners who define themselves against all manner of theory (although not, significantly, Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies in Britain). But both sides of the debate sometimes miss the point that the face of theory has changed precisely through its cultural appropriations. There is a new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation. This is not the displacement of theory by historicism, nor a simple historicization of theory that exposes the contingent limits of its more generalizable claims. It is, rather, the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success, uncertain.

Subjecting post-structuralist theory to a feminist framework, but not in formalist context

Clarifying sentence: There are still restricted practices (Bestiality, Pedophilia, etc.)... But we cannot come to the conclusion that these should be restricted because they go against a transcendent order. We need to still interrogate them

"French Theory"

Gender Trouble is rooted in "French Theory," which is itself a curious American construction. Only in the United States are so many disparate theories joined together as if they formed some kind of unity. Although the book has been translated into several languages and has had an especially strong impact on discussions of gender and politics in Germany, it will emerge in France, if it finally does, much later than in other countries. I mention this to underscore that the apparent Francocentrism of the text is at a significant distance from France and from the life of theory in France. *Gender Trouble* tends to read together, in a syncretic vein, various French intellectuals (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig) who had few alliances with one another and whose readers in France rarely, if ever, read one another. Indeed, the intellectual promiscuity of the text marks it precisely as American and makes it foreign to a French context. So does its emphasis on the Anglo-American sociological and anthropological tradition of "gender" studies, which is distinct from the discourse of "sexual difference" derived from structuralist inquiry. If the text runs the risk of Eurocentrism in the U.S., it has threatened an "Americanization" of theory in France for those few French publishers who have considered it.[1]

as U.S. construction

grouping there together to form "French" studies

Of course, "French Theory" is not the only language of this text. It emerges from a long engagement with feminist theory, with the debates on the socially constructed character of gender, with psychoanalysis and feminism, with Gayle Rubin's extraordinary work on gender, sexuality, and kinship, Esther Newton's groundbreaking work on drag, Monique Wittig's brilliant theoretical and fictional writings, and with gay and lesbian perspectives in the humanities. Whereas many feminists in the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, *Gender Trouble* sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. Lesbianism is not the erotic con-

lesbian practices do not automatically fall under feminist theory. They are intentionally trying to reveal heterosexism in feminist theory.

summation of a set of political beliefs (sexuality and belief are related in a much more complex fashion, and very often at odds with one another). Instead, the text asks, how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?

The idea that sexual practice has the power to destabilize gender emerged from my reading of Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" and sought to establish that normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender. I take it that this is the first formulation of "gender trouble" in this text. I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in "becoming gay," the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly "same" gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. This issue has become more acute as we consider various new forms of gendering that have emerged in light of transgenderism and transsexuality, lesbian and gay parenting, new butch and femme identities. When and why, for instance, do some butch lesbians who become parents become "dads" and others become "moms"?

What about the notion, suggested by Kate Bornstein, that a transsexual cannot be described by the noun of "woman" or "man," but must be approached through active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which "is" the new identity or, indeed, the "in-betweenness" that puts the being of gendered identity into question? Although some lesbians argue that butches have nothing to do with "being a man," others insist that their butchness is or was only a route to a desired status

as a man. These paradoxes have surely proliferated in recent years, offering evidence of a kind of gender trouble that the text itself did not anticipate.[2]

But what is the link between gender and sexuality that I sought to underscore? Certainly, I do not mean to claim that forms of sexual practice produce certain genders, but only that under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality. Catharine MacKinnon offers a formulation of this problem that resonates with my own at the same time that there are, I believe, crucial and important differences between us. She writes:

> Stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women.[3]

In this view, sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender. It is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations. If gender hierarchy produces and consolidates gender, and if gender hierarchy presupposes an operative notion of gender, then gender is what causes gender, and the formulation culminates in tautology. It may be that MacKinnon wants merely to outline the self-reproducing mechanism of gender hierarchy, but this is not what she has said.

Is "gender hierarchy" sufficient to explain the conditions for the production of gender? To what extent does gender hierarchy serve a more or less compulsory heterosexuality, and how often are gender norms policed precisely in the service of shoring up heterosexual hegemony?

Katherine Franke, a contemporary legal theorist, makes innovative use of both feminist and queer perspectives to note that by assuming the primacy of gender hierarchy to the production of gender, MacKinnon also accepts a presumptively heterosexual model for thinking about sexuality. Franke offers an alternative model of gender

assuming gender hierarchy before production of gender, which ultimately exists in a heterosexual model

Sexual Harassment — vs. Gender Discrim.

discrimination to MacKinnon's, effectively arguing that sexual harassment is the paradigmatic allegory for the production of gender. Not all discrimination can be understood as harassment. The act of harassment may be one in which a person is "made" into a certain gender. But there are others ways of enforcing gender as well. Thus, for Franke, it is important to make a provisional distinction between gender and sexual discrimination. Gay people, for instance, may be discriminated against in positions of employment because they fail to "appear" in accordance with accepted gendered norms. And the sexual harassment of gay people may well take place not in the service of shoring up gender hierarchy, but in promoting gender normativity.

