JUDITH BUTLER

Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[1]—Simone de Beauvoir's formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. The distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; *sex* is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation. With the distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural. Moreover, if the distinction is consistently applied, it becomes unclear whether being a given sex has any necessary consequence for becoming a given gender. The presumption of a causal or mimetic relation between sex and gender is undermined. If being a woman is one cultural interpretation of being female, and if that interpretation is in no way necessitated by being female, then it appears that the female body is the arbitrary locus of the gender 'woman', and there is no reason to preclude the possibility of that body becoming the locus of other constructions of gender. At its limit, then, the sex/gender distinction implies a radical heteronomy of natural bodies and constructed genders with the consequence that 'being' female and 'being' a woman are two very different sorts of being. This last insight, I would suggest, is the distinguished contribution of Simone de Beauvoir's formulation, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301. Henceforth, references will be given in the text.

According to the above framework, the term 'female' designates a fixed and self-identical set of natural corporeal facts (a presumption, by the way, which is seriously challenged by the continuum of chromosomal variations), and the term 'woman' designates a variety of modes through which those facts acquire cultural meaning. One *is* female, then, to the extent that the copula asserts a fixed and self-identical relation, i.e. one is female and therefore not some other sex. Immeasurably more difficult, however, is the claim that one *is* a woman in the same sense. If gender is the variable cultural interpretation of sex, then it lacks the fixity and closure characteristic of simple identity. To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities. Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form. In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities.

For Simone de Beauvoir, it seems, the verb "become" contains a consequential ambiguity. Gender is not only a cultural construction imposed upon identity, but in some sense gender is a process of constructing ourselves. To *become* a woman is a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the acquisition of a skill, a 'project', to use Sartrian terms, to assume a certain corporeal style and significance. When 'become' is taken to mean 'purposefully assume or embody', it seems that Simone de Beauvoir is appealing to a voluntaristic account of gender. If genders are in some sense chosen, then what do we make of gender as a received cultural construction? It is usual these days to conceive of gender as passively determined, construct*ed* by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language which precedes and determines the subject itself. Even if gender is rightly understood to be constructed by such systems, it remains necessary to ask after the specific mechanism of this construction. Does this system unilaterally inscribe gender upon the body, in which case the body would be a purely passive medium and the subject, utterly subjected? How, then, would we account for the various ways in which gender is individually reproduced and reconstituted? What is the role of personal agency in the reproduction of gender? In this context, Simone de Beauvoir's formulation might be understood to contain the following set of challenges to gender theory: to what extent is the 'construction' of gender a self-reflexive process? In what sense do we construct ourselves and, in that process, *become* our genders?

In the following, I would like to show how Simone de Beauvoir's account of 'becoming' a gender reconciles the internal ambiguity of gender as both 'project' and 'construct'. When 'becoming' a gender is understood to be both choice and acculturation, then the usually oppositional relation between these terms is undermined. In keeping "become" ambiguous, Beauvoir formulates gender as a corporeal locus of cultural possibilities both received and innovated. Her theory of gender, then, entails a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice whereby 'choosing' a gender is understood as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms.

SARTRIAN BODIES AND CARTESIAN GHOSTS

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

Whether consciousness can be said to precede the body, or whether it has any ontological status apart from the body—these are claims alternately affirmed and denied in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and this ambivalence toward a Cartesian mind/body dualism reemerges, although less seriously, in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In fact, we can see in *The Second Sex* an effort to radicalize the Sartrian program to establish an embodied notion of freedom. Sartre's chapter, "The Body," in *Being and Nothingness* echoes Cartesianism which haunts his thinking as well as his own efforts to free himself from this Cartesian ghost. Although Sartre argues that the body is coextensive with personal identity ("I am my body"),[2] he also suggests that consciousness is in some sense beyond the body ("My body is a *point of departure* which I *am* and which at the same time I surpass. . .").[3] Rather than refute Cartesianism, Sartre's theory seeks to understand the disembodied or transcendent feature of personal identity as paradoxically, yet essentially, related to embodiment. The duality of consciousness (as transcendence) and the body is intrinsic to human reality, and the effort to locate personal identity exclusively in one or the other is, according to Sartre, a project in bad faith.

