8 Sexed Bodies

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1980: 145)

Thus far I have concentrated on apparently “neutral” or indeterminate accounts of human bodies considered in their generality. I have focused on a number of key male theorists and what they have had to say about “the” body: Freud, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, the theorists of body image, Nietzsche, Foucault, Lingis, Deleuze and Guattari. All have contributed, in their various ways, to the broad terms by which we can understand human bodies and how we can wrest notions of corporeality away from the constraints which have polarized and opposed it to mind, the mental or the conceptual, not to mention away from the confines of a biology that is considered universal, innate, fundamentally nonhistorical, and capable of change only through the violent intervention of surgical, chemical, or physiological means, means which may alter details of the body but which leave its ontological status as inert and passive, as cultural “raw materials,” intact. The various theorists discussed and sometimes criticized here have helped make explicit the claim that the body, as much as the psyche or the subject, can be regarded as a cultural and historical product. They testify to the permeability or incompleteness of the notion of nature. Individually and collectively, they have affirmed that the body is a pliable entity whose determinate form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription and the provision of a set of limiting biological codes. The body is constrained by its biological limits—limits, incidentally, whose framework or “stretchability” we cannot yet know, we cannot presume, even if we must presume some limits. The body is not open to all the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject: the human body, for example, cannot fly in the air, it cannot breathe underwater unaided by prostheses, it requires a broad range of temperatures and environmental supports, without which it risks collapse and death. On the other hand, while there must lie some kinds of biological limit or constraint, these constraints are perpetually capable of being superseded, overcome, through the
human body's capacity to open itself up to prosthetic synthesis, to transform or rewrite its environment, to continually augment its powers and capacities through the incorporation into the body's own spaces and modalities of objects that, while external, are internalized, added to, supplementing and supplemented by the "organic body" (or what culturally passes for it), surpassing the body, not "beyond" nature but in collusion with a "nature" that never really lived up to its name, that represents always the most blatant cultural anxieties and projections.

I have concentrated on these apparently "neutral" presentations of the "human" body and have generally avoided many if not most feminist texts that have recently appeared on the question of the female body because up to this point I have been concerned with the ways in which a corporeal "universal" has in fact functioned as a veiled representation and projection of a masculine which takes itself as the unquestioned norm, the ideal representative without any idea of the violence that this representational positioning does to its others—women, the "disabled," cultural and racial minorities, different classes, homosexuals—who are reduced to the role of modifications or variations of the (implicity white, male, youthful, heterosexual, middle-class) human body.

I have attempted to read the male discourses dealt with here as discourses for and about men, discourses which have ignored or misunderstood the radical implications of insisting on a recognition of sexual specificity, discourses which have presented their claims—radical as these might be—without any understanding of their relevance to or usefulness for women's self-representations. I have not attempted to give an alternative account, one which provides materials directly useful for women's self-representation. To do so would involve knowing in advance, preempting, the developments in women's self-understandings which are now in the process of being formulated regarding what the best terms are for representing women as intellectual, social, moral, and sexual agents. It would involve producing new discourses and knowledges, new modes of art and new forms of representational practice outside of the patriarchal frameworks which have thus far ensured the impossibility of women's autonomous self-representations, thus being temporally outside or beyond itself. No one yet knows what the conditions are for developing knowledges, representations, models, programs, which provide women with nonpatriarchal terms for representing themselves and the world from women's interests and points of view. This book has been a preliminary exploration of some of the (patriarchal) texts which feminists may find useful in extricating the body from the mire of biologism in which it has been entrenched. But the terms by which feminists can move on from there, can supersede their patriarchal forebears, are not dear to me. But perhaps the framework I have been trying to use in this book—a framework which acknowledges both the psychical or interior dimensions of subjectivity and the surface corporeal exposures of the subject to social inscription and training; a model which resists,
as much as possible, both dualism and monism; a model which insists on (at least) two surfaces which cannot be collapsed into one and which do not always harmoniously blend with and support each other; a model where the join, the interaction of the two surfaces, is always a question of power; a model that may be represented by the geometrical form of the Möbius strip’s two-dimensional torsion in three-dimensional space—will nevertheless be of some use if feminists wish to avoid the impasses of traditional theorizing about the body.

In this chapter, I hope to present at least some of the elements of a more positive and detailed investigation of the question of the sexual specificity of bodies. In repeating the framework of the earlier chapters, the rotations of the Möbius strip from the inside out and from the outside in, the inversion from psychoanalytic and phenomenological investigations of sexual specificity to the inscriptive and productive functioning of social bodies marked in their sexual difference, I hope not only to provide a framework with which to begin asking questions of male and female bodies in their irreducible specificities but also to provide a series of displacements and criticisms of the very (male) models that helped make these investigations possible, a kind of feedback of the Möbius rotations on itself, a doubling that makes it problematize and extend its own boundaries. I am not suggesting that what is to follow represents a new non-patriarchal or feminist framework; it clearly does not. But with the help of certain phallocentric discourses and through the establishment of some sort of theoretical distance from these frameworks (alongside of a recognition of their formative relations to their feminist transgressions), perhaps the project can at last begin.

This chapter seeks to elucidate and negotiate a certain aporia. It seeks to question the ontological status of the sexed body—an issue which has generally remained submerged up to now in this book but which underlies many of its speculations. What, ontologically speaking, is the body? What is its “stuff,” its matter? What of its form? Is that given or produced? Or is there some relation between givenness and the cultural order? Are sexually neutral, indeterminate, or hermaphroditic bodies inscribed to produce the sexually specific forms with which we are familiar? Or do bodies, all bodies (even nonhuman bodies, it must be presumed), have a specifically sexual dimension (whether it be male or female or hermaphroditic) which is psychically and culturally inscribed according to its morphology? In other words, is sexual difference primary and sexual inscription a cultural overlay or rewriting of an ontologically prior differentiation? Or is sexual differentiation a product of the various forms of inscription of culturally specific bodies? Do inscriptions produce sexual differentiation? Or do bodies, all bodies (even nonhuman bodies, it must be presumed), have a specifically sexual dimension (whether it be male or female or hermaphroditic) which is psychically and culturally inscribed according to its morphology? In other words, is sexual difference primary and sexual inscription a cultural overlay or rewriting of an ontologically prior differentiation? Or is sexual differentiation a product of the various forms of inscription of culturally specific bodies? Do inscriptions produce sexual differentiation? Or do bodies, all bodies (even nonhuman bodies, it must be presumed), have a specifically sexual dimension (whether it be male or female or hermaphroditic) which is psychically and culturally inscribed according to its morphology?
between writing and bodies, bodies as the blank or already encoded surfaces of inscription.

