

## Part I

# Sex, Gender Performativity, and the Matter of Bodies



# Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault (1987)

## Introduction

Even if one accepts Simone de Beauvoir's postulation that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," received wisdom would apparently still have it that sex is an immutable essence, so that it should at least be possible to say that people are born male or female. Not according to Butler in this early article and in another, similar piece published a year earlier, both of which start out from the premise that gender is unnatural, a cultural construction (see "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," 1986). Reading Beauvoir through Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault, in "Variations on Sex and Gender" Butler provides what she calls "a schematic outline of a theory of gender invention," although throughout the article she is careful to emphasize that to talk in terms of gender's "inventiveness" is not to imply that it is a radical act of creation. Rather, gender is "an originating activity incessantly taking place," a construct, a process, a project occurring in a culture where it is impossible to be "without" (i.e. lacking or outside) gender. Jean-Paul Sartre's ambivalence towards the Cartesian mind/body dualism leads Butler to argue that the body is neither static nor self-identical but something that is lived and experienced in specific contexts. As Beauvoir puts it, consciousness *exists* one's body, which, in the context of culture, involves "becoming" one's gender.

One way of overcoming the Cartesian mind/body dualism is to argue that sex is *already* gender, since the body/mind split no longer makes sense if you claim, as both Butler and Beauvoir do, that gender is a way of "doing" the body. As Butler puts it, we can only know sex *through* gender, and although we "become" our genders, there is no place outside gender which precedes this becoming. Sex, as Butler will claim in *Gender Trouble*, is always already gender: the body does not antedate or "cause" gender, but it is an effect of genders which can only be taken up within existing cultural norms, laws, and taboos which constrain that taking up or "choice."

Clearly, gender is not a static entity, and Butler analyzes how gender identities are taken on and disavowed by subjects who are not, however, engaged in radical acts of

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creation. The moments of gender dislocation which both Butler and Beauvoir acknowledge, reveal the contingency of existing gender identities, and yet the recognition of gender's instability also brings with it what Butler identifies as the "vertigo and terror" of losing or leaving one's sanctioned social place. Butler insists that inventiveness or innovation is more effective than the transcendence of sex and gender for which Monique Wittig calls in *The Lesbian Body*: this is not the Marcusean dream of sexuality without power (a dream Wittig appears to entertain), but the subversion and dispersal of existing forms of power. Indeed, Butler sees Wittig's call for the eradication of sex as profoundly humanistic, and an unwitting reinforcement of the binaries she seeks to transcend.

On the other hand, what Butler calls "postmodern relations of power" present opportunities for the subversion and destabilization of existing gender hierarchies from within those structures. "[T]he power of binary opposition is diffused through the force of internal ambiguity," Butler argues, citing as an example Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century "hermaphrodite" whose translated journals are published with an introduction by Michel Foucault. By confounding rather than transcending univocal sex and the binary sex/gender system, Herculine reveals the ways in which anatomy is invested and defined within binary terms, although Butler appears to concur with Wittig that sexual difference is created when it is restricted to certain body parts that are pronounced and identified at birth. The facticity of the body is by no means refuted, and the "vertigo and terror" generated by a body such as Barbin's which cannot be defined according to existing binaries, reveals both the mythology and the multiplicity of heterosexuality, even as it attempts to present itself as univocal and "natural."

In conclusion, Butler acknowledges that the Foucauldian proliferation of existing power structures might indeed seem to imply the possibility of radical invention, yet viewed through a Marxist psychoanalytic lens, it is clear that gender identities are circumscribed and socially constituted. Gender may be "chosen" only from within the parameters of culturally available terms which always preexist the subject. To acknowledge, as Marxists and psychoanalysts do, that the subject is not free to create herself or himself at will, necessitates scrutinizing language in order to reveal the ontological assumptions underlying terms such as "woman" that disguise and preclude productive gender dissonance and multiplicity. Again, Marxist and psychoanalytic models constitute a challenge to current configurations of sexed and gendered identities, while Gayle Rubin's reading of psychoanalysis as a reconfiguring of kinship structures leads Butler to suggest that tracing the history of gender may reveal its gradual release from the binary restrictions within which it has been mired.

