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# Janus Head

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# Interdisciplinary Feminist Phenomenology

Editors: Eva-Maria Simms and Beata Stawarska

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## Introduction: Concepts and Methods in Interdisciplinary Feminist Phenomenology

Eva-Maria Simms and Beata Stawarska

### *Feminist Phenomenology*

This volume showcases some of the current developments in interdisciplinary feminist phenomenology. The notion that phenomenology belongs to the field of feminist concerns and benefits from an engagement with other disciplines hinges on a progressive and broad understanding of what phenomenology is. Phenomenology is *feminist* as long as it includes questions related to gendered experience and sexual difference within its field of study. Contrary to the conservative and narrow view of phenomenology as being confined to the stance of a (presumably) sexless, individualistic ego, gendered embodiment and sexual hierarchy do not fall out of the pure transcendental domain into the contingent and the empirical; they belong to the aspirations of phenomenology to describe concrete, lived human experience in its richness and complexity.<sup>1</sup> One notes therefore a veritable resurgence of publications in the field of feminist phenomenology within the last two decades (it includes notably Stoller and Vetter's edited anthology *Phänomenologie und Geschlechterdifferenz* (Stoller & Vetter, 1997), Fisher and Embree's volume *Feminist Phenomenology* (Fisher & Embree, 2000), Fisher, Stoller and Vasterling's bilingual collection *Feminist Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* (Stoller, Vasterling, & Fisher, 2005), Heinämaa and Rodemeyer's special edition "Feminist Phenomenologies" of the *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2010 (Heinämaa & Rodemeyer, 2010); Iris Young's collection of essays *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a Girl" and other Essays* (Young, 2005) has become a classic in the field; numerous other collections and individual pieces have come out since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most notably many fine papers in the journal *Hypatia*.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist phenomenology has become an active sub-field within the phenomenological school of thought within the last two decades.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the narrow view, and the possible difficulties involved in aligning classical phenomenology and feminism, see Linda Fisher's 'Phenomenology and Feminism. Perspectives on the Relation' (*Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Fisher and Embree, Kluwer, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For more extensive bibliographical references to feminist phenomenology, see e. g. Fisher and Embree (2000) and Heinämaa and Rodemeyer (2010).

Historically, its origins are usually dated back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, (Beauvoir, 1949/1989), considered a founding text in the tradition due to its admixture of narrative accounts of women's lived experience with a global outlook on women's subordination in society. This text has been only recently reclaimed as a properly philosophical opus with a distinctly phenomenological conceptual vocabulary – a fact obscured to the English-speaking audience by an incomplete and misleading translation;<sup>3</sup> there now exists a substantial body of secondary literature devoted to the philosophical and phenomenological dimensions of Beauvoir's work, and she has belatedly become recognized as an original thinker in her own right.

The beginnings of feminist phenomenology can be dated further back to Edith Stein's phenomenological writings from the 1930s. They raise the question of human types and gendered identities – a properly philosophical/phenomenological interrogation, which combines an interest in the universal categories of experience with the political cause of women's access to appropriate education, as well as spirituality (in English, see especially *Essays on woman* (Stein, 1996); for an introduction, see Calcagno (Calcagno, 2007). Hannah Arendt's reflections on the human action's dependency on natality and the event of birth in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958/1998) are directly relevant to the feminist phenomenological project. Luce Irigaray's engagement with the phenomenological tradition (through Merleau-Ponty and Levinas), and the inclusion of pre-discursive experience in her own thinking, point to a live relation between phenomenology and the “French feminist” tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (see especially *An Ethics of Sexual difference*, (Irigaray, 1993)). In sum, elements of feminist phenomenology can be encountered in the writings of contemporary women philosophers in the continental European tradition for a long time – even if the authors did not adhere to the labels “feminist” or “phenomenologist.”

### *Interdisciplinary Dialogue in Feminist Phenomenology*

#### A deliberate thematic openness to experience as gendered feminine

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<sup>3</sup> The first translation into English by Parshley omitted large sections of the original material, and turned technical philosophical concepts into loose everyday ones; a new translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier has been available since November 2010 (Beauvoir, 2011).

and/or masculine has not always been coupled with interdisciplinarity; feminist phenomenology is sometimes bound by an academic emphasis on exegesis of the canonical phenomenological texts, and converses with other traditions of inquiry within philosophy only. Feminist phenomenology is interdisciplinary as long as it intersects the methods and approaches of reflective and empirical disciplines, and ties theoretical study with practical relevance (such as in therapeutic practice, or in concerns about the ethical and political backdrop, and implications of phenomenological claims). We believe that feminist aspirations are well served by interdisciplinarity, and that a thematic and a methodological openness go hand in hand. A straightforward appeal to one's own experience may not be sufficiently mindful of its own background assumptions and its location on the social map; as such it can be corrected, without simply being overthrown, by a broader, structural analysis of the total situation in which this experience unfolds, which is the approach that feminist philosophy contributes. Similarly, a scholar can all the better accommodate the richness and complexity of lived human experience when she enriches phenomenological reflection with a case study or other data gathered by researchers, or even with the insights expressed by artists and writers. This does not imply, however, a blind trust in the unquestioned validity of hard data, nor does it suggest that the scientist has the final say on the truth. An interdisciplinary feminist phenomenologist brings conceptual resources to bear on the empirical material understood as a phenomenon endowed with meaning, and in need of interpretation. Needless to say, interdisciplinary efforts of this kind are best pursued by a community of scholars drawing on diverse disciplinary and social backgrounds. Only then is the myth of a sexless, individualistic ego effectively overcome.

### *The Phenomenological Method*

Phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty said, "can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking. (...) It has been long on the way, and its adherents have discovered it in every quarter " (1962, p. viii). This phenomenological style of thinking suffuses the papers in this collection: our authors come from many disciplinary quarters (philosophy, psychology, nursing, education) and also from different countries (Canada, the US, Great Britain, Austria, Norway and Sweden). But all are committed to a phenomenological sensibility and have discovered phenomenology as

a useful and fertile style of thinking in their field of research.

The strength of phenomenology lies in its interdisciplinary appeal. It is on the one hand a conceptual system within the history of philosophy, and since Husserl its intention has been to create new concepts in order to think the dimension of human experience and meaning (*Sinn*) more clearly and fully. But Husserl also conceived phenomenology as a *method* which would provide a deeper access to the fullness of phenomena as they present themselves to human consciousness (Husserl, 1952). As a method phenomenology slows down the stream of consciousness in order to create a descriptive attitude which focuses attention on the fullness (*Fülle*) of things and events. This process reveals the depth and complexity of phenomena which are usually covered over in our habitual, unreflected attitude of perceiving and judging what we experience. Phenomenology follows our naïve relationship to the world and lifts it up into philosophical thinking. Phenomenologists train themselves to dwell with phenomena and work on unraveling the fundamental structures of being which constitute the world as it appears in the researchers' particular time and place – a necessarily incomplete process because there is always more that can be researched and thought. The transcendence of things, which reveals itself in the phenomenological reduction, means that being is always already somewhere else and that the researcher discovers a profound web of significations, which leads to further questions rather than final answers. Phenomenology as practiced in philosophy and the human and social sciences has been long on the way, and it also has a long way to go: it is a method of continuous inquiry. Its strength lies in the ability of phenomenological researchers to be surprised by what the world has to offer and to work on understanding what determines our own construction of reality.

As a *method*, phenomenology has a number of functions:

1. Qualitative, phenomenological research in the human sciences works closely with first person descriptions about specific human experiences and attempts to illuminate the complexity of the research participants' worlds. It aims for depth and understanding of the human condition, rather than statistical validity. It is often useful for professionals in psychotherapy, nursing, and education who work with people with similar experiences as the research participants, and it allows them to develop better service practices for these populations.



2. In relation to qualitative research, a phenomenological inquiry practice pushes researchers to question the fundamental conceptual assumptions that undergird their research theories and practices and opens the field to new ways of understanding what is being researched. Here are two examples: Merleau-Ponty's (1962) introduction of the concept of the lived body was a very fertile challenge to the scientific theories of the body as a machine-like, anatomical entity, and it has revolutionized the thinking in contemporary cognitive neuroscience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1992); his phenomenological critique of the Kantian notion of "internal representations", which is a fundamental and unquestioned concept in most psychological theories, has the potential to open up research in cognition and intelligence in new and exciting ways (Dreyfus, 2002).
3. Engagement with psychology, education, nursing, sociology, anthropology, biology, physics etc. enlivens philosophical phenomenology. Simone de Beauvoir (2011) demonstrated that a *critical* engagement with the sciences of the day can be extremely fruitful for the philosopher. It reveals how philosophical concepts operate in the public discourse of the sciences, and that a *change* in philosophical concepts – feminist concepts, for example – leads to different research practices, which in turn can lead to different social practices since the sciences have a profound impact on the everyday lives of people. In return, the data of the sciences give philosophy something to think through and to challenge and test its philosophical systems.

### *A Critical Phenomenology*

Husserl's *époché*, as it has evolved in the phenomenological movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demands that we work on understanding the constraints of our own socio-historical discourses in which we were trained and which surround us in our institutions and public life. For Husserl (1970) it meant understanding the pervasive mathematization of knowledge and the resultant denigration--by the natural sciences--of the more fundamental epistemological structures of human experience as subjective and unreliable, and to rehabilitate consciousness and perception

as proper fields of inquiry for philosophy. For phenomenologists today the *époché* or bracketing implies that we have to be suspicious of our own cultural prejudices and accept that we will never be able to perform a complete reduction and see phenomena in their transcendental purity. Phenomenology has been on the way for a century and it has adapted and responded to the pressing philosophical questions of its time and widened its scope into continental philosophy: we have moved through the existential turn with Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; through the hermeneutic turn with Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur; through the post-structuralist turn with Foucault and Derrida; through the ethics/event turn with Levinas and Deleuze; through the feminist turn with Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Butler. A *critical phenomenology* understands the contingencies of human experience and consciousness and works on understanding the pervasive influences of ideology, politics, language, and power structures as they construct and constrain the lived experiences of people. Phenomenology is a limited and flawed enterprise, but more than any other philosophy and method it teaches us to pay close attention, to describe well, to understand phenomena within their larger context, and to reflect on our own limitations as researchers, thinkers, and fellow human beings.

Feminist phenomenology is, by definition, a *critical* phenomenology. Feminist thinkers find themselves thinking within a long tradition of concepts created by males who have taken the male world-experience as the norm and as the foundation for their epistemological practices. Finding one's place neither fully within nor completely outside this tradition is a difficult task, and the feminist researcher has to be critical of her own intellectual history as well as of the institutions which produce knowledge. But feminist phenomenologists are also faithful in their attempts to describe and conceptualize gendered existence and to allow for a clearing where women's voices can be heard. Feminist phenomenology finds itself having to balance the hermeneutic discipline of suspicion (of existing discourse structures) with a hermeneutic discipline of affirmation and empowerment (of the complexity of individual, situated, gendered life experiences) in order to find a place for ethical, non-patriarchal political action on behalf of women, men, and children.

*Feminist Research Practice*

Many contributions in this volume showcase qualitative research practices and articulate feminist and critical approaches to conceptualizing, conducting, and interpreting the process of research itself. In the following are some of the key insights about feminist phenomenological research methods from their papers.

1. Feminist research practice begins with understanding that human experience is embodied, inter-subjective, and contingent, and woven into personal and cultural webs of signification. The experiences of research participants have to be treated with interest, respect and compassion, but they also have to be interpreted from a critical perspective: is the disenfranchisement of a woman laboring in a hospital ward just a given of the process of pregnancy, or is her experience of giving birth produced by the underlying scientific ideology of the medical establishment and its institutional practices? Feminist phenomenologists do a “double book-keeping”: note what the participant says, but also uncover what she does not or cannot say but what structures her discourse.
2. Feminist researchers are critical of the power structures inherent in academic disciplines and try to develop alternate forms of generating data and interacting with research participants. The scientific production of knowledge and the academic research procedures themselves are suspect because they have been used to cement the patriarchal status quo and were used as a tool for the erasure of women from scientific theories (Gilligan, 1982).
3. Feminist researchers engage in the practice of *reflexivity*, which consists of procedures that help us become aware of our own preconceptions and prejudices and clarify the researchers own participation in the creation of research data.
4. Many feminist approaches are relation centered and challenge the view of the bounded, masterful, isolated self. As Linda Finlay puts it: we are related to our participants, even “entangled”, and our phenomenological *époché* demands that we become aware of it.

The entanglement is not something that needs to be erased; we only have to recognize it. Our inter-subjectivity, our *Ineinander*, our co-existentiality can function as a tool for hearing the voice of the other more genuinely.

5. Feminist research often sees itself as a tool for the empowerment of women, and its processes and results should enhance the lives of research participants directly. Treating participants with dignity, respect, and as *experts* in their own right, and “giving the results back” to the participants in an appropriate form are small political actions in the laboratory -- Eva Simms’ colleague Constance Fisher aptly called this the “Prometheus principle” of emancipatory qualitative research.
6. Feminist researchers often try to develop a different voice for articulating and presenting their data. Giguere and Janzen both use poetic techniques to capture the fullness of the moods which suffused their research situations. Subtle, textured descriptions, plenty of room for the participants’ own voice, and awareness of the unsaid within what is said are the hallmarks of feminist language practice in qualitative research.

### *Overview of the Essays*

The contributions to this volume fall roughly into two groups, depending on whether their gravitational pull falls more strongly in the field of classical phenomenology or empirical studies. Essays from the first group draw on resources from classical phenomenology (and post-structuralism) in order to shed light on gendered experience and sexual hierarchy – notably, the indeterminacy of gender (Silvia Stoller), the temporality of aging (Kristin Rodier), female embodiment and fatness (Talia Welsh), and institutionalized oppression (Neal de Roo). They make an excellent case for the continued relevance of phenomenological writings and concepts to feminist concerns – regardless of the former’s originally intended explanatory scope. Essays found in the second group present a body of empirical studies best-approached and deciphered by means of phenomenological concepts and methods. Topics include faked orgasms (Hildur Kalman), childbearing (Stacy Giguere), traumatic abortion (Linda

Finlay and Barbara Payman), and child custody loss (Katherine J. Janzen and Sherri Melrose). The essay dealing with the lived experience of morning sickness (Astrida Neimanis) is arguably pulled in the directions of case study and phenomenological reflection with equal force. The contribution by Geraldine Finn breaks through the interdisciplinary boundaries altogether by offering a long love poem inspired by continental thought.

In “The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Post-structural Feminism,” Silvia Stoller draws on relevant works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as Judith Butler to establish the philosophical importance of indeterminacy, and apply it specifically to gender identity. She argues that contrary to the received view, classical phenomenological and post-structuralist contributions have a lot in common and can be fruitfully combined. In “Time and Habit: Touching the Boundary Mark in Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse*,” Kristin Rodier spells out the unique phenomenology of habit and temporality found in the later work of Simone de Beauvoir. She focuses especially on Beauvoir’s notion of a boundary-marked or foreclosed future, and applies it to narrative figurations of dying. Talia Welsh’s essay “Unfit Women: Freedom and Constraint in the Pursuit of Health” offers a feminist phenomenological reflection on a “good health imperative” undergirding some contemporary medical practices, and the concurrent correlation of fatness with poor health. Capitalizing on insights from Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, as well as contemporary feminist phenomenologists, she makes a case that women’s freedom is curtailed in a reduction of female embodiment to the medical norm of testable health, at the expense of lived experience. In “What Phenomenology can teach us about Oppression,” Neal De Roo draws on the notion of passive synthesis from Husserl’s phenomenology’s to shed light on institutional oppression – specifically, the seemingly paradoxical experience of feeling responsible for unintended acts and meanings. He also imagines how passive synthesis can be deployed in an effort to combat the same mechanisms of oppression.

In “Faking Orgasms and the Idea of Successful Sexuality,” Hildur Kalman reflects on a trend of women (and some men) faking sexual desire and orgasms at a time of apparent sexual liberation in the Nordic countries. She draws on perspectives of feminist theory and phenomenology to shed light on the gendered relations and cultural signification of orgasm in present day society. Stacy Giguere’s “The Poetics of Childbearing: Revelations of an Other World in Other Words” contrasts women’s own narratives of pregnancy and birth-giving with prevalent childbearing metaphors in

medicine and psychology. The former challenge the notion of a solipsistic fetus as found in ultrasound snapshots, and reveal a sensual ambiguity of experience that may be best articulated in poetic discourse. Linda Finlay and Barbara Payman's essay "I'm already torn": A reflexive-relational phenomenology of a traumatic abortion experience" applies a relational, existential-phenomenological approach to explore the lived world of a woman Mia (fictional name) who experienced a traumatic abortion. They illustrate how a relational stance adopted within their methodology helped deepen the exploration of Mia's experience. In the essay "When the Worst Imaginable Becomes Reality: The Experience of Child Custody Loss in Mothers Recovering from Addictions," Katherine J. Janzen and Sherri Melrose apply the conceptual perspective of the phenomenologist Max van Manen to tease out dominant themes within the lived experience of four addicted mothers who lost custody of their children. These themes can guide professionals seeking to support addicted mothers as they reclaim their lives after losing custody of their children.

In "Morning Sickness and Gut Sociality: Towards a Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology," Astrida Neimanis ponders the potential significance of the gut in developing a material-semiotic mode of responsivity between bodies, and provides a phenomenological sketch of morning sickness as one instance of gut sociality. She reflects on future directions of posthumanist feminist phenomenology, considering both the risks and the promise of a biological turn.

This collection of essays is appropriately concluded by a poetic exploration of "What kind of saying is a song?" (Geraldine Finn). Finn risks a formal adventure in order to do justice to the specificity of the particular linguistic event called a "song." She draws on the tradition inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Irigaray, Nancy, and Derrida to navigate the in-between zone of music and philosophy, poetry and prose.

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# The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Poststructuralist Feminism

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*What kind of ethics can we consider in the framework of feminist phenomenology that takes poststructuralist feminism into account? This seems to be a difficult task for at least two reasons. First, it is not yet clear what ethics in poststructuralist feminism is. Second, phenomenology and poststructuralism are still regarded as opposites. As a phenomenologist with strong affinities to poststructuralism, I want to take on this challenge. In this paper, I will argue that phenomenology and poststructuralism share the idea of the "indeterminable." If this idea is applied to the topic of gender, we can speak of an "indeterminable gender." Moreover, phenomenology and poststructuralism support an ethical attitude toward genders inasmuch as they both avoid making problematic determinations. My goal is to explore what the so-called "indeterminable gender" is and to illuminate the ethical implications of this concept.*

## Introduction

Making determinations seems to be an integral part of our every-day life. We ask questions like: What's your name? How old are you? Where are you from? And if there is some doubt about the gender of a person: Is that a man or a woman? We are able to identify colors immediately: She has black hair. In our daily communication with other people we do not hesitate to judge them: He is an awful, or he is a lovely person. It seems we deal with determinations morning, noon, and night, until we fall asleep and lose consciousness, after which this game of determinations starts again the next day: Tea or coffee? Android or iPhone? Good or bad? Single, married, divorced? Woman or man? Homo or hetero? Transgender, transsexual, bisexual, asexual, queer, et cetera.

The French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, in his extraordinary book *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, argued that the entire history of Western thinking is based on the thesis that "being is being something determined" and that "speaking is saying something determined" (Castoriadis 1987, p. 221). Indeed, what would philosophy be without thesis, definitions, determinations and clarification of terms?

However, a majority of things in this world remain undetermined in everyday life. Can we ever list everything that we have perceived in one day? Can we remember everyone we have come into contact with today? How are my inner organs doing? Who is standing behind me at this very



moment? What exactly did we have for lunch? What kind of mood am I in? What's the temperature right now? And how do we determine gender? Outer appearance? Anatomical, hormonal, and genetic characteristics? According to one's own expressed gender identity? Why do we determine things only in certain situations and not in others? These questions demonstrate that the idea of always determining everything is an impossible task.

Even within philosophy itself the matter is not clear. On the one hand, analytical philosophers have generally not subscribed to the notion of an unclear fact. Wittgenstein wrote, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 89). Husserl viewed philosophy as "a rigorous science" (Husserl 2002). Philosophical logic developed a formal system that did not leave anything up to chance. But on the other hand, there are other voices: Socrates famously said: "I know that I know nothing," and Plato claimed that philosophy begins with wonder—something that goes beyond our will to determine things. Science, in general, is propelled by riddles and unexplained phenomena. The world, as we see it, does not confine itself to determinations. It has always been characterized by undetermined factors. There is something there in the world, but we cannot exactly say what it is. Philosophers in the tradition of phenomenology in particular have argued that the world we live in is mainly characterized by anonymity. In their phenomenological analysis of the reality of everyday life, Berger and Luckmann claim that in social interaction with others in everyday life the others are widely apprehended in anonymous terms (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 32–34). Similarly, Natanson holds that anonymity is indispensable for any further apprehension (Natanson 1986). Merleau-Ponty argued that ambiguity is not some imperfection of existence but its very definition (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 332).

*Husserl: The Phenomenological Theory of Indeterminacy*

In order to understand how existence is characterized by indeterminacy, it helps to turn to phenomenology. The idea of indeterminacy can already be found in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, and appears in regard to the concept of horizontality. According to Husserl every act of determination is basically embedded in a structure of determination and indetermination. The visible object, for example, is surrounded by an invisible horizon. Husserl calls this horizon anonymous in the sense it

is not yet named—it is indeterminate, or rather *radically indeterminate*.<sup>4</sup>

In *Ideas I* Husserl discusses a specific kind of world relation: “the world of the natural attitude” (paragraph 27). This attitude is essentially pre-reflexive. The world that we discover through this natural approach is marked by “more or less” determined things. Things are “immediately there for me,” they are at least “present as actualities,” and “it is not necessary that they [...] be found directly in my field of perception” (Husserl 1983, p. 51). The world presents itself to us in its perception as “*on hand*”, but this hands-on presence to the world is not limited solely to the really perceived “objects.” In addition to the “mere physical things” also “human beings” are immediately there for me (p. 51). “Along with the ones [objects] now perceived, other actual objects are there for me as determinate, *as more or less well known*, without being themselves perceived or, indeed, present in any other mode of intuition” (p. 51; my emphasis). What marks this world in its “natural” givenness is a simultaneousness of the actual givenness of objects, on the one hand, and the *implicit* givenness of objects, on the other: “In a peculiar way, every perceptual givenness is a constant mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity, a givenness that points to new possible perceptions that would issue in familiarity” (Husserl 2001, p. 48). The novelty of Husserl’s specific interpretation, in my opinion, lies precisely in this stance: the world does not only present itself to us in its determined form, but also in an undetermined shape: There are “things” clearly before our eyes, but there are also “things” that are more or less determinate. Moreover, beyond this there is also a realm of world experience that is solely characterized by an indeterminate actuality: “What is now perceived and what is more or less clearly co-present and determinate (or at least somewhat determinate), are penetrated and surrounded by an *obscurely intended to horizon of indeterminate actuality*” (1983, p. 52, typo in the original). This “obscurely intended horizon” is the anonymous or indeterminate horizon.

Husserl describes this horizon of perception in great detail in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (Husserl 2001). Every “genuinely perceived” thing relates to something that is “not genuinely perceived” (p. 40). For example, when we see a house, we view it from a particular angle, and this side is therefore what is actually seen. Yet the house still has other segments, a non-visible backside or a non-visible interior, and so forth. The actually and the non-actually seen are linked

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<sup>4</sup> Indeterminacy in Husserl is a key concept with regard to his analyses of the horizontality of sense perception. Anonymity is another term for it that can be found in his work. For a more extensive analysis of Husserl’s characterization of the horizon as “indeterminate” or “anonymous” with respect to the world as horizon in the widest sense, see Stoller 2008.

together through “a system of referential implications” (p. 41) that originates from the actually perceived: *In* perception we point to that which is not perceived, that is, the thing with the “co-present” horizon of perception (p. 40) or the “intentional empty horizon” (p. 42), also called as anonymous horizon. Thus, when we perceive a house, we actually perceive only the facade of the house, which indicates its other possible sides of the house, like the back or the interior. This intentional empty horizon or anonymous horizon is decisive for the constitution of perception. Without this unknown horizon it would be impossible to see the house *as* a house, the constant, identical house. We would, instead, only be able to identify the “front” of the house separate from the house itself. In Husserl’s words, “everything that genuinely appears is an appearing thing only by virtue of being intertwined and permeated with an intentional empty horizon, that is, by virtue of being surrounded by a halo of emptiness with respect to appearance” (p. 42). This “emptiness” is, according to Husserl, not nothingness but a kind of surplus: “Every appearance implies a *plus ultra* in the empty horizon” (p. 48). This surplus of perception in perception is then characterized as indeterminate: “It is an emptiness that is not nothingness, but an emptiness to be filled-out; it is a determinable indeterminacy” (p. 42). The fact that the empty horizon is characterized as a determinable indeterminacy is central to the determination of the horizon. The horizon is there for us as more or less “known,” but indeterminate; it is there for us solely in the form of a “premonition” or a certain “presentiment.” Husserl speaks of a “presentiment of what is to come” (p. 45). We intuitively or unconsciously “know” that there is more to it than we actually know, but it cannot be named or determined. No reflection, no intellectual effort can come close to describing the non-perceived. There is only a *premonition* that more can be determined than is actually perceived.

As Husserl claims in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (2001), the horizon cannot be fully determined, since in the very moment we try to give the anonymous horizon a name, a new horizon arises. What first was behind us is now in front of us, but only because something else has become a horizon. When Husserl wanted to demonstrate the idea of the indeterminate horizon, which, strictly speaking, cannot be grasped, he writes in the “voice” of the things themselves, calling for determination, and he did so not without a certain sense of humor:

“There is still more to see here, turn me so you can see all my sides,

let your gaze run through me, draw closer to me, open me, divide me up; keep on looking me over again and again, turning me to see all sides. You will get to know me like this, all that I am, all my surface qualities, all my inner sensible qualities, ‘etc.’” (2001, p. 41).

“Draw closer, closer still; now fix your eyes, etc. You will get to see even more of me that is new, ever new partial colorings, etc. You will get to see structures of the wood that were not visible just a moment ago, structures that were formerly only viewed indeterminately and generally” (p. 43).

How funny it must sound to apply this “call” for the determination of the thing or the object to the gendered subject: “There is still more to see, turn me so you can see all my sexual characteristics, let your gaze run through me, draw closer to me, open me, divide me up; keep on looking me over again and again, turning me to see all sides of my gender identity, you will get to see structures that were not visible just a moment ago, structures that were formerly only viewed indeterminately and generally, etc.”

Husserl not only emphasizes the role of indeterminacy, but also highlights the fact that each development of a horizon, in the process of a so called “determining more closely” or a “determining otherwise” (p. 63), brings about new horizons and with them new indeterminacy, “a new system of determinable indeterminacy” (p. 43), “*in infinitum*” (p. 60). “My indeterminate surroundings are infinite, the misty and never fully determinable horizon is necessarily there” (1983, p. 52). In relation to an object, this means that the object as the same “is never finished, never fixed completely” (2001, p. 50). Husserl rules out the idea that there could be a perception that precipitates “absolute knowledge” of the object, and claims that the act of perception does not allow for this: “For evidently, the possibility of a *plus ultra* is in principle never ruled out” (p. 58). Husserl does acknowledge, however, that the indeterminate can be transferred into the determined, through the act of drawing attention to the indeterminate and placing it in new perspectives. But ultimately this act cannot contend with any real success:

“The sphere of determinateness becomes wider and wider, perhaps so wide that connection is made with the field of actual perception

as my *central* surroundings. But generally the result is different: an empty mist of obscure indeterminateness is populated with intuited possibilities or likelihoods; and only the ‘form’ of the world, precisely as ‘the world,’ is predelineated” (1983, p. 52).

Husserl holds that the horizon with its “obscure indeterminateness” is a “never fully determinable horizon” (p. 52). This lack of success is connected to the premise that the indeterminate horizon can never be fully determined. The “indeterminate surroundings” are “infinite” (p. 52). Here we find ourselves at the center of Husserl’s determination of the world as a world of the indeterminate or anonymous horizon. From an etymological point of view the fact that he described the horizon with the word “anonymous” is no accident. The Greek word “an ónyma” does not only mean “unknown” but literally “not yet named” or “without a name.” The anonymous horizon is namely not only invisible, implicit and unconscious or latent, it will be always *unknown*: always un-named, and maybe never nameable, I would like to add. It does not have a name one could call it. Although the horizon is a part of the “identical x,” it remains undesignated.<sup>5</sup> It has a specific color, a specific shape, but we cannot say exactly what this color or shape is. In our immediate experience we see colors but in the very act of sensory perception we cannot say exactly what color we perceive. This type of unknown specificity also applies to perceptions or experiences that do not meet our expectations—to our “presentiments.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The “identical x” is the identical through a multiplicity of acts presenting the same object.

<sup>6</sup> I must point out a certain indecisiveness in Husserl. On the one hand, the horizon is depicted as something radically indeterminate. On the other, Husserl says that the indeterminate horizon can be determined. This inconsistency of once referring to a “determinable indeterminacy” (2001, p. 42) and the next time to an “undetermined determinability” (1999, p. 30; 1983, p. 157) is a sign of this ambivalence. On the one hand, there is an indeterminacy that can be determined: *determinable indeterminacy*. In this case, though, the indeterminacy is robbed of its radical nature; in the end, it can be determined. On the other hand, there is a determinability that cannot be determined: *undetermined determinability*. In this case, the starting point is a determinability that is only softened by adding that somehow it is undetermined. From this we can conclude that Husserl himself, in his determination of the anonymous horizon, remained indeterminate. How this discrepancy can be resolved, if at all, cannot be decided here.

*Merleau-Ponty: The Indeterminate as a Positive Phenomenon*

In his phenomenology, Husserl introduced a positive conception of what is indeterminate in the experience of the world. This positive conceptualization of indeterminacy was more clearly articulated by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty who in his *Phenomenology of Perception* claimed: “We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon” (1962, p. 6). For Merleau-Ponty, this means recognizing the indeterminate *as* indeterminate and not just as the negation of something else. This reorientation is essential. What Merleau-Ponty calls for is a rehabilitation of the indeterminate in our thinking. In my opinion this rehabilitation of the indeterminate is a challenge we are still facing since it is still difficult, personally and philosophically, to allow the indeterminate to remain indeterminate and to accept indeterminacy as such.

In the following, I will provide an overview of three different forms of indeterminacy in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, or as he calls it, anonymity.<sup>7</sup> First, there is anonymity on behalf of the “subject.” In this case, the subject almost disappears in action. Merleau-Ponty asks: “Who perceives this red? It is nobody who can be named and placed among other perceiving subjects” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 451). The “subject” of perception disappears because it is focused on something else than on itself. It is out of the focus when concentrating on something else. For example, when I am talking to somebody I do not actually know which gender I am, since my intellectual energy is entirely directed away from my gendered subjectivity and toward something else. As I write this paper, I am concentrating on my ideas, on the typed letters, on my command of the English language, and so forth. If at all, my gendered subjectivity is, at best, operating on a lower level, but I cannot say anything particular about it, because of this exclusive moment of my intentionality. Merleau-Ponty concludes: “The I, really, is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectification, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 246). It almost seems as if somebody or something else but me is doing the perceiving: “So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalization” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 215). That there is anonymity on the side of the subject, however, is not to say that it is an exception or a failure. On the contrary, it is a mode of normality in everyday perception, as Eugen Fink has pointed out: “The ‘anonymity’ of experiential life, of external experience turned toward

<sup>7</sup> Other terms Merleau-Ponty used with respect to one and the same phenomenon are ambiguity, vagueness or opacity.

things, for example, is not a failure and loss of self-consciousness, but rather it is just its normal mode. Reflection only objectifies the previously unthematic self-knowing of the I" (Fink 1995, p. 13). This holds true also for the gendered subject operating in the world, and there is nothing wrong in losing my explicit knowledge about my gendered existence while operating in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Second, there is anonymity on behalf of the "object." This means that, from the perspective of lived experience, the perceived object is not fully determinable in the act of sense perception; it remains partly indeterminate since an object presents itself only partially, and some of its sides always remain invisible. As shown by Husserl, a perceived object has anonymous horizons which belong to it, yet remain unperceived—unseen, unheard, untouched, and so on. Since an object does not present itself in full transparency, Merleau-Ponty says it remains incomplete in our perception of it. Moreover, since we are not always directed to things in the world by way of reflection, he even claims that our everyday perception in general is mostly *indifferent*. In our everyday communication we meet hundreds of people, women and men and other gendered beings. However, we are seldom directed to them by way of consciously identifying their gender. They remain indifferent. Insofar as they remain unidentified by way of conscious reflection or logical judgment, they remain anonymous to us.<sup>9</sup>

Third, there is a more general form of anonymity which characterizes our social world and which Merleau-Ponty called "the anonymity of the One" (1962, p. 450). This is a sphere of social generality, an "atmosphere of 'sociality'" (p. 449), as he puts it, in which the I and the other are not yet distinguished in the sense of distinct subjects or reflected-upon terms. "Subject" and "object" as identified terms would only be abstractions with respect to this anonymous sphere of sociality; the same goes for "woman" and "man." Other concrete persons do not present themselves to us as simple objects. They may be regarded as objects, at least partly, but in general they cannot be reduced to their objectivity. Merleau-Ponty says: "Another person is not necessarily, is not even ever quite an

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<sup>8</sup> Though phenomenology holds that the "subject" disappears in its intentional acts, this does not mean that we do not have an *implicit* knowledge of our gendered subjectivity. It simply means that we do not have an *explicit* knowledge of it. Put differently, when we are intentionally directed to something or somebody other than ourselves we do not lose our gender or gender identity, nor does it mean that there is no awareness of our gender identity at all. There is an awareness of our own gendered identity but it is only implicit.

<sup>9</sup> I have once asked my 80-something mother, married to my father for over 50 years, if she knew the color of her husband's eyes, and she could not say.

object for me. [...] The-other-as-object is nothing but an insincere modality of others, just as absolute subjectivity is nothing but an abstract notion of myself" (1962, p. 448). In general, in everyday life we do not take the other as object but experience her or him as animated concrete subjects. In terms of Husserl, in the case of immediate experience, we can speak of a "pre-predicative experience," in the case of reflecting upon this experience, we can speak of a "predicate judgment."<sup>10</sup> At first we experience somebody or something, then we give this experience a name and judge it according to our knowledge. Consequently, there is a social sphere of gendered space between the one and the other; however, this space is also an indeterminate, undifferentiated gender space. For example, if I speak before an audience, the people in the room I talk to are not given to me in a distinct way. While I am talking to them I do not treat them as distinct objects, meaning as objects of a reflective, determining act. As a functioning ego, an *operating* speaking subject, in fact, I am fully unable to identify them in their specificity, as for example, their gendered existence. Thus, they remain undetermined for me, as long as I am proceeding with my talk, focused on my speech. There are women and men and possibly other gendered beings listening to my speech, but I cannot say exactly who, what or how many there are. Consequently, there is a gendered space but it is there only in an indeterminate or anonymous way.

Merleau-Ponty articulates this "principle of indeterminacy" which underlies all our experiences in the chapter "The Body in its Sexual Being" (*être sexué*) in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962, pp. 154–73). According to him, indeterminacy is essential for human existence in general and for sexual beings in particular: "Thus there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection of our knowledge [...]. Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure [...]" (p. 169).

Thus, indeterminacy is not a lack of determination but the very presupposition of determinations. It is to speak of a sphere of sexuality in which we have not yet distinguished between different sexes, different genders, and other gender identities. A system of anonymous functions operates in daily life experiences. Contrary to anonymity as an imperfection, a lack or a failure, Merleau-Ponty argued in *Phenomenology of Perception*

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<sup>10</sup> This conceptual distinction was first drawn by Edmund Husserl in his study *Experience and Judgment* (Husserl 1973).



that anonymous sexuality represents a *surplus* which makes different experiences possible. Following him at this point, I would like to compare this sort of over-determined sexual sphere with Freud's so-called "polymorphously perverse" sexuality that represents an early stage of sexual development in which female or male identities are not yet developed (Freud 2000). I argue, with the help of Merleau-Ponty, that sexual difference presupposes an anonymous sexuality that underlies gender identifications, and the differentiation between gender identities. As in Freud, for Merleau-Ponty female and male sexuality are later developments. "Men" and "women," "feminine" and "masculine" are second-order terms, as Merleau-Ponty would agree with Freud. Anonymous sexuality is a sphere where sexuality is lived without division, and in particular, without designated gender identities. In other words, *there is* sexuality ("il y a sexualité"), but it is *not yet named* or analytically differentiated—it is an anonymous or indeterminate gender. At this point, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the anonymous, indeterminate gender leads us halfway to Judith Butler's poststructuralist feminism and brings us one step further to the issue of ethics in feminist phenomenology and poststructuralist feminism.

*Butler: Criticism of Determination*

Judith Butler sets her sights on to the problematic issue of determining women in the name of identity politics. She addresses the issue of how certain genders are rendered more legible than others, by excluding others that deviate from the norm. Her philosophical work, however, also questions whether gender identity, or, even identity in general can be determined with any sort of certainty. In her early work *Gender Trouble* (1990) she emphasized how difficult it is to deliver a full account of one's subjectivity. The fact that we very often add an "etc." at the end of a list of characterizations, she argues, illuminates the principle of incompleteness of such an effort. Notably, she claims, with respect to identity politics:

"The theorists of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete" (Butler 1990, p. 143).

The “embarrassment” that Butler rightly identified in the rhetoric of the representatives of identity politics results from the uncertainty of knowing what else to name in order to pinpoint one’s identity. Race, color, class, age, gender, sex, disability, nationality ... What else will be added in the future? We do not know. However, instead of proposing that this incompleteness represents a failure for feminism, Butler argues that feminists can learn from such a principal incompleteness; it can be seen as a starting point for a non-essentialist gender concept, and it can also serve as a new concept for thinking the political from a feminist perspective. She claims:

“This failure is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated ‘etc.’ that so often occurs at the end of such lines? This is a sign of exhaustion as well as of the illimitable process of signification itself. It is the *supplément*, the excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all. This illimitable *et cetera*, however, offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing” (p. 143).

How is the “et cetera” a departure for feminist political thinking? In Butler’s opinion, the “et cetera” indicates that the process of determination is in itself incomplete, and is, in fact, making room for future determinations. It indicates that there is, in principle, something else that could be named, even if we still cannot say exactly what it is. This also means that identity itself cannot be described by way of a finite number of categories, but rather that identity consists of attributes that resist any attributions. Understanding the “embarrassed etc.” as the positive sign that Butler seems to suggest it is, allows for future identities to come into existence, with the caveat that we are open to other possible and not yet named identifications.<sup>11</sup>

*The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Poststructuralist Feminism*

As seen via the line of thought I have articulated from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to the work of Judith Butler, there are clear analogies between phenomenological philosophy and poststructuralist feminism.

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the idea of indeterminacy does not only emerge in the field of poststructuralist feminism. It can also be found in one of its pretended opposites, that is, Luce Irigaray’s feminism of difference. In her opinion, Western culture is characterized by a certain practice of reasoning which corresponds to an “appropriation,” a kind of determination which is the wrong path towards the other as other (cf. Irigaray 2004, p. 23).

Husserl refers to the indeterminacy of the horizon; Butler claims that the determination of gender always has its limits. Both speak of the incompleteness of determination and see the “et cetera” as a necessary byproduct of every determination. They share the premise that determination is an infinite process, one without an end in sight. Both claim that the incompleteness of determination is not a failure. For Husserl the indeterminate horizon is *constitutive* for any determination. For Butler this failure is even *instructive* in that it can be channeled into a certain form of gender politics. This kind of agreement is, in my opinion, astonishing, since phenomenology and poststructuralism in general are seen as opposites, and poststructuralist advocates have a habit of criticizing phenomenology.<sup>12</sup>

In the following, I would like to further inquire into whether it is possible to draw conclusions for gender theory from these lessons of poststructuralist feminism and phenomenology. More specifically, I want to explore the ethical implications that can be deduced from the idea of indeterminacy in regard to gender. I find the idea of an “indeterminable gender” extremely attractive, and attempts at such a theory can be found in the works of Husserl and Butler. Can discussions of indeterminacy develop an ethics useful to gender research? And what kind of ethics would that be?

I would like to address this issue on a theoretical as well as a practical level. Theoretically, it has been shown that every determination is marked by indeterminacy. If indeterminacy is not simply a failure that to be remedied and is instead constitutive for determination, then the first step is to recognize the indeterminacy as such. Merleau-Ponty pointed this out clearly when he called for recognition of the indeterminate as a *positive* phenomenon. From a theoretical point of view, we can also conclude that each determination is not characterized solely by determinacy, since it consists of an indeterminate *and* a determinate part. Ultimately, when determination is incomplete due to indeterminacy, then it follows that the determination is not exactly that which it aims to be. The determination is always in jeopardy, that is, not as determined as one would think. Rather, it is instable within its parameters. This is precisely the conclusion Judith Butler reached in relation to the question of gender when, in her book *Bodies that Matter*, she speaks of a “constitutive instability” of gender norms (Butler 1993, p. 10). This insight is, in my opinion, one of the most important realizations pertaining to gender research.<sup>13</sup> The constitutive

<sup>12</sup> In the 1990s poststructuralist feminists most strongly criticized theoretical approaches in phenomenology surrounding the term experience. Here we should note Joan Scott’s prominent critique of terms of experience (Scott 1992). In one of my articles, I looked closely at her analysis to see if the post-structural criticism of experience extended itself to phenomenology, and found it to be inadequate (see Stoller 2009).

<sup>13</sup> While Judith Butler applied a constitutive instability of identity to the question of gender, Husserl was far from applying this to gender theory. But the French phenomenologist

instability is confirmed in the repetition of its gender norms, to which the genders themselves contribute, in so far as they behave according to the established gender norms. However, such an adamant and persistent need for repetition reveals that these norms *must*, in fact, have an intrinsic instability. Why else would one constantly strive to be a certain or particular gender? I believe that this compulsion for repetition applies to all gender identities, even those that purport to withdraw from the pre-existing gender norms, because, in the end, they too claim, in a certain way, to be specifically gendered beings. Consequently, from the premise that determinations are marked by a constitutive instability, there can grow a fundamental hope for other determinations. When something is unstable in itself, it need not be compelled to remain so. This opens the door to a kind of ethics that stipulates the instability of determination and assumes that another determination is *basically* possible. The determination itself points to further possible determinations. With regard to the issue of gender it means that living as a specific gender is never fixed once and for all. Every gender has the “option” of taking on another gender identity.<sup>14</sup> This means, for example, that one does not need to wait for the gender norms to change for people to adjust to a new norm. The *opportunity* for change is always present in the corresponding norm and has already been set in motion. Thus, the idea that gender norms permanently determine gender once and for all has to be revised.

In a more practical or concrete vein, I would like to advocate a building of awareness with regard to the indeterminacy of gender. The phenomenological and poststructuralist recognition of the incompleteness of determination has certainly proven to be helpful. If I know that an ultimate determination of gender is an illusion, then it is easier to maintain a critical distance from the pre-existing gender norms. This means that I can demonstrate a great degree of acceptance with regard to genders that deviate from the gender norm. Furthermore, I learn to respect those genders that regularly exist within the normative gender framework in a different sense, because I am now conscious of the idea that a gender identity is also subject to change. To what degree this gender identity can change has been demonstrated often enough in practice. If the willingness increases to react openly to the fundamental principle as well as to the

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Merleau-Ponty applied indeterminacy in the form of an anonymity directly to gender when he developed a concept of anonymous or indeterminate sexuality in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Contrary to some feminist criticisms of his concept of “anonymous sexuality” in the past, I have argued elsewhere that Merleau-Ponty does not omit particularities such as gender (Stoller 2000).

<sup>14</sup> By “option” I do not primarily mean that people can instrumentally and consciously choose one’s sex or gender. Rather, I mean that the change of one’s gender is ontologically given in principal, as for example if a heterosexual man, married to a woman for a couple of years, suddenly identifies himself as actually desiring men.

actual transformation of gender identity then there is less pressure on behalf of the gender being changed to try to squeeze into a specific gender order. Thus, our openness towards this changeability implies an *ethics* which recognizes plural gender identities—not only those gender identities which already exist, but a consideration of the possibility of totally unknown identities as well.

Finally, I propose to view gender identity as a phenomenon in terms of phenomenology, that is, to see it with the eyes of a phenomenologist. According to the phenomenological method this means taking a specific attitude toward the gendered subject. The phenomenologist has to consciously change her or his attitude to the world and toward others. In his phenomenology, Husserl differentiated between two approaches to the world: one, the “natural attitude” and two, the “phenomenological attitude.”<sup>15</sup> Being in the natural attitude means perceiving the world as simply there for us, and we effect all the acts by virtue of which the world is there for us. Taking up a phenomenological attitude means preventing the immediate effecting, with all its determinations, and we take a reflective view of the world. Husserl says that we have to “parenthesize” (Husserl 1983, p. 114) all the knowledge we have of the world. The remarkable thing about the phenomenological method is that with this new attitude we suspend judgment—and this also includes our determinations—of the world and whatever we experience. Husserl calls this methodical step “phenomenological *epoché*” (p. 60).<sup>16</sup> This suspension of judgment is particularly interesting since it means that one no longer makes statements about the “factual being” of the world. Whether something exists or not in an objective manner is not pertinent to phenomenologists. They are more interested in what remains when judgment is refrained from. That is the “phenomenon” in terms of phenomenology, or “that which appears.” It is the task of phenomenologists to describe what appears, regardless of whether what they are describing exists in pure objectivity or not. In this way genders can be described which fit into gender norms as well as those which depart from existing norms and even those that do not yet exist in full concretion or are in a transitional state of gender identity. A phenomenologist does not care because what she or he is interested in is the “phenomenon” whatever that may be.

The more abstract phenomenological method in phenomenological theory is a way of training one’s eyes by means of phenomenology—namely

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the corresponding paragraph 50 in *Ideas I* (Husserl 1983, pp. 112–14).

<sup>16</sup> The Greek *epoché* means “cessation.”

by not judging people according to preconceived gender knowledge, and not categorizing them along given gender norms. Applying phenomenology to the issue of gender means we can put in parentheses what we know of gender and dedicate ourselves to observing the “phenomenal gender,” the gender “as it appears to us.” The “phenomenal gender,” thus, is not the objective gender or the reflectively asserted gender but rather the anonymous gender, that is, the gender not yet named, or the indeterminate gender not yet determined. This kind of phenomenological attitude would be an ethical attitude, as it holds back from the normative compulsion to make fixed determinations about gender, thereby alleviates any negative effects that could accompany gender determination in a psychological or political sense. In fact, the phenomenological approach to the gendered other is a kind of invitation to perceive this other in its indeterminacy and to resist acts of determination. What remains are indeterminate genders that are not defined as failures but as beings in their determinacy *and* indeterminacy at once.<sup>17</sup>

Taking this non-judgmental phenomenological attitude one step further, a reference to Luce Irigaray and her ethics of sexual difference might be helpful in order to understand what I have in mind. In order to introduce a model of sexual difference based on the recognition of the other as radical Other, Irigaray has come to speak about wonder. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* she argues that a radical ethical relationship between the sexes requires that we turn back to wonder (Irigaray 1993, pp. 72–82).<sup>18</sup> In particular, she demands to regard the other gender as if it were a wonder. Phenomenologically speaking, wonder is something that happens to somebody; it is not something one can have control over it. It is an event in the strict sense of the word and as such comparable with a sudden surprise where we lose control. Furthermore, like the phenomenal “experience” in the phenomenological tradition, wonder is a pre-reflective experience and the starting-point for any further determinations. The wonder that takes place between two gendered subjects emerges before any determination: “Before and after appropriation, there is wonder” (p. 74), Irigaray says. Contrary to wonder as something that can be grasped or captured by knowledge, it is nothing else but the “appetite for knowledge” (p. 78). Even more, wonder, per definition, resists any appropriation or determination. Similar to what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Judith Butler have said, Irigaray maintains that wonder essentially comes as

<sup>17</sup> In its critical attitude towards determinations, phenomenology is not so far away from queer theory and its main project of exploring the contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality.

<sup>18</sup> For more on Irigaray’s concept of wonder, see La Caze 2002 and Heinämaa 2005.

a surprise and therefore it is something “*not yet assimilated or disassimilated as known*” (p. 75). One wonders if it is not the child with its curiosity and impartiality who is best capable of treating the other as a wonder. It seems to me that the view of the child which, at least in certain stages of childhood, is much more presuppositionless and admirably non-normative than the view of the adult could serve as a means for an ethical encounter with the other.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, one can easily identify problems with such a proposed “ethics of indeterminacy.” Could one be so tolerant that there is no action on behalf of the other? Does the continual recognition of indeterminacy not lead to being, sort of, incapable of human action? Given, somebody is fundamentally open to the possibility of change—will she or he not fail in responding adequately to a given indeterminate situation? How can agency be guaranteed if indeterminacy is dominating one’s life? Put differently, does feminist political action not require determinacy instead of indeterminacy?

I would like to respond to this critical intervention, by saying: First, strictly speaking, one cannot simply *choose* not to be open toward the world or decide against indeterminacy, because the world itself is always ontologically characterized by indeterminacy or anonymity, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty pointed out. There is also a fundamental incapability of fully determining identities, as Butler rightly demonstrated, and as I have shown with Husserl’s phenomenology. This means that the idea of determination is in a certain way an illusion. Thus, demanding determinacy with respect to political actions is paradoxical in itself. Calling for determinacy is, in fact, always also calling for incomplete and fragmentary determinacy—determinacy is not fully determined.

Second, it seems one can only make oneself permanently *aware* of this ontological condition of being in the world by being aware of the world in its anonymity, indeterminacy, and incompleteness. However, the knowledge of such an anonymity, indeterminacy and incompleteness might serve as a new starting point for political action. The newly accepted openness toward the world and the others in their incompleteness can serve as a means for further agency if not to say judgments in the world, but this agency and these judgments will hopefully be less harmful and more insightful. Such an agency consists in the acknowledgment of the

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<sup>19</sup> Eva Simms has developed a unique phenomenology of childhood in which she has, in various ways, explored the child’s specific attitude to the world (Simms 2008). As she writes in her book *The Child in the World*: “Wonder is a child’s ability to be open to the surprising otherness and fullness of the things in the world” (2008, p. 106).

indeterminate world with its dwellers. This acknowledging is itself a certain “decision” in the face of the requirements of the world. At the more concrete level, it may also prevent somebody from hasty and imprudent decisions. If I am aware of the fragmentary character of determinations, I might also be more careful against unjust determinations. I see this as something extremely political.<sup>20</sup> It is political insofar as it does not solely consist of making clear decisions or labeling someone. It also consists of the abstinence of certain actions and the continuous anticipation of future change. Thus, in my opinion, the anonymity of the world and the indetermination of gender do not have the effect of finalizing one’s decisions. They are and remain the very condition under which future and alternative determinations may become possible.<sup>21</sup>

Translated by Ida Černe

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<sup>20</sup> I should add that poststructuralist feminists such as Judith Butler did not fully argue against determination in the field of the political. A so-called “strategic essentialism,” is indispensable, she argues, for political work.

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## Touching The Boundary Mark: Aging, Habit, And Temporality In Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*

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*This paper explores the unique phenomenology of habit and temporality put forth in Beauvoir's La Vieillesse. I situate her understanding of temporality in relation to her early work Pyrrhus and Cinéas. I extract her notion of a boundary marked future that decreases anticipation for the future and thus rigidifies habits (through an increased reliance on the past). In the final section I appropriate the notion of a boundary mark for a cultural phenomenology where we understand boundary marks as constituted by our understandings of ourselves in time and not through aging alone. This cultural boundary mark can be used to understand how societal prejudice operates at the level of lived temporality.*

*Thus the very quality of the future changes between middle age and the end of one's life. At sixty-five one is not merely twenty years older than one was at forty-five. One has exchanged an indefinite future – and one had a tendency to look upon it as infinite – for a finite future. In earlier days we could see no boundary mark upon the horizon: now we do see one 'When I used to dream in former times,' says Chateaubriand, harking back to his remote past, 'my youth lay before me; I could advance towards the unknown that I was looking for. Now I can no longer take a single step without coming up against the boundary-stone.' (Beauvoir 1970, 378)*

It may seem counterintuitive to look to an existentialist phenomenologist such as Simone de Beauvoir for insight into habitual experience. Beauvoir gives us patterns of flight from freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), but rather than habits, she argues that styles of being such as nihilism or passion are ways of approaching our freedom. A nihilistic style of being, for example, is one where in the face of no universal values the person makes action itself her end—conquest, adventure, speculation, and so on spur the nihilist on towards action without fixed content (58). In *La Vieillesse* (1970), Beauvoir moves her phenomenological expertise beyond styles of being and she explores a phenomenology of habit in relation to temporality, the rigidity of habits, and the negotiation of openness to the new. In order to explain Beauvoir's understanding of habit

as posited in *La Vieillesse*, it is necessary to frame her discussion of the role of temporality in transcendence through her larger corpus, especially her early work in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944). I will then explain Beauvoir's account of habit and temporality, especially how habit can function as a "lifeless requirement" in experience. I will explore the insight that death can act as a "boundary mark" in lived experience. In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir shows that habits carry their own flexibility or rigidity in relation to the temporal meaning we endow them with. I argue with Beauvoir that we should pay careful attention to the temporal meaning of our lived habits in order to understand the kinds of resistance we experience when trying to change them. In the final section, I look for wider applications of the phenomenology of *La Vieillesse*, specifically I gesture towards a cultural phenomenology of boundary marks useful for feminism.

In working through Beauvoir's phenomenology, I am engaged in a similar project as that of Johanna Oksala (2006) who is trying to recuperate a philosophical understanding of experience useful for feminist theorizing. I am mindful of Oksala's two criticisms of phenomenology: first that phenomenology posits rather than establishes universal essences of experience, which can only be accomplished by denying the context in which that experience is undergone. Second, that phenomenology is insensitive to the ways in which the phenomenological structures of experience are due to cultural patterns in our ontology that produce subjectivities in stable and predictable ways (230). Interestingly, Oksala argues that we should usher in an era of post-phenomenology where "it is more helpful to start by reading anthropological and sociological investigations, medical reports...and psychological studies...than by analyzing one's own normatively limited experiences" (238). Oksala's insight is instructive for phenomenology as it furthers its project to accommodate the ways in which our methods of reflection are historically informed, and that we need to look to the social mechanisms that produce social meaning as we do phenomenological experience.