I am reluctant to claim that sexual difference is purely a matter of the inscription and codification of somehow uncoded, absolutely raw material, as if these materials exert no resistance or recalcitrance to the processes of cultural inscription. This is to deny a materiality or a material specificity and determinateness to bodies. It is to deny the postulate of a pure, that is, material difference. It is to make them infinitely pliable, malleable. On the other hand, the opposite extreme also seems untenable. Bodies are not fixed, inert, purely genetically or biologically programmed entities that function in their particular ways and in their determinate forms independent of their cultural milieu and value. Differences between bodies, not only at the level of experience and subjectivity but also at the level of practical and physical capacities, enjoy considerable social and historical variation. Processes and activities that seem impossible for a body to undertake at some times and in some cultures are readily possible in others. What are regarded as purely fixed and unchangeable elements of facticity, biologically given factors, are amenable to wide historical vicissitudes and transformations.

Two brief illustrations. The formation of stigmata, perforations, cuts, bleeding, even the production of a quite literal alphabetic script across the body can be induced or produced through the adherence to certain beliefs (about religious piety, worship, a sense of worthlessness or supreme value, the notion of the body as a vessel for divine intervention or satanic interference, etc.). These indicate that biological and physiological processes can be induced in subjects through the inculcation into certain beliefs about the body and its place in social and religious life.2 Or conversely, there is the transformation of apparently bedrock biological features through the disturbance of certain psychical functions, perhaps best illustrated in the case of multiple personality syndrome, in which one of the many personalities inhabiting an individual body has different abilities and defects than another. One personality may require glasses to correct faults in the optical apparatus while another personality has perfect vision; one personality is left-handed, the other right, one personality has certain allergies or disorders missing in the other. These are not simply transformations at the level of our ideas of or representations of the body. Our ideas and attitudes seep into the functioning of the body itself, making up the realm of its possibilities or impossibilities.

The scope and limit of the body's pliability is not yet adequately understood; nor is the biologically constitutive role played by the significances and meanings attributed to bodies, the codes and practices that tattoo it in various ways. Any model that links genetics and environment externally, bringing together two domains which are considered logically separable from each other, cannot explain the active interventions and limits each poses for the other. This cannot be understood on the kind of subtractive models that have hitherto informed many bio-
logical and psychological accounts: subtract the environment, culture, history, and what you are left with is nature or biology; compare identical twins brought up in different environments as if this somehow ensures a neutralization of the effects of the environment, and as if the twins’ sameness can be assumed to be the consequence of their shared biologies. Biology is somehow regarded as the subject minus culture, as if this could result in anything but an abstraction or bare universal category. The sexual difference I explore here cannot be understood in terms of a fixed or ahistorical biology, although it must clearly contain a biological dimension. But biology cannot be regarded as a form whose contents are historically provided, nor as a base on which cultural constructs are founded, nor indeed as a container for a mixture of culturally or individually specific ingredients. It is an open materiality, a set of (possibly infinite) tendencies and potentialities which may be developed, yet whose development will necessarily hinder or induce other developments and other trajectories. These are not individually or consciously chosen, nor are they amenable to will or intentionality: they are more like bodily styles, habits, practices, whose logic entails that one preference, one modality excludes or makes difficult other possibilities. The kind of model I have in mind here is not simply then a model of an imposition of inscription on a blank slate, a page with no “texture” and no resistance of its own. As any calligrapher knows, the kind of texts produced depends not only on the message to be inscribed, not only on the inscriptive tools—stylus, ink—used, but also on the quality and distinctiveness of the paper written upon. Perhaps, then, a more appropriate model for this kind of body writing is not the writing of the blank page—a model which minimizes the impact and effects of the paper itself—but a model of etching, a model which needs to take into account the specificities of the materials being thus inscribed and their concrete effects in the kind of text produced.

Here I will explore the corporeal styles, the ontological structure, and the lived realities of sexually different bodies. This raises a further problem. The question of sexual difference admits of no outside position. The proclamation of a position outside, beyond, sexual difference is a luxury that only male arrogance allows. It is only men who can afford the belief that their perspective is an outside, disinterested, or objective position. The enigma that Woman has posed for men is an enigma only because the male subject has construed itself as the subject par excellence. The way (he fantasizes) that Woman differs from him make’s her containable within his imagination (reduced to his size) but also produces her as a mystery for him to master and decipher within safe or imthreatening borders (the fantasy of the inscrutable that man attributes to women and the West attributes to its others as well). But if one takes seriously the problematic of sexual difference, then as mysterious as Woman must be for men, so too must men be for women (and indeed so too must Woman be for women, and Man for men). There is no Tiresian position, no position outside of or midway between the two
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sexes, from which to objectively analyze them. A midway position (if it makes any sense at all) would simply be another sexually specific position, but by no means a more encompassing position. The task, then, is not to establish a neutral or objective perspective on the question of sexual difference but to find a position encompassing enough for a sexually specific perspective to be able to open itself up to, meet with, and be surprised at the (reciprocal) otherness of the other sex(es). Sexual difference entails the existence of a sexual ethics, an ethics of the ongoing negotiations between beings whose differences, whose alterities, are left intact but with whom some kind of exchange is nonetheless possible. My exploration of the lived and social dimensions of sexual difference will therefore openly acknowledge that the perspectives, peculiarities, and enigmas encountered are those of a woman raising issues about men’s, as well women’s, sexual specificities.

Powers and Dangers: Body Fluids

In Powers of Horror, Julia Kristeva outlines a typology of personalized horror that marks the significance for the subject and for culture of the various orifices and boundaries of the body. Relying heavily on Mary Douglas’s innovative text Purity and Danger, Kristeva asks about the conditions under which the clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body, emerges, the cost of its emergence, which she designates by the term abjection, and the functions that demarcating a clean and proper body for the social subject have in the transmission and production of specific body types. The abject is what of the body falls away from it while remaining irreducible to the subject/object and inside/outside oppositions. The abject necessarily partakes of both polarized terms but cannot be clearly identified with either. What interests me here about Kristeva’s work is the way in which this notion of abjection links the lived experience of the body, the social and culturally specific meanings of the body, the cultural investment in selectively marking the body, the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or leaving un- or underrepresented other parts and functions. It is the consequence of a culture effectively intervening into the constitution of the value of the body.

The abject is not that which is dirty or impure about the body: nothing in itself, as Douglas has argued, is dirty. Dirt, for her, is that which is not in its proper place, that which upsets or befuddles order. Nothing has the intrinsic property of disrupting or disturbing but can only be regarded as such in a specific context and system where order is imposed at the cost of the elements being thus ordered. Dirt signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and unincorporable always locates sites of potential threat to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematizes.
It is significant that from the outset of her analysis Douglas locates the question of purity and danger firmly in the relations between the two sexes, which function as her paradigm and sustained example.