Although Sartre's references to "surpassing" the body may be read as presupposing a mind/body dualism, we need only conceive of this self-transcendance as itself a corporeal movement to refute that assumption. The body is not a static phenomenon, but a mode of intentionality, a directional force and mode of desire. As a condition of access to the world, the body is a being comported beyond itself, sustaining a necessary reference to the world and, thus, never a self-identical natural entity. The body is lived and experienced as the context and medium for all human strivings. Because for Sartre all human beings strive after possibilities not yet realized or in principle unrealizable, humans are to that extent 'beyond' themselves. This *ek-static* reality of human beings is, however, a corporeal experience; the body is not a lifeless fact of existence, but a mode of becoming. Indeed, for Sartre the natural body only exists in the mode of being surpassed, for the body is always involved in the human quest to realize possibilities: "we can never apprehend this contingency as such insofar as our body is for us; for we are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves . . . this inapprehensible body is precisely the necessity that *there be a choice*, that I do not exist *all at once*."[4]

Simone de Beauvoir does not so much refute Sartre as take him at his non-Cartesian best.[5] Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that "it

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 329.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 328.
5. Simone de Beauvoir's defense of the non-Cartesian character of Sartre's account of the body can be found in "Merleau-Ponty et le Pseudo-Sartrisme," *Les Temps Modernes*, 10:2, 1955. For a general article tracing Sartre's gradual overcoming of Cartesianism, see

would be best to say, using 'exist' as a transitive verb, that consciousness *exists* its body . . .".[6] The transitive form of 'exist' is not far removed from her disarming use of 'become', and Simone de Beauvoir's becoming a gender seems both an extension and a concretization of the Sartrian formulation. In transposing the identification of corporeal existence and 'becoming' onto the scene of sex and gender, she appropriates the ontological necessity of paradox, but the tension in her theory does not reside between being 'in' and 'beyond' the body, but in the move from the natural to the acculturated body. That one is not born, but becomes, a woman does not imply that this 'becoming' traverses a path from disembodied freedom to cultural embodiment. Indeed, one is one's body from the start, and only thereafter becomes one's gender. The movement from sex to gender is internal to embodied life, i.e. a move from one kind of embodiment to another. To mix Sartrian phraseology with Simone de Beauvoir's, we might say that to 'exist' one's body in culturally concrete terms means, at least partially, to become one's gender.

Sartre's comments on the natural body as "inapprehensible" find transcription in Simone de Beauvoir's refusal to consider gender as natural. We never experience or know ourselves as a body pure and simple, i.e. as our 'sex', because we never know our sex outside of its expression as gender. Lived or experienced 'sex' is always already gendered. We become our genders, but we become them from a place which cannot be found and which, strictly speaking, cannot be said to exist. For Sartre, the natural body is an "inapprehensible" and, hence, a fictional starting point for an explanation of the body as lived. Similarly, for Simone de Beauvoir, the postulation of 'sex' as fictional heuristic allows us merely to see that gender is non-natural, i.e. a culturally contingent aspect of existence. Hence, we do not become our genders from a place prior to culture or to embodied life, but essentially within their terms. For Simone de Beauvoir at least, the Cartesian ghost is put to rest.

Although we 'become' our genders, the temporal movement of this becoming does not follow a linear progression. The origin of gender is not temporally discrete because gender is not originated at some point in time after which it is fixed in form. In an important sense gender is not traceable to a definable origin precisely because it is itself an originating activity incessantly taking place. No longer understood as a prod-

Thoman W. Busch, "Beyond the Cogito: The Question of the Continuity of Sartre's Thought," *The Modern Schoolman* 60 (March 1983).
6. *Being and Nothingness*, 329.

uct of cultural and psychic relations long past, gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself with respect to those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world.