Whereas MacKinnon offers a powerful critique of sexual harassment, she institutes a regulation of another kind: to have a gender means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination. At an analytic level, she makes an equation that resonates with some dominant forms of homophobic argument. One such view prescribes and condones the sexual ordering of gender, maintaining that men who are men will be straight, women who are women will be straight. There is another set of views, Franke's included, which offers a critique precisely of this form of gender regulation. There is thus a difference between sexist and feminist views on the relation between gender and sexuality: the sexist claims that a woman only exhibits her womanness in the act of heterosexual coitus in which her subordination becomes her pleasure (an essence emanates and is confirmed in the sexualized subordination of women); a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women. The latter accepts the power of the former's orthodox description, accepts that the former's description already operates as powerful ideology, but seeks to oppose it.

Sexist vs. Feminist

I belabor this point because some queer theorists have drawn an analytic distinction between gender and sexuality, refusing a causal or structural link between them. This makes good sense from one

perspective: if what is meant by this distinction is that heterosexual normativity ought *not* to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed, I am firmly in favor of this view.[4] If, however, what is meant by this is that (descriptively speaking), there is no sexual regulation of gender, then I think an important, but not exclusive, dimension of how homophobia works is going unrecognized by those who are clearly most eager to combat it. It is important for me to concede, however, that the performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact.[5] Thus, no correlation can be drawn, for instance, between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the distribution of hetero-, bi-, and homo-inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing.

Much of my work in recent years has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*.[6] It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what "performativity" might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms,[7] but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations. I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law." There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which

the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.[8]

Several important questions have been posed to this doctrine, and one seems especially noteworthy to mention here. The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. Does this mean that everything that is understood as "internal" about the psyche is therefore evacuated, and that internality is a false metaphor? Although *Gender Trouble* clearly drew upon the metaphor of an internal psyche in its early discussion of gender melancholy, that emphasis was not brought forward into the thinking of performativity itself.[9] Both *The Psychic Life of Power* and several of my recent articles on psychoanalytic topics have sought to come to terms with this problem, what many have seen as a problematic break between the early and later chapters of this book. Although I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts, I continue to think that it is a significant theoretical mistake to take the "internality" of the psychic world for granted. Certain features of the world, including people we know and lose, do become "internal" features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world, as the Kleinians call it, is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorizations that a psyche performs. This suggests that there may well be a psychic theory of performativity at work that calls for greater exploration.

Although this text does not answer the question of whether the materiality of the body is fully constructed, that has been the focus of much of my subsequent work, which I hope will prove clarifying for the

reader.[10] The question of whether or not the theory of performativity can be transposed onto matters of race has been explored by several scholars.[11] I would note here not only that racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. I would therefore suggest that the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race. Many of these debates have centered on the status of "construction," whether race is constructed in the same way as gender. My view is that no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another. Thus, the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once, and the analysis surely illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis.[12]

Although I've enumerated some of the academic traditions and debates that have animated this book, it is not my purpose to offer a full apologia in these brief pages. There is one aspect of the conditions of its production that is not always understood about the text: it was produced not merely from the academy, but from convergent social movements of which I have been a part, and within the context of a lesbian and gay community on the east coast of the United States in which I lived for fourteen years prior to the writing of this book. Despite the dislocation of the subject that the text performs, there is a person here: I went to many meetings, bars, and marches and saw many kinds of genders, understood myself to be at the crossroads of some of them, and encountered sexuality at several of its cultural edges. I knew many people who were trying to find their way in the midst of a significant movement for sexual recognition and freedom, and felt the exhilaration and frustration that goes along with being a part of that movement both in its hopefulness and internal dissension. At the same time that I was ensconced in the academy, I was also living

Cannot assume race is one category of analysis that can unmistakably answer intersectional difficulties by itself

a life outside those walls, and though *Gender Trouble* is an academic book, it began, for me, with a crossing-over, sitting on Rehoboth Beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life. That I can write in an autobiographical mode does not, I think, relocate this subject that I am, but perhaps it gives the reader a sense of solace that there is someone here (I will suspend for the moment the problem that this someone is given in language).

It has been one of the most gratifying experiences for me that the text continues to move outside the academy to this day. At the same time that the book was taken up by Queer Nation, and some of its reflections on the theatricality of queer self-presentation resonated with the tactics of Act Up, it was among the materials that also helped to prompt members of the American Psychoanalytic Association and the American Psychological Association to reassess some of their current doxa on homosexuality. The questions of performative gender were appropriated in different ways in the visual arts, at Whitney exhibitions, and at the Otis School for the Arts in Los Angeles, among others. Some of its formulations on the subject of "women" and the relation between sexuality and gender also made its way into feminist jurisprudence and antidiscrimination legal scholarship in the work of Vicki Schultz, Katherine Franke, and Mary Jo Frug.

In turn, I have been compelled to revise some of my positions in *Gender Trouble* by virtue of my own political engagements. In the book, I tend to conceive of the claim of "universality" in exclusive negative and exclusionary terms. However, I came to see the term has important strategic use precisely as a non-substantial and open-ended category as I worked with an extraordinary group of activists first as a board member and then as board chair of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (1994–7), an organization that represents sexual minorities on a broad range of human rights issues. There I came to understand how the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet

* glad that this book has moved outside the bounds of academia. Think Queer Art of Failure and "Studying" isolo.

met. Thus, I arrived at a second view of universality in which it is defined as a future-oriented labor of cultural translation.[13] More recently, I have been compelled to relate my work to political theory and, once again, to the concept of universality in a co-authored book that I am writing with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek on the theory of hegemony and its implications for a theoretically activist Left (to be published by Verso in 2000).