Beauvoir's project is amenable to Oksala's project of recuperating the phenomenological method for feminism because Beauvoir continually underscored the importance of what the knowledge-producing disciplines have had to say about our social world and how it affects the ways in which we do philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir intricately compiles understandings from anthropology, sociology, medicine, and psychology in the first half of her two major studies: in part one of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, "Facts and

Myths”, and in *La Vieillesse*’s part one, “Old Age as Seen from Without.” The second halves of these two works entitled, “Lived experience” and “Being-in-the-World,” respectively, give a variety (though not a globally representative) study of first-person perspectives; the sheer length of her studies show her dedication to investigations beyond her normatively limited experience. In explicating Beauvoir’s phenomenology of aging I hope to bring fresh perspective to feminist theories of experience by showing how a phenomenological approach to aging can garner insights valuable for understanding prejudice against the old in much the same way a phenomenological understanding of gender can be useful for feminist theory.

### I.

The first half of *La Vieillesse* compiles cultural meanings of aging in different societies ranging from Ancient Egypt to the present day. Just like *Le Deuxième Sexe*, *La Vieillesse* begins with a chapter on biology. The biology chapter in *Le Deuxième Sexe* focuses on the development of biological designations and the development of biology as a science, sexual difference, reproduction, the gametes, and sexual selection. Similarly, *La Vieillesse* focuses on the development of the science of aging and its competing theories. She begins with Galen’s theory of the humors that described old age as an illness in which the humors lost the heat and moisture they needed to stay healthy. Also considered are the theories of mechanism wherein the body is seen as aging just as the parts of a machine get worn and break down, and vitalism where age weakens the vital principle along with late 18<sup>th</sup> century theories that attributed physiological changes associated with old age to the deterioration of the sex glands (20-25). Unlike in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, where Beauvoir argues against the theories of biology that she explains by showing their internal inconsistencies and blatant masculine biases, here in *La Vieillesse* she is rather neutral in her presentation. She details physiological changes associated with aging and hormonal changes. She laments the non-phenomenological research style of psychology, noting the empiricist methods of inquiry are too impoverished in their understandings the situations of the old (32).

In *La Vieillesse*, as in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir reveals at the end of each chapter of the first section a glimpse of the philosophical conclusions to come later in the work. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, to conclude

on biology, Beauvoir reminds us that it is not the givens of biology that determine experience, but the ways in which they are taken up in a particular society.<sup>2</sup> In speaking of the ethnographical data Beauvoir argues that the “decline” of old age is related to the ends that society proposes in light of its economic, spiritual, and political frameworks (86). The reverse also applies: “by the way in which a society behaves towards its old people it uncovers the naked, and often carefully hidden, truth about its real principles and aims” (87). Old age is a dense transfer point where society’s values are revealed, embodied and proliferated. Moving from the view from without to the being-in-the-world, Beauvoir writes:

Hitherto we have looked at the aged man as an object, an object from the scientific, historic and social point of view...But he is a subject, one who has an intimate inward knowledge of his state and who reacts to it...[Becoming old] is just something that happens [and the] plurality of experiences cannot possibly be confined in a concept or even a notion. But at least we can compare them with one another; we can try to isolate the constants and to find the reasons for the differences...To be sure, the state of the aged has not been the same in all places and at all times; but rising through this diversity there are constants that make it possible for me to compare various pieces of evidence (279).

The constants that Beauvoir isolates do not describe essential phenomenological experiences that hold true for all lived bodies, but rather that we all have a common situation—that we age; however, common situation carries with it no guaranteed experiences of temporality, the body, the social meanings of aging, or the self/other encounters made possible by aging.

The first chapter of the second half, “The Discovery and Assumption of Old Age; The Body’s Experience,” details different ways in which we can assume the “general fate” of old age (283). Cast in terms of a crisis akin to finding out there is no God, the discovery of one’s old age is “particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as an alien or foreign species: ‘Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?’” (283) The general fate of old age is one that we confront in relation to others, but we must assume and live it individually. Beauvoir writes: “Since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside—from others. We do not accept it willingly”

(288). The general fate of age is experienced as an Other within us, made apparent to us by the reactions of others to our aging and how we make meaning out of it through social narratives of aging. Beauvoir demonstrates how different understandings of aging shape our lived experience, specifically our self-reflective understanding of ourselves in relation to our gender, profession, relationships, and cultural context more generally.

In *La Vieillesse* Beauvoir argues that the experience of aging is of a shrinking future and a weighty past and that this temporal change alters habitual experience (361). Experiencing ourselves as aging alters our habitual lives because as the future appears less sizeable and thus less accommodating to both new, short-term and demanding projects, and long-term, stable projects our habitual involvement with the world becomes more sedimented and predictable. One of Beauvoir's most inventive theses in *La Vieillesse* is that in aging, when anticipation of the future diminishes, we are more likely to rely on the weight of the past to determine habitual existence. As the past becomes a vast temporal distance trailing behind present transcendence, a growing practico-inert escapes us and marks our past activities in the world.<sup>3</sup> Because of the relatively stable predictions of life span that can be produced by combining age and social conditions, the aged have an acute awareness of the approximate age at which they will die. The future that was youthfully experienced as indefinite and ambiguous shrinks as the end of life becomes a nearer and more vivid reality. Instead of intellectually acknowledging death, or experiencing a present fear of an abstract death, or even retrieving our ownmost possibility<sup>4</sup> for being as in Heidegger's being-towards-death, aging changes the horizon of our future because we experience it as containing a boundary mark.

This notion of a "boundary mark," the idea that as our dying approaches us we experience a future marked with limitations (or non-possibilities), is a productive site for inquiry into the unique phenomenology of *La Vieillesse*. Beauvoir aligns the boundary mark that we experience with certain biological processes of degeneration as the body ages, which implies that our experience of temporality roughly corresponds to a time of the body's life cycle. This may be due to Beauvoir's privileged life in that she sees the temporality of life as corresponding to natural age. Despite this, Beauvoir's view has space for taking into account the biological body and its intimate influence on our situation. This is the positive ambiguity of Beauvoir's philosophy in that she understands the body as a limitation on our possibilities without implying that those limitations have any specific

meaning outside of our social situation. In her view, we cannot separate the biological situation from the living perspective that experiences it.

When we experience bodily changes associated with aging, the aged person, in coming to make meaning of his situation, may feel like his life is accomplished, “and that he will never re-fashion it. The future is no longer big with promise: both this future and the being who must live it contract together” (377). The future is no longer big with promise for a being who has been made redundant by our cultural conceptions of aging, the change of material conditions over a lifespan, and the decline of the body. This view is promising for thinking through habit because it suggests that habits—as a defining part of our situation—must be understood in relation to the meaning that those habits have in society. Beauvoir argues that as we age we experience time differently because of the presence of boundary marks in the horizon of our experiences. As we age, our limitations (both real and unreal) change in quality, which alters anticipation and habitual life.

## II.

Beauvoir thinks through the temporality of the aged which sheds light more generally on a phenomenology of anticipating future lived experiences. Her early criticisms of infinity and the eternal reveal an emphasis on the lived time of experience. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* Beauvoir asks the preliminary existential question: “Why act at all?”—that is, “What ends can we genuinely set for ourselves?” Beauvoir begins with two stories that act as frames for the project. First, she recounts the story of Pyrrhus and Cinéas:

Plutarch tells us that one day Pyrrhus was devising projects of conquest. “We are going to subjugate Greece first,” he was saying. “And after that?” said Cinéas. “We will vanquish Africa.” – “After Africa?” – “We will go on to Asia, we will conquer Asia Minor, Arabia.” – “And after that?” – “We will go on as far as India.” – “After India?” – “After India?” said Pyrrhus, “I will rest” – “Why not rest right away?” said Cinéas (90).

This story teaches us that there is no rest, our being is always transcendence—there is always an “and after that.” Since each end achieved

is also a point of departure, we must continuously be setting new ends.

The second story is of a young boy who cries when he learns that his concierge's son has died. His parents scold him for crying: "After all, that little boy was not your brother" (92). Beauvoir cautions that this teaches a dangerous lesson to the boy. This teaches that the bond between the boy and the concierge's son could possibly not-be. It throws into doubt *why we care about our brothers at all*. Surprisingly, Beauvoir agrees with the boy's parents and praises Albert Camus's character Meursault in *L'Étranger*, because he denies the imposition of pre-given ties between people. What makes this ontological lesson dangerous is that the child is unprepared for this information. We want to see ourselves in the world, in our actions and in others, but in order to do that we must engage ourselves—it is not pre-given. Beauvoir writes:

[Man] would like to spread out his place on earth, to expand his being beyond the limits of his body and his memory, yet without running the risk of any action. But the object facing him remains, indifferent, foreign. Social, organic, economic relationships are only external relationships and cannot be the foundation of any true possession (92-3).

Consciousness, as a nothing, cannot give us ends; we must actively take up our transcendence and engage with others and the world.

Beauvoir sets up a separation between the being of a person and all that is external from her, including "objective" ends. Here Beauvoir defines our being as freedom; she relies upon a dichotomized ontology of humans as pure interiorized freedom versus the external world. The story of Pyrrhus and Cinéas teaches us that there are no pre-given ends—it is Pyrrhus who is right to go out and conquer and explore the world rather than Cinéas who would prefer to rest ashore. We find our ends and ourselves only in the concrete ties we go out and make:

Only that in which I recognize my being is mine, and I can only recognize it where it is engaged. In order for an object to belong to me, it must have been founded by me. It is totally mine only if I founded it in its totality. The only reality that belongs entirely to me is, therefore,



my act; even a work fashioned out of materials that are not mine escapes me in certain ways. What is mine is first the accomplishment of my project; a victory is mine if I fought for it (92-3).

Cinéas cannot remain ashore as a bystander and congratulate himself for the victories of Athens. On this system he can take credit for neither the accomplishments of humanity nor his place in a religious master plan. We cannot genuinely engage our projects in either of these ends because they are infinite abysses in which we would lose ourselves (which is the opposite of a project) or because they are inauthentic absolutes.

In characteristic style Beauvoir begins by considering (and subsequently rejecting) many different ends that humans have given themselves as necessary. She considers God, Humanity, Pleasure, and Creativity; she argues, for example, that we cannot genuinely destine ourselves towards Humanity as a pre-given end. She argues this not only because humanity cannot furnish a collective noun with real content, but because: “[Humanity] is never completed; it unceasingly projects itself toward the future. It is a perpetual surpassing of itself; an appeal in need of a response constantly emanates from it; a void in need of fulfillment is constantly being hollowed out in it” (106). Beauvoir concludes that Pyrrhus was right from the beginning:

The paradox of the human condition is that every end can be surpassed, and yet, the project defines the end as an end. In order to surpass an end, it must first have been projected as something that is not to be surpassed. Man has no other way of existing. It is Pyrrhus, and not Cinéas, who is right. Pyrrhus leaves in order to conquer; let him conquer, then. “After that?” After that, he’ll see (113).

In this work, Beauvoir concludes that we act because our transcendence is continually compelling us into the future; inaction is impossible, there is no rest in the heart of our being—we are beings of “far away places,” as she quotes Heidegger. How, then, should we set ends for ourselves that are true expansions of our beings, as opposed to projects that limit our being? We can only have a project when we expand our being via throwing ourselves

into a future that is alive with possibility.

If it were possible to experience the world as without future meaning and possibility then:

flowers are no longer made to be plucked and smelled, paths no longer to be followed. The flowers seem made of painted metal; the countryside is no longer anything but a façade. There is no longer any future, no longer any surpassing, no longer any enjoyment. The world has lost all of its depth (97).

We need to experience the future as embodied with meaning—we need to see practical engagements as open to us in our lived space and time. Her view here is ambitious in holding that we cannot fail to see the world this way—a foreshadowing of her development of other possibilities in *La Vieillesse*. The child who tries to reduce himself to the instant—to take the future out of his lived experience—withdraws into a corner and says; ‘I don’t care about anything.’ But soon he looks around, he fidgets, he gets bored” (1944, 97). The fidgeting that we experience is disquietude in being, the pull of transcendence that is experienced as the future coaxes us into it. We experience being in the future, as always being *somewhere else* (97). Attempting to reduce ourselves to the instant is a failed attempt at taking away tendency to the future, which we can never deliberately diminish.

### III.

The discussion of temporality in *La Vieillesse* will reveal *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*’s author to have been optimistic and perhaps naïve about our experience remaining saturated with the future in the same way. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, Beauvoir universalizes this experience of the future-directedness of our projects when she writes:

Since man is project, his happiness, like his pleasures, can only be projects. The man who has made a fortune immediately dreams of making another... The goal is a goal only at the end of the path. As soon as it is attained, it becomes a new starting point (99).

All goals are equalized here; when achieved they all equally begin new paths. The aged individual, however, experiences her transcendence towards the future and growing practico-inert behind her differently than the youth of *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*; thus each goal is unequally experienced as a new starting point—as life advances, the experience of time changes. Beauvoir writes in *La Vieillesse* that when we are in our youths, small amounts of time feel like a lifetime, a ten-month school year like an eternity, which she attributes to the exhausting detail contained within the memories of youth. When we age, however, whole years can be remembered by merely recalling a few important dates. For the aged, the memory that spans years—stretched out in the past, only recalling a few important dates—changes the ways in which we experience the future. The future becomes a place that will make little impression on us; there will be little for us to dwell on (375). She writes:

Young people's memories give them back the past year with a wealth of detail that spreads over an enormous extent: they therefore suppose that the year to come will have the same dimensions. When we are old, on the other hand, few things make much impression on us; the passing moment brings little new, and upon that little we do not dwell for long. As far as I am concerned, 1968 may be summed up in a few dates, a few patterns, a few facts (375).

Assuming Beauvoir is right about memory and expectation differing with age, the result of aging will be a change in phenomenological anticipation. As we age we may see less hope and less possibility because of how much the present makes an impression on us.

When we age the lifeless future quashes youthful anticipation. The future slips into the present and joins the large and fuzzy past. This further entrenches the habit of decreased anticipation for the future, thereby increasing the individual's reliance on habits in—and also in the service of—the present. This phenomenological change rigidifies habits and solidifies resistance to changing our actions. A decrease in anticipation causes an increased reliance on habit. When we are young, we expect the future to bring important changes or upheavals of who we are with new “experiences, intoxicatingly delightful, or hideous, and one emerges transformed, with the feeling that the near future will bring about a similar upheaval” (375).

For the aged, however, “the weight of the past slows [the elderly man] down or even brings him to a halt, whereas the young generations break free from the practico-inert and move forward” (390). The weight of the practico-inert solidifies the grip that habit can have on the aged, which makes transcending the weight of the past even more difficult.<sup>5</sup> The time and investment it takes to change when movements are dependent on experiences that are “out of date” can result in the calcification of habits.

Perhaps Beauvoir intends to explain how aging has a specific duration—that is, we experience a phenomenology of intervals that signify changes in time periods in our lives (i.e., an afternoon, a summer, a youth). In general we experience shorter intervals when we are young, but when we are older change is more gradual and thus intervals have a longer duration. Duration is not determined necessarily by biological age because the anticipation of youth and its correspondent shortening of intervals becomes available through an upset in habitual life, something available at any age. When we travel, for example, we experience upheaval and detailed memory because travelling upsets our habitual existence and routinization. We can compare the duration of travel with the duration of youth. In travelling we are engrossed in new environments and unable to predict what the future holds. Quoting Eugène Ionesco’s *Journal en miettes*, “two days in a new country are worth thirty lived in familiar surroundings, thirty days worn and shortened, spoiled and damaged by habit” (376).<sup>6</sup>

Changes in lived time can be gradual and barely noticed, but Beauvoir’s interesting contribution to a phenomenology of aging is that a boundary mark experience shapes the ways in which we experience our habitual lives, projects, relationships, memories, and existence generally. We realize that we have passed a half-way mark in our lives: “the whole of a long life is set and fixed behind us, and it holds us captive” (373). The past pulls on the present and the bigger the past gets the more difficult it is to project ourselves beyond it. In *La Vieillesse* Beauvoir gives countless examples of people who have a heavy past and difficulty projecting beyond it. This difficulty, or resistance is heightened even further when we stake our onto-security on strict continuity of the past into the present.

Continuing, Beauvoir uses the example of the scientist whose research is rendered out of date by new research that comes after his “time” as a leader in his field. She gives examples of professors who would prefer to forge the results of their research so as to retain old knowledge paradigms rather than adapt themselves to new research findings. Despair at a social

situation can cause this same kind of rigidity. There is no reason to adapt ourselves to a future with no promise, we must hold on to what we have in the present and its connection to a past in which we are invested. Thus, we hold ever more firmly in our grasp habits that we repeat and consequently enshrine in lived experience. Beauvoir also gives us the example of the politician whose political beliefs are made irrelevant when present material conditions change. Confronting the impossibility of continuing the past into the future, the politician's outdatedness can be read as resistance to "keep up with the times" and adapt to the new present. Allowing the past to overtake the present rigidifies our habits and makes them resistant to change. When habits are based on enshrining the past into the present, we may cling or hold on to them because they express the limit of our transcendence as determined by our phenomenology of time. Because we cling to certain habits we are not revealing that we have a weak will, but rather how our particular situation is temporally burdened. There is nothing inherently wrong with being out of step with the present, but when we unnecessarily cling to a past that escapes our present grasp, we can investigate it in terms of our lived temporality. When habits prove difficult to change it may signify our position in time as burdened by the past, by our existential situation. Beauvoir writes:

The aged man's inward experience of his past takes the form of images, fantasies and emotional attitudes. He is dependent upon it in still another way: it is the past that defines my present situations and its outlet into the future; it is the admitted fact, the base from which I project myself and which I must go beyond in order to exist (372).

That is, how we experience the past is not merely an attitude we take up in memory, it is a phenomenological structure that affects how we transcend in the present. Beauvoir admits this is true at any age—that is, we derive all of our cultural tools from the past, a state described by Heidegger as the "totality of involvement" (*Bewandtnisganzheit*). This past pre-exists the individual within a culture and is then incorporated into present projects.

The past is not always stultifying in the present—Beauvoir writes that we can incorporate the past into a present project and so relate to it and keep it living. If we have passed a boundary mark and no longer keep the past alive in our projects, we repeat actions merely because it was what

we did in the past. Beauvoir calls this a “lifeless requirement.” Her example:

Playing cards every afternoon in a certain café with certain friends is a habit that in the first place was freely elected and its daily repetition has a meaning. But if the card-player is angry or upset because *his* table is occupied, it means a lifeless requirement has come into existence, one that prevents him from adapting himself to the situation (396).

Beauvoir offers us a way around this dilemma. Following Sartre, she writes that it is our connection to the future that determines whether the past is living or not. Her examples of this are bad faith, for example, a man resists aging, so asserts his solidarity with his youthful self. Beauvoir writes: “They set up a fixed, unchanging essence against the deteriorations of age, and tirelessly they tell stories of this being that they were, this being that lives on inside them” (362). This is why routinization can gain importance for the aged person.

Touching the boundary mark can close off possibilities for adapting our habitual life to new situations. The past can swamp the present with lifeless requirements when the future is no longer alive with possibility. This can be exacerbated by what Beauvoir calls “social time”—the temporality of the values of a particular cultural context. In Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) is Baudu, a character who has invested his being externally in his shop. When the need for his services was outstripped by a changing political economy, he experienced this change as especially devastating. He saw the death of his future in the redundancy of his shop. Beauvoir finds this character rich with insight:

If Baudu had been younger he would have wanted to modernize his shop and he would have done so. But this shortness of his future and the weight of his past close all outlets to him. His shop was the reality in which he had his objective being: once it is ruined he no longer exists – he is a dead man under suspended sentence (385).

Though it is social time that outstrips Baudu, it does this because he has aged. The changed social time he lives combines with his embodied temporal situation to change his style of

existence—he is now “a dead man under suspended sentence.”

Oksala's worry that phenomenology creates universals insensitive to the ways in which cultural conditions promote the stable, predictable ways that subjects are formed, is quelled by Beauvoir's examples of experiences of aging where people avoid touching the boundary mark of their lives; reaching the boundary mark is not a universal experience of aging. She acknowledges, for example, how some societies have different material conditions that produce their relationship with the future. Arguing with Marx, she suggests that in “repetitive societies” a person can “live on” in the family farm, in their offspring, and in any other place labor is focused. We can avoid touching the boundary mark if we live on in projects that we anticipate will persist into the future, even if we cannot be entirely sure that these projects will persist. In so-called “repetitive societies” the aged could have lived on in younger generations. These societies valued elders quite differently. They were considered depositories of experience; their existence achieved “the final stage of a continual advance...life's highest pitch of perfection” but this belies how aging appears in western capitalist society, in our time or in Beauvoir's. She quotes Sainte-Beuve, “We harden in some places and rot in others: we never ripen” (380).<sup>7</sup> With the advance of technology and changing material conditions the aged person finds himself out of date. To move himself forward he must “perpetually be tearing himself free from a past that holds him with an ever-tighter grasp: his advance is slow” (391).

Cultural conditions can change how we experience ourselves in time, which affects habitual life, our transcendence into the future, and our relationships with the generations around us. Beauvoir is committed, however, to the view that even if it is possible to have a culture that prevents us from touching the boundary mark, our phenomenology of time roughly corresponds to biological age. Social time can speed up, as Baudouin exemplifies. But, society makes variable not just time, but death as well. Further, there are many different aspects of our finitude out of which we make phenomenologically salient meaning (sexual difference being an important example here). My hope is that Beauvoir's explanation about how to keep the future alive once we have touched the biological boundary mark of our finitude can give us guidance for how to go on when we touch a cultural boundary mark, a possibility that should be explored in another paper.

I think that we can understand the touching of a boundary mark as a kind of existential depression that demands an adequate response.

How do we keep the future alive so that we can expand our project at any biological or cultural time? Beauvoir offers a promising solution when she writes that the strength of the norms in our environment can safeguard us from depression initiated by a boundary marked future. She explains that “categorical imperatives arising from the past retain all their strength: this piece of work must be finished, that book written, these interests safeguarded. When this is so, the elderly man starts a race against time that leaves him not a moment’s respite.” Therefore the present can still become fully saturated with goals even within sight of a shrinking future (379). This reveals a remarkable consistency with what she wrote in *Pyrrhus* and *Cinéas* twenty-seven years earlier:

The writer is impatient to have finished a book in order to write another one. Then I can die happy, he says, *my* work will be completed. He does not wait for death in order to stop, but if his project engages him right into future centuries, death will not stop him either (113).

Beauvoir mentions the aged person who plants trees that she knows will out-live her; when she takes on a project that goes beyond her own death, her labor survives her and possibilities in the future are re-enlivened in the present. Anticipation returns as the future expands beyond biological life.

The suggestion that we try to re-enliven categorical imperatives of the past in order to re-enliven the future can only get us so far. Beauvoir neglects the bigger issue of how to make a break from the past that keeps our habits rigid. Revisiting the categorical imperatives that once strengthened transcendence can resuscitate old possibilities and help to retrieve them from depression and hopelessness. The scientist who cannot adapt his scientific paradigms to keep up with the present could revisit the scientific categorical imperatives of his youth that kept him thirsting for discovery and open to whatever exploration the scientific method may bring. If the existential depression that results from a boundary mark experience has ethical implications they appear at the level of re-enlivening possibilities. If it is possible, how and when do we re-enliven possibilities?

In particular contexts, do we re-enliven imperatives from the past when social and political forces make it nearly impossible to perform this retrieval? If the retrieval is possible, my suspicion is that we can connect with past imperatives by performing past habits in



ways that mimic when they were living requirements. In the same way as planting a tree that will outlive us, we can extend an enlivened future and thus affect anticipation of a future that is not only ours. Perhaps through habit, repeated action can bring us to a time when our future was young and we can trigger the lived body's phenomenological memory of thrusting towards a lively future. In much the same way, reconnections with past relationships could provide the living requirement necessary for retrieving culturally dead possibilities from their grave.

Looking to the past to retrieve imperatives as a way of countering resistance to change, however, may be complicated when we are overly invested in a particular possibility that deadens those around it. Beauvoir acknowledges that revisiting the past will not necessarily give us what we are looking for in this retrieval because we experience the past in the present *qua* past. We never get back the freshness of when the past was the present:

There are many things that we are powerless to summon up but that we can nevertheless recognize. Yet this recognition does not always give us back the warmth of the past. The past moves us for the very reason that it is past; but this too is why it so often disappoints us – we lived it in the present, a present rich in the future towards which it was hurrying; and all that is left is a skeleton (365-6).

An example would be a professional athlete who, due to an unforeseen injury, can look into the past and only see it saturated by imperatives for high-performance sports.<sup>8</sup> Revisiting imperatives of the past has to contend with the selective memory (i.e., the imperative of sports overshadows other things that were once important) and the relationships of strength that different imperatives have with each other (the norms of achievement in sports might be of a different strength and importance than those of family or education and so act to deaden those around it). When we are heavily invested in a particular imperative—past or future—it can be afforded special status in lived experience; it can become enshrined. Investment serves to establish the ways in which we make meaning out of our situation and other norms that guide our experience. What Beauvoir neglects to explain is how imperatives that keep us steaming towards the future can also keep us reticent to change. While it may be useful to revisit the past for categorical imperatives that will re-enliven our future, the ideals that we retrieve can themselves cause a reticence to change because the ideal may be especially exclusionary. Particular ideals can have exclusion built into their meaning, which can also keep us resistant to change. The holding

of this kind of ideal would produce a rigid habit of overinvestment; we can enshrine in it the power of revealing the whole world to us.

Beauvoir shows us there are many different ways in which the past can come to us: "I call to mind some scene that happened long ago, it is fixed against that background like a butterfly pinned in a glass case: the characters no longer move in any direction. Their relationships are numbed, paralysed (366). Also, she writes: "The past is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me, a country in which I can stroll wherever I please, and which will gradually show me all its secret hills and dales. As I was moving forward, so it was crumbling" (365). While it is true that the past is quantitatively growing as we age, it is false that the meaning of the past is then guaranteed; "the meaning of the past event can always be reversed" (366).

Beauvoir's interesting contribution is that aging, more than any consciousness of our death makes us more fully aware of our finitude. In the face of an even larger past, the aged face the difficulty of transcending the past and anticipating the future. Beauvoir's idea here offers an interesting consequence that because of the weight of the past behind the old, their transcendence beyond it may be that much more valuable.<sup>9</sup> That is, a transcendence that creates new habits in spite of a weighty past is a higher existential achievement (377). It is easier for the young person to pick themselves back up when the stakes are down because the past is easily sloughed off in favour of a new present, but for the old, the burden of the past is so great that transcending it can seem impossible.

#### IV.

Beauvoir's view goes beyond a pragmatist's reading of habits, which tend to focus on educating the young because the old are necessarily rigidified. Beauvoir's view — because it takes the aging person as an existent in a situation — cannot rest social change on the social categories "the old" and "the young." Her view extends beyond calendar age because the old can have any number of attitudes towards their past, experience breaks with the past, travel and have new experiences that defy stagnant habituation. Similarly, her view extends to younger existential situations because we can imagine a case where the young can fail to anticipate a future full of possibilities as in cases of boundary marks determined by the values and political economy of a culture. These extensions prompt us to investigate boundary marks that are not related to biological death.<sup>10</sup>

Beauvoir noticed that our cultural narratives inform how we understand our own boundary marked future and here is where we should revisit Oksala's concerns about phenomenology's usefulness for

feminism. The boundary mark in Beauvoir's work is relative to culture, though our existential situation remains the same. It is universal *that* we age, but not *how* we age. Since it is the *how* that is phenomenologically relevant for understanding experience, Beauvoir has found a way to take cultural conditions and explain how experience can be affected in predictable ways. If cultural conditions are materialized when existents make meaning of their situation, then it is possible to extend the concept of a boundary mark past our biological body as dying and towards our cultural body as dying. In much the same way that the boundary mark as age is culturally produced, cultural narratives and political processes can effect an experience of our body that exceeds the "pre-theoretical" body of biology, and gives us a cultural body with a life of its own.<sup>11</sup>

A general example of extending boundary marks into a cultural phenomenology would be that under the economic pressure of late capitalism, or what Adorno called the "performance principle," there is the phenomenon of 'blowing it.' Especially since the economic collapse of 2008 attaining a comfortable economic position is foreclosed for many. Given the difficulty of economic success, performance pressure tells us that if we have failed to "make it" by attaining some upward mobility, the story goes, by age 30, then future possibilities contain a clear boundary mark—if it hasn't already been passed. A specifically white and upwardly mobile norm of femininity reads that if women failed to find a man to marry by a certain age, then they are destined to become childless failures. Similar to Beauvoir's account of aging, we can imagine these 'failures' as a loss of anticipation for the future because they experience passing a real -and yet culturally produced—crucial juncture in life where the death of possibilities can cause the rigid reliance on habit that makes one "set in their ways." Beauvoir's view is that how we experience our possibilities is dependent on how we experience ourselves in time; we are more adaptable to new situations when the future appears to us as abundant. Going in this direction, Beauvoir can provide us with guidance about how to change resistant habits that are strongly informed by cultural meanings.

Cultural boundary marks are lived through our bodies, our basic habits. In "Throwing Like a Girl," Iris Young argues that feminine bodily experience is of the lived body as "both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act" (38). This is because women are discouraged from experiencing themselves as pure presence to the world. Instead they are taught to express themselves as

simultaneously presence and awareness of objecthood—a dual structure of the relationship towards our possibilities for spatial movement. Many of Young's examples have to do with taking up space, for example, spreading out in or constricting one's bodily space. The lived time of feminine bodily experience can then be added to this spatial feminine phenomenology. How are women and girls experiencing lived time? Can we marry these insights to better understand feminine experience and ultimately women's oppression. A phenomenology of boundary marks as cultural can ground a political critique of how they are constructed, distributed and how they can contribute to phenomenological limits to possibilities. Representations of women and girls as "waiting" for Prince Charming to wake them up, waiting to become a wife, a mother, validated by male authority can affect the temporal horizon of feminine experience. This attitude is reflected in self-help literature, for example, in *1001 Questions to Ask Before You Get Married*, the author shares the following anecdote:

On my wedding day, my 82 year-old grandmother pulled me aside and, in a voice that was almost a whisper, said, "When I got married, all I did was cry for the first two years!" A few hours later, my new husband's grandmother came up to me and said, "Dear, now that we're family, I would like to share something with you...When I got married, all I did was cry for about two years!" Since my grandmother doesn't speak English and my husband's grandmother doesn't know a word of Spanish, I knew they weren't in cahoots.

How society views marriage can be a boundary mark, something worth grieving, something that limits possibilities, diminishes anticipation and possibly rigidifies habit. It is especially shocking, perhaps, because, especially for women, it is supposedly when life "begins."

Here a feminist expansion of Beauvoir's insights can take a foothold.

<sup>12</sup> We can politicize the creation and experiencing of boundary marks. Many women who I have discussed this paper with have immediately read the boundary mark of aging analogously with beauty ideals for women. I am acutely aware of my own context. As a girl, I believed that I could not be a particular kind of white beauty because I had freckles, green eyes, and brown hair. I had blonde hair and blue eyes until I was two years old and I remember family members reminding me of that as I grew up. I

believed that I had a “chance” to be beautiful but that it “didn’t work out for me.” This message, received at such a young age, functioned to perhaps not rigidify habits, as I had few at the time, but it did lessen anticipation. I did not expect romantic interest in me when I was older, I did not expect to have a career that I thought only available to “the beautiful,” and so on. The messaging I received was that it was “too late” for me.

A norm of femininity is to be vigilant against “premature aging” (an interesting concept in its own right). I have been told that it is never too early to start a night time skin care regimen, not to touch your eye lids and brows too much (encourages wrinkle growth), and to guard vigilantly against any sign of aging be it cellulite, dark skin spots, grey hair, wrinkles, and so on. The everyday practical suggestions from other women combine with advertisers who play on women’s fear of premature aging and being “past one’s prime.” The same norms simply do not apply to men—indeed, the distinguished older man trope almost mentions itself. Women experience the norms of femininity that correspond to guarding against physical markers of lived time. I can only gesture at these implications in this space, however, I hope to have shown that there are effects in our embodiment that twine together our cultural notions of time and our lived temporality and that this twining deserves feminist description and critique.

If we take Beauvoir’s methods of cultural phenomenology seriously we see that time shows itself when we have experiences such as “running out of time” “time flying” and so on. Even though our experiences are always temporal, the temporality of experience often recedes into the background until we have experiences that challenge our notion of steady, sequential time. What the boundary mark experience does is jolt us out of our everyday involvement and flattens out anticipation in unpredictable ways. The personal experience of passing a boundary mark, experienced as a lived awareness of time is informed by our cultural notions of time. To marry Young’s insights with those from feminist phenomenology of time, we can think about women’s experiences as caregivers and without enough time to themselves. If women’s spatiality is limited and their time belongs to someone else, what would a boundary mark experience look like in this situation? If women do experience themselves as lacking personal time, a kind of phenomenological exhaustion can occur when a future horizon is frozen, occupied by the time of others, and predictable. A feminist politics of the futurity of women’s horizons is then necessary and it is unsurprising that seeds of this would be found in Beauvoir’s corpus.<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It also is not clear that we ought to maintain a firm distinction between phenomenology and anthropology, and other human sciences. Eva Gothlin writes "[In a] Heideggerian kind of phenomenology whose logical consequence would be being unable to determine the meaning of sexual difference in itself and absolutely, while at the same time recognizing its existence. And we must also be aware that the signification of the sexed body is always dependent on how the body as situation is concretely lived and disclosed, a disclosure that in turn is related to a situation of significations already given... It is thus no coincidence that when Beauvoir describes sexual initiation, for example, she relates a whole spectrum of different ways to live it, ways that are dependent on the general cultural situation and the specific situation of an individual woman, a situation that, in turn is dependent on her relationship to her parents, previous erotic experiences and so forth" (Eva Gothlin. "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card, ed. 45-65, Cambridge UP (2003), 56).

<sup>2</sup> "But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society; biology alone cannot provide an

answer to the question that concerns us: why is woman the *Other*? The question is how, in her, nature has been taken on in the course of history; the question is what humanity has made of the human female" (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, (New York, NY: Random House, 2010), 48).

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir relies heavily on the concept of the practico-inert in this chapter. She leans on Sartre to define this key term; "He defines this as the whole formed by those things that are marked by the seal of human activity together with men defined by their relationship to those things: as far as I personally am concerned, the practico-inert is the whole formed by the books I have written, which now outside me constitute my works and define me as their author" (Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 372-3).

<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger death is our ownmost possibility because no one can die in our place. There are many things that we do that others can leap in and do for us but no one can take away our dying. This is significant because we can reorient ourselves towards authenticity if we retrieve our ownmost possibility by making ourselves aware of our being-towards-death. This is how we guarantee that the possibility we are acting towards is not constituted by the-they or "the public" in non-Heideggerian.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Fielding has argued (forthcoming 2012) that the rigidity that Beauvoir posits for the aged in LV does not necessarily entail emotional rigidity, but rather that the aged person can repeat habits in the present for the purposes of deepening the feelings that they have associated with the habitual movements. I think she is right to read Beauvoir in this way, and that the emotions we have are not necessarily entailed by the rigidity of habits. Fielding is considering the individual repetition of the habit in the present and does not assume resistance to change that guides my project. Although it would be interesting to investigate how the individuals can shift their emotions associated with a habit in order to deepen the feelings in the ways that Fielding outlines, she does not assume at the outset that the individual wants to change the habitual movements.

<sup>6</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Fragments of a Journal*. Trans. Jean Stewart. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Sainte-Beuve was an important literary critique in France's nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche responds to him as a philosopher in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889).

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful for Janine Jones for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Shannon Musset for pointing out this potential problem in Beauvoir's view of transcendence.

<sup>10</sup> I am wary to extend Beauvoir's phenomenology to include cultural death as a process that can crystallize our reliance on habit because I resist the possible slippage toward trivializing the experience of the aged who touch boundary marks that characterize biological death. I read *La Vieillesse* in part as an extended meditation on the processes by which the experience of the aged is trivialized in society and so I take Beauvoir's work seriously as philosophy and also as a political undertaking, as it was surely intended. LV makes a profound political and philosophical contribution to understanding the trivialization of the experience of the aged and, without diminishing this contribution, Beauvoir's phenomenology can usefully speak to broader phenomenological questions.

<sup>11</sup> Here I am following Judith Butler who argues in *Bodies that Matter* that we cannot talk about a "pure" material body outside of the operations of power that produce bodies as intelligible (9).

<sup>12</sup> I am very grateful for an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to expand on this aspect of the paper.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Cressida Heyes, Chloë Taylor, Marie-Eve Morin, Michelle

Meagher, Robert Burch, and Megan Dean for valuable feedback on this paper. I would also like to thank the many organizers and attendees of the 2011 meeting of the Simone de Beauvoir Society, notably Bonnie Mann, Shannon Mussett, Deborah Bergoffen, Janine Jones, and Emily Parker for their productive feedback. Many fruitful conversations during the meeting of the Feminist Phenomenology Research Group in Vienna in 2008 with Helen Fielding, Gail Weiss, Penelope Deutscher, and many others sparked the creation of this paper.



## Unfit Women: Freedom and Constraint in the Pursuit of Health

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*Feminist phenomenology has contributed significantly to understanding the negative impact of the objectification of women's bodies. The celebration of thin bodies as beautiful and the demonization of fat bodies as unattractive is a common component of that discussion. However, when one turns toward the correlation of fat and poor health, a feminist phenomenological approach is less obvious. In this paper, previous phenomenological work on the objectification of women is paralleled to the contemporary encouragement to discipline one's body in order to pursue better health. Similar ideologies of free choice in the face of bodily habits run through discussions of health and beauty. The paper uses the work of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir as well as the contemporary feminist phenomenologists Diaprose, Bartky, Bordo, Young, Grosz, and Carel to explore how women are constrained by health testing and health normalization. It argues that despite the apparent benefits of a focus on modifying health habits, feminists have good reason to be wary of the good health imperative.*

### Introduction

The demonization of fatness has reached its historic zenith due to the correlation of obesity with poor health. In order to justify blaming and shaming the fat, it must be the case that fat people are culpable for their size. This educates both fat and thin alike to discipline their behaviors to either not acquire the dreaded extra flesh or, if having acquired it, to rid oneself of it. Someone who fails to properly limit her own size is viewed as both irrational (who would want the ill health associated with fatness?) and immoral (all people have a duty to make the most of their health).

Feminist phenomenology articulates how models of beauty and norms of female embodiment have shaped women's experiences and self-evaluations. When it comes to looks, writers have stressed the negative implications of considering one's body as a never-ending aesthetic project that needs to be molded, shaped, and managed into appropriate attractiveness. However, in turning to the role of health, this paper finds that a correlated, but more insidious, set of disciplining practices exists in the fight against fat. The good-health imperative, similar to the beauty model, implies continual improvement for one's body as a goal, but it is additionally strongly moralized providing little room for rebellion. One can decide to refuse to wear high heels as an empowering act, but can one refuse to pursue good-health?

This paper refers to the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and

Simone de Beauvoir as well as the contemporary feminist phenomenologists Rosalyn Diaprose, Sandra Lee Bartky, Susan Bordo, Iris Young, Elizabeth Grosz, and Havi Carel to explore the implications of the good-health imperative on female embodiment. I argue that the good-health imperative curtails women's freedom by reducing them to beings caught in an endless cycle of bodily maintenance. In particular, the use of testing to determine health makes it impossible to be sure one's health and one's experiences coincide. The lack of any discourse that violates the good-health imperative indoctrinates women to psychologically internalize its demands. In conclusion, this paper finds that while body modification in the pursuit of health is a possible goal for some women, it should cease to be a moral imperative any more than beauty should be one. I argue that feminists should continue their skepticism about others intruding in the bodies and choices of women even when such actions are purportedly in their own best interests.

*Objectification: Women's Bodies as Sexual Objects*

Feminist phenomenology has helped elucidate how the objectification of women not only affects how women judge themselves, but also how they move and live in the world. A common focus is how discrimination and sexism impacts the bodily habitus of women. A habitus is often referred to in the description of the bodily constitution of a disease, such as the habitus of multiple sclerosis. This analogy works well since as with disease, being affected by a sexist culture is not a "choice," but a long process of enculturation. Like the progress of an illness, one might be able to intellectually identify causes and contributing factors, but one's dispositions and behaviors in the world are transformed whether or not one is a willing participant. One can rail against the sexism inherent within the cult of beauty, but if one has grown up in a society where a repeated and directed equation between a woman's value to her looks is drawn, one's bodily comportment will show signs of this enculturation. Illness often causes one to feel distanced from the body and also more tied to its demands. A sick woman is both more frustrated and separated from her body that thwarts her plans, yet at the same time she is more hindered by it and thus tied to it. Likewise, insistent demands to modify one's appearance make the body an enemy to be conquered. Yet the more one spends time disciplining the body, the more one's life is tightly tied to appearance monitoring.

When it comes to fatness, contemporary women are defined by a similar estranged relationship with their bodies.<sup>22</sup> Given that fatness is coded as unattractive and as a sign of ill-health, a fat woman's body is both her enemy as well as her most defining feature. It is almost difficult to enumerate the ways in which fat women are coded as lying outside the realm of possible attractiveness: the lack of fat women as sexually active women in television and movies, the overwhelming acceptability of making fat jokes, and the clear coding of beauty as thinness. Fat women are also labeled as unhealthy. While fat women themselves receive the lion's share of shaming from the medical establishment as well as the media (and very often from friends and family), all women are impacted by the focus on fatness. If one is not fat, one is supposed to be on guard against it constantly, including extending that concern to one's children and family members. Before this paper expands upon the connection between fat and health, it looks at the general features to how women's appearance is objectified.

Women are strongly evaluated on their looks in situations ranging from dating to job interviews to walking down the street. Women are trained to constantly consider how they appear to the gaze of the other, rather than how they are embodied in a particular situation. When it comes to the demonization of fat women and the struggle most women have with their fat, women learn that their bodies are not acceptable as they are, or as they will likely tend to be over time. What a woman learns from "battle of the bulge" is that there is something amiss with her appearance. As Sandra Lee Bartky explains in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990)

It is a fact, that women in our society are regarded as having a virtual duty "to make the most of what we have." But the imperative not to neglect our appearance suggests that we can neglect it, that it is within our power to make ourselves look better—not just neater and cleaner, but prettier, and more attractive. (29)

Dieting and exercise are tightly connected to the demand for self-improvement devoted toward making oneself more appealing to others. For this to make sense, women must be convinced that they are not good enough already; how they appear to others is a problem, a problem that they can fix. Even a woman whose appearance is considered to fit the ideal of weight, skin tone, hair luxuriousness, and curvaceousness

<sup>1</sup> This paper's research is based in empirical studies of American women.

is under no less pressure. She too must engage in rituals of defense against aging, working constantly to maintain and perfect her look. Fat is a common enemy since its distribution is rarely ideal on most women's bodies. The average woman in the U.S. weighs 165 pounds, is 5'3", and is about a U.S. size 14. Whereas, the average fashion model weighs 117 pounds, is around 5'10", and is about a size 2 (CDC, Body Measurements). For most women, fat reduction or guarding against fat gain is a necessary beauty ritual. Even thin women rarely have the ideal fat distribution of full breasts, thin thighs, high rounded buttocks, and flat stomachs. Thus, women in general are in need of "improvement": body modification aimed at "redistributing" fat and muscle appropriately.

What women learn from an early age is that one's worth is tightly connected to one's appearance and this constrains one's embodiment in situations far removed from the catwalk or the cover of a magazine. One becomes limited by considering what one looks like to others, one does not direct action outward to a world, but instead reads into the future what such action would appear like if viewed from an ever-present gaze, like a camera fixed and documenting every roll of fat and every bad hair day. To know that the evaluation of one's worth is tied to the evaluation of one's appearance makes women self-conscious in situations where such concerns limit their free behavior. In "Throwing Like a Girl" (1990), Iris Marion Young describes how this habitual self-consciousness affects basic bodily motility from throwing to confidently jumping over a stream. While pleasure exists when one imagines approval from the critical gaze, in other words from a good performance, one's bodily habitus causes one to be self-conscious in situations that demand the opposite.<sup>23</sup> Embracing objectification can produce pleasure, but it does not provide an "out" to find spaces and times in which objectification is not present.

In *Unbearable Weight* (1995), Susan Bordo highlights how the obsession with "perfect" managed bodies increases women's sense of seeing their bodies as something to be molded and beaten into submission.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir (1989) discusses the ways in which women enjoy being reduced down to immanence, to the role of an object to be observed, in *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir, women learn as young girls to see themselves as objects (335-336). There is some enjoyment for many in this new doubling of the self as lived and the self as observed. As an object, the woman is no longer free, but also is no longer responsible. Bartky discusses feminine narcissism in *Femininity and Domination* (1990, 33-44). She admits that there is pleasure to be had in enjoying one's objectification, but argues that it is a "repressive" satisfaction (42). Repressive satisfactions chain us to the dominant power structure.

Models of beauty teach not only certain static aesthetic values—the shape of the ideal body, clothes, hair—but also how to act as a woman—sexual but vulnerable, flexible, fashionable, and, above all else, attractive. But being attractive is increasingly a project and not a natural gift. In a typical woman's magazine, the images of beauty are not simply photos; they are accompanied by instruction manuals regarding how to make one's own body approximate the model or celebrity. To be a valuable woman is to be engaged in projects of body manicuring, shaping, and sculpting.

Female objectification is based in the view of women as sexual objects. Beauty is about sexual attractiveness. The ways in which men's appearance is marked tends to draw attention toward codes of competence, such as height (tall) and skin color (white). These are likewise unjust but they do not imply that men in general are sexual *objects*—rather it is about looking “professional” and in charge. Objectification might be universal, but it still needs to be analyzed along gender lines or it will fail to be comprehended fully. As Linda Fisher (2000) writes:

An account that fails to recognize that its descriptions omit particularities of women's experience, such as pregnant embodiment, betrays the underlying (masculinist) assumption that the generic (male) account sets the standard and encompasses all possibilities, and in this manner functions to diminish and marginalize the experience and perspectives of women. (24)

For women, looking appropriate means some relationship to the ideal model of the sexually attractive woman. Female objectification is tied to the male heterosexual gaze. As Bartky notes above, it is not sufficient for women to merely meet certain standards of hygiene. Women must be appealing: i.e., appealing as sexual objects. Women consider how they appear to others even when the others who wait in judgment are not likely or potential sexual partners. Applying for jobs, walking down the street, waiting for a professor's evaluation are all situations in which one is self-conscious.

When Beauvoir (1989) writes about becoming a woman, she notes that the endless prescriptions about how to be a woman imply that it is a project that does not always end in success (267). One can fail. If one has succeeded, that success is precarious and always possibly threatened. In a similar vein, being an appropriately attractive object of attention is an unstable position. Fatness or the possibility of fatness is to be avoided at all costs since it takes one out of the realm of acceptable attractiveness.

What the objectification of women creates is not only women feeling observed and separated from their bodies, but also women believing in a tremendous amount of agency on their part to achieve any body. It is only their lack of sufficient effort, willpower, or the right combination of diet, exercise, and body modification that is holding them back. The immensely powerful rhetoric of “empowerment” suggests that any woman can (and thus should) improve her looks. This model of plastic, infinitely moldable bodies, increases the sense of deficiency as the ideal becomes further and further removed from the reality of real, living women.

*Healthism: The Good-Health Imperative*

Bringing to light the ways in which women have been conditioned to view their bodies as projects for continual improvement based on the need to appear attractive to others is not only important for understanding female embodiment, but also it can provide a place in which to turn back and become critical of such models. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) writes, without phenomenologies of female embodiment, “without some acknowledgement of the formative role of experience in the establishment of knowledges, feminism has no grounds from which to dispute patriarchal norms” (94). The obsession with female appearance makes a woman’s experience in seemingly innocuous situations a test of her appearance. Without considering how a woman’s habitus is modified by a culture where their bodies are objectified, it would be difficult to call for change given that many women appear complicit in objectification. As noted above, the objectification of women explains how body modification is not just one “choice” among many activities that a woman might participate in, it is central to the definition of what a valuable woman is.

A woman who feels obligated to constantly manage her appearance might read works by feminists such as Beauvoir (1989), Bordo (1995), Diaprose (1994), Young (1990), and Grosz (1994) as valuable aids to understand this split self she feels. She subsequently can rebel against this socialization. She might strive to spend less time viewing herself from the point of view of the male gaze and more time invested in her projects. Feminist theory has long helped women find space outside the cult of beauty and its incessant demands toward lives with better priorities. Yet, when it comes to fat bodies, a more insidious aspect of body modification arises—that of health. The fat body is increasingly associated with ill health and not just a failure to be attractive. Ceasing to wear make-up can be seen as an act arising

from a feminist rejection of one standard of appropriate appearance, but how should feminists label the refusal to modify one's diet to a healthier form?

Parallels between the conditions of being encouraged to work on one's looks and the increasing interest in working on one's health are apparent in the focus on combating fatness. While the practices may differ, one might take a questionable drug to lose weight if one has no interest in health, whereas if one is dieting to lose weight for one's health, one might work on changing "good" for "bad" foods. However, in general, the practice is one of discipline over the body with a key measure of success being the reduction of fatty tissue measured by scales and tape measures.

Some pushback against the demonization of fat exists, such as the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement (Bacon, 2008). HAES and other researchers critical of the war against obesity argue that dieting is largely deleterious for one's health, rarely successful, and that little evidence exists that proves fat women are doomed to lives of poor health (Gibbs, 2005; Kolata, 2007; Oliver, 2006). Contrasting with the war against obesity's focus on using weight as a measurement for health, critics stress healthy activity and eating for all people of all sizes and draw attention to studies that indicate the link between health and weight is not as conclusive as is often argued.

Insofar as the rejection of the hysteria over fatness is construed as the healthier model (not dieting is better for you than dieting), HAES and other anti-diet initiatives remain within the same good health imperative paradigm. They argue that the pursuit of good health should be the guiding goal of behavior and criticize the mainstream obsession with dieting. In this sense, traditional models of dieting for health and HAES are structurally similar. The way to settle certain arguments about lifestyles would be to discern what results in the healthiest individuals. If one includes an embodiment approach, where one doesn't treat the body as a machine that one feeds and exercises, but as one that is engaged in projects, ambitions, and deeply intertwined in investments with others and the world, then it would be hard to view a strictly mechanistic biological approach to health as valuable. It might be true that a very strict diet would result in the best health outcomes for an individual, but given that any individual has pressures and limitations on her time and money, perhaps the healthiest option will be one that is "good enough." In common language, this would be the idea that one must consider psychological health as well as physical health, although most phenomenologists would prefer to avoid this dualistic language.

Women may engage in various healthy models, such as ones that accept occasional "failures" as not only normal but also as healthy for

one's greater well-being. Occasionally having a piece of cake or using mass produced food after a long day at work might enable one to live more happily in one's situation. Pursuing the healthier food or activity option at every decision one makes in a day is impossible or destabilizing for many. In such more expansive models, the traditional focus on food and activity—those assumed to most directly affect weight—would need to be considered in the context of a variety of choices, activities, obligations, and desires. While such a model is certainly more reasonable than a model that pushes the maintenance of weight as a priority regardless of the woman's circumstances, I argue that it still presents health as an imperative (albeit a more holistic view of health). Gone is the emphasis on weight alone, to be replaced by a model focusing on all types of healthy behaviors. Both the traditional model, where weight is seen as a primary indicator of good-health habits, and the holistic model, where good-health habits are about behavior rather than weight, emphasize a view where the individual has agency to "manage" her health appropriately. She is encouraged to see her life as a series of choices to be made. Below, a phenomenological approach to freedom is outlined and then the way the good health imperative influences a woman's embodiment is explored.

### *Freedom in Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty*

Understanding freedom from a feminist phenomenological viewpoint requires that one step outside the poles of determinism and free will. Evidently one's embodied status is not entirely free; but it is also not determined what path one takes since one has many possible trajectories. Why one chooses one direction over another is a matter of a complex situation—one's intellectual deliberation, elements of past and present situations, habits, and sedimented relationships with others will all influence one's behavior. When one realizes that one's value is falsely tied to one's looks approximating some impossible beauty standard, one cannot immediately cease being influenced by the long history and current reality of living in such a society. One has long lived in a world where appearance and value are linked and one's bodily habitus is not so easily changed. Yet, one can take steps in different directions, habits are not set in stone, and new possibilities always arise in the complexity of the lived situation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1996) points out the difficulty of change by writing that if one has long engaged in certain practices that



are confirmed by one's milieu, it is possible, but unlikely, to alter one's behavior:

But here once more we must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us. Yet since freedom does not tolerate any motive in its path, my habitual being is at each moment equally precarious, and the complexes which I have allowed to develop over the years always remain equally soothing, and the free act can with no difficulty blow them sky-high. However, having built our life upon an inferiority complex which has been operative for twenty years, it is not *probable* that we shall change. (442)

The inferiority complex that dictates that women are unattractive and insufficiently healthy makes it difficult to imagine them "blowing sky-high" this indoctrination. Political advocacy for greater acceptance of a diversity of body shapes and lifestyles is an essential part of any project designed to provide more freedom for women since finding freedom would be more common in worlds where more paths were considered viable alternatives. But, when it comes to the discussion of health, one might assume that since health is a bodily state *and* a bodily experience, it would always fit well within a phenomenological analysis of freedom. In other words, what is healthy would always augment freedom. If it is healthier to refuse to live according to ridiculous standards of bodily manicuring, building such a life would reduce the inferiority complex and thus widen one's range of possibilities.

