BODIES THAT MATTER

ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF "SEX"

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and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter—and why?

This text is offered, then, in part as a rethinking of some parts of Gender Trouble that have caused confusion, but also as an effort to think further about the workings of heterossexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political. As a critical rearticulation of various theoretical practices, including feminist and queer studies, this text is not intended to be programmatic. And yet, as an attempt to clarify my "intentions," it appears destined to produce a new set of misapprehensions. I hope that they prove, at least, to be productive ones.

INTRODUCTION

Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?  

—Donna Haraway, A Manifesto for Cyborgs

If one really thinks about the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. There are thinkings of the systematization of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it.  

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In a Word," interview with Ellen Rooney

There is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization.  

—Jacques Derrida, Donner le Temps

Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender? And how does the category of "sex" figure within such a relationship? Consider first that sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference. The category of "sex" is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal." In this sense, then, "sex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, "sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, "sex" is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a
simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is propelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearraingtones that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.

But how, then, does the notion of gender performativity relate to this conception of materialization? In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.

In this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand “gender” as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as “the body” or its given sex. Rather, once “sex” itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. “Sex” is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.

At stake in such a reformulation of the materiality of bodies will be the following: (1) the recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects; (2) the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains; (3) the construal of “sex” no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies; (4) a rethinking of the process by which a bodily norm is assumed, appropriated, taken on as not, strictly speaking, undergone by a subject, but rather that the subject, the speaking “I,” is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex; and (5) a linking of this process of “assuming” a sex with the question of identification, and with the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexual identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The subject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation.

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex,” and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the valence of “abjection” and its status for the subject as a threatening specter. Further, the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control. The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.
Lastly, the mobilization of the categories of sex within political discourse will be haunted in some ways by the very instabilities that the categories effectively produce and foreclose. Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation. Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern.

FROM CONSTRUCTION TO MATERIALIZATION

The relation between culture and nature presupposed by some models of gender “construction” implies a culture or an agency of the social which acts upon a nature, which is itself presupposed as a passive surface, outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart. One question that feminists have raised, then, is whether the discourse which figures the action of construction as a kind of imprinting or imposition is not tacitly masculinist, whereas the figure of the passive surface, awaiting that penetrating act whereby meaning is endowed, is not tacitly or—perhaps—quite obviously feminine. Is sex to gender as feminine is to masculine?

Other feminist scholars have argued that the very concept of nature needs to be rethought, for the concept of nature has a history, and the figuring of nature as the blank and lifeless page, as that which is, as it were, always already dead, is decidedly modern, linked perhaps to the emergence of technological means of domination. Indeed, some have argued that a rethinking of “nature” as a set of dynamic interrelations suits both feminist and ecological aims (and has for some produced an otherwise unlikely alliance with the work of Gilles Deleuze). This rethinking also calls into question the model of construction whereby the social unilaterally acts on the natural and invests it with its parameters and its meanings. Indeed, as much as the radical distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the de Beauvoirian version of feminism, it has come under criticism in more recent years for degrading the natural as that which is “before” intelligibility, in need of the mark, if not the mark, of the social to signify, to be known, to acquire value. This misses the point that nature has a history, and not merely a social one, but, also, that sex is positioned ambiguously in relation to that concept and its history. The concept of “sex” is itself troubled terrain, formed through a series of contestations over what ought to be decisive criterion for distinguishing between the two sexes; the concept of sex has a history that is covered over by the figure of the site or surface of inscription. Figured as such a site or surface, however, the natural is construed as that which is also without value; moreover, it assumes its value at the same time that it assumes its social character, that is, at the same time that nature relinquishes itself as the natural. According to this view, then, the social construction of the natural presupposes the cancellation of the natural by the social. Insofar as it relies on this construal, the sex/gender distinction founders along parallel lines; if gender is the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture—and for the sake of argument we will let “social” and “cultural” stand in an uneasy interchangeability—then what, if anything, is left of “sex” once it has assumed its social character as gender? At issue is the meaning of “assumption,” where to be “assumed” is to be taken up into a more elevated sphere, as in “the Assumption of the Virgin.” If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces “sex,” the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialist point of view, might constitute a full desubstantiation.

When the sex/gender distinction is joined with a notion of radical linguistic constructivism, the problem becomes even worse, for the “sex” which is referred to as prior to gender will itself be a postulation, a construction, offered within language, as that which is prior to language, prior to construction. But this sex posited as prior to construction will, by virtue of being posited, become the effect of that very positing, the construction of construction. If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this “sex” except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that “sex” becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access.
But is it right to claim that “sex” vanishes altogether, that it is a fiction over and against what is true, that it is a fantasy over and against what is reality? Or do these very oppositions need to be rethought such that if “sex” is a fiction, it is one within whose necessities we live, without which life itself would be unthinkable? And if “sex” is a fantasy, is it perhaps a phantasmatic field that constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility? Would such a rethinking of such conventional oppositions entail a rethinking of “constructivism” in its usual sense?

The radical constructivist position has tended to produce the premise that both refutes and confirms its own enterprise. If such a theory cannot take account of sex as the site or surface on which it acts, then it ends up presuming sex as the unconstructed, and so concedes the limits of linguistic constructivism, inadvertently circumscribing that which remains unaccountable within the terms of construction. If, on the other hand, sex is a contrived premise, a fiction, then gender does not presume a sex which it acts upon, but rather, gender produces the misnomer of a prediscursive “sex,” and the meaning of construction becomes that of linguistic monism, whereby everything is only and always language. Then, what ensues is an exasperated debate which many of us have tired of hearing: Either (1) constructivism is reduced to a position of linguistic monism, whereby linguistic construction is understood to be generative and deterministic. Critics making that presumption have been heard to say, “If everything is discourse, what about the body?” or (2) when construction is figuratively reduced to a verbal action which appears to presuppose a subject, critics working within such a presumption can be heard to say, “If gender is constructed, then who is doing the constructing?”; though, of course, (3) the most pertinent formulation of this question is that following: “If the subject is constructed, then who is constructing the subject?” In the first case, construction has taken the place of a godlike agency which not only causes but composes everything which is its object; it is the divine performative, bringing into being and exhaustively constituting that which it names, or, rather, it is that kind of transitive referring which names and inaugurates at once. For something to be constructed, according to this view of construction, is for it to be created and determined through that process.

In the second and third cases, the seductions of grammar appear to hold sway; the critic asks, Must there not be a human agent, a subject, if you will, who guides the course of construction? If the first version of constructivism presupposes that construction operates deterministically, making a mockery of human agency, the second understands constructivism as presupposing a voluntarist subject who makes its gender through an instrumental action. A construction is understood in this latter case to be a kind of manipulable artifact, a conception that not only presupposes a subject, but rehabilitates precisely the voluntarist subject of humanism that constructivism has, on occasion, sought to put into question.

If gender is a construction, must there be an “I” or a “we” who enacts or performs that construction? How can there be an activity, a constructing, without presupposing an agent who precedes and performs that activity? How would we account for the motivation and direction of construction without such a subject? As a rejoinder, I would suggest that it takes a certain suspicion toward grammar to reconceive the matter in a different light. For if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an “I” or a “we” who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of “before.” Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an “I” or a “we” who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.

This then returns us to the second objection, the one which claims that constructivism forecloses agency, preempting the agency of the subject, and finds itself presupposing the subject that it calls into question. To claim that the subject is itself produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation. The “activity” of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition. In this sense, the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the “human”. Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an "it" to a "she" or a "he," and in that naming, the girl is "girlied," brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that "girlied" of the girl does not end there, on the contrary,
that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculation of a norm.

Such attributions or interpellations contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains which qualifies as “the human.” We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question. Indeed, the construction of gender operates through excretionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation. Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human,” the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation.4

Paradoxically, the inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism. For there is an “outside” to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute “outside,” an ontological thereeness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse;4 as a constitutive “outside,” it is that which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. The debate between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether, for the point has never been that “everything is discursively constructed”, that point, when and where it is made, belongs to a kind of discursive monism or linguicism that refutes the constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection and its disruptive return within the very terms of discursive legitimacy.

And to say that there is a matrix of gender relations that institutes and sustains the subject is not to claim that there is a singular matrix that acts in a singular and determinstic way to produce a subject as its effect. That is to install the “matrix” in the subject-position within a grammatical formulation which itself needs to be rethought. Indeed, the propositional form “Discourse constructs the subject” retains the subject-position of the grammatical formulation even as it reverses the place of subject and discourse. Construction must mean more than such a simple reversal of terms.

There are defenders and critics of construction, who construe that position along structuralist lines. They often claim that there are structures that construct the subject, impersonal forces, such as Culture or Discourse or Power, where these terms occupy the grammatical site of the subject after the “human” has been dislodged from its place. In such a view, the grammatical and metaphysical place of the subject is retained even as the candidate that occupies that place appears to rotate. As a result, construction is still understood as a unilateral process initiated by a prior subject, fortifying that presumption of the metaphysics of the subject that where there is activity, there lurks behind it an initiating and willful subject. On such a view, discourse or language or the social becomes personified, and in the personification the metaphysics of the subject is reconsolidated.

In this second view, construction is not an activity, but an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed. Thus, constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of human agency.

This view informs the misreading by which Foucault is criticized for “personifying” power: if power is misconstrued as a grammatical and metaphysical subject, and if that metaphysical site within humanist discourse has been the privileged site of the human, then power appears to have displaced the human as the origin of activity. But if Foucault’s view of power is understood as the disruption and subversion of this grammar and metaphysics of the subject, if power orchestrates the formation and sustenance of subjects, then it cannot be accounted for in terms of the “subject” which is its effect. And here it would be no more right to claim that the term “construction” belongs at the grammatical site of subject, for construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both “subjects” and “acts” come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability.

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of
regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense. Thus, the question is no longer, How is gender constituted as and through a certain interpretation of sex? (a question that leaves the "matter" of sex untheorized), but rather, Through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized? And how is it that treating the materiality of sex as a given presupposes and consolidates the normative conditions of its own emergence?

Crucially, then, construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its materialized effect and, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which "sex" is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of "sex" into a potentially productive crisis.

Certain formulations of the radical constructivist position appear almost compulsively to produce a moment of recurrent exasperation, for it seems that when the constructivist is construed as a linguistic idealist, the constructivist refutes the reality of bodies, the relevance of science, the alleged facts of birth, aging, illness, and death. The critic might also suspect the constructivist of a certain somatophobia and seek assurances that this abstracted theorist will admit that there are, minimally, sexually differentiated parts, activities, capacities, hormonal and chromosomal differences that can be conceded without reference to "construction." Although at this moment I want to offer an absolute reassurance to my interlocutor; some anxiety prevails. To "concede" the undeniability of "sex" or its "materiality" is always to concede some version of "sex," some formation of "materiality." Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs—and, yes, that concession invariably does occur—not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it conceives? To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it conceives; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of "referentiality" is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative.

In relation to sex, then, if one conceives the materiality of sex or of the body, does that very concealing operate—performatively—to materialize that sex? And further, how is it that the reiterated concession of that sex—one which need not take place in speech or writing but might be "signaled" in a much more inchoate way—constitutes the sedimentation and production of that material effect?

The moderate critic might concede that some part of "sex" is constructed, but some other is certainly not, and then, of course, find him or herself not only under some obligation to draw the line between what is and is not constructed, but to explain how it is that "sex" comes in parts whose differentiation is not a matter of construction. But as that line of demarcation between such ostensible parts gets drawn, the "unconstructed" becomes bounded once again through a signifying practice, and the very boundary which is meant to protect some part of sex from the rain of constructivism is now defined by the anti-constructivist's own construction. Is construction something which happens to a ready-made object, a preexistent thing, and does it happen in degrees? Or are we perhaps referring on both sides of the debate to an inevitable practice of signification, of demarcating and delimiting that to which we then "refer," such that our "references" always presuppose—and often conceal—this prior delimitation? Indeed, to "refer" naively or directly to such an extra-discursive object will always require the prior delimitation of the extra-discursive. And insofar as the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself. This delimitation, which often is enacted as an untheorized presupposition in any act of description, marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer. This marking off will have some normative force and, indeed, some violence, for it can construct only through erasing; it can bound a thing only through enforcing a certain criterion, a principle of selectivity.

What will and will not be included within the boundaries of "sex" will be set by a more or less tacit operation of exclusion. If we call into question the fixity of the structuralist law that divides and bounds the "sexes" by virtue of their dyadic differentiation within the heterosexual matrix, it
will be from the exterior regions of that boundary (not from a "position," but from the discursive possibilities opened up by the constitutive outside of hegemonic positions), and it will constitute the disruptive return of the excluded from within the very logic of the heterosexual symbolic.

The trajectory of this text, then, will pursue the possibility of such disruption, but proceed indirectly by responding to two interrelated questions that have been posed to constructivist accounts of gender, not to defend constructivism per se, but to interrogate the erasures and exclusions that constitute its limits. These criticisms presuppose a set of metaphysical oppositions between materialism and idealism embedded in received grammar which, I will argue, are critically redefined by a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex.

PERFORMATIVITY AS CITATIONALITY

When, in Lacanian parlance, one is said to assume a "sex," the grammar of the phrase creates the expectation that there is a "one" who, upon waking, looks up and deliberates on which "sex" it will assume today, a grammar in which "assumption" is quickly assimilated to the notion of a highly reflective choice. But if this "assumption" is compelled by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality, one which reiterates itself through the forcible production of "sex," then the "assumption" of sex is constrained from the start. And if there is agency, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands. The forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of that sexual body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity.

Performativity is thus not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. According to the biblical rendition of the performativel, i.e., "Let there be light," it appears that it is by virtue of the power of a subject or its will that a phenomenon is named into being. In a critical reformulation of the performativel, Derrida makes clear that this power is not the function of an originating will, but is always derivative:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"...in such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance [l'énonciation].

To what extent does discourse gain the authority to bring about what it names through citing the conventions of authority? And does a subject appear as the author of its discursive effects to the extent that the citational practice by which he/she is conditioned and mobilized remains unmarked? Indeed, could it be that the production of the subject as originator of his/her effects is precisely a consequence of this dissimulated citationality? Further, if a subject comes to be through a subjection to the norms of sex, a subjection which requires an assumption of the norms of sex, can we read that "assumption" as precisely a modality of this kind of citationality? In other words, the norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is "cited" as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels. And how it is that we might read the "citing" of the norms of sex as the process of approximating or "identifying with" such norms?