Butler's later work continues to describe gender and sex, the subject and the body, as effects rather than causes, products of a law (characterized here as a binary or "dimorphic" gender system) which precedes, produces – indeed *effects* – the subject. This early article displays many of the philosophical and theoretical preoccupations of Butler's later work, where psychoanalytic, Foucauldian, and Marxist insights continue to underpin her theories of gender, sex, and performativity.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”<sup>1</sup> – Beauvoir’s now-famous formulation asserts the noncoincidence of natural and gendered identity. Because what we become is not what we already are, gender is dislodged from sex; the cultural interpretation of sexual attributes is distinguished from the facticity or simple existence of these attributes. The verb “become” contains, however, a consequential ambiguity. Not only are we culturally constructed, but in some sense we construct ourselves. For Beauvoir, to *become* a woman is a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the gradual acquisition of a skill, a “project” in Sartrean terms, to assume a culturally established corporeal style and significance. When “become” is taken to mean “purposefully assume or embody,” Beauvoir’s declaration seems to shoulder the burden of Sartrean choice. If genders are in some sense chosen, then what happens to the definition of gender as a cultural interpretation of sex, that is, what happens to the ways in which we are, as it were, already culturally interpreted? How can gender be both a matter of choice and cultural construction?

Beauvoir does not claim to be describing a theory of gender identity or gender acquisition in *The Second Sex*, and yet her formulation of gender as a *project* seems to invite speculation on just such a theory. Monique Wittig, a French feminist who wrote an influential article “One is Not Born a Woman” (1978), extends Beauvoir’s theory on the ambiguous nature of gender identity, i.e. this cultural self that we become but which we seem to have been all along. The positions of Beauvoir and Wittig, though different in crucial respects, commonly suggest a theory of gender that tries to make cultural sense of the existential doctrine of choice. Gender becomes the corporeal locus of cultural meanings both received and innovated. And “choice” in this context comes to signify a corporeal process of interpretation within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms.

When the body is conceived as a cultural locus of gender meanings, it becomes unclear what aspects of this body are natural or free of cultural imprint. Indeed, how are we to find the body that preexists its cultural interpretation? If gender is the corporealization of choice, and the acculturation of the corporeal, then what is left of nature, and what has become of sex? If gender is determined in the dialectic between culture and choice, then what role does “sex” serve, and ought we to conclude that the very distinction between sex and gender is anachronistic? Has Beauvoir refuted the original meaning of her famous formulation, or was that declaration more nuanced than we originally guessed? To answer, we must reconstruct Beauvoir’s distinction between sex and gender, and consider her theory’s present life in the work of Monique Wittig who, in fact, considers the distinction anachronistic. We will then turn to Michel Foucault’s rejection of the category of “natural

sex,” compare it with Wittig’s position, and attempt a reformulation of gender as a cultural project.

### Sartrean Bodies and Cartesian Ghosts

The notion that we somehow choose our genders poses an ontological puzzle. It might at first seem impossible that we can occupy a position outside of gender in order to stand back and choose our genders. If we are always already gendered, immersed in gender, what sense does it make to say that we choose what we already are? Not only does the thesis appear tautological, but in so far as it postulates a choosing self prior to its own chosen gender, it seems to adopt a Cartesian view of the self, an egological structure that lives and thrives prior to language and cultural life. This view of the self runs counter to contemporary findings on the linguistic construction of personal agency and, as is the problem with Cartesian egos everywhere, their ontological distance from language and cultural life precludes the possibility of their eventual verification. If Beauvoir’s claim is to have cogency, if it is true that we “become” our genders through some kind of volitional and appropriative set of acts, then she must mean something other than an unsituated Cartesian act. That personal agency is a logical prerequisite for *taking on* a gender does not presuppose that this agency is itself disembodied; indeed, it is our genders that we become, and not our bodies. If Beauvoir’s theory is to be understood as freed of the Cartesian ghost, we must first establish her view of embodied identity, and consider her musings on the possibilities of disembodied souls.

Whether consciousness has any discrete ontological status apart from the body is a question that Sartre answers inconsistently throughout *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>2</sup> This ambivalence toward a Cartesian mind/body dualism reemerges, although less seriously, in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. In fact, in *The Second Sex* we can see an effort to radicalize the one implication of Sartre’s theory concerned with establishing an embodied notion of freedom. The chapter on “The Body” in *Being and Nothingness* contains the echoes of Cartesianism which haunt his thinking, but also gives evidence of his own efforts to expel the Cartesian ghost. Although Sartre argues that the body is coextensive with personal identity (it is a “perspective” that one lives), he also suggests that consciousness is in some sense beyond the body (“My body is a *point of departure* which I *am* and which at the same time I surpass”). Instead of refuting Cartesianism, Sartre’s theory assimilates the Cartesian moment as an immanent and partial feature of consciousness; Sartre’s theory seeks to conceptualize the disembodied or transcendent feature of personal identity as paradoxically, yet essentially, related to consciousness as embodied. The duality of

consciousness as both embodied and transcendent is intrinsic to personal identity, and the effort to locate personal identity exclusively in one or the other is, according to Sartre, a project in bad faith.