Are behaviors that promote health better tied to understanding freedom's connection to embodiment? Could one argue that the woman who acts to better her health is more likely to find a wider set of possibilities in her life than a woman who does not? Diaprose (1994) expands upon Merleau-Ponty's idea of freedom by emphasizing that projecting into the future is not a conscious choice but a projection of one's corporeal schema:

Intentional activity is not directed by a choice in the form of a representation or voluntary deliberation. Rather, the action is directed towards a future through projection of a corporeal schema and the future (and hence the choice) is constituted or actualized through the body's activity. (105)

While it might appear to me that I am deliberating about a choice and it is this deliberation that will resolve my future behavior, what underlies that deliberation is an imagination that is fully bodily and hence draws with it sedimented habits and affective relationships. For example, it is difficult to distance oneself from a fight with a family member because one's embodied reality is so constituted by the other person. A fight over who last emptied the dishwasher becomes excessive not because one is necessarily so invested in the justice of dishwasher emptying, but because one has to live with the other, and live in the future with the other. Bad health habits, such as overeating or failing to exercise, are likely as entrenched as bodily habits and related to a variety of interconnected situations—where one lives, what others in one's life do—and are hard to alter. The woman who enjoys good health could enjoy an embodiment that is as entrenched in her lived situation, but one that has more possibilities of projecting alternative corporeal schemas into the future. In illness, one's life becomes narrowed, everyday activities become challenges.

The freedom to alter an illness is quite different than the possible freedom to alter a bad health habit. Illness is not usually thought of as a problem of the individual not possessing the right amount of self-control. Some illnesses are not open to personal choice or modification. Some have no cure; some require external aid. In this case, there are some parallels to be drawn with bad health habits. Many blame health woes on our genetic heritage, coming from a long prehistory of scarcity into a contemporary situation of food abundance, our bodies have no sense of when enough is enough. Thus, overeating isn't a problem of agency but of evolution. One might also stress a psychoanalytic interpretation where food compulsions are the result of complexes that lie within the unconscious mental life of the person and thus are not easily, if at all, open to change.

Despite this difficulty of imaging change, Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1989) remains firm on the possibility of free action, even in the case of women who have been raised, educated, and socialized in a limiting fashion. For Beauvoir, what limits freedom in a situation is also what makes possible the very existence of freedom. Since one is not constituted by a straight line of causality but influenced and shaped by a multitude of different relations and situations, one is not determined to perform any particular action. "But a life is a relation to the world, and the individual

defines himself by making his own choices through the world around him” (Beauvoir, 1989, 49). It is true that an alienation from a woman’s own body exists— a sense of being constantly judged externally and a pressure to make sure she lives up to often impossible standards—but she is not compelled to always and without exception behave a certain way.

I shall place woman in a world of values and give her behavior a dimension of liberty, I believe that she has the power to choose between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as object; she is not the plaything of contradictory drives; she devises solutions of diverse ranking in the ethical scale. (Beauvoir, 1989, 50)

If one was but the product of genetic and psychological drives that are molded by the social world in which one finds oneself, change would be impossible. One would expect a strong uniformity of behavior across any group that is biologically similar and present in roughly the same culture. Instead one finds a diversity of reactions to the objectification of women in any group. In principle, a phenomenological approach to embodiment emphasizes the difficulty of change given the situation one lives within and the pressures on and limitations of the body, but it does not foreclose the possibility of freedom.

### *Health and Disembodiment*

Returning to health, is the choice that entails less condemnation to being determined, to being caught in immanence (being but a thing in the world determined by factors outside one’s control), the choice that promotes one’s health? At first glance, as mentioned above, the answer would appear to be yes. One could see the limiting forces of a world saturated with unhealthy foods, limitations on activity, and obsessions with excess as detractions from a life that better promoted freedom as an inherently embodied experience, not a cerebral one. Continuing with Beauvoir’s assessment of freedom, one could assert that even if there are genetic drives that encourage overindulgence, one is not condemned to live those drives out. Freedom in the face of objectification and freedom in the face of fat is possible.

Yet, if one considers a phenomenology of a contemporary woman’s

relation to health this answer is far less obvious. First, in the developed world, whether or not one is healthy is largely determined by one's results from a series of tests and one's behavior based on various large-scale studies. Is this woman healthy? To answer this question those in charge of determining health would ask: What is her cholesterol level? What is her BMI? What is her blood pressure? Does she smoke? One might *feel* fine but score outside the range that has been determined to be healthy. This is often the complaint of the HAES movement and fat activists who say the insurance industry standards of weight are unrelated to health. Or, alternatively, one might feel poorly but score well in a battery of tests. (The solution to the latter in the U.S. tends to be more tests.) Health increasingly is determined by "objective" measurements of one's body. When one reads an alarmist story about the growing weight of Americans, one isn't reading a story about the feelings and attitudes of fat Americans, but rather a story of biostatistics (CDC, 2011).

My employer—the State of Tennessee—has changed our health care options to include a program called "The Partnership Promise" (Partners for Health, 2011). Although the cost of health insurance is rising for all state employees, being part of "the Promise" permits one to pay slightly less for health insurance than the other plans. What one is required to do is to undergo a series of tests and then sign a form promising that you will take action as recommended regarding these tests. I signed up and went to the large room in our university center where employees were shuffled around from station to station taking simple tests such as blood sugar, blood pressure, weight, and cholesterol. One then sits in the middle of a room until the results are obtained thereafter one must have a "counseling" session regarding one's results. There was no privacy for this counseling so I was able to overhear the people before me being told to engage in more activity and consume less fatty foods.

Luckily I "passed" the tests and thus did not have to listen to a person who looked no older than 18 tell me to eat more vegetables. Discussing this process with friends I found that many saw nothing wrong with it since after all, one could "opt out" by paying more monthly for one's health care. In addition, as a state with abysmal health standards, is it really that terrible to encourage better health habits? This kind of intrusion by sticks and carrots (examples of "sticks" are paying more for insurance, being refused insurance; examples of "carrots" are free gym memberships, rewards for achieving weight loss goals) into one's health habits is becoming

more commonplace and is viewed as positive and needed to help control health care costs and promote a healthier populace.

But I do not experience the factors that document my healthiness directly. I do not experience my BMI as BMI or my cholesterol level as a cholesterol level. I can be in an eye exam and tell the doctor if I can read a set of letters, but I cannot answer meaningfully what my BMI is by considering my bodily state. If you tell me the number of my cholesterol level it is hard to say it corresponds to how I experience my body in the way in the way that I know I cannot see objects clearly at a distance. I can ask myself “can I read that sign?” but I cannot ask myself “what is my cholesterol level today?” and receive an answer. One can be surprised by findings if one lacks any symptoms of illness that are associated with “unhealthy” levels. Of course, the argument from health care providers (and for economic reasons from health insurers) is that even if now you feel fine as an overweight woman, eventually you have a higher risk of correlated diseases and thus it is imperative that you engage in practices to lower that possible future risk.

One might say that good health always has experiential correlates and thus one needs to “tune in” to one’s body to figure out if one’s health in addition to undergoing medical testing (or perhaps even in place of medical testing). Certainly one can say that one feels well, but does that mean one feels “healthy”? What does it mean to *know* one is in good health? One option would be to say if a woman feels well, then she is healthy. But this feeling of wellness might be illusory; a checkup might reveal a malignant tumor even though one had no experiential symptoms to suggest the body is ill. Another option would be to say that a healthy woman is someone who does not have any pain or discomfort. But athletes and those engaged in strenuous physical pursuits have discomfort. If one hears heartbreaking news she will feel pain directly even though it would seem her health would not have changed. Good news can alter one’s embodiment dramatically causing a sluggish, tired, even pained person to feel energized and well. Knowing when one is “healthy” is elusive; hence the medical profession must use tests to document health. But a gap exists between these numbers on a doctor’s report and one’s embodied existence.

This disjunction between testing and embodiment particularly impacts women as they are the biggest consumer of the products of the health-centered diet and exercise industry. In addition to a woman’s value being attached to her own perceived proper self-care, the proper care one’s dependents is a key criteria to being viewed as a good mother. Like

Beauvoir's discussion of the condemnation of women to immanence in the domestic sphere, the good-health imperative results in a similar condemnation to a peculiar kind of immanence—that of the maintenance of the body based on medical testing. Following Bartky, one finds that psychological oppression is particularly trenchant in women based on concerns about health. In addition, the strong tie to good health as being a moral requirement for good caregiving makes it impossible to see health as a personal choice, like one's fashion sensibility might be. Both of these oppressions curtail the freedom of women by presenting choice as a binary between good, moral, reasonable healthy choices and bad, immoral, unreasonable unhealthy ones.

Beauvoir (1989) writes in reference to housekeeping that “the battle against dust and dirt is never won” (451). While one may take some pleasure in housekeeping, it is an endlessly repetitive task and one in which it is difficult for Beauvoir to see much of the individual's own spirit reflected in its execution. There are, after all, only so many innovative ways to mop a floor. She writes how in contrast shopping is often seen as a joyful activity simply because the hunt for ideal item or bargain does permit a modicum of individual achievement.

This discussion of housekeeping appears distanced from the discussion of fatness and the good health imperative, but I argue that a strong similarity exists. The fight against fat is also a task that is never won. Even if one has obtained the ideal weight, constant and never-ending vigilance is required since the weight could creep back on. When one forgets to dust, the final result—a dusty house—might easily be perceived, but one does not perceive it as it accumulates. In weight gain, tighter pants might be a sign after sufficient weight has “accumulated” but without this signal or the preferred one, the scale, one does not perceive the gain as it happens. Unlike the immediate pleasure of a good meal or the immediate pain of a twisted ankle, weight gain is gradual.

Modern women may feel less anxiety over the assessment of their housekeeping abilities, but they feel extraordinary pressure over the assessment of their weight regulation abilities. And unlike a house that potentially could be cleaned before the boss comes to dinner, one's body cannot be made healthy in an afternoon. Dieting and exercise for health become a woman's major life project. This also distinguishes women from men. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes regarding marriage that “...no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project” (1989, 431). A similar parallel can be drawn between marriage and the good-health

imperative as between housekeeping and the good-health imperative. Modern mores on marriage are changing rapidly from Beauvoir's time and even in my own conservative state of Tennessee, I meet few female students who consider marriage as their only important goal in life. However, the maintenance of one's weight is a central and fundamental project for most women.

The weight and health of a woman is tightly tied to a perception of her competence. In contemporary U.S. politics, the Republican governor of New Jersey—Chris Christie—is fat. He has received some mocking about his weight and has commented upon it himself, usually jokingly (Marcus, 2011). However, it is impossible to imagine such a fat female candidate even being considered for any office. Hillary Clinton (U.S. Secretary of State) and Sonia Sotomayor (U.S. Supreme Court Justice), neither of whom are fat women, were criticized for their weight. In the case of Sotomayor, it was wondered if her type-one diabetes should disqualify her for the U.S. Supreme Court (Shapiro, 2009). While fat men certainly suffer discrimination, women who are seen as unhealthy are seen as incompetent. As Diaprose (1994) points out, "I think the central issue in redressing women's social subordination within patriarchal social relations is not so much male control of women's bodies as the ways in which women's bodies are socially constituted in relation to men" (119). In the case of weight maintenance the fat woman who does not make it a fundamental project will likely suffer the same kinds of discrimination which the woman who had "failed" to find a mate fifty years ago received.

Recognizing that one can have a fulfilling life without an immaculate house or without a husband is empowering for a woman. But when health comes into the equation, that same woman might willingly fully integrate the betterment of her health as a central ambition. The shift in diet campaigns toward the idea of "wellness" and away from "being bikini ready" is often articulated by dieters as family and other-centered rather than beauty-centered. Dieters will stress their desires to run around with their children and grandchildren, as needing to lose weight so they can be there for their families. Bartky (1990) writes that psychologically oppressed people stop sensing that they have the capacity to be autonomous. "Oppressed people might or might not be in a position to exercise their autonomy, but the psychologically oppressed may come to believe that they lack the capacity to be autonomous whatever their position" (29-30). No room exists for a woman to reject the good-health imperative as a

guiding goal. This is particularly the case for a woman who fails to meet the standards of health. She will be cajoled by doctors, lambasted by the public, and penalized by insurance companies. The more she “fails” the more she is likely to internalize the oppression, seeing herself as without freedom to reject, or resituate, the goal of health.

Bartky (1990) discusses how in sexual objectification, women suffer from both “fragmentation” and “mystification.” Fragmentation is the splitting of the person into parts, “which, in stereotyping, may take the form of a war between a ‘true’ and a ‘false’ self” (23). In a culture that demands dieting and exercise for health, the true self is the one who successfully controls the wayward body, the false self is the one who gives in. Mystification is “the systematic obscuring of both the reality and agencies of psychological oppression so that its intended effect, the depreciated self, is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis” (23). Under the good-health imperative, few if any are successful since there is always some action, no matter how small, that can be interpreted as unhealthy: that bite of cake, the day one took the elevator, one’s lack of sleep. One is unable to reject the good-health imperative as one can reject the obsession with a certain model of beauty. Who doesn’t want to be healthy? Only the unreasonable, the mentally ill, or the depressed would express such a desire. One must want to be healthy. Thus, any time one fails to engage in actions that further that goal, there must be something psychologically wrong. The authority that imposes the good-health imperative on women has been obscured and women are left with internalized failure and guilt.

### *Bodily Maintenance and Ill Bodies*

The most self-righteous voices that ring out against fatness draw attention to the host of illnesses that have a high correlation with obesity. Heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, sleep apnea, asthma, fatty liver disease, osteoarthritis, and polycystic ovary disease are related to obesity, and individuals have shown improvement when they lost weight (Malnick and Knobler 2006). Such concerns are interesting to consider in light of the model of illness and agency and the idea that an ill life is always a reduced and deficient one.

Merleau-Ponty (1996) supports the idea that when the body becomes an object of attention due to illness, the subject’s embodiment has become broken. He writes that in illness, the intentional arc “goes



limp" (136). When one is ill, one no longer directs oneself outward toward a world of possibilities, but rather one's body demands that one spend attention on it. As Diaprose (1994) writes in illness, "The structure of the self becomes disrupted when part of the body becomes an object of attention such that normal functioning becomes impossible" (108). Both Merleau-Ponty and Diaprose focus on the way in which illness that are not seen as caused by bad health habits, such as the brain damaged patient Schneider, affect one's embodiment and thus one's agency.

In illness, freedom is not eradicated, but merely limited and curtailed. For each individual, the nexus of possibilities and choices and the way in which an illness limits her would be complex and divergent from others. The medical model, in particular one that is based in charts of "good" and "bad" scores, tends to pass over these important differences. Diaprose (1994) writes that, "The phenomenological model not only reinstates the dignity of the patient by stressing that the fabric upon which biomedicine works is the self, but also highlights the specificity of that person's condition, however common that condition may appear to be" (110). A more phenomenological approach to illness would attempt to view illness in terms of the embodied person's plans and projects, her relationships, her habits, and her environment. It would not seek so much to classify and cajole but to find a connection to the ill person's own agency.

In Havi Carel's revealing book *Illness* (2008), she explores phenomenologically her own life-threatening illness lymphangioleiomyomatosis (LAM) for which no cure has been found. She describes how her bodily capacities are severely limited and how the knowledge of suffering from a disease that will likely end her life in her forties affects her embodiment. But this book does not merely consider illness a closing but also a meditation on restricting and reframing one's embodied life. For example, as she writes in her dedication to her husband that he has helped her make "a disaster into an obstacle" (2008, x). Her discussion of illness reveals a better approach to considering the highly individual nature of embodiment and points us toward a less moralizing approach to health and health habits.

Carel understands her illness to expose painfully the truths of embodiment. She writes that illness "is an abrupt, violent way of revealing the intimately bodily nature of our being" (27). In a project that absorbs one, one's body can recede further and further into the background, making one ignorant of it and even to imagine one holds complete dominion over it. But in illness, one is reminded that one is not a disembodied will only tangentially tied to a body. After becoming ill, Carel's previous habits and

plans are no longer possible. Bicycling, travelling, having children all ceased to be possible projects and hence her entire life required reorganization. Illness does not just impact the body, but it creates a global restructuring, and in the case of progressive illness, a continual restructuring, of the “way the body experiences, reacts and performs tasks as a whole” (29). Yet, surprisingly to the healthy, in researching the chronically ill phenomenologically, interviewers found that some saw themselves as healthy and happy and some who stressed the sorrow, frustration, guilt, and anger at their illnesses (Carel, 2008, 79). It is interesting here to note the divergence of experiences and, as Carel notes, “the limitation of the medical approach” (79). How the restructuring occurs remains largely divergent. While the progression of a disease may be predictable, the patient’s reaction is not.

Carel’s illness does not have any of the moral ambiguity that illnesses associated with bad health habits do. Insofar as it portrays a far richer account of the nature of living with illness, it is valuable, but it might be seen as irrelevant for the discussion of the good-health imperative since it was not due to her “failing” at eating healthily or not exercising sufficiently. What Carel adds to the considerations in this paper is pointing out that one still has individual agency even in the face of significant bodily illness, but also that all bodies are far more limited by their situations than one’s hubris might suppose. Carel (2008) writes that she learned “to respect two things: that the laws of cause and effect governing the universe may generate suffering over which we have no control and that everything, including myself, was ephemeral” (65).

### *Conclusion*

A phenomenological inquiry indicates that the pursuit of health by modification of bad health habits is not an unquestionable goal or good for women. It promotes even more insidious alienation from a woman’s own body than the beauty ideal does because no space is provided in which to reject it. The way in which tests work in monitoring the public and the idea that the individual is free to “chose” to be healthy or not encourages a sense of battle with the body. While this indoctrination into “healthy lifestyles” often appears to have a kind of patina of empowerment, there is little room for discourse about refusing it. In particular, if one is involved in caregiving for others, one’s “refusal” to conform to health standards is seen as immoral and possibly pathological.

Health has come to so shape the moral evaluation of our activities and is so often used as a trump card to end disagreement that it is time

to consider it in context of lived bodies, not tested bodies. Yet, this paper does not disagree with well-researched medical advice, nor does it offer a different model of health. It does not suggest that willed body modification is necessarily deleterious to a woman's sense of value. It is unreasonable to suggest that based on critical concerns about the overreach of the medical model, one divorce oneself from the extraordinary benefits of an advanced medical system and from its findings and suggestions for healthy behavior. Some of one's health can be understood through introspection of one's sense of wellness, but medical testing remains highly valuable. In addition, the pursuit of better health for women has greatly improved the lives of women around the world. Making it possible for women to pursue better nutrition and have active lives is not a trivial concern. In the U.S., a country of abundance, one finds a lack of fresh, healthy food and safe outdoor spaces for being active in poor communities. This curtails the freedom of individuals to imagine their bodies in different lifestyles and condemns them to being determined by their economic situation.

Modifications upon what a healthy body is, such as HAES, are also important but ultimately fit neatly into the idea that health is an unquestionable goal and should guide individual behavior and public policy. Instead of suggesting that the concept of health needs to be revised, this paper asks if there is a feminist position that erases good health as an *imperative*. This is not to say it suggests good health is not one of many possible reasonable ambitions for some women, but it is to argue to reject health as an imperative as feminists reject beauty as an imperative. No feminist would deny that a full, meaningful life can be led without one's appearance being a central concern; might this not also be the case for health? Drawing a parallel to phenomenological discussions of illness, one can see that the idea that ill bodies are deficient bodies condemned to lives of limitation also encourages the view that the worst thing that can happen to one is to become ill. Instead, illness does require restructuring of one's lived body but it does not foreclose agency or reduce the individual to a life that will always be diminished. In the case of behavior modification, to allow good health to be an imperative pushes women into a position of placing health as a priority that trumps all other ambitions and concerns. It relegates "good" behavior to "healthy" behavior. It encourages the view that women who are not engaged in good health habits have failed, like pre-feminist views that argued a woman's success was dependent upon a male partner, a child, or her beauty. To question the good health imperative might seem to invite bad health habits. But this kind of false dichotomy (if one questions a moral stance, then one must be suggesting that the

inverted position is good) severely limits critical thought. Feminists have long had reasons to reject the intrusion of others into their bodies and into their choices. This paper argues that feminists should not let down their guard simply based in an unquestioned assumption that good health must unequivocally be both a good and a goal.

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## Phenomenological Insights into Oppression: Passive Synthesis and Personal Responsibility

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*Drawing on phenomenology's account of "passive synthesis," this paper seeks to provide a phenomenological vocabulary that could be useful in explaining institutional oppression to those who find it difficult to understand that we can be responsible for acts and meanings that we do not intend. Though the main goal of the paper is to justify the use of the terminology of passive synthesis in the discourse on oppression, the paper ends by suggesting how employing passive synthesis in this manner suggests ways of combating oppression.*

The idea of responsibility for that which is not intended is key to any structural or institutional understanding of oppression.<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding of oppression claims that one can never understand oppression if "one's focus is riveted upon the individual event in all its particularity, including the particularity of the individual man's present conscious intentions and motives and the individual woman's conscious perception of the event in the moment" (Frye 2003, 186). Truly making sense of oppression requires a "shift [in] the level of one's perception in order to see the whole picture" of societal oppression (Frye 2003, 186).

However, such a shift in the level of perception to societal macro-structures often proves problematic to those who cannot conceive that they could be held responsible by others for things that they do not intend. The idea that I could be responsible for things I do not actively intend to do, therefore, proves to be a main point of resistance, both to the structural notion of oppression itself (when people refuse to shift the level of perception beyond the individual), and to the idea that people have a personal responsibility for oppressive structures. In both instances, people are unable to move beyond the idea that my intentions govern my actions and, especially, my moral and ethical responsibility for those actions. If I can be held responsible only for those actions that I freely undertake, and I freely undertake an action only when I do so knowingly and willingly, then, even if I can acknowledge that "society" seems to work against particular oppressed groups (a rather large "if," given this assumption concerning personal responsibility), I will fail to see my personal responsibility for that oppression, since I would never knowingly and willingly do sexist, or otherwise oppressive, things. That is, while some people may

acknowledge that “society” is oppressive, they cannot acknowledge that they in any way contribute to this oppression.<sup>2</sup> Without being aware of their personal responsibility for the situation, it is next to impossible to motivate people who assume such an individual and voluntaristic account of the (ethical and moral) subject to change oppressive structures.

Challenging the deeply held conviction that I cannot be held responsible for things I do not intend is important, then, to the fight against oppression. It has also proven, at least in my experience, to be immensely difficult. To begin immediately talking about societal structures is off-putting to those who cling to a more individualistic viewpoint, but not talking about societal structures at all makes discussing structural oppression impossible. What is needed is a vocabulary that can discuss structural notions of oppression in a way that is both adequate to challenge people to see their personal responsibility for the situation, and yet familiar enough that they will not be predisposed, from the beginning, to discount the very idea of a structural account of oppression.<sup>3</sup>

It is in beginning to develop such a vocabulary that I propose to show that the phenomenological notion of passive synthesis has something worthwhile to offer to discussions of oppression. While one does have to “shift the level of one’s perception in order to see the whole picture” of oppression, phenomenology suggests that that shift does not only have to be from a focus on the individual to a focus on societal structures, but also from a focus on the individual as an acting agent to a focus on the individual as necessarily acted upon by societal forces. By showing how every individual makes sense<sup>4</sup> of the world, phenomenology can help explain how societal structures operate within and upon individuals in a way that is both beyond their control and yet for which they remain personally responsible.

Central to this explanation is the idea of “passive synthesis” and the integral role it plays in how we make sense of the world in which we live. Because passive synthesis is something that is simultaneously accomplished by the subject (which thereby makes it responsible for the results of passive synthesis) and done without the active consent of the ego (thereby explaining how we can do things without intending to do them, and even, at times, do things that run *counter* to our intentions), it clarifies how we can participate unintentionally in institutions (or actions, meanings, etc.) without thereby removing the burden of responsibility from ourselves for that participation. The paper ends by suggesting how this recourse to passive synthesis might also help us begin to *change* our unintentional acts,

and so further contribute to the fight against oppression.

*Passive Synthesis and the Constitution of the World*

In *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Husserl<sup>5</sup> claims that the “fundamental stratification” of consciousness is its split into passive and active levels (Husserl 1973, 64). The realm of passivity describes those acts that occur within the subject without the ego acting on them, that is, without consciously taking them up. This is in contrast to the realm of activity, in which the subject knowingly directs its egoic regard to a particular object or purposively intends a particular act.

The essential elements of passive constitution<sup>6</sup> are associative structure, affection, and attention (Husserl 1985, §§ 16-18).<sup>7</sup> Attention is a “tending of the ego toward an intentional object, toward a unity which ‘appears’ continually in the change of the modes of its givenness” (Husserl 1985, 85). This tending occurs because of affecting [*Affektion*], that is, “the peculiar pull that an object given to consciousness exercises on the ego” (Husserl 1973, 148), though this pull is different from, and in a sense prior to, the ego’s attentively turning toward an object. Just as the heat of a fire is a stimulus that prompts us to remove our hand automatically, reflexively, and without the active involvement of the ego, so the allure of an object stimulates the ego to constitute (i.e., make sense of) that object automatically, like a reflex, before the active involvement of the ego.<sup>8</sup>

But the very process of constituting objects in the world is therefore already discretionary: by exercising an alluring pull on our consciousness, the object not only causes us to take it up (that is, it rather than something else), it also causes us to take it up in a certain way (that is, we take X up as X, not as Y or Z or A). When I encounter a chair, for example, the chair stimulates me to constitute it as a *chair*, rather than as a (rather small) house or a (particularly unattractive and sedentary) person or anything else. It does this without the need of my conscious ego intervening to determine what this thing before me is—I just automatically make sense of it as a chair and sit in it, without thinking about what I’m doing.<sup>9</sup> This ability to constitute the chair as a chair results from association, conceived as a “purely immanent connection of ‘this recalls that,’ ‘one calls attention to the other’” (Husserl 1985, 78). This recalling is done on the basis of similarity: that which is reproduced from the past is like that which is perceived in the present, in some way. This affective similarity entails that, at least at this stage of constitution, the affection is *felt* rather than understood, and is experienced as tendency: this affective pull *tends to* recall that previously

experienced affective pull; also, that previously experienced affective pull *tends to* produce a certain set of characteristics or consequences; the similarity between present affective pulls and relevantly similar, previously experienced affective pulls *tends to* produce similar characteristics in the present as were experienced in the past, and so on. The result of this concordance is what we commonly refer to as a tendency. The chair in front of me affects me in a way that recalls earlier experiences when I have been similarly affected. These earlier experiences, in turn, share some common characteristics that I then infer<sup>10</sup> will apply also to the situation before me: in the earlier experiences, the chair had a solid back, was able to hold weight, etc., and so I infer that this thing in front of me now in the present will also have these characteristics. This, in turn, enables me to expect, with varying degrees of certainty, how the other sides of the chair could be perceived if I were to make those other sides available to me, for example by walking around so that I could see the back of chair directly. That is, because of the tendencies produced in association, I am able to expect other, currently non-present sides of the chair, which allows me to apperceive—and hence perceive—what I see as a chair, a thing like other chairs.

More importantly, from an experiential standpoint, these tendencies enable me to expect certain behavioral characteristics of the chair (e.g., that it will hold my weight, that it is an acceptable thing to sit on) that enable me to interact with the chair in a meaning-full—but still automatic—way. I do not think (at least, not consciously) before I sit in a chair, but this does not mean my sitting in the chair is a meaningless act. That I sit in the chair (rather than trying to live in it, talk with it, or something else) evidences that I have constituted it—made sense of it—in a particular way.

But it must be emphasized again that all of this happens passively, that is to say, automatically. The associative aspects of passive synthesis are not separate moments that follow each other, as if I first perceived A, then related it to B, then remembered what B was like and inferred that A, too, must be similar. Rather, this all happens inherently in the very act of perception itself: I do not first encounter the world, and then relate it to previous experiences; rather, I encounter the world primarily in and out of my horizon of past experiences. Phrased alternatively, meaning is not added to the world after the fact, but rather the world I encounter is always a meaningful world. In Husserl, this notion begins to emerge with his discussion of the “object-like formations” [*Gegenständlichkeit*] that are constituted in passive synthesis. These are what enable us to interact with things in the world without first running those interactions through our active judgments.<sup>11</sup> We need not experiment or consciously think about



whether some object is or is not a chair—rather, we come in and sit on it, without interrupting our conversation. In making us able to do this, passive synthesis not only gives us the seeds for further judgments, but, more importantly, it gives us an “environing world”<sup>12</sup> that makes sense, in which we live and by which we are affected.

*Passivity and the Acts of the Subject*

The notion of passive synthesis, in addition to being critical to how we make sense of the world, opens up the possibility of simultaneous responsibility and passivity, that is, of being responsible for things we do not actively intend. Levinas takes this up explicitly in his re-reading of Husserl. Levinas notes that the idea of passivity necessarily entails that the subject is not alone and monadic, but is always influenced by a world that “is not only constituted but also constituting” (Levinas 1998a, 118). This is to say that the world is not only constituted by the subject, but also helps to constitute that subject. As subjects, we not only act upon the world, but are acted upon by that world.

By showing that the ego is not purely active, but is also passive (and passively active and actively passive), Levinas’ conception of phenomenology paves the way for a re-evaluation of the freedom of the (moral) subject. Instead of being free first, and responsible only because it is free (to make choices, to have done otherwise, etc.), Levinas asserts that the subject is first responsible, and is free (to act, to make choices and do things) only because it is responsible (to an interpersonal world that is meaningful because of other, meaning-granting people within it). The ego is not wholly free to do as it wishes, but is rather primordially constituted by something (and someone) outside of itself. This means, most basically, that the very power and basic functioning of the subject—the subject’s ability to constitute the world—is not something that the subject does on its own merit or because of its own inherent capacities. Rather, the subject is able to do what it does only because it has had those abilities bestowed upon it by another (or by multiple Others<sup>13</sup>). In this sense, the most basic action of the self—its ability to make sense of the world—is not the outworking of its own sovereignty, but is in fact the product of the self’s relationship with the Other (and with others).<sup>14</sup> The self is not first on the scene, but rather the last. The self decides whether or not to be in relation with others only after it has been given the ability to decide by its relation to others. The self makes sense of the world only after other people in that

world—both individually and collectively—give the subject the ability to make sense. Levinas' entire discourse of the ipseity of the subject as responsibility<sup>15</sup> is the radicalization of this point.<sup>16</sup>

Think, for example, of yourself as a person who is able to make sense of the world, someone who can encounter objects in meaningful ways and interact with them accordingly. You have the ability to go against societal conventions, if you choose, or to go along with societal conventions—but both options presuppose a familiarity with those societal conventions, a familiarity that cannot be learned auto-didactically, but must be taught. You can teach yourself something (e.g., a new language) only because you have first learned at the knee of others. You can make sense of the world only because you have first learned, from others, how to make sense—how to use and apply concepts, how to interact with other people (socially, linguistically, economically, etc.), and so on. Further, you are able to do that only because someone else first kept you alive by feeding you, clothing you, protecting you. And many of the ways in which you now make sense of the world reflect, either positively or negatively, the ways in which those who raised you taught you (implicitly and otherwise) to make sense of the world. Without first yourself being given the ability to make sense, you would now be totally unable to make sense of the world.

In making sense of the world, then, you act automatically (as discussed earlier), but in these very automatic actions you already reveal a certain relationship to those who helped give you the ability to make sense. Building on this point, we see a compelling reason for our responsibility for social institutions: because it is always already engaged in a world that it both constitutes and is constituted by, the subject is always “on the hook” for this world and for its response to that world. If we cannot control the aspects of society that shape and constitute us originally—if we are, in Levinas' language, *primordially constituted* by something outside ourselves—it is also true that we are not merely receivers of social pressures, but are shapers and transmitters of society as well: we are not just constituted, we are also constituting. As constituting, I (the subject) am responsible, at least partially, not only for the way I myself make sense of the world, but also for the meanings or sense of the world that I communicate to others. Because my passive syntheses make sense of current experiences in part by associating currently encountered things with other similar experiences I have of things,<sup>17</sup> my previous experiences gain not only an epistemological significance (in terms of how they help

me make sense of the world) but an ethical or moral significance as well: they not only help me make sense of some encountered A, but they make me encounter A precisely as (an) A—a chair as a chair, but also a man as a man, a white person as a white person—and therefore subsume a unique individual under categories that make sense of the individual thing by relating it to other things. Because this relation to other things will then shape how I understand *and act toward* A, the experiences which shape my understanding of A as (an) A necessarily have a moral as well as an epistemological content.

But this sense is not merely individual either. That is, the experiences that help me make sense of A are not only my experiences, but are shaped in large part by other people: the way other people have treated me, both as an individual and as a type of something or an instance of something (e.g., a male, a white person), what other people have taught me, implicitly or explicitly, about how to think about or react to things, and so on. In this sense, every subject is necessarily shaped by intersubjective—indeed, by social—forces and institutions. But this is a two-way street, as Levinas has explained to us: we are not only constituted by others in the world, but we also constitute others in the world. That is to say, my reactions to, experiences of, and actions toward things (and people) in the world make up my “horizons,” the reservoir of past experiences and affections used in every act of passive association. My horizons, however, are not only used in my own future passive associations, but are also partially constitutive of the horizons of other people’s future passive associations. How I react to certain things in the world is observed by other people, and goes into their “repository of experiences,” which in turn will then shape how they experience, act toward and make sense of those things in the future.

Though passive association happens automatically, it is still something I do, and hence something for which I bear responsibility. In fact, I can be seen as *doubly* responsible in my passive associations. First, I am responsible, at least partially, for my own passive associations, since I am the one drawing the similarities to previous experiences (even if I do so automatically, that is, passively) and I am the one who had those previous experiences to which I am now making the associations. I and no one else perform my passive associations: I am affected by things in a certain way, I relate these affections to previously experienced affections that I have had, I am the one who had those previously experienced affections.<sup>18</sup> Secondly,

I am responsible for the way in which my actions and tendencies become part of the experiences of other people and shape the way that *they* make sense of the world. Whether I intend to or not, because I am not just constituted by the world, but also serve to help constitute the world—because I not only learn at the knee of others but others also learn at my knee—I impact the way others experience and make sense of the world, and as such I am responsible for what my actions and reactions communicate to others about the world.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of the subject as both passive (in its reception of external stimulus and external influence, including in the very formation of that subject itself) and active (even in the very world that in turn constitutes the subject) therefore makes possible that the subject can be responsible, even for things it may not (actively) intend. If passive constitution is beyond our control, it is no less, for all that, something committed by us, and hence something for which we bear responsibility. Of course, it is not an act we commit “freely” in a modern sense of the term (which presupposes uncoerced purposive consent), but this very notion of freedom is itself challenged by the view of the self as constituted (rather than purely constituting).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as agents of (and not merely in) society, we bear some responsibility for the actions of that society. This preserves the possibility of social change that an overly passive view of the subject-society relation might seem to challenge. This possibility of social change seems necessary for any discourse on oppression.

Allow me to use an example to help illustrate how the recourse to passive synthesis helps us make sense of oppression. I have a niece and a nephew who are very close in age. Though I consider myself quite committed to breaking down gender stereotypes, I found myself nevertheless (and much to my horror) treating my niece and nephew in markedly different ways. If he needed something, for example, I would encourage my nephew to get it himself (“You can do it! Come on—just a little farther, you’re almost there!”), while, if my niece needed something, I would be far more likely to get it for her. In the big picture, this plays directly into the hands of gender stereotyping, and the oppression of women: by treating my nephew in this manner, I encourage him to be self-sufficient and capable, while my niece acquires a certain learned helplessness that leaves her adept, perhaps, at manipulation, but ultimately dependent on others. How could this be?

The problem does not stem from the fact that I want to encourage

the oppression of women, either consciously or unconsciously. The problem, therefore, is not that I see one as male, and then think “Oh, he can do it himself,” while I see the other as a female and think “She’ll probably need my help to do it.” Rather, in constituting them, pre-objectively (that is, passively), I constitute one as male and one as female. *In this very constitution*, I already smuggle in, so to speak, certain presuppositions. Why? Because I encounter them always already as male or female, and in so doing, I associate them with my varied experiences of maleness and femaleness (i.e., with the sense I have of maleness and femaleness),<sup>21</sup> experiences that occurred in a world that treats (and acts toward) maleness and femaleness in different ways. That is, in encountering them as male (or female), I passively call to mind certain associations I have with maleness and femaleness, associations based in part on previous incidences (both theoretical and lived) in which I was affected by maleness and femaleness. In these other experiences (including, of course, the experience of how I was treated by others), I no doubt experienced males as independent and doing things themselves, and females as more adept at social interaction, using their words to get what they want. I had these previous experiences, in part because the people whom I was experiencing were themselves recalling their earlier experiences and affections, etc., back into history, a history that is, in our part of the world, notably patriarchal; and, in part because of my own experiences, also shaped by that history. While consciously I am aware of this history of cultural and social transmission, *passively*, that is to say, associatively, I make use of this history without the intervention of acts of judgment and critique.

But my responsibility is not only for how I treat my nephew and niece in light of my experiences and affections concerning maleness and femaleness. It is also for the ways in which my current actions of treating them differently in turn shapes, not only their experiences of maleness and femaleness, but also the experiences of all those who see me act this way (their parents and other friends and relatives who are around), and those who are subsequently affected by those who see me act this way (those who, in turn, encounter my nephew or niece, their parents, or the other friends and relatives, and those who encounter those who encounter my nephew or niece, their parents, and so on). That is, formative influence is not only exercised from “the top down” (e.g., from adults to children), but also between peers and from “the bottom up” (e.g., from children to adults). Influence is caught up in a complex social web that is neither fully

controllable nor unidirectional. Indeed, it is precisely the uncontrollable, multi-directional aspect of influence that makes us so responsible in these situations.

Passive synthesis, then, by way of affection and association, helps us see how we continue to pass on and transmit socially learned behavior without doing so intentionally.<sup>22</sup> Further, because the associations made are to my own past experiences, I am still responsible for the content of those associations, even if, to some extent, I was not responsible for how people treated me, and other aspects that went into making up my experiences. If I am clearly responsible for my acts and active judgments (i.e., those things I do purposively), then, given that my horizon of past experiences and affections is itself made up (in part) of my past acts and my judgments upon them, I would seem to be responsible also for my horizon of past experiences and affections. In addition, the society that conditions, not just myself but also those who act upon me, is itself the product of my acts and judgments (though surely not mine alone), and I therefore bear (some) responsibility for it as well. Though I do not intend my passive syntheses and associations purposively, this does not absolve me of responsibility for them.

### *Conclusion: Changing our Passive Syntheses*

So far, I have tried to demonstrate that the language of passive synthesis, drawn from phenomenology, can provide us with a vocabulary with which to talk about the notion of unintended responsibility that is central to most structural theories of oppression. Given its emphasis on individual action and responsibility, this vocabulary, I hope, is familiar enough that it would not immediately off-put those not already inclined to agree with the viability of a structural understanding of society, while still proving challenging enough to get them to see their personal responsibility in and for oppressive structures. Specifically, I hope that the notion of passive synthesis gives us an account of how we might be responsible for things we do not intend (in the strong sense of purposive, freely chosen action). In this regard, I hope the discussion of passive synthesis will be helpful to those attempting to discuss issues of oppression either with those who are not familiar with, or with those who are hostile to, structural theories of oppression.

But I also hope that the vocabulary of passive synthesis can help

shed light on oppression theory in a new and helpful way for those working within the field. In this light, I would now like to briefly examine some ways in which it is possible to *change* our passive syntheses and associations. At first, the possibility of changing those actions that we do not intend to do seems difficult, if not downright contradictory: because they do not pass through our active judgments and decision-making faculties, we cannot change our passive synthesis through a resolve of the will or through a commitment to be more careful. However, the notion that our horizons are determined by the “sedimentation” or “depositing” of experiences into the reservoir of our previous experiences and affections outlines one way in which we can begin to change our passive syntheses.

Because passive association requires a horizon of past experiences, change is possible, if, perhaps, somewhat slow. Though we cannot go back and change our past experiences, we can change aspects about this past: first, we can change our emotional, intellectual, and affective reaction to past experiences; second, we are always modifying the horizon of past experiences by creating new past experiences, as the present continues to slide into the past.

I will begin with the second of these. Our horizon of past experiences results from the sedimentation of previous active and passive acts of the ego. Hence, by changing how we think about and judge things now, we can begin to offer new material for possible future associations within the horizon of past experiences.

If association operated solely according to volume of reactions (i.e., to what happened the most often in previous similar situations), then adding new experiences to the reservoir of our past experiences would take a great deal of time to make a difference in our passive syntheses. However, association operates mainly by way of affection: it is how a thing affects me that calls to mind similar, previous affections, not some inherent similarities in the things themselves. Hence, if we can change the nature of the affection of our previous experiences, we can help to ensure that situations will call to mind more recent (and perhaps more favorable) experiences, rather than others.

Modifying how we are affected by things (or modifying how we were affected by things) is possible, though not easy. Because affection is not the same thing as emotion, changing these affections is not equivalent to changing how we “feel” about them. At the same time, changing how we feel about things obviously changes the manner in which they affect us and

the experiences they recall for us. For example, things that are strange to us call to mind other things that are strange to us, most of which inspire emotions of nervousness and anxiety in us. As such, encountering something with which I am not very familiar—be it a food I have never tried or a person from a racial group with which I do not have significant previous experience—calls to mind, not only those experiences of other things that are strange to us, but also experiences of other things that inspire nervousness and anxiety in us. As such, my automatic response to unfamiliar things will skew in the direction of anxiety, making me less likely to have positive experiences of unfamiliar things.

To begin to change this response, I must first analyze the response, and make myself aware of its constitutive parts, of what is being recalled in these instances of passive synthesis. I can then make myself more familiar with that particular food or with people of that racial group, so that my further experiences of that food or of people of that racial group no longer call to mind previous experiences of unfamiliar things, but rather previous experiences of that food or racial group.

This would not, however, help me in future encounters with other unfamiliar things. To begin to try to change that, I would have to try to have more positive experiences of things that are unfamiliar to me, so that I would begin to associate unfamiliar things with emotions of pleasant surprise, even excitement, rather than nervousness and anxiety. Having more positive experiences here requires not only doing things that are more positive, but also responding more positively to the things that I do (and have previously done). In other words, to have more positive associations with unfamiliar food I need to not only eat more good-tasting food with which I was previously unfamiliar, but I also need to bring to mind previous incidences when trying unknown foods worked out well (the delicious pad thai I had the first time I ate Thai food, or my discovery of strawberry cheesecake flavored ice cream), rather than focusing on those times when it did not (the smoke-flavored beer I tried that time in Paris, or the bubblegum ice cream that was overly sweet). In doing this, I will not only try to override my automatic responses by consciously pushing past them, but I will also begin to change those automatic responses by instituting new habits, which will in turn change how I feel about things I have previously done.

Of course, my reaction of nervousness and anxiety to unfamiliar things is not the result of my experiences alone, but also of the way in



which societal views relating unfamiliarity to terror have been sedimented in my horizon of past experiences. To begin to change my affection toward unfamiliar things, then, I must not only alter the things I do in regard to unfamiliar things, but also make myself aware of and alter the things I do that make me more likely to take on certain societal views rather than others (e.g., watching action movies or reading certain websites or news sources that portray the unfamiliar as dangerous). This involves not just changing how I *think* about things, but changing my actions—especially my habitual actions—to alter my affections. In this regard, I must make myself a more conscientious consumer of social and cultural mores.

So far, what I have suggested bears almost exclusively on our responsibility for our own horizon of previous experiences. But we are also responsible for the ways in which we participate and shape social and cultural mores. As such, we must become also more conscientious *producers* of social and cultural mores, recognizing that our beliefs and actions are never merely private, but always affect the social and cultural horizons in which I (and others) operate. What is needed is not just a change in personal affections, but also in the social imagination<sup>23</sup> that partially conditions and shapes my (and others') affective responses.

It is not easy, then, to change our passive syntheses, but it is, I would argue, possible. The process would be slow, and would require, not just changing active judgments, but also a concerted effort to continually bring to mind the way in which we are passively constituting the world, and critiquing this passive constitution on the basis of its principles, underlying motives, and affections. It would also require reinforcing these changes in judgment with a change in notable affective force—I can't just *think* that the stereotype of the stoic and unfeeling man is dangerous, but I must also regularly bring to mind examples where this is true, and watch movies that valorize sensitive men rather than the unattached loner, and otherwise make myself aware of the pain and sorrow caused by that stereotype. Changing our affections towards things is not just done for ourselves, but also for the social community that we transmit to future generations. In this regard, what is needed, perhaps, is not just social education—which tries to change people's minds—but also a new social imagination that helps shape people's experiences and affections.

One possible application of this notion of social imagination occurs in the complex issue of affirmative action. While this is no doubt a larger issue than can be adequately dealt with here, I would like to point

out the way that the notion of passive synthesis helps us make sense of affirmative action as an attempt to re-inscribe the social imagination. That is, given the role that past experiences play in how we make sense of our world now, one possible justification for affirmative action is that there is a social value to be gained from having persons of different ethnic and sexual groups in various positions throughout society. This would be part of trying to right previous historical imbalances—but *not* by way of some odd numbers game, in which a certain percentage of people occupying a certain position would somehow make up for centuries of oppression.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it would begin to right previous historical imbalances by beginning to foster a new set of experiences (i.e., one in which we see people of those groups in those societal positions) so that our passive syntheses regarding people of those groups can start to be influenced by these new experiences, and not just old ones. That is, the point of giving pride of place (all other things being equal) to, for example, a woman in a philosophy graduate student program<sup>25</sup> is not that having X number of women in philosophy grad programs somehow makes up for centuries of patriarchy. Rather, the idea is that there is a social value (which tips the scales in this direction, all other things being equal) in having women represented in an area they are not currently widely represented in. This social value would be that the more women that are encountered in philosophy (as writers, speakers, students and teachers), the more philosophy becomes a normal and acceptable avenue for women to pursue, the more women are seen as philosophical and rational (rather than emotional and ‘flighty’), the more traditional notions of femininity are adapted to include academic success, etc.

By applying the phenomenological language of passive synthesis here, we are then able to reshape the discussion surrounding affirmative action (for example) so that we see that it is not some silly numbers game, but rather as one way (though not the only way) to begin to change the social imaginary, both by adding new sedimentations to the ‘reservoir’ of people’s experiences and by beginning to change the affective force associated with certain meanings and experiences. Not only does this argue against the ‘numbers game’ view of affirmative action, but it also argues against the ‘reverse discrimination’ view,<sup>26</sup> which understands affirmative action as favoring minorities merely because they are minorities. Given the impact of experience on the way we make sense of the world, passive synthesis helps us understand that there is another factor, another level of social value, to add to every evaluative process, namely, that of helping

shape future horizons of past experiences by shaping the social imagination. Hence, the mitigating factor in affirmative action is not that a particular person is or is not a minority, but rather the extent to which they can help shape the social imagination in desirable ways. This social value is something else to be considered in reviewing applications, alongside educational background, efficiency with which the candidate can carry out the required task, relevant work history, etc. This is but one example of a way in which the discourse of passive synthesis might be helpful in combating oppression.<sup>27</sup>

I think that this brief sketch of an example suggests the possibility of using the language of passive synthesis to help combat oppression. While there is more work to be done on this topic, I hope what has been accomplished here is enough to at least prove the merit of using the phenomenological language of passive synthesis to discuss oppression.<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind the notion of oppression discussed in the work of Marilyn Frye. For a brief introduction to this understanding of oppression, cf. Frye 2003 and Bailey 2003.

<sup>2</sup> This seems, to me, to be a central motivation for Bailey's analysis of privilege: to show people their personal complicity in oppressive structures; cf. Baily, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> It is also helpful in this regard to distinguish between several types of responsibility, especially if one wants to avoid making one's audience defensive. At the very least, we can distinguish: a) being called on to respond to something (i.e., my response-ability); b) being responsible to someone for something; and c) blameworthiness. The vocabulary of passive synthesis that will be discussed in this paper, I think helps us understand how being responsible in the first sense can lead to a responsibility in the second sense (which is sufficient to inspire action and/or change in us) without necessarily having to lead to responsibility in the third sense. By showing us a responsibility that calls for change without prescribing blame, I believe passive synthesis can remain 'neutral' enough to be acceptable to those not predisposed towards agreeing with it, without thereby letting them off the hook for change. I'd like to thank John Drummond for pointing out this distinction in senses of responsibility to me.

<sup>4</sup> I use "making sense" here in a somewhat technical manner that is distinct from understanding. Understanding requires judgment, and active, theoretical engagement with the world. Making sense, on the other hand, is the way in which we encounter the world first and foremost as meaningful, as having a sense. Since, as I will argue below, this sense comes about via acts of (passive) synthesis carried out by the subject, this sense is

not merely found in the world, nor merely created by me, but is in some sense both: it is made by the subject, even as this making happens passively, automatically, and in response to what gives itself in the world. Sense, then, is not merely objective (found in the world), nor subjective (created by me), but phenomenological.

<sup>5</sup> While other phenomenological figures (e.g., Merleau-Ponty) discuss themes of sedimentation, habituation, and other related phenomena, I focus here primarily on Husserl because his discourse is more individualistic than that of many later figures. As such, Husserl provides more ‘common ground’ with the kind of individualistic moral thinking that we are hoping to speak to, and therefore strikes me as providing a better basis for a vocabulary that could speak to those people with whom we are concerned. I hope to show that the more individualistic nature of the Husserlian discourse does not prevent phenomenology from being able to account for societal structures and institutions.

<sup>6</sup> Also called at times by Husserl “prepredicative experience” or functioning subjectivity. These refer to the same basic functions, if from different perspectives.

<sup>7</sup> For more on these elements, cf. also Ryan 1977.

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is not entirely proper to speak here of objects, as only the categorial object is an object according to Husserl (Husserl 1985, 81 n.1). One can say though, as Husserl does, that without affection “there would be no objects at all and no present organized with objects” (Husserl 1973, 164).

<sup>9</sup> The automatic nature of such acts of constitution is brought most noticeably to our attention in those situations when the act of constitution is no longer able to happen automatically. When I encounter a new design of chair, for example, if the new design is sufficiently different from my previous experiences of chairs, I do not recognize it as such, and so do not know what the thing in front of me is. Similarly, when I encounter familiar objects in new contexts, I am unable to make sense of their new function, and so do not use them automatically, but must determine their significance in this new context. The first time I encountered carpet swatches on the ground in kindergarten, it was not immediately obvious that these were to function as our ‘chairs,’ that this is where we were supposed to sit during story time, because this was not a familiar use of carpet swatches to me, nor was a carpet swatch a familiar example of a chair. I had to be instructed that the swatches were to be used for this purpose before I could realize what I was supposed to do with them.

<sup>10</sup> One could be tempted to think that induction lies in the sphere of active synthesis, given its use in scientific judgments. However, Husserl will contend that the scientific and philosophico-logical use of induction is in fact founded on an earlier, experiential and passive level of induction (Husserl 1954, 29), which is ubiquitous in all human practices and experience (Husserl 1954, 51); cf. also Mohanty 1964, 142-143.

<sup>11</sup> These “object-like formations” can then become the basis for later judgments and (active) acts—but Husserl is adamant that it is only because of passive syntheses that the ego is able to actively direct its regard (Husserl 1973, 120).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the notion of an *envirning-world*, cf. Steinbock 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Levinas’ discussion of the “third,” for example in Levinas 1998b, 106-107.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Levinas 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Levinas 1980, 114-15 and 124-125.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Levinas along these lines, cf. DeRoo 2013 and

DeRoo 2010.

<sup>17</sup> One must be careful to remember here that this similarity is “felt,” not objectively present. That is, it is a similarity in how I associate with things, not similarities in the things encountered. While there is, no doubt, a connection between objective structures and my association to them, the significant aspect in passive synthesis is the felt similarity (i.e., how I experience or intend the thing). It is, therefore, a similarity of (phenomenological) sense or meaning.

<sup>18</sup> This would be responsibility in the third sense discussed above (“blameworthiness”), in a manner similar to that put forward by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he claims that we are responsible for the habits that we currently have; cf., e.g., II.1.§ 8 (1103b25).

<sup>19</sup> This, I would argue, is responsibility in the second sense given above: “being responsible to someone for something.”

<sup>20</sup> Cf., for example, Levinas 1995, 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> The sense I have of maleness (and this would apply also for femaleness, though obviously my personal experiences of that would be different) would be constructed from a variety of experiences and affections that reside in my horizon of past experiences and affections, including: a) my own experience as male (how others have treated me as a male); b) discussions I have had about being male; c) discourses I have read and/or been a part of concerning maleness; d) my affections of maleness, both in myself and in others; and e) my experiences of other males. All of these would be affected in various ways by the affective relationship I would have between the males I have experienced (including myself) and the masculinity I have read/heard/learned about, both academically and otherwise.

<sup>22</sup> This would be also hold true for people from marginalized groups. That is, it is not only those in the oppressing groups, but also those in oppressed groups, who contribute to the construction of the “bird cage” of oppression, at least in the lives of individual people. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers from *Janus Head* for pointing this out to me. Pursuing this issue further would be interesting, not only in its own right, but also as a potential point of disagreement between phenomenological and structural accounts of oppression. While I am trying to bring the two together in this paper, this topic could potentially prove divisive (hopefully, fruitfully so). Though there will not be time to pursue this topic further in this paper, I hope others will do so.

<sup>23</sup> The literature on social imagination is too vast to be recounted here. In shorthand, let me point to the work of Charles Taylor as one example of social imagination; cf. Taylor 2004 and Taylor 2007.

<sup>24</sup> This notion of affirmative action as a “numbers game” is prevalent among many political and social opponents of affirmative action. A mainstream (rather than academic) example that clearly shows this is the article and the corresponding response section of Cueva 2011. For a more academic exploration of the issue, specifically in terms of hiring practices in police departments, cf. Levinson 1982.

<sup>25</sup> I do not know whether such policies play any role in graduate program acceptance. I use it here merely as a hypothetical example, not because I am claiming that it happens.

<sup>26</sup> Also prevalent in Cueva 2011, especially in some of the responses.