Further, to what extent within psychoanalysis is the sexual body secured through identificatory practices governed by regulatory schemas? Identification is used here not as an imitative activity by which a conscious being models itself after another; on the contrary, identification is the assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges. Freud argues that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego," that this ego is, further, "a projection of a surface..." what we might redescribe as an imaginary morphology. Moreover, I would argue, this imaginary morphology is not a presocial or
presymbolic operation, but is itself orchestrated through regulatory schemas that produce intelligible morphological possibilities. These regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter.

If the formulation of a bodily ego, a sense of stable contour, and the fixing of spatial boundary is achieved through identificatory practices, and if psychoanalysis documents the hegemonic workings of those identifications, can we then read psychoanalysis for the inculcation of the heterosexual matrix at the level of bodily morphogenesis? What Lacan calls the "assumption" or "accession" to the symbolic law can be read as a kind of citing of the law, and so offers an opportunity to link the question of the materialization of "sex" with the reworking of performativity as citationality. Although Lacan claims that the symbolic law has a semi-autonomous status prior to the assumption of sexed positions by a subject, these normative positions, i.e., the "sexes," are only known through the approximations that they occasion. The force and necessity of these norms ("sex" as a symbolic function is to be understood as a kind of commandment or injunction) is thus functionally dependent on the approximation and citation of the law, the law without its approximation is no law or, rather, it remains a governing law only for those who would affirm it on the basis of religious faith. If "sex" is assumed in the same way that a law is cited—an analogy which will be supported later in this text—then the law of sex is repeatedly fortified and idealized as the law only to the extent that it is reiterated as the law, produced as the law, the anterior and inapproximable ideal, by the very citations it is said to command. Reading the meaning of "assumption" in Lacan as citation, the law is no longer given in a fixed form prior to its citation, but is produced through citation as that which precedes and exceeds the mortal approximations enacted by the subject.

In this way, the symbolic law in Lacan can be subject to the same kind of critique that Nietzsche formulated of the notion of God: the power attributed to this prior and ideal power is derived and deflected from the attribution itself. It is this insight into the illegitimacy of the symbolic law of sex that is dramatized to a certain degree in the contemporary film "Paris Is Burning": the ideal that is mirrored depends on that very mirroring to be sustained as an ideal. And though the symbolic appears to be a force that cannot be contravened without psychosis, the symbolic ought to be rethought as a series of normatizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability. And further, that this "law" can only remain a law to the extent that it compels the differentiated citations and approximations called "feminine" and "masculine." The presumption that the symbolic law of sex enjoys a separable ontology prior and autonomous to its assumption is contravened by the notion that the citation of the law is the very mechanism of its production and articulation. What is "forced" by the symbolic, then, is a citation of its law that reiterates and consolidates the ruse of its own force. What would it mean to cite the law to produce it differently, to cite the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?

The process of that sedimentation or what we might call materialization will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the "I."

In this sense, the agency denoted by the performativity of "sex" will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes. The paradox of subjectivation (assujettissement) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.

As a result of this reformulation of performativity, (a) gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes; (b) the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject; (c) the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the "materiality" of sex, and that "materiality" is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony; (d) the materialization of norms requires those identificatory processes by which norms are assumed or appropriated, and these identifications precede and enable the formation of a subject, but are not, strictly speaking, performed by a subject; and (e) the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as "bodies." If the
materiality of sex is demarcated in discourse, then this demarcation will produce a domain of excluded and delegitimated “sex.” Hence, it will be as important to think about how and to what end bodies are constructed as it will be to think about how and to what end bodies are not constructed and, further, to ask after how bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary “outside,” if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter.

How, then, can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the formation of what qualifies as a viable body? How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenges does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?

TRAJECTORY OF THE TEXT

The texts that form the focus of this inquiry come from diverse traditions of writing: Plato's Timaeus, Freud's "On Narcissism," writings by Jacques Lacan, stories by Willa Cather, Nella Larsen's novella Passing, Jennie Livingston's film Paris Is Burning, and essays in recent sexual theory and politics, as well as texts in radical democratic theory. The historical range of materials is not meant to suggest that a single heterosexualizing imperative persists in each of these contexts, but only that the instability produced by the effort to fix the site of the sexed body challenges the boundaries of discursive intelligibility in each of these contexts. The point here is not only to remark upon the difficulty of delivering through discourse the uncontested site of sex. Rather, the point is to show that the uncontested status of "sex" within the heterosexual dyad secures the workings of certain symbolic orders, and that its contestation calls into question where and how the limits of symbolic intelligibility are set.

Part One of the text centrally concerns the production of sexed morphologies through regulatory schemas. Throughout these chapters I seek to show how power relations work in the very formation of "sex" and its "materiality." The first two essays are different genealogical efforts to trace the power relations that contour bodies: "Bodies That Matter" suggests how certain classical tensions are taken up in contemporary theoretical positions. The essay briefly considers Aristotle and Foucault, but then offers a revision of Irigaray's reading of Plato through a consideration of the chora in Plato's Timaeus. The chora is that site where materiality and femininity appear to merge and from which a materiality is prior and formative of any notion of the empirical. In "The Lesbian Phallic and the Morphological Imaginary" I attempt to show how normative heterosexuality shapes a bodily contour that oscillates between materiality and the imaginary, indeed, that is that very oscillation. Neither of these essays is meant to displace the materiality of the body; on the contrary, together they constitute partial and overlapping genealogical efforts to establish the normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed, and, in particular, how it is formed through differential categories of sex.

In the course of the second essay, another set of questions emerges concerning the problematic of morphogenesis: how do identifications function to produce and contest what Freud has called "the bodily ego"? As a projected phenomenon, the body is not merely the source from which projection issues, but is also always a phenomenon in the world, an estrangement from the very "I" who claims it. Indeed, the assumption of "sex," the assumption of a certain contoured materiality, is itself a giving form to that body, a morphogenesis that takes place through a set of identificatory projections. That the body which one "is" is to some degree a body which gains its sexed contours in part under specular and exteriorizing conditions suggests that identificatory processes are crucial to the forming of sexed materiality.

This revision of Freud and Lacan continues in the third chapter, "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex." Here, two concerns of social and political significance emerge: (1) if identificatory projections are regulated by social norms, and if those norms are construed as heterosexual imperatives, then it appears that normative heterosexuality is partially responsible for the kind of form that contours the bodily matter of sex; and (2) given that normative heterosexuality is clearly not the only regulatory regime operative in the production of bodily contours or setting the limits to bodily intelligibility, it makes sense to ask what other regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies.
Here it seems that the social regulation of race emerges not simply as another, fully separable, domain of power from sexual difference or sexuality, but that its "addition" subverts the monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative as I have described it so far. The symbolic—that register of regulatory ideality—is also and always a racial industry, indeed, the reiterated practice of racializing interpellations. Rather than accept a model which understands racism as discrimination on the basis of a pre-given race, I follow those recent theories which have made the argument that the "race" is partially produced as an effect of the history of racism, that its boundaries and meanings are constructed over time not only in the service of racism, but also in the service of the contestation of racism. Rejecting those models of power which would reduce racial differences to the derivative effects of sexual difference (as if sexual difference were not only autonomous in relation to racial articulation but somehow more prior, in a temporal or ontological sense), it seems crucial to rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested. Especially at those junctures in which a compulsory heterosexuality works in the service of maintaining hegemonic forms of racial parity, the "threat" of homosexuality takes on a distinctive complexity.

It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations. The assertion of their abstract or structural equivalence not only misses the specific histories of their construction and elaboration, but also delays the important work of thinking through the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation. Indeed, it may not be possible to think any of these notions or their interrelations without a substantially revised conception of power in both its geopolitical dimensions and in the contemporary tributaries of its intersecting circulation. On the one hand, any analysis which foregrounds one vector of power over another will doubtless become vulnerable to criticisms that it not only ignores or devalues the others, but that its own constructions depend on the exclusion of the others in order to proceed. On the other hand, any analysis which pretends to be able to encompass every vector of power runs the risk of a certain epistemological imperialism which consists in the presupposition that any given writer might fully stand for and explain the complexities of contemporary power. No author or text can offer such a reflection of the world, and those who claim to offer such pictures become suspect by virtue of that very claim. The failure of the mimetic function, however, has its own political uses, for the production of texts can be one way of reconfiguring what will count as the world. Because texts do not reflect the entirety of their authors or their worlds, they enter a field of reading as partial provocations, not only requiring a set of prior texts in order to gain legibility, but—at best—initiating a set of appropriations and criticisms that call into question their fundamental premises.

This demand to think contemporary power in its complexity and interarticulations remains incontrovertibly important even in its impossi-

bility. And yet it would be a mistake to impose the same criteria on every cultural product, for it may be precisely the partiality of a text which conditions the radical character of its insights. Taking the heterosexual matrix or heterosexual hegemony as a point of departure will run the risk of narrowness, but it will run it in order, finally, to cede its apparent priority and autonomy as a form of power. This will happen within the text, but perhaps most successfully in its various appropriations. Indeed, it seems to me that one writes into a field of writing that is invariably and promisingly larger and less masterable than the one over which one maintains a provisional authority, and that the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas for which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful. The political problematic of operating within the complexities of power is raised toward the end of "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex," and further pursued in the reading of the film 

Partie III Burning in the fourth chapter, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," and again in chapter six, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge."

In Part Two of the text, I turn first to selections from Willa Cather's fiction, where I consider how the paternal symbolic permits subversive reterritorializations of both gender and sexuality. Over and against the view that sexuality might be fully disjoined from gender, I suggest that Cather's fiction enacts a certain gender trespass in order to facilitate an otherwise unspeakable desire. The brief readings of Cather's fiction, in particular "Tommy the Unsentimental," "Paul's Case," and portions of My

Antonia, take up the question of the resignifiability of the paternal law as it
destabilizes the operation of names and body parts as sites of crossed identification and desire. In Cather, the name effects a destabilization of conventional notions of gender and bodily integrity that simultaneously deflect and expose homosexuality. This kind of textual cunning can be read as a further instance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has deftly analyzed as "the epistemology of the closet." In Cather, however, the discursive articulation of gender is linked to the narration and narrativizability of lesbian desire such that her fiction implicitly calls into question the specific ways in which Sedgwick, in relation to Cather, has suggested a disjoining of sexuality from gender.8

The reading of Nella Larsen's Passing considers how a redescription of the symbolic as a vector of gendered and racial imperatives calls into question the assertion that sexual difference is in some sense prior to racial differences. The term "queering" in Larsen's text rallies both racial and sexual anxieties, and compels a reading which asks how sexual regulation operates through the regulation of racial boundaries, and how racial distinctions operate to defend against certain socially endangering sexual transgressions. Larsen's novella offers a way to retheorize the symbolic as a racially articulated set of sexual norms, and to consider both the historicity of such norms, their sites of conflict and convergence, and the limits on their rearticulation.

If performativity is construed as that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration, how are we to understand the limits of such production, the constraints under which such production occurs? Are these social and political limits on the resignifiability of gender and race, or are these limits that are, strictly speaking, outside the social? Are we to understand this "outside" as that which permanently resists discursive elaboration, or is it a variable boundary set and reset by specific political investments?

The innovative theory of political discourse offered by Slavoj Žižek in The Sublime Object of Ideology takes up the question of sexual difference in Lacan in relation to the performative character of political signifiers. The reading of his work, and the subsequent essay on the resignification of "queer" are inquiries into the uses and limits of a psychoanalytic perspective for a theory of political performatives and democratic contestation. Žižek develops a theory of political signifiers as performatives which, through becoming sites of phantasmatic investment, effect the power to mobilize constituencies politically. Central to Žižek's formulation of the political performative is a critique of discourse analysis for its failure to mark that which resists symbolization, what he variously calls a "trauma" and "the real." An instructive and innovative theory, it nevertheless tends to rely on an unproblematized sexual antagonism that unwittingly installs a heterosexual matrix as a permanent and incontestable structure of culture in which women operate as a "stain" in discourse. Those who try to call this structure into question are thus arguing with the real, with what is outside all argumentation, the trauma and the necessity of oedipalization that conditions and limits all discourse.

Žižek's efforts to link the performative character of discourse to the power of political mobilization are nevertheless quite valuable. His explicit linking of the theory of performativity to that of hegemony as it is articulated in the radical democratic theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe offers insights into political mobilization through recourse to a psychoanalytically informed theory of ideological fantasy. Through a critical engagement with his theory, then, I consider how performativity might be rethought as citationality and resignification, and where psychoanalysis might retain its explanatory force in a theory of hegemony which reifies neither the heterosexual norm nor its misogynist consequence.

In the final chapter, then, I suggest that the contentious practices of "queerness" might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of a structure of political agency that might explain why "citationality" has contemporary political promise. The public assertion of "queerness" enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy. I argue that this does not have to be a "reverse-discourse" in which the defiant affirmation of queer dialectically reinserts the version it seeks to overcome. Rather, this is the politicization of abjection in an effort to rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification. Such a strategy, I suggest, is crucial to creating the kind of community in which surviving with AIDS becomes more possible, in which queer lives become legible, valuable, worthy of support, in which passion, injury, grief, aspiration become recognized without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion. If there is a "normative" dimension to this work, it consists precisely
in assisting a radical resignification of the symbolic domain, deviating the
citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning
of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world.

To recast the symbolic as capable of this kind of resignification, it will
be necessary to think of the symbolic as the temporalized regulation of
signification, and not as a quasi-permanent structure. This rethinking of
the symbolic in terms of the temporal dynamics of regulatory discourse
will take seriously the Lacanian challenge to Anglo-American accounts of
gender, to consider the status of “sex” as a linguistic norm, but will recast
that normativity in Foucaultian terms as a “regulatory ideal.” Drawing
from the Anglo-American accounts of gender as well, this project seeks to
challenge the structural stasis of the heterosexualizing norm within the
psychoanalytic account without dispensing with what is clearly valuable
in psychoanalytic perspectives. Indeed, “sex” is a regulatory ideal, a forcible
and differential materialization of bodies, that will produce its remainder,
its outside, what one might call its “unconscious.” This insistence that every
formative movement requires and institutes its exclusions takes seriously
the psychoanalytic vocabulary of both repression and foreclosure.

In this sense, I take issue with Foucault’s account of the repressive
hypothesis as merely an instance of juridical power, and argue that such
an account does not address the ways in which “repression” operates as a
modality of productive power. There may be a way to subject psycho-
analysis to a Foucaultian redescription even as Foucault himself refused
that possibility. This text accepts as a point of departure Foucault’s
notion that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls, that power
is not only imposed externally, but works as the regulatory and normative
means by which subjects are formed. The return to psychoanalysis, then,
is guided by the question of how certain regulatory norms form a “sexed”
subject in terms that establish the indistinguishability of psychic and bod-
ily formation. And where some psychoanalytic perspectives locate the
constitution of “sex” at a developmental moment or as an effect of a
quasi-permanent symbolic structure, I understand this constituting effect
of regulatory power as reiterated and reiterable. To this understanding of
power as a constrained and reiterative production it is crucial to add that
power also works through the foreclosure of effects, the production of an
“outside,” a domain of univiability and unintelligibility that bounds the
domain of intelligible effects.