I believe that some pollutants are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. According to other beliefs only one sex is endangered by contact with the other, usually males from females, but sometimes the reverse. Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy which apply in the larger social system. What goes for sex pollution also goes for bodily pollution. The two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness for social units. So also can the processes of ingestion portray political absorption. Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolise an ideal theocracy. (Douglas 1980: 3)

Douglas makes explicit here the notion that the body can and does function to represent, to symbolize, social and collective fantasies and obsessions: its orifices and surfaces can represent the sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise. Rituals and practices designed to cleanse or purify the body may serve as metaphors for processes of cultural homogeneity. Although Douglas herself seems less interested in the psychical and individual significance of these rituals, concentrating instead on their religious and cultural importance, she does provide us with some relevant data in discussing the question of sexual difference. Perhaps most interesting for our purposes is her claim that in certain cultures each of the sexes can pose a threat to the other, a threat that is located in the polluting powers of the other’s body fluids. This may prove a particularly significant site for an analysis of sexual difference in the era where sexuality has become reinvected with notions of contagion and death, of danger and purity, as a consequence of the AIDS crisis.

Kristeva’s use of Douglas’s work on pollution and defilement shifts it from a sociological and anthropological into a psychological and subjective register. While she indicates the social significance of the abject, its necessary implication in broader cultural values, she begins her analysis within a phenomenological framework. In discussing three broad categories of abjection—abjection toward food and thus toward bodily incorporation; abjection toward bodily waste, which reaches its extreme in the horror of the corpse; and abjection toward the signs of sexual difference—Kristeva is each time discussing the constitution of a proper social body, the processes of sorting, segregating, and demarcating the body so as to conform to but not exceed cultural expectations (excessiveness in itself pushes the question of the limit for the order which it exceeds).

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside. They atfront
a subject's aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity. They attest to a certain irreducible "dirt" or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the "clean" and "proper." They resist the determination that marks solids, for they are without any shape or form of their own. They are engulfing, difficult to be rid of; any separation from them is not a matter of certainty, as it may be in the case of solids. Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed. In this sense, they betray a certain irreducible materiality; they assert the priority of the body over subjectivity; they demonstrate the limits of subjectivity in the body, the irreducible specificity of particular bodies. They force megalomaniacal aspirations to earth, refusing consciousness its supremacy; they level differences while also specifying them. In our culture, they are enduring; they are necessary but embarrassing. They are undignified, nonpoetic, daily attributes of existence, rich or poor, black or white, man or woman, that all must, in different ways, face, live with, reconcile themselves to.

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly, and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such waste drops so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cōdere, cadaver. (Kristeva 1982: 3)

Douglas herself refers to Sartre's analysis of the viscous in Being and Nothingness as some kind of explanation of our horror of the fluid. For both Douglas and Sartre, the viscous, the fluid, the flows which infiltrate and seep, are horrifying in themselves: there is something inherently disgusting about the incorporative, immersing properties of fluid:

Viscosity repels in its own right, as a primary experience. An infant, plunging its hands into a jar of honey, is instantly involved in contemplating the formal properties of solids or liquids and the essential relation between the subjective experiencing self and the experienced world. The viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable, but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. There is no gliding on its surface. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it. Long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness ... to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity. Stickiness is clinging, like a too possessive dog or mistress. (Douglas 1980: 38)

Like Sartre, Douglas associates this clinging viscosity with the horror of femininity, the voraciousness and indeterminacy of the vagina dentata. It is clear, to me at least, that this horror of submersion, the fear of being absorbed into something which has no boundaries of its own, is not a property of the viscous itself;
in keeping with Douglas's claims about dirt, what is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity—the very notion that governs our self-representations and understanding of the body. It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations. Irigaray claims that this disquiet about the fluid, the viscous, the half-formed, or the indeterminate has to do with the cultural unrepresentability of fluids within prevailing philosophical models of ontology, their implicit association with femininity, with maternity, with the corporeal, all elements subordinated to the privilege of the self-identical, the one, the unified, the solid.7

Douglas refers to all borderline states, functions, and positions as dangers, sites of possible pollution or contamination. That which is marginal is always located as a site of danger and vulnerability. She, like Kristeva, conceives of the fluid as a borderline state, disruptive of the solidity of things, entities, and objects. Blood, vomit, saliva, phlegm, pus, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, seminal fluids, seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control, tracing the paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world, which must nevertheless be clear of these bodily “products” for an interchange to be possible.

These body fluids have different indices of control, disgust, and revulsion. There is a kind of hierarchy of propriety governing these fluids themselves. Those which function with clarity, unclouded by the specter of infection, can be represented as cleansing and purifying: tears carry with them none of the disgust associated with the cloudiness of pus, the chunkiness of vomit, the stickiness of menstrual blood. Acquiring a social representation as a clean fluid, as waterlike, transparent, purifying, tears take on a different psychological and sociological status than the polluting fluids that dirty the body. Douglas distinguishes between one kind of body fluid and another on the basis of their intrinsic properties, on the model of her (and Sartre’s) analysis of the viscous:

Why are saliva and genital excretions . . . more pollution-worthy than tears? If I can fervently drink his tears, wrote Jean Genet, why not so the limpid drop on the end of his nose? To this we can reply: first, that nasal secretions are not so limpid as tears. They are more like treacle than water. When a thick rheum oozes from the eye, it is no more apt for poetry than nasal rheum. But admittedly clear, fast-running tears are the stuff of romantic poetry: they do not defile. This is partly because tears are naturally preempted by the symbolism of washing, tears are like rivers of moving water. They purify, cleanse, bathe the eyes so how can they pollute? But more significantly tears are not related to the bodily functions of digestion and procreation. Therefore their scope for symbolising social relations and social processes. (Douglas 1980: 180)
Douglas suggests that it is the excessiveness of tears, their superfluity to the species and cultural requirements of biological preservation and reproduction, that leaves them free to represent elements of the social order. Perhaps this is true. But by the logic of her own argument, those bodily processes construed or constituted as marginal—most particularly, the sites of sexuality and jouissance—are readily able to function as loci for the representation of social and collective anxieties and fantasies. Douglas relies on a thinly veiled understanding of analogies, in which functions sharing broad similarities are able to act as metaphors for each other: tears, like a river, wash and flow, therefore tears are lived and function as cleansing and purifying. But if there is nothing inherently polluting, inherently disordered, then this does not explain why body fluids are constituted as polluting, as entrapping. She makes a similar presumption regarding cultural investments in the representation of sexual organs. She bases her claims once again on the apparently similarities between sexual processes and functions and cultural artifacts, with no recognition of implicit models she relies on for her very conception of human physiology:

Both male and female physiology lend themselves to the analogy with the vessel which must not pour away or dilute its vital bodily fluids. Females are correctly seen as, literally, the entry by which the pure content may be adulterated. Males are treated as pores through which the precious stuff may ooze out and be lost, with the whole system being thereby enfeebled. (Douglas 1980: 116)

By her own arguments, though, male and female physiology, whatever their forms, lend themselves to all sorts of models and representations. None seem more "natural" and inevitable than any others. Douglas here merely carries on a long tradition of rationalizing the models she finds useful in terms of some kind of natural resemblance, this time positing the body in a synecdochical relation to the fluids it contains. But hydraulic models, models of absorption, of incorporation, are all culturally validated representations that may make sense in our culture but are by no means inevitable. They all share the characteristic of establishing male sexuality and corporeality as the singular form, which is inadequate in establishing a symmetrical female sexuality and body morphology. The "precious stuff" circulating in sexual relations is not the movement of desire, the exchange of pleasures, but the transmission of seminal fluids, oozing through the male body into its resting place, the female body. This is seen as the only fluid exchanged, the one for which the female flows are merely preparatory, the media or conduits for male sexual flow. Douglas's view is by no means alien to or even very far from the dominant biological models today.

Douglas is, however, right in claiming that we live our sexual bodies, our body fluids and their particular forms of jouissance or tension, never as it were "in the raw," unmediated by cultural representations. Our pleasures and anxieties are always lived and experienced through models, images, representations,
and expectations. Those regulating and contextualizing the body and its pleasures have thus far in our cultural history established models which do not regard the polluting contamination of sexual bodies as a two-way process, in which each affects or infiltrates the other. Such a model involves a dual sexual symmetry that is missing in patriarchal structures. It is not the case that men's bodily fluids are regarded as polluting and contaminating for women in the same way or to the same extent as women's are for men. It is women and what men consider to be their inherent capacity for contagion, their draining, demanding bodily processes that have figured so strongly in cultural representations, and that have emerged so clearly as a problem for social control.

This has become alarmingly clear in contemporary AIDS discourse, where programs to halt the spread of the disease into the heterosexual community are aimed at women: women are, ironically, the ones urged to function as the guardians of the purity of sexual exchange. It is they who have been targeted by medical groups and community health centers as the site for the insistence on condom use. This targeting is not explicitly aimed at self-protection but rather at arresting the circulation of contaminants throughout the community. This remains particularly ironic insofar as the transmission of the disease, in the West at least, has moved from a largely gay male community through the sexual activities of bisexual men into the heterosexual community. Women are of course far more at risk from men than men are from women: it seems statistically likely that men will catch the HIV virus from other men, even if the virus's transmission is heterosexual. Making women responsible for the use of condoms and safe sex practices not only presumes a model of sexual conduct represented as a contract or a form of consent, in which women are "equal consenting partners," a model powerfully problematized in Carole Pateman's incisive analysis of liberal representations of sexual exchange in *The Sexual Contract*; it makes women, in line with the conventions and practices associated with contraceptive procedures, the guardians of the sexual fluids of both men and women. Men seem to refuse to believe that their body fluids are the "contaminants." It must be women who are the contaminants. Yet, paradoxically, the distinction between a "clean" woman and an "unclean" one does not come from any presumption about the inherent polluting properties of the self-enclosure of female sexuality, as one might presume, but is a function of the quantity, and to a lesser extent the quality, of the men she has already been with. So she is in fact regarded as a kind of sponge or conduit of other men's "dirt."*

While it is clear that one cannot provide universal or general claims about the ways in which either men as a group or women as a group live and experience their sexualities and corporealties or about the ways in which their bodies are culturally codified and constituted, this does not mean that these issues are illegitimate and ondiscussable; nor does it absolve us of the responsibility to discuss at least those forms with which we are concerned. What follows thus makes no
claim to universal relevance, but it docs aspire to capture at least some key fea­
tures that mark the ways in which men and women in contemporary Western
cultures signify, live, and practice their sexualities and desires.

Seminal Fluids

Perhaps the great mystery, the great unknown, of the body comes not from
the peculiarities and enigmas of female sexuality, from the cyclically regulated
flows that emanate from women's bodies, but from the unspoken and generally
unrepresented particularities of the male body. I have claimed in earlier chapters
that the specificities of the masculine have always been hidden under the gener­
ality of the universal, the human. Men have functioned as if they represented
masculinity only incidentally or only in moments of passion and sexual encour­
der; while the rest of the time they are representatives of the human, the generic
“person.” Thus what remains unanalyzed, what men can have no distance on, is
the mystery, the enigma, the unspoken of the male body.9

In researching this chapter I was at first puzzled and shocked that where
there seems to a huge volume of literature—medical, experiential, cultural—on
the specificities of the female body (the growth of literature on menstruation and
menopause since the feminist awakenings of the 1960s and 1970s is truly aston­
ishing), there is virtually nothing—beyond the discourses of medicine and biol­
ogy10—on men's body fluids. This has changed to some extent with the AIDS
crisis, but it still remains true that the vast bulk of literature emerging from AIDS
discourses on seminal fluids and male body fluids remains medicalized. Even por­
nography, the most explicit discourse of (men's representations of) female plea­
sure, remains focused on the body of woman. There are virtually no phenome­
nological accounts of men's body fluids, except in the borderline literatures of
homosexuality and voyeurism (the writings of de Sade, Genet, and others are as
close as we get to a philosophical or reflective account of the lived experiences
of male flow).

In an important analysis of pornography in Hard Core (1990), Linda Wil­
liams presents a significant confirmation of this claim when she argues that even
in the most explicit visual representations of male sexual fluids, what in the in­
dustry is known as the “money shot,” the come shot, functions primarily as a
mode of metaphorization of the invisible and graphically unrepresentable myster­
ies of the vagina and woman's interior. I don't want to suggest that female sex­
uality or anatomy is graphically unrepresentable. On the contrary, with the de­
velopment of newer and more complex imaging techniques, no part of the body
is graphically unrepresentable. The point is that the graphic representation nec­
essarily transforms the parameters and terms of the body thus represented. The
tactile exploration of the vagina and female sexual organs establishes a difference
space, different points of registration, different forms, shapes, intensities than visual representation.

The ejaculation shot is an externalization of (the presumption) of her pleasure, not his:

The stag film, seeking to learn more about the wonders of the “unseen world,” encounters its limits of visibility. ... for the male performer to penetrate the wonders is to make it nearly impossible for the viewer to see what is penetrated.