GENDER AS CHOICE

One chooses one's gender, but one does not choose it from a distance which signals an ontological juncture between the choosing agent and the chosen gender. The Cartesian space of the deliberate 'chooser' is fictional, but the question persists: if we are mired in gender from the start, what sense can we make of gender as a kind of choice? Simone de Beauvoir's view of gender as an incessant project, a daily act of reconstitution and interpretation, draws upon Sartre's doctrine of prereflective choice and gives that difficult epistemological structure a concrete cultural meaning. Prereflective choice is a tacit and spontaneous act which Sartre terms "quasi knowledge." Not wholly conscious, but nevertheless accessible to consciousness, it is the kind of choice we make and only later realize we have made. Simone de Beauvoir seems to rely on this notion of choice in referring to the kind of volitional act through which gender is assumed. Taking on a gender is not possible at a moment's notice, but is a subtle and strategic project which only rarely becomes manifest to a reflective understanding. Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them anew. Rather than a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms. This is not a prescriptive task we must endeavor to do, but one in which we have been endeavoring all along.

The predominance of an existential framework has been criticized by Michele Le Doeuff[7] and others for resurrecting "a classical form of voluntarism" which insidiously blames the victims of oppression for 'choosing' their situation. When the doctrine of existential choice is used in this context, it is assuredly insidious, but this uage is itself a misusage which diverts attention from the empowering possibilities of

7. Michele Le Doeuff, "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980):278.

the position. The phenomenology of victimization that Simone de Beauvoir elaborates throughout *The Second Sex* reveals that oppression, despite the appearance and weight of inevitability, is essentially contingent. Moreover, it takes out of the sphere of reification the discourse of oppressor and oppressed, reminding us that oppressive gender norms persist only to the extent that human beings take them up and give them life again and again. Simone de Beauvoir is not saying, however, that oppression is generated through a series of human choices. Her own efforts in anthropology and history underscore her awareness that oppressive systems have complicated material origins. The point is rather that these systems persist only to the extent that gender norms are tacitly yet insistently taken up in the present through individual strategies which remain more or less disguised. Over and against a less sophisticated view of 'socialization', she is using the existential apparatus to understand the moment of appropriation through which socialization occurs. Through this emphasis on appropriation, she is providing an alternative to paternalistic explanatory models of acculturation which treat human beings only as products of prior causes, culturally determined in a strict sense, and which, consequently, leave no room for the transformative possibilities of personal agency.

Althusserian interpelation

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

Simone de Beauvoir does not directly address the burden of freedom[8] that gender presents, but we can extrapolate from her view how constraining norms work to subdue the exercise of gender freedom. The social constraints upon gender compliance and deviation are so great that most people feel deeply wounded if they are told that they are not really manly or womanly, that they have failed to execute their manhood or womanhood properly. Indeed, insofar as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. The fall from established gender boundaries initiates a sense of radical dislocation which can assume a metaphysical significance. If existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of established gender is

8. A term commonly used by Sartre to describe the experience of having to make choices in a world devoid of objective moral truths.

in some sense to put one's very existence into question. In these moments of gender dislocation in which we realize that it is hardly necessary that we be the genders we have become, we confront the burden of choice intrinsic to living as a man or a woman or as some other gender identity, a freedom made burdensome through social constraint.

The anguish and terror of leaving a prescribed gender or of trespassing upon another gender territory testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation as well as to the necessity that there be an interpretation, i.e. to the essential freedom at the origin of gender. Similarly, the widespread difficulty in accepting motherhood, for instance, as an institutional rather than an instinctual reality expresses this same interplay of constraint and freedom. Simone de Beauvoir's view of the maternal instinct as a cultural fiction often meets with the argument that a desire so commonly and so compellingly felt ought for that very reason to be considered organic and universal. This response seeks to universalize a cultural option, to claim that it is not one's choice but the result of an organic necessity to which one is subject. In the effort to naturalize and universalize the institution of motherhood, it seems that the optional character of motherhood is being denied; in effect, motherhood is actually being promoted as the *only* option, i.e. as a compulsory social institution. The desire to interpret maternal feelings as organic necessities discloses a deeper desire to disguise the choice one is making. If motherhood becomes a choice, then what else is possible? This kind of questioning often engenders vertigo and terror over the possibility of losing social sanctions, of leaving a solid social station and place. That this terror is so well known gives perhaps the most credence to the notion that gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention.