To what extent is “sex” a constrained production, a forcible effect, one
which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body by regulating the terms
by which bodies are and are not sustained? My purpose here is to under-
stand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of
“sex”—where that domain is secured through a heterosexualizing imper-
ative—might at once be produced as a troubling return, not only as an
imaginary contestation that effects a failure in the workings of the inevitable
law, but as an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation
of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all.
ARGUING WITH THE REAL

What is refused in the symbolic order returns in the real.


She grounds predications without strictly speaking being marked by it; she is not determined through the application of such or such quality. She subsists "within herself" beneath discourse. As that which has also been called prime matter.

—Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*

Counter to the notion that performativity is the efficacious expression of a human will in language, this text seeks to recast performativity as a specific modality of power as discourse. For discourse to materialize a set of effects, "discourse" itself must be understood as complex and convergent chains in which "effects" are vectors of power. In this sense, what is constituted in discourse is not fixed in or by discourse, but becomes the condition and occasion for a further action. This does not mean that any action is possible on the basis of a discursive effect. On the contrary, certain reiterative chains of discursive production are barely legible as reiterations, for the effects they have materialized are those without which no bearing in discourse can be taken. The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility. Hence, the reading of "performativity" as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms (the "chains" of iteration invoked and dissimulated in the imperative utterance) constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names. To think of "sex" as an imperative in this way means that a subject is addressed and produced by such a norm, and that this norm—and the regulatory power of which it is a token—materializes bodies as an effect of that injunction. And yet, this "materialization," while far from artificial, is not fully stable. For the imperative to be or get "sexed" requires a differentiated production and regulation of masculine and feminine identification that does not fully hold and cannot be fully
exhaustive. And further, this imperative, this injunction, requires and
institutes a “constitutive outside”—the unspeakable, the unviável, the
nonnarrativizable that secures and, hence, fails to secure the very borders
of materiality. The normative force of performativity—its power to estab-
lish what qualifies as “being”—works not only through reiteration, but
through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt
signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the
unviável, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic.

The political terms that are meant to establish a sure or coherent iden-
ity are troubled by this failure of discursive performativity to finally and
fully establish the identity to which it refers. Iterability underscores the
non-self-identical status of such terms; the constitutive outside means
that identity always requires precisely that which it cannot abide. Within
feminist debate, an increasing problem has been to reconcile the apparent
need to formulate a politics which assumes the category of “women” with
the demand, often politically articulated, to problematize the category,
interrogate its incoherence, its internal dissonance, its constitutive exclu-
sions. The terms of identity have in recent years appeared to promise, and
to promise in different ways, a full recognition. Within psychoanalytic
terms, the “impossibility” of an identity category to fulfill that promise is a
consequence of a set of exclusions which found the very subjects whose
domains such categories are supposed to phenomenalize and represent.
To the extent that we understand identity-claims as rallying points
for political mobilization, they appear to hold out the promise of unity,
solidarity, universality. As a corollary, then, one might understand the
resentment and rancor against identity as signs of a dissension and disas-
satisfaction that follow the failure of that promise to deliver.

The recent work of Slavoj Žižek underscores the phantasmatic promise
of identity as a rallying point within political discourse as well as the
inevitability of disappointment. In this respect, his work opens a way to
rethink identity-claims as phantasmatic sites, impossible sites, and, hence,
as alternately compelling and disappointing.

Žižek works between the Althusserian notion of ideology and the
Lacanian symbolic, foregrounding the symbolic law and the real, and
backgrounding the imaginary. He also makes clear that he is opposed to
poststructuralist accounts of discursivity and proposes to rethink the
Lacanian symbolic in terms of ideology. In this chapter, I will employ the
term “ideology” in the effort to restate Žižek’s position, but I will try to
make plain where I think a rewriting of his theory makes a move toward
poststructuralism possible, and where I understand a critical rethinking of
the “feminine” in relation to discourse and the category of the real is
needed. If some of the previous chapters have argued that psychoanalysis
might be brought into a productive relation with contemporary discourses
which seek to elaborate the complexity of gender, race, and sexuality,
then this chapter might be read as an effort to underscore the limitations
of psychoanalysis when its founding prohibitions and their heterosexual-
izing injunctions are taken to be invariant. Central to the task will be the
retheorization of what must be excluded from discourse in order for
political signifiers to become rallying points, sites of phantasmatic insti-
mation and expectation. My questions, then: How might those ostensibly
constitutive exclusions be rendered less permanent, more dynamic? How
might the excluded return, not as psychosis or the figure of the psychotc
within politics, but as that which has been rendered mute, foreclosed from
the domain of political signification? How and where is social content
attributed to the site of the “real,” and then positioned as the unspeak-
able? Is there not a difference between a theory that asserts that, in prin-
ciple, every discourse operates through exclusion and a theory that
attributes to that “outside” specific social and sexual positions? To the
extent that a specific use of psychoanalysis works to foreclose certain
social and sexual positions from the domain of intelligibility—and for all
time—psychoanalysis appears to work in the service of the normativizing
law that it interrogates. How might such socially saturated domains of
exclusion be recast from their status as “constitutive” to beings who might
be said to matter?

POLITICS OF THE SIGN

Opposed to what he calls “discourse theory,” which appears to be a position
attributed to a poststructuralism that includes Foucault and Derrida, Žižek
at once underscores the centrality of discourse in political mobilization
and the limits to any act of discursive constitution. Žižek is surely right
that the subject is not a unilateral effect of prior discourses, and that the
process of subjectivation outlined by Foucault is in need of a psychoanalytic
rethinking. Following Lacan, Žižek argues that the “subject” is produced in
language through an act of foreclosure (Verwerfung). What is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject. What remains outside this subject, set outside by the act of foreclosure which founds the subject, persists as a kind of defining negativity. The subject is, as a result, never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is found and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject.

Žižek is surely right that any theory of the discursive constitution of the subject must take into account the domain of foreclosure, of what must be repudiated for the subject itself to emerge. But how and to what end does he appropriate the Lacanian notion of the real to designate what remains unsymbolizable, foreclosed from symbolization? Consider the rhetorical difficulty of circumscribing within symbolic discourse the limits of what is and is not symbolizable. On the one hand, the limits to symbolization are necessary to symbolization itself, which produces through exclusion its provisional systematics. On the other hand, how those limits are set by theory remains problematic, not only because there is always a question of what constitutes the authority of the one who writes those limits, but because the setting of those limits is linked to the contingent regulation of what will and will not qualify as a discursively intelligible way of being.

The production of the unsymbolizable, the unspoken, the illegible is always a strategy of social abjection. Is it even possible to distinguish between the socially contingent rules of subject-formation, understood as regulatory productions of the subject through exclusion and foreclosure, and a set of "laws" or "structures" that constitute the invariant mechanisms of foreclosure through which any subject comes into being? To the extent that the law or regulatory mechanism of foreclosure in this latter instance is conceived as ahistorical and universalistic, this law is exempted from the discursive and social rearticulations that it initiates. This exemption is, I would argue, highly consequential insofar as this law is understood to be that which produces and normativizes sexed positionabilities in their intelligibility. To the extent that this law engages the traumatic production of a sexual antagonism in its symbolic normativity, it can do this only by barring from cultural intelligibility—and rendering culturally abject—cultural organizations of sexuality that exceed the structuring purview of that law. The risk, of course, is that contingent regulatory mechanisms of subject-production may be reified as universal laws, exempted from the very process of discursive rearticulation that they occasion.

The use of psychoanalysis that remains most persuasive in Žižek's analysis, however, is the linking of political signifiers, rallying points for mobilization and politicization, like "women," "democracy," "freedom," with the notion of phantasmatic investment and phantasmatic promise. His theory makes clear the relationship between identification with political signifiers and their capacity both to unify the ideological field and to constitute the constituencies they claim to represent. Political signifiers, especially those that designate subject positions, are not descriptive; that is, they do not represent pregiven constituencies, but are empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds. No signifier can be radically representative, for every signifier is the site of a perpetual mésconnaissance; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers—"women" is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. It is what opens the signifier to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification. It is this open-ended and performative function of the signifier that seems to me to be crucial to a radical democratic notion of futurity.

Toward the end of this chapter, I will suggest a way in which the phantasmatic investment in the political signifier needs to be thought in relation to the historicity of such signifiers. I will also offer an argument concerning the status of performativity in both Ernesto Laclau and Žižek, namely, that performativity, if rethought through the Derridean notion of citationality, offers a formulation of the performative character of political signifiers that a radical democratic theory may find valuable.

**DISCOURSE AND THE QUESTION OF CONTINGENCY**

Crucial to Žižek's effort to work the Althusserian theory through Lacan is the psychoanalytic insight that any effort of discursive interpellation or constitution is subject to failure, haunted by contingency, to the extent
that discourse itself invariably fails to totalize the social field. Indeed, any attempt to totalize the social field is to be read as a symptom, the effect and remainder of a trauma that itself cannot be directly symbolized in language. This trauma subsists as the permanent possibility of disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality. It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of "reality" fails to include. The real constitutes the contingency or lack in any discursive formation. As such, it stands theoretically as a counter both to Foucaultian linguistics, construed as a kind of discursive monism whereby language effectively brings into being that which it names and to Habermasian rationalism which presumes a transparency of intention in the speech act that is itself symptomatic of a refusal of the psyche, the unconscious, that which resists and yet structures language prior to and beyond any "intention."

In Žižek's view, every discursive formation must be understood in relation to that which it cannot accommodate within its own discursive or symbolic terms. This traumatic "outside" poses the threat of psychosis and becomes itself the excluded and threatening possibility that motivates and, eventually, thwarts the linguistic urge to intelligibility. His position is explicitly linked with the critical reformulation of Althusser proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. In particular, with their notion that every ideological formation is constituted through and against a constitutive antagonism and is, therefore, to be understood as an effort to cover over or "suture" a set of contingent relations. Because this ideological suturing is never complete, that is, because it can never establish itself as a necessary or comprehensive set of connections, it is marked by a failure of complete determination, a constitutive contingency, that emerges within the ideological field as its permanent (and promising) instability.

Against a causal theory of historical events or social relations, the theory of radical democracy insists that political signifiers are contingently related, and that hegemony consists in the perpetual rearticulation of these contingently related political signifiers, the weaving together of a social fabric that has no necessary ground, but that consistently produces the "effect" of its own necessity through the process of rearticulation. Ideology, then, might be construed as a linking together of political signifiers such that their unity effects the appearance of necessity, but where that contingency is apparent in the nonidentity of those signifiers, the radical democratic reformulation of ideology (still and always itself ideological) consists in the demand that these signifiers be perpetually rearticulated in relation to one another. What is here understood as constitutive antagonism, the nonclosure of definition, is assured by a contingency that underwrites every discursive formation.

The incompleteness of every ideological formulation is central to the radical democratic project's notion of political futurity. The subjection of every ideological formation to a rearticulation of these linkages constitutes the temporal order of democracy as an incalculable future, leaving open the production of new subject-positions, new political signifiers, and new linkages to become the rallying points for politicization.

For Laclau and Mouffe, this politicization will be in the service of radical democracy to the extent that the constitutive exclusions that stabilize the discursive domain of the political—those positions that have been excluded from representability and from considerations of justice or equality—are established in relation to the existing polity as what calls to be included within its terms, i.e., a set of future possibilities for inclusion, what Mouffe refers to as part of the not-yet-assimilable horizon of community. The ideal of a radical inclusivity is impossible, but this very impossibility nevertheless governs the political field as an idealization of the future that motivates the expansion, linking, and perpetual production of political subject-positions and signifiers.

What appears to guarantee this mobilizing incompleteness of the political field is a contingency that remains constitutive throughout any and all signifying practices. This notion of contingency is directly linked to the notion of "constitutive antagonisms," a notion developed by Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, and further elaborated in the first chapter of Laclau's Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time. In this last work, Laclau distinguishes between the status of contradictory social relations and antagonistic social relations: those relations that negate one by virtue of a logical necessity and those relations, considered contingent and based in power, that are in a kind of social tension whose consequences cannot be predicted. In this essay, Laclau makes the strong claim that there are relations of production that exceed those that characterize the worker's structural position or "identity" and which preclude the possibility of an immanent or causal account of how social relations will proceed. He
remarks that “this constitutive outside is inherent to any antagonistic relationship” (9). Here it seems that what assures that any social description or prediction will be non-totalizing and non-predictive are other social relationships that constitute the “outside” to identity: “...antagonism does not occur within the relations of production, but between the latter and the social agent’s identity outside them” (15). In other words, any attempt to circumscribe an identity in terms of relations of production, and solely within those terms, performs an exclusion and, hence, produces a constitutive outside, understood on the model of the Derridean “supplément,” that denies the claim to positivity and comprehensiveness implied by that prior objectivization. In Laclau’s terms, “the antagonizing force denies my identity in the strictest sense” (18).

The question, then, is whether the contingency or negativity enacted by such antagonizing forces is part of social relations or whether it belongs to the real, the foreclosure of which constitutes the very possibility of the social and the symbolic. In the above, it seems, Laclau links the notions of antagonism and contingency to what within the social field which exceeds any positive or objectivist determination or prediction, a supplement within the social but “outside” of posited identity. In Žižek, it seems, this contingency is linked to the Lacanian real in such a way that it is permanently outside the social as such. And within the same essay as above, Laclau also argues for the notion of the “lack” in accounting for the production of identifications (44). If the “outside” is, as Laclau insists, linked to the Derridean logic of the supplement (Laclau, NRRT, 84 n. 5), then it is unclear what moves must be taken to make it compatible with the Lacanian notion of the “lack”; indeed, in what follows, I will attempt to read the Lacanian “lack” within Žižek’s text according to the logic of the supplement, one which also entails a rethinking of the social specificity of taboo, loss, and sexuality.