The money shot, however, succeeds in extending visibility to the next stage of representation of the heterosexual sex act: to the point of seeing climax. But this new visibility extends only to a knowledge of the hydraulics of male ejaculation, which, though certainly of interest, is a poor substitute for the knowledge of female wonders that the genre as a whole still seeks. The gynecological sense of the speculum that penetrates the female interior here really does give way to that of a self-reflecting mirror. While undoubtedly spectacular, the money shot is also hopelessly specular; it can only reflect back to the male gaze that purports to want knowledge of the woman’s pleasure the man’s own climax. (Williams 1990: 94)

This argument has a certain plausibility insofar as pornography, at least in part, offers itself to the (male) spectator as a form of knowledge and conceptual/perceptual mastery of the enigmas of female sexuality but is in fact his own projection of sexual pleasure. The come shot is thus no longer an unmediated representation and demonstration of his pleasure (as one would expect); it becomes an index of his prowess to generate her pleasure. His sexual specificity is not the object of the gaze but remains a mirror or rather a displacement of her pleasure (or at least his fantasy of her pleasure).

Phenomenology is generally displaced in favor of externalization, medicalization, solidification. Seminal fluid is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a causal agent and thus a thing, a solid: its fluidity, its potential seepage, the element in it that is uncontrollable, its spread, its formlessness, is perpetually displaced in discourse onto its properties, its capacity to fertilize, to father, to produce an object. Man sees that his “function” is to create, and own, at a (temporal and spatial) distance, and thus to extend bodily interests beyond the male body’s skin through its proprietorial role, its “extended corporeality” in the mother whom he has impregnated and the child thereby produced, making them his products, possessions, responsibilities.

Irigaray sees in this maneuver a reduction of the fluid to the solid, the establishment of a boundary that congeals, phallicizes, male (flows, flows which link male bodies to the modes of representation they commonly attribute to female bodies. This lies behind her question: why does Lacan, or psychoanalytic theory, censor the fluid, the seminal? Why does not sperm qualify as the objet à?

... we might ask (ourselves) why sperm is never treated as an object? Isn’t the subjection of sperm to the imperatives of reproduction alone symptomatic
of a permanence historically allocated to the solid (product)? And if, in the
dynamics of desire, the problem of castration intervenes—fantasy/reality of an
amputation, of a "crumbling" of that solid that the penis represents—a reck-
ooning with sperm-fluid as an obstacle to the generalization of an economy re-
stricted to solids remains in suspension. (Irigaray 1985b: 113)

Could the reduction of men’s body fluids to the by-products of pleasure and
the raw materials of reproduction, along with men’s refusal to acknowledge the
effects of flows that move through various parts of the body 12 and from the
inside out, have to do with men’s attempt to distance themselves from the very
kind of corporeality—uncontrollable, excessive, expansive, disruptive, irration-
al—they have attributed to women? Could the ways in which men’s body fluids
are lived coalesce with the demands of a heterosexualized opposition between
men and women in which women are attributed the very powers and capacities
that men fear in themselves? The ways in which men disavow their dependence
on what they construe as femininity (in themselves) may account for the con-
tempt (or reverence; they may amount to the same thing) in which many of them
hold women. It may help explain the alienness to many women of men’s capacity
to distance themselves, their subjectivities, from their sexualities in such a way
that men (both gay and straight) regard their sexual desires as overwhelming or
uncontrollable impulses and find themselves to be “different persons” when com-
paring daily life with sexual encounters, regarding their sexual organs on the
model of the homunculus, a little man within the man, with a quasi-autonomy
of its own. It may help explain the alienness of men’s capacity to reify bodily
organs, to be interested in organs rather than the subjects to whom they belong,
to seek sexuality without intimacy, to strive for anonymity amid promiscuity, to
detach themselves from sexual engagement in order to establish voyeuristic dis-
tance, to enjoy witnessing and enacting violence and associate it with sexual
pleasure, to enjoy the idea or actuality of sex with children, as an act of con-
scious cruelty, to use their sexual organs as weapons (and indeed to produce
weapons modeled on the image of their sexual organs).

I am struck by the very different attitudes and relations at least some gay
men take to their own bodies, body parts, and body fluids compared with het-
erosexuals, although of course there are also major similarities between them not
shared by women which should not be ignored. I am not making claims for all
gay men here and certainly not for gay men in all cultures or times: there are
many ways in which gay men’s bodies can be lived and invested, which are
largely a function of the practices they undertake, the desires that feed them, and
the meanings attributed to these desires and practices (or desires as practices).
But perhaps many gay men are allowing a sort of “latent femininity” to appear
which heterosexual men need to repress. I am suggesting that a different type of
body is produced in and through the different sexual and cultural practices that
men undertake. Part of the process of phallicizing the male body, of subordinat-
Sexed Bodies

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The rest of the body to the valorized functioning of the penis, with the culmination of sexual activities occurring, ideally at least, in sexual penetration and male orgasm, involves the constitution of the sealed-up, impermeable body. Perhaps it is not after all flow in itself that a certain phallicized masculinity abhors but the idea that flow moves or can move in two-way or indeterminable directions that elicits horror, the possibility of being not only an active agent in the transmission of flow but also a passive receptacle. It may be this, among other things, that distinguishes heterosexual men from many gay men who are prepared not only to send out but also to receive flow and in this process to assert other bodily regions than those singled out by the phallic function. A body that is permeable, that transmits in a circuit, that opens itself up rather than seals itself off, that is prepared to respond as well as to initiate, that does not revile its masculinity (as the transsexual commonly does) or virilize it (as a number of gay men, as well as heterosexuals, tend to do) would involve a quite radical rethinking of male sexual morphology. This rethinking is, I hope, partly being undertaken, whether consciously or not, in the rethinking of sexual encounters and sexual pleasure demanded by the AIDS crisis, with its possibilities of a nonphallicized male sexual pleasure. I do not want to suggest that this is impossible for heterosexual men, but it must involve a radical transformation in the kinds of sexual practices they engage in and an even more difficult transformation in the structure of desire whereby they are not weakened as men, do not see themselves as “feminized,” in their willingness of take on passive positions, to explore the rest of their bodies (as well as women’s), taking on pleasure of a different order, but are able to reclaim, reuse, re intensify, body parts, zones, and functions that have been phallidy disinvested.