<sup>27</sup> There are, of course, several other factors that would have to come into play to evaluate whether or not affirmative action is an affective policy in addressing societal inequalities,

and whether or not, overall, it does in fact combat rather than perpetuate oppression. I am not contending that the factor I present here (the ability to shape the social imagination) outweighs the others, just that it is another factor to be included in the equation.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank especially Noah Moss-Brender, David Koukal, Sara Heinämaa, Kascha Snavely and John Drummond, as well as the participants of the 2010 Annual Congress of the Canadian Philosophical Association and of the 48th Annual Conference of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

# Faking Orgasms and the Idea of Successful Sexuality

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*In the Nordic countries, at a time when women have only recently won the right to their own bodies and to a sexuality of their own and for themselves, women nevertheless fake orgasms. Moreover, a common question posed to the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) deals with lack of desire. Not only are women faking and complaining of lack of desire, but men as well. It seems that contemporary ideals surrounding sexuality converge with quests for not only pleasure and love, but also for fitting in and experiencing what is conceived of as normal and “successful” sexuality. This essay examines the contemporary and prevalent phenomenon of faked orgasms from the perspectives of feminist theory and phenomenology.*

## Introduction

In 2007, while planning for a feminist anthology on the subject of faked orgasms, Susanna Alakoski and Amanda Mogensen invited Swedish women, by way of newspaper advertisement, e-mail postings, etc., to write anonymously about their orgasms, faked or real. The e-mail postings also reached women in other Scandinavian countries and Finland. They received an abundance of answers from the Nordic countries, a selection of which was published. Some of the contributors chose not to be anonymous, having made their own analysis and interpretation of their experiences. Two rather unexpected things turned up. The first was that the very first letter to arrive was from a man, and eventually they received more examples of male experiences of faking. The second surprising thing was there were also letters from lesbian women asking why the editors were not interested in their experiences of faking as well. At first the editors were hesitant to include such stories as their plan had been to give a picture of, and investigate, the heterosexual norm for sexuality from women's point of view. But eventually they decided to include the broader empirical material, which gave an even more complex and compelling picture of the norms for sexuality today. Further, they decided to invite experts and academics – such as social workers, historians, counsellors, and myself as a philosopher – to write on the book's theme.<sup>1</sup> In the book *Fejkad Orgasm* (Alakoski & Mogensen, 2008—hereafter referred to as *FO*), the participating women and men provide many examples of experiences of faking along with their analyses and musings on the reasons for and circumstances surrounding faking. The contributors telling of their faked orgasms describe how they might move about, groan and moan a little extra, as well as say something about how good it was. Others tell of another kind of faking – where pleasure and enjoyment are overstated in direct or indirect terms. In 2007, RFSU (the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) together with the



TV programme *Lustgården* carried out a survey among 1000 women aged 18-35, and circa 25% of these women had at some point faked an orgasm. The most common explanation given for faking in this survey was that it was a way to put an end to the sex (*FO*, p. 88). Moreover, a common question posed to RFSU (the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) deals with lack of desire. Not only are women faking and complaining of lack of desire, but men as well. This empirical background forms a point of departure for the present essay, the aim of which is to explore reasons for faking, and the values attached to orgasm that make it important enough to be faked, through the lenses of feminist theory and phenomenological reflection.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Orgasm—Both Important and Not Important*

For faking to be an option, there must first of all be an idea of orgasm—based either on earlier or vicarious experience. Secondly, to be worth faking, the orgasm must be assigned some importance or value. Thirdly, the orgasm must be conceived of as being possible to mediate through pretence, that is, as faked. Not even knowing it was possible to fake an orgasm, one woman writes about her first sexual intercourse: “Had I thought that a faked orgasm was expected of me, I would have cried out for the King and motherland. Thank God for ignorance!” (*FO*, 2008 p. 37).<sup>3</sup>

In *FO* many different circumstances and reasons for faking are given—but two major kinds of faking surface: faking in the name of love and faking to put an end to the sex.

It would seem that the person who fakes orgasm out of love wants to meet and accepts his/her partner’s expectation and hope of achieving the consummate erotic encounter—the completion of which is orgasm. Obviously, in these circumstances, the faker does not consider the orgasm to be particularly important—with regard to him-/herself. Seemingly, what is important at this point is to comply with the expectations of the other person—rather than to meet him/her in open-ended erotic play. It may be that the faker enjoys the moment tremendously, but is slightly disturbed by the expectations of an orgasm. But the question is, regardless of whether the faker wishes to comply with expectations or simply does not care about having an orgasm, and instead fakes one out of pure kindness, or to put an end to the sex, why is the orgasm important enough to be faked?

*Orgasm as a Sign of Success*

Asking why the orgasm is important may seem somewhat ridiculous. But besides being very pleasurable, the orgasm is sometimes important enough to be faked. This brings us to the role orgasm has as a sign, the meaning of which is manifest in the interpretations that it generates. The orgasm functions as a sign in that it is interpreted and presented as an essential achievement, even when it is faked, and not having one is interpreted and presented as a failure. Note that, in this case, what shows on the surface, the form, seems to be more important than content—the extent to which one enjoys the sexual activity. From the experiences shared in *FO* we learn that what seems to be at stake in many sexual encounters is the ability to “give” the other person an orgasm, where a woman’s orgasm is the mark of success for a male partner. Thus one might claim that the person who is being exposed to the technicalities of sex has come to play a minor role in this situation, and the leading part in the orgasm performance is not the “I” who experiences the orgasm but the person who “gives” it. As one 25-year-old male writes, “The times when my buddies and I have talked about faked orgasms, it’s been about our own. It’s as if it’s a greater defeat when the girl you’re having sex with fakes it than when you do it yourself” (*FO*, p. 198).

To regard one’s own needs as subordinate and to set one’s own needs aside may, however, sometimes result in sexual practices best described as “ambivalent”, as in the case of young women engaging in vaginal intercourse despite associated pain in order to prioritize their partner’s enjoyment (Elmerstig, 2009). In an interview study with young Swedish women (14–20 years) who suffered variable degrees of coital pain during sexual intercourse, the women had sexual intercourse for their partner’s sake, and considered their own experiences of pain insignificant compared with the sexual pleasure the partner gets. By feigning pleasure the women in the study strove to be affirmed in their image of an ideal woman, what “a sexually normal woman should be like”. This ideal woman and perfect girlfriend was one who would be “willing to have sexual intercourse, . . . perceptive of their partner’s sexual needs, and . . . able to satisfy them”. In fact, these women experienced themselves as “women” if they had sexual intercourse, otherwise not (Elmerstig, Wijma and Berterö 2008, p. 360–1). As one of them said: “. . . well, I wanted it to be perfect, you know . . . that it should be like in the love movies, when they have sex with each other and

like ‘oh, God it feels good,’ sort of . . . “ (p. 361). These examples, together with several of the contributions in *FO*, point to existing ideals concerning what is conceived of as a successful sexuality for both women and men, an important part of which is successfully providing pleasure and/or “giving” an orgasm to one’s partner.

*The Body as a Situation—Our Grasp Upon the World*

Just as sexual experiences have their basis in individual biological bodies, our sexualities are formed in cultural and historical contexts. Phenomenology highlights the way in which the *lived body* encompasses and expresses its history and lived experience as well as its presently lived relation to the world. To cite Merleau-Ponty:

It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table ‘a table’. Feelings and passionate conduct are invented like words. Even those which, like paternity, seem to be part and parcel of the human make-up are in reality institutions. It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour which one chooses to call ‘natural’, followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world. Everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being—and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behaviour to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of *leakage* and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define man. (1962 [1945], p.189)

The lived body is a lived relation to the world, in that we have access to the world through our bodies. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir: the living body is “a situation”, and “our grasp upon the world and the outline for our projects” (2010 [1949], p.46). Our experiences are given to us through the lived body, and lived relation to the world (of which we ourselves are a part). As embodied subjects, we are in a constant emotionally coloured interplay with our environment, and affectivity is a distinctive form of consciousness when we are relating to the world. Places,

situations, people and things are experienced as speaking to, calling on, enticing or making appeals to us. In erotic encounters, this means that our own body as well as the other person's may appear to be happy, beautiful and wonderful (Merleau-Ponty 1962 , pp. 63, Heinämaa, 2003, pp. 67).

Moreover, the lived body has its own conditions—both possibilities and limitations. In a tangible and embodied sense, every human being carries with her her own time, culture, and society, even when she engages in a sexual encounter. Some of the cultural expressions of embodiment and bodily appearances, such as a hairstyle or the bell-bottoms of last year, can be more easily changed than others. But the expressions given through the ways in which we “live” our bodies are not as easily changed. Because they are two sides of the same coin, experience and the expression thereof cannot be detached, nor can body and person be separated. In other words, the social and cultural ways in which we live our bodies—our gender and sexuality, our ways of perceiving ourselves, our having confidence in ourselves, and activities such as walking, running, throwing a ball, or making love—are all embodied (Young, 2005). We live in and are part of a symbolic universe where certain notions and ideas about the body and sexuality form part of how we perceive ourselves, our bodies and their needs, and our sexual lives.

### *The Social Constitution of Bodies*

We have all been told, in different ways, what an orgasm should be like, and we even know what a faked orgasm should be like. Common references within popular culture are the imitation of a faked female orgasm in the film “When Harry met Sally” and episodes in the TV series “Seinfeld” and “Sex and the City” dealing with faked orgasm. Although these examples are taken from American popular culture, the circulation and impact of American popular culture in Sweden, for example, can hardly be overestimated.<sup>4</sup>

The body is socially constituted in two ways. First, the values and ideals of society are inscribed in bodies, through the ways in which we talk about the body and sexuality, and through the ways these are represented in the media, films, myths, and in counselling. From romantic portrayals to pornographic stagings, from the Song of Songs to the smashing spreads of weekly magazines with exciting advice, we are supplied with a set of repertoires to achieve *the* satisfactory sex life.

Second, the body is constituted *through lived life*. As social conditions and cultural values are lived and managed by us, they become sedimented

or laid down within us, so to speak, becoming part and parcel of our experiences (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945], p.130). In this way, social conditions are incorporated and can be seen in embodied habits—habits such as kissing, caressing, and even the ways in which orgasms are faked.

### *The Conditioning of Sexual Experience*

In his analysis of perception, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the personal and the anonymous body. These are not two different entities, but he uses this distinction to focus on different aspects of experience. He suggests that our habits, our personal style, our personal way of seeing and experiencing, are formed like a fold in fabric (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945], p. 215), or like “a wave on the sea surface” (Heinämaa, 2003, p. 51 n. 35). The surface on which the wave occurs, or the fold is formed, is the anonymous body, which is the basis of our ability to see, hear, etc. The personal body inherits this ability, as it were, where lived experience shapes our perception. The anonymous body both limits and enables new experiences and may elude our deliberate attempts at control, such as when an orgasm does not come as easily as one might wish, or it may surprise us, such as when we get goose bumps from listening to a piece of music or feel our hackles literally rise in fear. Engaging ourselves in a field of interest may tune and refine our attention in that area, whereas it may continue to be rather numb, or be numbed, in others (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945], pp. 212 ff., 240). In this way, lived experience is partly constitutive of future experiences. Certain cultural “scripts” may be thus embodied, too, such as the notions we have of love and the way we “do” love. Such “scripts” are on the fringe of our encounters in love and sex, as part of what socially conditions our experiences of these encounters.

### *A Sign of Love—Take One*

The person faking in the name of love for some reason lacks sufficient desire or arousal to be able to experience the joy of shared pleasure in an orgasm, but still wishes to make his/her partner feel like an accomplished lover, and like someone who is loved and loving. “I faked on my wedding night. I didn’t want to make the bridegroom sad” one woman writes (*FO*, p. 78). Along the same lines, one man reports: “There were nights when I didn’t make it all the way. . . . But still I wanted her to feel that . . . No

offence meant. It was simply my little gift to her. No more, no less" (*FO*, p. 200). When an orgasm is faked, the non-faking partner may feel special, having been able to give and perhaps share something as intimate as an orgasm. Thus, faking in the name of love also points to the perceived value of orgasm—as a sign of success.

### *A Sign of Love—Take Two*

Inscribed in our thoughts and emotions concerning love and sex are cultural and social myths that shape our growth into adult women and men. According to Beauvoir, these myths tell us that it is desirable for a woman to passively exist to meet the needs of others (2010 [1949], pp.273, 294-5, 311, 334-5). At the same time, these myths tell us it is desirable for a man to be offered this kind of self-denial by a woman. She points to how women in our culture become used to perceiving themselves through the eyes of others, and to responding to and taking care of the needs of others, and how there is a risk that, even in the sexual domain, a woman will see herself as and make herself into an object for others (pp. 273, 294-5).

Faking an orgasm out of love might then, in terms of Beauvoir's account above, be a way for a woman to respond to and meet the man's need to experience himself as an accomplished lover. The contributions to *FO*, however, show that faking does not necessarily coincide with the female gender, as there are examples of men faking, as well as faking in same-sex relationships. Note, though, that Beauvoir's account in no way ascribes these differing roles to women and men as it were in essential terms. Her philosophical account, including many historical examples, points to the situation of women and the ways in which we become women as socio-cultural beings. Naturally, the gendered roles of women and men in Beauvoir's contemporary France of 1949, where women had had the vote for only five years, cannot be simply equated with the gender roles of contemporary Sweden which, together with the other Nordic countries, is ranked as having the greatest equality in the world according to the *World Economic Forum's* Global Gender Gap Report from 2011. But although some of the gendered binaries and myths inherent to Western thought may have changed slightly, others have proven to be more persistent.

If faking in the name of love is taken to be a sign of loving care, there are both women and men in Sweden who are prone to engage in such practices within an intimate relationship. This gives us reason to consider romantic love, what is called 'love' and how we "do love". Contemporary notions

of love seem to harbour heteronormative ideas, in terms of a symbolically gendered binary, where loving care is coded as womanly/feminine. Political scientist Anna G. Jónasdóttir has focused on what is taken for granted as normal in the Nordic countries of today; love that is freely given and freely taken. She argues that love, and the existential forces at the heart of its power, is the driving force of society. She suggests that the typical relation between women and men *as sexes* today is one of *political* power, and that sexuality—as it is typically organized in contemporary Western societies—“affirms and fortifies essential social relations and distinctions between groups of people” (1991, p. 224-5). Problematising the practice of love, she points to a specific kind of exploitation—the exploitation of loving capacities. She writes: “[i]f ‘politics’ has any particular core of significance it is about a field of power for wills and the consequences for will-power, where it is determined how we are with each other.” She suggests that sex/gender relations constitute such a relatively independent field of power, in which there is “a complex and tangible struggle over who is master of the situation, who has the power to decide *who is/does and /gets what, when and how.*” (p. 38). Social relations always consist of practices, societal practices—actions that reproduce these same relations. In this context, love is to be understood as a social, socio-sexual practice, where the two main elements of love are *loving care* and *erotic ecstasy*. She claims that the ways in which *heterosexual love is institutionalized* in contemporary society result in these two elements being positioned as opposites. Thus, according to Jónasdóttir, when (formally free and equal) women and men meet as sexes, the societal frames that condition these meetings are not equal. Women therefore tend to practice loving care, whereas men get to live/experience ecstasy, which becomes a means towards the end of self-assurance and personal growth.

The theoretical outline suggested by Jónasdóttir already in 1991 was later given empirical support in the socio-psychological research of Carin Holmberg (1993). Holmberg interviewed young, equal (as judged by others and themselves) couples without children, and analysed how their love and care were expressed in the actions and negotiations of everyday life. It turned out that while the women in these relationships tended to show more of loving care than the men did, they often simultaneously suppressed their own needs, calling that “love”.

Questions of sexuality were not pursued at length in Holmberg’s study, not for lack of interest but because she thought this would require

an in-depth study of its own (p. 169). Still we can see how faking orgasms in the name of love has similarities with the loving care under scrutiny in Holmberg's investigation. In women's quest to fulfil men's wish to be special, the women who fake lovingly express loving care in a way that meets men's need to be capable of fulfilling the needs of women. But as has been stated earlier here, both women and men may fake in the name of love, which means that both sexes may practice loving care in this sense. Thus, the gendered, and heteronormative, binary of romantic love is not strictly realized in terms of genders, that is as women and men, but in the gendered practices of loving care in which both the "giving" of orgasm and the "delivery" of orgasm are important. Both signal the success of the sexual encounter, to the effect that both parties may experience the self-assurance of being successful lovers.

*A Sign of (Real) Sex Having Come to Completion*

In recent research on sex habits in Sweden and the U.S., faked orgasms emerge as a prevalent phenomenon. In his research, American sociologist Michael Kimmel describes what he calls the "orgasm gap". When young men and women were asked about whether they themselves and/or their partner had an orgasm the last time they were together, the women were fairly accurate in estimating their male partners' orgasms, whereas the men greatly overestimated the prevalence of their female partners' orgasms (2008, p. 210). Sandra Dahlén (2008, p. 156) discusses similar results from a Swedish population-based study of sexual habits from 1996: *Sex in Sweden* (Folkhälsoinstitutet, 2000).<sup>5</sup> The mismatches in prevalence of experienced or perceived orgasms say nothing about the reasons for faking, however. Both sexes fake in order to put an end to the sex, in the name of love or for some other reason.

Let's start at the end. Orgasm and ejaculation are for many people the same as the end of sex. That is the overarching reason for faking; you want to get the sex over with when it's not working for you. With a credible faked orgasm, there is no need for inconvenient truth. (Ullholm 2008, p.201)



Pelle Ullholm, engaged in education at RFSU (the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) and specializing in masculinity and sexuality, points out that the male faker's best friend is the massive lack of knowledge about the non-existent connection between ejaculation and orgasm; if the ejaculation is seen as a guarantee of orgasm, the man who fakes does not even have to fake very well—if he can hide behind an ejaculation. Some of the male contributors to *FO* also complain about this lack of knowledge, among former partners as well as among many of the sexual counsellors writing in weekly magazines, about this non-existent connection. The complaint is that these people seem to think that, for men, ejaculation is equivalent to orgasm. If so, there would be only two gradations: ejaculation or not equals orgasm or not—one or zero. But as one of the informants in *FO* states, “An ejaculation can be as enjoyable as blowing your nose, or like a vision of the cosmos, with all the gradations in between” (p. 203). The women in *FO* express similar thoughts, orgasms for women being a vast and varied experience as well, coming as it were, in all different shapes and sizes.

*The Cultural Signification of Orgasms—Heteronormative and Male*

The orgasm as a sign representing that “real sex” has occurred is symbolically and culturally coded as male. The model that serves for this phallic and normative ideal is what is perceived of as *the* male orgasm. One aspect of this is the inherent norm of the presumed connection mentioned above—that in which male orgasm equals ejaculation.

Another aspect is its being connected to a heterosexual norm, by which the notion of a “right” time and a “right” place for orgasm is conveyed. Tacit assumptions of erection as well as penetration are inherent to this ideal, and connected to its role within an ideal of heterosexual marriage. This means that a man's orgasm is supposed to occur within a woman's vagina, where it plays its “natural” role in the procreation of children (at times referred to as the “reproductive model”) (Dahlén, 2008, p. 164).

As a consequence of this norm, other sexual practices are rendered less visible, and a notion of what male pleasure may be is restricted in ways that may have discriminatory undertones with regard to, for example, age and homosexuality (cf. Picket, 2011). A historical, albeit influential, example of the devaluation of ageing men's non-erectile practices is for

example to be found in the Kinsey Reports, despite of its pronounced non-normative ambitions:

In some of these males, ejaculation may occur without erection as a result of the utilization of special techniques in intercourse. In many older persons, erectile impotence is, fortunately, accompanied by a decline in and usually complete cessation of erotic response (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948, p.237).

Historian of ideas Åsa Andersson (2009) notes that the researchers' use of the term "fortunately" gives a hint as to why it is just as well that old men with erectile problems stop having sex—as if an ejaculation or orgasm without erection would somehow be tragic. She points to how, albeit not explicitly, a norm has been set for what heterosexual intercourse ought to be, where it seems that certain kinds of performance are more highly valued than sensations of pleasure.

The norm constructs some sexual practices as more correct, which makes other practices appear deviant, lacking or less successful (cf. Andersson, 2009; Picket, 2011; Saul, 2010). It is not surprising then that there are both women and men in *FO* who write about having "faked away" their orgasms, in situations when they felt the orgasms came about at an inappropriate moment, that is, prior to a penetrating sex act (see, e.g., *FO*, pp. 111, 207). Several contributors in *FO* tell of feelings of inadequacy with regard to their own bodies, such as feeling ashamed or being the object of shame for not being able to have orgasms in a relationship, or for not having them in accordance with some normative principle dictating when and how they should happen. The associated unhappiness has caused some of them to fake orgasms in order to appear normal and successful.

Further, for women this ideal—coded as it has been according to ideas about the masculine—is problematic in more ways than one. First, female orgasm is expected to coincide with features defined by the male norm, that is, the notion of what male pleasure and male orgasms "are" and are expected to be represents female pleasure and orgasms as being complementary or opposite to male pleasure and orgasms. Second, the norm is heterosexual and connected to the production of children. Thus the "right" time and place for a female orgasm is to be in accordance with

what is expected of the male orgasm, through which the woman might get pregnant. In short: women are expected to have vaginal orgasms in conjunction with penetrating intercourse.

Complaints about male theorists either having taken their own experiences as exemplary and as the norm and model for descriptions of sexuality, or for attempting to control female sexuality, are common among feminist theorists and activists. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir criticizes Freud among others for his mistaken view on female sexuality (cf. 2010 [1949], pp. 16-7, 418-9; Heinämaa, 2003, p. 73). Partly echoing Beauvoir's critique, Anne Koedt (1973) points to how Freud greatly influenced the norms for female sexuality when he "contended that the clitoral orgasm was adolescent, and that upon puberty, when women began having intercourse with men, women should transfer the center of the orgasm to the vagina" (p. 199).

Another aspect of how the symbolically male has informed the norms and ideas surrounding orgasm is mediated in language, where Jennifer Saul (2010) uses an example of the differentiation between 'sex' and 'foreplay'. 'Sex' is taken to refer to an activity in which someone (hopefully) achieves orgasm. Foreplay, on the other hand, is something else, not quite sex, but something that prepares us for the important and "real" activity. Foreplay is thus rendered a second-rate sexual activity, even though many women experience orgasm during activities referred to as foreplay. (Note that this should not be taken to mean that the division reflects the experiences of most women, or those of most men, nor that what is referred to as foreplay should necessarily be of special interest to women.) What is conveyed through this linguistic division is not innocent, as it helps shape our thoughts and experiences regarding such matters. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the script provided to men is as conditioned by historical and cultural context as that provided to women.

### *Orgasm Depicted as Connected to Subordination and Violence*

Some cultural "scripts" portray male sexuality as being conditioned in terms of violence or subordination. Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin have argued that pornography depicts the subordination of woman as a condition for male orgasm. That is, in their view female subordination is represented both as something that kindles desire and as what conditions orgasm. They argue that pornography thus fashions

women's as well as men's desire to fit the roles of victim and perpetrator, respectively, and that these roles are then portrayed as being natural forms of sexual expression and of the sexes (Dworkin, 1981; 1989; MacKinnon, 1987; 1993).

It is easy to connect such cultural representations of natural roles within a heterosexual matrix: until recently, rape within marriage did not exist as a legal concept. Rape within marriage was not criminalized in Sweden until 1965. It was long seen neither as a societal problem nor as a concern for the public prosecutor. To put it crudely: the "right thing" had happened in the "right place".

The notion of the "right things" happening in the "right places" has in later years found a deeply homophobic and violent expression in the hate crime *corrective rape*. Lesbian women in South Africa have come forward to tell of systematic rapes, where the perpetrators ascribe a "corrective" function to rape (Mufweba 2003; Reddy et al. 2007). Rape, and rape as a weapon of war, has been dealt with by feminist philosophers such as Claudia Card and Susan Brison (Card 1996; Brison 1997). When rape is used as a weapon, male orgasm is connected to violence in ways that are closely connected to the victim/perpetrator roles Dworkin and MacKinnon argue are formed in part through pornography.

Although neither orgasms nor faking them have to be connected to violence or subordination, such cultural "scripts" do exist in the realm of sex and orgasm. Authors such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Martha Roth, who is one of the contributors to as well as one of the editors of *Transforming a rape culture* (1993), envision better scripts to come. But even in the absence of violence or subordination, there are always some kinds of scripts that "have to be" followed. Should we be surprised, then, that there are women, as well as men, who complain of not even experiencing desire?

### *Expected to Desire*

Both sexes may feel they are expected to be interested in having sex at times when they actually are not. Failing to achieve orgasm may signal an overall lack of desire, as well as lack of pleasure.

Many men claim they find it hard to say no to sex even when they do not feel like it. It may clash with expectations. . . . those of others as well as their own. It is not unusual

for men to assume they are “on” all the time, despite the fact that desire varies and is connected to how you feel otherwise. (Ullholm 2008, p. 201)

When people contact RFSU about sexual problems (instead of, for example, concerns about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases), the most common question concerns lack of desire (more often posed by women), closely followed by questions about erectile problems (commonly posed by men). One might ask whether changed norms for male sexuality would make it easier for men to address the question of lack of desire, instead of having it framed as a matter of erectile dysfunction.

The expected and valued quest for orgasm may even forego the onset of desire or arousal. One example is given by a woman and feminist who writes about how she came to feel that she was not faking the orgasm, but faking herself. She had always felt having orgasms was important—and having them as often as possible (in the appropriate circumstances). She took this as a sign that she was living the good feminist life. At times when she had a hard time coming, even becoming aroused, she would instead go numb in certain respects and fantasize about things that eventually led to orgasm. At the same time she felt like she was somewhere else, and she did not like her fantasies as they were about being abused and forced. Eventually, because she “would do almost anything to have an orgasm”, she began to feel she was faking “inside herself” and to herself; it seemed that the orgasm had become more important to her than whether she really wanted to have sex. With time, she writes, she has changed her ways with regard to having sex; she has quit having fantasies that make her feel outside the situation, elsewhere and powerless, instead allowing herself to say: “Let’s stop, I’ve lost the urge”, or something similar. For her this means that she feels better about herself and her sex life (*FO*, pp. 150 ff.).

### *Faking as a Means to an End*

As was stated earlier in the essay, two of the reasons given for faking in *FO* were faking in the name of love and faking to put an end to the sex. Although there seem to be some notable differences between these two types of faking, there are similarities as well. Both kinds are *instrumental*, they are performed in order to achieve something else, that is, the sounds and movements signalling pleasure are used as a means to an end—to end

the sex in a way that signals that the “essential end”, the orgasm, has been achieved. This is in contrast to when the expressions of pleasure are ends in themselves, as a source of enjoyment regardless of what follows. The instrumental faker may see the faking as a convenient way to put an end to the sex. But faking as a means may have more distant ends than this. One of the women in *FO* even gives faked orgasms their due, as being what helped her climb the social ladder (p. 16-8).

The loving faker may believe s/he is performing an act of love. But one may well ask to what extent faking can be an act of love, regardless of how lovingly it is performed? Love and acts of love are typically understood as being ends in themselves. If what a partner erroneously perceives as acts of love turn out to have been instrumental, s/he will be prone to feel manipulated and trust will be difficult to restore. Trust and its counterpoint, distrust, are self-reinforcing (cf. Hertzberg, 1988; Lagerspetz, 1997; Kalman, 1999). Several stories in *FO* support this kind of process, where the disclosure of earlier faked orgasms has had a detrimental effect on the relationship.

In an instrumental approach one's attention is focussed on the movements and expressions of the other person as things to be dealt with, or even manipulated, thereby simultaneously reducing the partner to a fact of/in one's world. Interestingly enough, as the focus is not on feeling and experiencing whatever happens, one's own body is also reduced to a thing, an instrument of one's will, as one's focus is bent on dealing with the other using one's own body.

### *Habitual Faking*

For some who turn to faking, an instrumental attitude and behaviour may develop into a habit, a lived experience that resides in the body, a lived body with a lived experience of faking. As Merleau-Ponty points out, we acquire the ability to react to certain situations using certain kinds of solutions (1962 [1945], p. 142). The body is a situation, and it is the body that “‘understands’ when a habit is acquired” (pp. 143-4). In the habit, there is agreement between what we aim to do and what we do, and our body is our anchor in the world. When encountering situations similar to those in which the habit was once acquired, our body is our means of handling the situation, that is, practice makes perfect. One way of dealing with *certain* situations has become a habit, such that *the habit becomes*

*the terms on which one experiences similar situations.* Several stories in *FO* support these notions, in that contributors report experiencing difficulty not responding with faking at later occasions—especially with that same partner, but in some cases even with other partners. Thus, a practice that was intended to “resolve” certain situations may eventually end up as a lasting tendency (cf. Kalman 1999, pp. 102-9).

*Faking—as an End in Itself*

If the faked orgasm is part of play it may well be experienced as pleasurable by the faker. In that case, the faking can be regarded as an end in itself, and for the faker at least, as part and parcel of erotic play. One woman writes: “I have probably faked orgasm over a hundred times. I find that to be completely normal and a natural part of the play of flirt, seduction and sex” (*FO*, p.11). Erotic encounters are often marked by play—be it imitation, role-play, or something like hide-and-seek or “Simon Says”. When aroused one may want to express and represent this arousal, thereby entering the role of the aroused.

Given the nature of role-play it is hardly surprising that a faked orgasm may be unintended as well, and surface as an effect of misunderstanding, where the partner perceived expressions of pleasure as signs of orgasm. In such cases, the faker may well choose to stick to the more or less unintended faked orgasm, so as not to break the pleasurable and playful mood of intimacy and lovemaking. “Oh, you’ve been longing for me, my boyfriend cooed, and naturally he enjoyed it when I (in complete honesty) more or less screamed with delight, and (completely falsely) seemed to have been quick to come. And I didn’t have the heart to tell him” (*FO*, p.241).

There is further a certain enjoyment in the development of a skill, even though such pleasure might not be described as playful. For some, the ability to act, perform, and master their own bodies in line with what is perceived as others’ expectations and “needs” is one such skill. One’s idea of self-becoming may then be focused on a desire to be someone who can be and stay in control, of others and oneself.

But there is also another sense in which control and power can be at play in the sexual encounter. For some, one aspect of withholding an orgasm and faking one instead is the sense of being in full control and not letting the other person get intimate. In Beauvoir’s novel *Les*

*mandarins* (1954) a woman—during intercourse with a man who is obsessed with synchronicity—is rather irritated, and thinks to herself that they would be no less separated even if they were to experience orgasm simultaneously. Yet somehow she feels defeated and sighs and moans, albeit not convincingly enough, because he asks her whether she came. Giving an affirmative answer, she thinks to herself that he has been defeated as well, as he did not pursue the question.

*Playful Loving—an End in Itself*

Until now, most of the paper has been devoted to exploring the instrumentality of faked orgasms. But what about the background of faked orgasms, what the faker is faking, namely the pleasure of sexual activities that are enjoyed as ends in themselves?

The mark of erotic encounters in which sexual acts are ends in themselves is closeness and the accompanying possibility of play. Merleau-Ponty describes the way our movement, touch and gestures are filled with meaning, just as our words are, and how it is through our bodies that we understand other people (1962 [1945], pp. 185-6). We convey messages through our lived bodies—through our way of walking, talking and even making love. Sexuality, knowledge and action exist in a relationship of reciprocal expression (p. 157). We can see, hear, and touch, as well as be seen, heard, and touched—by ourselves and by our partner (cf. pp. 92-3).

What becomes especially marked in an erotic encounter is that we do not only get to know the other person through our body, but we also get to know our own body through the other person's (cf. Kalman 1999, p. 150, n. 166). Sexual activities may have many ends, such as “inhabiting” or dwelling in a sexuality that is charged; enjoying touch, play and arousal may also be an end in itself. Here, some readers may remember the cuddling, kisses and petting of their youth, along with the pleasurable discovery of bodies—their own and others’—as being an almost ecstatic state in which space and time could become blurred.

Merleau-Ponty describes how we can invite sleep by lying down or sitting comfortably, emptying the mind, and breathing slowly (pp. 163-4). Along similar lines several contributors to *FO* write about having discovered ways to invite sensuous and ecstatic experience for themselves. As one woman in *FO* states: “If there is something I have learned, . . . it's that it's up to me, that it does require a bit of concentration



and fiddling about” (p. 28).<sup>6</sup> On one’s own or together with someone else, one may discover how to invite and awaken pleasurable feelings. Sneezing and sleeping cannot be willed, nor can sexual pleasure—but they can be “invited”. Several contributors point out that an orgasm is not something you *get* (from your lover), it is something you *take*. As one woman puts it: “You are not given an orgasm, you take it” (*FO*, p. 138), and another writes: “For me it has always been natural to take responsibility for my own sexuality, to participate myself in achieving an orgasm. I would never blame a partner for the failure of pleasure to come off” (p. 15). The anonymous body both limits and enables experience, and may well elude our, as well as others’, deliberate attempts at control.

To make love is also to play, and in play there is a kind of uncertainty. The uncertainty lies in the absence of rules, or rules that might suddenly be changed—neither party knows where the playful attitude will take them. María Lugones describes how the attitude of playfulness turns an activity into play:

*...the attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, turns the activity into play. Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, there are no rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried by competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. . . . We are there creatively.* (Lugones, 1996, p.431, italics in original)

A playful attitude renders us accessible to the surprise of the body’s capacity for joy and pleasure, and the associated openness to outcome will then not implicitly hinge on an orgasm. There does not need to be a script with a self-evident end. A playful attitude in which we are open to self-creation is also one in which we recreate each other in reciprocity. In her description of a lesbian act of love, Simone de Beauvoir relates how

the body of a lover may be seen as a possibility to recreate oneself in reciprocity (2010 [1949], p. 429). I take this to be a description of human possibility as well. In the words of a 29-year old male from Stockholm:

I think faked orgasms are a shame, but I have faked myself. I think it's more common for women to fake than for men to do it. If men would stop being so damned hurt by sex not being like it is in pornographic movies, women wouldn't have to fake to keep the man in a good mood. I'd rather have a moment of genuine sex without orgasm, than a moment of sex with make-believe orgasm (FO, p. 206).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> None of the contributors, academic or otherwise, or the editors are receiving any payment or royalty for their contributions to the book. In the invitation to write, it was stated that every contribution was considered a gift to the project and to humanity. All income generated by the book is given to an organization, NSKK, working at the grassroots level outside of Kolkata in India with sexual education for young people, and supplying sanitary towels to young women.

<sup>2</sup> A much earlier, Swedish, version of this paper has been published in the book *Fejkad Orgasm* (Kalman 2008). Parts of the current version have been presented at conferences in Utrecht in 2009, Oslo in 2010 and Umeå in 2011, and at seminars at the universities of Melbourne, Linköping and Umeå, respectively. I thank the audiences at these conferences, seminars and symposia, and the anonymous reviewers for *Janus Head* for their insights and helpful suggestions.

<sup>3</sup> This and all the following translations of citations from the anthology *Fejkad Orgasm* are mine.

<sup>4</sup> These examples from American popular culture are not foreign to the Swedish public—on the contrary. These series and the film have been shown and rerun on several Swedish TV channels for many years. The impact of American popular culture can hardly be overestimated, as for example more than 40% of what was shown on the five biggest TV channels in 2010 was produced in the US, which is comparable to the amount produced in Sweden. If productions of British origin are added to the American productions, these make up 50% of what is offered to the Swedish televiewer. Cinema film premieres in Sweden show comparable numbers: circa 50% are of North American origin. If one focuses on what viewers between 15-24 watch most of the time, that is drama, series and films (57% of their TV watching time in 2010), the North American cultural dominance is even greater (all statistics from NORDICOM, *Nordic Information Centre for Media and*

*Communication Research*: [www.nordicom.gu.se/eng.php](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/eng.php) - retrieved 2012-04-17).

The question of impact on the audience is another issue of course, but two examples may give a hint. When teaching ethics in the Basic Training Programme for Police Officers at Umeå University, my colleague teachers who were police officers told me that nowadays, when Swedish police officers are about to make a search of a premises, they are commonly asked to present “the search warrant”. This is noteworthy as according to Swedish law there is no need for a search warrant. The expectation is obviously based on what people have seen on TV—that is, American legal practice. And most Swedish lay persons know more about American procedures in the court room, from having watched a series of dramas etc. on the subject—whereas few have seen the inside and know the practices of a Swedish court room. The next example is from the topic of weddings: it has become common when planning for a wedding that young women in Sweden ask for a ceremony in which their fathers walk them down the aisle in order to “give them away”. This has evoked some debate, and many pastors refuse to abide by this wish or at least question it. The reason is that this “giving away” of the bride is perceived of as a patriarchal tradition, foreign and opposed to the Swedish custom, which is for the two parties to walk down the aisle side by side as two equals. This gradual change in customs, where young women perceive of the “giving away” as a romantic part of a wedding, is often interpreted as an effect of the obvious fact that most people have witnessed more American weddings on TV and in films than Swedish weddings in real life or on TV. Thus, when the Swedish crown princess and the king, in their preparations for her wedding the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2010, expressed the wish that the king walk her down the aisle, there was a heated public debate. This led to a historical compromise whereby the king walked the princess halfway down the aisle, where the bridegroom was waiting, and then the couple continued their walk according to the Swedish custom (Sundén Jelmini 2010; Sandberg 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The report is based on responses from a total of 2810 respondents. The net sample consisted of 4781 individuals between the ages 18-74, and of these 2810 (59%) took part in the study.

<sup>6</sup> This citation is not intended to imply that women’s bodies are more complicated than men’s bodies when it comes to the ability to experience pleasure. Rather, it means that in a culture where girls’ bodies and body parts are the objects of shame earlier, more deeply and to a larger extent than are the bodies of boys (Haug, 1999) and where norms for sex are heteronormative and connected to the notion of penetration, for some this “fiddling” may have to be given some scope.

# The Poetics of Childbearing: Revelations of an Other World

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*With the ascent of obstetrics, gynecology, and psychoanalysis, the childbearing woman's subjectivity has been increasingly eclipsed by that of her child-to-be. This article describes the sociohistorical understanding of childbearing and shows how it has become intertwined with four women's lived experiences of pregnancy and birth based on diaries and interviews they completed for this study. The participants' childbearing experiences revealed an ambiguous, sensual symbiosis between themselves and others that threatens the Western notion of a free-floating, solipsistic subject exemplified in fetal photographs and ultrasound images.*

*The gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—  
has far more radical implications than we have yet to come to appreciate.*  
—Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

## *The Poetics of Childbearing*

Three images come to mind when I think about the origins of human life as depicted in popular culture, medicine, and psychoanalysis. The first is Lennart Nilsson's prenatal photography where the fetus appears like an astronaut alone against a black sky. In such images, the pregnant woman appears *out of the picture* even though the picture would have been impossible without her. In the second image, prevalent in the United States, the childbearing woman is birthing on her back on a table in a hospital, tangled with the wires of a fetal monitor and an intravenous drip; she is depicted as an inefficient machine that needs a doctor and an efficient staff to help her produce the best "product" (Martin, 1992; Davis-Floyd, 1992). In the third image, derived from Sigmund Freud, (1925/1963d) the child is merely a penis substitute to allay the anatomical wound of being castrated. Each of these images metaphorizes the childbearing woman in a new way: in the first, she is the "space" of life; in the second, she is a dysfunctional machine; and in the third, she is a castrated creature.

Feminist writer and poet Adrienne Rich would consider these derogatory metaphors part of the institutional story of childbearing. In her landmark book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich (1986) says that we have confused *women's own stories* of their childbearing experiences with the *institutional story* of childbearing. The institutional story emerges from the influential and authoritative

discourses, practices, and places of childbearing within Western culture, from obstetrical texts in medical libraries to birthing rooms in hospitals. The institution is not a particular building that pregnant women enter; rather, it is a sociohistorical framework of childbearing that psychologists and obstetricians have instituted and endorsed. Within this story, childbearing women's experiences have been absent or discounted.

This article tells a new story of childbearing by adopting a research method that I call poetics. The purpose of poetics is to articulate the ambiguity of women's lived experiences as they unfold within the sociohistorical context. I begin with a sociohistorical hermeneutics by reading three prevalent childbearing metaphors—space, machine, and castration—as texts that portray the world that childbearing women inhabit. Second, to explore how they experience this world, I compare and contrast the sociohistorical hermeneutics of childbearing metaphors with four women's experiences of pregnancy and birth to determine the extent to which the childbearing metaphors in medicine and psychology accurately portray their lived experiences.

Many works have already investigated the impact of childbearing metaphors on women's experiences: For instance, Dubow (2011) and Duden (1993) explore the spatial childbearing metaphor; Wolf (2003), Block (2007), and Davis-Floyd (1992) explore the mechanistic metaphor; Rich (1986) and De Beauvoir (1949/2009) explore the castration metaphor. Nevertheless, they focus primarily on one metaphor. The aim of the poetic approach in this article is to show *how all three of these* metaphors are inextricably intertwined with each other and women's childbearing experiences. The result is a new story that changes how we see childbearing women as well as medicine and the origins of psychoanalysis.

*The Institutional Story of Childbearing:  
How Childbearing Became Man's Business*

Since 1965 when Lennart Nilsson pioneered prenatal photography, fetal images have pervaded documentaries, developmental textbooks, and magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. The editors of *Life* included Nilsson's photograph of the lone fetus, *How Life Begins*, in a collection called *100 Photographs that Changed the World*. According to the editors, they chose the photograph because "Nilsson's painstakingly made pictures informed how humanity feels about...well, humanity" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 171). Their ellipses are telling, for like the photograph, they reflect the omission of childbearing woman; the statement suggests that she has been excluded from humanity while the fetus' humanity is focal. The loss of



the childbearing woman's humanity in such photographs began centuries ago when she lost her status as the exclusive authority on childbearing.

In the seventeenth century, the birthing woman's body became metaphorized as a malfunctioning machine that must be controlled through male intervention (Merchant, 1989). Consequently, in birth, a realm where woman had always been an active and autonomous subject, she became regarded as a passive object subjected to mechanistic laws best understood by men. Men became "experts" on an experience they could never have and excluded the birthing woman's knowledge, experiences, and perspectives from their obstetrical sciences.

This shift arose from the new belief that the birthing woman, like nature, needed human intervention to function properly. Nature was no longer viewed as a magical and powerful force that one must obey, but as an entity to control and conquer. Likewise, birth was no longer a natural event where men were excluded, but an unpredictable and dangerous event that necessitated the expertise of men. Just as rituals and restrictions about tampering with the earth were lifted for miners during this era, so were rituals and restrictions that prohibited men from tampering with the birthing process. Removing mining restrictions allowed men to reap profits from exploring the inner recesses of the earth (Merchant, 1989). Likewise, seventeenth century male barber-surgeons and physicians realized that they could profit by exploring the hidden recesses of a birthing woman and thereby expand their practices and monopolize midwifery. (Wilson, 1995). As men became interested in the birthing process, traditional female midwives were increasingly discredited.

Discrediting midwives was not a new phenomenon. It had begun during the Inquisition when many were burned at the stake for witchcraft (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). In fact, the manual used by the Inquisitors to identify and prosecute witches, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, written by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger (1486/1971), linked midwifery with witchcraft. In addition to claiming that midwives regularly killed children and offered them to the devil, Kramer and Sprenger (1486/1971) also *accused midwives of healing*, which they considered even more dangerous. Witch hunting authorities concluded that such women's healing *powers must be derived from the devil* because women had been prohibited from studying at the University. Otherwise, without an education, how could she possibly know how to cure another?

Defending herself with the *ample experience* she developed from her training as an apprentice attending births would not redeem a midwife; the Church authorities cast suspicion on empirical approaches that relied on the senses rather than on faith or doctrine. They surmised



that the devil worked through the senses (Kramer and Sprenger, 1486/1971). Thus, midwives, who acquired knowledge through their senses, were especially susceptible to the corruptive powers of the devil.

Given that midwifery is based upon an empirical apprenticeship, one might assume that the scientific revolution would have empowered the midwives' practices. After all, philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1620/1994) advocated scientific knowledge derived from empirical approaches. The empirically oriented scientific revolution, however, did not improve the plight of midwives. The empiricism espoused by its leaders, such men as Bacon and Harvey did not include the everyday experiential approach that midwives utilized. Instead, their empiricism necessitated a formal education denied to women (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). In fact, during this period, male physicians and barber-surgeons struggled to abolish traditional midwifery models and to develop man-midwifery as a new science founded upon the discoveries of anatomy and dissection, subjects already esteemed in the Universities. In the 1700s when surgeons began establishing midwifery programs based on formal training in the anatomical sciences, women were excluded even though they had historically always been the exclusive practitioners of midwifery. So while midwives were not burned at the stake once the scientific revolution and the enlightenment emerged, they would eventually be exiled from their own profession by male physicians and man-midwives who took over by deeming them ignorant and unfit for the required education.

Without the formal education, economic resources, and political influence of their male counterparts, midwives could not defend themselves from the slander levied against them (Wertz & Wertz, 1977). Despite such disadvantages, however, midwives did not disappear from the European birthing scene. Furthermore, in countries such as the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, midwives not only survived, they eventually thrived. In fact, with the exception of the United States, midwives have been the primary attendants at births in almost every country (O'Dowd and Philipp, 1994).

Anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger (2000) traces midwifery's demise in the United States back to the 1760s when the American colonists began turning away from midwives to distinguish themselves from the old European way of birthing. Ironically, later, during the Victorian period in America, pregnant women of the middle and upper classes preferred man-midwives because they were educated "European-style." They also preferred male attendants because they were generally perceived as more educated and competent (even if this was not the case). Furthermore, by charging three to four times more than traditional midwives,

man-midwives found favor with the middle and upper classes who equated a great expense with prestige and wealth (Knibiehler, 1993).

This shift from female midwives to male obstetricians profoundly affected the milieu of birth for American women of all classes. Through monopolizing the profession of midwifery, male obstetricians monopolized not only the meaning of birth, but also *the meaning of being a childbearing woman*. As Wertz and Wertz (1977) explain:

maleness became a necessary attribute of safety, and femaleness became a condition in need of male medical control...(p. 72)  
Further, as an initiation rite for women, birth became a moral test and a physical trial in which the male doctor, not merely the company of women, judged a woman's passage into adult society. (p. 73)

In addition to excluding women from the medical professions in the nineteenth century, physicians began excluding them from attending the births of their closest female companions. Up until the nineteenth century, birth was still considered a special occasion where women expressed their mutual love and care by assisting each other during and after it. In addition to a female midwife, toward the end of her pregnancy a woman invited her mother, friends, relatives, and neighbors to attend her birth. Upon her request, once labor pains began, her husband summoned the women she had invited—usually about five women. When the women arrived, her husband, as well as any other men, were required to leave the area. The female attendants then prepared what was called a lying-in chamber: curtains were drawn, keyholes covered, and candles lit, creating a womb-like milieu. In this sheltered space, the female companions nurtured the pregnant woman during birth and until one month afterwards (Wilson, 1995).

The women who attended to the birthing woman were called *god-sibs* which meant “Siblings or Sisters of God.” Eventually, the word “god-sibs” became contracted into the word “gossips” (Kitzinger, 2000; Wilson, 1995). By the eighteenth century, the meaning of gossip extended beyond birth companions and referred to the idle chatter that some believed characterized any female gathering. This derogatory meaning emerged from men's negative associations to the lying-in period, a custom which some of them resented. Far from quiet, the lying-in period was noted for its jovial atmosphere, infused with leisurely talk and laughter. Referring to this ritual, a man in 1683 wrote “for gossips to meet...at a lying-in, and not to talk, you may as well damn up the arches of London Bridge, as stop their mouths as such a time. ‘Tis a time of freedom, when women... have a privilege to talk

petty treason” (qtd. in Wilson, 1995, p. 30). Apparently, lying-in was a time of freedom, perhaps one of the only times of freedom accorded to women.

However, as male physicians continued to compete with midwives and to challenge their authority along with the authority of experienced mothers, the communal nature of birth began to change:

Indeed, nineteenth century doctors, possibly feeling ill at ease under the watchful eyes of many women, were inclined to urge the removal of all from the delivery room except one, a hired nurse or a friend who would obey the doctor’s orders. (Wertz & Wertz, 1977, p. 5)

In addition to excluding female companions from the delivery room, physicians also discouraged women from discussing sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth with each other. According to historian Amanda Banks (1999), pregnancy was no longer an acceptable topic of polite conversation. When pregnancy and birth were discussed, people used euphemisms such as storks and cabbage patches. In fact, both pregnancy and the pregnant woman were banished from everyday discourse and life. Banks says that women endured pregnancy in a “contrived seclusion” during which they rarely shared their experiences with other women (p. 49). Following from this, sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth were transplanted from a woman-centered world to a male-centered one. The renowned nineteenth century neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, for example, forbade his female patients from discussing their health with anyone but him. Moreover, he also discouraged them from asking him too many questions.

The silence that shrouded women’s experiences in the nineteenth century was a relatively new phenomenon. It sharply contrasts the loud and festive milieu within which women gave birth prior to the seventeenth century, amongst their closest female companions (Wilson, 1995).

The dwindling of female midwives, the loss of female supports, and the withholding of information by physicians, suggests that women had no one to talk to—no more gossips with whom to discuss sex, pregnancy, or birth. They were thus excommunicated from discussing what were undoubtedly momentous events in any woman’s life, especially during a time when femininity was defined by maternity.

### *Freud: The Hysteric’s Gossip*

The silence that shrouded woman’s reproduction paved the way for Freud to build a science of being a confidant—a professional “gossip”—to women. Rather than discourage his female patients

from talking as S. Weir Mitchell had, he encouraged them to speak about whatever came to them. When women had the occasion to discuss whatever came to mind, as Freud had so invited, they often discussed reproductive issues. Freud noted in the case of Dora:

I have already indicated that the majority of hysterical symptoms, when they have attained their full pitch of development, represent an imagined situation of sexual life—such as a scene of sexual intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth, confinement, etc. (Freud, FN 1905/1963a, p. 94)

These were all issues no longer allowed in polite society, but that surfaced—in words or deeds—during the course of analysis. Anna O. staged a pregnancy. Dora read about pregnancy, childbirth, and virginity in an encyclopedia to quell her sexual curiosity. She enacted a childbirth fantasy, Freud says, through a “supposed” attack of appendicitis. Moreover, according to Freud, her nurturing relationship with children revealed maternal longings.

Psychoanalysis, which by Freud’s own account originated with cases of hysteria, has ever since been linked with sex, pregnancy, and birth—all of which had recently been transformed by obstetrics and gynecology. The interconnections of hysteria, sex, pregnancy, birth, gynecology, obstetrics, and psychoanalysis are best expressed in the following syllogism: *hysteria is to psychoanalysis as pregnancy and childbirth are to obstetrics and gynecology*.

In obstetrics, gynecology, and psychoanalysis, women found themselves in the same position: confined to a reclined position that conveyed that they were ill and that male expertise could save them. Before the rise of the man-midwife, women *birthed upright in a squatting or kneeling position*, against a stool or hammock, with female birth attendants supporting them. Later, when men and women changed positions as childbirthing authorities, the birthing woman’s position *literally* changed from being upright to horizontal. This shift metaphorically conveys the birthing woman’s loss of authority, autonomy, and control during birth; it also signifies illness. While women delivered babies on a birthing bed, hysterics delivered symptoms in a horizontal position on Freud’s couch.

Freud (1905/1963a) even referred to himself as a gynecologist when describing his approach to hysteria. Gynecology was respected enough professionally in Europe and America that he defended the sexual frankness of his prefatory remarks in case of Dora by saying, “I will simply claim for myself the rights of the gynaecologist” (p. 3). He later extended his defense, describing how his psychoanalytic work is similar to that of a gynecologist:

It is possible for a man to talk to girls and women upon sexual matters of every kind without doing them harm and without bringing suspicion upon himself, so long as, in the first place, he adopts a particular way of doing it, and, in the second place, can make them feel convinced that it is unavoidable. *A gynecologist, after all, under the same conditions, does not hesitate to make them submit to uncovering every possible part of their body.* The best way of speaking about such things is to be dry and direct.... (1905/1963a, p. 41, emphasis added)

Like the gynecologists and obstetricians of his day, Freud did not hesitate to “*uncover every possible part*” of girls and women. According to medical historian Elizabeth Fee, such sexual metaphors of woman (and nature) as something to be “unveiled, unclothed, and penetrated by masculine science” have been prevalent since the sixteenth century (qtd. in Sargent & Brettell, 1996, p. 2). Professional pioneers languaged their discoveries with the bravado of a man breaking a woman’s hymen, entering ‘virginal’ territory and colonizing a strange fertile land. Obstetricians had broken the taboo of entering the birthing chamber and had penetrated the vagina with forceps; gynecologists had broken the taboo of peering into the vagina and had probed it with the speculum; and now Freud (1905/1963a) broke the taboo of *listening* to women’s “most secret and repressed wishes” (p. 2).

By listening to women, he acknowledged the inadequacies of the anatomical-physiological sciences. To solve the riddle of hysteria, he instead developed a science that involved turning away from *physiological* causes toward *psychological* causes. Unlike his predecessors, Freud did not uncover every part of women’s bodies. Rather, he uncovered every part of their “minds”—that is, through listening to their words, he analyzed their dreams, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. He thus became a confidant to women in a world where relationships among female supports—gossips—were strained by cultural changes.

In the case of Dora, he also describes himself as a “conscientious archeologist” who was striving to “bring to the light of day after their long burial the priceless though mutilated relics of antiquity” (Freud 1905/1963a, p. 7). Like an archeologist, Freud unwittingly excavated hidden fragments of women’s childbearing past that were manifesting themselves in the body and discourse of hysterics during the Victorian Era. He recognized early on, for instance, the connection between hysteria and witchcraft, acknowledging that during the Middle Ages hysterics had been condemned as witches. In a letter to Fliess, he also drew parallels between his theory of hysteria and the medieval theory of possession:

What would you say, by the way, if I told you that all of my brand-new prehistory of hysteria is already known and was published a hundred times over, though several centuries ago? Do you remember that I always said that the medieval theory of possession held by the ecclesiastical courts was identical to our theory of a foreign body and the splitting of consciousness? (1985, p. 224)

Freud also noted that the confessions of both witches and hysterics involved phallic symbols—sharp instruments such as pins, needles, and knives. For Freud, these phallic symbols signified a *sexual trauma that had been repressed* and had now reemerged in a new form, possessing the woman's body like a demon that takes over until she can no longer function.

When Freud wrote again to Fliess the following week, he reported that he had ordered the *Malleus Maleficarum*. As stated earlier, this was the manual used by the Inquisitors to identify and prosecute witches; it contributed to the downfall of midwifery by linking it with witchcraft.

Despite Freud's stated intention to delve further into the parallels between witches and hysterics, after this letter it seems he never did (1985, p. 224). If he had, he may have discovered that witches of the Middle Ages and hysterics of the Victorian Era shared more than torture from phallic symbols, bodily possession, and the splitting of consciousness; both of these conditions arose during a similar sociohistorical context regarding medicine.