Whereas Žižek understands the move from ideology to discourse in Laclau’s work to constitute a partial “regression” (Laclau, NRRT, 250), and Laclau appears to take issue with Žižek’s preservation of Hegel (Žižek, SQ, xii), they agree that ideology surfaces discursively as an effort to cover over a constitutive “lack” in the subject, a “lack” that is at times rendered equivalent to the notion of “constitutive antagonism” and, at other times, understood as a negativity more fundamental than any given social antagonism, as one that every specific social antagonism presupposes. The suturing together of political signifiers within the ideological domain masks and disarticulates the contingency or “lack” by which it is motivated. This lack or negativity is central to the project of radical democracy precisely because it constitutes within discourse the resistance to all essentialism and all descriptivism. The “subject-position” of women, for instance, is never fixed by the signifier “women”; that term does not describe a preexisting constituency, but is, rather, part of the very production and formulation of that constituency, one that is perpetually renegotiated and rearticulated in relation to other signifiers within the political field. This instability in all discursive fixing is the promise of a teleologically unconstrained futurity for the political signifier. In this sense, the failure of any ideological formation to establish itself as necessary is part of its democratic promise, the ungrounded “ground” of the political signifier as a site of rearticulation.

At stake, then, is how this “contingency” is theorized, a difficult matter in any case for a theory that would account for “contingency” will doubtless also always be formulated through and against that contingency. Indeed, can there be a theory of “contingency” that is not compelled to refuse or cover over that which it seeks to explain?

A number of questions emerge concerning the formulation of this contingency or negativity: To what extent can the Lacanian real be used to stand for this contingency? To what extent does that very substitution saturate this contingency with social significations that become reified as the prediscursive? More particularly, in Žižek’s work, which rendition of the real is appropriated from the Lacanian corpus? If the real is understood as the unsymbolizable threat of castration, an originary trauma motivating the very symbolizations by which it is incessantly covered over, to what extent does this oedipal logic prefigure any and every “lack” in ideological determinations as the lack/loss of the phallic instituted through the oedipal crisis? Does the formulation of the real in terms of the threat of castration establish the oedipally induced sexual differential at a prediscursive level? And is this fixing of a set of sexual positionalities under the sign of a “contingency” or “lack” supposed to assure the inflexibility or instability of any given discursive or ideological formation? By linking this “contingency” with the real, and interpreting the real as the trauma induced through the threat of castration, the Law of the Father, this “law” is posited as accountable for the contingency in
all ideological determinations, but is never subject to the same logic of
contingency that it secures.

The "Law of the Father" induces trauma and foreclosure through the
threat of castration, thereby producing the "lack" against which all
symbolization occurs. And yet, this very symbolization of the law as the
law of castration is not taken as a contingent ideological formulation. As
the fixing of contingency in relation to the law of castration, the trauma
and "substantial identity"* to the real, Žižek's theory thus evacuates the
"contingency" of its contingency. Indeed, his theory valorizes a "law"
up to all ideological formations, one with consequential social
and political implications for the placing of the masculine within
discourse and the symbolic, and the feminine as a "stain," "outside the
circuit of discourse" (75).

If symbolization is itself circumscribed through the exclusion and/or
abjection of the feminine, and if this exclusion and/or abjection is secured
through Žižek's specific appropriation of the Lacanian doctrine of the
real, then how is it that what qualifies as "symbolizable" is itself constitu-
ted through the *symbolization* of the feminine as originary trauma?
What limits are placed on "women" as a political signifier by a theory that
installs its version of signification through the abjection/exclusion of the
feminine? And what is the ideological status of a theory that identifies the
contingency in all ideological formulations as the "lack" produced by the
threat of castration, where that threat and the sexual differential that
it institutes are not subject to the discursive rearticulation proper to
hegemony? If this law is a necessity, and it is that which secures all conting-
ency in discursive and ideological formulations, then that contingency is
legislated in advance as a nonideological necessity and is, therefore, no
contingency at all. Indeed, the insistence on the preideological status of
the symbolic law constitutes a foreclosure of a contingency in the name of
that law, one which, if admitted into discourse and the domain of the
symbolizable, might call into question or, at least, occasion a rearticula-
tion of the oedipal scenario and the status of castration. Considering the
centrality of that project of rearticulating the oedipal scenario to the
various contemporary projects of feminist psychoanalysis (and not only
to those "historicizing" feminisms [50] opposed to psychoanalysis),
this foreclosure appears to be a consequential ideological move with
potentially anti-feminist consequences. A number of significant feminist

psychoanalytic reformulations take the contestable centrality of the threat
of castration as a point of departure; moreover, they also underscore the
role of the *imaginary* in Lacan over and against the almost exclusive focus
on the symbolic in relation to the real in Žižek. Considering as well the
permutations of oedipal relations in non-heterosexual psychic formations,
it seems quite crucial to admit the oedipal scene into a discourse that sub-
jects it to contemporary rearticulations.

* Žižek's text appears in some ways to be mindful of these challenges to
the real, and we might well ask what it means that the "real" appears
within his text as that which needs to be protected or safeguarded from
Foucaultian (Žižek, SO, 2), feminist (Žižek, SO, 50), and poststructuralist
(Žižek, SO, 72) challenges. If the "real" is itself threatened by these theo-
retical enterprises, how are we to understand—psychoanalytically—the
"defense" of the real? If the "real" is under threat, but is itself understood
as the threat of castration, to what extent can Žižek's text be read as an
effort to protect the "threat" of castration against a set of further "threats"?
Do these further threats (Foucault, poststructuralism, feminism) operate
within his text as threats to the threat of castration which then operate as
tokens of the threat of castration itself, whereby the doctrine of the real
becomes the token of a phallos (intoned in the phrase, the "rock of the
real" that recurs throughout the text) to be defended against a certain
displacement? If the "threat" of castration is to be protected, what then
does the threat of castration *secure*? The threat is protected in order to
safeguard the law, but if it is in need of protection, the force of that law is
already in a crisis that no amount of protection can overcome.

In "The Signification of the Phallus," that threat institutes and sustains
the assumption of the masculine sex in relation to the "having" of the
phallus, whereby the feminine "sex" is assumed through embodying that
threat as the "being" of the phallus, posing as the "loss" with which the
masculine is perpetually threatened. To what extent is the stability and
fixity of this differential threatened by those positions which take issue
with the Žižekian real?

Further, it seems crucial to ask about the rhetorical status of the
Žižekian text which reports and asserts the workings of the symbolic law.
Significantly, Lacan's own textuality is not considered in the often brilli-
ant appropriations to be found in Žižek's work. Here it is a question of
writing *in language* of a foreclosure that institutes language itself: How to
write in it and of it, and how to write in such a way that what escapes the full force of foreclosure and what constitutes its displacements can be read in the gaps, fissures, and metonymic movements of the text? Considering the persistence of this linguistic and hermeneutic preoccupation in Lacan’s own theoretical writing, it makes sense to ask of Žižek: What is the relation of the textual propositions in Sublime Object to the law that it enunciates and “defends”? Is the textual defense of originary foreclosure, designated by the real, itself a rearticulation of the symbolic law; does Žižek’s text enact an identification with that law, and speak in and as that law? To what extent can the textuality of Sublime Object be read as a kind of writing of and as the law that it defends? Is the “contingency” of language here mastered in and by a textual practice that speaks as the law, whose rhetoric is domesticated by the declarative mode? And to what extent does this project of mastery reappear in Žižek’s explicit account of how political signifiers operate, more specifically, in the rendition of political performativity that is linked with the impossible “X” of desire?

THE ROCK OF THE REAL

Žižek begins his critique of what he calls “poststructuralism” through the invocation of a certain kind of matter, a “rock” or a “kernel” that not only resists symbolization and discourse, but is precisely what poststructuralism, in his account, itself resists and endeavors to “dissolve.” This solidly figures the Lacanian real, the outside to discourse construed as symbolization, and so is a figure that fortifies the theoretical defense of that which, for Žižek, must remain unfigurable, and so might be said to perform the impossibility that it seeks to secure. The rock thus figures the unfigurable, and so emerges not only as a catachresis, but as one that is supposed to secure the borders between what he will call sometimes symbolization and sometimes “discourse,” on the one hand, and the “real,” on the other, where the latter is designated as that for which no symbolization is possible. Significantly, I think, the “real” that is a “rock” or a “kernel” or sometimes a “substance” is also, and sometimes within the same sentence, a “loss” a “negativity”, as a figure it appears to slide from substance to dissolution, thereby conflating the law that institues the “lack” and the “lack” itself. If the real is the law, it is the solidity of the law, the incontrovertible status of this law and the threat that it delivers; if it is the loss, then it is the effect of the law and precisely that which ideological determinations seek to cover; if it is the threatening force of the law, it is the trauma.

The evidence for the real consists in the list of examples of displacement and substitution, given within the grammatical form of an apposition, that attempts to show the traumatic origination of all things that signify. This is the trauma, the loss, that signification seeks to cover over only to displace and enact again. For Žižek signification itself initially takes the form of a promise and a return, the recovery of an unhematizable loss in and by the signifier, which along the way must break that promise and fail to return in order to remain a signifier at all. For the real is the site of the impossible fulfillment of that promise, and the exclusion of the real from signification is its very condition; the signifier that could deliver on the promise to return to the site of barred jouissance would destroy itself as a signifier.

What interests me is the move that Žižek makes from the signifier as an always uncompleted promise to return to the real, itself figured as the “rock” and the “lack”—figured, I would suggest, in and as the vacillation between substance and its dissolution—to the political signifier, the rallying point for phantasmatic investments and expectations. For Žižek, the political signifier is an empty term, a non-representational term whose semantic emptiness becomes the occasion for a set of phantasmatic investments to accrue and which, through being the site of such investments, wields the power to rally and mobilize, indeed, to produce the very political constituency it appears to “represent.” For Žižek, then, the political signifier accrues those phantasmatic investments to the extent that it acts as a promise to return to a pleasurable satisfaction that is foreclosed by the onset of language itself; because there can be no return to this fantasized pleasure, and because such a return would entail the breaking of the prohibition that founds both language and the subject, the site of the lost origin is a site of unhematizable trauma. As a result, the promise of the signifier to make such a return is always already a broken one, but one nevertheless structured by that which must remain outside politicization and which must, for Žižek, always remain the same.

How are we to understand this figure of a rock which is at once the law and the loss instituted by that law? The law as rock is to be found in the Hebrew prayer in which God is “my rock and my redeemer,” a phrase
that suggests that the “rock” is the unnameable Yahweh, the principle of
monotheism. But this rock is also the figure that emerges at the conclu-
sion to Freud’s “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” to denote the
resistance of women patients to the suggestion that they suffer from penis
envy. There Freud remarks, “We often feel that, when we have reached
the wish for a penis and the masculine protest, we have penetrated all the
psychological strata and reached ‘bedrock’ [der grausamere Fel) and that
our task is accomplished. And this is probably correct, for in the psychical
field the biological factor is really the rock-bottom.” This is, interesting-
ly, a figure of a ground that is nevertheless sedimented through time, and
so not a ground, but an effect of a prior process covered over by this
ground. As we will see in Žižek, this is a ground that calls to be secured
and protected as a ground and that is always positioned in relation to a set
of threats; hence, a contingent ground, a kind of property or territory in
need of defense.

Žižek identifies a number of positions that appear to destabilize this
“rock,” the law of castration, the redeemer, and he also offers a list of
“examples” in which this figure of the rock, the hard kernel, appears and
reappears. What links these examples together? Indeed, what constitutes
the exemplary, and what, the law, in this theoretical effort to keep back
the forces of poststructuralist “dissolution”? The list is an impressive one:
poststructuralists, historicizing feminists, sadomasochistic Foucaultians,
and fascists, where the exemplary instance of fascism is understood as
anti-Semitic fascism.

Žižek remarks that “the fundamental gesture of poststructuralism is to
decompose every substantial identity, to denounce behind its solid con-
sistency an interplay of symbolic overdetermination—briefly, to dissolve
the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential
relations; the notion of symptom is the necessary counterpoint to it, the
substance of enjoyment, the real kernel around which this signifying
interplay is structured” (Žižek, SO, 73).

Earlier, Žižek invokes this resistant kernel in relation to “the Marxist-
feminist criticism of psychoanalysis” and in particular “the idea that
its insistence on the crucial role of the Oedipus and the nuclear family
triangle transforms a historically conditioned form of patriarchal family
into a feature of the universal human condition” (SO). Žižek then asks the
following question, but asks it through a figure which makes the rock of
the real speak: “Is not this effort to historicize the family triangle precisely
an attempt to elude the ‘hard kernel’ which announces itself through the
‘patriarchal family’—[then in caps] ‘the Real of the Law, the rock of
castration?’” If the real of the law is precisely what cannot speak, the tra-
matic site foreclosed from symbolization, then it is with some interest that
the real speaks here, qualified here as the real of the law, and that it is Žižek
who, it seems, receives the word from the rock, and brings it down the
mountain to us. Here it seems that “the real of the law” is the threaten-
ing force of the law, the law itself, but not the loss that the law forcibly
institutes, for the loss could not be figured as a substance, since the loss
will be defined as that which is always and only surreptitiously covered
over by an appearance of substance, the loss being that which produces the
desire to cover over that gap through signifying effects which carry the
desire for substance which, within the social field, is never achieved. The
figure of substance, then, appears misplaced here, unless we take it as a
figure for incontrovertibility, specifically, the unquestionable status of the
law, where that law is understood as the law of castration.

It is, then, clear why this kernel emerges centrally as a sexual antago-
nism that is constitutive of the family prior to any and all historical or
social specificities. In reference to the patriarchal family, Žižek cautions
as well against an over-rapid universalization that overrides specific
determinations; his language returns most avidly to the dangers, the
threats, of an “over-rapid historicization (that) makes us blind to the real
kernel which returns as the same through diverse historicizations/sym-
bolizations.”

In the paragraph that follows, he offers another example of the same
effort at over-rapid historicization, one that also seeks to elude the “real”
of the law which, in the above, is rendered equivalent through apposition
to “the rock of castration.” This example is “concentration camps,” and
within the formulation of this example yet another string of examples
emerges meant to demonstrate the same principle of equivalence: “All the
different efforts to attach this phenomenon to a concrete image (‘Holo-
cast,’ ‘Gulag’…)[three dots implying a proliferation of equivalent
‘examples,’ but also an indifference to the specificity of the example, since
the example is only interesting as ‘proof’ of the law], to reduce it to a
product of a concrete social order (Fascism, Stalinism…)—what are they
if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the
'real' of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems" (50).

The effect of this citation is to claim that each of these social formations: the family, concentration camps, the Gulag, instantiate the same trauma, and that what is historically textured about each of these sites of trauma is itself indifferent to and ontologically distinct from the lost and hidden referent that is their traumatic status. They are by virtue of this "same traumatic kernel" equivalent to one another as traumas, and what is historical and what is traumatic are made absolutely distinct; indeed, the historical becomes what is most indifferent to the question of trauma, and the political or historical effort to understand the institution of the family or the formation of concentration camps or Gulags cannot account for the "traumatic" character of these formations; and, indeed, what is properly traumatic about them does not belong to their social formation. This is, I take it, what Laclau refers to as the contingency in all social determinations, the lack which prevents the totalization of any given social form. But insofar as the real secures this lack, it postures as a self-identical principle that reduces any and all qualitative differences among social formations (identities, communities, practices, etc.) to a formal equivalence.