Earlier in this chapter I suggested, in agreement with Douglas, that what is considered disruptive or transgressive of borders or boundaries is represented as dirt and may be experienced, in keeping with Kristeva’s terminology, as abject. Dirt is what disrupts order, and order is conceived of as an arbitrary arrangement of elements in relative stability or harmony. It is only through the attempted expulsion of the improper, the disarranging, the unclean (an attempt, as Kristeva observes, that is always provisional and ultimately impossible), that the representation of order can continue. By excluding men’s body fluids from their self-representation, or rather, by exerting a quasi- or apparent control over them (not the control implied by abstinence, which is an attempt to control the flow by preventing it from occurring, a fear of the disarray implied by the flow), by either separating them from the body as soon as possible (the familiar gesture of washing, or even ritual cleansing, after sexual intercourse) or, more commonly, representing the flow as a mark of appropriation, as the production of a solid, with all its attendant rights and occasional responsibilities, men markate their own bodies as clean and proper. Moreover, through this dispossession or transmission of possession men take on the right of the proprietors of women’s bodies too.
insofar as women’s bodies are conceived as the receptacles of men’s body fluids and the nesting place of their product—the fetus. This may explain the anger of many men directed not so much against the principle of abortion on demand—which, if recent surveys are correct, most men and women support—as against “their” women’s use of this principle, described in some of the literature of “male feminism” as “lost fatherhood”; men mourn not the loss of their body fluids but its wastage.” It seems clear that it is only when men take responsibility for and pleasure in the forms of seepage that are their own, when they cease to reduce it to its products, when they accept the sexual specificity, particularity, and limit that is their own, that they will respect women’s bodily autonomy and sexual specificity as well.

Thus far in the history of recent feminist theory, men have operated reactively, often with confusion and anger, to the changes and upheavals women have effected in their lives. They have been forced to disrupt their expectations and sometimes their practices, especially in the sphere of sexual encounters, but they have commonly done so unwillingly and with a sense of nostalgia at what they believe they have lost. It is only when these kinds of changes and transformations are also actively sought and affirmed, only when men themselves are willing and desire to make positive and expansive changes to their own sexual horizons, that they are able to meet women half way in the transformation of the sexually binarized body. This is a rewriting of the Oedipalized body (note that I am not suggesting a voluntaristic willful changing of the deepest structure of the unconscious: such a change is not readily possible, in psychoanalytic terms, or if it is, it is the result of a very detailed psychotherapy that may accompany but is not necessary for the kinds of changes that I have in mind here), both from the point of view of establishing an experimental desire, a desire for experiment, change, transformation, and of developing procedures for rewriting of the kind involved in transforming one’s practices and activities.

**Women’s Corporeal Flows**

Women’s bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men’s but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness to men’s. This is not to say that women necessarily experience their sexualities and desires in this way but rather that the only socially recognized and validated representations of women’s sexuality are those which conform to and accord with the expectations and desires of a certain heterosexual structuring of male desire. This, I believe, is part of the explanation of why feminists have found that psychoanalytic discourse, in spite of its well-recognized problems, has been useful in explaining the sexual structuring and positioning of the two sexes relative to each other. Psychoanalysis has provided a series of insights regarding the ways in which a desire for passivity is constructed and
reproduced for women. But, as already discussed, psychoanalysis does not provide a way of transforming the structure of power relations between the sexes, although it has been strategically used by a number of feminists to demonstrate the inherent paradoxes, ironies, and tensions associated with the passages to masculinity and femininity expected for men and women respectively.

Rather than add to the plethora of feminist texts on psychoanalysis and tread the well-worn pathway from the polymorphous infantile to the Oedipalized, castrated feminine or the phallic masculine positions, a different kind of approach, one not incompatible with psychoanalysis, one perhaps closer to the kinds of phenomenological approach already discussed, might be worth pursuing. Here I am interested not so much in the genesis and structure of libidinal zones according a model of infantile development outlined by psychoanalysis as in a tracing of the kinds of libidinal pathway across women’s bodies that various corporeal flows make possible and in turn respond to.

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment—not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? I am not suggesting that this is how women are, that it is their ontological status. Instead, my hypothesis is that women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage. My claim is not that women have been somehow desolidified but the more limited one which sees that women, insofar as they are human, have the same degree of solidity, occupy the same genus, as men, yet insofar as they are women, they are represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity. The metaphors of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body (particularly, but not only, with the onset of puberty and in the case of pregnancy), its powers of cynical seduction and allure are all common themes in literary and cultural representations of women. But these may well be a function of the projection outward of their corporealities, the liquidities that men seem to want to cast out of their own self-representations.

If women have been defined on the side of the body and men on the side of the mind, then there are particular bodily zones that serve to emphasize both women’s difference from and otherness to men. There is nothing inherent in these regions and zones that makes them more suitable for culturally representing sexual difference—many others would have served this function just as well; what culturally marks sexual difference is biologically arbitrary, conventional. With the developments of puberty, what becomes visible and tangible is a measure of womanhood is the development of the so-called secondary sexual characteristics, the filling out of breasts and hips, the growth of pubic hair, and perhaps most strikingly, the onset of menses. While clearly the development of these character-
Sexual Difference

istics leads to many different attitudes and responses—some girls relish their new-found maturation, while others approach it with dread and shame—none­theless there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions. Boys’ bodies too mature at this time, but what their biological developments entail is a preparedness not simply for reproduction and fatherhood but also for “mature” sexual activity (primarily intercourse).

It is significant that Iris Young, in her definitive phenomenological study of the experience of being/having breasts, also has recourse to the kind of metaphorics of fluidity proposed by Irigaray. From Young’s point of view, Irigaray is not posing a new ontological truth about women’s inherent fluidity as opposed to men’s solidity and self-identity. Rather, her gesture is openly acknowledged as strategic. A “mechanics of solids,” which works in fundamental complicity with Cartesian dualism and the metaphysics of realism and self-identity that it supports, entails a thing (including a subject) that is identical to itself. This metaphysics is dualist not simply in terms of presuming and establishing an opposition between mind and body but in binarizing existence with the distinction between subject and object, thus implicitly (and at times explicitly) coding women on the side of body and object. Young resorts to the Irigarayan metaphorics of fluids insofar as it befuddles and complicates this Cartesian ontology and is as capable of rewriting male corporeality as female. Moreover, as Young validates, Irigaray’s refusal to subordinate the tactile and the morphological under the domination of the visual is consistent with this strategy of problematizing the self-identical, problematizing the ready separation between subject and object (which is most readily confirmed, as I have already argued in chapter 4, through the distance separating the seer from the seen). This is not a new “fact” of female or human existence but a different way of looking at subjectivity and corporeality, highlighting quite different facets and features. Here is Young’s suggestion for displacing the alienating objectification and sometimes self-objectification undergone by women when breasts become an object of the male gaze and male “possession”:

My conceptualization of a woman-centered experience of breasts is a construc­tion, an imagining, that I will locate in the theme of desubstantialization. If we move from the male gaze in which woman is the Other, the object, the solid and definite, to imagine the woman’s point of view, the breasted body becomes blurry, mushy, indefinite, multiple and without clear identity-----A metaphys­ics generated from feminine desire, Luce Irigaray suggests, might conceptualize being as fluid rather than as solid substances, of things. Fluids, unlike objects, have no definite borders; they are unstable, which does not mean that they are without pattern. Fluids surge and move, and a metaphysic that thinks being as fluid would tend to privilege the living, moving, pulsing over the inert dead matter of the Cartesian world view. ...
As far as I am concerned, it is not at all a matter of making a claim about women's biology or bodies, for conceptualized in a radically different way, men's bodies are at least as fluid as women's. The point is that a metaphysics of self-identical objects has clear ties to the domination of nature in which the domination of women has been implicated because culture has projected onto us identification with the abject body. (Young 1990: 192-93)

The fluidity and indeterminacy of female body parts, most notably the breasts but no less the female sexual organs, are confined, constrained, solidified, through more or less temporary or permanent means of solidification by clothing or, at the limit, by surgery. This indeterminacy is again not a fact of nature but a function of the modes of representation that privilege the solid and the determinate over the fluid. This process too may account for the valorization of the erect over the flaccid penis and the humiliation, the feminization, presumed in men's sexual impotence.

Women's bodies do not develop their adult forms with reference to their newly awakened sexual capacities, for these are dramatically overcoded with the resonances of motherhood. Puberty for girls marks the development of the breasts and the beginning of menstruation as an entry into the reproductive reality that is presumed to be women's prime domain. Puberty is not figured as the coming of a self-chosen sexual maturity but as the signal of immanent reproductive capacities. The first issuing forth of sperm, the onset of nocturnal emissions, signals coming manhood for the boy, the sexual pleasures and encounters fantasized and yet to come; but the onset of menstruation is not an indication at all for the girl of her developing sexuality, only her coming womanhood. And moreover, whereas the boy is able to psychically solidify the flow of sperm, connecting it metonymically to a corporeal pleasure and metaphorically with a desired object (or at least a place), for the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood. The idea of soiling oneself, of dirt, of the very dirt produced by the body itself, staining the subject, is a “normal” condition of infancy, but in the case of the matur­ing woman it is a mark or stain of her future status, the impulsion into a future of a past that she thought she had left behind. This necessarily marks womanhood, whatever else it may mean for particular women, as outside itself, outside its time (the time of a self-contained adulthood) and place (the place definitively within its own skin, as a self-identical being), and thus a paradoxical entity, on the very border between infancy and adulthood, nature and culture, subject and object, rational being and irrational animal.

Kristeva too seems to think there is a link between menstruation and dirt. She creates a dual set of pairings: on one hand there are nonpolluting body fluids and on the other, polluting body fluids. The two nonpolluting but still marginal
... fluids she mentions are, in keeping with Douglas, tears (as earlier quoted) and, significantly, semen. Douglas has adequately, even if not entirely plausibly, explained why tears are regarded as purifying rather than polluting (for her it has to do with the resemblance between clear tears and water, the cleansing element par excellence); but it is less plausible to argue that semen inherently, as a consequence of its own natural “properties” or “qualities”—its translucence, its clarity, its purity—is nonpolluting. Tears and semen are in any case not structurally symmetrical. While tears are commonly culturally associated with femininity, they are of course a capacity of both men's and women's bodies. Semen, by contrast, is a specifically male sexual flow, indeed, in the light of current medical knowledge, it is the only specifically male sexual flow. Its nonpolluting status cannot be simply a function of its role in the fertilization of the ovum and the reproduction of the species, for this is a relatively recent medical discovery and does not, for example, explain the sacred status of semen in many non-Western cultures, not to mention in our own cultural history. Nor does it explain the differential status of menstruation, which also has its role in the reproduction of the species.

Kristeva distinguishes these nonpolluting body fluids from those which defile. The latter she divides into two classes or types, each of which elicits the reaction of abjection: excrement and menstrual blood. This coupling is itself significant insofar as menstrual blood, as I have been arguing, becomes associated with the characteristics of excrement. The representation of female sexuality as an uncontainable flow, as seepage associated with what is unclean, coupled with the idea of female sexuality as a vessel, a container, a home empty or lacking in itself but fillable from the outside, has enabled men to associate women with infection, with disease, with the idea of festering putrefaction, no longer contained simply in female genitals but at any or all points of the female body. Bodily differences, marked and given psychical and cultural significance, are of course not restricted to the particular bodily regions in which they originate: they seep not only outside of and beyond the body, forming a kind of zone of contamination, but also into all other regions of the body, passing on a kind of aura or mode of operation that is no longer localized or localizable.

The development of shame, disgust, and other moral functions is, as Freud has argued, a consequence of the child’s learning to control its bowels. The clean and proper body’s development is directly linked to the child’s negotiations with the demands of toilet training and the regulation of body fluids. Within this cultural constellation it is not surprising, then, that women’s menstrual flow is regarded not only with shame and embarrassment but with disgust and the powers of contaminating. Kristeva distinguishes these two classes of abject in terms of the kinds and location of the danger each poses:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without; the ego threatened by the non-
ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate, and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva 1982: 71)

Excrement poses a threat to the center—to life, to the proper, the clean—not from within but from its outermost margin. While there is no escape from excrementality, from mortality, from the corpse, these do not or need not impinge on the everyday operations of the subject or body. The (social and psychical) goal is to establish as great a separation as possible from the excremental, to get rid of it quickly, to clean up after the mess. What Kristeva suggests about menstrual flow seems more complicated and problematic: for her, it is a danger, internal to identity, and threatens the relations between the sexes. It cannot be escaped or fled from, for it is the condition, qua maternity, of life and sexual difference.

I cannot understand how Kristeva can claim that menstrual blood represents a danger to both sexes in a way that semen does not. She links excrement and menstrual blood through the figure of the (phallic) mother, so presumably sperm is attributed to the father. Is it that paternity is less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable, than maternity? Or rather, is it less dangerous and threatening for men? The grounds of Kristeva's analysis remain obscure and not entirely convincing.