The persecution of 'witches' emerged at a time when male physicians strove to exclude the majority of women from practicing medicine except for midwifery (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). Similarly, the diagnosis of hysteria emerged at a time when obstetricians and gynecologists strove to exclude women from practicing midwifery. Persecuting women as witches and diagnosing them as hysterics both coincided with women being *excluded from professions* where they once *possessed power and authority apart from men*. Now, instead of possessing authority, they were increasingly finding themselves "possessed" by male medical authorities who excluded them from practicing medicine and turned to surgical castration to heal them.

### *Castration: The Social Mutilation of the Childbearing Woman*

Ovariectomy, often called female castration, was first performed in 1850 to remove a cyst. By the 1870s, however, gynecologists began removing ovaries to cure a variety of pathological behaviors including hysteria, excessive sexual desire, and aches and pains with no organic cause. (Laqueur, 1990; Ussher, 1989). By 1906, a gynecologist estimated that

150,000 had been performed in the United States alone. Men, in contrast, were rarely castrated except for criminal insanity or to treat prostate cancer (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Castration was thus a woman's condition.

Accordingly, Freud explained that, the girl "accepts castration as an established fact, an operation already performed." (1923/1963b, p. 171). His words, "*an operation already performed*," sound like Freud meant castration as an actual surgical event. However, he was not referring to surgery but to a *genital trauma* inflicted at birth by being born female and, consequently, without a penis. Freud said that when a girl first notices her difference, she thinks that she will grow a penis, she denies its absence, or she thinks of her clitoris as the "penis-equivalent" (1933/1965, p. 146). Eventually this changes when she realizes that she *is* castrated and will *never* grow a penis. Freud says thereafter the girl notices not only that she's castrated but "*its significance too*," meaning her inferiority (p. 155).

The girl realizes that not only has she been castrated, but so have all women. Castration is thus a universal characteristic among women. When the "universality of this negative character of her sex dawns upon her," Freud says that "womanhood, and with it also her mother, suffers a heavy loss of credit in her eyes" (Freud, 1931/1963c, p.192). Conversely, her father and men become idealized when she realizes that they can provide what women cannot: the penis and impregnation which enable her to improve her value and worth through childbearing.

And so within psychoanalysis we learn that with each generation, a mother passes to her daughter the same castration, rivalry, and attempts to substitute a penis with a child that her mother had inflicted upon her. And each generation of mothers and daughters will further deprive each other of the phallus, the emblem of power. The mother cannot provide the phallus to her daughter so the daughter must turn to her father. Likewise, the daughter cannot provide the phallus to her mother so the mother must turn to a son. Both signify each other's deficiencies. At best the daughter can provide her mother with a grandson. He becomes their only hope to heal their mutual wounds of castration.

Reflecting on terms such as castration and the child as a penis substitute, Rich (1986) chastises Freudian analysis for its "tone-deafness in the language" (p. 201). Freud and his followers, she says, overlooked the ways that women are "socially mutilated" (p. 202). For her, castration is a metaphor for not only the ways in which women are disempowered, but the ways in which they can also disempower each other, particularly mothers and daughters. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2009) describes how mothers disempower their daughters in the *Second Sex*:



The disgust they feel for their sex could incite them to give their daughters a virile education: they are rarely generous enough to do so. Irritated at having given birth to a female, the mother accepts her with this ambiguous curse: "You will be a woman." She hopes to redeem her inferiority by turning this person she considers a double into a superior being; and she also has a tendency to inflict on her the defect she has had to bear. (p. 562)

Enraged and disgusted by their mothers' social mutilation, Rich (1986) says that daughters then turn away from their mothers toward men. They dread becoming like their mothers, a condition she calls "matrophobia":

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (p. 236)

The mother becomes the daughter's nemesis from whom she must free herself. She achieves this through "radical surgery" which consists of severing the symbiosis between herself and her mother. The psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva (1989) indicates that such radical surgery is not only valuable but necessary: "For man and woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. *Matricide is our vital necessity*, the sin-quanon condition of our individuation" (pp. 27-28, emphasis added).

To survive and thrive, the daughter, like a son, must sever the umbilical relation to her mother. During pregnancy this becomes especially difficult, if not impossible, since childbearing can reawaken the daughter's identification with her mother and thus threaten her individuation. Furthermore, in becoming a mother, she longs for her own mother and wishes to protect her. Nonetheless, she must kill her mother to save herself. The only alternative to matricide, Kristeva believes, is depression, which she calls "putting to death of the self" instead of the mother (p. 28).

If *matricide is an antidepressant*, as Kristeva suggests, then we can credit scientists and media venues for protecting us from the contours of the mother's flesh in fetal photographs. Within such images, the mother *has ceased* to exist, whereas the fetus emerges as an astronaut in space, a victorious hero freed from the mother's body. To grow up and



become civilized, in Western culture, means to turn away from one's mother and identify with the father (Rich, 1986, p. 198). In obstetrics and gynecology, civilization means identification with the "manly" pursuits of science and technology; in psychoanalysis civilization means identification with the father. Either way, these disciplines begin with the unquestioned assumption that we must get rid of mothers, or at least disempower them, in order to preserve ourselves as individuals.

*Being a Nothingness:*

*Institutional Metaphors as Lived by Childbearing Women*

Davis Floyd's (1992) research suggests that women take up institutional metaphors in multiple ways—some resist, some submit, and some adapt to them. To explore ways in which women's childbearing experiences concur with, contradict, or transcend the sociohistorical metaphors, I collected descriptions of women's lived experiences of pregnancy and childbirth through diaries and interviews.

Four white women ranging from 30-44 participated in this study. The pool of participants for this study was not culturally and ethnically diverse as I had hoped. Nonetheless, they did vary in educational background. Of the four participants who completed the study, one earned a master's degree, two earned associates' degrees, and one never attended college. Although all four women were in committed relationships, three were married and one unmarried. All lived with their partners. Three participants were first-time mothers employed full-time throughout their pregnancies. For the fourth, this was her fourth pregnancy; she home-schooled her other three children. The women were scattered among three different New England states: one lived in northern Massachusetts, one in eastern Connecticut, one in southern Connecticut and another in southern Maine.

Despite their differences, the participants' experiences confirmed that the sociohistorical metaphors were not simply ideas about their childbearing experiences; rather they were inextricably intertwined with them. According to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1975/1997), metaphors make "ontological commitments" about what it means to be in the world (p. 249). In this way, the ontological commitments of metaphors have existential consequences—they affect the childbearing woman's ways of being in the world. Writer Helene Cixous (1976/1981) boldly claims that men have "flaunted" their metaphors like "banners throughout history" (p. 47). From the sociohistorical hermeneutics stories, I conclude that the banners read: the childbearing woman does not exist.

In their diaries and interviews, all four participants of this

study— Tammy, Anna, Mandy, and Heidi<sup>1</sup> —described how they no longer felt significant after giving birth. During an interview, for instance, Tammy explicitly stated that she felt like she no longer existed. She had been discussing how she felt closer to her mother throughout her pregnancy and after giving birth. Then, after a long sigh, she said:

We're closer in that way because she wants to see the baby all the time. *But I don't think I exist anymore.* Honestly, we talk 99% of the time just about the baby. Before it wasn't about the baby, *it was about me.* It's about the baby now. (p. 424)

Her words stunned me. She summarized what I had encountered in sociohistorical metaphors of childbearing—the erasure of the childbearing woman's existence and the emphasis on her baby.

Mostly though, her pronouncement stunned me for personal reasons. During Tammy's interview, I realized that I had behaved similarly toward my sister. Like Tammy's mother, I had unwittingly negated my sister's existence in our conversations after she gave birth. When I called her, I no longer greeted her with, "Hi Lori, how are you doing?" Instead I asked her about the baby. Then, *if I remembered*, I asked about my sister, as if she had become an afterthought. Realizing that I had participated in the cultural negation of my sister as a person distinct from her baby troubled me. Besides the hypocrisy I felt for behaving this way toward my sister while critiquing others in my research for doing the same, I realized how entrenched the disavowal of the childbearing woman's existence as a human being has become in everyday life.

The other participants also felt that their existence had been negated or diminished by others. Anna, like Tammy, expressed feeling secondary to her baby after giving birth. When she arrived home from the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that no one, besides her husband, was helping her in the way that she had envisioned. During her pregnancy she had envisioned women, specifically her mother and sisters, caring for her after giving birth. But that didn't happen. Instead of being offered the soda, tea, and toast she expected, Anna's mother and sisters "attacked" her with questions about what she wanted them *to buy for the baby rather than what they could provide for her* (p. 462). These circumstances disappointed and vexed Anna.

Heidi, who was pregnant for the fourth time during this study, explains what Anna and Tammy may have been feeling. "With the first baby," she says, "I think it's really common to feel blue with the buildup and the showers. Then your husband goes back to work and you still have to learn to do this by yourself with no family. Who

wouldn't be blue?" (p. 533). Moreover, she says that new mothers underestimate the needs of their newborns. She explained that it is easy to become resentful, to feel "touched out" as though one's "emotional tank" is empty (pp. 537 & 502). She uses these words to express how new mothers feel depleted from giving so much day and night to meet the needs of their children without receiving care from anyone else.

Mandy, for instance, felt "physically and emotionally drained" with only a few minutes to herself each day during the first few weeks after giving birth. Although she loved being at home with her baby, Andrew, she explained that she missed feeling a "sense of importance" (p. 497). She distinguished the importance she felt as a mother from the importance she derived from work:

It's only natural that my baby would need me and that I would be important to him, but it's a different thing to be important to an organization.... They don't have to need me, but it's just natural that Andrew would need me. I've earned being needed at work. (p. 497)

Mandy's words suggest that while she feels important to her son and to her husband, she *doesn't feel as important in the world*. Worldly importance *must be earned* and, apparently, mothering does not earn that importance.

Mandy's words summarize an experience that the other participants hinted at—feeling *less important* to people within the larger culture, people other than their babies and husbands. Conversations between my sister and I, and those between Tammy and Anna and their mothers, suggest that the childbearing woman loses her place as a *subject* in discourse. The baby literally replaces her as the subject of conversation. Moreover, she feels that the baby has become the exclusive *subject* of her life. As Tammy put it, "I don't think I exist anymore."

### *Struggling to Be Heard*

When Tammy told her doctors that she feared her extraordinary pain meant that she might miscarry, they explained that "it's just the baby growing." A week later she called again because the pain was unbearable. Once again the doctors reassured her that her pain was from the baby growing until she became angry and demanded that they check again. After an ultrasound, the doctor realized Tammy had kidney stones and a bladder infection. Tammy had known that *something* was wrong. Yet initially the doctors were unwilling to listen to the significance of her experiences. Thus, Tammy found herself frustrated and angry in a world where her experiences were discounted.

Similarly, when Anna had been experiencing intense cramps along with a watery, bloody discharge, she called her doctor concerned that she was in labor and that her water had broke. Her doctor told her to visit the office. When she arrived, she explained to the doctor that she had timed the contractions and that they “didn’t seem regular” (p. 454).

After examining her, he assured her that her water had not broken and she was merely experiencing Braxton-Hicks contractions, explaining that such contractions were not “real” but that they could be very painful and Anna would “just have to endure this pain, that’s all there is to it” (p. 452).

“I’m afraid that I’m not going to know if I go into labor,” Anna told him.

“Oh no, you’ll know,” he replied (p. 454).

Convinced that she was not in labor, they scheduled an appointment for a Cesarean section for the following week.

That night and the next day the contractions worsened. Anna comforted herself in any way she could: relaxing by taking a bath, squatting on the toilet, talking to her husband on the phone, and crying from the pain. She didn’t think that she was in labor because when she measured her contractions, they didn’t fit the designated pattern detailed in her childbirth book or in her doctor’s description of contractions. After twenty hours of “irregular contractions,” when she could no longer bear the pain, she finally decided to call the doctor again. He told her to come in and that if labor had started they would schedule a Cesarean section earlier than they had planned. By the time she arrived at the hospital, the nurse checked her cervix and realized that Anna was fully dilated and, therefore, ready to push. She had been in labor the entire time.

Anna panicked when the nurse told her that she could not have a Cesarean section since her doctors had previously told her that she would never be able to deliver vaginally because of a prior surgery. Despite this, she delivered her son within twenty minutes without complications. Afterwards, she could not believe the ease with which her son “flew” out of her, especially since she never attended any childbirth classes (p. 457).

Although Anna expressed no complaints about her obstetrician, her story, like Tammy’s, reveals the subtle ways in which obstetricians disregard childbearing women’s experiences. Tammy and Anna, for their part, did not initially question the authority of their doctors. They presumed that their doctors *must know* since they earned professional degrees that provided them with specialized knowledge and tools. When it became apparent to these women that despite this training their doctors were wrong, they found

themselves disturbed. Tammy's and Anna's situations reveal the intrinsic ambiguity of birth and life—sometimes no one, no matter how educated they might be, knows what is happening. Tammy and Anna turned to the doctors to eradicate this ambiguity by clearly answering their questions: “What is wrong?” and “What should I do?” Tammy acknowledged that:

I really want all the answers to come from them and not me because I didn't go to school for anything. For me to guess and I'm right, you kind of wonder sometimes why they don't know this. They're doctors and they got all the big money. (p. 402)

Like Tammy, Heidi initially believed that costly care meant better care. She said that for her first pregnancy she chose an obstetrician because she thought that the “best care was the most expensive and involved” (p. 517). Her opinion changed, however, as a result of her experience with her obstetricians. She said that the doctors treated her as though she was “high-risk” and like she was an “idiot” (p. 518). After this experience, she decided to go to a family practitioner who described seeing birth as a natural part of family life rather than as a disease. During her fourth pregnancy, to know as much as she could about obstetrics, she stayed up late each night reading *Williams Obstetrics*, stating that “I have seen doctors stop treating me like some pathetic little patient. I get more respect because I know this stuff” (p. 505).

Mandy, like Heidi, also informed herself as much as possible about obstetrics during her pregnancy. She devised a birth plan which included the following: being upright during birth, eating and drinking, and forgoing the use of electric fetal monitoring and an episiotomy. When she discussed this plan with her doctors and supported it with evidence from research, she said her doctors initially agreed to it. However, when she gave birth, Mandy ended up in bed, permitted no food or drink except for ice chips, hooked up to an electronic fetal monitor, and she had an episiotomy. When Mandy's sister, Heidi interceded to advocate for Mandy's wishes, the doctor and the nurse did not uphold Mandy's birth plan.

For instance, despite her birth plan the doctor told Mandy that she must have electronic fetal monitoring and that she could only have ice chips. When he left the room, Mandy's sister told her that Mandy did not have to do what the doctor told her. Mandy reported that the doctor must have been listening through the door or on an intercom because he returned to tell Mandy's sister that if she “didn't shut her mouth he was going to call security and get her out of there” (p. 487). Mandy expressed her fear during that moment:

I was saying [to her] “I don’t want to make enemies here. I don’t want them to slice me open because you provoked them.” I just really wanted to beg her... “please just don’t make enemies because this doctor was about to wheel in this tray with all these stainless steel instruments that looked really scary.” (p. 487)

The obstetrician possessed the authority to challenge and disregard Mandy’s wishes regardless of their prior agreements and despite the evidence Mandy had presented. For instance, the doctor’s unwillingness to allow Mandy to birth upright was not based on any evidence that birthing horizontally improves the health of the mother or child, since no such evidence exists. Her doctor told her that he did not want her to birth in an upright position because he had a “bad back” (p. 486). Thus, his stricture was not based on scientific evidence, but on his personal convenience.

Unlike Tammy and Anna, Heidi and Mandy *questioned the authority* of their obstetricians. Questioning his expertise, however, did not empower them. Mandy was still forced to give birth according to his protocols. When she and her sister argued otherwise, Mandy not only felt slighted, she felt threatened that such a provocation might lead the doctor to “slice her open” (p. 487). Meanwhile, the physician effectively silenced her sister. Mandy said of the situation, “I couldn’t afford the energy to care too much” (p. 487) and “I felt the disappointment, but I was in no real mood to argue. I mean, you just roll with whatever you’re faced with” (p. 489). Robbie Davis-Floyd (1992) suggests that Mandy’s resignation to her doctor’s wishes arose from the inherent vulnerability of the birthing process:

The “opening” that occurs during birth is quite literal—a birthing woman’s cervix must dilate to a diameter of ten centimeters in order for her baby to be born—while the stress, anxiety, and pain of the labor process are often enough in themselves to ensure simultaneous category breakdown and psychological opening. (p. 39)

Heidi’s reflections on her previous birthing experiences supports this. She says, “when you’re in labor, your opinion is very malleable. You forget why you wanted certain things” (p. 518).

### *Bearing the Pain*

As the childbearing woman’s cervix opens and thins, her vulnerability and pain intensifies. At times the participants felt hopeless, helpless, and unsure of their ability to move through labor. Desperately,

they sought a way out, but they knew there was no reprieve. During the period of “transition” when the cervix dilates to 8-10 centimeters, the participants felt inconsolable. Tammy thought that she was dying, Mandy wished she could jump out of the window, and Heidi believed that she would forsake her identity by seeking pain medication, thereby, contradicting everything she believed about natural childbirth.

In his book *Medical Nemesis*, Ivan Illich (1976) suggests that this existential malaise inevitably arises from pain:

When I suffer pain, I am aware that a question is being raised....Pain is the sign for something not answered; it refers to something open, something that goes on the next moment to demand, What is wrong? How much longer? (p. 142)

In addition to the questions Illich lists, other questions were raised for the participants during birth: *Am I dying? Do I still want to live amid this pain?* These questions reveal the connection between pain and death. As the psychologist F. J. Buytendijk (1943/1962) says, “Pain is death’s shadow” (p. 27-28). The participants’ doctors and nurses attempted to banish death’s shadow by diminishing the existential significance of the participants’ pain: telling them to breathe differently, to consider pain medication, or in Tammy’s case when she screamed from excruciating pain during birth, a nurse told her “keep your mouth quiet and stop yelling.”

Tammy turned to her partner Mattand said, “I’m going to kill her.... *I’m dying.*”

“Calm down, Tammy,” her doctor told her.

“Get the baby out of me, I’m dying!” (p. 421)

In telling Tammy to shut up and calm down, her nurse and doctor did not simply try to hush her pain, but her life and death concerns. Tammy really believed that she was dying.

Heidi calls this struggle with birth and death the “dark side of motherhood.” She says that through her own births and those of her close friends she has experienced this dark side:

It’s all the stuff that our society is afraid to talk about—birth and death... For me I think the whole thing is conscious acceptance that when we begin playing this game of reproduction there’s no guarantees. (p. 501)

The participants' experiences suggest that their doctors and nurses encouraged them to deny the dark side of childbearing by acting as though their obstetrical rituals could guarantee safety. Furthermore, by avoiding the concerns about death during childbirth, medical professionals eradicated dimensions of childbirth pain that defy scientific explanation.

Unlike the weeks of gestation or the dilation of the cervix, pain cannot be measured objectively. It is purely subjective. In denying the significance of the participants' pain, the doctors and nurses denied the participants' subjectivity. During pregnancy, when Tammy's obstetrician told her that her pain was "just the baby growing," he dismissed Tammy's own personal evidence that something else was wrong.

When Anna's doctor told her that her pain signified Braxton-Hicks contractions, which are defined in *Williams Obstetrics* as "palpable but ordinarily painless contractions," he implied that her pain was not significant enough to count as evidence for "real" contractions (Cunningham et al., 2001, p. 26). And finally, when Mandy's nurse told her, "don't be a hero, now what kind of drugs can we give you," she undermined Mandy's explicit statement that she wanted to forgo medication (p. 486). She also suggested that Mandy *could not cope* with her contractions without medication. As Mandy struggled with the question, *can I endure this pain*, the nurse tried to answer it for her—*do not* be a hero. When the doctors and nurses denied the significance of the questions raised by the participants' pain, the participants felt slighted as *human beings*. Illich (1976) says that medical professionals treat pain as a problem to solve by reducing it to "a list of complaints that can be collected in a dossier" (p. 146). Healing, in contrast, calls for compassionate acceptance of the questions raised by suffering. Allowing the ambiguity of such questions to arise without trying to answer them, preserves a person's humanity; conversely, when medical professionals strive to silence these questions by solving them for the childbearing woman, they negate her humanity and what she can teach us about being human.

### *The Primacy of Childbearing: Revelations of Another World*

Heidi said that she believed that when women become pregnant they see the world anew. She explained how the world becomes weightier when a woman decides to bear a child:

I think a lot of pregnant women can watch the news and just start crying. This is as big as life gets—it's like birth and death.... When you're pregnant you look at this life as someone who's about to create another human being who will live in it. (p. 506)



Following from this, Heidi attributed the pronounced crying that some childbearing women experience during pregnancy to this new relationship with the world. While all four women reported crying more often during pregnancy, the other three mostly attributed these tears to hormonal shifts. Heidi, however, believed that hormones “cause the pregnancy to be maintained but I think its bringing a new life into the world period that makes you look at these things this way” (p. 506).

Buytendijk (1943/1962) would agree. He writes that “to weep for anger, joy, wonder, or delight, besides being an act of self-surrender, is also a recognition of the concrete power of the situation” (p. 143). Indeed, when the women interviewed described crying during pregnancy, they said that their tears arose in relation to concrete situations, for example: being bedridden, reflecting on the death of loved one, or feeling overwhelmed by work. Although Mandy, Anna, and Tammy implicitly acknowledged the connection between the events happening in their lives and their urge to weep, they all believed that hormones heightened that connection. Furthermore, they expressed wanting to hide or retreat when they cried. When describing her urge to cry, Mandy explained, “I just want to hide in my bed and pass the time until the feeling goes away. I didn’t want Mike to see me feeling that miserable” (p. 475).

Tammy also wished to hide her tears from her husband. When explaining the “depression” she experienced when her doctor told her that she must refrain from work and sex and remain bed-ridden, she says, “I try to be smiley and happy all the time because it’s not Matt’s fault. He doesn’t want to come home and see me cry everyday” (p. 404). Anna also expressed the urge to hide when she found herself crying as the hormones “kicked in” after giving birth (p. 460).

While Anna and Tammy attributed their own weeping to hormones, they found themselves puzzled when their partners wept. Since they couldn’t attribute their partners’ weeping to hormones, they deduced that their partners’ tears revealed their connection to the situation of becoming a father. Whereas these women described their own crying as weak, they seemed proud when their partners cried. For them, their own tears designated the weakness of succumbing to a hormonal reaction, while their partners’ reflected an intimate relationship to them and to their future children.

### *Tears: The Interpersonal Waters*

The participants’ reflections about their husbands’ tears and their urge to hide their own, left me contemplating the tears I shed while

engaged in this research project. I cried when I read the participants' diaries. I also cried at times during the interviews when they cried. When I tried to hold back the tears, my throat ached. Holding back was painful, and yet like the participants I felt an urge to restrain my tears, or at least to hide them. But why? An answer began to form in an unlikely place, Simms' (2008) description of breastfeeding her daughter:

I made milk, smelled like milk, was sticky with this stuff that was me, but not me, which produced in me the need to give it away. Keeping it myself was painful, impossible...The miracle was that she and my body were one, that she, more than I myself, controlled what my body made in milk. (p. 11)

Just as her daughter's body beckoned her to make milk, the participants' joys and sorrows beckoned me to make tears. The tears were mine and yet not mine. They were mine in that they flowed from my body, but they were also the participants' tears—their joy and sorrow flowing through the ducts of my eyes. Likewise, the milk that flows from the mother's nipples is her child's hunger surfacing through her body.

Just as milk nourishes the infant, tears nourish the other. My tears were an elixir of empathy saying to the participants, *I am with you*. Through these tears, I felt a momentary oneness with the participants. And yet like them, for a moment I wanted to hide my tears as though *caught* in some act. This urge to hide arises from a desire to avoid being caught in a moment that discloses an intimate intertwining, akin to the urge to avoid being caught in an erotic act. Tears, like milk, are a testament to our carnal coitus with others and the world. They are the inter-flesh, the inter-being that arise from a self carnally intertwined with another. Indeed, the other moments we associate with "being caught" are all moments that reveal a sensual symbiosis with the world: urinating and defecating reveal an intertwining with the earth through food and drink; sexual encounters reveal an intertwining with another; and pregnancy reveals an intertwining with the child-to-be. These intimate moments reveal our carnal symbiosis with others and the earth.

No one symbolizes this symbiosis more than the childbearing woman. Her fecund body epitomizes sensuality through her swelling belly, the leaking fluids from her womb, the tears from her eyes, and the milk from her breasts. She is intimately tied and bound to others, the world, and her flesh. Like the earth itself, she *is* the sensual symbiosis of self and other, the carnal thread from which human existence unfurls.

No wonder, then, that the philosopher Maurice Merleau-

Ponty often used pregnancy to describe the ambiguity and the intrinsic complexity of existence (1945/1962; 1964/1968). Pregnancy is his metaphor for the *gestalt*—a configuration in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts. The ambiguity inherent to the “gestalt” arises from the alternating perceptions of the irreducible figure-ground relationship, best exemplified by pregnancy. As an irreducible whole, pregnancy cannot be fully comprehended in terms of the pregnant woman or in terms of the unborn child since they form a whole larger than themselves, a relational whole. When either mother or child is made figural, the whole of pregnancy cannot be understood. Pregnancy, like existence, has multiple meanings and profiles that cannot be reduced to a single disclosure. The philosopher M.C. Dillon (1997) says that when we try to reduce the figure-ground relationship into one or the other, we “arrive only at constructs, things which are literally imperceptible” (p. 60).

The institutional story of childbearing leaves us with just that—a construct of being human that includes the fetus but excludes its mother. The fetus, as celebrated on the cover of magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, has become an *emblem of human consciousness*—a solipsistic being divorced from others, the unknown, and the flesh. Alas, it is not just the childbearing woman who has been deleted from popular depictions of the origins of human existence. All those significant to the childbearing woman — her partner, her parents, her friends and neighbors—are also out of the picture. Thus, no one *other than* the fetus exists. All traces of otherness have been abolished.

Contrary to free-floating homunculi afloat in a vast nothingness, human origins are inevitably mired in others, especially mothers and fathers. In this way, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1950/1966) says that birth casts a shadow upon the notion of freedom:

My birth does not mean only the beginning of my life, but also expresses its dependence with respect to two other lives: I do not posit myself, I have been posited by others. Others have willed this brute existence which I have not willed. (pp. 433-434)

Ricoeur’s passage suggests that attempts to delete the childbearing woman from the origins of life, could be efforts to preserve the cherished image of the unambiguously free human being bound and beholden to no one. Instead of being free from others, Ricoeur indicates that we might owe very our existence to others, especially to our mothers, for better or worse.

The only way people get to earth is through a woman willing to bear a child. She is the way to life, the *only* way as of yet. As such we

could say that she *is* the origin of life. Heidegger (1971) says that “the origin of something is the source of its nature” (p. 17). Following this, we could say that as the source of life’s origins, woman reveals part of its nature or essence. Thus, she does not simply disclose what it means to be pregnant and give birth, but what it means to be human.

### *Toward A New Ontology*

Originally, I envisioned this study as a first step toward developing ontology of woman as distinct from man. As woman’s indisputable difference, childbearing seemed a good place to start elucidating the structure of being a woman. I now envision childbearing as the foundation for a more complete human ontology. What I assumed to be the most unique part of being a woman, in the end, expressed the most essential part of being human—the ambiguity of the sensual symbiosis between self, others, and world. However, this study is just a small step in that direction.

The sociohistorical and poetic approach of this study could be extended to women who choose to give birth at home with midwives “outside” of the medical institution of hospitals and obstetrics. Midwifery proposes a different metaphorical world than obstetrics—one that does not reduce childbearing women to dysfunctional machines, one that sees them as earthly beings possessing a trustworthy corporeal intelligence. Following from this, a study on childbearing women birthing at home with midwives might sharply contrast the results of this study.

In addition, extending the sociohistorical and poetic method of this study to women of different racial, ethnic, and sexual backgrounds as well as ages would also clarify different ways that women’s experiences are similar or different to the institutional metaphors. According to anthropologist Emily Martin (1992), collecting diverse descriptions of women’s reproductive experiences reveals many “visions of life, different for different women and powerfully different than the reality that now holds sway” (p. 203). We need to listen to their diverse stories—both within and beyond the institutional metaphors of childbearing—to allow their joys and sorrows, blood and pain, hopes and fears to teach us what psychologists have forgotten about being pregnant *and* being human.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> I have changed the participants’ names and all identifiable information to preserve their confidentiality. The page numbers that follow the participants’ quotes refer to my dissertation (Giguere, 2004).

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## “This Rifled and Bleeding Womb”: A Reflexive-Relational Phenomenological Case Study of Traumatic Abortion Experience

Linda Finlay and Barbara Payman

*In this case study we have used a relational-centred, existential-phenomenological approach to explore the lived world of a woman – Mia – who has experienced a traumatic abortion. We offer an account of her story, followed by an explication of emergent existential themes: ‘Feeling Torn’, ‘Cutting Shame’ and ‘Monstrous (M)othering’. Trauma associated with abortion is found to be complex, layered and enduring. We present examples of our own reflexive writings and supervision extracts to illustrate how our relational stance within the methodology helped deepen the exploration of Mia’s experience.*

### *Introduction*

Abortion experiences vary widely. For some women, the experience triggers immediate ambivalence and perhaps emotional trauma with associated guilt, anxiety, self-loathing and loss. Later they may become haunted by memories of the event and of the child which did not come into being. For others, abortion offers a pragmatic solution “a life choice – and comes with relief. But given the physical trauma and violence of the act, present and future danger lurks. In the words of feminist phenomenological philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, the one thing a woman can be sure of following an abortion is “this rifled and bleeding womb, these shreds of crimson life, this child that is not there” (1949/1997, p.510). Whatever reaction the woman might have, the resulting pain, and possible sense of violation and grief, has to be managed.

Some factors related to abortion can be described objectively, like the age of the foetus and the nature of the procedure (e.g. chemical or surgical). However, the complex nature of the physical and emotional trauma involved is almost impossible to predict, assess or describe[i]. Commentators are divided about degrees of trauma and the longer-term psychological consequences.

Both pro-life groups and pro-choice groups are united in the belief that abortion is deeply impactful and likely to leave significant emotional scars in the long-term. Both groups can also be found medicalizing the problem, presenting abortion as a mental health issue whose symptoms range from mild grief to “post-abortion syndrome” and/or “post-traumatic stress disorder” [ii] (Lee 2003). They argue that social taboos and accusations of “sin” stifle discussion of the experience and leave women feeling isolated; unable to be helped through recovery. This is what



Burke (2002) calls “Forbidden Grief: the unspoken pain of abortion”.

The sheer variability of women’s attitudes and responses to abortion of course needs to be taken into account in any phenomenological exploration of the experience. Qualitative research reveals a continuum of traumatic experience. At one pole are those women who, in the context of a smooth surgical/chemical procedure and a supportive social world, regard abortion as part of life’s routine stresses and feel equipped to deal with it. At the other polarity are women, particularly those entering into an abortion with mixed feelings or lacking medical, emotional and social support, who emerge with a heightened sense of emotional distress, pain, loss and suffering. The experience may elicit intense, ambivalent responses featuring complex physical, emotional and social elements (Hess, 2006; Trybulski, 2008; Walters, 2002). Such responses may endure, or even intensify, over the long term.

For de Beauvoir (1949/1997), the experience is inherently layered and ambivalent. Abortion is both a “mutilation” whereby a woman is forced to destroy part of herself and sacrifice her femininity, and also “one of the risks normally applied in woman’s situation” (p.502). Explicating longer term trauma, de Beauvoir argues the woman’s world following abortion is forever changed. She highlights how the woman feels the “contradictions in her wounded flesh”, even as she actively chooses to proceed. “Her whole moral universe is being disrupted” (p.508) given she has been told from infancy that she is made for childrearing: “Through all the risks she takes, the woman feels herself to be blameworthy, and this interpretation of anguish and transgression is peculiarly painful” (pp.507-8).

Rather than regard the abortion experience as a single phenomenon, we are interested in its multi-dimensional quality. We (the authors - Linda and Barbara) are curious about the complexity within different kinds of experiences and - given our interests as psychotherapists - especially those that are particularly traumatic and damaging for the individuals concerned.

This single case-study is a part of a wider investigation where we have interviewed several individuals who have found the experience to be especially traumatic and as having problematic long-term impact (even if they do not necessarily regret having the abortion). Our project is one of seeking to learn through first-hand accounts about the complexity of trauma associated with some women’s experience of abortion rather than any moral positioning. We suggest that this increased understanding may in turn deepen compassion for those who have had abortions regardless of the politics at stake.

We have used a relational-centred, existential phenomenological approach (Finlay & Evans, 2009; Finlay, 2011) to explore the lived world of one woman – Mia 1. In this article we provide an account



of Mia's story drawing on her own words from an interview, followed by an explication of emergent existential themes. While we were both involved in discussion and reflexive writing, Barbara, the second author, took on the role of interviewer while Linda, the first author, acted as the supervisor and took the lead role in analysing and writing up this article.

In offering this article for this special issue showcasing feminist phenomenology, we seek to contribute to the nascent literature of the field in two ways: empirical and methodological. Empirically we have chosen to research the topic of abortion which is explicitly feminist in its concern given its focus on a woman's body and the issue of reproduction. We argue that a woman's experience of the medical/surgical intervention cannot be understood unless we take into account the wider relational and social context in which she experiences it. Methodologically, we engage a somewhat unusual and innovative relational-centred phenomenological method which exemplifies a feminist approach given its explicit relational and reflexive concerns.

Following a discussion of our chosen methodology, a constructed narrative summary of Mia's voice and experience is presented. Then, Mia's experience is explicated through a thematic existential phenomenological analysis. Finally, a reflexive account of the research relationship and the going "between" process is offered to honour the principles of relational-centred research and to provide a more transparent accounting of the methodology and how we came to our interpretive descriptions. We hope that in counterpoint to the neatly constructed narrative and thematic analyses, the reflexive account reveals some of the messiness and emergent, unpredictable nature of the research process.

## *Methodology*

### *Design*

In this case study, we have used a relational-centred, existential phenomenological methodology (Finlay & Evans, 2009; Finlay, 2009; Finlay, 2011) to explicate two phenomena: a traumatic abortion experience and a reflexive research process. While the explicit focus is on describing Mia's experience, the story of how we collaborated as reflexive researchers, and used our own experience to possibly throw light on Mia's, offers another exploratory lens.

In our **phenomenological** exploration of existential meanings, we attempted a layered, rich description. As Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968,

p.157) advises: Phenomenological description “must stick close to experience, and yet not limit itself to the empirical but restore to each experience the ontological cipher which marks it internally”. We sought to capture something of the phenomenon of Mia’s traumatic experience and the research process as concretely lived, in an embodied, experiential, relational way. Here we follow Todres’ (2007) recommendation to balance “texture” (poetic interpretation) with “structure” (rigorous scientific description), moving between analytic closeness and distance:

In exercising “closeness” I attempted to enter my informants’ experiences and bring the “heart” of these textures to language. In exercising “distance” I entered a more academic moment and attempted to tease out some of the meanings in a more thematic way. (2007, p.58)

Engaging a **relational-centred approach** involved us in practicing a **hermeneutic** variant of phenomenology where meanings are seen to emerge in a co-created, dynamic context. The approach parallels the process of relationally-orientated psychotherapy where any interpretive understandings are seen to be born within the intersubjective *between* of the embodied dialogical encounter. The “between” in this work arises within the thickly populated encounters<sup>2</sup> between both participant-researcher and researcher-supervisor. The process involves a way of being *with* rather than doing *to* where the relationship is “continually established and re-established through ongoing mutual influence in which both [persons]... systematically affect, and are affected by, each other” (Mitchell & Aron, 1999, p.248).

Finlay (2011) describes the researcher’s (and supervisor’s) approach as one of openness to what is emerging in the now of the encounter – a process which has the potential to be transformational for all involved. When we go unknowing into the *between*, results are usually unexpected:

We pay close attention to the other with curiosity, empathy and compassion. When we intertwine with another in an encounter, we may well find ourselves surprised and touched by the connection we make and the transferences/counter-transferences we experience... The depth of personal introspection and the dialogical journey involved usually lays the ground...for research that has deep personal significance and this helps to ensure its

evocative resonance and relevance. (Finlay, 2011, pp.166, 174)

This version of relational-centred methodology (Finlay & Evans, 2009) draws on a range of theoretical concepts straddling different traditions: Its core is our use of collaborative, creative feminist methodology which celebrates a focus on emotional and relational dimensions and reflexivity as a source of insight (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1983). We also centrally engage the phenomenological concept of embodied intersubjective intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and Buber's (1923/2004) notion of the significance of the 'I-Thou' relationship. In addition, ideas from the psychotherapy field are embraced including gestalt theory (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995), intersubjectivity theory (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992) and relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell & Aron, 1999).

Our **reflexive** (i.e. self-aware) focus forms part of the phenomenological attitude adopted where researchers aim to engage a paradoxical dance between the reduction and reflexivity (Finlay, 2008). Our use of reflexivity also highlights our understanding that researcher and/or supervisor (inter)subjectivity is inextricably intertwined with any interpretations made (Churchill, 2007). Relational dynamics between participant and researcher (and researcher and supervisor) are taken seriously and are used as a way of deepening understandings (Finlay and Gough, 2003). In our research, we have aimed to reflect reflexively upon:

Our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomenon being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes (Finlay 2003, p.108).

### *Data Collection*

Mia, a psychotherapy colleague, was one of several volunteers who offered to share her story of having a (self-defined) "traumatic abortion". At the time of interview she was getting support in her own (on-going) psychotherapy where she was exploring the impact of various traumas on her life. She viewed this research as an opportunity to further explore, and work through, this particular traumatic episode in her life. With our ethical concerns foregrounded, Mia was prepared for

the possibility that the interview could well be emotionally intense and that it had the potential to re-traumatize her. She trusted Barbara (the interviewer) to handle her material sensitively and to be supportive while taking care not to transgress boundaries between research and therapy.

Gathering data involved employing an unstructured, relational-centred interview plus the writing of extensive reflexive notes following both interview and supervision sessions. In the interview (which was taped for subsequent transcription), Mia was invited to “tell her story”. Barbara adopted an attitude of openness and empathy where she attempted to feel, intuit, attune to and share in Mia’s experience while holding onto her own presence to ensure a safe, bounded space for Mia. At the end of the interview, Mia was invited to write/e-mail us within a week if she felt she wanted to add anything to her story. (As it transpired, the interview triggered some buried memories about the steps she had taken pre-surgery, with her mother’s support, to attempt to expel her baby more naturally).

Over the next few weeks following the interview, Barbara wrote extensive reflexive notes. Although an experienced psychotherapist, she was new to phenomenological research and sought to engage formal supervision and mentoring with Linda. Together we reflected upon the experience of the embodied intersubjective relationship between Mia and Barbara, and between ourselves. Particular attention was paid to the possibility of “*parallel processes*”<sup>3</sup> being re-created in both the interview and in subsequent supervision. We took seriously our belief that both depth-oriented psychotherapy and phenomenological research practice is “more matter of being than doing, ... of presence than technique” (Craig, 2012, p.11).

### *Data Analysis*

As we processed Mia’s story, it was immediately apparent that the abortion “trauma” could be seen as several traumas. Would multiple traumas be an essential structure of for our larger study on traumatic abortion experience we wondered? We set aside this thought and followed our intuition, simply going with whatever seemed figural to process at any particular time. At times this meant we had to focus on our own collaborative relationship and (inter-)personal process as researchers, while Mia’s experience temporarily receded.

We allowed ourselves to flow with whatever felt right at the time. Initially we concentrated on writing our separate reflexive accounts and dialoguing as a way of sensitising ourselves to emergent themes and issues (see penultimate section titled “‘Going *Between*’ and Reflexive Processing”). We then co-created a narrative of Mia’s lived experience, drawing extensively on Mia’s words and her way of organising her experience as a temporal sequence. From there, we separately took time to dwell with the transcript and other diary/email communications.

When we stop and linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes...amplified. What to the subject was a little thing becomes a big deal to the researcher, who hereby transcends the mundanity of the subject’s situation. (Wertz, 1985, p.174)

In this “*empathic dwelling*” (Churchill et al, 1998), we aimed to stay with, and listen to, Mia’s descriptions, all the time attempting to become ever more open to what was being communicated implicitly as well as explicitly. Churchill and colleagues (1998, p.65) describe the process in terms of being fascinated or spellbound: “In being spellbound by the others’ self-presentation, one becomes attentive to various imaginable (as well as self-evident) meanings of that presentation.”

Alongside this empathic lingering, we returned to our own notes and engaged in “*reflexive, embodied empathy*” (Finlay, 2005). Here, we used our bodily experience as a way of empathetically tuning into Mia’s. In intuitively cueing into her experience, we made a point of opening ourselves to being touched and moved. For example, when reading her story we would have a visceral reaction to particular passages. That would be a signal to slow down and attend to implicit meanings which we might otherwise have missed. At this stage of the research we also engaged in an iterative and dialectical process of hermeneutic reflection (Finlay, 2003) to try to tease out reflexively which perceptions belong to researcher and which to co-researcher. For instance, in the following reflection, Barbara describes her response to one particularly poignant phrase of Mia’s, which she found herself drawn into and captured by:

Barbara writes: [I am wondering whether I want to start writing ‘as her’ ( Mia)???) I ask myself/Mia softly: “I wonder what the words mean to you?” I ‘hear’... “My body is trying to comfort

itself (after its horrific ordeal), I like to ‘curl up’ sometimes, from the time I was a little girl. It is sort of comforting when I need it, sort of tucked away, maybe a bit like giving myself a hug.” [At this point as researcher I am aware that my own story of sad, lonely nights as a child is being evoked. It is hard to know in this moment whose story I am writing. I am wondering how to proceed: first person/third person? Looking back on the scene/in the scene? What the ‘rules’ are as researcher? And then I remember that there aren’t any - just the question ‘What was/is it like to be Mia?’....] Some words are coming to me: “I just want to be looked after”. Are they Mia’s or mine from when I was little? I feel (my/Mia’s?) resistance to the words and in response (to them) I ‘hear’: “I can do it on my own. I am fine on my own. I don’t need anyone. I never have.” Perhaps this sense of this ‘impasse’ is relevant to the exploration of Mia’s experience? I need to let go of all this for now. I sense I am caught by something. I need to put it down without feeling I am abandoning it, not repeating the ‘abandonment’.

(Barbara reflexive notes)

The analysis was finally progressed by thematizing existential meanings. We were aware of the many emotions and themes which presented themselves quite quickly: guilt, shame, aloneness, horror, existential anxiety, abandonment... But these words, in themselves, somehow lacked the depth and trauma implicit in Mia’s account. We delved deeper and, following van Manen (1990) and Todres (2007), allowed the writing process to take us into a more unknowing place to find the *existential darkness* within.

Overall, the analytic process remained fluid and ever-evolving with its imaginative leaps of intuition as well as systematic working through iterative versions over time. We have chosen to present one of these iterations here juxtaposing Mia’s story, our reflexive processing and the emergent existential themes.

### *Mia’s story*

The following is a re-worked, constructed account which summarises Mia’s story as she told it in the interview with Barbara. The actual story she told was less packaged but we’ve tried to honour her “voice” in using the first-person form and in the choice of words and various quotations used:

I was fifteen when I had my first “proper” boyfriend and became pregnant. I was young and I had a chaotic family so it was not surprising I was “a bit chaotic in many ways”. It’s also not surprising birth control was “hit and miss”. I had little idea of when my period was due but I couldn’t help but notice my sore breasts. I decided I must be pregnant. I remember telling my mother. We were in the living room. Her response was immediate: “Oh, oh dear, well, ah, we’ll get the abortion arranged tomorrow”. I was lucky that my elder sister was also there, on a brief flying visit. She could “step in”, do the “mummy thing”. It helped the situation feel safer. It was my sister who asked what I wanted to do. I was absolutely clear: I wanted an abortion. And so it was arranged.

Prior to the surgery my mother got me to “drink lots of gin while having a warm bath”. She also took me to a gym to have hot saunas and to be pummelled by hot jet massages. The attention from my mother was kinda nice in a weird way but also the whole experience was embarrassing.

I was quite “cut off” before the operation. But once in hospital I “started to feel the shame”. In fact the whole time there was extremely “embarrassing”. I found it “excruciating” that both my parents came to visit me in the hospital. It was bad enough my mother came by, but it was horrible to know she had told my father. And it was weird that he had been brought to the hospital as we weren’t really “on speaking terms”.

It started to feel pretty humiliating as I lay in the bed being prepared for surgery. I remember being shaved by a nurse. I felt I was being judged as “immoral” by the doctor and nurses (many came from different cultural backgrounds to mine and I could only guess at what they thought). I remember the abortion as involving the anaesthetic and being “quite sore” after the “scraping”, but I recall little of the operation itself.

In the days following, I was relieved that I had had the abortion and that I was “back to normal”. My boyfriend and I went to a party. While dancing, I suddenly started bleeding really heavily. “Oh God it’s a really heavy period”, my first thought. But I found I needed more and more sanitary towels. The next thing

I remember was standing in the bath with blood “pouring out” – it was gushing. Various women – more strangers than friends - were “clucking round” me. Somebody said “this is a miscarriage” but, having just had the abortion, I knew I couldn’t be pregnant. So I was “absolutely sure” it wasn’t a miscarriage:

“I didn’t know what was going on... Possibly somewhere there I was thinking, maybe I deserve this...I kinda vaguely linked it to the abortion but I had no sense that it was a miscarriage.”

A taxi was called and I travelled back home with my boyfriend, all the time lying upside down, “trying to keep the blood in”, concerned about getting “blood in the taxi”. After getting me home to bed, my boyfriend left. I found myself on my own: I was scared, in pain, and still haemorrhaging:

“By this time, I was cramping and it had started to hurt and I was bleeding madly, I had a towel, which I was kinda stuffing there to try to soak up the blood.”

By three o’clock in the morning, I had decided, “it was the abortion. Maybe some damage has been done, and I’m internally bleeding”. By now I’m starting to panic a bit. I wondered if I should call my mother: “I really need to tell my mother...just in case I die”, I thought. At the same time, I knew my mother would be really drunk and that she wouldn’t “be much help”. After tussling with myself, I took the decision to wake her. As anticipated, it was difficult. I remember “being the adult” and insisting that she came. She “kinda got herself together”, and gave me a hefty dose of gin (her “solution for everything”). But things were to get more “horrific”. I can’t quite remember the sequence. I remember I had what I now know are “labour pains”. “I went to the loo and had this haemorrhage, massive haemorrhage, in the loo”. Now I was really scared. “I didn’t flush the loo, so I left the blood clot...That is when I called my mother [into the bathroom] as I was pretty frightened”. My mother responded, “You have had a miscarriage... I guess the



doctor didn't get it all out and um that's hard and obviously it couldn't survive and that's it". To hear this stark assessment really shook me, "I must have been pretty freaked out by that... that somehow I had been responsible for the 'reality' of the baby, which I had I suppose, mutilated...and then it's sitting in the loo."

It was something of a living nightmare. From "having all the blood coming out", and being in severe pain combined with the fear that I "may die any minute", with the "biggish bloody mess" in the toilet, and my mother's analysis of it, I was faced with "suddenly realising the horror of what I had done". (Years later I would wonder if those "cells in my womb" were actually a baby. Had it been "hurt" by the "scraping" of the abortion? Did it "feel pain"? Had it then been "growing in a deformed way"? Was it "alive"?).

My mother and I conferred. We agreed the bloody mass in the toilet had to go to the doctor for testing. My mother suggested I "put it in some container or something". So I "had to go and pick it up in a glass". (Looking back from my perspective now I can see she should have helped me here and not leave me to do this but "of course what I understand now is that I had no sense that she should be caring for me").

We eventually "decided I was going to live and would be alright and that the gin would reduce the pain". At that my mother left to go back to sleep. I found myself alone again. "I curled up and went to sleep - with my little glass with the blood in it in the bathroom".

It's that image that "is in my head", that haunts me. "That is the horror". It was the fact that I "might die any minute" and also "suddenly realising the horror of what I had done...Well I think I feel some guilt, you know it was clearly a baby that I was party to killing. And then it may have started out as cells in my womb that was scraped, but the baby hung on in there or it was the cells that remained. There is something horrific about that... I'm aware that I have some guilt and horror and sadness for hurting the baby....thinking about this baby that is growing in a deformed way, by something I had done or been party to...I can feel the horror and...attached ...is some sadness... I don't feel in

touch with grief though; I guess there must be some there.”  
 I don’t remember exactly what happened the next morning but  
 the “glass” was sent to the doctors, and my mother confirmed  
 some time later that the doctor agreed that “the operation hadn’t  
 gone right”.  
 “That was the end of that. I’m fine.”

### *Existential Analysis*

Re-reading passages from the transcript showed us the multiple layers of trauma involved in Mia’s abortion experience. While the abortion itself was traumatic at a physical and emotional level, the more significant trauma seems to be the aftermath where she feared she was dying as she miscarried *giving birth to* violent haemorrhage, pain, horror, guilt, grief and shame. Here we find evidence of complex existential, physical, psychological, and emotional trauma. Mia also experienced her (alcoholic) mother’s repeated abandonment and neglect for her safety and needs – something which was part of a deeply significant, broader, relational trauma.

Three themes are offered below to further explicate some existential dimensions of Mia’s traumatic abortion experience: ‘Feeling Torn’, ‘Cutting Shame’ and ‘Monstrous (M)othering’. Intertwined within the thematic analysis are philosophical and theoretical insights to highlight the dialectical ambiguity of her experience as something in process and part of Mia’s *being*.

#### *Theme 1: ‘Feeling Torn’*

The physical tearing of cells from the womb which occurred in both Mia’s abortion and subsequent miscarriage offers one understanding of being torn. But there is also the feeling of being torn *ontologically* as well as *cognitively and emotionally*.

Parker (1995) offers this powerful metaphor of being torn in her psychoanalytic explication of maternal ambivalence. Lundquist (2008) takes up the metaphor in her explication of the experience of “rejected pregnancy”. Following de Beauvoir, she notes that the pregnant woman is not an active agent. Instead she finds herself “seized by an alien teleology” (2008, p.142), undergoing a “radical internal division between the flesh which engenders flesh” (2008, p.143). The reluctantly pregnant woman, says de Beauvoir, is “divided against herself” (1949/1984, p.508).

For Mia, the foetus growing inside of her is a problem: a hostile intruder that needs to be evicted, an invasive growth to be surgically excised, a burden to be rejected. She has not made the baby; it has made itself in her. It – the foetus – is a ‘thing’ to be expelled. She is a vessel for some-*thing* “radically other” (Lundquist, 2008, p.142). She has been possessed and invaded without her consent and it needs to be got rid of. This thing is a source and symbol of her failure and it stands in opposition to her, threatening to unravel her life as she knows it. She wants simply to refuse to host it.

The splitting of the body subjectivity discussed by Young (2005) in her explication of being pregnant is subverted. This is no romantic co-existential differentiation of two subjects, a chiasm of mother and child where flesh <sup>4</sup> entwines lovingly with flesh. Instead there is subject and object; a “menacing object, some less than human, perhaps monstrous creature” (Lundquist, 2008, p.141).

As the foetus is object, so too is Mia’s body, transformed from lived body to object body (Toombs, 1993). She becomes aware that her body is changed somehow: her breasts are tender, a period is missed. Her body becomes something to fix, split-off from any emotional-social needs. Her body becomes the site of conflict between an embryo and herself, between herself and the surgeons. But this fight manifests as one against her Self as she strives to expel the growth inside with pounding hot jet baths, punishing saunas and an aggressive use of gin. With each assault she splits her body from herself. On eventually opening herself and submitting to the violence of the abortion itself, her body is examined, probed and ultimately invaded surgically. The scraping tears tissue away from her womb, ripping flesh from flesh. The body is reduced further, till it is just a site for medical and technological intervention. She ceases to be human, becoming just a body to be used and manipulated by others. As Mazis (2001) argues, medical practice objectifies and alienates:

The medical objectification of the body with the biotechnological focus of practice exacerbates the same sort of de-contextualizing of the body, the same sort of alienation from the world of the body. (p.206)

Somewhere Mia understands that her body is also the site of conflict between her Self and a society which would not easily accept a fifteen year old mother birthing an illegitimate child.

“I remember being really clear... I knew that is what people did if they got pregnant. And I was fifteen. I KNEW I didn’t want a baby. I wanted to finish school. No WAY did I want a baby, no way! So I was very clear and there wasn’t any decision-making angst about it.”

But beneath the certainty of her decision to have an abortion and her clarity about having “no regrets,” Mia has some ambivalence – *she remains cognitively and emotionally torn*. For Mia, the cells growing within are not a baby. The cells of the foetus are merely objects destined to be surgically removed. She determinedly cannot let herself conceive those cells are an actual life growing inside her. She declares “It’s easier if it’s ‘cells’ and it’s harder if it’s a ‘baby’”; “One is traumatic and the other is practical”. It’s easier for Mia if the growth inside is kept as an object, not seen as a subject - a consciousness, a being in its own right entwined with her being. Her maternal ambivalence is animated by the cells versus baby question even as she insists that she has “no regrets”:

“Up until that point there hadn’t been, there just wasn’t a baby, I was making sure there wasn’t a baby! I was doing the right thing! I had no regrets at all about it, no regrets about the abortion.”

Mostly she keeps her guilt at bay by distancing herself, thinking only about the practical course of terminating a pregnancy. Her felt sense of trauma kicks in only when with shock she suddenly sees what the blood clot in the toilet represents and is faced with the unbearable horror, grief and shame of her deeds.

Towards the end of the interview, Mia went on to describe how she had been recently working through her trauma in therapy, revealing that she has now actually named her baby. It seems that coming to think about her “son” has been transformational, and partially healed the tear in the fabric of her existence.

“When I did the work with [therapist], one of the things that came out that I did ... find soothing, was he asked me ... if I had ever thought of any names...I remember being quite shocked... cause it took it to baby level and it was the first time that I had really faced that.... But actually it was quite nice as well...Since then, I’ve thought about [name]... in a more loving way... Somehow it’s helped some of the trauma.”