Here it seems crucial to ask whether the notion of a lack taken from psychoanalysis as that which secures the contingency of any and all social formations is itself a presocial principle universalized at the cost of every consideration of power, sociality, culture, politics, which regulates the relative closure and openness of social practices. Can Žižekian psychoanalysis respond to the pressure to theorize the historical specificity of trauma, to provide texture for the specific exclusions, annihilations, and unthinkable losses that structure the social phenomena mentioned above? It is unclear whether the examples are merely illustrative in this context, or whether it is the means by which the law orders and subordinates a set of phenomena to reflect back its own enduring continuity. Do the examples demonstrate the law, or do they become "examples" to the extent that they are ordered and rendered equivalent by the very law that then, as an après-coup effect, reads back the examples it itself has produced as signs of the law's own persistence? If the priority and the universality of the law are produced as the effects of these examples, then this law is fundamentally dependent on these examples, at which point the law is to be understood as an effect of the list of examples even as the examples are claimed to be indifferent and equivalent "instances" and effects of that law.

Moreover, what counts as an "example" is no indifferent matter, despite the relation of equivalence that is drawn among them. If the trauma is the same, and if it is linked with the threat of castration, and if that threat is made known within the family as an interpellation of sexed positionality (the production of "boy" and "girl" taking place through a differential relation to castration), then it is that sexualized trauma which originates in the family and reappears in the Gulag, in concentration camps, in political horror shows of various kinds.

In "Beyond Discourse-Analysis," Žižek circumscribes this trauma further as that which is symptomaticized in the asymmetrical relation to "existence" (being a subject, having the phallus) for men and women: "It is no accident that the basic proposition of Hegemony (and Socialist Strategy)—"Society does not exist"—evokes the Lacanian proposition 'la Femme n'existe pas' ('Woman doesn't exist')." This non-existence is described again in the next sentence as "a certain traumatic impossibility," and here it becomes clear that what is traumatic is the non-existence of woman, that is, the fact of her castration. This is a "certain fissure which cannot be symbolized" (249). We might well ask why the conversation about the castration of woman must stop here. Is this a necessary limit to discourse, or is it imposed in order to ward off a threatening set of consequences? And if one raises a question about this necessary limit, does one inadvertently become the threat of castration itself? For if woman did exist, it seems that, by this logic, she could only exist to castrate.

Žižek's interpretation of the Lacanian doctrine of the real has at least three implications that I will for the most part only indicate: first, the real, understood as the threatening force of the law, is the threat of punishment which induces a necessary loss, where that loss, according to the oedipal logic, is figured as the feminine, as that which is outside the circuit of discursive exchange (what Žižek calls "an inert stain...which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse" [75]), and hence is not available as a political signifier. Where feminism is named in the text, it is primarily cast as an effort to "elude" the kernel, symptomatizing a certain resistance to feminine castration. Secondly, whereas Žižek describes the real as the unsymbolizable, and proceeds to invoke the real against those who defend discourse analysis or language-games, a consideration of the real in
Lacan's third seminar, *Les Psychees*, suggests a slightly different reading. In that text, Lacan repeatedly remarks that, "what is refused in the symbolic order returns in the real" (22), and specifies that that refusal ought to be understood as Verwerfung (foreclosure or repudiation) (21). Lacan's formulation remains ambiguous with respect to the location of both the refusal and that which is refused: "what is refused in the symbolic order" suggests that there are a set of signifiers "in" the symbolic order in the mode of refusal or, indeed, refuse. The French makes it clearer, for it is not what is refused to that order, but what in that order is refused: "Ce qui est refusé dans l'ordre symbolique" (my emphasis). If what is refused reappears (resurgit [22] or reparat [21]) in the real (dans le réel), then it appears first to have appeared in the symbolic prior to its refusal and reappearance in the real.

In a provocative essay by Michael Walsh, "Reading the Real," the process of Verwerfung or foreclosure that institutes the real is described as a matter of "the exclusion of fundamental signifiers from the Symbolic ordering of the subject". In other words, these are signifiers that have been part of symbolization and could be again, but have been separated off from symbolization to avert the trauma with which they are invested. Hence, these signifiers are desymbolized, but this process of desymbolization takes place through the production of a hiatus in symbolization. Walsh also recalls that the term Verwerfung (which Lacan deploys in the third seminar to delineate a psychosis-producing repudiation over and against a neurosis-producing repression [Verdrängung]) is used by Freud to describe the Wolf Man's rejection of castration (Walsh, 73). This resistance to symbolic paternity is symptomatized in the repudiation of signifiers that would readmit the symbolic force of that paternity. These are not signifiers that are merely repressed but could be worked through; they are signifiers whose reentry into symbolization would unravel the subject itself.

The notion of foreclosure offered here implies that what is foreclosed is a signifier, namely, that which has been symbolized, and that the mechanism of that repudiation takes place within the symbolic order as a policing of the borders of intelligibility. Which signifiers qualify to unravel the subject and to threaten psychosis remains unfixed in this analysis, suggesting that what constitutes the domain of what the subject can never speak or know and still remain a subject remains variable, that is, remains a domain variably structured by contingent relations of power. Žižek's rendition of the real presupposes that there is an invariant law that operates uniformly in all discursive regimes to produce through prohibition this "lack" that is the trauma induced by the threat of castration, the threat itself. But if we concur that every discursive formation proceeds through constructing an "outside," we are not thereby committed to the invariant production of that outside as the trauma of castration (nor to the generalization of castration as the model for all historical trauma). Moreover, it may further the effort to think psychoanalysis's relation to historical trauma and to the limits of symbolizability if we realize that (a) there may be several mechanisms of foreclosure that work to produce the unsymbolizable in any given discursive regime, and (b) the mechanisms of that production are—however inevitable—still and always the historical workings of specific modalities of discourse and power.

Since (c) the resistance to the real is a resistance to the fact of feminine castration or a denial of the structuring power of that threat for men, those who seek to dissolve the real (they are referred to as feminists, post-structuralists, and historicizers of various kinds) tend to undermine the differential force of castration and its permanent status within and as the symbolic. This "law" requires that castration is the "already having happened" for women, the installation of loss in the articulation of the feminine position, whereas castration signifies as what is always almost happening for men, as anxiety and the fear of losing the phallus, where the loss that is feared is structurally inscribed in the feminine and, hence, is a fear of becoming feminine, becoming abjected as the feminine; this possibility of abjection thus governs the articulation of sexual difference, and the real is the permanent structure that differentiates the sexes in relation to the temporal location of this loss. As noted in the chapter "The Lesbian Phallus", the having and the being of the phallus are determined along these lines as an opposition. The masculine anxiety over loss denies an impossibility of having, an always already having lost the phallus which makes the "having" into an impossible ideal, and approximates the phallus as the deferral of that having, a having to have that is never had. The having of the phallus as a site of anxiety is already the loss that it fears, and it is this recognition of the masculine implication in abjection that the feminine serves to defer.

The threat of a collapse of the masculine into the abjected feminine
threatens to dissolve the heterosexual axis of desire; it carries the fear of occupying a site of homosexual abjection. Indeed, we receive in the opening pages of *Sublime Object* a figure for such abjection when Foucault is introduced and discounted as one "so fascinated by marginal lifestyles constructing their own mode of subjectivity" and then, within parenthesis, "(the sadomasochistic homosexual universe, for example: see Foucault, 1984)." The fantasy of a "universe" of sadomasochistic lifestyle may implicate the figure of the sadomasochistic Foucault as part of the global threat which, given to an historicizing trend and a certain attenuated link with poststructuralism, becomes part of this phantasmatic threat to the seemingly treasured real. If this is a text that defends the trauma of the real, defends the threat of psychosis that the real delivers, and if it defends this latter threat over and against a different kind of threat, it seems that the text proliferates this threat by investing it in a variety of social positions, thereby constituting the text itself as that which seeks to "elude" the challenges of "feminism," "Foucault," and "poststructuralism."

What is the "threat," and who is "eluding" it by what means? Does Žižek's text rhetorically perform an inversion of this dynamic such that feminists and poststructuralists are figured in "denial" and "escape," and Žižek, as the bearer and spokesman for the Law? Or is this the invocation of the law in order to keep the sexual differential in its place, one in which women will always be the symptom of man (not existing), and where the Aristophanic myth of the lack as the consequence of a primary severing necessitates heterosexuality as the site of an imaginary completion and return?

To claim that there is an "outside" to the socially intelligible, and that this "outside" will always be that which negatively defines the social is, I think, a point on which we can concur. To delimit that outside through the invocation of a preideological "law," a prediscursive "law" that works invariably throughout all history, and further, to make that law function to secure a sexual differential that ontologizes subordination, is an "ideological" move in a more ancient sense, one that might only be understood through a rethinking of ideology as "reification." That there is always an "outside" and, indeed, a "constitutive antagonism" seems right, but to supply the character and content to a law that secures the borders between the "inside" and the "outside" of symbolic intelligibility is to preemt the specific social and historical analysis that is required, to confute into "one" law the effect of a convergence of many, and to preclude the very possibility of a future rearticulation of that boundary which is central to the democratic project that Žižek, Laclau, and Mouffe promote.

If, as Žižek argues, "the real itself offers no support for a direct symbolization of it" (97), then what is the rhetorical status of the metaethical claim which symbolizes the real for us? Because the real can never be symbolized, this impossibility constitutes the permanent pathos of symbolization. This is not to claim that there is no real, but, rather, that the real cannot be signified, that it stands, as it were, as the resistance at the core of all signification. But to make this claim is to assert a relation of radical incommensurability between the "symbolization" and the "real," and it is unclear that this very assertion is not already implicated in the first term of the relation. As such, it is unclear to what metasymbolizing status that very assertion disingenuously seeks to lay claim. To claim that the real resists symbolization is still to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance. The former claim (the real resists symbolization) can only be true if the latter claim ("the real resists symbolization" is a symbolization) is true, but if the second claim is true, the first is necessarily false. To presume the real in the mode of resistance is still to predicate it in some way and to grant the real its reality apart from any avowed linguistic capacity to do precisely that.

As resistance to symbolization, the "real" functions in an exterior relation to language, as the inverse of mimetic representationalism, that is, as the site where all efforts to represent must founder. The problem here is that there is no way within this framework to politicize the relation between language and the real. What counts as the "real," in the sense of the unsymbolizable, is always relative to a linguistic domain that authorizes and produces that foreclosure, and achieves that effect through producing and policing a set of constitutive exclusions. Even if every discursive formation is produced through exclusion, that is not to claim that all exclusions are equivalent: what is needed is a way to assess politically how the production of cultural unintelligibility is mobilized variably to regulate the political field, i.e., who will count as a "subject," who will be required not to count. To freeze the real as the impossible "outside" to discourse is to institute a permanently unsatisfiable desire for an ever elusive referent: the sublime object of ideology. The fixity and universality of this relation between language and the real produces, however, a prepolitical pathos that precludes the kind of analysis that would take the real/reality distinction as the instrument and effect of contingent relations of power.
PERFORMATIVE SIGNIFIERS, OR CALLING AN AARDVARK "NAPOLEON"

Žižek's use of the Lacanian "real" to establish the permanent recalcitrance of the referent to symbolization implies that all referring ends up phantasmatically producing (and missing) the referent to which it aspires. Žižek seeks recourse to the "agency of the signifier" in Lacan to develop his own theory of the political performatives. Exchanging Kripke's notion of the "rigid designator" for the Lacanian notion of a point de capiton, Žižek argues that the pure signifier, empty of all meaning, nevertheless postures as a site of radical semantic abundance. This postulation of a semantic excess at the site of a semantic void is the ideological moment, the discursive event that "totalizes an ideology by bringing to a halt the metonymic sliding of its signified" (99). Žižek argues that these terms do not refer, but act rhetorically to produce the phenomenon they enunciate:

In itself, it is nothing but a "pure difference": its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative—its signification coincides with its own act of enunciation; in short, it is a "signifier without the signified." The crucial step in the analysis of an ideological edifice is thus to detect, behind the dazzling splendour of the element which holds it together ("God," "Country," "Party," "Class"...), this self-referential, tautological, performative operation [99].

The implication of this anti-descriptivist view of naming entails both the effectivity and the radical contingency of naming as an identity-constraining performance. As a consequence, the name mobilizes an identity at the same time that it confirms its fundamental alterability. The name orders and institutes a variety of free-floating signifiers into an "identity"; the name effectively "sutures" the object. As a rallying point or point of temporary closure for a politics based on "subject positions" (what Žižek via Lacan calls a nodal point, or point de capiton), the name designates a contingent and open organizing principle for the formation of political groups. It is in this sense that anti-descriptivism provides a linguistic theory for an anti-essentialist identity politics.

If signifiers become politically mobilizing by becoming sites of phantasmatic investment, then with what are they invested? As promissory notes for the real—counterfeit ones—these signifiers become phantasmatic occasions for a return, a return to that which must be foreclosed in order for symbolization to occur, a return to a conjectured jouissance which cannot be named or described within language precisely because language is itself based on its foreclosure. Indeed, language only comes into being through that foreclosure or primary prohibition. Language then operates by means of the displacement of the referent, the multiplication of signifiers at the site of the lost referent. Indeed, signification requires this loss of the referent, and only works as signification to the extent that the referent remains irrecoverable. Were the referent to be recovered, this would lead to psychosis and the failure of language.

What Žižek offers us, then, is an account of politicization that holds out the (impossible) promise of a return to the referent within signification, without psychosis and the loss of language itself. Insofar as performatives are their own referent, they appear both to signify and to refer and hence to overcome the divide between referent and signification that is produced and sustained at the level of foreclosure. Significantly, this phantasmatic return to the referent is impossible, and as much as a political signifier holds out the promise of this return without psychosis, it cannot make good on its promise. Phantasmatic investment is invariably followed by disappointment or disidentification. It appears to follow that the movement of political organizations in their factionalization are those in which the sign does not rally and unify in the way that Žižek describes. The advent of factionalization consists in the recognition that the unity promised by the signer was, in fact, phantasmatic, and a disidentification occurs. The rallying force of politics is its implicit promise of the possibility of a livable and speakable psychosis. Politics holds out the promise of the manageability of unspeakable loss.