Although Sartre's references to "surpassing" the body may be read as presupposing a mind/body dualism, we need to understand this self-transcendence as itself a corporeal movement, and thus rethink both our usual ideas of "transcendence" and of the mind/body dualism itself. For Sartre, one may surpass the body, but this does not mean that one definitively gets beyond the body; the subversive paradox consists in the fact that the body itself is a surpassing. The body is not a static or self-identical phenomenon, but a mode of intentionality, a directional force and mode of desire. As a condition of access to the world, the body is a being comported beyond itself, referring to the world and thereby revealing its own ontological status as a referential reality. For Sartre, the body is lived and experienced as the context and medium for all human strivings.<sup>3</sup> Because for Sartre all human beings strive after possibilities not yet realized, human beings are to that extent "beyond" themselves. This *ek-static* condition is itself a corporeal experience; the body is thus experienced as a mode of becoming. Indeed, for Sartre the natural body only exists in the mode of being surpassed: "We can never apprehend this contingency as such in so far as our body is *for us*; for we are a choice, and for us to be is to choose ourselves... this inapprehensible body is precisely the necessity that *there be a choice*, that I do not exist *all at once*."<sup>4</sup>

Beauvoir does not so much refute Sartre as take him at his non-Cartesian best.<sup>5</sup> Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that "it would be best to say, using 'exist' as a transitive verb, that consciousness *exists* its body."<sup>6</sup> The transitive form of "exist" is not far removed from Beauvoir's disarming use of "become," and Beauvoir's concept of becoming a gender seems both a radicalization and concretization of the Sartrian formulation. In transposing the identification of corporeal existence and "becoming" onto the scene of sex and gender, Beauvoir appropriates the ontological necessity of the paradox, but the tension in her theory does not reside between being "in" and "beyond" the body, but in the move from the natural to the acculturated body. That one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman does not imply that this "becoming" traverses a path from disembodied freedom to cultural embodiment. Indeed, one is one's body from the start, and only thereafter becomes one's gender. The movement from sex to gender is internal to embodied life, a sculpting of the original body into a cultural form. To mix Sartrian phraseology with Beauvoir's, we might say that to "exist" one's body in culturally concrete terms means, at least partially, to become one's gender.

Although we "become" our genders in Beauvoir's view, the temporal movement of this becoming does not follow a linear progression. The origin

of gender is not temporally discrete precisely because gender is not suddenly originated at some point in time after which it is fixed in form. In an important sense, gender is not traceable to a definable origin because it itself is an originating activity incessantly taking place. No longer understood as a product of cultural and psychic relations long past, gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself in and through those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world.

### Gender as Choice

One chooses one's gender, but one does not choose it from a distance, which signals an ontological juncture between the choosing agent and the chosen gender. The Cartesian space of the deliberate "chooser" is fictional, but if the distanced deliberations of the spectator are not the choices whereof Beauvoir speaks, then how are we to understand the choice at the origin of gender? Beauvoir's view of gender as an incessant project, a daily act of reconstruction and interpretation, draws upon Sartre's doctrine of prereflective choice and gives that abstract epistemological structure a concrete cultural meaning. Preflective choice is a tacit and spontaneous act which Sartre terms "quasi-knowledge." Not wholly conscious, but nevertheless accessible to consciousness, it is the kind of choice we make and only later realize that we have made. Beauvoir seems to rely on this notion of choice in referring to the kind of volitional act through which gender is assumed. Taking on a gender is not possible at a moment's notice, but is a subtle and strategic project, laborious and for the most part covert. Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew a cultural history in one's own corporeal terms. This is not a prescriptive task we must endeavor to do, but one in which we have been endeavoring all along.

By scrutinizing the mechanism of agency and appropriation, Beauvoir is attempting, in my mind, to infuse the analysis of women's oppression with emancipatory potential. Oppression is not a self-contained system that either confronts individuals as a theoretical object or generates them as its cultural pawns. It is a dialectical force that requires individual participation on a large scale in order to maintain its malignant life.



Beauvoir does not address directly the burden of freedom that gender presents, but we can extrapolate from her position how constraining gender norms work to subdue the exercise of gender freedom. The social constraints upon gender compliance and deviation are so great that most people feel deeply wounded if they are told that they exercise their manhood or womanhood improperly. In so far as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. The fall from established gender boundaries initiates a sense of radical dislocation which can assume a metaphysical significance. If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one's very existence into question. In these moments of gender dislocation in which we realize that it is hardly necessary that we be the genders we have become, we confront the burden of choice intrinsic to living as a man or a woman or some other gender identity, a freedom made burdensome through social constraint.