*Theme 2: Cutting Shame*<sup>5</sup>

Tomkins described shame as a “sickness of the soul”: Shame is the affect of indignity, of transgression and of alienation.... Shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul.... The humiliated one ... feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth. (Tomkins, 1963, p.118)

Some forty years after her abortion, Mia still remembers the “excruciating embarrassment” and the “public humiliation” of her abortion experience and she is infused with an all-encompassing cutting shame. As the nurse wields the razor to shave her pubic hair she feels naked and exposed. When the nurse refuses to allow Mia to shave herself, Mia feels chastised. The probing, dissecting invasion of the surgical procedure further objectifies and amplifies her shame. Even the gynaecologist probably despises her, Mia thinks, as she grapples with holding her own self-loathing at bay:

“I’m wondering just how much [the doctor] despised her patients. There is a sense of that. And whether this is my projection and it’s my own self-despising... There was a sense in me ... that from [the doctor’s].... eyes I was pretty immoral.”

She cringes when she remembers her parents visiting her unexpectedly at the hospital— it is mortifying to her that her father had been told of her intimate transgression. Mia remains all too aware that others too were told in the process of her mother trying to expunge her own shame and distress.

“My mother told my father which I found excruciatingly embarrassing. And they actually both visited me in the hospital which I found excruciating as well and I guess full of shame about it. So that was a bit traumatic [slight tense laugh]. Um, because my father, well we weren’t really on speaking terms really, he was just kinda there. How embarrassing is that? And he was very uncomfortable about the whole thing and my

mother was quite uncomfortable but of course she had her booze with her... she was fussing around... I was pretty cut off really, but then, in the hospital, I started to feel the shame, I started to feel [people's]... judgement ... it didn't feel right."

After the abortion, Mia seeks to leave the experience behind her. She doesn't want to think about it, remember it, or talk about it with anyone. It remains her guilty secret while she pretends to the world – and herself - she is okay.

"I don't remember a lot ... I have never really spoken about it since... I think I probably did the '*I'm fine*' thing and that was kinda the end of it."

She must hide and protect herself from the shaming look of others. As Sartre (1943/1969) argued, when we become aware that someone else is looking at us, we become aware of ourselves as objects. With this profoundly objectifying look cast by the 'other', we are denied existence as a subject and feel alienated. Drawn to take on their perceptions, we emigrate into that other's world – a world which is at once both seductive and alien. Feeling objectified we feel judged and uncomfortable. We want to escape, hide, become invisible.

Naked and exposed to the world, Mia clothes herself with an inauthentic veneer and plays her role of "I'm fine". She defends and protects herself through secrecy (not telling others about her experience) and denial (in the years before her therapy thinking of "cells" rather than "baby"). She doesn't want to be reminded of her bad-ness just as she doesn't want others to see it. In hiding her truth and flawed self from both herself and others, she dissociates, disconnecting body and spirit. The deep-felt cut of shame divides her. Cutting off – pretending all is well - becomes a way to cope. With such a mask, she cuts-off from the world and finds a way to flee her experience and herself. In doing so, she effectively abandons her traumatised fifteen year old self as others have done. She also flees from others who could be a source of solace. Yet in hiding herself she gains some relief from the shame and some protection from her traumatic experience. She is simply attempting to keep herself safe from more harm.

When shame is toxic, it is an excruciatingly internal experience of unexpected exposure. It is a deep cut felt primarily from the inside. It divides us from ourselves and from others. (Bradshaw, 1988, p.5)

Shame lurks. It lurks in every corner of her being and shows itself in the way Mia does not feel worthy of, or entitled to, love and care throughout her abortion experience. Somehow she has internalized others' presumed negative judgments of her and lives a sense of being 'not okay'. This feeling is so pervasive that she does not recognise or protest the absence of loving care and attention to her health and safety. Personal disgrace affirmed, public disregard for her welfare is accepted. It is only when Barbara, the researcher, offers a different perspective, one of compassion and sadness for this fifteen year old who no one was caring for, that Mia begins to recognise her taken for granted assumptions.

Barbara: I can give you a bit of [pause] feedback about feeling - if you want at this stage (?)...

Mia: Yeah I think I would, yeah.

Barbara: I think the part of your story that is shouting so loud, at this particular moment to me, is your mother's absence and that at fifteen you had no sense of being supported by her and you didn't really know what it was to ask for help. So I'm feeling immensely sad around that.

Mia: Well I don't have any sadness. I have a [pause], I suppose, it's such an acceptance of it.

Barbara: ...the way you tell the story of going to get your mum and the decision-making process that went into that and the reasons for that, and you know it's all in that, you just had no expectation of support and help from her, and indeed you didn't get it. Yes she went to get some gin but the endless times she abandoned you, and the time she was with you she -

Mia: [interrupts] I've not thought [of it] like that before.

Barbara: She physically abandoned you when she went back to sleep [ironic outtake of breath, a little tearful]. I'm a mother, there is no way on earth I'd have left a daughter like that.

Imbued with a sense of her own inherent badness, Mia is cut off from her own needs and expecting little from others. Thus for Mia, the *world-as-experienced-through-shame*, is a place where loving care is inconceivable and where exposure involves hurt and abandonment.

Mia's *existential feeling* (Radcliffe, 2008) of shame sets up and gives

meaning to the world in which she lives. It's a background orientation where self and world are experientially related, woven into our bodily being and experience of the world. As Heidegger notes, this *attunement* is a space of possibility within which we act (pre-conceptually/pre-intentionally) and it is an atmosphere which surrounds us: "A mood assails us. It comes neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside', but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being... A state-of-mind is a basic existential way in which *Dasein* is its 'there'" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp.176, 178). Shame constitutes an enduring, pervasive mood which is taken for granted: Mia's world is bad and tells her she is bad, so she must be bad. Her badness is revealed in the world. Living her shame, the world that addresses her is shaming.

But in the process of confirming her unworthiness, Mia also finds a way of coping. Here the coping involves cutting off from the depth of her pain and trying to forget. As she talks about her traumatic abortion experience during the interview, she is cut-off from much feeling and keeps it at a more distanced head (thinking) level. We also see her *retroflexion*<sup>6</sup>. When prompted by Barbara to tune into the discomfort in her body, Mia connects with underlying emotion, namely, anger towards her mother and the doctor and medical system.

Mia: I was young and it was traumatic and scary. And I've got a headache.

Barbara: Do you have any sense of emotion attached to the headache?

Mia: [pause] I am, I am tense at the moment. Tight tense. And it has some energy behind it. It's not...like a depression despair thing. There is more energy. I guess I am in touch with [pause] the anger both at my mother for not caring, and... for not knowing how to care, not getting near there.... And also anger at the doctor and the system for not caring and not doing it properly... The doctor is tinged with bits of shame and public humiliation at the hospital thing, but I can live with that kind of thing. I think the energy more is with my mother... I think I'm more angry with her for telling my father and telling her friends and everyone. I'm angry with my mother for turning it into *her* problem.

For Mia, 'Cutting shame' manifests as her dissociation from her emotions,



her body, her experience and her Self. To hear her connecting with anger – towards both the system and her mother – is perhaps particularly poignant as shame has been attributed to “the disavowal and retroflection of anger”. The retroflection of the anger may occur, to “maintain a semblance of a connected relationship with the person who engaged in humiliating transactions” (Erskine, 1995). Mia’s recognition of both her anger at her mother and hunger for her mother’s attention is implicated in her shame.

### *Theme 3: Monstrous (M)othering?*

Shildrick (2002) offers a post-structural explication of “monstrous (m)others” including mothers, women of colour, homosexuals, the disabled – anyone who occupies an oppositional relationship to the “normal”. She problematizes bodily boundaries and identity, showing how the human self is vulnerable to the “monsters” surrounding us and that live inside. Discussing the maternal imagination, she touches on the themes of malformed babies and the monstrosity of mother as involving the symbiotic or parasitic relationship between mother and foetus. Along with other feminist scholars who engage the social construction of reproduction and motherhood, she challenges understandings which separate mothers and fetuses from their social context.

While we do not wish to follow this post-structuralist route, the concept of monstrous (m)others offers us an opportunity to explicate phenomenologically something of the ambiguous relational boundaries and paradoxical symbolic meanings potentially inherent in Mia’s experience. We suggest that at some level Mia believes she has been a ‘monstrous mother’; one who has birthed a ‘monstrous other’. Yet, refracted in this subjectivity we find ghosted images of her own ‘monstrous mother’ and her own ‘monstrous self’ both as foetus and as a young woman who has chosen to have an abortion.

When Mia is confronted by the truth that her haemorrhage constituted a miscarriage replete with labour pains, she feels the force of her horror, connecting with the reality that she had tried to abort a baby. This is a knowledge she has worked to keep at bay over 40 years. Tortured by a vision of the blood clot that was a part-birth of mangled cells, she connects with her guilt about the “baby/blood”: “I worry that ‘it’ did feel pain or that it was alive”.

She is confronted by her corporeal excess and deficiency, the monstrosity of her deviant, violent motherhood. Not only has

she has birthed a monstrous Other, she has engaged this monstrous act of killing her child. What kind of monstrous mother is she? The sheer horror of her experience is amplified as she forces herself to scoop the malformed, bloody mass into a glass (test-tube?), holding disgust and aversion at bay as best she can. “I remember being a bit freaked out when I was putting the blood clot in a glass”, she says.

“What is in my head is the blot clot in the bathroom, toilet. Um and I think for me THAT is the horror, that is the image ...but also that suddenly realising the horror of what I had done, um and the full implications really, which I hadn’t understood...It clearly was a baby that I was party to killing. And then it may have started out as ‘cells’ in my womb that was scraped, but the baby hung on in there or it was the cells that remained. That is, there is something horrific about that... which I feel some guilt about. It’s as much about thinking about this baby that is growing in a deformed way, by something I had done, or been party to.”

The biggest horror for Mia is thinking about the foetus who *determinedly hung on* despite all efforts – surgical and otherwise – to remove it, to kill it. She has questions about how/why this could have happened. For Mia the thought of causing that damage and pain to a living creature is intolerable and horrific; a crime too shaming to bear. Too scared to seek expert reassurance from professionals in case it is not forthcoming, she has to remind herself that cells can grow and blood can clot – the clot is *not* to be thought of as a baby which she mutilated and then part-birthed.

This proliferation of cells becomes adventitious and troublesome; it is one more feminine defect...Even when she consents to abortion, even desires it, woman feels it as a sacrifice of her femininity: she is compelled to see in her sex a curse, a kind of infirmity, and a danger...Woman feels these contractions in her wounded flesh...she regards herself as the victim of an injustice that makes her a criminal against her will, and at the same time she feels soiled and humiliated. (de Beauvoir, 1949/1984, p.509)

Yet as Mia connects with her grief, guilt and trauma, she connects to her

own experiences of being mothered. In the following passage she explains how she, too, was once a traumatized foetus given her alcoholic mother who exposed her to excessive alcohol in utero (and then “abandoned” her as a matter of routine throughout her childhood). During the interview, she described understanding that her bodily habit of pulling her neck back may be linked to a primitive foetal reflex reaction to a toxic environment.

“Barbara: I was just about to ask you just to check where you were, with your story and your feelings that are around right now.

Mia: I’ve got a tight pain here [pointing to right side of neck]... I went to that osteopath...she was working on me she was noting that I had this moving away from [reflex]... She felt I was a foetus. And I suppose there is something there [about] foetuses, mothers and doing damage? There is some symbolism there.

Barbara: So you’re connecting?

Mia: So I’m a foetus too.

Barbara: Yeah your mum did some damage to you [pause]. Do you feel any emotion attached to that? It’s quite a big thing to say.

Mia: Is it? I suppose I’ve spent so many years...expressing rage to my mother... I’ve spent so many years, there’s a list a hundred items long where she abandoned me, didn’t care, or wasn’t there...I could go on endlessly...I have raged over the years. But I don’t feel any rage. Since she died I’ve been able to feel that compassion. I don’t feel that rage. I see her as very damaged... I have some sadness, sympathy, empathy for that 15 year old and for me as a baby...foetus.”

Thus Mia integrates layers of damage, betrayal and abandonment which have replayed themselves through at least two generations. She *betrayed* her baby and she *abandoned* herself (psychically in her dissociation), just as her mother *betrayed* and *abandoned* her. Barbara writes reflexively of Mia’s miscarriage experience:

“And I curled up and went to sleep with my little glass with the blood in it in the bathroom”. I feel myself reacting to Mia’s words- it is almost as if I have to remind myself to breathe-

somehow her words ‘take my breath away’...

I think perhaps it is as if I am being transported into the scene. My empathy for Mia is evoked in such a way that it is almost as if I am somehow ‘identifying’ with her. I have the sense that so much of her (life) story could be found within those few words...

The girl (Mia) had to be ‘so big’-had to ‘look after herself’, no matter how difficult things were emotionally. Somehow ‘my little glass’ seems to symbolise so much; to carry so much of ‘the story’. No matter how bad things got (like ‘giving birth’ to ‘her baby’ in the toilet), she still had to get it together herself to look after herself (fish ‘the baby’ out of the toilet into a glass). And somehow maybe Mia metaphorically captures the ‘distance’ of mother from child (i.e. the absence of an ‘empathic other’) in the picture of ‘her baby’ being ‘in a glass’ ‘in the bathroom’ as she sleeps in the bedroom whilst similarly her own mother has returned to her room to sleep leaving Mia alone.” (Barbara’s reflection, August, 2011)

In acknowledging her grief and some compassion for both her Self *and* for her mother, Mia finds a softened horizon of forgiveness and healing. She recognises her mother and her share a “wounded fallibility” (Milburn, 1992, cited in Halling, 2008). Mia understands her mother tried her best and that her mother had shown her version of love and care in producing the gin and in their gym activities.

Forgiveness is a movement of compassion...The other whom one forgives...is someone like oneself...compassion involves a paradoxical movement of letting go of one’s preconception of the other, connecting with the other as similar to oneself and yet being aware of the other’s separateness. (Halling, 2008, pp.90-91)

### *‘Going Between’ and Reflexive Processing*

To avoid unduly sanitizing the messiness of our analytic process we offer an account below of our reflexive processing and how we came to our interpretive descriptions. We hope to show something

of the evolution of our understanding through the following sequence of excerpts from our diaries where we explore both Mia's experience and our own process as researchers. We offer these reflections here in an attempt to highlight significant relational features of our methodology and to show the ambiguous edge of the essentially human stories underlying Mia's experience and our own struggle as researchers.

*Barbara reflects post-interview...*

"I felt highly *protective and supportive* of Mia as she told her story. She evoked my deep compassion, and I can see that I was monitoring throughout what was '*missing relationally*' for her; and feeling the impact of this 'absence' in an underlying feeling of sadness. Whenever I referred to sadness with her during the interview, she reported she wasn't feeling any, so it is not unlikely that I was 'holding' her suppressed sadness as well as my own 'internal tears of compassion'.

When she owned her anger with her mother at one point, I had a flash of very strong anger too, but it was fleeting. Perhaps ... my prime, 'relational role' was... to help *enable her* to tell her story, was to '*take care*' of the sadness that could potentially overwhelm her and possibly then prevent her telling her overall story in the way she wanted and that we had 'contracted' for. Perhaps if we do go along this line of thought of 'containing feelings for the other', one way we could think of it could be as a type of 'maternal counter-transference'... I was very overtly aware of how an 'attentive and loving mother' would be responding to the various scenes I was hearing being described; I was feeling this strongly, and clearly, and probably with much protective 'maternal fervour' (!)

So when I think about it, my anger was probably present... but 'in the background'. At times I expressed all this overtly...and used the phrase, "if that had been my daughter, there is no way I would have left her on her own at that point". And I referred to the 'many times' Mia had 'been abandoned' by her mother in the story (which Mia said she hadn't seen in this way before)... Having talked of the possibility of 'maternal counter-transference', I actually want now to just remove the psychotherapeutic labelling and open up to the language/concept

of ‘compassion’; of simply feeling ‘the response of an open heart’ to a very moving story of trauma and neglect and terror and aloneness; of being a ‘loving, open, totally accepting presence’ with another human in their distress - in this case ‘the other’ is Mia.”

(Barbara’s reflexive notes post-interview 10 August, 2011)

*Barbara and Linda Reflect During Supervision...*

After the interview, Barbara found it hard to put it away and shake off her sense of sadness. She had a sense of holding something. She turned to supervision (with Linda) to process the encounter. Barbara started by acknowledging that beyond the lingering sadness, she felt shame in her body. She recognised a sense of agitation around “not doing the interview right” and fearing she might “let Mia down”. Probing this, Linda suggested she might be feeling some parallel process of Mia’s shame.

Together we (Linda and Barbara) also wondered if, in the “maternal counter-transference”, Barbara may be connecting with Mia’s *mother*. We queried whether Barbara might be experiencing some projective identification and be “holding” something for Mia or her mother. With these tentative explorations and insights, Barbara felt a shift of something, an easing. She felt freed to follow her intuition.

Going with the flow, Barbara fell into an intriguing reverie where she somehow felt very aware of the “presence” of Mia’s mother in the room. Barbara slowly spoke the following out loud, pausing as she felt herself tuning in to each new phrase, while Linda, appreciating something potentially transformative was taking place, took verbatim notes:

Barbara: “I have a sense of connection and identification with her. She is not a ‘detached, uncaring, uninvolved mother. She is sad. She didn’t know how to be a mum. She wants forgiveness. She was too scared. My sense of her is her young lost self and how she didn’t know how to deal with her relationships and how to deal with being a mother. There is something about her carrying this long enough. I think she feels sorry.”

While we accepted that Barbara was going along with an unusual but creative process that felt very powerful and intuitive, we started

to question the significance of our focussing on Mia's mother. Were we perhaps paralleling Mia's experience of having to attend to her mother's needs before her own? Might Barbara's focus on Mia's mother repeat Mia's history of not being seen and being abandoned?

Linda suddenly then seemed to get a flash of insight into the words that Barbara had spoken for Mia's *mother*. She was moved to read the words out loud once again. But, *this* time, she suggested, they should try to imagine the words as relating to the *fifteen year old Mia*. It proved a powerful moment. We felt the theme of compassion and forgiveness was figural for both Mia and her mother.

Exploring these themes subsequently helped us connect with the profound guilt and horror that lurked within Mia's somewhat detached account of her trauma. We recognised, and valued, some of the coping mechanisms Mia had developed which had led her to deny, retrofect and dissociate. Even so, the ambivalence she expressed verbally and bodily was almost palpable leading us to articulate the 'Feeling Torn' theme.

#### *Barbara and Linda Reflect Further...*

The post-interview e-mail communication from Mia led us (Linda and Barbara ) to reflect further on the significance of Mia's relationships, particularly with her mother. In an e-mail following the interview, Mia shared some newly emergent memories which the interview had triggered. She re-membered how prior to the surgery, Mia's mother had advised her to "drink lots of gin while having a warm bath". Her mother also took her to a gym to have hot saunas and to be pummelled by hot jet massages. For Mia the memory represented evidence of her mother's caring and attention which she "quite enjoyed".

We were impacted by Mia seeing this somewhat aggressive attention as evidence of her mother's caring. We had already been struck by how Mia seemed to have little awareness of her mother's neglectful, abandoning behaviour. We saw, for example, how Mia took for granted the way her mother returned to bed after her miscarriage and left Mia to cope alone. It seemed Mia did not feel entitled to anything more. And curiously, Mia's safety and health seemed neglected by everyone on that evening (boyfriend and friends). We wondered whether in her shame she had also pushed people away.

In a later reflexive account Barbara wrote more about Motherhood:

“As interviewer, the moments when Mia described her realisation that she had had a miscarriage, and thus had ‘given birth’ to ‘a baby’ felt very poignant, as if, with disbelief and horror, she had suddenly *woken up* to the fact that she had actually been a mother, and had somehow then been responsible for the welfare of a baby. And throughout Mia’s account, we hear of her own mother’s apparent emotional and physical distance from her. And then we hear of Mia having difficulty literally *waking* her mother up, on the night of her miscarriage. So the metaphor seems very strong. And indeed we have no evidence in Mia’s account that her mother ever really *woke up* to her daughter’s emotional, psychological and physical plight. (Barbara’s reflexive notes, August 2011)

As Kaufman (1989, p.19) has suggested, “In the midst of shame, there is an ambivalent longing for reunion with whomever shamed us”. In disclosures such as Mia somewhat enjoying her mother’s “attention”, it seemed that she may be expressing something of an ambivalent longing for the mother, who was part of the shaming. And perhaps deep in there is a longing for her mother to take some responsibility to repair the rupture. Mia’s retroflected anger (which she could not express as she needed to maintain a semblance of a connected relationship with her mother) and grief (which she could not fully acknowledge without owning her guilt) thus became figural as part of a wider mother-daughter relational trauma.

Processing these pieces led us to more deeply connect what we saw as Mia’s shame with her mother’s betrayal/abandonment. This understanding evolved into the themes of ‘Cutting Shame’ and ‘Monstrous (M)othering’.

### *Linda Reflects Some More...*

Following supervision of Barbara by Linda, and their continuing reflexive dialogue with each other, Linda puzzles over the research process and the occasionally challenging dynamics between Barbara and herself. She attempts to relate their process to Mia’s story:

“Barbara and I seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time trying to unravel the complexities of our collaboration and division of labour. Our past scripts keep getting in the way as we



struggle with our respective research roles and try to negotiate challenging new novice researcher-supervisor boundaries which have appeared in our friendship. It is tough to hang in there and I find myself wondering how much easier it would be to work independently instead of attempting collaboration. And maybe the difficulties we're having in working with our ambiguous boundaries in part mirror something of Mia's process such as wanting to 'go it alone'?...

I am aware of feeling irritated that we are focusing so much on 'mothers' and 'forgiveness'. Where is Mia and her lived experience?! And, is there some resistance in Barbara to work more directly with the horror and trauma? Or is this Barbara's own interests and preoccupations as a mother herself?

And how am I contributing? Am I disconnecting too quickly from the focus on mothers? Perhaps I am finding it hard to stay with Mia too? It's easier to analyse Barbara's responses and my supervision dilemmas in this slightly detached, objectifying way. Is there some dissociation here mirroring Mia's? Am I responding sufficiently to Barbara's current supervision needs or am I missing her? Perhaps in musing over writing this article alone I am paralleling Mia's mother's abandoning process?

How are we going to unravel all these layers and fuzzy boundaries?!! Have we taken on too much?? Can we face the horror 'within'?...."

(Linda's reflexive notes September 2011)

We reflected subsequently and recognised the value of our reflexive processing to understand that abandonment was a figural relational theme in Mia's story. "It is difficult to imagine abandonment more frightful than that in which the menace of death is combined with that of crime and shame" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1997, p.507). It is not surprising that we may have been pulled into a parallel process within the research given the strength of this relational dynamic. Our methodology allowed us to consider the question of whether we were perhaps placing too much emphasis on mothers and mothering, with the concern that we might unwittingly be mirroring Mia's history whereby her own needs were super-ceded by her mother's. We also reflected on our belief that it was actually Barbara's attention to mothering, as well as her sharing

of her own thoughts and feelings with Mia about how her mother had treated her, that gave Mia a fresh relational perspective on her experience that she had “not thought of”, affirming her entitlement to support.

### *Conclusion and Evaluation*

We have sought to contribute to the field of feminist phenomenology by engaging a feminist-inspired relational-reflexive methodology to research a significant women's issue - abortion. The case study highlights the value of engaging interpretive, **relational-centred methodology** in researching complex phenomena. We suggest that the reflexive-relational stance implicit in our approach (within both researcher-participant and researcher-supervisor relationships) allowed for a level of exploration which might not otherwise be forthcoming. We see how, for example, Mia was facilitated to delve deeper and to unlock some retroflected responses by Barbara's attuned relational attention both to Mia's embodied experience and to her own. Also we see how, as researchers, we interpretively accessed deeper nuances of Mia's story through our relationally-engaged post-interview dialogue and writing. Mia's story reveals the **multiple, ambiguous layers of trauma** involved in her abortion experience. We hear not only of her physical trials (including the surgery and giving birth to violent haemorrhage) but also her sense of horror, guilt, grief and shame captured by our three themes of 'Feeling Torn', 'Cutting Shame' and 'Monstrous (M)othering'. Through Mia's story we can begin to understand her profound ambivalence – how she is torn cognitively, emotionally and ontologically. We see how she experienced her (m)other's repeated abandonment and neglect for her safety and needs and how - in her shame - Mia hardly recognised that she was entitled to more loving care. Instead, she found a way to cope which involved disconnecting and dissociating from body, feelings and experience generally. Through both her therapy and the research process, it seems that Mia is beginning to integrate layers of damage, betrayal and abandonment which have replayed themselves: She betrayed her baby and she abandoned herself (psychically in her dissociation), just as her mother betrayed and abandoned her.

We suggest that this case study illustrates the importance of recognising the **individual** and **relational context** of a (young) woman's abortion to gain any meaningful understanding of the degree of trauma experienced. It would be valuable also to hear other women's

experiences too, taking seriously the point that traumatic experiences will be complexly varied and layered before jumping too quickly into labels and categories such as “post-abortion syndrome”. In Mia’s case, the traumatic miscarriage and long-term relationship with her alcoholic mother significantly contributed to the overall trauma of the experience.

In addition to exploring further idiographic accounts, it would also be valuable to critically examine the socio-cultural and discursive context underpinning the relational one. Mia’s history took place in a particular community and cultural setting (which we have not addressed), one for instance, that allowed abortions for teenagers. That the abortion took place in the 1970s suggests a time where stigma of school-age teenage pregnancy was still prominent. To what extent would Mia’s sense-making and discourse around her abortion experience be present in teenagers’ discourses today? A post-structural deconstruction of the language used would be a useful elaboration.

We believe Mia’s story offers a profound reminder of the *more* that lies behind apparently simple biographical facts such as having had an abortion. It is a reminder too of the need to avoid latching too quickly onto value-laden generalisations or assume that abortions will inevitably be “traumatic” etc. Applied to the psychotherapy field, this study highlights the value of careful, compassionate, slow phenomenological dwelling with the broader relational meaning context as a whole. If a client discloses she has had an abortion, it behoves us to explore what that means *to her* and for her world. Only then can we help the client make sense of and work through the experience.

We need to strive to understand better the different ways that trauma of abortion can be profound and enduring, impacting an individual’s felt sense of Self and way of being in the world.

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## Notes

Shame involves a diminished self-concept, a sense of unloveability and worthlessness, a self-consciousness and a sense of feeling something is wrong with oneself. It's an "an inner revulsion against one's own existence" (Evans, 1994, p. 103). At times shame and

guilt are used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Guilt is more concerned with transgressions, while shame is about a perceived failure of being, such as being unworthy or unwanted. Guilty people fear punishment. Shamed people fear abandonment. Guilt says: "I did something bad." While shame says: "I am bad."

Mia's headache in the following dialogue is being interpreted as possible retroflected anger turned inward. Retroflection is a split within the Self. It involves the bodily holding back and holding in of an impulse (speech, expression of feelings, behaviour) whereby aspects of the self are resisted by the self. In retroflection, the Self does to itself what it would like to do to another; the Self is replaced for the environment. Hugging oneself when one wants to be hugged is one example. The illusion of self-sufficiency is another example of retroflection as it substitutes self for environment.

### Endnotes

<sup>[i]</sup> No claims are made here to suggest one type of abortion is more or less traumatic than another. The level of trauma involved is likely to depend on the specific circumstances and wider individual and social factors.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Neither the American Psychological Association or the American Psychiatric Association recognize "Post-abortion Syndrome" as an actual diagnosis or condition, and it is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR or in the ICD-10 list of psychiatric conditions. According to DSM criteria, to warrant the label of being a "post-traumatic stress disorder" the woman would have to have been exposed to a traumatic "event" and the abortion would have to be persistently re-experienced in one or more of the following ways: i. she would have to show a persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the abortion; ii. numbing of general responsiveness, and iii. there would need to be persistent symptoms of increased arousal.

<sup>1</sup> Mia is a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. We have also slightly changed a few minor details of Mia's story to ensure that she cannot be identified.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to deYoung who in her book on *Relational Psychotherapy* talks of the therapy relationship as being "thickly populated" (2003, p.2). In subsequent writings, Finlay and Evans (2009, p.118) have used the phrase "thickly populated encounters" to refer both to how we have many selves (past, present and future including different ego states and/or subjectivities) as well as how our subjectivity is populated by our ancestral history.

<sup>3</sup> *Parallel process* is a psychotherapeutic concept. Here various dynamics in the therapist's relationship with his or her client, and sometimes - by extension - in the client's relationships with significant others are re-enacted in the supervisor/supervisee relationship. The process can similarly emerge in the researcher-participant relationship and might be mirrored in the supervision relationship (Finlay & Evans, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of flesh being evoked comes from Merleau-Ponty's (1964/1968) version of flesh as the ontological fabric or element of being in which both my body and things are given. The world and body are within one another and intertwined. "There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (p.138).

## When the Worst Imaginable Becomes Reality: The Experience of Child Custody Loss in Mothers Recovering from Addictions

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*This article describes findings from a qualitative study that investigated the lived experiences of four mothers recovering from crack cocaine addictions who lost custody of their children. The project was guided by feminist interpretive inquiry, van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, and involved thematic analysis of in depth interview data. By telling the stories of these women and using their own words as well as interpretive poetry written by one of the authors to describe their suffering, our research offers important insights to professionals involved in the field of addictions.*

For many women, becoming a mother is seen as one of life's most rewarding experiences—one that they may look toward from their own very childhoods. Having children changes not only how women view their own personal lives, but also how they see themselves in a broader social context (Stenius, Veysey, Hamilton & Anderson, 2005). For the addicted mother, this role becomes a source of ambiguity, strain and conflict when she finds herself trying to choose between being a mother and using substances (Brady, Black & Greenfield, 2009). According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2011) and Streetworks (2011) (a harm reduction/needle exchange program), child custody loss has been described by mothers with mental health issues and addictions as the worst imaginable outcome of substance abuse. To date, the voices of recovering mothers who have lost custody of their children are not represented in existing literature. In this article, we advocate for this group of marginalized women by sharing their experiences with the worst possible outcome of their addiction, losing custody of their children.

This article is a culmination of the quest to (1) give 'voice' and, perhaps hope, to women who find themselves grappling with child custody loss, and to (2) provide insight into the complexity of these mother's experiences for professionals who treat and come in contact with them.

To provide context for the mothers' stories, we begin by presenting background literature that explores the ideology of motherhood; constructs a composite picture of the addicted mother; delineates child welfare and court practices; discusses trends in addiction treatment and ramifications

of child custody loss; and comments on resilience in recovering mothers. This literature underscores the no-win situation addicted mothers can experience. Next, we describe our research approach and emphasize three themes. First, mothers experience feelings of betrayal; second, soul-ache; and third, reclamation when they experience child custody loss. By representing our data with interpretive poetry arising from the transcripts written by Katherine Joyce Janzen (KJJ), one of the researchers as well as participants' verbatim comments to tell the mothers' stories, we are able to depict the richness of their experiences. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings.

The following poem, written by KJJ, is addressed to our research participants and expresses our commitment to advocacy, to providing context, to giving voice, and to allowing them to find their own strengths.

QUEST  
 You have shared  
     Your life,  
     Your story,  
     Your soul.  
 I now act  
 As an advocate  
     For you.  
 I will be your voice.  
     Your story  
     Will live on  
 Beyond the borders  
 Of your spoken words;  
     Touching others  
     With its  
     Profoundness.

*Literature Review*  
*The Ideology of Motherhood*

The ideology of motherhood holds a variety of different meanings. For almost all mothers, the attempt to navigate the 'road of motherhood' can be filled with potholes and fissures as motherhood is both glorified



and demeaned (Dunlap, Sturzenhofecker & Johnson, 2006) in a carefully constructed “gender system” of social and cultural roles (Haddock, Zimmerman & Lyness, 2003). While becoming and being a mother is often romanticized, for centuries society has pathologized, demonized and demeaned mothers and presented them as failures as they reach to fulfill impossible expectations (Caplan, 2001; Dunlap et al., 2006; Irwin, Thorne & Varcoe, 2002; Litzke, 2004). Patriarchal systems, including those of law and custom, have judged and controlled mothers in terms of extensive idealization, scrutinization and denigration in their roles and behaviours (Reid, Greaves & Poole, 2008). Choices in motherhood are further constrained by power imbalances (gender, class, and ethnicity) and social roles which offer a perplexing medium where there exist many choices—none of which are easy (Dunlap et al., 2006). These include being/not being a mother, lesbian mothering, whether to use reproductive technologies, issues of balancing work with the constraints of extended families, being a single mother/parent, and potential poverty (Glenn, Change & Forcey, 1995).

The distance between the polarities of ‘ideal mothering’ and ‘real mothering’ further constricts the rights of mothers; significant conflict arises between legal and social responses to mothers who are deemed by society to “behave badly” (Reid et al., 2008) such as addicted mothers or mothers who neglect and abuse their children (Chelsler, 2011). Mothers who fail to live up to the stereotypical ideals and roles that society assigns, especially in terms of femininity and motherhood, exacts severe social stigma (Beck, 2006). This social stigma is further typified in the labels that addicted mothers are given.

### *A Composite Picture of the Addicted Mother*

In our review of the literature we observed a pattern where mothers tended to be polarized into either “good mothers” or “bad mothers” (Brown, 2006). In North America, the stereotypical image of a “good mother” as is severely challenged and delegitimized when mothers abuse substances such as illicit drugs and alcohol (Caplan, 2001; Litzke, 2004).

[A good] “mother is one who is expected to perform a limited number of tasks all of which are never ending. Mothers are not allowed to fail any of these obligations. [This] ideal of motherhood is sacred; it exposes

all mothers as imperfect. (Chelser, 2011, p. 48).

This imperfection is even more pronounced with the addicted mother. Not only does substance use conflict with the traditional female role, it is also considered to be deviant (Powis, Gossop, Bury, Payne & Griffiths, 2000). This deviance is perpetuated and socially constructed in popular media (Meyers, 2004) and within the medical and nursing profession (Marcellus, 2003). Mothers with addictions have been stereotyped as “she devils” or “sexual... Jezebel[s] who [threaten] the lives and safety of [their] born and unborn children” (Meyers, 2004, p. 194). This has resulted in substance using mothers being given various labels including “good, bad, thwarted, [and/or] addicted” as they strive but often fail to meet the ‘ideal’ of mothering (Reid et al., 2008, p. 211).

Thus the addicted mother eventually is forced to see herself as either a ‘good mother’ or a ‘bad mother’ (Brown, 2006). An addicted woman’s view of being a ‘good mother’ often is tied to “trying to do the right thing for their children” (Reid et al, 2008, p. 231). Reid and colleagues support our observation by noting that these women are “very aware of the powerful social forces that have clear images of ‘good mother’ and ‘bad mother’ and often [try] to position themselves as mothers attempting to do good in a system and society that does not value or assist them” (p. 231). In her attempts to continue mothering her children, she may live with very high levels of shame, guilt, and self-blame due to her own perceptions of being an inadequate parent (Coyer, 2001). Even with emerging research which supports the presence of adequate parenting skills in addicted mothers (Doris, Meguid, Thomas, Blatt & Eschenrode, 2006; Huxley & Foulger, 2008), these mothers are further marginalized by social service and health care professionals (Brown, 2006), who deem them “unfit” (Powis et al., 2000; Smith, 2006). Shackled by these constraints, the addicted mother often eventually sees herself as being “weak” and “morally corrupt”—paralleling society’s view of her (Litzke, 2004).

Social pressures and situational constraints often create conditions where addiction becomes a tool for survival. Intense poverty, homelessness, social isolation, violent relationships, inadequate food/provisions, and a lack of care for their children often perpetuate addiction (Dunlap et al., 2006). Substance abusing mothers are often further impacted by intergenerational patterns of substance abuse, mental illness, and physical and/or sexual abuse (Cash & Wilke, 2003) which results in further societal stigmatization (Suchman, McMahon, Slade & Luthar, 2005). These

significant constraints are felt by society to be solely the problem of the mother and have no bearing on the 'system' or society at large further victimizing and vilifying the addicted mother (Reid et al., 2008). Litzke (2004) aptly describes addiction as "dehumanizing;" mothers are "hailed as addicts" instead of human beings (Aston, 2009, p. 611).

Despite all the barriers and constraints that these mothers face, the role of motherhood provides a sense of stability in recovery (Hiersteiner, 2004). Addicted mothers struggle with feelings about having and keeping their children (Suchman et al., 2005). These feelings result in the presence of considerable conflict which centres on their drug dependence and the fear of losing custody of their children (Powis et al., 2000). Giving up her children is seen as a mother's last possible resort (Coyer, 2001). Clearly, mothers are significantly impacted by the fear of losing custody of their children in their experiences with courts and child welfare agencies.

### *The Courts and Contemporary Child Welfare Practices*

In the United States and Great Britain, 25% to 69% of addicted mothers see their children being placed in foster care or kinship programs (Kovalesky, 2001; Litzke, 2004). In the United States 33% of child welfare cases result in permanent custody loss while Canada's 2004 statistics reveal 62% of all children taken into care have permanent guardianship orders (European University Association, n.d.) which is an increase of five percent from 1999 (Human Resources Skills Development Canada, 2000). In multi-national studies, Canada has the highest rate of child placement (Mulchay & Trocmé, 2010). Rural areas in Canada see children placed at twice the rate of those in urban communities (Budeau, Barniuk, Fallon & Black, 2009). Canadian statistics portray 32% of children being removed from homes led by single mothers with alcohol or drug/solvent use (Trocmé et al., 2005). There has been a shift in which pregnant women now make up 30% of the overall cases mandated in court (Terplan, Smith, Kozlowski & Pollack, 2010).

Rigid restrictions have been in effect for over 10 years in the United States that cause permanency hearings (for permanent guardianship by the State) to be enacted after 12 months, and parental rights terminated if a child is in foster care for longer than 15 months (Smith, 2006; Semidei, Radel & Nolan, 2001). In Canada, children can spend up to three years waiting for a permanency decision which arguably creates a scenario where

the children are literally in “limbo” and constrains the development of secure attachments (Knoke, 2009). Given this situation, in the authors’ jurisdiction, when three temporary guardianship orders have been in place, the child(ren) are either placed permanently or returned to their parent(s) (Alberta Children’s Services, 2007). In both the United States and Canada, there has been a move in the judicial system to shorten these timelines in an effort to enforce quicker permanency decisions (Alberta Children and Youth Services, 2009; Semidei et al., 2001).

Despite the presence of adequate parenting capabilities, mothers who become totally abstinent are still considered to be high risk by the child welfare system (Reid et al., 2008). Social workers’ professional relationships with addicted mothers are often strained, even confrontational, with social workers enforcing their own agenda, and paying little attention to the concerns of the mother (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbeing & Rollinick, 2008). The understanding of both the court and child welfare agencies related to addictions/addictions treatment is deemed lacking which translates into a lack of a “just and equitable standard” for working with recovering mothers (Burman, 2004; Kruk, 2008; Smith, 2006). Risk assessment remains a contentious issue but there have been attempts to use a strengths-based harm reduction model (Weaver, 2009). This model sees recovery as a continuum where social workers meet addicted mothers “where they are at” (Kullar, 2009, p. 10). It is of note that advances in addictions treatment programs are beginning to act as a bridge between child welfare and the courts.

### *Trends in Addictions Treatment*

Recovery from addictions is not a straightforward process. While the medical model (complete abstinence) continues to guide many treatment philosophies, advances have been made in addiction treatment. The harm reduction model (relapse being a temporary condition) is increasingly gaining acceptance on a global level (Burman, 2004; Snow & Delaney, 2006). Gender-responsive treatment is another trend that has emerged since the 1990’s, and this model attempts to mediate the complexities of addiction in the context of gender roles, sexism, poverty, and other environmental issues (Grella, 2008). Before 2004, however, models which involved mothers and their children had not yet emerged (Cash & Wilke, 2004).

Models of treatment that include not only family members, but also children, have become more common (Werner, Young, Dennis & Amateri, 2007). This shift in thinking reflects the profoundly negative impact that occurs when, in order to gain access to treatment, mothers are separated from their children (Barry, 2006a; Beck, 2006). In recent years, residential recovery programs have been offering programs and services that allow children to stay with their mother while she engages in recovery (VanDeMark, O'Keefe, Finkleseing & Gampel, 2005; Worley, Conners, Williams & Bokony, 2005). A call for multi-disciplinary teams that can share their expertise in terms of child welfare requirements and issues while concurrently treating the mother's substance abuse remains (Knoke, 2009). Once again, this reflects a pattern in the literature where the voices of women themselves are not represented.

### *The Ramifications of Child Custody Loss*

Child custody loss has profound ramifications. There is very little known about mothers who are recovering from addictions who lose custody of their children. For mothers, the consequences of court-mandated treatment can leave them feeling powerless and victimized (Burman, 2004). Experiencing being labelled an "unfit mother" similarly results in intensified levels of stress, denial, depression, anger, and intense emotional pain (Barry, 2006b; Concoran, 2001; Shillington, Hohman & Jones, 2001). This emotional pain can become even more pronounced when a mother loses custody (Barry, 2006b). Further, the emotional turmoil often triggers increased impulses to seek relief through substance use (Schleuderer & Campagna, 2002) and feelings of traumatisation intensify (Rockhill et al., 2008). Custody loss severely undermines a recovering mother's hope that her children will ever be returned to her (Rockhill et al., 2008). Irwin et al.'s (2002) research revealed that having children physically with her gives mothers the strength to make difficult decisions. The children act as a major motivator to continue recovery (Grella, 2008; Kovalesky, 2001) and as such custody loss can have a significant impact on mothers' efforts to recover.

### *Resilience in Recovering Mothers*

There are only a handful of studies addressing resilience in

recovering mothers. Despite the paucity of research, the results of these studies offer more insight into these women's' lives. Recently, Sutherland, Cook, Stetina & Hernandez (2009) looked at problem solving skills and coping strategies as a measure of resilience in addicted and non-addicted mothers. They found that recovering women overall are less resilient than their counterparts who are not chemically dependent. However these researchers also found that the very custodial status of a mother's children seemed to be protective: recovering mothers who had custody of their children had greater treatment completions and decreased substance use in the post-recovery period.

In an earlier study, Hardesty and Black (1999) also identified that the presence of children became the marker of successful recovery where "motherhood served as a survival strategy" (p. 609). Children consistently remained a central focus in the lives of their mothers—even when custody was lost permanently. The emotional bonds created a sense of permanency as the mothers focused on what they viewed as a temporary physical separation. The primary motive of recovery then became a regaining and re-claiming of their children. Consistently, the mothers in this study reported that the worst possible outcome that could occur was having their children taken away permanently.

Paris and Bradley (2001) found mothers who had lost custody of their children told stories of "hope and resilience" (p. 663). Both Hardesty and Black (1999) and Paris and Bradley (2001) cited that a fundamental task of recovery was re-negotiating a maternal identity. Mohatt, Rasmuss, Thomas, Allen, Hazel and Marlatt's (2007) study reaffirmed Hardesty and Black's (1999) conclusions that resilience in addicted mothers was tied to a sense of interconnectedness with family/kin. Despite this interconnectedness, mothers are still ultimately positioned within a no-win situation.

Both the courts and addiction treatment centers desire early reunifications, but reunifications are hampered by the short timelines that currently exist within the judicial system (Hohman & Butt, 2001). Mothers feel substantial pressure to improve their parenting abilities and to stabilize their lives. But the very requirements for programs and services that are meant to help addicted mothers are "ambiguous, incomprehensible, or put [the mothers themselves] at risk" (Reid et al., 2008, p. 224). The social services system for addicted mothers is "all-powerful," and a source of "constant surveillance" as mothers live under the relentless "threat of

having their children apprehended” which results in a “constant source of fear which instilled distrust and powerlessness in the face of” social services (p. 224).

Attempts to use their identities as mothers to drive their recovery may become focused on constantly renegotiating the meaning of what it means to be a ‘good’ mother. There exists a platform where the labels of ‘good mother’ and ‘bad mother’ exist almost simultaneously in the literature. Hardesty and Black (1999) explain that an addicted mother needs to retain a “view of self as a good mother despite the addition... as a self-survival tool” (p. 609) and without this image she falls into a “numbing surrender to self-destruction” (p. 607). The literature is divided on the parenting capabilities of addicted mothers as well as the presence/absence of healthy relationships with their children (Doris et al., 2006; Huxley & Foulger, 2008). Thus, creating a definitive and accurate portrait of a typical addicted mother is difficult. Despite inconsistencies among research findings, existing literature does provide us with a picture of recovering mothers who have lost custody of their children as women who feel deeply ambiguous. The aim of our study was to expand understanding of this ambiguity and for us to provide a platform to give voice to recovering mothers who may have been ‘silenced’ as a result of losing their children. As Davis and Dodd (2002) assert, ‘silence’ remains a significant barrier to understanding women’s experiences, especially in sensitive-topic research. In sum, this literature review reveals much professional dialogue rather than the women’s own voices.

### *The Research Approach*

#### *Feminist Paradigmatic and Theoretical Assumptions*

The feminist paradigm is considered to either fall beneath the umbrella of the interpretive paradigm (Jansen & Davis, 1998), deemed as a theory (Creswell, 2007), or stand on its own as a distinctive worldview (Wilkinson & Morton, 2007). As a paradigm, feminist ontology theorizes “being” and in doing so rejects Cartesian duality and instead focuses on body, mind and emotion (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Stanley and Wise (1993) describe reality in this sense as the ‘self’ where reality is “relationally and interactionally composed”, having historic, contextual, and cultural influences where reality “subtly change[s] in different interactional circumstances” (p. 195). In relation to epistemology, the most central

concept relates to there being a “situated knower” and therefore “situated knowledge” (Stanford University, 2009). The relationship between the known and the knower therefore, is one of establishing a mutual conversational relationship of trust where the ‘known’ discloses his/her own personal experiences in an effort to be transparent, and the ‘knower’ in reciprocity is empowered, validated, and strengthened as she shares her experiences (Jansen & Davis, 1998).

Key assumptions of an interpretive-feminist paradigm are: the acknowledgement of the pervasive influence of gender, a primary focus on “consciousness raising”, a rejection of a separation of subject/object, denunciation of the “assumption that most personal experience is unscientific”, an unwavering concern for ethical implications of one’s research, and unequivocally (through research) women can be empowered and transformed (Milojevic et al., 2008 p. 8). Frisby et al. (2009) further add that as “multiple sources of oppression are embodied and experienced on a daily basis” (p. 19-20) by women, an assumption exists that a feminist paradigm creates a meaningful framework for making “sense of the physical, spiritual, and social worlds and for envisioning meaningful actions for social changes” (p. 15). Finally, Milojevic et al. (2008) cites that the feminist worldview is a means for “altering” the human condition.

### *Feminist Interpretive Inquiry*

Feminist interpretive inquiry has an end result of a conscious mindfulness of power in terms of gender, but also promotes trust, creates a platform for individual stories to be told, and allows for holistic findings that are not necessarily captured by qualitative research (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson & Wilkes, 2009; Jansen & Davis, 1998). One of the key strengths of feminist inquiry as the giving of voice to voiceless silenced populations (Frisby et al., 2009; Oakley, 1998) who have lived under a “framework of invisibility, marginalization and powerlessness” (Jansen & Davis, 1998, p. 294). Jansen and Davis (1998) cite other strengths of feminist interpretive inquiry such as: supplying the context of the experience, focusing on the strengths of the participants, diminishing hierarchy, de-emphasizing hierarchy, promoting an atmosphere of mutual understanding by allowing the participants to share in the experiences of the researcher, and signalling a non-judgemental stance.

Oakley (1998) cites that the primary limitations of the feminist



paradigm are bias and validity. Although the intentions of qualitative research exclude generalizability, a small sample size can signal bias in terms of false inferences when viewing the placement of the story in a wider social and political context (Oakley, 1998; Skene, 2007). Validity can come into question in terms of the veracity of the participant's stories (Oakley, 1998; Porter, 2007). Feminist researchers "challenge detachment and objectivity" which may be seen as a bias within itself where the researcher seeks to understand the ways that a research topic is "autobiographical" (Glense, 2006, p. 119).

### *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

#### *Hermeneutical Paradigmatic and Theoretical Assumptions*

Hermeneutics is grounded in the interpretive paradigm (Rapport & Wainwright, 2006) which encompasses distinctive assumptions related to ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Koch, 1996; Shah & Corley, 2006). The ontology of hermeneutics is a conviction that truth is founded on relativism where truth is "composed of multiple local and specific realities" (Weaver & Olson, 2006, p. 462). Epistemologically, reality is established intersubjectively or with a "shared subjective awareness and understanding" (p. 462). Methodology reflects the progression of constant revision where theory emerges inductively and the principal goals are understanding and change in a social world that esteems the promotion of practical knowledge.

Key assumptions of interpretive inquiry include: understanding as a key outcome, a acceptance that the world is contextual, holistic inquiry, narrative description, investigation as context laden, theory and practice being interactive and specific, and the presence of a participator-researcher relationship (Bridges, n.d.). Assumptions that are explicit to hermeneutics are: the existence of a distinct interpretation (Shah & Corley, 2006), common life experiences presenting a fertile medium for the study of meaning, a focus on human experience rather than conscious understanding, and the "presupposition of expert knowledge on the part of the researcher" being a "valuable guide to inquiry" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 729).

*Melding Hermeneutic Phenomenology with Feminist Interpretive Inquiry*

A melding of hermeneutic phenomenology with interpretive feminist inquiry complements hermeneutic phenomenology in several ways. “Hermeneutic phenomenology [from the perspective of van Manen (1997)] is quite amenable to feminist forms of knowing, inquiry and writing” (p. xviii). Both are based upon the construct of “being” (Stanely & Wise, 1993; Heidegger, 1962). Ceci (2003) describes that “facets of feminist thought...have drawn attention to the politics of knowledge through theorizing the significance and the situatedness of knowers and knowledge” and thereby by viewing our characters as “meaning-constituting [it stresses] the interpretive nature of our being in the world” (p. 63). Hermeneutical phenomenology as a “philosophy of actions” has the potential to not only “radicalize thought” but make a difference in the world (van Manen, 1997) by giving voice to the women who may feel “silenced” as a result of losing their children (Davies & Dodd, 2002). This is highly congruent with the aims of feminist thought where “feminism is a program for social change... and [offers an] alternative vision [for] the future” (Milojevic et al., 2008, p. 1).

Rather than the theoretical, abstract detachment that is characteristic of empirical research, hermeneutics is both a science and art form where the researcher and the researched, as co-creators, intimately engage with each other in the “pragmatic and poetical” (Barnacle, 2001; Litchman, n.d.). Interpretive feminism enhances this view where researcher and researched meet on equal ground. “Trust is built not just for the purpose of collecting meaningful data, but for a human purpose in relationships” which sees the participant and the researcher “enrich each other’s lives” (Jansen & Davis, 1998, p. 308). Finally we believe, as did Heidegger (1962), that it is impossible to bracket one’s own life experiences, values and assumptions—a conviction that the writers’ own “life-worlds” can enhance the study as the research process unfolds—a precept held in high regard within the interpretive feminist paradigm.

*Additional Considerations of Research  
Researcher Subjectivity*

When choosing a phenomenological tradition for this research, immediately the question of researcher subjectivity arose. In the Husseralian

tradition, the researcher brackets his/her pre-understandings and in effect 'divorce's' the research from these influences (Smythe, Ironside, Simms, Swensen & Spence, 2008). We felt it was impossible to tell the 'story' without recognizing that we are both mothers and that being a mother and caring for our children is at the heart of all we do. Deciding to use van Manen's (1997) method was conducive to this end as our experiences are honored and valued in this phenomenological tradition. Investigating the experience as it was lived involved using our own personal experience as a point of departure. Personal experience is considered by van Manen to contribute and not detract from the research process as possibilities were opened up and kept open. This allowed us, as researchers, to exact 'clues' for orientating ourselves to the phenomenon and further connection with all the other phases or steps in the research process (van Manen, 1997).

Sensitive topic research "creates a space for self-disclosure by the researcher that might not be appropriate in other types of research" (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2006, p. 857). The purposes of self-disclosure "level[ed] the playing field" (p. 857). For us as researchers, it also "level[ed] the power relationship between researcher and participant" (Shields & Diccio, 2011, p. 496).

Li (2002) explains that "by being able to share with others our own feelings, experiences and secrets in this world, we also encounter the other person's secrets and vulnerabilities of which we must be respectful" (p. 94). By sharing our 'sacred' experiences, the women were invited to share their 'sacred' experiences. This potentially allowed a deeper sharing of experiences, feelings, and meaning.

### *The Use of Interpretive Poetry*

For van Manen (2007) telling the 'story' becomes balanced and enhanced by the use of literature (phenomenological and otherwise), the arts (such as poetry), etymological sources of words, and biography. Utilizing these sources of data, results in more reflective depth, promotes dialogue, and assists the researcher and reader of the research to potentially see beyond (their) "limits" and to "transcend beyond the limits of (their) interpretive sensibilities" (van Manen, 1990, p. 74-76). Perry suggests that "to provide a hermeneutic analysis...[poems express] the nucleus or heart of the narrative" (p.134). Kockleman (1987) supports this view:

In the human reality there are certain phenomena which reach so deeply into a [person's] life and the world in which [they] live that poetic language is the only adequate way through which to point to and make present a meaning which we are unable to express in any other way. (p. ix)

"Poetry [then becomes] appropriate medium of analysis as it bridges non-verbal and verbal expression and it allows for communication in succinct and creative ways... expos[ing] the tacit, which is difficult to express otherwise" (Perry, 1994, pp. 134-135). Interpretive poetry, written by researcher Katherine J. Janzen, became an integral part of the research process where "together the narratives, poems and literature provide[d] an [enhanced] understanding" (Perry, 1994) of the mothers' experiences where words alone would at times fail to capture the experiences and feelings of the participants.

### *Research Question*

Our research asked the question: *What is the lived experience of mothers in recovery who have lost custody of their children?* We used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach based on the work on Canadian phenomenologist Max van Manen (1997). Methodology includes elements of (1) philosophic structure, (2) essential assumptions of that framework and (3) the features of the human science perspective. Van Manen saw that phenomenology was a retrospective "study of the lifeworld—in the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize or reflect on it" (p.9).