Another practical dimension of my thinking has taken place in relationship to psychoanalysis as both a scholarly and clinical enterprise. I am currently working with a group of progressive psychoanalytic therapists on a new journal, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, that seeks to bring clinical and scholarly work into productive dialogue on questions of sexuality, gender, and culture.

Both critics and friends of *Gender Trouble* have drawn attention to the difficulty of its style. It is no doubt strange, and maddening to some, to find a book that is not easily consumed to be "popular" according to academic standards. The surprise over this is perhaps attributable to the way we underestimate the reading public, its capacity and desire for reading complicated and challenging texts, when the complication is not gratuitous, when the challenge is in the service of calling taken-for-granted truths into question, when the taken for grantedness of those truths is, indeed, oppressive.

I think that style is a complicated terrain, and not one that we unilaterally choose or control with the purposes we consciously intend. Fredric Jameson made this clear in his early book on Sartre. Certainly, one can practice styles, but the styles that become available to you are not entirely a matter of choice. Moreover, neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself. As Drucilla Cornell, in the tradition of Adorno, reminds me: there is nothing radical about common sense. It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints

that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself. But formulations that twist grammar or that implicitly call into question the subject-verb requirements of propositional sense are clearly irritating for some. They produce more work for their readers, and sometimes their readers are offended by such demands. Are those who are offended making a legitimate request for "plain speaking" or does their complaint emerge from a consumer expectation of intellectual life? Is there, perhaps, a value to be derived from such experiences of linguistic difficulty? If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given.

The demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly "clear" view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, "let me make one thing perfectly clear" and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of "clarity," and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of "clarity" and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does "transparency" keep obscure?

I grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends, living out his days in an "institute" in the Kansas prairies; gay cousins forced to leave their homes because of their sexuality, real and imagined; my own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes. All of this subjected me to strong and scarring condemnation but, luckily, did not prevent me from pursuing pleasure and insisting on a legitimating recognition for my sexual life. It was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed. It was assumed either to be

a natural manifestation of sex or a cultural constant that no human agency could hope to revise. I also came to understand something of the violence of the foreclosed life, the one that does not get named as "living," the one whose incarceration implies a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence. The dogged effort to "denaturalize" gender in this text emerges, I think, from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of "real" politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind? How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life?[14]

Some readers have asked whether *Gender Trouble* seeks to expand the realm of gender possibilities for a reason. They ask, for what purpose are such new configurations of gender devised, and how ought we to judge among them? The question often involves a prior premise, namely, that the text does not address the normative or prescriptive dimension of feminist thought. "Normative" clearly has at least two meanings in this critical encounter, since the word is one I use often, mainly to describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals. I usually use "normative" in a way that is synonymous with "pertaining to the norms that govern gender." But the term "normative" also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom. One critical question posed of *Gender Trouble* has been: how do we proceed to make judgments on how gender is to be lived on the basis of the theoretical descriptions offered here? It is not possible to oppose the "normative" forms of gender without at the

same time subscribing to a certain normative view of how the gendered world ought to be. I want to suggest, however, that the positive normative vision of this text, such as it is, does not and cannot take the form of a prescription: "subvert gender in the way that I say, and life will be good."

Those who make such prescriptions or who are willing to decide between subversive and unsubversive expressions of gender, base their judgments on a description. Gender appears in this or that form, and then a normative judgment is made about those appearances and on the basis of what appears. But what conditions the domain of appearance for gender itself? We may be tempted to make the following distinction: a *descriptive* account of gender includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas a *normative* account seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not, supplying persuasive reasons to distinguish between such expressions in this way. The question, however, of what qualifies as "gender" is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of "what will be the case" under the rubric of "what is the case." Thus, the very description of the field of gender is no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation.

I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgments cannot be made out of context, but that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time ("contexts" are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity). Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening cliches through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where "subversion" carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to. So what is at stake in using the term at all?

What continues to concern me most is the following kinds of questions: what will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as the "human" and the "livable"? In other words, how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human? What is the means by which we come to see this delimiting power, and what are the means by which we transform it?

The discussion of drag that *Gender Trouble* offers to explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely *an example* of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency. The point is rather different. If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks "reality," and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is the sense of "gender reality" that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the anatomy of the person is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at the level of anatomical description). Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous. Indeed, if we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body. That body may be preoperative, transitional, or postoperative; even "seeing" the body may not answer the question: for *what are the categories through which one sees?* The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail,

when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question.

When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be "real," what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else. Although this insight does not in itself constitute a political revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real. And sometimes this shift comes as a result of certain kinds of practices that precede their explicit theorization, and which prompt a rethinking of our basic categories: what is gender, how is it produced and reproduced, what are its possibilities? At this point, the sedimented and reified field of gender "reality" is understood as one that might be made differently and, indeed, less violently.

The point of this text is not to celebrate drag as the expression of a true and model gender (even as it is important to resist the belittling of drag that sometimes takes place), but to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be "real," they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression. If there is a positive normative task in *Gender Trouble*, it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible. Drag is an example that is meant to establish that "reality" is

not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender "reality" in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms.