The anguish and terror of leaving a prescribed gender or of trespassing upon another gender territory testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation as well as to the necessity *that there be* an interpretation, i.e., to the essential freedom at the origin of gender. Similarly, the widespread difficulty in accepting motherhood, for example, as an institutional rather than an instinctual reality expresses this same interplay of constraint and freedom. The effort to interpret maternal feelings as organic necessities discloses a desire to disguise motherhood as an optional practice. If motherhood becomes a choice, then what else is possible? This kind of questioning often engenders vertigo and terror over the possibility of losing social sanctions, of leaving a solid social station and place. That this terror is so well known gives the most credence to the notion that gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention.

### **Embodiment and Autonomy**

Beauvoir's analysis of the body takes its bearings within the cultural situation in which men have traditionally been associated with the disembodied or transcendent feature of human existence and women with the bodily and immanent feature of human existence. Her own view of an embodied identity that "incorporates" transcendence subscribes to neither position. Although she occasionally seems to embrace a view of authority modeled on the disembodied transcendence of consciousness, her criticism of this disembodied perspective suggests that another version of autonomy is implicitly at work in her theory.

Women are “Other” according to Beauvoir in so far as they are defined by a masculine perspective that seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere. Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. If women *are* their bodies (to be distinguished from “existing” their bodies, which implies living their bodies as projects or bearers of created meanings), if women are only their bodies, if their consciousness and freedom are only so many disguised permutations of bodily need and necessity, then women have, in effect, exclusively monopolized the bodily sphere of life. By defining women as “Other,” men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies – a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally – and to make their bodies other than themselves. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others *are* their bodies, while the masculine “I” is a noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other – the body repressed or denied and, then, projected – reemerges for this “I” as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence, and existence as a woman becomes what Hegel termed “a motionless tautology.”

Beauvoir’s dialectic of self and Other argues the limits of a Cartesian version of disembodied freedom, and criticizes implicitly the model of autonomy upheld by these masculine gender norms. The pursuit of disembodiment is necessarily deceived because the body can never really be denied; its denial becomes the condition of its emergence in alien form. Disembodiment becomes a way of existing one’s body in the mode of denial. And the denial of the body – as in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave – reveals itself as nothing other than the embodiment of denial.

### **The Body as Situation**

Beauvoir suggests an alternative to the gender polarity of masculine disembodiment and feminine enslavement to the body in her notion of the body as a “situation.” The body as situation has at least a twofold meaning. As a locus of cultural interpretations, the body is a material reality that has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations. As a field of interpretive possibilities, the body is a locus of the dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have already informed corporeal style. The body becomes a peculiar nexus of culture and

choice, and “existing” one’s body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms. To the extent that gender norms function under the aegis of social constraints, the reinterpretation of those norms through the proliferation and variation of corporeal styles becomes a very concrete and accessible way of politicizing personal life.

If we accept the body as a cultural situation, then the notion of a natural body and, indeed, a natural “sex” seem increasingly suspect. The limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy than by the weight of the cultural institutions that have conventionally interpreted anatomy. Indeed, it becomes unclear when we take Beauvoir’s formulation to its unstated consequences, whether gender need be in any way linked with sex, or whether this linkage is itself cultural convention. If gender is a way of existing one’s body, and one’s body is a situation, a field of cultural possibilities both received and reinterpreted, then both gender and sex seem to be thoroughly cultural affairs. Gender seems less a function of anatomy than one of its possible uses: “the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Body Politic

If the natural body – and natural “sex” – is a fiction, Beauvoir’s theory seems implicitly to ask whether sex was not gender all along. Monique Wittig formulates this challenge to natural “sex” explicitly. Although Wittig and Beauvoir occupy very different sides of the feminist political spectrum in contemporary France, they are nevertheless joined theoretically in their refusal of essentialist doctrines of femininity. Wittig’s article, “One is Not Born a Woman,” takes its title from Beauvoir’s stated formulation, and was initially presented at the Simone de Beauvoir conference in New York City in 1979. Although that piece does not mention Beauvoir after the first few paragraphs, we can nevertheless read it as an effort to make explicit Beauvoir’s tacit theory of gender acquisition.