AUTONOMY AND ALIENATION

That one becomes one gender is a descriptive claim; it asserts only that gender is taken on, but does not say whether it ought to be taken on a certain way. Simone de Beauvoir's prescriptive program in *The Second Sex* is less clear than her descriptive one, but her prescriptive intentions are nevertheless discernible. In revealing that women have become "Other," she seems also to be pointing to a path of self-recovery. In criticizing psychoanalysis, she remarks that,

> Woman is enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object,

Is there a way out in the speculative scheme: I – other

> the *Other*—and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation. . . . The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfillment in transcendence. [57]

The language of "transcendence" suggests, on the one hand, that Simone de Beauvoir accepts a gender-free model of freedom as the normative ideal for women's aspirations. It seems that Beauvoir prescribes the overcoming of gender altogether, especially for women, for whom becoming one's gender implies the sacrifice of autonomy and the capacity for transcendence. On the other hand, insofar as transcendence appears a particularly masculine project, her prescription seems to urge women to assume the model of freedom currently embodied by the masculine gender. In other words, because women have been identified with their anatomy, and this identification has served the purposes of their oppression, they ought now to identify with 'consciousness', that transcending activity unrestrained by the body. If this were her view, she would be offering women a chance to be men, and promoting the prescription that the model of freedom currently regulating masculine behavior ought to become the model after which women fashion themselves.

autonomy = transcendence

And yet, Simone de Beauvoir seems to be saying much more than either of the above alternatives suggest. Not only is it questionable whether she accepts a view of consciousness or freedom which is in any sense beyond the body (she applauds psychoanalysis for showing finally that "the existent is a body"), (10, 38) but her discussion of the Other permits a reading which is highly critical of the masculine project of disembodiment. In the following analysis, I would like to read her discussion of Self and Other as a reworking of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave in order to show that, for Simone de Beauvoir, the masculine project of disembodiment is self-deluding and, finally, unsatisfactory.

The self-asserting 'man' whose self-definition requires a hierarchical contrast with an "Other" does not provide a model of true autonomy, for she points out the bad faith of his designs, i.e. that the "Other" is, in every case, his own alienated self. This Hegelian truth, which she appropriates through a Sartrian filter, establishes the essential interdependence of the disembodied 'man' and the corporeally determined 'woman'. His disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. If women *are* their bodies (which is not the same as 'existing' their bodies which implies living one's body as a project and bearer of created meanings), if women are only their bodies, if their consciousness and freedom are only so many disguised permutations of bodily need and necessity, then women have, in effect, exclusively monopolized the bodily sphere. By defining women as "Other," 'men' are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies, and to make their bodies other than themselves. This Cartesian 'man' is not the same as the man with distinct anatomical traits, and insofar as a 'man' is his anatomical traits, he seems to be participating in a distinctively feminine sphere. The embodied aspect of his existence is not really his own, and hence he is not really a sex, but beyond sex. This sex which is beyond sex must initiate a splitting and social projection in order not to know his own contradictory identity.

The projection of the body as "Other" proceeds according to a peculiar rationality which relies more on associative beliefs and conclusions which defy the laws of commutativity than on sound reasoning. The disembodied 'I' identifies himself with a noncorporeal reality (the soul, consciousness, transcendence), and from this point on his body becomes Other. Insofar as he inhabits that body, convinced all the while that he is *not* the body which he inhabits, his body must appear to him as strange, as alien, as an alienated body, a body that is *not* his. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others *are* their bodies, while the masculine 'I' is a noncorporeal phenomenon. The body rendered as Other—the body repressed or denied and, then, projected—reemerges for this 'I' as the view of Others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence, and existence as a woman becomes what Hegel termed "a motionless tautology."