In this text as elsewhere I have tried to understand what political agency might be, given that it cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power from which it is wrought. The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility. This text does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions. In some ways, the continuing work of that clarification, in response to numerous excellent criticisms, guides most of my subsequent publications.

Other concerns have emerged over this text in the last decade, and I have sought to answer them through various publications. On the status of the materiality of the body, I have offered a reconsideration and revision of my views in *Bodies that Matter*. On the question of the necessity of the category of "women" for feminist analysis, I have revised and expanded my views in "Contingent Foundations" to be found in the volume I coedited with Joan W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Routledge, 1993) and in the collectively authored *Feminist Contentions* (Routledge, 1995).

I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, but it does draw attention to the difficulty of the "I" to express itself through the language that is available to it. For this "I" that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this "I" possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. If I treat that grammar as pellucid, then I fail to call attention precisely to that sphere of language that establishes and disestablishes intelligibility, and that would be precisely

to thwart my own project as I have described it to you here. I am not trying to be difficult, but only to draw attention to a difficulty without which no "I" can appear.

This difficulty takes on a specific dimension when approached from a psychoanalytic perspective. In my efforts to understand the opacity of the "I" in language, I have turned increasingly to psychoanalysis since the publication of *Gender Trouble*. The usual effort to polarize the theory of the psyche from the theory of power seems to me to be counterproductive, for part of what is so oppressive about social forms of gender is the psychic difficulties they produce. I sought to consider the ways in which Foucault and psychoanalysis might be thought together in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, 1997). I have also made use of psychoanalysis to curb the occasional voluntarism of my view of performativity without thereby undermining a more general theory of agency. *Gender Trouble* sometimes reads as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered presentation might be read directly off its surface. Both of those postulates have had to be refined over time. Moreover, my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity has consequences for the practice of coming out, for the insurrectionary power of the speech act, for language as a condition of both bodily seduction and the threat of injury.

If I were to rewrite this book under present circumstances, I would include a discussion of transgender and intersexuality, the way that ideal gender dimorphism works in both sorts of discourses, the different relations to surgical intervention that these related concerns sustain. I would also include a discussion on racialized sexuality and, in particular, how taboos against miscegenation (and the romanticization of cross-racial sexual exchange) are essential to the naturalized and denaturalized forms that gender takes. I continue to hope for a coalition of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity, that will refuse the erasure of bisexuality, that will counter and dissipate the violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms. I would hope that such a coalition would be based on the irreducible complexity of sexuality and its implication in various dynamics of discursive and institutional power, and that no one will be too quick to reduce power to hierarchy and to refuse its productive political dimensions. Even as I think that gaining recognition for one's status as a sexual minority is a difficult task within reigning discourses of law, politics, and language, I continue to consider it a necessity for survival. The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes. That is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity. There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes. Those who are deemed "unreal" nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise. This book is written then as part of the cultural life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have, some success in increasing the possibilities for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins.[15]

Judith Butler
Berkeley, California
June, 1999

Preface (1990)

Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it. As time went by, further ambiguities arrived on the critical scene. I noted that trouble sometimes euphemized some fundamentally mysterious problem usually related to the alleged mystery of all things feminine. I read Beauvoir who explained that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men, and this seemed confirmed somehow when I read Sartre for whom all desire, problematically presumed as heterosexual and masculine, was defined as *trouble*. For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female "object" who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the

masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female "Other" suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory. That particular dialectical reversal of power, however, couldn't quite hold my attention—although others surely did. Power seemed to be more than an exchange between subjects or a relation of constant inversion between and subject and an Other; indeed, power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender. I asked, what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between "men" and "women," and the internal stability of those terms? What restriction is here at work? Are those terms untroubling only to the extent that they conform to a heterosexual matrix for conceptualizing gender and desire? What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology?

But how can an epistemic/ontological regime be brought into question? What best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality? Consider the fate of "female trouble," that historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition, which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition. Serious as the medicalization of women's bodies is, the term is also laughable, and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play. *Female Trouble* is also the title of the John Waters film that features Divine, the hero/heroine of *Hairspray* as well, whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted

Think Woolf

through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex? Divine notwithstanding, gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize "the natural" in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex. What other foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable?

To expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power requires a form of critical inquiry that Foucault, reformulating Nietzsche, designates as "genealogy." A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. The task of this inquiry is to center on—and decenter—such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality.

Precisely because "female" no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as "woman," and because both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and the relational analysis it suggests. Further, it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics. Instead, we ought to ask, what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity. What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? And to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics preclude a radical inquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?

* * *

No need to try and search for "origins" of gender in an essentialist framework. Intentionally looking for the politics within gender norms; and what possibilities arise in its critique

This text is divided into three chapters that effect a critical genealogy of gender categories in very different discursive domains. Chapter 1, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," reconsiders the status of "women" as the subject of feminism and the sex/gender distinction. Compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism are understood as regimes of power/discourse with often divergent ways of answering central question of gender discourse: How does language construct the categories of sex? Does "the feminine" resist representation within language? Is language understood as phallogocentric (Luce Irigaray's question)? Is "the feminine" the only sex represented within a language that conflates the female and the sexual (Monique Wittig's contention)? Where and how do compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism converge? Where are the points of breakage between? How does language itself produce the fiction construction of "sex" that supports these various regimes of power? Within a language of presumptive heterosexuality, what sorts of continuities are assumed to exist among sex, gender, and desire? Are these terms discrete? What kinds of cultural practices produce subversive discontinuity and dissonance among sex, gender, and desire and call into question their alleged relations?