The purpose of human science is to provide "plausible insights" to our everyday life experiences in terms of discovering the very "essence" of a phenomenon rather than pursuing explanations or control (van Manen, 1997). Rigour, exactness and precision are distinguished by human science's own criteria. Objectivity is realized in the researchers being "true" and "oriented" to the "object being studied" and subjectivity exists in terms of the researcher perceptiveness, insightfulness and discernment "in order to... disclose the object in its fullest richness and greatest depth" (p. 20). As a result, "grasping and formulating thematic understanding" becomes "a free act of 'seeing' meaning" rather than a "rule-bound process" (p. 79). Six research activities guide van Manen's human science research:

(1) Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world, (2) investigating the experience as it is lived rather than as we conceptualize it, (3) reflecting on essential themes which characterize the phenomenon, (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting, (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and (6) balancing the research context by considering both the whole and the parts. (p. 30-31)

### *Sampling*

Participants were selected from a purposive sample of English speaking mothers living in Western Canada who had a crack cocaine addiction. Inclusion criteria included: currently living in a residential addictions treatment centre and having one or more children who were not in the participant's custody during a period of active addiction. Mothers with severe mental health issues, and participants who were heavily medicated were excluded from the sample. A recruitment poster was placed in the host facility and participants contacted the researcher through the agency. All participants gave informed consent. The study protocols were approved by the University Research Ethics board and the Board of Directors at the host recovery institution. No compensation was given for participation in this study.

### *Data Collection*

In-depth semi-structured interviews with four recovering mothers were undertaken over a five month period. Out of the four women who were interviewed, two had lost custody of their children permanently, one was still trying to regain custody, and one had recently received temporary custody while still facing imminent court proceedings related to custody issues. Face-to-face interviews with each participant lasting 45 minutes to one and three quarter hours were recorded on a digital recorder. Other sources of data which are consistent with van Manen's (1997) approach included the researchers' reflections, journal entries, etymological sources of words tied to the research, phenomenological literature and descriptions outside the context of the research such as readings and poetry. These

additional representations of data were incorporated to provide context and support for the data.

### *Data Analysis*

A combination of manual and computer-assisted coding was undertaken utilizing QRS NVivo8 qualitative data analysis software (QRS International, 2009) to ascertain themes from the data. Using a dual method of analysis was advantageous as it did not estrange us from the data and allowed the data to be examined with both closeness and distance from the data which is essential in hermeneutic phenomenology. NVivo8 complemented this process with its excellent capabilities to cross-reference, annotate, and index the data. The data analysis as a result was richer and served to enforce analytic strategies that methodologically guide the hermeneutic research process (Seale & Gabon, 2004). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) techniques for operationalizing trustworthiness were employed in the process of data analysis. Member checks affirmed authenticity of the themes. Katherine Joyce Janzen wrote the poems. Van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic reduction strategies guided the data analysis.

### *Findings*

Staying true to van Manen's (1997) philosophy of "thematic understanding" being a goal of hermeneutic research (p. 79), three themes, each with three sub-themes emerged from the data. The three themes represent scenes or dimensions that the mothers passed through as they moved through the experience of child custody loss. These scenes—betrayal, soul-ache, and reclamation—represented key stages in their experiences. Each scene was further divided into three sub-scenes which add additional filters to understand the elements of the scenes. The four stories of the women that were interviewed—Charolette, Crystal, Cristine and Hanna (all pseudonyms which the mothers chose themselves)—are described with illustrative quotes from the mothers which embodied their experiences. Interpretive poetry written by KJJ was used to provide another layer of depth and breadth to their stories (Perry, 2009).

*Scene One: Betrayal*

Estés (2003) describes betrayals taking many forms... “roads not taken, paths that [are] cut off, ambushes.. or [even] deaths” (p. 365). Betrayers (*bitrayens*) mislead, deceive, and act as traitors (*tradres*) to what and who individuals believe in and people and things accepted as truth. Betrayals and betrayers took many forms—both animate and inanimate. The betrayers of the four mothers we interviewed were not always bodily betrayals but always betrayers of the soul and represented small deaths—*las meurtes chiquitas* and large deaths—*las meurtes grandotas* (Estés, 2003). The primary betrayers became substances, self and others, and child welfare. Each betrayer exacted a price—a price that came as a result of the mother’s implicit trust in the betrayer. The following betrayals are explored using the mothers’ own words and interpretive poetry.

*Substances*

While each mother described crack cocaine as being her “best friend” in a life that “revolved around [their] addiction,” mothers’ were also very aware that over time crack was “slowly destroying [their] soul.” Their relationship with crack was understood as a progressive, destructive relationship. Charolette knew how deeply the addiction took over her life. “I was so addicted. So addicted. And my addiction was so strong and intense and the negative talk, and it really weighed out, like really took over.” Mothers were pinned between both lives—that of a recovering mother and that of an addict. Said Crystal, “I’ve been clean for periods of my recovery...but it’s always been like okay, my body would be in the door but my foot would be sticking out...” Cristine sadly explained that conflict. “But it’s hard when you feel stuck, right? Like what choice do you make? Do you make a choice to say goodbye to the addict or goodbye to your kid? It’s not as simple as making that choice.” Despite this conflict each women knew that the “ultimate” outcome of being “on the streets [and using cocaine] was going to be death.” While cocaine held the elusive promise of coping with their worlds, cocaine in the end would result in a last final betrayal—the loss of their very lives.

*REALIZATION*

The first time I met you  
It was so good  
The feeling I had  
That I lost years of my life  
Making love to you; needing you before all others.  
Somehow you mocked me  
As I turned to you to solve life's problems.  
I realize you have betrayed me  
With elusive promises  
My best, old friend—cocaine.

*Self and Others*

Even with the presence of multiple betrayers these mother's single most significant betrayer was the mother herself. Charolette knew that she had betrayed herself. "I fed into it. I made it more believing. I convinced myself about it. So I gave up more to life." Hanna knew that her decision making process was faulty when her children were apprehended. She relates, "I didn't pick up the phone and call my treatment centre. I picked up the phone and called my drug dealer."

There were also other multiple betrayers. Christine experienced this with her boyfriend, his parents and even her own parents thinking that they were 100% behind her and realizing this was not the case. Crystal was extremely surprised when her children were told she was their aunt. Hanna identified that others betrayed her with their attitudes about addiction. She felt she was shunned, even if others knew she was in recovery. Hanna explained that even her own mother was reluctant to hug her once she started using again...

Yeah, what's that in the Bible? The disease you give, leprosy, you know that you're just contagious. And actually when I started using again I used to say that to my Mom. "Don't worry, if you hug me, you're not going to catch an addiction."



*TREATCHERY*

While you betray me  
 With thoughts  
 With words  
 With actions  
 The worst betrayer of me  
 Is me.

*Child Welfare*

These women described valiant efforts to stay “clean” and adhere to the requirements of their child welfare worker in the belief that they would have their children returned to them. When they completed requirements, however, there were always more conditions imposed on them, which left them feeling confused, alone and discouraged. Charolette sorrowfully described the implicit trust she put in child welfare— “I trusted them with my life and [the] lives [of my children] because I thought they were there for me. They didn’t understand. I felt so alone at those times.” Hanna described the process with child welfare as “jump[ing] through hoops” and then being given “10 more.” The decision to be honest about drug use was always a difficult one. Cristine knew the pain of betrayal... “It was tough, you know, like when they stepped in and it was like I was the bad guy because I was honest with them... I told them the circumstances, everything. It didn’t matter.” Charolette summarized the feelings of the mothers amid the tears that she cried— “They won. They got what they wanted... Not once did I have a worker that supported me, that was there for me or that encouraged me to keep going to get my kids back. Not one. So I gave up.”

*CIRCUS*

I don’t see it coming  
 As I jump through hoops  
 Placed before me  
 Each one higher  
 And in the end I fall.  
 Do I tell the truth  
 When it leaves me imprisoned;  
 Trapped  
 Without an advocate?

*Scene Two: Soul-ache*

*GIVING UP*

A terrible sadness comes in May  
 With too much light and unreal green;  
     A sadness like a jail cell  
 With no corner left to hide.  
     Clearly I see a little face.  
     Soft eyelashes shade her cheeks  
 And she has such a trusting smile;  
 Beryl runs forever on a lawn-starred with dandelions.  
     And always she is six years old.  
 Again she's asking what I cannot give,  
 The pain, the tenderness is there once more  
     The old reproach of selfishness.  
 While other people raised my child  
     I sought sanctuary in madness.  
 (M.C. Jones, 1970, used with permission)

Madness comes in many forms when trying to live with loss: seeking relief in continued use of substances, trying to end one's life, and falling into deep depression while struggling with living itself. Madness was found within the spaces of accountability—where blame was situated for events that had happened. Eliot (1969) described this madness as “the pain of living and the drug of dreams,” where one is “neither living nor dead.” (p. 38). This was the true space of soul-ache.

*The Moment of Loss*

The very moment that the mothers' lost custody of their children represented a death for the women who remained—deaths without funerals or spaces to mark them. This 'death without death' was considered worse than if their children had physically died. In many ways the mothers felt that they had themselves died right along with their children. Each woman could recall the moment of loss vividly.

Charolette experienced the loss of her children in a court room where she voluntarily gave up custody. She had been battling her addictions and came to the point where she believed that there was no hope left for their return. She saw the decision as one of “giving up,” a decision which

“broke [her] heart.” Crystal abandoned her children when she was 18 and left for another city when she didn’t have enough food for her children and didn’t know where to go for help. She felt she had “failed” and “couldn’t give [her] kids what they deserved.” Cristine lost her son when he was 11 weeks old. She was trying to deal with post-partum depression and couldn’t manage a little baby and the emotions that were surfacing related to the death of her first infant son. Hanna lost custody of her new born daughter in a hospital room. She related, “I’ve never cried so hard in my life. Like nothing breaks my heart more.”

### WHITE CROSSES

I mark the spaces of soul-ache.  
One for each time my heart broke.

### *Accountability*

Each mother had great difficulty coming to terms with how accountable they were for the loss of their children. Crystal had no food for her children; Cristine was suffering from post-partum depression. Charolette had been beaten so badly by her husband that she had a brain injury; Hanna thought she would be able to make a decision of where her children were placed. Despite this, each woman came to accept her role in the loss of her children.

Charolette relates that although she knew she “was a part of the problem of giving them up... all [she] knew was to use drugs.” Cristine knew that her cocaine use was the direct reason for losing her two daughters, both of whom were born addicted to cocaine. She stated, “It cost me my life and my kids.” The most difficult part of losing custody was, as Hanna explained, “to know that [she] did it to [herself].”

### *Living with Loss*

After the mothers lost custody of their children they went through a period in which they engaged more deeply with their addictions. It was a period of indifference in their lives—lives which ceased to have meaning except by that defined by cocaine. For the women it was a downward spiral into “losing everything” and “cutting everyone out of their li[ves].” Crystal described herself as being “broken.” The depth of despair was

overwhelming. Charolette knew in her heart that she totally “gave up” to the point she knew she would “die out there.” Hanna described the deadly effect of losing her children...

No. I didn't feel like [living]. I felt that all the hope was gone.  
What did it matter? I might as well go die and that's what I tried to do. Like honestly, that's why I ended up in [hospital] because I tried to kill myself. My mom took me to the hospital and told them. You don't put her somewhere, she's going to be dead. And I probably would have been.

*THE VOID OF NOTHINGNESS*

Her loss, like death, changes me

For a time the very jaws of hell gape open

And I fall into darkness

Until there is nothing

No words

No thoughts

No soul.

*Scene Three: Reclamation*

If soul-ache was the place of the soul that hovered between living and dying, then reclamation represented a place of rebirth where life was declared once more. This dawning hailed an entrance into a new stage in their lives—one where hope began to exist again. Reclamation consisted of three areas: learning to live again, the perfect day, and reaching toward the future.

*Learning to Live Again*

Learning to live again was a process for the mothers. Their hearts and souls began to be expanded. They began to feel hope which came from a place where each woman refused to believe that the separation from her children was permanent. They looked toward a both a future where that they would have relationships and contact with their children, and a present where they still saw themselves as mothers.

Each mother emphatically and assuredly stated that “[she] would always be their mother.” Crystal firmly stated, “Nobody's going to change

that, no matter what. Your children will always come back. Will always come back.” Charolette held on to the belief that in the future, she would be able to have contact with her sons: “Another thing that keeps me going is that, knowing I’m gonna—that I can possibly one day see my boys. See my boys and talk to them, or even get a letter from them. It’s a start.” The mothers’ fervent belief in God as their higher power had helped them and continued to help them regain not only their lives but their children.

Part of learning to live again was coming to terms with the role that child welfare had in their lives. Charolette expressed a sense of thankfulness for child welfare when she said, “ But yet I thank them. I thank them for the person I am now... I thank them because they’re there. They gave me that push in life.” Hanna summed it up this way—

I can’t hate the system forever for wanting better for my children and taking them out of a negative environment... A child in an addictive atmosphere where there’s drugs and alcohol going on is not a good place for them. So I can deal with that...

### *A Perfect Day*

Each woman was able to describe a perfect day with her children which provided the motivation that carried her forward into her recovery. These days were of normal activities, but were profound for the mother herself. For Cristine and Crystal it would have been just in the act of “being with” them and “feeling of their energy and love.” The perfect day would be one of absorbing all the actions of their children as the children simply played around them.

The power of touch was something that was sacred to these women and represented the greatest gift that they could be given on a perfect day with their children. Cristine’s wish was just “to hold” them, while Crystal would simply want to “touch [their] faces.”

Hanna’s description of what a perfect day would be for her was filled with a longing that was bittersweet:

I think I would just hold her. So I would just hold her, and you know, I talk to their pictures every night. Clara...Clara she’s just... my mom says she’s just like me and it’s true...with Clara I would just hold her, I think. I would just want to be alone with her. The same with Izzy. And just do what she wanted to do.

*THE VISIT*

I touch your face  
And you are real;  
You are here.

I cry  
Tears of heartache past,  
Tears of present;  
Tears of future hoped.

*Reaching Toward the Future*

Each of the mothers represented individuals who didn't just go on trying—they were able to both conquer and reconcile a past that otherwise may have crippled them and to reach toward a future that had promise. Without the shackles of addiction their life had new freedom—a freedom to dream; a freedom to become that which was in their imaginations. Many of the women's dreams centered on what most people take for granted: having a nice house, a good job, and spending time with their families. Charolette's dreams revolved around employment and her family with the resolve that she needed a secure job to "become a mother again." Crystal's motivation was found in her children. "Everything I do is because I want a better life for my children. In all instances... it's hope for my kids and grandkids." Cristine firmly recounted a simple truth—

For a long time I thought I was powerless, but you know what?  
For the first time in forever, I finally feel like I can do this  
because before I became overpowered by crack, I was an amazing  
person. I worked two jobs. I had my own place. I took care of  
my friends. Like I could do it... I could function and I could  
make it happen because I was strong and able. Well, I finally feel  
that way again so I can do it and I will... I will, for me and for  
my kids because without my kids, I don't have me and without  
me, I don't have my kids.

Hanna echoed this when she said, "I have my recovery. And with my recovery is going to come life, and with life comes my kids."

*RECLAMATION*  
Once imprisoned  
I have broken free.  
Before me lies  
My children...  
My future.

*Discussion*

*Motivation to Remain in Treatment*

Thoughts of their children remained a primary motivator for the mothers to remain in treatment. Even when mothers permanently lost custody, they looked to a day when their children would surround them. This is consistent with Ferraro and Moe's (2003) study where they found that "even when women's rights were terminated and [mothers] were prohibited from interaction with their children believed that they would be reunited one day..." "This connection [with their] children helped [them] to survive and look toward the future with hope" (pp. 34-35). A 'perfect day' was conceptualized as a dream that she held close to her heart and soul and motivated her work not only toward recovery, but also how she lived her life. This dream provided a tangible foothold which brought forth the strength and "faith... [to] pursue a new direction (Jones, 2007, p. 207).

The power of 'touch' was a concept which permeated each interview. Each woman dreamed of simply holding her children—touching their faces. This image seemed to be healing for each of the women. Touch is considered to be both discriminative and emotional (McGlone, Vallbo, Olausson, Loken & Wessberg, 2007). Through touch emotions are communicated (Hertenstein, Holmes, McCullough & Keltner, 2009). It has been demonstrated that the sight of touch as well as the thought of touch light up the same areas in the brain in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans as if touch was occurring physically (McCabe, Rolls, Bilderbeck & McGlone, 2008; Seung-Schik, Freeman, McCarthy & Jolesz, 2003). Touch, therefore may be both emotionally protective and simultaneously acting as a source of motivation for the mothers to continue in their recovery.

*Redefining Life Without Children*

This study adds to the determination of what constitutes intense emotional pain (Barry, 2006b) in recovering mothers. The women in this study felt that custody loss was worse than if their children had died. This represents an ambiguous loss for these mothers (Betz & Thorngren, 2006).

Ambiguous loss is a loss that doesn't fit within the traditional notion of death and are felt to be either loss where there is physical presence but psychological absence or physical absence but psychological presence. Recovering mothers who lose custody of their children fit into the latter category. This type of loss can be compared to a child that has been abducted, but in this case the child is apprehended. In this loss "the natural processes of their lives stop the day the child is" apprehended (Betz & Thorngren, 2006, p. 360). These losses find mothers "stuck [in an] uncertainty of what their role is" with subsequent feelings of "powerlessness, insecurity in their future... and examining [their] values and beliefs... calling into question who one truly is" (p. 360). In addition, in ambiguous loss, the loss of role is mourned and creates a situation where a redefinition of relationship, roles and responsibilities presents itself to the bereaved.

Ambiguous loss presents itself as a situation where there are no rituals for meaning-making and the loss is socially stigmatized (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). "For years [the mothers] may go through the cycle of hope only to be disappointed once again" (p. 361) where the "grief can be exhausting" (p. 362). Betz and Thorngren note that "with [this] ambiguous loss the [mothers'] cannot simply move on. Their immobility or inability to deal effectively with the situation becomes a combination of... feelings of failure [and] the impossibility of the situation that... leave[s] them powerless" (p. 362).

The death of a child is considered to be catastrophic (Craighead and Nemeroff, 2004) and the outcome for these women was indeed catastrophic. "I felt that all hope was gone. What did it matter? I might as well just go and die..." This wish to 'go and die' was acted upon as each of the mothers engaged deeper with their addictions—consciously attempting to end their own lives with increased crack use.

Carlson, Matto, Smith and Eversman (2006) describe mothers who lose custody of their children as experiencing "intense emotional reactions" where mothers may surrender to feelings of desperation. Wijngaards-de Meij et al. (2007) notes that outcomes of parental loss of a child can be



parental mortality. Jiong, Precht, Mortensen and Olsen (2003) cite that mothers are particularly vulnerable in the first three years after a child's death and are at much higher risk of suicide than fathers. The loss of hope appears to be omnipresent whether the loss occurs because of custody loss or child mortality (Roberts, 1999).

A grieving process ensued which was consistent with Florczak's (2008) notion of finding meaning in the loss of their children. The strength and courage to go onward could be considered to be "post-traumatic growth" which is the "highest form of change associated with grief" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008, p. 31). Resilience was a demonstrated outcome where maladaptive coping (Sutherland, 2009) gave way to behaviours consistent with not only life and living, but also living well, which seemed to be tied to the ability to have hope, goals, and dreams.

### *Re-conceptualization of Life and Role*

While the literature points to recovering mothers re-conceptualizing their identity as mothers (Paris & Bradley, 2000; Sutherland et al., 2009) our study supported that it was their *role* as mothers that was re-conceptualized. Each of the women had a firm belief they were still mothers despite the loss of their children. This kept their identities as mothers intact. Hence it was not their identity that was relinquished when they lost custody but a process of renegotiation of role and what that role looked like. This role was primarily influenced by what having contact with their children would look like in terms of capacities and activities.

### *Making Sense of Losing Children*

Frankl (2006) found that finding meaning is integrally "unique and specific" to those that seek it. A recovering mother appears to make sense of losing custody when she accepts accountability for the loss of her children. Part of making sense was accepting that "mistakes" were made and moving onward despite those mistakes. Cristine said, "Whatever I have to live today, I can't worry about yesterday... I know that what I did yesterday is going to affect my tomorrow, but right now I can just be here."

A solid relationship with their higher power was a lifeline for these women. The concept of a higher power is synonymous with recovery programs (McGee, 2000; Ronel, 2000). Brome, Owens,

Allen and Vevania's (2000) study revealed that a relationship with a higher power resulted in "more positive self-appraisals, more positive relationships with others, and an empowering coping stance" (p. 482).

*Courage in the Face of Social and Societal Adversity*

The presence of the kind of social and societal adversity these women experienced is supported in the literature (Aston, 2009; Poole & Greaves, 2009). The mothers faced considerable mixed messages from both society and the institutions that served them. These conflicting messages had a significant impact when one considers the recovering mother's efforts to use motherhood as a driver to recover. These ambiguities left them with a considerable burden to carry—furthering feelings of being lost, confused, and alone. These mothers valiantly tried to change their lives in the face of complex ever changing 'rules'—always hoping that adherence to these conditions would result in the return of their children.

As Powis et al. (2000) note there is a definite struggle between using drugs and keeping custody of one's children. What this study adds is that there comes a time when mothers ultimately make this decision. This 'giving up' could be understood as a process of deliberation which is influenced on many fronts but primarily by the betrayals they experienced. The literature is clear that child welfare workers have an impact on recovering mothers who lose custody of their children (Poole & Greaves, 2009; Reid et al., 2008). What emerged from our study was that betrayal was not framed singularly from child welfare workers. Rather, betrayal was multidimensional and included substances, significant others, and the mother herself. While the findings support that literature which describes addicted women as seeing themselves as thwarted and punished (Reid et al., 2008) what is further gained from this study is the magnitude of the impact that others have upon them. In Charolette's words, "A mother will lose her life."

While Aston (2009) notes that addicted women learn to "hail" themselves as addicts, what gave the women the courage to persevere despite the reactions of others was a central belief that, in the words of one of the women in this research, they were "not the addiction" but the "person behind the addiction." They were first and foremost human beings. This adds to current knowledge that even in their darkest moments, their identity was not solely reflective of their addiction.

As we listened to our participants' stories about their children and their treatment, we were struck by their courage in both the very thoughts of their children and in the philosophies of the addiction treatment center which they resided. Each woman felt she had been loved and supported as she progressed through recovery. All of the women noted they were "loved" until they could once more love themselves. This is consistent with what Kearney (1998) saw as "truthful self-nurturing" and what Aston (2009) described as recovery assisting mothers to see themselves differently. The mothers experienced truthful *other*-nurturing until they could truthfully *self*-nurture. What this adds to current knowledge is that Maslow's (Boeree, 2006) basic human needs—even in recovery—extend beyond physiological and safety needs and are seen within the seeds of being esteemed, belonging, affection, and most importantly being loved.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Although generalization is not an aim of qualitative research, a limitation of this study is a lack of generalizability. However, the goal of this research was not generalizability, but transferability (Glesne, 2006). Studies which have small samples are thought to "...deepen understanding and build breadth into their investigation through mindfulness of other work in the field. Thus... just one 'case' can lead to new insights... if it is recognized that any such case is an instance of social reality" (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 498). Although this study had a small sample, with any study there are considered to be tradeoffs between depth and breadth (Patton, 2002). With this in mind, the aim of our study was to explore in detail the lived experience of recovering mothers who had lost custody of their children, or in other words, to seek depth. The breadth of this study could be reflected in the provision of associated literature and first examining disciplinary knowledge in the form of a literature review and then, situating findings in the context of that literature.

### *Recommendations*

There are several recommendations that arise from our research. For mothers in recovery, the ability to hold or touch their children, even if only in their minds, embodied motivation for the mothers. Guided imagery that simulates the experiences of holding or touching their children may

be valuable as a modality to sustain both well being and motivation in recovering mothers.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) note that “the encounter with major losses teaches the bitter lesson that the individual is vulnerable to experiencing great suffering” upon the death of a loved one (p. 33). For mothers, this represented a figurative death. Losing custody can be viewed as an ambiguous loss resulting in disenfranchised grief in a society that does not recognize the immense suffering of mothers who lose custody of their children (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Hazen, 2003). Grief counselling represents a viable strategy that could be easily undertaken as part of treatment in addictions recovery. Given the course of self-destruction that mothers engage in after losing custody, this may act as a buffer and provide new strategies to cope with the loss of their children and potentially decrease the risk of suicide.

The loss of custody has a profound impact on mothers. Hope is both lost and regained through the belief of others. Those who occupy positions of power, such as physicians, nurses, child welfare workers and addictions counsellors are called upon promote and communicate a sense of belief in an addicted mother to recover. Utilizing a strength-based perspective, examining personal belief and value systems as human beings and as professionals, as well as negotiating the underlying philosophies of their professions may do more to assist these mothers than any other single force in the recovering mother's lives. Perhaps only then will society and social institutions begin to create a “just and equitable” system (Kruk, 2008) that meets recovering mothers “where they are at” (Kullar, 2009, p. 10).

This begins with giving voice to mothers who have lost custody of their children and providing opportunities for dialogue. Instead of viewing these mothers as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ perhaps it is time to see addicted mothers as human beings with strengths and frailties—and the capacity to change their lives given appropriate supports and resources. Examining personal and professional belief systems may help professionals and institutions realize inconsistencies between their practices and values which may have served to penalize and subjugate addicted mothers in the mother's efforts to recover. The single phrase, “believe in me,” spoken of by one the mothers in this research, may have more power to change lives when acted upon by those who can and should enact change in our societal structures than any other phrase these mothers could utter.

*SHERPA*

Believe in me.

I am not the addiction.

I am the woman behind the addiction.

I laugh.

I cry.

I hurt.

I need you

To be my guide

As I climb

Over mountains

That rise above me.

Without you

I falter.

Without you

I fail.

Believe in me.

*Conclusions*

Human suffering can take many forms. For mothers with addictions the loss of custody of their children represents a dark, deadly period in their lives where there is intense suffering and pain. From a humanitarian perspective, this research has invited the reader to vicariously experience, through the stories of the mothers, the experience of child custody loss. While the reader may find this paper disturbing and unsettling, a bird's eye view of the pain, grief, and loss of recovering mothers becomes very 'real.' Perhaps more importantly, the message—that recovering mothers can recover from this loss—is paramount. Ultimately, the use of our findings has the potential to be influential as professionals consider their own practices, identify their beliefs and values surrounding addicted mothers in recovery, and perhaps as a result, take the first steps towards enacting social and disciplinary change.

Our research underscores the multiple contextual factors that are associated with substance abuse in mothers as well as their journeys to recovery. There exists a need to look at recovering mothers who have

lost custody of their children in a holistic sense while trying to ascertain influences that affect their drug use and subsequent custody loss. Examining the experiences of recovering mothers who have lost custody provides further insights that identify the needs of recovering mothers and the processes they go through in their journey to reclaim their lives. We hope that with further research, these processes will become better understood and assist in the progressive determination of policy and treatment options.

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## Morning Sickness and Gut Sociality: Towards a Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology

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*Beginning with the idea that our bellybuttons specifically and our guts more generally are a good thing to think with, this paper proposes the idea of “gut sociality”—that is, a material-semiotic, posthumanist mode of responsivity between bodies that hovers in, around, and through the gut. In order to deepen our understanding of this notion, I provide a phenomenological sketch of morning sickness as one instance of gut sociality. To conclude, I propose that in order to accommodate new modes of being embodied in our twenty-first century world, a method of posthumanist feminist phenomenology should be further developed. This practice should draw upon science discourses, but consider both the risks and the promise of a biological turn.*

### 1. Gut Sociality in an Ectogenetic Future

A couple of years ago, I picked up the New Year’s edition of *Adbusters*, stocked with warnings about our strange and precarious earthly future. A short article by Maria Hampton called “Faking Babies” included the following text:

“The first post-human borne by a machine will have no umbilical cord. Decanted from artificial wombs after ectogenesis, or out-of-body gestation, generation zero will lack not only bellybuttons—the trivial if collective scar of the human condition—but also any significant links to the previous 100,000 years of motherhood.” (Hampton, n.p.).

Hampton goes on to tell us that this “unsettling scenario” is already well underway. Indeed, the new millennium has already seen goat fetuses in Tokyo being kept alive for weeks in plastic breadbasket-sized tubs, and mice surviving (albeit “mortally deformed”) for up to 31 weeks on uterine-shaped scaffolds of collagen at Cornell University (Simonstein 2006). Scientists predicted a “functioning prototype” of an ectogenetically spawned being by the year 2010, but so far, scientists have been unable to fulfil this prediction.

Nonetheless, the scenario remains unsettling for a variety of reasons: bioethicists, for example, are justifiably concerned with legal and policy implications of ectogenesis. In a world where biotechnological invention is patentable, and life forms can be copyrighted, questions of ownership and commodification are a prime concern, while issues of eugenics, disability

rights, and research experiment protocols all raise equally pressing questions around the advent of such radical reproductive technologies. But what struck me immediately about Hampton's article was her almost off-handed mention of that "trivial scar of the human condition." In effect, ectogenesis would render the bellybutton redundant. Notwithstanding the fact that current biotech experiments in this area are all still very much attached at the navel (the goats in vats were removed from their mothers' uteruses, and their umbilical cords hooked up to artificial placentas, for example), this future-in-the-making got me thinking: are our bellybuttons really so trivial? What do we stand to lose if our bellybuttons become obsolete?<sup>1</sup>

Certain "facts" about our bellybuttons sprang immediately to mind: the bellybutton marks umbilical attachment to a maternal body. On one view, then, bellybuttons are a key index (in a Peircian semiotic sense)<sup>2</sup> of sexual difference; they demand of us, as Luce Irigaray might do, that we remember our embodied debt to our maternal beginnings.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, bellybuttons are also a significant marker of bodily commonality: as Hampton notes, they are our fleshy membership card to Club Human (although, more accurately, we might say, "Club Mammal").<sup>4</sup> In other words, they materialize both sexual difference *and* commonality across this difference. One question provoked by this navel-gazing might be whether bellybuttons could provide a fecund site from which to expand a feminist understanding of sexually different embodiment.

But thinking about bellybuttons provoked other questions and associations, too: when the "cord is cut," does not the gut continue to be an affective centre through which we take up and cultivate relations with others? In starting to pay attention to my own gut centre, for example, I noted that a considerable amount of embodied information is processed through this portal: the "funny feeling" we get when a situation seems out-of-sorts; the butterflies of anticipation when going to meet a loved one; the dull ache of separation from that same person. All of this intercorporeal affect seemed to collect and hover around "that trivial little scar."

Moreover, even as we extend outwards to connect to other beings, we simultaneously fold inwards, into our own guts, into our centres of affect.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while the affect I experience in my navel area could be my body reaching out in a mode of intersubjective relationality, just as likely, it is the world, and my situation therein, pressing into me, my gut responding. Not only a potential mediator between commonality and difference, my gut centre also seemed to serve as a mediating portal between my most deeply

buried or ignored affective states, and the intercorporeal community in which this affect was bound up. It seemed the bellybutton was not only a place on the map of my body, but also an action or a situation which I took up: perhaps we “bellybutton” (as a verb), as part of our affective interpermeation with our worlds and our others.

So all this led me to believe that bellybuttons might be good things to think with, in thinking about embodiment. More specifically, the act or situation of bellybuttoning suggests to me a way in which we might think about sociality as an affective, but also adamantly material, fleshy and even *visceral* phenomenon. To take apart the very word, “bellybutton” means a gut fastening. It is not a permanent welding but a way of attaching and unattaching through our guts. “Navel,” etymologically, relates to words such as “relationship” and “next of kin.”<sup>6</sup> I am thus prompted to ask: what kind of kinship relations, beyond the obvious maternal-foetal ones, do we enact or take up through our guts? In one sense, this question enacts a metaphoric maneuver—we are not, after all, attached to *other* others by a literal umbilical cord. Yet, by considering the bellybutton in its gerundial form, might it be possible to explore how our “gut fastenings” continue to be enacted across various instances of bodily being—with those who *affect* us, and whom we *affect* in turn? Importantly, then, “bellybuttoning” is more than metaphor. Bellybuttoning may indeed be a key “material-semiotic knot” (to materialize Donna Haraway’s phrase in a most literal sense!)<sup>7</sup> for exploring intersubjective, affective relations.

At the same time, the site of the bellybutton is a busy one. While it may be where some bodies get to know an emergent new life, growing from the inside *out*, or where others feel the angst of their troubled relations to the world pressing *in*, there are other kinds of relationality afoot in my gut, too. Is that queasiness I am experiencing a response to the phone call I don’t want to make... or is it only that the yoghurt I had for breakfast was slightly “off”? Are those distracting pangs a way of dealing with the absence of a lover... or simply the delay in eating my lunch? In other words, our gut centres also seem to ask important questions about how we categorize “gut feelings”: is that slow churn of disquietude a manifestation of intercorporeal sociality and affect, or rather just the good old biochemical machinations of my innards? On what grounds can we differentiate what we might call ‘affect’ from what we might call “biological reaction” or “physiological sensation”?

And, if we are going to entertain my suggestion that what is going on in the area of the navel is some sort of sociality—a *gut sociality*<sup>8</sup>—then

we also probably want to ask about the kinds of bodies that are engaged in this “socializing.” Fully-formed human bodies socialize, for certain. And it seems as though human bodies quite plausibly “socialize” with foetal bodies, in utero, as well. But humans and dogs socialize, dogs and cats socialize, and cats and fleas enact a mode of sociality, too: they all engage in responsive—rather than causal or mechanistic—relations with one another in ways that *matter*. And if this is true, might it not also be plausible that what is going on in the “merely biological” depths of my viscera is *sociality*, too?<sup>9</sup> Part of this question is about how we distinguish the biological from the socio-cultural, but in part this question also rests on our understanding of “intercorporeality,” and specifically what counts as a “corps” (or body) that is “*inter-*” (or social) with another: if the intertwining of bodies extends beyond the human, then perhaps the sensation I experience when my body intertwines with the bodies of “*lactobacilius gone wild*” (i.e., that slightly rancid yoghurt) is just another manifestation of intercorporeal sociality, but on a different, more-than-human scale. If, as Donna Haraway claims, my “companion species”—i.e. those specimens of life with which my body interacts and that make “me” who I am, and vice versa—are not only dogs, or horses, but also “rice, bees, tulips and intestinal flora” (Haraway 2004: 302), then certainly I enact social relations with these other entities too. In what other terms, after all, might we be considered *companions*? It seems that if we follow Haraway’s lead in expanding our understanding of intercorporeality, then the separation of the “merely” visceral or biological from the more profoundly intersubjective, socio-affective modes of embodiment becomes problematic.

All of these suggestions open, in turn, to a provisional understanding of what *gut sociality* might be. Might we (cautiously) suggest that this refers then to a mode of responsivity between bodies that hovers in, around, and through the gut?

Yet, while sociality could be simply defined as responsivity, or the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected<sup>10</sup> in mutually implicated ways, *gut sociality* entails two key features that are necessary to underline, if we wish to generate theoretical usefulness from this. First, this is a sociality that is both decidedly material and adamantly posthumanist. Here, posthumanism refers to the refusal of any unquestionable, a priori or hierarchical division between the human (and all we associate with this category) and the non-human,<sup>11</sup> particularly as such distinctions are often dependent upon an ontological separation of “natural” bodies from our “cultural” ones – that is, brute matter



from more meaningful (and usually exclusively human-oriented) processes and projects of subjectivity. As noted above, *gut sociality* problematizes these customary maneuvers. The bodies entwined in gut sociality are affecting one another in ways directed by the material stuff of which these bodies are made, but in open-ended circuits of response.

In considering this materiality, it is important to stress that such responsivity is not mechanistic causality. To help clarify this point, we could look at Elizabeth A. Wilson's work on organic empathy and the capacity of the biological substrata to "problem solve." Wilson seizes onto the idea of the "biological unconscious"—a term coined by erstwhile student and penpal of Freud, Sandor Ferenczi. According to Ferenczi, our biological matter manifests an unconscious; our organs have "memories"—ones that may be evoked by psychological stimuli but are manifest in a very real, *physiological* way—i.e. in the way our organs "think." On this view, our organs are "knowing things" all the time, "the [biological] substrata themselves attempting to question, solve, control, calculate, protect, and destroy" (Wilson 2004: 82).<sup>12</sup> Sociality as responsivity is thus registered not only by our socio-affective subjectivities, but in our very organic, visceral being.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, while the "other bodies" that interpermeate my gut are sometimes human bodies, they are also animal and vegetable bodies,<sup>14</sup> chemical or toxic bodies,<sup>15</sup> bodies just barely perceptible at the molecular level. For instance, while I may pay little attention to the intestinal flora that colonize my gut, I am co-implicated with these more-than-human embodied others in various intra- and extracorporeal circuits of sociality. In many different ways, they render my world hospitable and habitable. Gut sociality thus problematizes the idea that sociality would be solely an *interhuman* mode of relation, and instead suggests a notion of sociality that is posthumanist in orientation; this understanding opens up the term "sociality" beyond its common privileging of the human subject.

But even if such an expansive understanding of "sociality" is helpful in some ways, the caution we need to exercise here also concerns diluting the term so far as to render it meaningless. My queries here are thus geared towards a specific kind of (posthuman) sociality, namely gut sociality, where the term is qualified in a way that is *geographically* significant. We recall that this responsivity operates in a specific zone that is in, around and through the gut. Our bodies are complicated topographies whose spatial choreographies are hardly random. The location of our hands on the ends of our long, swingable arms is meaningful, just as there is a reason that our eyes are placed

on the fronts of our faces, or that our mouths and anuses are rather distant from one another.<sup>16</sup> The bellybutton and the gut, must also, then, occupy a specific and significant place upon our corporeal territory. In many languages, the word for navel has a secondary meaning of being a centre or a hub.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the fleshy barrier that separates outside from inside in the zone of the gut, and the internal viscera that this barrier thinly veils, are notoriously exposed—hence the symbolic weight of the foetal position, and the prudent advice concerning the sort of stance one should adopt when at risk of being mauled by a bear. Surrounded by bony cages but with none of its own to protect it, anchoring extensions out into the world but with none of its own to enact an instrumental grasp, the gut enacts of space of vulnerability that is as material as it is psychic, affective and symbolic. Located at the hub of all of our other bodily projects, the gut becomes a key site of mediation and interface between bodies of all kinds. Gut sociality, as a concept then, attempts to gather diverse instances of sociality as related to one another specifically because of their connected corporeal topography. Rather than distinguishing between our bodily engagements according to divisions of “biological” and “cultural,” or “mechanistic” and “intentional,” gut sociality suggests that we might consider certain bodily projects as joined by material proximity—in a sense, as a way of paying respect to the anatomical syntax that our own bodies suggest. Such a schematization does not intend to deny the important ways in which visceral processes might differ from other things. Rather, it hopes to open up directions of phenomenological inquiry that other schematizations might downplay or obscure.

The above proposal—that gut sociality might be a mode of embodiment worthy of further attention—thus forms the backstory of this paper. I now turn to a specific instance of this phenomenon—morning sickness—and discuss it in light of Drew Leder’s phenomenological account of viscera and foetal bodies. In undertaking my own phenomenological sketch of gestational nausea, my primary aim is to generate a more robust justification for the significance of a gut sociality, and the theoretical work it might do. Additionally, however, I hope to elaborate the potential of embracing a posthumanist sensibility in feminist phenomenology. Gut sociality, as noted, demands a certain conceptual shift toward the posthuman, but it will also require methodological flexibility. By opening the ways in which medical and other scientific knowledges can amplify (without ever replacing) first-person phenomenological description, I suggest that phenomenological epistemologies and methods can also become

posthumanist. In my own experimentation with such methods, I aim to contribute to the articulation of a feminist posthumanist phenomenology.

## 2. *Disappearing Bodies*

My research on embodiment is grounded in a phenomenological sensibility in terms of method and practice: I want to begin by going “back to thing itself”—that is, by asking questions derived from my lived experience of being embodied. Like some other phenomenologists, I am committed to the idea that close, careful attunement to sometimes seemingly banal aspects of embodiment can yield rich and powerful insights into the structures of things, but also into the ethics and politics of being in the world. As a feminist phenomenologist, I am also particularly attuned to those insights that might be revealed through attention to sexually different embodiment, and like some other feminists, I am committed to the idea our bodies are not just lumps of matter we lug around with us, but are rather valuable resources of resistance and knowledge. While my writing (of, on) the body is inspired in particular by the feminist continental tradition, my understanding of what it means to be a body also owes a great debt to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment—that is, as an open-ended, chiasmically entwined-with-the-world phenomenon through which we come to know that same world.<sup>18</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s rich phenomenologies of relationality and intercorporeity prepare me in important ways for thinking through the processes of responsivity that gut sociality suggests. And, although it is not the body of work for which he is best known, a posthumanist sensibility can be detected in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. In his *Nature* lectures, for example, he discusses our interpermeations with our “strange kin”—the other animal—whereby the cut between human and non-human is not ontologically absolute (2003: 271), and refers to the organic, more-than-human aspects of human corporeality. Yet, Merleau-Ponty’s attention to our viscera and the inner depths of our biological bodies is not fully developed here. For this, we need to turn elsewhere. Merleau-Ponty’s silence on this matter is in part the impetus for Drew Leder’s book, *The Absent Body* (1990). Here, Leder phenomenologically describes various examples of bodily viscosity to elaborate a theory of the “recessive body.” According to this theory, visceral and organic function are necessarily “hidden from view,” muted, accepted as virtually imperceptible, in order to facilitate our ecstatic body’s being-in-

the-world. Leder's key amendment to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, then, is to acknowledge the phenomenological significance of this visceral realm that the visible body rests upon. Viscerality, according to Leder, makes the ecstatic or surface body possible.

Moreover, in suggesting that one of the defining features of the recessive body is the *affective* way in which we experience the viscera's communications, Leder covers ground relevant to my proposal of gut sociality. He notes that in terms of the *surface*, or ecstatic body, "the separation between the perceiver and the perceived makes possible a dispassionate scan." But, "by contrast, visceral sensations grip me from within, often exerting an *emotional insistence*" (40, my emphasis). In other words, Leder implicitly notes the blurring between the visceral and the affective (or perhaps the way in which the visceral is part of the affective) that is a key feature of gut sociality. And not least, Leder is well aware that the geography of our body parts is always significant, and that the physical and existential aspects of our embodiment are always intertwined, and mutually constitutive (44). Again, these realizations are key to an appreciation of gut sociality as I have sketched it out above.

But there are tensions within Leder's account of our viscera as well. For example, Leder accounts for this "almost emotional" experience of visceral discomfort not in terms of a phenomenological opening—perhaps towards a world where the viscera are also social and affective—but rather in terms of a closing down: such sensations indicate a "withdrawal" from exteroception (directed surface perception) and also thus constitute a "more limited" perceptual field. "Inner sensation," or interoception, he claims, is nowhere near as robust as exteroception, where even a single sensation (e.g. touch) yields "a huge variety of sensory statements" (40). Leder thus recognizes the *difficulty* with which we might locate, distinguish or categorize inner sensations—but rather than reading this as complexity or a qualitative (rather than quantitative) difference from exteroception, Leder's argument depends upon understanding visceral experience as generally "lesser." Despite, then, the great strides that Leder makes in imbuing the viscera with phenomenological significance, a hierarchization of that significance still persists. Matter, viscera, and the biological substrata remain at the short end of this theoretical stick. Leder's descriptions of pregnancy as illustrative of the recessive body amplify these tensions. Leder writes:

The mysterious process of conception and implantation takes place out of the range of [the maternal body's] apprehension and will. ... But once [pregnancy is] initiated, an impersonal viscosity takes over... The early stages are largely imperceptible... The mother experiences gestational processes indirectly through their global effects on her body: nausea, food cravings, and the like. Later there is an interoceptive experience of the fetus's movements... Yet, as with all visceral processes, such perceptions are highly limited, traces of a vast invisible realm (60-61).

Undoubtedly, pregnancy is a mysterious phenomenon. Many women who have experienced it would corroborate the "disappearance" that Leder describes. But at the same time, other autoethnographic descriptions and phenomenologies of pregnancy<sup>19</sup> suggest that Leder's account might require further nuancing: conception and implantation are often sensed by women (they are not always entirely out of the range of apprehension); early stages of pregnancy, likewise, can be perceptible in various ways. The perception of foetal movements in some cases is not as "highly limited" as Leder suggests, and can be as complex, localizable and open to scrutiny as many exteroceptive experiences. To be clear, I am not stating that the experience described by Leder is *never* manifest, but only that the distinctions between out and in, maternal body and foetal body, interoception and exteroception are not as definitive as Leder indicates. The hierarchy between these poles is most clear in his assumption that the foetus belongs to "recessive" being—as it resides in a pre-personal state of "metabolic anonymity." This suggests that the foetus is not unlike an organ, and thus similarly, is primarily a "nullpoint in experience and memory" (60). In terms of our dominant body-as-lived, it mostly just disappears.

Leder's commitment to describing the predominant *absence* of the recessive body is likely what keeps him from fully accounting for the varied, localized and very *present* ways in which women can experience pregnant embodiment and foetal life. Additionally, his commitment to the connection between a literal visibility (i.e. that which we can see with our eyes) and that which we experience as *present* and thus can complexly schematize, might also account for his dismissal of other dimensions of sensation that women are very much alive to during pregnancy as, again, inferior to vision. We get a sense of this sentiment in the opening sentences of the book, where Leder writes that "my expressive face can form a medium of communication only

because it is available to the other's gaze. No organ concealed in the hidden depths of the body could actualize intersubjectivity in this way. It is thus necessary that our perceptual, motor, and communicative powers cluster at or near the body surface" (1). As evidenced in this statement, Leder's important arguments in this book demand a certain schematization of bodily experience such that certain phenomenological nuances can be foregrounded. But as a result, whatever is happening *in* the gut, *in* and around pregnancy must, like other visceral experience, take its place in a hierarchy of bodily experience—barely sensible, necessarily absent, and phenomenologically distinct from the outwardly-directed ways bodies engage in the world.

My intention is certainly *not* to counter Leder's account with the desire for a metaphysical distinction between the foetus and "mere organs." In fact, I find Leder's implicit alignment of foetal and organic life productively provocative.<sup>20</sup> But instead of downgrading foetal sensation to the level of barely perceptible, and thus phenomenologically inferior to exteroception, what if we instead *upgraded* organic life? Or better yet, what if we replaced such bifurcated hierarchies—whether explicit or implicit—with more ambiguous schemas? I propose that if we unpacked Leder's reference to "nausea and food cravings" in more detail—that is, if this visceral feeling were also understood as some sort of social responsivity between bodies—we might also begin to break down the hierarchies that Leder's account implicitly upholds. In doing so, we might be better able to understand gut sociality as a part of lived experience, whereby the social is not the sole prerogative of human subjects, whereby responsivity happens at the level of organs and matter, as well as between these and human subjects, and whereby the geocorporeal zone of the gut is recognized as a particularly rich site of such complex and posthumanist material sociality. To ground these propositions in a concrete example from the lifeworld, let us turn now to a phenomenological sketch of morning sickness.

### 3. *Morning Sickness*

Recently, I was talking to Older Sister about Younger Sister, now twelve weeks pregnant. *She's feeling really sick*, Older Sister told me, to which my immediate reaction was, *How awful!* I was immediately brought back to those days when even getting out of bed seemed like a heroic feat, when I wondered how many social

engagements I could cancel without losing my friends entirely. These were days of incurable lethargy and constant anxiety about what my stomach might be able to hold down. I remember carrying a paper cup everywhere I went so that I might spit out the constant stream of saliva caused by an ever-stimulated gag reflex—and I would appear to be simply drinking my coffee. But Older Sister interrupted this train of memories with her own surmised: *Isn't that great?* she asked. Having twice experienced the very *present* absence of these sensations as her own fetuses slowly miscarried, Older Sister was more inclined to view Younger Sister's discomfort as a positive sign. *It means something's happening*, she said.

*Something is Happening.* Some of that something is clear: a zygote becomes morula becomes blastocyst. There is implantation into the uterine walls. Optic cups and otic pits form; buds of nascent limbs sprout. A backbone is grown. The brain divides into vesicles, and cell differentiation occurs at break-neck speed. But other parts of that "something" are far more mysterious. While the developments I just described are apparently, according not only to Leder but to medical practitioners as well, *imperceptible*, for many women, these changes are accompanied by anything from mild queasiness to severe vomiting. Some enter a perpetual flu-like state; others experience sharp but short-lived periods of illness on a daily basis. About one woman in every hundred experiences symptoms so severe that she must be hospitalized (Flaxman and Sherman 2001: 146-7).

But the single most fascinating thing about gestational nausea, morning sickness, or (as the medical journals often refer to it) "NVP" (nausea and vomiting in pregnancy) is that it continues to completely elude medical certainty. Medical knowledge is incapable of explaining its precise cause, predicting its severity or effectively treating its symptoms. As noted in the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education (2003), "Much of the frustration that clinicians experience while managing nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (NVP) is caused by a lack of understanding of the various factors underlying NVP and how these factors interact in pregnant women" (Kouzi, n.p.). Furthermore, "Although the proximate, physiological mechanisms underlying NVP have been extensively studied, the cause of NVP remains unknown. There currently are no scientifically based treatments that address the cause of NVP" (n.p.). Quite simply, as one researcher phrased it, "hyperemesis gravidarum" (also known as severe nausea

and vomiting in pregnancy) is “a diagnostic and therapeutic enigma for the obstetrician” (Starks 2003, 253). This is echoed by others: “Hyperemesis gravidarum remains a puzzling condition for both physicians and patients because there is no known cause or cure”—or as this researcher is quick to clarify, while the biological cause *is* known (pregnancy), “the exact causal pathophysiological cause” remains a mystery (Munch 2002a: 1267). The very mechanics of the ill feeling are also elusive: “Although the mechanism of emesis (i.e. vomiting) is well understood, the mechanism responsible for nausea remains unclear” (Kouzi 2003, n.p.). All of this uncertainty leads, moreover, to what feminist researchers document as an overdiagnosis of psychosomatism: if medical science can’t prove how or why it is in the body, then it must be all in the (always female) patient’s head (see Munch 2002a and 2002b).

In other words, morning sickness does not fit well with western medical paradigms that expect biochemical and physiological processes to be intelligible and manageable. This leads me to venture two further propositions. First: could it be that the “biological substrate” is not as mechanical as its reputation might suggest? Gestational nausea and vomiting may be exactly the kind of organic problem solving at work in the biological unconscious that Sandor Ferenczi, and Elizabeth A. Wilson after him, posit. While there is *clearly something happening at the biological, visceral level* (Munch 2002b), this substrate is hardly “mechanical” (as in: programmable, predictable, knowable). The viscera are engaged in some thinking of their own. The medical profession has at times proposed some tentative explanations of gestational nausea. One that has gained more traction than others in recent years is the suggestion that morning sickness is a defense mechanism, deployed by the body to protect the particularly susceptible maternal body—and the even more vulnerable foetus—from potential food-borne pathogens (Flaxman and Sherman, 2000). But even if such an explanation turned out to be the case, it would support rather than discredit the notion that the viscera are engaged in some rather sophisticated problem-solving. Recalling that gestational nausea is predictable in neither presentation nor severity, again, we have to resist the temptation to label potential food pathogens a mechanistic “cause.” Perhaps not unlike the “thinking” fauces (the place where the back of the mouth joins the pharynx) that, in Elizabeth A. Wilson’s account, is ideally situated to rewire the empathic circuits between mood, digestive organs and social circumstances of a person with bulimia, the gut is ideally placed



to rewire the empathic circuits between maternal body, foetal body and potential external threats. The viscera, like Wilson's fauces, are attempting to "question, solve, control, calculate, protect, and destroy" (Wilson 2004: 82). Perhaps our gurgling, brute, biological substrate is *also* socio-affective. This is gut sociality, as profoundly material, at work.

But this leads me to my second proposal: if gestational nausea can be considered a manifestation of organic intelligence, we also need to reappraise the tendency to separate the biological from the loftier socio-affective milieu commonly attributed to human subjects. While no sufferer of morning sickness denies that the ill-feeling is biologically manifest, and while claims of psychosomatic invention are rightly called out as subtly misogynist, belonging to the same genealogy of "hysteria" diagnoses, we also have to acknowledge that there is something *more than* "merely" *biological going on here*. Is it irrelevant that morning sickness circulates primarily in the place most associated with affective sociality (i.e. the gut)? Moreover, is it mere coincidence that it is brought on precisely when a body is opening up her corporeal space to another? At the same time as the inexplicable biological processes of nausea and vomiting are at work, a profound affective and social transformation is underway—and *in the very same place*. Here, morning sickness becomes a form of "bellybuttoning" whose (albeit ambiguous) relation to other forms of gut sociality is underwritten by this sharing of corporeal space.

In fact, gestational nausea is not entirely unlike the queasiness I feel in other daunting social situations: going to a job interview, or meeting up with a once-upon-a-time crush. Gestational nausea can be a similar sort of nauseous feeling, just pushed to a debilitating extreme. "Anticipation" and "trepidation" are words that come to mind in both instances. Both evoke a visceral dis-ease that is also social. This tentative comparison suggests that gestational nausea might also be a question of *intersubjectivity* and affective directedness—precisely of the kind that Leder claims eludes the recessive body. Morning sickness is not just a question of organs solving physiologically-oriented problems, but also a question of coping with the anxiety and ignorance that can accompany the transition from one body to two. In a sense, while early studies of NVP that attributed this affliction to cultural factors, including gender role pressures, are now largely ignored as off-base,<sup>21</sup> they may have been on to something in their suggestion of the complex interplay between biology and culture, or at least between what is biologically manifest but also culturally mediated (even if this

author, too, is happy to leave the condescension of some of these studies in the forgotten past). Regardless of the degree of nonchalance of any expectant maternal body, the events of pregnancy and childbirth are always semiotically charged. This does not mean that NVP is psychologically fabricated, but only that the organic sociality afoot here is responsivity on more levels than one.

To put it otherwise: as an example of organic problem solving, morning sickness is a clear instantiation of gut sociality. But our understanding of gut sociality deepens even further when we acknowledge that gut sociality is not *only* about organic communication at a substratum “beneath” the level of human subjectivity, but *also* about the complex circuits of responsivity at play between the biological substratum and the human subject, *and* between the human and the cultural world, *and* between the organs and the cultural world—all knotted together in the gut. Gut sociality shows up the natural or biological as inextricable from the cultural or (commonly) “social.” As Donna Haraway would say, gut sociality is “turtles upon turtles of natureculture, all the way down” (Haraway 2004, 2).