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

THE BODY AS SITUATION

Despite Simone de Beauvoir's occasional references to anatomy as transcendence, her comments on the body as an insurpassable "perspective" and "situation" (38) indicate that, as for Sartre, transcendence must be understood within corporeal terms. In clarifying the notion of the body as "situation," she suggests an alternative to the gender polarity of masculine disembodiment and feminine enslavement to the body.

The body as situation has at least a twofold meaning. As a locus of cultural interpretations, the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret that set of received interpretations. No longer understood in its traditional philosophical senses of 'limit' or 'essence', the body is a *field of interpretive possibilities,* the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted in the flesh. The body becomes a peculiar nexus of culture and choice, and 'existing' one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms. To the extent that gender norms function under the aegis of social constraints, the reinterpretation of those norms through the proliferation and variation of corporeal styles becomes a very concrete and accessible way of politicizing personal life.

If we understand the body as a cultural situation, then the notion of a natural body and, indeed, a natural 'sex' seems increasingly suspect. The limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy itself than by the weight of the cultural institutions which have conventionally interpreted anatomy. Indeed, it becomes unclear when one takes Simone de Beauvoir's formulation to its unstated consequences, whether gender need be in any way linked with sex, or whether this conventional linkage is itself culturally bound. If gender is a way of 'existing' one's body, and one's body is a "situation," a field of cultural possibilities both received and reinterpreted, then gender seems to be a thoroughly cultural affair. That one becomes one's gender seems now to imply more than the distinction between sex and gender. Not only is gender no longer dictated by anatomy, but anatomy does not seem to pose any necessary limits to the possibilities of gender.

Although Simone de Beauvoir occasionally ascribes ontological meanings to anatomical sexual differentiation, her comments just as often suggest that anatomy alone has no inherent significance. In "The Data of Biology" she distinguishes between natural facts and their significance, and argues that natural facts gain significance only through their subjection to non-natural systems of interpretation. She writes: "As Merleau-Ponty very justly puts it, man is not a natural species; he is a historical idea. Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with men; that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined (40).

The body as a natural fact never really exists within human experience, but only has meaning as a state which has been overcome. The body is an *occasion* for meaning, a constant and significant *absence* which is only known through its significations: "in truth a society is not a species, for it is in a society that the species attains the status of existence—transcending itself toward the world and toward the future. Individuals . . . are subject rather to that second nature which is custom and in which are reflected the desires and fears that express their essential nature" (40).

The body is never a self-identical phenomenon (except in death, in the mythic transfiguration of women as Other, and in other forms of epistemic prejudice). Any effort to ascertain the 'natural' body before its entrance into culture is definitionally impossible, not only because the observer who seeks this phenomenon is him/herself entrenched in a specific cultural language, but because the body is as well. The body is, in effect, never a natural phenomenon: "it is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment—it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself. And, once again, it is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them" (40).

The conceptualization of the body as non-natural not only asserts the absolute difference between sex and gender, but implicitly questions whether gender ought to be linked with sex at all. Gender seems less a function of anatomy than one of its possible uses: ". . . the body of woman is one of the essential elements of her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society" (41).

THE BODY POLITIC

If the pure body cannot be found, if what *can* be found is the situated body, a locus of cultural interpretations, then Simone de Beauvoir's theory seems implicitly to ask whether sex was not gender all along. Simone de Beauvoir herself does not follow through with the consequences of this view of the body, but we can see the radicalization of her view in the work of Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault: the former self-consciously extends Simone de Beauvoir's doctrine in "One is Not Born a Woman";[9] the latter is not indebted to Simone de Beauvoir (although he was a student of Merleau-Ponty) and yet promotes in fuller terms the historicity of the body and the mythic status of natural 'sex'.[10] Although writing in very different discursive contexts, Wittig and Foucault both challenge the notion of natural sex and expose the political uses of biological discriminations in establishing a compulsory binary gender system. For both theorists, the very discrimination of 'sex' takes place within a cultural context which requires that 'sex' remain dyadic. The demarcation of anatomical difference does not precede the cultural interpretation of that difference, but is itself an interpretive act laden with normative assumptions. That infants are divided into sexes at birth, Wittig points out, serves the social ends of reproduction, but they might just as well be differentiated on the basis of ear lobe formation or, better still, not be differentiated on the basis of anatomy at all. In demarcating 'sex' as sex, we construct certain norms of differentiation. And in the interest which fuels this demarcation resides already a political program. In questioning the binary restrictions on gender definition, Wittig and Foucault release gender from sex in ways which Simone de Beauvoir probably did not imagine. And yet, her view of the body as a "situation" certainly lays the groundwork for such theories.