For Wittig, the very discrimination of “sex” takes place within a political and linguistic network that presupposes, and hence requires, that sex remain dyadic. The demarcation of sexual difference does not *precede* the interpretation of that difference, but this demarcation is itself an interpretive act laden with normative assumptions about a binary gender system. Discrimination is always “discrimination,” binary opposition always serves the purposes of hierarchy.

Wittig realizes that her position is counterintuitive, but it is precisely the political education of intuition that she wants to expose. For Wittig, when we name sexual difference, we create it; we restrict our understanding of relevant sexual parts to those that aid in the process of reproduction, and thereby render heterosexuality an ontological necessity. What distinguishes the sexes are those anatomical features, which either bear on reproduction directly, or are construed to aid in its eventual success. Hence, Wittig argues that erogenuity, the body's sexual responsiveness, is restricted through the institutionalization of binary sexual difference; her question: why don't we name as sexual features our mouths, hands, and backs? Her answer: we only name sexual – read, feel sexual – those features functional in reproductive activity.

Her claim is counterintuitive because we see sexual difference constantly, and it seems to us an immediate given of experience. She argues:

Sex . . . is taken as an “immediate given,” a sensible given, “physical features,” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as others but marked by a social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived.<sup>9</sup>

Like Beauvoir, Wittig understands gender as a proscription and a task; in effect, gender is a norm that we struggle to embody. In Wittig's words, “We have been compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us.”<sup>9</sup> That we experience ourselves or others as “men” and “women” are political categories and not natural facts.”

Wittig's theory is alarming for a number of reasons, foremost among them the intimation that discourse about sex creates the misnomer of anatomy. If this were Wittig's point, it would seem that sexual difference has no necessary material foundation, and that seeing differences among bodies, which turn out to be binary, is a deep delusion indulged in by cultures in an almost universal fashion. Luckily, I do not think this is Wittig's claim. Surely, differences do exist which are binary, material and distinct, and we are not in the grips of political ideology when we assent to that fact. Wittig contests the social practice of valorizing certain anatomical features as being definitive not only of anatomical sex but of sexual identity. She points out that there are other kinds of differences among people, differences in shape and size, in earlobe formation and the lengths of noses, but we do not ask when a child enters the world what species of earlobe it has. We immediately ask about certain sexually

differentiated anatomical traits because we assume that those traits will in some sense determine that child's social destiny, and that destiny, whatever else it is, is structured by a gender system predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and, consequently, heterosexuality. Hence, in differentiating infants in the ways that we do, we recapitulate heterosexuality as a precondition for human identity, and posit this constraining norm in the guise of a natural fact.

Wittig thus does not dispute the existence or facticity of sexual distinction, but questions the isolation and valorization of certain kinds of distinctions over others. Wittig's *Lesbian Body* is the literary portrayal of an erotic struggle to rewrite the relevant distinctions constitutive of sexual identity. Different features of the female body are detached from their usual places, and remembered, quite literally. The reclamation of diverse bodily parts as sources of erotic pleasure is, for Wittig, the undoing or rewriting of binary restriction imposed at birth. Erogenicity is restored to the entire body through a process of sometimes violent struggle. The female body is no longer recognizable as such; it no longer appears as an "immediate given of experience"; it is disfigured, reconstructed, and reconceived. The emancipation of this consists in the dissolution of the binary framework, in the emergence of essential chaos, polymorphousness, the precultural innocence of "sex."

It might well seem that Wittig has entered into a utopian ground that leaves the rest of us situated souls waiting impatiently this side of her liberating imaginary space. After all, the *Lesbian Body* is a fantasy, and it is not clear whether we readers are supposed to recognize a potential course of action in that text, or simply be dislocated from our usual assumptions about bodies and pleasure. Has Wittig decided that heterosexual norms are cultural norms while lesbian norms are somehow natural? Is the lesbian body that she posits as somehow being prior to and exceeding binary restrictions really a body at all? Has the lesbian preempted the place of the psychoanalytic polymorph in Wittig's particular sexual cosmogony?

Rather than argue for the superiority of a nonheterosexual culture, Wittig envisions a sexless society, and argues that sex, like class, is a construct that must inevitably be deposed. Indeed, Wittig's program seems profoundly humanistic in its call for an eradication of sex. She argues that

a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can be found beyond the categories of sex (man and woman) and that the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the category of sex, ending the use of them, and rejecting all sciences which still use these categories as their fundamentals (practically all social sciences).<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, Wittig calls for a transcendence of sex altogether, but her theory might equally well lead to an inverse conclusion, to the dissolution of binary restrictions through the *proliferation* of genders.