In an early public articulation of some of the ideas I am suggesting here, Florentien Verhage provided an incisive response that suggested a schematization to some of my provisional thoughts. “Gut,” she noted, in my paper seemed to refer to three different things: a general bodily location, home to bellybuttons and morning sickness; “guts” as a general moniker for messy biological viscera; and “gut” as a synonym for instinct and affect, such as we invoke in the expression of “gut feelings.” While I had not categorized my thoughts in that way, I was impressed by the order that Verhage was able to impose on them. Now, having more time to reflect on this, I am more curious (without rejecting the helpful insights of the commentary) about the work that such schematizations do. While Verhage’s schema underlines the distinct ways in which we think about guts, this same schema also ironically reminds us of the way in which these three ideas are bound to one another in our imaginaries of embodiment. As such, the next question one poses might be “*which* meaning of gut do you mean?”—but this question only reinstates the hierarchical compartmentalizations, whereby we have visceral disappearances, affective experiences and (brute, inert) bodily “stuff,” all largely separate. Phenomenology can help us get under schematizations; to problematize them and reveal their inadequacies. In this phenomenology, then, I am more interested in asking: what is it

about these three different facets of gut-ness that magnetically pulls them together? I want to explore how all of these bodily experiences are inter-implicated, and largely *inseparable* (except via sedimented categorizations). In another interweaving of the material-semiotic, it cannot be coincidence that we refer to all of these things in terms of the gut. Nor is it coincidence that they all find a common corporeal nesting place.

#### 4. *On Method: Toward a Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology*

When I began this study, I had a gut feeling that morning sickness might be a meaningful situation to think with. But if it was, then I had a problem: even though this experience was closer to me than my own skin—indeed, completely enveloping me at times—my comfortable human-scaled way of being-in-the-world would only allow me to get so far into gestational nausea. The phenomenological methods I had been trained in depended upon being able to access the vicissitudes of bodily life, in its various modalities: cognitive, motor, perceptual, affective.<sup>22</sup> But the recessive body described by Leder remains *ipso facto* beyond this access. Above, I aim to nuance the way in which Leder characterizes the disappearance of the viscera, and the experience of pregnancy along with it. But at the same time, the general contours that Leder sketches move in a phenomenologically sound direction: the workings of the viscera and other aspects of the recessive body *are* less readily available to me than other surface embodied phenomena. Although I am certain that the disappearance is not as complete as Leder would have me believe, gut sociality is still at the outer reaches of what my human-scaled self can render sensible. Here I agree with Leder: NVP grips me, wrenches my gut in its grasp—but as soon as I try to make this experience explicit, so that I might analyze or even carefully describe it, it slips away again, carried off on the cloud of my discombobulating visceral discomfort. In some ways, I understand this affliction no better than the doctors do. Visceral life appears to us in qualitatively different, more nuanced and complex ways. We can access it, but this access requires some work. So the questions that faced me were: How could I take my phenomenological attention into the inner workings of my viscera? What sort of methodological manoeuvres would allow me to get right up inside my gut? In order to phenomenologize this experience—that is, to go “back to the thing itself” with any sense of critical bracketing that would hold my sedimented understanding of the

phenomena at bay, I would need to find a way of gaining access to the subtleties of this experience.

Paradoxically, the answer to my questions seemed to lie in the same discourses that cordoned off the biological substrate in the first place. While lived experience certainly reveals that *something* is going on in the guts of those who suffer from morning sickness, getting a grip on what that something is, for this phenomenologist at least, required recourse to the medical literature. I needed science to help explain to me the anatomical links between my digestive track and the hormone levels in blood. I needed science to sketch out for me the changes underway, burrowing into my endometrial tissue. This knowledge provided not only a vocabulary, but a “helping hand” in honing in on these subtle phenomena. For instance: if I knew that my levels of HCG – the pregnancy hormone – were elevated, how might that attune my attention to my viscera in certain ways? Or, if I could grasp the specific mechanisms of emesis – i.e. a marked reduction in gastric tone and motility, followed by a retrograde contraction that moves the contents of the small intestine into the stomach, followed by relaxation of the gastroesophageal sphincter to allow passage of gastrointestinal contents up and out through the mouth (in short : how vomiting happens) – how might these details attune my attention in certain ways? Could these scientific discourses be the *amplifier* I was looking for?

The relationship between scientific knowledge and phenomenology is complex. Certainly, the founding thinkers of the phenomenological tradition often drew on contemporaneous scientific experimentation results as a way of framing their explorations—Merleau-Ponty’s work is a particularly notable example of this practice. Contemporary scholarship under the rubric of neurophenomenology and naturalized phenomenology (including the work of scholars such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Shaun Gallagher), is a current example of an even further intertwining of the scientific (including the clinical) and the phenomenological. Other thinkers, such as William E. Connolly, bring embodied phenomenology closer to science by articulating the connections between thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze—suggesting that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological accounts could be folded into those of neuroscientists as a way of deepening the reflections of both (180). After all, the voracious appetites of our intestinal flora, the chemical signals passing between our endocrine system and our moods, or the acute thirst felt by an inadequately watered kidney—all such phenomena impinge upon our being in the

world, and are thus as phenomenologically significant as crossing a bridge or throwing a ball. But if we want to phenomenologize such situations, the more traditional methods of phenomenological attunement bring us up short.

Such transdisciplinary experiments are undoubtedly nudged forward by the hurtling speed of progress and change in the domains of science and biotechnology. These advances alter the landscape of knowledge tools available to us through which we might disclose the world. But, more significantly, I want to underline, these advances actually alter the way in which we experience embodiment in that same world. For instance, in a quote from Drew Leder, cited above, we noted how Leder cordons off the visceral body from the surface body precisely because he claims we cannot perceive the depths of our body. But with the help of advanced biotechnologies, *this is changing, and it is inaugurating new configurations of the “embodied I.”* In order to entertain the possibility of this claim, though, one has to agree that the experience of embodiment—that is, how we exist and understand ourselves as embodied beings—is not some inert, static, enduring sort of truth.<sup>23</sup> At the present moment, in the twenty-first century, we are increasingly living our bodies as fragmentable, augmentable, extendable, and intelligible in ways that are mostly new. Organ transplantation, biobanking and assisted reproduction fragment our bodies in new ways, putting pressures on commonly held notions of bodily integrity.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, we are becoming increasingly aware of our embodiment as intimately imbricated in and invaded by our environmental others – animals, bacteria, toxins, and the like.<sup>25</sup> The insides of our viscera are now available to us in microscopic detail, and we can track the remnants of our psychopharmacaceutically enhanced urine, dispersing through our local watersheds and beyond. But again, these are not changes extraneous to our lived embodiment. The ways in which we understand what it means to be a body, the cartographies that our bodies chart, and our inextricability from complex webs of relation are all *lived* by us, in phenomenologically relevant ways. The miniature videocamera inserted down one’s throat creates a new relation to one’s stomach than one might have previously had.<sup>26</sup> The implantation of another person’s kidney shifts and radicalizes the experience of intersubjectivity in significant ways.<sup>27</sup> Today, the “I” is both technological, and ecological, connected up with other bodies of all kinds, and lived at diverse levels of sensory perception. The question then is: to what extent is embodied phenomenology, and feminist phenomenology in

particular, equipped to deal with these changes? Merleau-Ponty taught us that existence *is* embodiment—that we only know the world through our experience of being embodied. But what do we do when that experience begins to significantly shift? How might our phenomenological methods be revised to be adequate to this new experience?

In other words, can we still rely on a journey “back to the things themselves,” on close and careful attunement to embodied experience, on extended first-person description schematized across matrices of meaning, to make sense of this new way of being embodied? If we are now experiencing our bodies in both increasingly diffuse *and* increasingly fragmented or microscopic ways, any methodology that relies on bodily experience is going to have to morph in order to accommodate this changed experience. Ulrich Beck, for example, notes that many of our contemporary embodied experiences “require ...the ‘sensory organs’ of science—theories, experiments, measuring instruments—in order to become visible or interpretable” (cited in Alaimo, 19). Feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo, drawing on Beck’s work, suggests that “syncretic assemblages” of knowledge<sup>28</sup> are needed to understand the ways in which our bodily matter is implicated in a world that cannot be adequately grasped through one method, or one school of belief, alone (19). Even if Alaimo herself insists that the “trans-corporeality” she describes is “*not* a phenomenological ... stance” (2009, 23), I think this surmises both underestimates the value of phenomenological description, and also instates too wide a gap between the attunement of phenomenologists and that of natural scientists to the wonder of the world. In short, I believe scientific knowledge and phenomenology can be one of these syncretic assemblages.

In his assessment of our recessive embodiment, Leder points to the advent of biotechnological interventions in our visceral or inner bodies as well: sphygmomanometers allow us to “access” blood pressure, x-rays allow us to see our lungs, the lumen is made visible via colonoscopy. For Leder, however, the key point is that “the absences that haunt my bodily depths are not effaced by these reflective maneuvers” (44). In other words, while the readings of such apparatus are visible to us, for Leder they do not join up in a meaningful way with our *experience* of our insides; the absences persist. I would like to move in a different direction, where the experience of pregnancy is again instructive. My move insists that we recall the co-constitution of nature and culture, of imagination and matter. Our experience of the body-as-lived is never simply given, and is rather mediated

by the categories, ideologies and explanatory tropes we use to get a grip upon material experience. Leder does not dispute this: in a footnote to this section, Leder notes that our Western schemas of understanding “the visceral body” as discrete organs “inside” a body may contribute to their disappearance from our powers of perception; he suggests that other systems of knowledge, such as Taoism and Buddhism, may be better equipped at bringing their not completely absent, but rather exceptionally subtle, appearance to us into focus.<sup>29</sup> In other words, what Leder acknowledges and what I hope to draw out even further is that once the mediating tools of biotechnology are brought into our sphere of experience, they cannot help but impinge upon the ways in which we experience ourselves and our bodies. There is no “pre-mediated” state to get back to here: language, custom, and technology *all* mediate our experiences, no less than the specific powers of our primate retinas and optic nerves mediate what we are *sure* we perceive.<sup>30</sup> And if this is true, then it follows that our experience of the body-as-lived is not immune from the structures of our various imaginaries. The visual landscape that opens to us through biomedical imaging technologies and other types of monitoring and assessment apparatuses *changes* how we actually experience our bodies because we take on these schematizations, and integrate them into our ways of being in the world. The absence of the liver that we experience *as absence*, so persuasively documented by Leder, *does* shift when a blood sample narrates the function of my liver to me. Similarly, an ultrasound that re-presents to me a kicking, reaching foetus with a pumping, pulsing heart shifts the ways in which I perceive the subtle movements in my abdomen—just as knowledge about emesis shifts the queasy sensation that may accompany them.

This is not a failure of phenomenology to “get back to the things themselves;” it is rather an admission that the structures we uncover always maintain a degree of contingency. We thus need to account for the various mediations that always accompany our phenomenologizing. In this case, with care and subtle attunement, I can move my breath through my visceral core, honing in on the place where my liver lives, or I feel the pang at my pelvis no longer as an indeterminate stab but as a hand, or a foot, communicating—but scientific knowledge might help me achieve this subtle attunement. As with all habit, the ongoing layering of technologically mediated knowledges upon our bodies must be accounted for. As Foucault taught us decades ago, we can’t just decide *not* to take such knowledge into account – it has already disciplined us, for better or worse.<sup>31</sup> So why not use this knowledge in the

phenomenological method as well?

But in calling on such amplification, we have to ensure that the mediations of scientific knowledge are *necessarily* in conversation with my other ways of knowing the world, both exteroceptive and interoceptive. A laproscope, or a clinical trial, or a report on mercury levels in my soil, does not invent the sociality going on in my gut—I can feel the various subtle ways that it travels through my being. Measurements may occur in laboratories, but the phenomenon is already there, burrowed in my flesh. These conversations, these reciprocal but always imperfect dialectics between scientific knowledge and phenomenology, reaching toward greater understanding, are thus the tools of phenomenological attunement. Phenomenology, moreover, can be approached as a key tempering of scientific discourse that tends to objectify and instrumentalize the focus of its study, keeping this discourse alive to the “wonder in the face of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xiii) that grounds phenomenology, but which is also likely the original impetus for most scientific inquiry.

When such “wonder” is brought together the serious acknowledgement of the biological substrata that one finds in science, this can shift the experience of our own humanness. The edges of our discretely bounded selves begin to blur, and our skin becomes increasingly transparent. In other words, while phenomenology may not *require* this amplification, I argue that this resource contributes to a posthumanist frame of understanding that can enhance, rather than annul, phenomenology’s insights into what it means to be human. This enhancement can also be distinctly feminist. Feminist phenomenologies have long disputed the phallogocentric myth of Man, individualized and omnipotent, at the centre of the world. It follows that a posthumanist frame might bring such challenges to an even deeper level. The relational ontologies of gut sociality, for example, invite us to rethink the privileging of the human over the more-than-human, or the cultural over brute matter. Such explorations might invite further investigation of how such hierarchies are coexistent with the logics of phallogocentrism.

But such methodological experimentation is not without risk, and here I would like to assess this risk in specifically feminist terms as well. As phenomenologists well know, there is a danger that scientific paradigms will eclipse the experience of lived bodies. Scientific schematizations can overtake the body-as-lived, in all of its fluctuating and interpermeating complexities. But earlier in this paper I underlined my commitment, as



a feminist phenomenologist, to paying attention to the body, and as a feminist I am also attune to criticisms of biological and other scientific thought on additional terms, namely, that it can wrest this knowledge and power from us, by congealing, reifying or essentializing aspects of our embodiment in ways that incarcerate and oppress us. We know that treating science as the new, all-knowing god can have disastrous effects, not only epistemologically but also practically, in the lives of women, people of colour, indigenous peoples, queer people, people living with disabilities, and others.<sup>32</sup> In this context, the feminist stakes of handing the reigns over to science are quite high. While phenomenologists in the tradition of Merleau-Ponty distinguish their work from empiricism because of the latter's claim to absolute and unambiguous truth, the feminist tradition I am invoking here is more concerned with the false objectivity of empiricism, and the power of the purportedly "neutral" scientific knower to determine the fate of those bodies it marginalizes.<sup>33</sup>

But while there is much truth in the sentiment that feminist accounts of embodiment seem to have been "brokered through a repudiation of biological data" (Wilson 2004: 70), there is another story to be told about feminism's engagement with science as well. It should come as no surprise that feminists have also done a considerable amount of the dirty work in slowly chipping away at the pervasive sets of binaristic dualisms (women/men, nature/culture, civilized/primitive, etc.) upon which masculinist humanism was erected. Feminists have been at the forefront of dismantling these binaries, because *it was politically necessary for survival*—for women and other marginalized bodies that were positioned on the wrong side of this sedimented divide. This has also meant, then, a long and persistent (if sometimes disavowed) tradition in feminist thought of refusing the separation between the natural and the cultural, of the materially "real" and the semiotically constructed. In constructing the genealogy of my own inspirations in developing a feminist posthumanist phenomenology, I look to those feminist thinkers who enfold scientific discourse into their scholarship precisely because it is a way of *resisting* the ways in which science has been used against us. Anne-Fausto Sterling on bone density, Donna Haraway on evolutionary science, Evelyn Fox Keller on genetics, Karen Barad on quantum physics, Stacy Alaimo on environmental toxins—this is just the bare beginning of a long line of debts. While we should be sceptical of the dangers that lurk in current turns towards "new materialisms," the natural sciences and posthumanism,

we also have much to gain. As Elizabeth A. Wilson writes, “by engaging so little with the vicissitudes of biological systems, feminism is closing itself off from a vibrant source of political agency and energy” (2008: 390). It is clear that even as we are wary of the dangerous power that the discourse of science holds, we cannot afford to ignore it. Innovative and liberatory understandings of embodiment must continue to investigate how viscosity and intersubjectivity, how the biological and the cultural, how the outside and the inside, are all co-imbricated.

Taking these risks into account, then, the feminist partnership between phenomenology and science that I am advocating is as cautious as it is enthusiastic, as critical as it is creative. In enfolding scientific knowledge into our phenomenological accounts, we need to remain vigilant that this is a means of *amplifying* our otherwise difficult-to-perceive embodied experiences, thus refusing to put the horse before the cart. To amplify is neither to corroborate, nor justify—nor certainly to set the bar. It is rather a rendering of an experience more accessible, more graspable, more intelligible, in an ongoing and imperfect conversation. These enfoldings are as ethical and political as they are descriptive.

### 5. *Punctum and Possibility*

In conclusion I would like to bring us back to where we began—both in the context of this paper, and in the context of our own gut-facilitated beginnings: the bellybutton. In the section in which he discusses foetal life, Drew Leder also states that “my very being alive refers me back to a necessary, though elusive, point of origin. Its traces are imprinted upon my body in the form of a navel” (60). In making this claim, Leder hopes to further substantiate the *impossibility* of connection with the recessive body. Once again, however, I will take Leder’s observations in another direction. I want to ask: What if we gazed upon our navels—upon this “imprint”—rather as a site of possibility that is opened up in and through our guts? This fleshy knot is the very anchor of my material-social existence. It refers me back to a maternal debt that I cannot forget, precisely because of its imprint in my material flesh. Starting from this material-semiotic knot, I work inwards, and outwards. And again, it is no coincidence that it is here, in this navel zone, that new, other-than-cognitive knowledges are born, and other-than-human relations are forged. The bellybutton is a healed puncture—perhaps the “punctum” that Chela Sandoval describes, following Barthes, as “that which

breaks through social narratives to permit a bleeding, meanings unanchored and moving away from their traditional moorings." For Barthes, she notes, this is a "gentle hemorrhage" (141).

The bellybutton no longer gapes, but it still serves as a material reminder of this beautiful wound, a never-fully sealed portal between my inside and my outside, between my debts to a past and my still unfolding gifts to a future, between what I know and what I don't. This is a fitting site for the cultivation of gut sociality—that is, the fastening together and pulling apart of all kinds of bodies, in a responsivity that moves in, around and through my belly. But it is also a fitting site for acknowledging the invisibilized forms of sociality that our schematizations, methodological sedimentations and persistent humanist prejudices fail to notice.

Trust me; I have a gut feeling.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to several anonymous reviewers for their comments and insights to an earlier draft of this paper. I also thank Florentien Verhage for her prepared commentary on a version of this paper that I gave at the meeting of the Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture in Montreal (2010). My conversations with Matthew King, and his own phenomenological work on "gut feelings," have also been inspiring, and led to productive exchanges. All of these insights have not only helped sharpen my claims, but also suggested other directions in which to take them, beyond the scope of this paper. This paper, and the larger project of which it is a part, is in memory of Barbara Godard, who modelled compassionate responsivity like too few others. The goings-on in the belly are hardly all benign.

<sup>2</sup> As semiotician Charles Peirce explains, indices are a type of sign that "show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them" (Peirce 1894: §3).

<sup>3</sup> See Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Or, even more specifically, "Club Placental Mammal." The ways in which bellybuttoning, or other forms of gut sociality, inaugurate webs of relation and difference within the more-than-human animal world are the subject of another paper.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, according to Tantric thought, the Navel Centre absorbs, transforms, balances and distributes chi energy (life-force) from both the macrocosm (Heaven and Earth Chi) and the microcosm (the other centres and organs within our body) (Chia 174-178). Again, the bellybutton seems to function as a mediating portal between outside and inside.

<sup>6</sup> As this etymology traces back to Sanskrit, Proto-Indo-European and Avestan, this association holds not only for English but extends to European and Middle Eastern languages as well. "Navel" has a secondary sense of "centre" in most Eastern languages.

<sup>7</sup> For Haraway, a material-semiotic knot is a material thing or body that is potentially charged with symbolic meanings in a way that opens up a lively site of socio-cultural interrogation. Since such phenomena do exist and are lived, they are different from tropes or (mere) metaphors. See Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> This phrasing, and indeed my project here in general, is indebted to and in part inspired by Elizabeth A. Wilson's work on "gut feminism" (2004), where she asks what "anatomy (specifically the gut) can know" (70) and suggests that "gut feminism" is "a feminism that can think innovatively and organically at the same time" (86).

<sup>9</sup> For a recent argument that gathers scientific and philosophical evidence for social relations in the more-than-human world, see Olkowski, "Politics -The Highest Form of Philosophy?", in particular her commentary on Henri Bergson (2012).

<sup>10</sup> I am aware of the echo of Deleuze and Guattari, and their understanding of what it means to be a body, in this provisional definition. However, while both deleuzian bodies and my conception of sociality share the capacity to affect and be affected, here I hope to stress the idea of responsivity, in particular, such that sociality moves toward the domain of the ethical, and not only the ontological. For a discussion of material sociality as the precondition of ethics in the interhuman world, see Chandler and Neimanis,

forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> While posthumanism has come to mean many things on our contemporary critical landscape, I am drawn to Karen Barad's statement that posthumanism might simply be "a refusal to take the distinction between "human" and "nonhuman" for granted" (2007: 32). This view is neither a denial of the human nor a collapsing of the human and other bodies. On the contrary, such a view allows us to account for the specific location and capacities of the human in more responsible and critical ways.

<sup>12</sup> Ferenczi discusses organic response to trauma to illustrate his point, while Wilson elaborates the "problem solving capacities" of our organs and physiological matter in the instance of vomiting in eating disorders as another instructive instance. See Wilson, "Gut Feminism" (2004).

<sup>13</sup> This mode of thinking has key implications for feminist theories of embodiment, as Wilson underlines: Ferenczi's use of an analysis of materialization reveals "the plastic nature of all organic substrate. In so doing, he generates a schema for feminists wanting to think about biological substrate as another scene, rather than as bedrock" (2004: 77-78). I will return to these implications near the end of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (2000), Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2008).

<sup>15</sup> See Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* (2010), Simms, "Eating One's Mother," (2009), and Neimanis, "We are All Bodies of Water" (2009).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Elizabeth A. Wilson again turns to the work of Sandor Ferenczi to elaborate the specific geocorporeal significance of the fauces—the apperture that "connects at the upper end with the mouth, nasal passages, and ears and at its lower end with the esophagus." In Wilson's discussion of how the body of the bulimic "rewires" the empathic circuits between extracorporeal social events, mood and digestive organs, it becomes significant that the fauces is located particularly where it is, in order to "problem solve" in specific ways: "Much more than the front of the mouth or even a little lower down into the esophagus itself, the fauces is a site where the communication between organs may readily become manifest" (2004: 80).

<sup>17</sup> In looking at Leonardo Da Vinci's iconic drawing of the Renaissance Man, we note that the centrality of navel geography is echoed in this classical corporeal geometry lesson as well: all lines spanning the diameter of the outer circle intersect at the bellybutton.

<sup>18</sup> For further details on Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm, and of the intertwining of our bodies and the world, caught up in a mutually determining element that Merleau-Ponty calls "flesh," see "The Intertwining-The Chiasm" in Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (2000).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh," (1993), Young, "Pregnant Embodiment" (1998) and Steingraber, *Having Faith* (2001).

<sup>20</sup> Is it possible that the elaboration of gut sociality might also help us theorize foetal agency—material and active, yes, but not *human*—in ways that resist an automatic ascension to anti-choice positions? This will be the subject of another paper.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Wolkind and Zajicek (1977)

<sup>22</sup> I refer to the method of body hermeneutics, developed, practiced and taught by Samuel Mallin. See Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology* (1979) and *Art Line Thought* (1996).

<sup>23</sup> For example, we can already trace a change from a nineteenth century "ecological" understanding of embodiment in the west, as documented by environmental historian Linda Nash, to the dominant twentieth century experience of ourselves as discretely bounded individuals, that emerged in tandem with the body imagined in western allopathic medicine that saw disease as intrinsic to an individual body and isolatable body parts (Alaimo 2010, 90). Rosi Braidotti invokes the concept of "organs without bodies" to

describe the liminal space of the late twentieth century where bodies stopped being more than the sum of their parts, and instead those parts (a womb, a kidney, a heart) were rendered increasingly detachable, fragmentable, alienable through biotechnology (Braidotti 2011).

<sup>24</sup> See Blackman, "Bodily Integrity" (2010).

<sup>25</sup> See Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* (2010) and Simms, "Eating One's Mother" (2009).

<sup>26</sup> See Sawchuk, "Biotourism, Fantastic Voyage and Sublime Inner Space" (2003).

<sup>27</sup> See Waldby, "Biomedicine, Tissue Transfer and Intercorporeality" (2002).

<sup>28</sup> While syncretism is a term most often used in relation to religion—as the mixing and melding of different schools of belief—it has also been used in relation to politics and art. A useful analysis of the term comes from Greek scholar Vassilis Lambropoulos (2001), who describes syncretism as "the agonistic yet symbiotic coexistence of incompatible elements from diverse traditions" and notes the particular viability for such a theoretical concept in a multicultural and global world.

<sup>29</sup> Leder hints, however, that such Eastern knowledge would also be a matter of training—not unlike my suggestion that we can hone or train our phenomenological attunement (paradoxically) by using the knowledge of the very systems that also obfuscate the appearance of visceral sociality to us.

<sup>30</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" (1991).

<sup>31</sup> Such discipline is never absolute, and opens its own spaces of resistance.

<sup>32</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" (1991).

<sup>33</sup> See Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," (1991) and Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account" (1993).

## WHAT KIND OF SAYING IS A SONG?

Geraldine Finn

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*This essay takes the risk of a formal adventure – both on and off the page – in order to do justice to the specificity of the event, the particular Saying, named ‘song.’ Written by ear to be (read aloud as) heard it has been explicitly composed for oral presentation to perform the ‘truth’ it tells. Taking Joni Mitchell’s rendering of ‘Answer Me’ as its inspiration and point of departure, reference, and return, and drawing on the work of and intellectual tradition associated with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Irigaray, Nancy, and Derrida, for example, the essay explores the power of popular song in the spirit of song itself. Neither music nor philosophy, neither poetry nor prose, but something in between: mousikē-philosophy/philosophy-mousikē.*

*Singing is the gathering of Saying in song. If we fail to understand the lofty meaning of song as Saying it becomes the retroactive setting to music of what is spoken and written. Heidegger*

*If one wants to take the event named ‘song’ into account one must write, recount, demonstrate in another fashion. One must take the risk of a formal adventure. Derrida*

### Answer Me

*Answer me  
Oh my love  
Just what sin have I been guilty of  
Tell me how I came to lose your love  
Please answer me my love<sup>1</sup>*

*Whose words are these?  
To whom do they belong?  
What kind of saying is a song?*

*Who is speaking?  
To whom do I respond?  
When I listen  
When I sing along*



*Answer me  
Tell me  
You must know*

What kind of saying is a song?

Whose words are they?  
To whom are they addressed?

Of whom do they speak?  
To whom do they belong?

*My love  
My sorrow  
My prayer*

Who is being entreated  
To respond

By whom  
In a song

When I listen  
When I sing along

*I've been true  
I've gone astray  
I turn to you*

Who's who  
I Me You  
My love  
Your love  
Me my love  
Who

Who exactly am I  
Who exactly am I hearing  
Who exactly am I speaking  
Who exactly am I speaking to

I Me You

My love  
Your love

Me  
My love  
Who

When I sing  
When I listen  
When I hear

This song

Putting words into my mouth  
Taking the words out of my mouth

*Answer me*  
*My love*

Who me  
Who you

Who exactly am I  
Hearing  
Speaking  
Singing  
To through You

My love

### **I Love**

I love  
This song  
I love  
Everything about it

Every word  
Every silence  
Every sound

Every subtlety  
Of Hesitation  
Intonation  
Alteration  
Of time and tone

I love  
The way it opens  
With the statement of an end

That turns  
Into a question  
That turns

And turns  
And returns  
As a refrain

*Please*  
*Answer me*  
*My love*

The way it mixes  
Sacred and profane

*Just what sin have I been guilty of*  
*Please listen to my prayer*

My love

The way it sustains  
Hope without a sign  
Belief without faith

Maintains  
Evenness of timbre  
Equanimity of tone  
Without sacrificing  
Truth  
Affect

And I love the sound  
Of the soprano saxophone  
Struggling to respond  
Seeking its way  
Going astray  
In the space between  
The statement and repetition  
Of the refrain

The way it hovers  
In the background of the reprise

And the echo  
Of its faint and distant fading  
At the end

I love  
The slow and steady tempo  
Of this song

To the scarcely moving  
Rhythm of a waltz

Immobilized  
In repetition of the same

Relentless  
Inevitable  
Return

Of  
One

Two three  
One t(w)o  
Three

One

My love

### **My Love**

I love this song

Or should I say  
This song loves me

Calls me  
My love<sup>2</sup>

And I cannot *not* respond

I hear  
I listen  
(*Ob-audire*)

I obey  
I sing along

I cannot not  
It is my song

I hear  
(*Gehören*)

I belong<sup>3</sup>

(Re)Turning to yearn  
Yearning to (re)turn (to) (be)  
The desire of the other <sup>4</sup>

To start anew

Over and over  
And over  
Again

Who's who  
Who I  
Who you

Who precisely  
In my Imaginary

(In the Imaginary of this waltzing song)

Am I  
Are we  
Are you

Singing  
Clinging to

One t(w)o one  
T(w)o one  
T(w)o  
Who

Who me  
Who you

Who's leading who  
Who's following  
Who's who

We  
Me  
You

In this fantasy  
Dance  
Romance

Of three t(w)o  
One t(w)o three  
One t(w)o

Who

My love

### **Love Happens**

Love happens  
Between two <sup>5</sup>

Between fact and fantasy  
Between me and you  
Between speaking and being spoken to

Love comes  
To pass through

Love comes  
And goes

Love comes  
To pass

Neither here  
Nor there  
Neither (in) me  
Nor (in) you

Always  
Only  
Ever  
In  
Through to  
The space between

T(w)o

Compromised  
By the unconscious of the Other

The enigmatic message  
Of the (m)other <sup>6</sup>

Love comes  
To pass through

*Jouissance*  
Of the other  
(Mother)

Happens  
In the space between  
T(w)o

Between  
Me and you

Neither one  
Nor other

*In the beginning is the relation* <sup>7</sup>

I become  
I am  
Through you <sup>8</sup>

Love comes  
Always already passed

Past

Through  
The love of the (other)  
Mother

Pas(t)sed  
Through

Lost  
Cause

To be  
Desire of the (m)other

Love comes  
And goes

Love comes  
To go

*'Trajectory not entity seems to make the self'<sup>9</sup>*

'Freud's grandchild keeps the self going  
Through the repetition  
Of throwing the cotton reel  
Out to an extreme  
And hauling it back'<sup>10</sup>

*Fort-da*

Gone – astray  
Here – to stay

My love  
Always already  
Gone away

Always already  
Yesterday

All my troubles seemed so far away  
*I believed that love was here to stay*

Oh I believe in yesterday

*Oh answer me  
My love*



**Whose Words**

Whose words are these?  
To whom do they belong?  
What kind of saying is a song?

Who is speaking?  
When I listen?  
When I sing along?

*Answer me*  
*Tell me*  
*You must know*

Who  
Me  
I We

You  
My Love  
Who

*We are in fantasy that which we lose<sup>11</sup>*

Me  
Who  
Your Love  
My Love  
We  
You

Love comes  
And goes

Love comes  
To go

Between  
T(w)o

Me We  
You

My Love  
Your Love  
Who

*There where speech fails **Jouissance** appears*<sup>12</sup>

‘You only have to go and look  
At Bernini’s statue in Rome  
To understand immediately  
That she’s coming  
There’s no doubt about it’<sup>13</sup>

In his hands I saw a golden spear  
And at the end of the iron tip  
I seemed to see a point of fire  
With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times  
So that it penetrated my entrails  
The pain was so sharp  
That it made me utter several moans  
And so excessive was the sweetness  
Caused me by this intense pain  
That one can never wish to lose it  
Nor will one’s soul be content with anything less  
Than God’<sup>14</sup>

‘And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from?’<sup>15</sup>

‘Lacan argues that the sexual relation  
Hangs on a fantasy of *oneness*  
Which the woman  
Has classically come  
To support

Against this fantasy  
Lacan sets the concept of *jouissance*  
Used here to refer  
To that moment of sexuality  
Which is always in excess

Something over and above the phallic term  
Which is the mark of sexual identity’<sup>16</sup>

Here there

Where speech fails

Music appears

**J'Ouïe Sens<sup>17</sup>**

*Oh you are in my blood like holy wine  
Oh and you taste so bitter but you taste so sweet  
Oh I could drink a case of you darling  
Still I'd be on my feet  
I'd still be on my feet<sup>18</sup>*

Singing  
Is not speaking

Song  
Is not poetry

Or  
Speech<sup>19</sup>

It is  
Song

Incantation  
Decantation

Invocation  
Convocation

'By which I get  
That faith which is mine  
To pass into the other'<sup>20</sup>

*'Cause part of you pours out of me  
In these lines from time to time*

Consecration  
Dedication

Of that which is lost  
In by through  
Speech

Soli-citation  
Ex-citation

In-citation  
Re-citation

Of that which is gained  
Of that which remains

Unspoken

*You are in my blood  
You're my holy wine*

On the other side of language  
The hither side of speech

*And you taste so bitter  
But you taste so sweet*

Always in excess

*I could drink a case of you Darling  
Still I'd be on my feet*

Something over and above the phallic

The enigmatic desire of the other (mother)  
The fantasy of oneness with the mother  
The alienation of the 'I' in by through to the (m)other

Nor will my soul be satisfied with anything less

Turning  
To yearn

Yearning  
To return

To the *lalalangu*<sup>21</sup>  
Of the mother tongue

Muted  
Displaced

Lost  
Replaced

In  
To by through  
The discourse of the father

*Go to him  
Stay with him if you can  
Oh but be prepared  
To bleed*

Returning  
To yearn

Yearning  
To return

To the originary  
Silence  
Of the  
One  
Corporeal  
Voice

Undivided  
Undecided

Between  
Self and other

Between  
Self and mother

On the hither side  
The other side  
Of speech

*Ce qui reste à force de musique*<sup>22</sup>

‘A power of inscription  
That is no longer verbal but phonic  
Polyphonic’<sup>23</sup>

*‘Cause part of you pours out of me  
In these lines from time to time*

‘The tone being precisely  
That which informs  
And establishes  
The relation’<sup>24</sup>

*I've been true*  
*I turn to you*

*Answer me*  
*Tell me*  
*You must know*

Songs call us <sup>25</sup>

Recall us to  
Call to us from

The splace  
Non-place  
Of the originary relation

Between

Between  
Affect and idea

Between  
Identification and desire

Between  
The *lalalangu*e  
Of the mother tongue

And the discourse  
Of the father

Neither  
One  
Nor other

Undecidable

Between

Music (and) Words  
Silence (and) Speech  
Poetry (and) Sound

Songs  
(Re)Call us to its Call

*Answer me  
Tell me  
You must know*

My love  
Your love  
You Me  
I We

Mirroring the mirroring  
Of self and other (mother)  
Which calls us into being  
One (self) and as  
Response-ability of to  
The (M)other

*'Cause part of you pours out of me  
In these lines from time to time*

'The essential thing is  
To set the song in motion  
As a *graft*  
[Shoot or scion  
Inserted in a slit of another stock  
From which it receives sap  
Piece of transplanted living tissue  
Process of grafting  
Place where graft is inserted  
Hard work]<sup>26</sup>  
And not as a meaning  
A work or a spectacle<sup>27</sup>

There  
Where speech fails  
It best succeeds  
In dividing us from the (m)other

From the *lalalangu*  
Of the mother tongue

There  
Where  
Speech fails

Music

Appears  
To (re)call us

To from  
Its splace  
(Non-place)

In the  
Space-between<sup>28</sup>

**Coming To Music**

There  
Where speech fails  
Music appears

Music comes  
And goes

Music comes  
To go

Music comes  
To pass

Through  
The space between  
T(w)o

Me You  
One silence and another

*If you want me I'll be in the bar*

'It lingers in this transitory passage  
In the coming-and-going  
*Between*

What *goes* and what *comes*  
In the middle of  
What leaves and what arrives  
At the articulation  
Between

What absents itself and what presents itself<sup>29</sup>



In the space-between  
The *lalalangu*  
Of the mother tongue  
And the discourse of the father

Music comes to call

Giving place to the trace  
Of the other  
(Mother)

In its articulation  
Of the space-between

One silence and another  
Self and (m)other

Music comes  
To call

Comes  
To call  
You Me

Before I you  
We come  
To music

Music comes to pass  
Through me  
From (as) desire of the other (mother)  
Before I we come to music  
With what we I (mis)take to be  
Our own desire

For

Before we come to music  
Music has always already come to us  
Named claimed (maimed) framed  
And contained us  
As (the its)  
Beloved <sup>30</sup>

*Ce qui reste à force de musique*

Your love  
My love

You Me  
I We

*In my blood*  
*Like holy wine*

Set the song in motion as a *graft*  
Piece of transplanted living tissue

A gift which is not at my disposal<sup>31</sup>

(Not a meaning a work or a spectacle)

Mirroring the mirroring  
Of self and other (mother)  
Which calls us into being

One (self)  
And as response-ability  
To of from the (m)other

A double demand<sup>32</sup>  
Of to from the other  
To which I cannot *not* respond

*Double*  
*Entendre*  
*Entre*

Listen/Hear  
Give/Receive

Me  
Your My Love  
You

My Your  
Love  
I You Me  
We

Undecidable

Between  
Self and other (mother)

Bearing witness  
To the reversibility  
Of the flesh<sup>33</sup>

Between one and other

**Both Sides Now**

“The symbolic condition  
Of the production of the object  
Is a double speech

A double demand

“I am hungry”  
Is a demand that goes  
From the child to the mother

“Let yourself nurse”  
Is a demand that goes  
From the mother to the child

The infant can only demand the breast  
If the mother recognizes it as her child

There is no demand of the subject  
That is not reciprocated by the Other

These two demands  
Trace a single trajectory  
That of the cut  
The object is detached  
Then the child hallucinates the breast  
And by hallucinating  
Identifies with it

The subject  
Having become the breast  
Offers it to the devouring Other  
“Eat me mother”<sup>34</sup>

In my own case

The music that inaugurated this reflection  
 On the particular *jouissance* / *jouïe sens* of song  
 That it both precipitated and provoked  
 — Joni Mitchell's rendering of *Answer Me* —  
 Took me completely by surprise  
 (Or so it seemed at the time — I know better now)  
 On a CD I bought over ten years ago  
 After seeing an interview with Joni Mitchell on TV

Which I bought

Not so much because I expected to enjoy it  
 But as a gesture of solidarity with Mitchell herself  
 Of admiration and respect  
 For the dignity and determination  
 Resilience courage strength  
 Independence industry individuality authority  
 Creativity commitment and talent  
 With which Mitchell has continued to make her music  
 And respond  
 (Or not as she pleases)  
 To the pundits who comment upon it  
 Like the respected music critic and *jazz afficianado*  
 Who interviewed her on this particular occasion

Which I bought

I also now realize  
 As a talisman or fetish  
 Through which I hoped to acquire  
 Some of that Joni Mitchell *mana* for myself  
 And by the same token  
 Steal some of it away  
 From the authorized knowers  
 And arbiters of taste and talent  
 Like Mr. *Afficianado* Jazz Critic himself

I particularly enjoyed the way Mitchell made no effort  
 To humour him or his condescension  
 In the interview  
 Or make him feel comfortable  
 As an interviewer  
 Or as a man  
 Or apologize for her music or herself  
 (A Canadian living and working in L.A.)  
 Or for her smoking  
 Which she never ceased

I was enthralled inspired  
Enraptured

My students (I learned later)  
Were appalled

I also enjoyed  
The way Mitchell talked about  
Her recent reunion  
With the daughter  
She had given up for adoption  
Over thirty years before  
And to whom she dedicated the new CD  
Called  
(Appropriately)  
*Both Sides Now*

The which I  
Like a good daughter  
Mother myself  
Promptly went out and bought

And which  
As it turned out  
I did not particularly like  
Consisting as it does of  
(What seemed to me to be)  
Overblown orchestral arrangements  
Of classic love songs  
More typical of my parents' generation  
Than my own

So

Many weeks even months went by  
Before I actually listened to the entire CD  
One day while cleaning house  
And finally came upon 'Answer Me'

Or should I say  
'Answer Me'  
Came upon me

Soliciting as it did an immediate *jouissance* (*j'ouïe sens*)

Of recognition and relief  
Of pleasure indistinguishable from pain

Of being  
Found

Of being  
Called

Re-called

(Again)

The bitter-sweet sensation  
Of coming home

(Again)

Of being  
In the truth<sup>35</sup>

Of being  
Where I belong  
(*Gehören*)

Suspended  
In a song

Waltzing  
In the space-between  
The father's words and the mother tongue

In the no-man's land  
Of (the) *lalalangu*

The *mamalangu*  
Of the lover's tongue

Calling called  
My Your Love

Lost  
But not betrayed

Disrupted  
But not displaced

Interrupted  
But not replaced

Something over and above the phallic

For

After many listenings to this song  
And much reflection  
As I sang along

I came finally to see  
That the words and music  
Of Joni Mitchell's rendering of 'Answer Me'

Mirror  
Precisely the  
Form and Structure  
Rhythm Movement  
Mood and Tone

Of my own relationship  
To my mother

And her relationship to me  
And to her mother

And her mother's relationship to her  
And to her own mother

In turn  
Turn  
Turn  
Re-turn

And turn  
Turn  
Again

This stately waltz  
In triple time  
This *Mütterlein*<sup>36</sup>  
With one beat in the bar  
Performed by two  
In three

Who progress  
And rotate  
Simultaneously

Two as one  
In three

In step  
And face to face

Turning  
And re-turning  
To the place  
They started from

Mirroring the mirroring  
Of self and other (mother)  
Which calls us into being

One (self) and as  
Response (ability) of to  
The (m)other

Face to face  
In step  
In three

Moving two as one  
T(w)o three

One t(w)o three  
One

Never in the same direction  
Never seeing what the other sees  
But always only ever  
A reflection

In turn  
Turn turn  
Re-turn

And turn  
Turn  
Again

Progress  
Rotate  
Return

Back to where we started from



*Please*  
*Answer me*  
*My love*

Words and music  
Expressing perfectly the  
Contradictory  
Complicit  
Continuing  
Desire

Of myself  
And my mother  
And my mother's mother

To be  
The desire  
Of the other (mother)

Our shared attachment  
To the fantasy  
Of Oneness

(Which the woman has  
Classically come to support)

In the figure  
Of the other (mother)

*Double*  
*Entendre*  
*Entre*

Interrupted  
In my own case  
By the birth of a brother

And the transference of my attachment  
To my father from my mother  
As she transferred her own  
To the baby brother

It was 1954  
I was six years old  
And Nat King Cole's recording of 'Answer Me'  
Was number 6 on the hit parade

Coming to it again  
In the fall of 2000  
By way of Joni Mitchell

On an album dedicated to her own  
Once lost now returned daughter Kilauren

My own teaching and research  
On psychoanalysis and music

And my continuing and troubled  
Relationship with my mother

Was thus the occasion for me  
Of considerable insight

Into the genealogy  
Of my own musical *jouissance*  
In this particular song

And the power and pleasure  
The *jouissance* of the  
Saying of Song in general

The double demand  
Of the mother tongue

*Double*  
*Entendre*  
*Entre*

Of to from  
The (m)other  
Lover

Listen  
"I am hungry"

Give Me  
(My Your Love)

Hear  
“Let yourself nurse”

Receive Me  
(You’re My Love)

*‘These two demands trace a single trajectory that of the cut’*

Between

Subject (and) object  
Self (and) (m)other

Silence (and) speech  
Identification (and) desire

‘The object is detached  
Then the child hallucinates the breast  
And by hallucinating identifies with it’

Music  
Performs the function  
Of that cut <sup>37</sup>

Which  
It commemorates

Re-peats  
Re-members  
Re-presents  
Re-calls

Re-pairs

One way or another

From which  
By way of which  
It gives

A certain *j’ouïe sens*

Reparation  
Release  
Reprieve  
Relief

Receiving  
T(w)o give

Giving  
T(w)o receive

(The pleasure of the text)<sup>38</sup>

Linking what it disjoins  
Disjoining what it links

Coming and going  
In to through

The transitional space<sup>39</sup>  
Between  
One (self) and (an)other

I Me We You  
My Love  
Your Love  
Who

In a melancholy tone

Of  
Longing  
Mourning  
Reparation  
Love

Loss

‘The tone being precisely that which informs and establishes the  
relation’<sup>40</sup>

Nor will my soul be content  
With anything less

(Than God)

**Plus D'Une Musique**

Music comes  
Not as my object  
Therefore

But as my passion  
My compassion

My non-me possession  
My other my self

My Your Love  
You're My  
Beloved

My Love

'It comes from the Other and it is addressed to the Other  
It begins from the Other and it goes back to the Other'<sup>41</sup>

The *double entendres entre*  
Of this *passage*

This undecidable  
Indeterminable

Undecipherable  
*Jouissance*

*J'ouïe sens*  
(*Résonance* play)

Of music  
Through the subject

Of the subject  
Through music

Of music and subject  
Through desire  
Of the other (mother)

The enigmatic message  
Of the (m)other lover  
Is irreducible

*We must stay within the difficulty of this passage*<sup>42</sup>

Neither music  
Nor the discourse

On of by about  
Music  
Can do without it

Nor therefore avoid  
The order of the disorder  
Produced within it

And this first of all  
Is what counts  
For me<sup>43</sup>

Which means of course  
That there is more than one way  
To come to music

More than one way  
Of longing  
To be

The desire  
Of the (m)other  
Lover

*Plus d'une jouissancel'jouie sens*

*Plus d'une musique*

*Plus d'une chanson*

More than one coming

More than one music

More than one  
Gathering of saying  
In song

No more (music) as such

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From 'Answer Me, My Love' by Gerhart Winkler and Fred Rauch. English lyrics by Carl Sigman (1953). Joni Mitchell's particular rendering of this song on *Both Sides Now* (Reprise Records, 2000) is the focus of this paper. Unless otherwise indicated italicized words are from this song and intended to be read as sung (as they were in its composition).

<sup>2</sup> In 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music' in *Queering the Pitch*, edited by Philip Brett et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) pp. 67 – 83, Suzanne Cusick describes her own experience of music "as the lover," teaching her students "to open themselves to the music they hear, to let the music "do it" to them," to increase their skill through practice "in the art of being music's beloved" (p.74).

<sup>3</sup> For elaborations of the relationship between *gehören* (belonging) and *hören* in Heidegger's work, as well as the links between listening and obedience (from the Latin *obaudire*, literally listening from below) see, for example: Gerald L. Bruns, *Heidegger's Estrangements* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Don Ihde, *Listening: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976); and Jacques Derrida, 'Heidegger's Ear,' translated by John P. Leavey Jr., in *Reading Heidegger*, edited by John Sallis (Bloomington Ind: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> "In short, nowhere does it appear more clearly that man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other." Jacques Lacan, 'Function and field of speech in language' in *Écrits. A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1977): 58 and passim.

<sup>5</sup> "By the sphere of the between, Buber means "exclusively actual events" (DP261). So he is able to say "Feelings are 'had'; love happens" (DP 18:66)." Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984): 280 and passim. For the between of love see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), where the passage cited by Theunissen reads: "Feelings one "has"; love occurs. Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in love. This is no metaphor but actuality: love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its "content" or object; it is between I and You" (66).

<sup>6</sup> "The thing-like presentations which form the kernel of the unconscious are to be conceived as that which eludes the child's first attempts to construct for itself an interhuman world, and so translate into a more or less coherent view the messages coming from adults. The partial but necessary failure of these attempts derives from the fact that these messages are enigmatic for the one who sends them, in other words they are *compromised* by the sender's unconscious." From Jean Laplanche, 'A Short Treatise on the Unconscious,' translated by Luke Thurston, in *Essays on Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) pp. 84 – 116: 93.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, op.cit. p.69.

<sup>8</sup> "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You." Buber, op.cit. p.62.

<sup>9</sup> Marion Hobson, Jacques Derrida. *Opening Lines* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998): 166.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "In practice, we must recognize that the loss of the object occurs in the same movement

of the identification of the subject with the object of desire. In fact, there is no real loss without the subject's identification with what it loses. From the psychoanalytic perspective, we are, in fantasy, that which we lose." Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons in the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, translated by David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998): 103.

<sup>12</sup> Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons* op.cit. p.35 and passim.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'God, and the *Jouissance* of The Woman' in *Feminine Sexuality*, translated by Jacqueline Rose, in *Jacques Lacan and the école Freudienne*, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1985) pp. 137 – 148: 147.

<sup>14</sup> Saint Theresa of Avila cited by Alain de Botton in *Essays in Love. A Novel* (London: Picador, 1993): 109.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'God, and the *Jouissance* of The Woman,' op.cit. p.147.

<sup>16</sup> Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, op.cit. p.137.

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed, the 'Law' appears to be giving the order, 'Jouis!', to which the subject can only reply 'j'ouis' (I hear), the *jouissance* being no more than understood." Jacques Lacan, 'Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire' in *Écrits. A Selection*, op.cit. p.319.

<sup>18</sup> From Joni Mitchell, 'A Case of You' on *Both Sides Now* (Reprise Records, 2000), originally recorded on Blue (1971). Unless otherwise indicated italicized words are from this song and intended to be read as sung (as they were in its composition).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger's exploration of the relationship between poetry and song (from the standpoint of poetry rather than song) in *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982) from which the epigraph to this essay was taken (p.148).

<sup>20</sup> An invocation isn't an inert formula. It's that by which I get that faith which is mine to pass into the other." Jacques Lacan, Seminar XXIV, 'Thou Art' in *Psychoses 1955 – 1956 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III)*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton, 1993): 304.

<sup>21</sup> "*Lalangue* indicates that part of language which reflects the laws of unconscious processes, but whose effects go beyond that reflection, and escape the grasp of the subject (see SXX, pp.126 – 7)." Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality* op.cit. p.46. "*Lalangue* is something that one sucks, it is the maternal part of language that undergoes *jouissance*. *Lalangue* remains intimately linked to the body, and is thus eminently charged with meaning. *Lalangue* is the language of meaning, full of meaning." Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons* op. cit. p.5. Cf. also Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Théorie de lalangue (rudiment),' in *Ornicar?1* Paris 1975).

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, '*Ce qui reste à force de musique*' in *Psyche* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987) pp. 95 – 103.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida (with reference to Numbers, a novel by Philippe Sollers) in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): 332. "*Numbers* is also a poem in a fully raised voice. Try it. Note its broad yet controlled, tense, restrained, yet pressing clamor. It is the clamor of a song that puts the vowel on stage, along with the articulation whose prior echo it precipitates onto the wall surfaces, reflecting, from one panel to the other, in hundredfold repercussion, each bounce ... An authorless, a full-throated writing, a song sung out at the top of the lungs."

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida in 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, edited by Peter Brunette and



David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp.9 – 32:21.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

<sup>26</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Sixth edition (Oxford University Press, 1976) p.464.

<sup>27</sup> From Philippe Sollers *Numbers* cited by Jacques Derrida in *Dissemination* op.cit. p.355.

<sup>28</sup> “In reality the child hallucinates an object that belongs neither to the mother [n]or to themselves, but is located between them.” Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons* op.cit. p.88. See also Michael Theunissen ‘The Ontology of the ‘Between’ in *The Other* op.cit. chapter 7, pp.257 – 290. For an elaboration of the ethics and politics of the space-between see Geraldine Finn, ‘The Space-Between: Ethics and Politics, Or More of the Same’ in *Why Althusser Killed His Wife: Essays on Discourse and Violence* (New Jersey: Humanities, 1996) pp.166 – 177. And for more on the relationship between music and the space-between see Geraldine Finn, ‘To Speculate – On Music and/as the Sound of *Différance*’ in *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie/Journal of Music Theory*, Jaargang 7, nummer 3 (November 2002) pp. 189 – 195.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Suzanne Cusick, ‘On a Lesbian Relationship with Music’ op.cit. p.74 and passim.

<sup>31</sup> “Grace is the gift of what is not at my disposal,” Michael Theunissen, *The Other*, op.cit. p.280. “The You encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking,” Martin Buber, *I and Thou* op. cit. p.62.

<sup>32</sup> “We recall that the symbolic condition of the production of the object is a double speech, a double demand. The infant can only demand the breast if the mother recognizes it as her child.” Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons*, op.cit. p.91.

<sup>33</sup> For the “reversibility that defines the flesh ...a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact” see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) chapter 4, ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm,’ pp. 130 – 155, and passim. “As there is a reflexivity of touch, of sight, and of the touch-vision system, there is a reflexivity of the movements of phonation and of hearing; they have their sonorous inscription, the vociferations have in me their motor echo. This new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking” (pp.144 – 145).

<sup>34</sup> Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons*, op.cit. pp.91 - 92.

<sup>35</sup> “Our assurance of being in the truth is one with our assurance of being in the world ... Our experience of the true ... is at first not distinct from the tensions that arise between the others and ourselves, and from their resolution ... the true dawns through an emotional and almost carnal experience, where the “ideas” – the other’s and our own – are rather traits of his [sic] physiognomy and of our own, are less understood than welcomed or spurned in love or hatred.” Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, op.cit. p.12.

<sup>36</sup> I was intrigued to discover that the original German title of ‘Answer Me’ was in fact ‘Mutterlein’ while that of the first English recording, ‘Answer Me, Lord Above’ (by Frankie Laine, 1953), did indeed suggest a prayer.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Juan-David Nasio: “The fantasy is not the work of someone but the result of both the action of the object and the cut of the signifier ... the two terms of the subject of the

unconscious (\$) and of the object (a) are linked and separated, joined and disjoined, by the intermediary of a signifier that performs the function of the cut.” *Five Lessons*, op.cit. p.104.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller. Toronto: Harper and Collins.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Geraldine Finn, ‘The Space-Between’ in *Why Althusser*, op.cit. pp. 166 – 177, and ‘To Speculate’ in *Tijdschrift voor muziektheorie*, op.cit. pp.189 – 195. For ‘transitional objects’ see D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida in ‘The Spatial Arts. An Interview’ in Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, op.cit. p.21.

<sup>41</sup> Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons*, op.cit. p.135.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986): 22.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’ in *Margins*, op.cit. p.4.

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