Chapter 2, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," offers a selective reading of structuralism, psychoanalytic and feminist accounts of the incest taboo as the mechanism that tries to enforce discrete and internally coherent gender identities within a heterosexual frame. The question of homosexuality is, within some psychoanalytic discourse, invariably associated with forms of cultural unintelligibility and, in the case of lesbianism, with the desexualization of the female body. On the other hand, the uses of psychoanalytic theory for an account of complex gender "identities" is pursued through an analysis of identity, identification, and masquerade in Joan Riviere and other psychoanalytic literature. Once the incest taboo is subjected to Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality,* that prohibitive or juridical structure is shown both to instate compulsory heterosexuality within a masculinist sexual

economy and to enable a critical challenge to that economy. Is psychoanalysis an antifoundationalist inquiry that affirms the kind of sexual complexity that effectively deregulates rigid and hierarchical sexual codes, or does it maintain an unacknowledged set of assumptions about the foundations of identity that work in favor of those very hierarchies?

The last chapter, "Subversive Bodily Acts," begins with a critical consideration of the construction of the maternal body in Julia Kristeva in order to show the implicit norms that govern the cultural intelligibility of sex and sexuality in her work. Although Foucault is engaged to provide a critique of Kristeva, a close examination of some of Foucault's own work reveals a problematic indifference to sexual difference. His critique of the category of sex, however, provides an insight into the regulatory practices of some contemporary medical fictions designed to designate univocal sex. Monique Wittig's theory and fiction propose a "disintegration" of culturally constituted bodies, suggesting that morphology itself is a consequence of a hegemonic conceptual scheme. The final section of this chapter, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," considers the boundary and surface of bodies as politically constructed, drawing on the work of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva. As a strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories, I describe and propose a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame.

It seems that every text has more sources than it can reconstruct within its own terms. These are sources that define and inform the very language of the text in ways that would require a thorough unraveling of the text itself to be understood, and of course there would be no guarantee that that unraveling would ever stop. Although I have offered a childhood story to begin this preface, it is a fable irreducible to fact. Indeed, the purpose here more generally is to trace the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts. It is

clearly impossible to recover the origins of these essays, to locate the various moments that have enabled this text. The texts are assembled to facilitate a political convergence of feminism, gay and lesbian perspectives on gender, and poststructuralist theory. Philosophy is the predominant disciplinary mechanism that currently mobilizes this author-subject, although it rarely if ever appears separated from other discourses. This inquiry seeks to affirm those positions on the critical boundaries of disciplinary life. The point is not to stay marginal, but to participate in whatever network or marginal zones is spawned from other disciplinary centers and that, together, constitute a multiple displacement of those authorities. The complexity of gender requires an interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary set of discourses in order to resist the domestication of gender studies or women studies within the academy and to radicalize the notion of feminist critique.

The writing of this text was made possible by a number of institutional and individual forms of support. The American Council of Learned Societies provided a Recent Recipient of the Ph.D. Fellowship for the fall of 1987, and the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton provided fellowship, housing, and provocative argumentation during the 1987–1988 academic year. The George Washington University Faculty Research Grant also supported my research during the summers of 1987 and 1988. Joan W. Scott has been an invaluable and incisive critic throughout various stages of this manuscript. Her commitment to a critical rethinking of the presuppositional terms of feminist politics has challenged and inspired me. The "Gender Seminar" assembled at the Institute for Advanced Study under Joan Scott's direction helped me to clarify and elaborate my views by virtue of the significant and provocative divisions in our collective thinking. Hence, I thank Lila Abu-Lughod, Yasmine Ergas, Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, Dorinne Kondo, Rayna Rapp, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Louise Tilly. My students in the seminar "Gender, Identity, and Desire," offered at Wesleyan University and at Yale in 1985 and 1986, respectively, were indispensable for their willingness to

imagine alternatively gendered worlds. I also appreciate the variety of critical responses that I received on presentations of parts of this work from the Princeton Women's Studies Colloquium, the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Kansas, Amherst College, and the Yale University School of Medicine. My acknowledgment also goes to Linda Singer, whose persistent radicalism has been invaluable, Sandra Bartky for her work and her timely words of encouragement, Linda Nicholson for her editorial and critical advice, and Linda Anderson for her acute political intuitions. I also thank the following individuals, friends, and colleagues who shaped and supported my thinking: Eloise Moore Aggar, Inés Azar, Peter Caws, Nancy F. Cott, Kathy Natanson, Lois Natanson, Maurice Natanson, Stacy Pies, Josh Shapiro, Margaret Soltan, Robert V. Stone, Richard Vann, and Eszti Votaw. I thank Sandra Schmidt for her fine work in helping to prepare this manuscript, and Meg Gilbert for her assistance. I also thank Maureen MacGrogan for encouraging this project and others with her humor, patience, and fine editorial guidance.

As before, I thank Wendy Owen for her relentless imagination, keen criticism, and for the provocation of her work.