Because the category of “sex” only makes sense in terms of a binary discourse on sex in which “men” and “women” exhaust the possibilities of sex, and relate to each other as complementary opposites, the category of “sex” is always subsumed under the discourse of heterosexuality. Hence, Wittig argues that a lesbian is not a woman, because to be a woman means to be set in a binary relation with a man. Wittig does not argue that the lesbian is another sex or gender, but claims that the lesbian “is the only concept I know which is beyond the category of sex.”<sup>11</sup> But even as Wittig describes the lesbian in relation to this binary opposition of “man” and “woman,” she underscores the fact that this being beyond opposition is still a way of being related to that opposition, indeed a binary relation at that. In order that the lesbian avoid being caught up in another binary opposition, i.e., the opposition to heterosexuality itself, “being lesbian” must itself become a multiple cultural phenomenon, a gender with no univocal essence. If binary oppositions imply hierarchies, then postulating a sexual identity “beyond” culture promises to set up yet another pair of oppositions that, in turn, suggest another hierarchical arrangement; hegemonic heterosexual culture will stand as the “Other” to that postcultural subject, and a new hierarchy may well replace the old – at least on a theoretical level. Moreover, to define culture as necessarily preoccupied with the reproduction of binary oppositions is to support a structuralist assumption that seems neither valid nor politically beneficial. After all, if binary restrictions are to be overcome in experience, they must meet their dissolution in the creation of new cultural forms. As Beauvoir says, and Wittig should know, there is no meaningful reference to a “human reality” outside the terms of culture. The political program for overcoming binary restrictions ought to be concerned, then, with cultural innovation rather than myths of transcendence.

Wittig’s theory finds support in Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* which holds improbable but significant consequences for feminist theory. In that Foucault seeks to subvert the binary configuration of power, the juridical model of oppressor and oppressed, he offers some strategies for the subversion of gender hierarchy. For Foucault, the binary organization of power, including that based on strict gender polarities, is effected through a multiplication of productive and strategic forms of power. Hence, Foucault is interested no longer in the Marcusean dream of a sexuality without power, but is concerned with subverting and dissipating the existing terms of juridical power. In this sense, Wittig is paradoxically closer to Marcuse’s theory of sexual emancipation as she does imagine a sexual identity and a sexuality freed of relations of domination. In effect, Foucault writes in the disillusioned

aftermath of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, rejecting a progressive model of history based on the gradual release of an intrinsically liberating *eros*. For Foucault, the *eros* which is liberated is always already structured culturally, saturated with power dynamics, thus implicitly raising the same political dilemmas as the repressive culture it was meant to liberate. Like Wittig, however, Foucault does reject "natural sex" as a primary given, and attempts to understand how "the deployment of sexuality . . . was what established this notion of 'sex'."<sup>12</sup> The category of sex belongs to a juridical model of power that assumes a binary opposition between the "sexes." The subversion of binary opposites does not result in their transcendence for Foucault, but in their proliferation to a point where binary oppositions become meaningless in a context where multiple differences, not restricted to binary differences, abound. Foucault seems to suggest "proliferation" and "assimilation" as strategies to diffuse the age-old power game of oppressor and oppressed. His tactic, if that it can be called, is not to transcend power relations, but to multiply their various configurations, so that the juridical model of power as oppression and regulation is no longer hegemonic. When oppressors themselves are oppressed, and the oppressed develop alternative forms of power, we are in the presence of postmodern relations of power. For Foucault, this interaction results in yet new and more complicated valences of power, and the power of binary opposition is diffused through the force of internal ambiguity.

For Foucault, the notion of natural sex is neither primary nor univocal. One's "sex," i.e., one's anatomically differentiated sexual self, is intimately linked to "sex" as an activity and a drive. The word compromises a variety of meanings that have been clustered under a single name to further certain strategic ends of hegemonic culture:

The notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomic elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.<sup>13</sup>

Foucault no more wants to dispute the material reality of anatomically discrete bodies than does Wittig, but asks instead how the materiality of the body comes to signify culturally specific ideas. Hence, he imagines at the close of volume I of *The History of Sexuality* "a history of bodies [which shows] the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested."<sup>14</sup>

Foucault conducts a phenomenology of such an "investment" in publishing the journals of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite whose

anatomical ambiguity culminates in an eventual “confession” and suicide.<sup>15</sup> In his introduction Foucault insists upon the irrelevance of established gender categories for Alexina’s (Herculine’s) sexual life:

One has the impression, at least if one gives credence to Alexina’s story, that everything took place in a world of feelings – enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness – where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance. It was a world in which grins hung about without the cat.<sup>16</sup>

Herculine seems to have escaped univocal sex, and hence the binary system governing sex, and represents for Foucault the literalization of an ambiguity in sex and sexual identity which is the suppressed potential of every proper and univocal sex or gender. Herculine Barbin, our hermaphrodite, is neither here nor there, but neither is she in some discrete third place. She is an amalgamation of binary opposites, a particular configuration and conflation of male and female. Because of her uncanny intrusion into the male domain, she is punished and banished by the Church authorities, designed univocally as a male. Herculine does not transcend sex as much as she confuses it, and while we can see her fate as to a certain extent anatomical, it is clear that the legal and medical documents that address her anatomical transgression reveal an urgent social need to keep sex down to just the usual two. Hence, it is not her anatomy, but the ways in which that anatomy is “invested,” that causes problems. Her plight reveals in graphic terms the societal urge and strategy to discover and define anatomy within binary terms. Exploding the binary assumption is one of the ways of depriving male hegemony and compulsory heterosexuality of their most treasured of primary premises. When, on the other hand, binary sexual difference is made a function of ontology, then the options for sexual identity are restricted to traditional heterosexual terms; indeed, heterosexuality is itself reduced to a mythical version of itself, disguising its own potential multiplicity beneath a univocal presentation of itself.

### **Conclusion: Embodying Dissonance**

In conclusion, it seems important to note that the challenge to a dyadic gender system that Beauvoir’s theory permits and that Wittig and Foucault help to formulate, is also implicitly a challenge to those feminist positions that maintain sexual difference as irreducible, and which seek to give expression to the distinctively feminine side of that binary opposition. If natural sex is a fiction, then the distinctively feminine is a purely historical moment in the develop-



ment of the category of sex, what Foucault calls, "the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality."<sup>17</sup>

The schematic outline of a theory of gender invention that I have been sketching here does not overcome the existential pitfalls of Sartreanism by the mere fact of its cultural application. Indeed, with Foucauldian proliferation at hand, we seem to have moved full circle back to a notion of radical invention, albeit one that employs and deploys culturally existent and culturally imaginable conventions. The problem with this theory seems twofold, and in many senses the objections that will surely be raised against these visions are ones that have, in altered form, been raised against the existential thesis from both Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives. The Marxist problem may be understood as that of the social constitution of personal identity and, by implication, gender identity. I not only choose my gender, and not only choose it within culturally available terms, but on the street and in the world I am always constantly constituted by others, so that my self-styled gender may well find itself in comic or even tragic opposition to the gender that others see me through or with. Hence, even the Foucauldian prescription of radical invention presupposes an agency which, *à la Descartes*, definitionally eludes the gaze of the Other.

The psychoanalytic objection is perhaps the most trenchant, for psychoanalytic theories of gender identity and gender acquisition tend to insist that what we become is always in some sense what we have always been, although the process of becoming is of oedipal necessity a process of restricting our sexual ambiguity in accord with identity-founding incest taboos. Ambiguity, whether described in the discourse of bisexuality or polymorphousness, is always to be presupposed, and established gender identity both contains and conceals this repressed ambiguity. The proliferation of gender beyond binary oppositions would thus always constitute a return to a pre-oedipal ambiguity which, I suppose, would take us outside of culture as we know it. According to the psychoanalytic perspective, the normative ideal of multiplicitous genders would always be a peculiar mix of memory and fantasy to be understood in the context of an oedipally conditioned subject in an affective quarrel with the incest taboo. This is the stuff of great literature, perhaps, but not necessarily practicable in the cultural struggle to renovate gender relations as we know them. In effect, speaking within this point of view, what I have provided here is a pre-oedipal fantasy that only makes sense in terms of a subject who can never realize this fantasy. In this sense, both the hypothetical Marxist and the psychoanalytic objection would charge that the theory I have presented lacks a reality principle. But, of course, such a charge is tricky, because it is unclear whether the principle governing this reality is a necessary one, or whether

other principles of reality might well be “invented,” as it were, and whether such counterintuitive principles as these are part of the cultural fantasies that ultimately do come to constitute new organizations of reality. It is not clear to me that reality is something settled once and for all, and we might do well to urge speculation on the dynamic relation between fantasy and the realization of new social realities.