Following Laclau and Mouffe, Žižek views political signifiers as free-floating and discontinuous within the prepoliticized field of ideology. When these political signifiers become politicized and politicizing, they provide contingent but efficacious points of unity for the otherwise disparate or free-floating elements of ideological life. Following Lacan's notion that the name confers legitimacy and duration on the ego (recasting the ego as subject in language), Žižek considers these unifying terms of politics to function on the model of proper names: they do not, strictly speaking, describe any given content or objective correlate, but act as rigid designators that institute and maintain the social phenomena to which they
appear to refer. In this sense, a political signifier gains its political efficacy, its power to define the political field, through creating and sustaining its constituency. The power of the terms “women” or “democracy” is not derived from their ability to describe adequately or comprehensively a political reality that already exists; on the contrary, the political signifier becomes politically efficacious by instituting and sustaining a set of connections as a political reality. In this sense, the political signifier in Žižek’s view operates as a performative rather than a representational term. Paradoxically, the political efficacy of the signifier does not consist in its representational capacity; the term neither represents nor expresses some already existing subjects or their interests. The signifier’s efficacy is confirmed by its capacity to structure and constitute the political field, to create new subject-positions and new interests.

In Laclau’s preface to the English translation of Žižek’s Sublime Object, he argues that Žižek’s theory offers a performative theory of names, and that this performativity is crucial to a theory of politics and hegemony. In Žižek’s revision of Kripke, to be considered shortly, the name retroactively constitutes that to which it appears to refer. It gathers together into a unity or identity elements that previously coexisted without any such relation. The signifiers of “identity” effectively or rhetorically produce the very social movements that they appear to represent. The signifier does not refer to a pregiven or already constituted identity, a pure referent or essential set of facts that preexist the identity-signifier or act as the measure of its adequacy. An essentialist politics claims that there is a set of necessary features that describe a given identity or constituency and that these features are in some sense fixed and available prior to the signifier that names them. Žižek argues that the name does not refer to a pregiven object; Laclau concludes that this non-referentiality implies “the discursive construction of the object itself.”

Laclau then draws the conclusion for a radical democratic politics: “the consequences for a theory of hegemony or politics are easy to see.” If the name referred to a pregiven set of features presumed to belong discursively to a given object, then there could be no “possibility of any discursive hegemonic variation that could open the space for a political construction of social identities. But if the process of naming of objects amounts to the very act of their constitution, then their descriptive features will be fundamentally unstable and open to all kinds of hegemonic rearticulations.”

Laclau then concludes this exposition with a significant remark: “The essentially performative character of naming is the precondition for all hegemony and politics” (Žižek, 30, “Preface,” xiii-xiv).

Whereas Laclau emphasizes the performative possibilities for destabilizing the already established field of social identities, underscoring variation and rearticulation, Žižek’s own theory appears to emphasize the rigid and inflexible status of those signifying names. Žižek refers to those points de captation as stable unifying structures of the political field. Laclau emphasizes in Žižek’s theory the performativity of the signifier, affirming the variability of signification implicit in a performative use of language freed from the fixity of the referent. But Žižek’s theory, a cross between Kripke and Lacan, presumes that political signifiers function like proper names, and that proper names operate on the model of rigid designators. An examination of rigid designation, however, suggests that precisely the variation and rearticulation apparently promised by the performativity of the name is rendered impossible. In fact, if performatives operate rigidly, that is, to constitute that which they enunciate regardless of circumstance, then such names constitute a functional essentialism at the level of language. Freed from the referent, the proper name as rigid performative is no less fixed. In the end, it is profoundly unclear whether Žižek’s effort to understand political signifiers on the model of a performative theory of names can provide for the kind of variation and rearticulation required for an anti-essentialist radical democratic project.

It is of no small significance that proper names are derived from the paternal dispensation of its own name, and that the performative power of the paternal signifier to “name” is derived from the function of the patronym. It is important here in Kripke to distinguish between what he calls “rigid designators” and “nonrigid or accidental designators.”11 The latter are designators that refer, but cannot be said to refer in every possible world, because there is some chance that the world in which they occurred could have been significantly different in structure or composition than the ones that constitute the domain of “possible worlds” for us. Rigid designators, on the other hand, are those which refer to a “necessary existent,” that is, refer to an object in any case where it could or could have existed” (Kripke, NN, 48). When Kripke then maintains that names are rigid designators, he means names of persons, and the example he gives is of the surname “Nixon.” The example of Nixon is then used to
support the thesis that "proper names are rigid designators." The next example is "Aristotle," followed by "Hesperus." Hence, not all names will be rigid designators; in fact, those names that can be substituted for by a set of descriptions fail to qualify: "If the name means the same as that description of cluster of descriptions, it will not be a rigid designator." The discussion continues to link proper names with "individuals" via Strawson (61) and "people" via Nagel (68).

Between the discussion of proper names that refer as rigid designators to individuals and the discussion of terms like "gold" which refer to objects (116-119), Kripke introduces the notion of the primal baptism. And it is in reference to this activity, which forms the paradigm for naming as such, that we begin to see the link, indeed, the "causal link," between rigid designators that refer to individuals and those that refer to objects. In fact, the baptism which is originally reserved for persons is extrapolated from that original context to apply to things. A proper name of a person comes to refer first by a preliminary set of descriptions that assist in the fixing of the referent, a referent that subsequently comes to refer rigidly and regardless of its descriptive features. It is, however, only after the introduction of proper names referring to persons that we are given the notion of an "initial baptism" (96). Considered critically, this scene of baptism, which will retroactively become the model for all naming as rigid designation, is the fixing of a referent to a person through the interpellation of that person into a religious lineage, a "naming" that is at once an inculcation into a patrilineage that traces back to, and reiterates, the original naming that God the father performs on Adam. The "fixing" of the referent is thus a "citation" of an original fixing, a reiteration of the divine process of naming, whereby naming the son inaugurates his existence within the divinely sanctioned community of man.

Significantly, Kripke concedes that this notion of an "initial baptism" takes place at no time and place, and in this sense the fable of initial baptism shares the fictive space of the act of divine naming that it mimics. Kripke also argues that this naming cannot take place in private (in contrast to what we presume to be the solitary irruption of God's act of nomination) but must always have a social or communal character. The name is not fixed in time, but becomes fixed again and again through time, indeed, becomes fixed through its reiteration: "passed from link to link" (96) through a "chain of communication" [91]. This begins the characterization of Kripke's causal theory of communication.

This also raises the question of the "link" between language users in Kripke's model. Kripke writes, "When the name is 'passed from link to link,' the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it" (96). This presumption of social agreement thus is inserted as a prerequisite for the proper name to fix its referent in the mode of rigid designation. But what, we might ask, guarantees this homogeneity of social intention? And if there is no guarantee, as Kripke himself appears to know, what is the fiction of homogenous intention from which this theory draws?

Kripke appears to know that there is no guarantee because he offers the example of an improper or catachrestic use of the proper name: "If I hear the name 'Napoleon' and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition." This improper usage, however, inheres in the possibility of the proper usage, indeed, remains that over and against and through which the proper reiterates itself as proper. It also signals a departure from the homogeneity of intention that appears to link the community of language users together. And yet, by virtue of the very reiterability of the name—the necessity that the name be reiterated in order to name, to fix its referent—this risk of catachresis is continually reproduced. Hence, the very iterability of the name produces the catachrestic divergence from the chain that the referent is meant to forestall. And this raises the further and consequential question of whether the permanent risk of catachresis does not "unfix" the referent. It also raises, I think, the consequential question of whether the referent is itself always only tenuously fixed by this regulation of its use, that is, by the outlawing of this catachrestic divergence from the chain of normative usage.

Baptism is an act which is "initial" or "primal" only to the extent that it initiates the originating Adamic act of naming, and so produces that origin again through mimetic reiteration. This character of reiteration appears in Kripke's notion of the "linking" which constitutes the homogeneity of communal intention upon which the causal theory of reference depends. Every language user must learn the right intention from a previous language user, and it is only on the presumption that right intention is rightly passed along this chain that the name continues to function as rigid designator. In other words, the link between acts of baptism, mimetically reiterating the divine performative, is the link between members of
community, conceived also as a lineage, in which names are handed down and the uniformity of intention is secured. This latter set of links, understood as the “chain of communication,” is not only the teaching of names that happens between members of a linguistic community, but is itself the reiteration of that “initial” baptismal moment conceived as ostensive reference, i.e., “This is Aristotle.”

Further, not only is baptism an act of naming in which reference is secured through the extension of the surname to embrace or include the first name, but baptism is itself the action of the surname. The “given” or Christian name is offered in the name of the patronym, the baptism fixes the name to the extent that it is brought into the patrilineage of the name. For Kripke, the referent is secured through supposing a communal homogeneity of intention. This is a notion that sustains strong links with the notion of the continuous uniformity of the divine will in the Adamic account of nomination (pre-Babel). But it also appears to follow, then, that the fixing of the referent is the forcible production of that fictive homogeneity and, indeed, of that community: the agreement by which reference becomes fixed (an agreement which is a continual agreeing again that happens through time) is itself reproduced on the condition that reference is fixed in the same way. And if this reiteration is baptismal, that is, the reiteration of the divine performative and, perhaps also, the extension of the divine will in its uniformity, then it is God the father who patronymically extends his putative kingdom through the reiterative fixing of the referent.

The exclusion of catachresis, that is, the prohibition against naming the aardvark “Napoleon,” secures the “chain of communication,” and regulates and produces the “uniformity” of intention. Catachresis is thus a perpetual risk that rigid designation seeks to overcome, but always also inadvertently produces, despite its best intentions. The larger question, then, is whether Laclau’s notion of “the performativity that is essential to all hegemony and all politics” can be construed as rigid designation, as Žižek via the Lacanian revision would suggest, without at once construing this performativity as catachresis. Is not the defilement of sovereignty, divine and paternal, performed by calling the aardvark “Napoleon” precisely the catachresis by which hegemony ought to proceed?

In Kripke, then, it appears that any use of the rigid designator presupposes that there is a language user who has been correctly initiated into the use of a name, one “initiated” into the lineage of proper intention that, passed down generationally, becomes the historical pact that secures the appropriate fixing of the name. Although the name is said to “fix” its referent without describing the referent, it is clear that the instructions handed down through the chain of communication are presupposed in the act of fixing itself, so that the name remains fixed and fixable to the extent that that instruction in right intention and right usage is in place. To be initiated into that historical chain of language users with the right intention, one must first be baptized into that community, and it is in this sense that the baptism of the language user precedes the baptismal designation of any object. Moreover, to the extent that the language user must be installed in that community of those who use language properly, the language user must be linked relationally to other language users, that is, must be positioned in some line of kinship that secures the social lines of transmission whereby proper linguistic intentions are passed along. The person named thus names objects, and in this way the “initiation” into the community of homogenous intention is extended; if the name fixes the object, it also “initiates” the object into the patronymic lineage of authority. Fixing thus never takes place without the paternal authority to fix, which means that the referent remains secure only to the extent that the patrilineal line of authority is there to secure it.

Here the notion of baptism seems significant, for insofar as a baptism is an initiation into the kingdom of God, and the conferring of a “Christian name,” it is the extension of divine paternity to the one named. And insofar as the Adamic mode of nomination is the model for baptism itself, then it is God’s performativity that is reiterated in the fixing of the referent through rigid designation. If rigid designation requires the patronymic production and transmission of a uniformity of intention, i.e., the intention to use language properly, it can secure the lines of this transmission through time through the production of stable kinship, that is, strict lines of patrilineality (it being God the Father’s will which is passed along generationally), and through the exclusion of catachresis.

To the extent that a patrilineal form of kinship is presupposed here, and the patronym itself is the paradigm for the rigid designator, it seems crucial to consider that a rigid designator continues to “fix” a person through time only on the condition that there is no change of name. And yet, if the name is to stay the same and the demands of kinship are to met,
then the institution of exogamy is necessitated and, with it, the exchange of women. The patronymic operation secures its inflexibility and perpetuity precisely by requiring that women, in their roles as wives and daughters, relinquish their name and secure perpetuity and rigidity for some other patronym, and daughters-in-law are imported to secure the eternity of this patronym. The exchange of women is thus a prerequisite for the rigid designation of the patronym.

The patronym secures its own rigidity, fixity, and universality within a set of kinship lines that designate wives and daughters as the sites of its self-perpetuation. In the patronymic naming of women, and in the exchange and extension of patronymic authority that is the event of marriage, the paternal law "performs" the identity and authority of the patronym. This performative power of the name, therefore, cannot be isolated from the paternal economy within which it operates, and the power-differential between the sexes that it institutes and serves.

How, then, does the above analysis bear on the question of Žižek's appropriation of Kripke, his subjection of the doctrine of rigid designation to the Lacanian point de captation, and the further use of this political performative in the notion of hegemony in Laclau and Mouffe? Although Kripke is an anti-descriptivist in his account of how names refer, he is not for that reason in favor of an account of rigid designation as performativity. Does the theory of performativity based in the Lacanian revision of Kripke reinscribe paternal authority in another register? And what alternatives are available for understanding the operation of performativity in hegemony that do not unwittingly reinscribe the paternal authority of the signifier?

In Žižek's words, "what is overlooked, at least in the standard version of anti-descriptivism, is that this guaranteeing the identity of an object in all counterfactual situations—through a change of all its descriptive features is the retroactive effect of naming itself: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object" (95). Žižek thus redescribes the referential function of the name as performative. Further, the name, as performative signifier, marks the impossibility of reference and, equivalently, the referent as the site of an impossible desire. Žižek writes, "That 'surplus' in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is 'something in it more than itself', that is to say the Lacanian petit objet a we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency—because it is just an objectification of a void, a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier" (95).

To the extent that a term is performative, it does not merely refer, but acts in some way to constitute that which it enunciates. The "referent" of a performative is a kind of action which the performative itself calls for and participates in. Rigid designation, on the other hand, presupposes the alterity of the referent, and the transparency of its own indexical function. The saying of "This is Aristotle" does not bring Aristotle into being; it is a saying that lays bare through ostensive reference an Aristotle exterior to language. It is in this sense that performativity cannot be equated with rigid designation, despite the fact that both terms imply anti-descriptivism.

In Žižek's revision of rigid designation through Lacan, the referent of rigid designation is permanently lost and, hence, constituted as an impossible object of desire, whereas for Kripke, the referent is permanently secured and satisfaction is at hand. Laclau, on the other hand, appears to consider the name in its performativity to be formative, and to locate the referent as a variable effect of the name; indeed, to recast the "referent" as the signified and thereby to open the term to the kind of variability required for hegemony. It is Kripke's position to argue that the name fixes the referent, and Žižek's to say that the name promises a referent that can never arrive, foreclosed as the unattainable real. But if the question of the "referent" is suspended, then it is no longer a question of what modality it exists—i.e., in reality (Kripke) or in the real (Žižek)—but rather how the name stabilizes its signed through a set of differential relations with other signifiers within discourse.