1

Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire

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

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

Woman does not have a sex.
—Luce Irigaray

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

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual.
—Monique Wittig

There is a natural "women" in traditional feminist theory who fights for women rights

1. "Women" as the Subject of Feminism

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. But *politics* and *representation* are controversial terms. On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is

For women to be represented politically feminists have generally developed a category for "women" that is assumed to fully or adequately represent them

assumed to be true about the category of women. For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women's lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all.

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

response to

Criterion for subjects are defined before representation and assumed in its workings

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

Where do subjects come from?

Remaining in a political system of power dedicated to gendered domination makes "women" an almost impossible subject category to hold on to.

axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of "women" will be clearly self-defeating.

The question of "the subject" is crucial for politics, and for feminist politics in particular, because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been established. In other words, the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of "a subject before the law"[2] in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony. It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "women," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.

Because of what has been naturalized in language particularly

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

idea of looking for "women" as category with origins before structures. That there is an essential "women" we just need to find her.

Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women,* even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. As Denise Riley's title suggests, *Am I That Name?* is a question produced by the very possibility of the name's multiple significations.[3] If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

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

claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women's common subjugated experience.

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

My suggestion is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions. Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary

limits of identity politics. The suggestion that feminism can seek wider representation for a subject that it itself constructs has the ironic consequence that feminist goals risk failure by refusing to take account of the constitutive powers of their own representational claims. This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for merely "strategic" purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. In this case, exclusion itself might qualify as such an unintended yet consequential meaning. By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation.

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

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

Perhaps the problem is even more serious. Is the construction of

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

Main question

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

This is the problem. "Universal"

II. The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire

Although the unproblematic unity of "women" is often invoked to construct a solidarity of identity, a split is introduced in the feminist subject by the distinction between sex and gender. Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is

neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.[7]

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two.[8] The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.

This radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a "given" sex or a "given" gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is "sex" anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such "facts" for us?[9] Does sex have a history?[10] Does each sex have a different history, or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it

was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.[11]

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

III. Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate

Is there "a" gender which persons are said to *have*, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to *be*, as implied in the question "What gender are you?" When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner or mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does "construction" suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual difference? How and where does the construction of gender take place? What

sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to that construction? On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one."[12] For Beauvoir, gender is "constructed," but implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cogito,* who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. Is gender as variable and volitional as Beauvoir's account seems to suggest? Can "construction" in such a case be reduced to a form of choice? Beauvoir is clear that one "becomes" a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from "sex." There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the "one" who becomes a woman is necessarily female. If "the body is a situation,"[13] as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.[14]

The controversy over the meaning of *construction* appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism. As a consequence, one might reasonably suspect that some common linguistic restriction on thought both forms and limits the terms of the debate. Within those terms, "the body" appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural mean-

ings are only externally related. But "the body" is itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?[15]

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

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

their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood.

In a move that complicates the discussion further, Luce Irigaray argues that women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the "sex" which is not "one." Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable.* In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignatable. In this sense, women are the sex which is not "one," but multiple.[16] In opposition to Beauvoir, for whom women are designated as the Other, Irigaray argues that both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether. For Beauvoir, women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself; for Irigaray, that particular dialectic constitutes a system that excludes an entirely different economy of signification. Women are not only represented falsely within the Sartrian frame of signifying-subject and signified-Other, but the falsity of the signification points out the entire structure of representation as inadequate. The sex which is not one, then, provides a point of departure for a criticism of hegemonic Western representation and of the metaphysics of substance that structures the very notion of the subject.

What is the metaphysics of substance, and how does it inform thinking about the categories of sex? In the first instance, humanist conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes. A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an *attribute* of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or "core," called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language. The universal conception of the person, however, is displaced as a point of departure for a social theory of gen-

der by those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. This relational or contextual point of view suggests that what the person "is," and, indeed, what gender "is," is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined.[17] As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.

Irigaray would maintain, however, that the feminine "sex" is a point of linguistic *absence,* the impossibility of a grammatically denoted substance, and, hence, the point of view that exposes that substance as an abiding and foundational illusion of a masculinist discourse. This absence is not marked as such within the masculine signifying economy—a contention that reverses Beauvoir's argument (and Wittig's) that the female sex is marked, while the male sex is not. For Irigaray, the female sex is not a "lack" or an "Other" that immanently and negatively defines the subject in its masculinity. On the contrary, the female sex eludes the very requirements of representation, for she is neither "Other" nor the "lack," those categories remaining relative to the Sartrian subject, immanent to that phallogocentric scheme. Hence, for Irigaray, the feminine could never be the *mark of a subject,* as Beauvoir would suggest. Further, the feminine could not be theorized in terms of a determinate *relation* between the masculine and the feminine within any given discourse, for discourse is not a relevant notion here. Even in their variety, discourses constitute so many modalities of phallogocentric language. The female sex is thus also *the subject* that is not one. The relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified. Paradoxically enough, Beauvoir prefigured this impossibility in *The Second Sex* when she argued that men could not settle the question of women because they would then be acting as both judge and party to the case.[18]

The distinctions among the above positions are far from discrete;

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

For Beauvoir, the "subject" within the existential analytic of misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine "Other" outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly "particular," embodied, condemned to immanence. Although Beauvoir is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects and, hence, for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject.[19] That subject is abstract to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment and, further, projects that disavowed and disparaged embodiment on to the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female. This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom. Beauvoir's analysis implicitly poses the question: Through what act of

negation and disavowal does the masculine pose as a disembodied universality and the feminine get constructed as a disavowed corporeality? The dialectic of master-slave, here fully reformulated within the nonreciprocal terms of gender asymmetry, prefigures what Irigaray will later describe as the masculine signifying economy that includes both the existential subject and its Other.

Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence.[20] The theory of embodiment informing Beauvoir's analysis is clearly limited by the uncritical reproduction of the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body. Despite my own previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms.[21] The preservation of that very distinction can be read as symptomatic of the very phallogocentrism that Beauvoir underestimates. In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism.[22] As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized.

The discursive construction of "the body" and its separation from "freedom" in Beauvoir fails to mark along the axis of gender the very mind-body distinction that is supposed to illuminate the persistence of gender asymmetry. Officially, Beauvoir contends that the female body is marked within masculinist discourse, whereby the masculine body, in its conflation with the universal, remains unmarked. Irigaray clearly suggests that both marker and marked are maintained within a

masculinist mode of signification in which the female body is "marked off," as it were, from the domain of the signifiable. In post-Hegelian terms, she is "cancelled," but not preserved. On Irigaray's reading, Beauvoir's claim that woman "is sex" is reversed to mean that she is not the sex she is designated to be, but, rather, the masculine sex *encore* (and *en corps*) parading in the mode of otherness. For Irigaray, that phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplifying desire. Instead of a self-limiting linguistic gesture that grants alterity or difference to women, phallogocentrism offers a name to eclipse the feminine and take its place.

IV. Theorizing the Binary, the Unitary, and Beyond

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

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to

Irigaray

the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. It can operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination, to name but a few. And clearly, listing the varieties of oppression, as I began to do, assumes their discrete, sequential coexistence along a horizontal axis that does not describe their convergences within the social field. A vertical model is similarly insufficient; oppressions cannot be summarily ranked, causally related, distributed among planes of "originality" and "derivativeness."[24] Indeed, the field of power structured in part by the imperializing gesture of dialectical appropriation exceeds and encompasses the axis of sexual difference, offering a mapping of intersecting differentials which cannot be summarily hierarchized either within the terms of phallogocentrism or any other candidate for the position of "primary condition of oppression." Rather than an exclusive tactic of masculinist signifying economies, dialectical appropriation and suppression of the Other is one tactic among many, deployed centrally but not exclusively in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain.

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

cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed.

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

The insistence in advance on coalitional "unity" as a goal assumes that solidarity, whatever its price, is a prerequisite for political action. But what sort of politics demands that kind of advance purchase on unity? Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact. Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often tortuous process of democratization. The very notion of "dialogue" is culturally specific and historically bound, and while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not. The power relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated. Otherwise, the model of dialogue risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes "agreement" and "unity" and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought. It would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a cate-

gory of "women" that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete. The assumption of its essential incompleteness permits that category to serve as a permanently available site of contested meanings. The definitional incompleteness of the category might then serve as a normative ideal relieved of coercive force.

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

This antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that "identity" is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. Because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal. Moreover, when agreed-upon identities or agreed-upon dialogic structures, through which already established identities are communicated, no longer constitute the theme or

subject of politics, then identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. Certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view. Coalitional politics requires neither an expanded category of "women" nor an internally multiplicitous self that offers its complexity at once.

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

V. Identity, Sex, and the Metaphysics of Substance

What can be meant by "identity," then, and what grounds the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent? More importantly, how do these assumptions inform the discourses on "gender identity"? It would be wrong to think that the discussion of "identity" ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning. Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of "the person" has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is "in" remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation. Although that literature is not examined here, one premise of such inquiries is the focus of critical exploration and inversion. Whereas the question of what constitutes "personal identity" within philosophical accounts

"person" does not proceed gender.

almost always centers on the question of what internal feature of the person establishes the continuity or self-identity of the person through time, the question here will be: To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.

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

The notion that there might be a "truth" of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of

What has made "identity" grounded in unity and temporally coherent?

"Unintelligible"

"identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. "Follow" in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of "gender identities" fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.

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

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

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

Central to each of these views, however, is the notion that sex appears within hegemonic language as a *substance,* as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being. This appearance is achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that "being" a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible. For Irigaray, grammar can never be a true index of gender relations precisely because it supports the substantial model of gender as a binary relation between two positive and representable terms.[25] In Irigaray's view, the substantive grammar of gender, which assumes men and women as well as their attributes of masculine and feminine, is an example of a binary that effectively masks the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism, silencing the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity. For Foucault, the substantive grammar of sex imposes an

Since women is the "unrepresentable" this is impossible

artificial binary relation between the sexes, as well as an artificial internal coherence within each term of that binary. The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies.