A good deal of French feminist scholarship has been concerned with specifying the nature of the feminine to settle the question of what women want, how that specific pleasure makes itself known, or represents itself obliquely in the rupture of logocentric language. This principle of femininity is sought in the female body, sometimes understood as the pre-oedipal mother and other times understood naturalistically as a pantheistic principle that requires its own kind of language for expression. In these cases, gender is not constituted, but is considered an essential aspect of bodily life, and we come very near the equation of biology and destiny, that conflation of fact and value, which Beauvoir spent her life trying to refute. In an article entitled, “Women can never be defined,” Julia Kristeva remarks that “the belief that ‘one is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that ‘one is a man’.”<sup>18</sup> Kristeva says “almost as absurd” because there are practical, strategical reasons for maintaining the notion of women as a class regardless of its descriptive emptiness as a term. Indeed, accepting Wittig’s argument that “women” is a political category, Kristeva goes on to consider whether it might not be a *useful* political category at that. This brings us back to the Marxist objection proffered above, and yet Kristeva is prepared to forfeit the term altogether when its political efficacy is exhausted. Hence, she concludes, “we must use ‘we are women’ as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot ‘be’; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*.”<sup>19</sup> Women is thus a false substantive and univocal signifier that disguises and precludes a gender experience internally varied and contradictory. And if women are, to return to Beauvoir, such a mode of becoming that is arrested prematurely, as it were, through the reductive imposition of a substantializing nomenclature, then the release of women’s internally complex experience, an experience that would make of the very name “women’s experience” an empty signification, might well become released and or precipitated. And here the task is not simply to change language, but to examine language for its ontological assumptions, and to criticize those assumptions for their political consequences. In effect, to understand woman to exist on the metaphysical order of *being* is to understand her as that which is already accomplished, self-identical, static, but to conceive her on the metaphysical order of *becoming* is to invent possibility into her experience, including the possibility of never becoming a substantive, self-identical “woman.” Indeed,

such substantives will remain empty descriptions, and other forms of active descriptions may well become desirable.

It is not surprising that Beauvoir derives her philosophical framework from existential philosophy, and that Wittig seems more indebted to Beauvoir than to those French feminists who write either for or against Lacan. Nor is it surprising that Foucault's theory of sexuality and his history of bodies is written against the background of Nietzsche's *Will to Power* and the *Genealogy of Morals* whose method of existential critique regularly revealed how values that appear natural can be reduced to their contingent cultural origins.

The psychoanalytic challenge does well to remind us of the deep-rootedness of sexual and gender identity and the Marxist qualification reinforces the notion that how we are constituted is not always our own affair. It may well be that Wittig and Foucault offer (a) new identity/ies which, despite all their qualification, remain utopian. But it is useful to remember Gayle Rubin's reading of psychoanalysis as the reconstruction of kinship structures in the form of modern gender identities.<sup>20</sup> If she is right to understand gender identity as the "trace" of kinship, and to point out that gender has become increasingly free of the vestiges of kinship, then we seem justified in concluding that the history of gender may well reveal the gradual release of gender from its binary restrictions. Moreover, any theoretical effort to discover, maintain, or articulate an essential femininity must confront the following moral and empirical problem: what happens when individual women do not recognize themselves in the theories that explain their unsurpassable essences to them? When the essential feminine is finally articulated, and what we have been calling "women" cannot see themselves in its terms, what then are we to conclude? That these women are deluded, or that they are not women at all? We can argue that women have a more inclusive essence, or we can return to that promising suggestion of Simone de Beauvoir, namely, that women have no essence at all, and hence, no natural necessity, and that, indeed, what we call an essence or a material fact is simply an enforced cultural option which has disguised itself as natural truth.

### Notes

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), 301. Parts of the discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* are taken from the author's article "Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986).
- 2 Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues*, 1, 2 see also "The Category of Sex", *Feminist Issues*, 2, 2.

- 3 See Thomas W. Busch, "Beyond the Cogito: The Question of the Continuity of Sartre's Thought," *The Modern Schoolman*, LX (March 1983).
- 4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 329.
- 5 Beauvoir's defense of the non-Cartesian character of Sartre's account of the body can be found in "Merleau-Ponty et le Pseudo-Sartrisme," *Les Temps Modernes*, 10, 2 (1955).
- 6 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 329.
- 7 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 41.
- 8 Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," 48.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 10 Wittig, "The Category of Sex," 22.
- 11 Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," 53.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1980), vol. I: *An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley, 154.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 15 Michel Foucault (ed.), *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, tr. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
- 16 Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, xiii.
- 17 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 155.
- 18 Julia Kristeva, "Women can Never be Defined," in Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtrivon (eds.), *New French Feminisms*, 137.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 See Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: The Political Economy of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 178–92.