If 'existing' one's gender means that one is tacitly accepting or reworking cultural norms governing the interpretation of one's body, then gender can also be a place in which the binary system restricting gender is itself subverted. Through new formulations of gender, new ways of amalgamating and subverting the oppositions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', the established ways of polarizing genders becomes increasingly confused, and binary opposition comes to oppose itself. Through the purposeful embodiment of ambiguity binary oppositions lose clarity and force, and 'masculine' and 'feminine' as descriptive terms lose their usefulness. Inasmuch as gender ambiguity can take many forms, gender itself thus promises to proliferate into a multiple phenomenon for which new terms must be found.

Simone de Beauvoir does not suggest the possibility of other genders besides 'man' and 'woman', yet her insistence that these are histor-

9. Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues*, 1, no. 2 (1981) and Wittig, "The Category of Sex," *Feminist Issues*, 2, no. 2 (1982).

10. See Foucault's introduction to the volume he edited, *Herculine Barbin, Being Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980). Also, Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, (New York: Bantam, 1979).

ical constructs which must in every case be appropriated by individuals suggests that a binary gender system has no ontological necessity. One could respond that there are merely various ways of being a 'man' or a 'woman', but this view ascribes an ontology of substance to gender which misses her point: 'man' and 'woman' are *already* ways of being, modalities of corporeal existence, and only emerge as substantial entities to a mystified perspective. One might wonder as well whether there is something about the dymorphic structure of human anatomy that necessitates binary gender arrangements cross-culturally. Anthropological findings of third genders and multiple gender systems suggest, however, that dymorphism itself becomes significant only when cultural interests require, and that gender is more often based upon kinship requirements than on anatomical exigencies.

Simone de Beauvoir's own existential framework may seem anthropologically naive, relevant only to a postmodern few who essay to trespass the boundaries of sanctioned sex. But the strength of her vision lies less in its appeal to common sense than in the radical challenge she delivers to the cultural status quo. The possibilities of gender transformation are not for that reason accessible only to those initiated into the more abstruse regions of existential Hegelianism, but reside in the daily rituals of corporeal life. Her conceptualization of the body as a nexus of interpretations, as both "perspective" and "situation," reveals gender as a scene of culturally sedimented meanings and a modality of inventiveness. To become a gender means both to submit to a cultural situation and to create one, and this view of gender as a dialectic of recovery and invention grants the possibility of autonomy within corporeal life that has few if any parallels in gender theory.

In making the body into an interpretive modality, Beauvoir has extended the doctrines of embodiment and prereflective choice that characterized Sartre's work from *Being and Nothingness*, through *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* and his final biographical study of Flaubert. Just as Sartre in that last major work revised his existential assumptions to take account of the material realities constitutive of identity, so Simone de Beauvoir, much earlier on and with greater consequence, sought to exorcise Sartre's doctrine of its Cartesian ghost. She gives Sartrian choice an embodied form and places it in a world thick with tradition. To 'choose' a gender in this context is not to move in upon gender from a disembodied locale, but to reinterpret the cultural history which the body already wears. The body becomes a choice, a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh.

The incorporation of the cultural world is a task performed incessantly and actively, a project enacted so easily and constantly it seems a natural fact. Revealing the natural body as already clothed, and nature's surface as cultural invention, Simone de Beauvoir gives us a potentially radical understanding of gender. Her vision of the body as a field of cultural possibilities makes some of the work of refashioning culture as mundane as our bodily selves.