For Wittig, the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality; occasionally, she claims that the overthrow of compulsory heterosexuality will inaugurate a true humanism of "the person" freed from the shackles of sex. In other contexts, she suggests that the profusion and diffusion of a nonphallocentric erotic economy will dispel the illusions of sex, gender, and identity. At yet other textual moments it seems that "the lesbian" emerges as a third gender that promises to transcend the binary restriction on sex imposed by the system of compulsory heterosexuality. In her defense of the "cognitive subject," Wittig appears to have no metaphysical quarrel with hegemonic modes of signification or representation; indeed, the subject, with its attribute of self-determination, appears to be the rehabilitation of the agent of existential choice under the name of the lesbian: "the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex . . . the lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex."[26] She does not criticize "the subject" as invariably masculine according to the rules of an inevitably patriarchal Symbolic, but proposes in its place the equivalent of a lesbian subject as language-user.[27]

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

> Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general.[28]

Beauvoir

Hence, Wittig calls for the destruction of "sex" so that women can assume the status of a universal subject. On the way toward that destruction, "women" must assume both a particular and a universal point of view.[29] As a subject who can realize concrete universality through freedom, Wittig's lesbian confirms rather than contests the normative promise of humanist ideals premised on the metaphysics of substance. In this respect, Wittig is distinguished from Irigaray, not only in terms of the now familiar oppositions between essentialism and materialism,[30] but in terms of the adherence to a metaphysics of substance that confirms the normative model of humanism as the framework for feminism. Where it seems that Wittig has subscribed to a radical project of lesbian emancipation and enforced a distinction between "lesbian" and "woman," she does this through the defense of the pregendered "person," characterized as freedom. This move not only confirms the presocial status of human freedom, but subscribes to that metaphysics of substance that is responsible for the production and naturalization of the category of sex itself.

The *metaphysics of substance* is a phrase that is associated with Nietzsche within the contemporary criticism of philosophical discourse. In a commentary on Nietzsche, Michel Haar argues that a number of philosophical ontologies have been trapped within certain illusions of "Being" and "Substance" that are fostered by the belief that the grammatical formulation of subject and predicate reflects the prior ontological reality of substance and attribute. These constructs, argues Haar, constitute the artificial philosophical means by which simplicity, order, and identity are effectively instituted. In no sense, however, do

they reveal or represent some true order of things. For our purposes, this Nietzschean criticism becomes instructive when it is applied to the psychological categories that govern much popular and theoretical thinking about gender identity. According to Haar, the critique of the metaphysics of substance implies a critique of the very notion of the psychological person as a substantive thing:

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

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

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

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

defining Other is assumed: "You make me feel like a natural woman."[34] This achievement requires a differentiation from the opposite gender. Hence, one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair.

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

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

consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire.

The strategic displacement of that binary relation and the metaphysics of substance on which it relies presuppose that the categories of female and male, woman and man, are similarly produced within the binary frame. Foucault implicitly subscribes to such an explanation. In the closing chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and in his brief but significant introduction to *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Journals of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite,*[35] Foucault suggests that the category of sex, prior to any categorization of sexual difference, is itself constructed through a historically specific mode of *sexuality.* The tactical production of the discrete and binary categorization of sex conceals the strategic aims of that very apparatus of production by postulating "sex" as "a cause" of sexual experience, behavior, and desire. Foucault's genealogical inquiry exposes this ostensible "cause" as "an effect," the production of a given regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the discrete categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within any discursive account of sexuality.

Foucault's introduction to the journals of the hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin, suggests that the genealogical critique of these reified categories of sex is the inadvertent consequence of sexual practices that cannot be accounted for within the medicolegal discourse of a naturalized heterosexuality. Herculine is not an "identity," but the sexual impossibility of an identity. Although male and female anatomical elements are jointly distributed in and on this body, that is not the true source of scandal. The linguistic conventions that produce intelligible gendered selves find their limit in Herculine precisely because she/he occasions a convergence and disorganization of the rules that govern sex/gender/desire. Herculine deploys and redistributes the terms of a binary system, but that very redistribution disrupts and proliferates those terms outside the binary itself. According to Foucault, Herculine is not categorizable within the gender binary as it stands; the

disconcerting convergence of heterosexuality and homosexuality in her/his person are only occasioned, but never caused, by his/her anatomical discontinuity. Foucault's appropriation of Herculine is suspect,[36] but his analysis implies the interesting belief that sexual heterogeneity (paradoxically foreclosed by a naturalized "hetero"-sexuality) implies a critique of the metaphysics of substance as it informs the identitarian categories of sex. Foucault imagines Herculine's experience as "a world of pleasures in which grins hang about without the cat."[37] Smiles, happinesses, pleasures, and desires are figured here as qualities without an abiding substance to which they are said to adhere. As free-floating attributes, they suggest the possibility of a gendered experience that cannot be grasped through the substantializing and hierarchizing grammar of nouns (*res extensa*) and adjectives (attributes, essential and accidental). Through his cursory reading of Herculine, Foucault proposes an ontology of accidental attributes that exposes the postulation of identity as a culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy, a regulatory fiction.

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

The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self, what the psychiatrist Robert Stoller refers to as a "gender core,"[38] is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines

of coherence. As a result, the exposure of this fictive production is conditioned by the deregulated play of attributes that resist assimilation into the ready made framework of primary nouns and subordinate adjectives. It is of course always possible to argue that dissonant adjectives work retroactively to redefine the substantive identities they are said to modify and, hence, to expand the substantive categories of gender to include possibilities that they previously excluded. But if these substances are nothing other than the coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous.

In this sense, *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything."[39] In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

VI. Language, Power, and the Strategies of Displacement

A great deal of feminist theory and literature has nevertheless assumed that there is a "doer" behind the deed. Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a