If, as Kripke's text unwittingly demonstrates, the referent is secured only on the condition that proper usage is differentiated from improper usage, then the referent is produced in consequence of that distinction, and the instability of that distinguishing border between the proper and the catachrestic calls into question the ostensive function of the proper name. Here it seems that what is called "the referent" depends essentially on those catachrestic acts of speech that either fail to refer or refer in the wrong way. It is in this sense that political signifiers that fail to describe, fail to refer, indicate less the "loss" of the object—a position that nevertheless secures the referent even if as a lost referent—than the loss of the loss, to rework that Hegelian formulation. If referentiality is itself the
effect of a policing of the linguistic constraints on proper usage, then the possibility of referentiality is contested by the catachresic use of speech that insists on using proper names improperly, that expands or defiles the very domain of the proper by calling the aardvark 'Napoleon.'

WHEN THE LOST AND IMPROPER REFERENT SPEAKS

If "women" within political discourse can never fully describe that which it names, that is neither because the category simply refers without describing nor because "women" are the lost referent, that which "does not exist," but because the term marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity. The term will gain and lose its stability to the extent that it remains differentiated and that differentiation serves political goals. To the degree that that differentiation produces the effect of a radical essentialism of gender, the term will work to sever its constitutive connections with other discursive sites of political investment and undercut its own capacity to compel and produce the constituency it names. The constitutive instability of the term, its incapacity ever fully to describe what it names, is produced precisely by what is excluded in order for the determination to take place. That there are always constitutive exclusions that condition the possibility of provisionally fixing a name does not entail a necessary collapse of that constitutive outside with a notion of a lost referent, that "bar" which is the law of castration, emblazoned by the woman who does not exist. Such a view not only reifies women as the lost referent, that which cannot exist; and feminism, as the vain effort to resist that particular proclamation of the law (a form of psychosis in speech, a resistance to penis envy). To call into question women as the privileged figure for "the lost referent," however, is precisely to recast that description as a possible signification, and to open the term as a site for a more expansive rearticulation.

Paradoxically, the assertion of the real as the constitutive outside to symbolization is meant to support anti-essentialism, for if all symbolization is predicated on a lack, then there can be no complete or self-identical articulation of a given social identity. And yet, if women are positioned as that which cannot exist, as that which is barred from existence by the law of the father, then there is a conflating of women with that foreclosed existence, that lost referent, that is surely as pernicious as any form of ontological essentialism.

If essentialism is an effort to preclude the possibility of a future for the signifier, then the task is surely to make the signifier into a site for a set of rearticulations that cannot be predicted or controlled, and to provide for a future in which constituencies will form that have not yet had a site for such an articulation or which "are" not prior to the siting of such a site.

Here it is not only expected unity that compels phantasmatic investment in any such signifier, for sometimes it is precisely the sense of futurity opened up by the signifier as a site of rearticulations that is the discursive occasion for hope. Žižek persuasively describes how once the political signifier has temporarily constituted the unity that it promises, that promise proves impossible to fulfill and a disidentification ensues, one that can produce factionalization to the point of political immobilization. But does politicalization always need to overcome disidentification? What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of *mirroration*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong? And how are we to interpret this disidentification produced by and through the very signifier that holds out the promise of solidarity? Lauren Berlant writes that "feminists must embrace a policy of female disidentification at the level of female essence." The expectation of a full recognition, she writes, leads to a necessary scene of "monstrous doubling" and "narcissistic horror" (253), a litany of complaint and recrimination in the wake of the failure of the term to reflect the recognition it appears to promise. But if the term cannot offer ultimate recognition—and here Žižek is quite right to claim that all such terms rest on a necessary méconnaissance—it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference.

To take up the political signifier (which is always a matter of taking up a signifier by which one is oneself already taken up, constituted, initiated) is to be taken into a chain of prior usages, to be installed in the midst of significations that cannot be situated in terms of clear origins or ultimate goals. This means that what is called agency can never be understood as a controlling or original authorship over that signifying chain, and it cannot be the power, once installed and constituted in and by that chain, to set a sure course for its future. But what is here called a "chain" of signification operates through a certain consistent citing of the signifier, an
iterable practice whereby the political signifier is perpetually resignified, a repetition compulsion at the level of signification; indeed, an iterable practice that shows that what one takes to be a political signifier is itself the sedimentation of prior signifiers, the effect of their reworking, such that a signifier is political to the extent that it implicitly cites the prior instances of itself, drawing the phantasmatic promise of those prior signifiers, reworking them into the production and promise of “the new,” a “new” that is itself only established through recourse to those embedded conventions, past conventions, that have conventionally been invested with the political power to signify the future.

It is in this sense, then, that political signifiers might be avowed as performative, but that performativity might be rethought as the force of citationality. "Agency" would then be the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where "to be constituted" means "to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime" the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose. The more insistently the foreclosure, the more exacerbated the temporal nonidentity of that which is heralded by the signifier of identity. And yet, the future of the signer of identity can only be secured through a repetition that fails to repeat loyally, a reciting of the signer that must commit a disloyalty against identity—a catachresis—in order to secure its future, a disloyalty that works the iterability of the signer for what remains non-self-identical in any invocation of identity, namely, the iterable or temporal conditions of its own possibility.

For the purposes of political solidarity, however provisional, Žižek calls for a political performative that will halt the disunity and discontinuity of the signified and produce a temporary linguistic unity. The failure of every such unity can be reduced to a “lack” with no historicity, the consequence of a transhistorical “law,” but such a reduction will miss the failures and discontinuities produced by social relations that invariably exceed the signer and whose exclusions are necessary for the stabilization of the signer. The “failure” of the signer to produce the unity it appears to name is not the result of an existential void, but the result of that term’s incapacity to include the social relations that it provisionally stabilizes through a set of contingent exclusions. This incompleteness will be the result of a specific set of social exclusions that return to haunt the claims of identity defined through negation; these exclusions need to be read and used in the reformulation and expansion of a democratizing reiteration of the term. That there can be no final or complete inclusivity is thus a function of the complexity and historicity of a social field that can never be summarized by any given description, and that, for democratic reasons, ought never to be.

When some set of descriptions is offered to fill out the content of an identity, the result is inevitably fractious. Such inclusionary descriptions produce inadvertently new sites of contest and a host of resistances, disclaimers, and refusals to identify with the terms. As non-referential terms, “women” and “queer” institute provisional identities and, inevitably, a provisional set of exclusions. The descriptivist ideal creates the expectation that a full and final enumeration of features is possible. As a result, it orients identity politics toward a full confession of the contents of any given identity category. When those contents turn out to be illimitable, or limited by a preemptory act of foreclosure, identity politics founders on factionalized disputes over self-definition or on the demand to provide ever more personalized and specified testimonies of self-disclosure that never fully satisfy the ideal under which they labor.

To understand “women” as a permanent site of contest,22 or as a feminist site of agonistic struggle, is to presume that there can be no closure on the category and that, for politically significant reasons, there ought never to be. That the category can never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy. In this sense, what is lamented as disunity and factionalization from the perspective informed by the descriptivist ideal is affirmed by the anti-descriptivist perspective as the open and democratizing potential of the category.

Here the numerous refusals on the part of “women” to accept the descriptions offered in the name of “women” not only attest to the specific violence that a partial concept enforces, but to the constitutive impossibility of an impartial or comprehensive concept or category. The claim to have achieved such an impartial concept or description shores itself up by foreclosing the very political field that it claims to have exhausted. This violence is at once performed and erased by a description that claims finality and all-inclusiveness. To ameliorate and rework this violence, it
is necessary to learn a double movement: to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That the term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds, and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation.

8

CRITICALLY QUEER

Discourse is not life; its time is not yours.
—Michel Foucault, “Politics and the Study of Discourse”

The risk of offering a final chapter on “queer” is that the term will be taken as the summary moment, but I want to make a case that it is perhaps only the most recent. In fact, the temporality of the term is precisely what concerns me here: how is it that a term that signaled degradation has been turned—"refunctioned" in the Brechtian sense—to signify a new and affirmative set of meanings? Is this a simple reversal of valuations such that "queer" means either a past degradation or a present or future affirmation? Is this a reversal that retains and reiterates the abjected history of the term? When the term has been used as a paralyzing slur, as the mundane interpellation of pathologized sexuality, it has produced the user of the term as the emblem and vehicle of normalization; the occasion of its utterance, as the discursive regulation of the boundaries of sexual legitimacy. Much of the straight world has always needed the queers it has sought to repudiate through the performative force of the term. If the term is now subject to a reappropriation, what are the conditions and limits of that significant reversal? Does the reversal reiterate the logic of repudiation by which it was spawned? Can the term overcome its constitutive history of injury? Does it present the discursive occasion for a powerful and compelling fantasy of historical reparation? When and how does a term like "queer" become subject to an affirmative resignification for some when a term like "nigger," despite some recent efforts at reclamation, appears capable of only reinscribing its pain? How and where does discourse reiterate injury such that the various efforts to recontextualize and resignify a given term meet their limit in this other, more brutal, and relentless form of repetition?

In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche introduces the notion of the “sign-chain” in which one might read a utopian investment in discourse, one that reemerges within Foucault's conception of discursive power.
Nietzsche writes, "the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion" (77). The "ever new" possibilities of resignification are derived from the postulated historical discontinuity of the term. But is this postulation itself suspect? Can resignifiability be derived from a pure historicity of "signs"? Or must there be a way to think about the constraints on and in resignification that takes account of its propensity to return to the "ever old" in relations of social power? And can Foucault help us here or does he, rather, reiterate Nietzschean hopefulness within the discourse of power? Investing power with a kind of vitalism, Foucault echoes Nietzsche as he refers to power as "ceaseless struggles and confrontations...produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another."

Neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment; they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply. And yet how are we to understand their convergent force as an accumulated effect of usage that both constrains and enables their reworking? How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought? Here it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility. And further, how is it that those who are abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?

PERFORMATIVE POWER

Eve Sedgwick's recent reflections on queer performativity ask us not only to consider how a certain theory of speech acts applies to queer practices, but how it is that "queering" persists as a defining moment of performativity? The centrality of the marriage ceremony in J.L. Austin's examples of performativity suggests that the heterosexualization of the social bond is the paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name. "I pronounce you..." puts into effect the relation that it names. But from where and when does such a performative draw its force, and what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial?

Performatives acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse.

Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only, to repeat an earlier phrase, a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act," singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimics the discursive gestures of power. Hence, the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names invariably cites the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power. And though it may appear that the binding power of his words is derived from the force of his will or from a prior authority, the opposite is more true: it is through the citation of the law that the figure of the judge's "will" is produced and that the "priority" of textual authority is established. Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary "act" emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions.

Where there is an "I" who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that "I" and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no "I" who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse. On the contrary, the "I" only comes into being through being called, named, interpolated, to use the Althusserian term, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the "I"; it is the transitive invocation of the "I." Indeed, I can only say "I" to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition
precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. Further, the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabitating the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. The "I" is thus a citation of the place of the "I" in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak.

QUEER TROUBLE

The term "queer" emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, sitikin performativity. The term "queer" has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. "Queer" derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts "queer!" To what extent, then, has the performative "queer" operated alongside, as a deformation of, the "I pronounce you..." of the marriage ceremony? If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction.

On that note, let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the "act" by which a name authorizes or deauthorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity, a repetition. "Could a performative succeed," asks Derrida, "if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance... if it were not identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that "success" is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. What this means, then, is that a performative "works" to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissipating historicity of force.

This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said. What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity. Those of us who have questioned the presentist assumptions in contemporary identity categories are, therefore, sometimes charged with depoliticizing theory. And yet, if the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing democratisation of queer politics. As much as identity terms must be used, as much as "outness" is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal "outness"? Who is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backdropped or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism's most treasured contemporary premises.

As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument against using identity categories,
but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use. The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommodate—without domesticating—democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated in advance.

It may be that the concept of autonomy implied by self-naming is the paradigmatically presentist concept, that is, the belief that there is a one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history, that this one makes oneself in and through the magic of the name, that language expresses a “will” or a “choice” rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which compose the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked. To recast queer agency in this chain of historicity is thus to avow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the limits of agency and its most enabling conditions. As expansive as the term “queer” is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions: in some contexts, the term appeals to a younger generation who want to resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by “lesbian and gay”; in some contexts, sometimes the same, it has marked a predominantly white movement that has not fully addressed the way in which “queer” plays—or fails to play—within non-white communities; and whereas in some instances it has mobilized a lesbian activism, in others the term represents a false unity of women and men. Indeed, it may be that the critique of the term will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized.

We no more create from nothing the political terms that come to represent our “freedom” than we are responsible for the terms that carry the pain of social injury. And yet, neither of those terms are as a result any less necessary to work and rework within political discourse.

In this sense, it remains politically necessary to lay claim to “women,” “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian,” precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Laying claim to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in “private” life. But the necessity to mobilize the necessary error of identity (Spivak’s term) will always be in tension with the democratic contestation of the term which works against its deployments in racist and misogynist discursive regimes. If “queer” politics postures independently of these other modalities of power, it will lose its democratizing force. The political deconstruction of “queer” ought not to paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought. Some recent race theory has underscored the use of “race” in the service of “racism,” and proposed a politically informed inquiry into the process of racialization, the formation of race. Such an inquiry does not suspend or ban the term, although it does insist that an inquiry into formation is linked to the contemporary question of what is at stake in the term. The point may be taken for queer studies as well, such that “queering” might signal an inquiry into (a) the formation of sexualities (a historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the deforming and misappropriative power that the term currently enjoys. At stake in such a history will be the differential formation of sexualities across racial boundaries, including the question of how racial and reproductive relations become articulated through one another.

One might be tempted to say that identity categories are insufficient because every subject position is the site of converging relations of power
that are not univocal. But such a formulation underestimates the radical challenge to the subject that such converging relations imply. For there is no self-identical subject who houses or bears these relations, no site at which such relations converge. This converging and interarticulation is the contemporary fate of the subject. In other words, the subject as a self-identical entity is no more.

It is in this sense that the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of “queer” will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments. Indeed, the term “queer” itself has been precisely the discursive rallying point for younger lesbians and gay men and, in yet other contexts, for lesbian interventions and, in yet other contexts, for bisexuals and straights for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics. That it can become such a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance ought to be safeguarded not only for the purposes of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also to expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term.

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND DRAG

How, if at all, is the notion of discursive resignification linked to the notion of gender parody or impersonation? First, what is meant by understanding gender as an impersonation? Does this mean that one puts on a mask or persona, that there is a “one” who precedes that “putting on,” who is something other than its gender from the start? Or does this miming, this impersonating precede and form the “one,” operating as its formative precondition rather than its dispensable artifice?