The specific, particular developments surrounding women's coming to maturity are thus linked with and may be represented in terms of various cycles of bodily flow: women's genitals and breasts are the loci of (potential) flows, red and white, blood and milk, flows that are difficult to appropriate while under constant threats of personal and legal appropriation, flows that signal both a self-contained autoerotic pleasure and a site of potential social danger insofar as they are resistant to various cultural overlays (being unamenable to coercion and pressure, though in a sense absolutely open to cultural inscription), and insofar as they insist on the irreducible specificity of women's bodies, the bodies of all women, independent of class, race, and history. This irreducible specificity in no way universalizes the particular ways in which women experience their bodies and bodily flows. But given the social significance of these bodily processes that are invested in and by the processes of reproduction, all women's bodies are marked as different from men's (and inferior to them) particularly at those bodily regions where women's differences arc most visibly manifest.

There will always remain a kind of outsidencss or alienness of the expert cnees and lived reality of each sex for the other. Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity—a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with tin-rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman. I he
one sex, whether male or female or some other term, can only experience, live, according to (and hopefully in excess of) the cultural significations of the sexually specific body. The problematic of sexual difference entails a certain failure of knowledge to bridge the gap, the interval, between the sexes. There remains something ungraspable, something outside, unpredictable, and uncontainable, about the other sex for each sex. This irreducible difference under the best conditions evokes awe and surprise; under less favorable conditions it evinces horror, fear, struggle, resistance. When respected, this difference implies distance, division, an interval: it involves each relating to the other without being engulfed or overwhelmed. In other words, it involves a remainder, an indigestible residue, which remains unconsumed in any relation between them. More commonly, though, this gulf, this irremediable distance, is what remains intolerable to masculinist regimes bent on the disavowal of difference and the insistence on sameness and identity: these regimes make the other over into a (lesser) version of the same. While sexual difference entails its own forms of violence (the violence of differentiation), the insistence on sameness, identity, equivalence, formalized exchange, exerts a different kind of violence, a violence that occurs to a group (in this case women) whose difference is effaced. The former is a constitutive, formative, ineliminable violence, the violence of existence and becoming; the latter is a wanton, gratuitous violence, a violence that undergoes historical and cultural transformation, a violence capable of being transformed, rewritten, even reversed, through the counterviolence of resistance. This book has been an attempt to promote this counterviolence while at the same time recognizing the constitutive violence of the operations of difference itself.

I have been concerned with establishing models, concepts, categories, and methodologies that tie subjectivity irreducibly to the specificities of sexed bodies. But in doing so, instead of seeking sexual identities, the notion of two absolutely separate types of entity, men and women, I have attempted to seek out traces and residues of sexual difference, a difference impossible to unify, impossible to separate from its various others and impossible to identify or seal off in clear-cut terms. Once the subject is no longer seen as an entity—whether psychical or corporeal—but fundamentally an effect of the pure difference that constitutes all modes of materiality, new terms need to be sought by which to think this alterity within and outside the subject.

In using the notion of the sexed body as the frame for my analysis of (sexual) difference, I risk that ready slippage from a focus on difference to one on identity. It is clear that there must be a relation between sexual difference and sexual identity; sexual difference, though, cannot be understood, as is commonly the case in much feminist literature, in terms of a comparison and contrast between two types of sexual identity independently formed and formulated. Instead it must be seen as the very ground on which sexual identities and their external relations
Sexed Bodies

are made possible. Sexual difference is related to sexual identity in the same way that Saussure’s notion of pure difference provides the grounds or conditions of existence of linguistic value. But just as, for Saussure and Derrida, pure difference can never appear as such because it must consistently erase its contribution to signification and linguistic value, because for it to appear as such is for it to transform itself, to render itself present, so too sexual difference is a framework or horizon that must disappear as such in the codings that constitute sexual identity and the relations between the sexes. Sexual difference is the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms but is implied in the very possibility of an entity, an identity, a subject, an other and their relations.

This notion of sexual difference, a difference that is originary and constitutive, is not, strictly speaking, ontological; if anything it occupies a preontological—certainly a preepistemological—terrain insofar as it makes possible what things or entities, what beings, exist (the ontological question) and insofar as it must preexist and condition what we can know (the epistemological question). The framework or terrain of sexual difference entails not the concept of a continuum, a wholeness, a predivisional world as plenum, but the simultaneous recognition and effacement of the spacings, the intervals, the irreducible if unspecified positioning, the fissures and ruptures, that bind each “thing” to every other and to the whole of existence without, however, linking them into an organic or metaphysical wholeness or unity.

These are no longer either independent units each with their own internal cohesion; nor are they unbounded relations with no specificity or location. Bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate, certain self-evidences because embodiment, corporeality, insist on alterity, both that alterity they carry within themselves (the heart of the psyche lies in the body; the body’s principles of functioning are psychological and cultural) and that alterity that gives them their own concreteness and specificity (the alterities constituting race, sex, sexualities, ethnic and cultural specificities). Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment: it conditions but is also a product of the pliability or plasticity of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their “nature,” their functions and identities.

My goal, though, was not to provide a definitive model by which bodies and their sexual differences are to be understood. For one thing, that seems to misunderstand what a model entails. A model is a heuristic device which facilitates a certain understanding, highlighting certain features while diminishing the significance of others; it is a selective rewriting of a situation whose complexity entails the possibility of other, alternative models, models which highlight different features, presenting different emphases. The Möbius strip model hits the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two “things” — mind and body—which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate “things” being related, they
have the capacity to twist one into the other. This enables the mind/body relation to avoid the impasses of reductionism, of a narrow causal relation or the retention of the binary divide. It enables subjectivity to be understood not as the combination of a psychical depth and a corporeal superficiality but as a surface whose inscriptions and rotations in three-dimensional space produce all the effects of depth. It enables subjectivity to be understood as fully material and for materiality to be extended and to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance. It stretches and represents the conceptual possibilities that this book has attempted to explore. But the Mobius strip is only one possible representation; it neither precludes other possibilities nor is necessarily the best or most enabling representation. Nor is it without its own problems or limits (any model has them). For one thing, utilizing the Mobius model limits our understanding of the subject in terms of dualism but links it to a kind of monism, autonomy, or self-presence that precludes understanding the body, bodies, as the terrain and effect of difference. Moreover, it is a model not well suited for representing modes of becoming, modes of transformation. But in a sense the field of differences, the trajectories of becoming, do not lend themselves readily to representation, to handy models. The infinite pliability of the body that I have suggested throughout implies that a host of other models may, for other purposes and in other contexts, prove just as useful. The task ahead involves exploring and experimenting with as many of these models as we may need and find useful for the various infinite contexts in which the question of bodies, their powers and differences, arises. It involves taking theoretical risks in the hope that new methods and models, new techniques and contexts, may one day develop which will readily acknowledge the centrality of the problematic of sexual difference to the ways in which we conceive of and act in the world. It involves not a death of man or of God but the generation of a new productivity between and of the two sexes.