The construal of gender-as-drag according to the first model appears to be the effect of a number of circumstances. One of them I brought on myself by citing drag as an example of performativity, a move that was taken then, by some, to be exemplary of performativity. If drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as

drag. The publication of Gender Trouble coincided with a number of publications that did assert that “clothes make the woman,” but I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman. Added to these, however, are the political needs of an emergent queer movement in which the publicization of theatrical agency has become quite central.11

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language.

As Paris Is Burning made clear, drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony through its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms without calling them into question.

On other occasions, though, the transferrability of a gender ideal or gender norm calls into question the abjecting power that it sustains. For an occupation or reterritorialization of a term that has been used to abject a population can become the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political resignification. And this has happened to a certain extent with the notion of “queer.” The contemporary redeployment enacts a prohibition and a degradation against itself, spawning a different order of values, a political affirmation from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as its final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation.

It may seem, however, that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of discourse. Are these two different senses of “performativity,” or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation? Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity
and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. In this sense, the initiatory performative, "It’s a girl!" anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, "I pronounce you man and wife." Hence, also, the peculiar pleasure of the cartoon strip in which the infant is first interpellated into discourse with "It’s a lesbian!" Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law and its expropriability.

To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a "girl," however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no "one" who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a "one," to become viable as a "one," where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.

It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain "citation" in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought. And precisely in relation to such a compulsory citationality that the theatricality of gender is also to be explained. Theatricality need not be conflated with self-display or self-creation. Within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is "queer," we read a resignifying practice in which the desanctioning power of the name "queer" is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy. Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is "queered" into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds takes up or cites that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses. The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic "law" that can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies.

To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: the hyperbolic "performance" of death in the practice of "die-ins" and the theatrical "outruse" by which queer activism has disrupted the closeting distinction between public and private space have proliferated sites of politicization and AIDS awareness throughout the public realm. Indeed, an important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake (more productive, I think, than an insistence on the two as polar opposites within queerness). Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch-femme spectacles, the sliding between the "march" (New York City) and the parade (San Francisco); die-ins by ACT UP, kiss-ins by Queer Nation; drag performance benefits for AIDS (by which I would include both Lypsinka’s and Liza Minnelli’s in which she, finally, does Judy); the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism; performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the desexualization of the lesbian; tactical interruptions of public forums by lesbian and gay activists in favor of drawing public attention and outrage to the failure of government funding of AIDS research and outreach.

The increasing theatricalization of political rage in response to the killing instigation of public policy-makers on the issue of AIDS is allegorized in the recontextualization of "queer" from its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation to an insistent and public seversion of that interpellation from the effect of shame. To the extent that shame is produced as the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness, where the latter is understood through homophobic causality as the "cause" and "manifestation" of the illness, theatrical rage is part of the public resistance to that interpellation of shame. Mobilized by the injuries of homophobia, theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an "acting out," one that does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that also deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS and to the graphics of suffering, or a hyperbolic display of kissing to shatter the epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality.

MELANCHOLIA AND THE LIMITS OF PERFORMANCE

The critical potential of "drag" centrally concerns a critique of a prevailing truth-regime of "sex," one that I take to be pervasively heterosexual: the
distinction between the "inside" truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the "outside" truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed "truth" can be established. Gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as "internal" and "hidden," nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play between psyche and appearance (where the latter domain includes what appears in words). Further, this will be a "play" regulated by heterosexist constraints though not, for that reason, fully reducible to them.

In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the "truth" of gender; performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"; further, what is "performed" works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.

The rejection of an expressive model of drag which holds that some interior truth is exteriorized in performance needs, however, to be referred to a psychoanalytic consideration on the relationship between how gender appears and what gender signifies. Psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche. It also argues, rightly I think, that what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier and from the domain of corporeal legibility.

How precisely do repudiated identifications, identifications that do not "show," circumscribe and materialize the identifications that do? Here it seems useful to rethink the notion of gender-as-drag in terms of the analysis of gender melancholia. Given the iconographic figure of the melancholic drag queen, one might consider whether and how these terms work together. Here, one might ask also after the disavowal that occasions performance and that performance might be said to enact, where performance engages "acting out" in the psychoanalytic sense. If melancholia in Freud's sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss (a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that Other, self-heretanism, and the acting out of unresolved anger and love), it may be that performance, understood as "acting out," is significantly related to the problem of unacknowledged loss. Where there is an ungrieved loss in drag performance (and I am sure that such a generalization cannot be universalized), perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one that reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical unhabitability. This is neither a territorialization of the feminine by the masculine nor an "envy" of the masculine by the feminine, nor a sign of the essential plasticity of gender. What it does suggest is that gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go.

The analysis above is a risky one because it suggests that for a "man" performing femininity or for a "woman" performing masculinity (the latter is always, in effect, to perform a little less, given that femininity is often cast as the spectacular gender) there is an attachment to and a loss and refusal of the figure of femininity by the man, or the figure of masculinity by the woman. Thus, it is important to underscore that drag is an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification, but that cross-gendered identification is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may be one. In this sense, drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize gender. Not only are there a vast number of drag performers straight, but it would be a mistake to think that homosexuality is best explained through the performativity that is drag. What does seem useful in this analysis, however, is that drag exposes and allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time that it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love. Drag thus allegorizes heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but "preserved" through the heightening of feminine identification itself. In this sense, the "truest" lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the "truest" gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man.

What drag exposes, however, is the "normal" constitution of gender
presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disavowed attachments or identifications that constitute a different domain of the "unperformable." Indeed, it may well be that what constitutes the sexually unperformable is performed instead as gender identification. To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently become prohibited. Rather, these are desires that are proscribed from the start. And when they do emerge on the far side of the censor, they may well carry that mark of impossibility with them, performing, as it were, as the impossible within the possible. As such, they will not be attachments that can be openly grieved. This is, then, less the refusal to grieve (a formulation that acccents the choice involved) than a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love. And it is this absence that produces a culture of heterosexual melancholy, one that can be read in the hyperbolic identifications by which mundane heterosexual masculinity and femininity confirm themselves. The straight man becomes (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he "never" loved and "never" grieved; the straight woman becomes the woman she "never" loved and "never" grieved. It is in this sense, then, that what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal.

Moreover, it is precisely to counter this pervasive cultural risk of gay melancholia (what the newspapers generalize as "depression") that there has been an insistent publicization and politicization of grief over those who have died from AIDS; the NAMES Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publically avowing the limitless loss.

Insofar as grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publically proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations. And insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death, they call to be read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.

How then does one link the trope by which discourse is described as "performing" and that theatrical sense of performance in which the hyperbolic status of gender norms seems central? What is "performed" in drag is, of course, the sign of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it. The sign, understood as a gender imperative—"girl!"—reads less as an assignment than as a command and, as such, produces its own subordinations. The hyperbolic conformity to the command can reveal the hyperbolic status of the norm itself, indeed, can become the cultural sign by which that cultural imperative might become legible. Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of "man" and "woman." These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate. I write "forced to negotiate" because the compulsory character of these norms does not always make them efficacious. Such norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction.

The resignification of norms is thus a function of their inefficacy, and so the question of subversion, of working the weakness in the norm, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation. The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders, as if a sheer increase in numbers would do the job, but rather with the exposure or the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals. Hence, it is not that drag opposes heterosexuality, or that the proliferation of drag will bring down heterosexuality; on the contrary, drag tends to be the allegorization of heterosexuality and its constitutive melancholia. As an allegory that works through the hyperbolic, drag brings into relief what is, after all, determined only in relation to the hyperbolic: the understated, taken-for-granted quality of heterosexual performativity. At its best, then, drag can be read for the way in which hyperbolic norms are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane. At the same time these same norms, taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be "cited," twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not, for that reason, necessarily subverted in the process.
It is important to emphasize that although heterosexuality operates in part through the stabilization of gender norms, gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix. Although forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain. Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men "feminine" or calling lesbians "masculine," and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender ("no longer being a real or proper man" or "no longer being a real and proper woman"), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender.

We might want to claim that certain kinds of sexual practices link people more strongly than gender affiliation, but such claims can only be negotiated, if they can, in relation to specific occasions for affiliation; there is nothing in either sexual practice or in gender to privilege one over the other. Sexual practices, however, will invariably be experienced differentially depending on the relations of gender in which they occur. And there may be forms of "gender" within homosexuality which call for a theorization that moves beyond the categories of "masculine" and "feminine." If we seek to privilege sexual practice as a way of transcending gender, we might ask at what cost the analytic separability of the two domains is taken to be a distinction in fact. Is there perhaps a specific gender pain that provokes such fantasies of a sexual practice that would transcend gender difference altogether, in which the marks of masculinity and femininity would no longer be legible? Would this not be a sexual practice paradigmatically fetishistic, trying not to know what it knows, but knowing it all the same? This question is not meant to demean the fetish (where would we be without it), but it does mean to ask whether it is only according to a logic of the fetish that the radical separability of sexuality and gender can be thought.

In theories such as Catharine MacKinnon's, sexual relations of subordination are understood to establish differential gender categories, such that "men" are those defined in a sexually dominating social position and "women" are those defined in subordination. Her highly deterministic account leaves no room for relations of sexuality to be theorized apart from the rigid framework of gender difference or for kinds of sexual regulation that do not take gender as their primary objects (i.e., the prohibition of sodomy, public sex, consensual homosexuality). Hence, Gayle Rubin's influential distinction between the domains of sexuality and gender in "Thinking Sex" and Sedgwick's reformulation of that position have constituted important theoretical opposition to MacKinnon's deterministic form of structuralism. 20

My sense is that now this very opposition needs to be rethought in order to muddle the lines between queer theory and feminism. 21 For surely it is as unacceptable to insist that relations of sexual subordination determine gender position as it is to separate radically forms of sexuality from the workings of gender norms. The relation between sexual practice and gender is surely not a structurally determined one, but the destabilizing of the heterosexual presumption of that very structuralism still requires a way to think the two in a dynamic relation to one another.

In psychoanalytic terms, the relation between gender and sexuality is in part negotiated through the question of the relationship between identification and desire. And here it becomes clear why refusing to draw lines of causal implication between these two domains is as important as keeping open an investigation of their complex interimplication. For, if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man, and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an imaginary logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender. On the other hand, there is no one femininity with which to identify, which is to say that femininity might itself offer an array of identificatory sites, as the proliferation of lesbian female possibilities attests. On the other hand, it is hardly descriptive of the complex dynamic exchanges of lesbian and gay relationships to presume that homosexual identifications "mirror" or replicate one another. The vocabulary for describing the difficult play, crossing, and destabilization of masculine and feminine identifications within homosexuality has only begun to emerge within theoretical language: the non-academic language historically
embedded in gay communities is here much more instructive. The thought of sexual difference within homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity.

For one deciding issue will be whether social strategies of regulation, abjection, and normalization will not continue to re-kindle gender and sexuality such that the oppositional analysis will continue to be under pressure to theorize their interrelations. This will not be the same as reducing gender to prevailing forms of sexual relations such that one "is" the effect of the sexual position one is said to occupy. Resisting such a reduction, it ought to be possible to assert a set of non-causal and non-reductive relations between gender and sexuality, not only to link feminism and queer theory, as one might link two separate enterprises, but to establish their constitutive interrelationship. Similarly, the inquiry into both homosexuality and gender will need to code the priority of both terms in the service of a more complex mapping of power that interrogates the formation of each in specified racial regimes and geopolitical spatializations. And the task, of course, does not stop here, for no one term can serve as foundational, and the success of any given analysis that centers on any one term may well be the marking of its own limitations as an exclusive point of departure.

The goal of this analysis, then, cannot be pure subversion, as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle. Rather than denaturalization or proliferation, it seems that the question for thinking discourse and power in terms of the future has several paths to follow: how to think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution? How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification—with all the weight and difficulty of that labor—and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition? But how, also, to rethink the terms that establish and sustain bodies that matter?

The film Paris Is Burning has been interesting to read less for the ways in which it deploys denaturalizing strategies to re-idealize whiteness and heterosexual gender norms than for the less stabilizing rearticulations of kinship it occasioned. The drag balls themselves at times produce high femininity as a function of whiteness and deflect homosexuality through a transgendersing that re-idealizes certain bourgeois forms of heterosexual exchange. And yet, if those performances are not immediately or obviously subversive, it may be that it is rather in the reformulation of kinship, in particular, the redefining of the "house" and its forms of collectivity, mothering, mopping, reading, and becoming legendary, that the appropriation and redeployment of the categories of dominant culture enable the formation of kinship relations that function quite supportively as oppositional discourse. In this sense, it would be interesting to read Paris Is Burning against, say, Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering and ask what happens to psychoanalysis and kinship as a result. In the former, the categories like "house" and "mother" are derived from that family scene, but also deployed to form alternative households and community. This resignification marks the workings of an agency that is (a) not the same as voluntarism, and that (b) though implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, is not, as a consequence, reducible to those dominant forms.

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.

How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose? Is it, one might rejoin, a matter of "knowing"? For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself. The incalculable effects of action are as much a part of their subversive promise as those that we plan in advance.

The effects of performatives, understood as discursive productions, do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions.

It is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation. But this yielding of ownership over what one writes has an important set of political corollaries, for the taking up, reforming, deforming of one's words
does open up a difficult future terrain of community, one in which the hope of ever fully recognizing oneself in the terms by which one signifies is sure to be disappointed. This not owning of one’s words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself, the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by, expropriated in, as the unstable and continuing condition of the “one” and the “we,” the ambivalent condition of the power that binds.

NOTES

PREFACE


INTRODUCTION

1. Clearly, sex is not the only such norm by which bodies become materialized, and it is unclear whether “sex” can operate as a norm apart from other normative requirements on bodies. This will become clear in later sections of this text.

2. Abjection (in Latin, ab-secare) literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated. Here the casting away resonates with the psychoanalytic notion of Verwerfung, implying a foreclosure which founds the subject and which, accordingly, establishes that foundation as tenuous. Whereas the psychoanalytic notion of Verwerfung, translated as “foreclosure,” produces sociality through a repudiation of a primary signifier which produces an unconscious or, in Lacan’s theory, the register of the real, the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out stage within the terms of sociality. Indeed, what is foreclosed or repudiated within psychoanalytic terms is precisely what may not reenter the field of the social without threatening psychosis, that is, the dissolution of the subject itself. I want to propose that certain abject zones within sociality also deliver this threat, constituting zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution (“I would rather die than do or be that”). See the entry under “Forclusion” in Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) pp. 163-167.