



**PROFIT AND PLEASURE**



**Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism**



**R O S E M A R Y   H E N N E S S Y**

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~ PROFIT AND PLEASURE

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PLEASURE

SEXUAL IDENTITIES IN  
LATE CAPITALISM



ROSEMARY HENNESSY

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Si te quiero es porque sos  
Mi amor, mi cómplice y todo,  
Y en la calle codo a codo  
Somos mucho más que dos.

—*Mario Benedetti*



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I am indebted to the students in undergraduate and graduate courses I taught from 1993 to 1999 on postmodern and marxist theory, lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory at the University at Albany, SUNY. Their work always challenged my thinking and helped me to refine many of the arguments I present here. My exchanges throughout these years with two students in the doctoral program in English, Deborah Kelsh and Julie Tarrant, have been particularly important. Several other colleagues have read all or parts of the book, sometimes going carefully over drafts and offering useful commentary. Among them are Cesare Casarino, Corinna Genschel, Richard Goldman, Frigga Haug, Stephanie Madnick, Sibyl McPherson, Vivien Ng, Nancy Ota, Steven Seidman, Laura Shore, Robyn Wiegman, and Donna Young.

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Many others gave me the essential material supports of friendship and care that often were my lifeline: Penny Dugan opened her heart and her magical Camp Ingie to me, endured many long-distance conversations about the trials of writing and surviving the contradictions of being an oppositional lesbian in the academy, and inspired me with her incomparable pedagogy and feisty politics. Marni Gillard and Jean Hynes provided countless hours of listening and showed the way toward life's unexpected

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This book is dedicated to those of you—students, young workers, teachers, writers, organizers—who are the next generation; may your dreams, your leadership, and your daring to change and change again move us forward to a time when our needs for love and labor are no longer met at such staggering human cost.

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## SETTING

## THE TERMS

### LIVING SEXUAL IDENTITY IN THE LOCAL-GLOBAL SCENE

I began writing the essays that form the basis of this book in the early nineties. Looking back at that time, it is clear to me that my interest in the problem of sexual identity in late capitalism was generated by contradictions that both defined and spilled beyond my own historical circumstances. As a woman-identified feminist who came through the sexual revolution of the seventies (un)easily embracing marriage to an at-times straight/gay/bi-identified man, coherent sexual identities were hardly a given for me, yet being lesbian in 1988 made some very dramatic differences in my life. Claiming a public lesbian identity made the politics of sexual identity more immediate, painful, and complicated. Being lesbian was to make celebration and transgression my constant companions. It meant affirming the unfolding joys and challenges of loving a woman affectionately and sexually—but calculatedly and selectively—as I developed a new and intimate acquaintance with homophobia—an insidious, corrosive undertow to my days and nights. As a lesbian, I confronted a culture that was beginning to consider lesbians avant-garde, even chic, but in the more mundane everyday saw through me or negated central



parts of my life: denying the existence or value of my relationship with my lover, refusing to legitimize my family, and invading my teenage daughters' lives with formerly unimaginable fears of exposure or shame. I learned in very immediate ways that fear is only one of many palpably violent consequences of a vast sea of heterosexual prescriptions. Above all, and much to my surprise, I learned how unconsciously and—despite my best feminist efforts, how comfortably—I had lived within the privileges of heterosexuality, how they had bolstered not just my economic security but my shameless sense of entitlement and ease of movement through the world.

Like most lesbians, my sexuality was not a coherent or consistent identity for me, and the lesbian mantle still only partially covers who I am. I was also a middle-class white woman living and working in a small city in the northeastern United States where I still moved safely through most social spaces. Passing as a proper subject in many of the communities I lived and worked in was still only possible so long as I maintained a conspiracy of silence on the realities of race and class—and being lesbian did not change that. As a mother raising two daughters, I already had found that the passion and heartache, and most of all the domestic labor, of child care were invariably rendered invisible in my professional life—an invisibility I myself too often fostered—and being lesbian did not change that. As an outspoken marxist feminist in the university, my lesbian identity was in many ways irrelevant. Lesbian or not, the fact remained that materialist feminism was being both courted and tamed by English departments looking to be updated but undisturbed in their transitions through the upheavals of the late eighties and nineties. When I found my first tenure-track job, a lesbian profile actually compensated for my much less palatable interest in postmodern theories and my marxist feminism. This was a university, like many others, where the bold oppositional efforts of a handful of women in the seventies had succeeded in clearing a space for feminism and a more narrowly conceded one for openly lesbian and gay teachers, programs, and curricula. Two decades later, however, many of these radical faculty had been fully incorporated into academic power structures to become seasoned professors in positions of influence, too often protecting institutional interests and turf against new critical ideas.

In all of these respects, my situation was hardly unique. The contradictory historical forces that converged on me, shaped my decision to write about sexuality, and gave this project a sense of urgency were in fact collective ones fomented by forces that stretched far beyond my life in upstate

New York. In 1989, when my lover and I and my two daughters made a home together, the model middle-class nuclear family (never as serene and untrammled as its images suggest) that I disrupted and so perversely resecured was also being abandoned, resisted, or revamped by many others in the United States, men and women both. “New families”—most headed by women, many of whom, like me, were paying a heavy price for their divorces or marriage resistance—were beginning to seize a measure of positive public attention. And yet at the same time, against the swelling numbers of divorces and single mothers, conservative campaigns in the U.S. Congress, in the media, and in schools and neighborhoods repeatedly invoked the icon of the traditional nuclear family as the cure-all for a host of social ills. Some of the “new families” were more vilified than others. Households of lesbian and gay partners were certainly more acceptable if they were properly middle class. Less tolerable and so more frequently scapegoated were the “new families” headed by poor women; perhaps some of them were lesbian, but most were visibly identified as black.

By the early nineties AIDS had already reaped a staggering harvest of lives and mobilized the gay community in the United States, fueling campaigns for social change that extended gay politics beyond demands for tolerance or “a place at the table.” Many middle-class lesbians and gay men were in fact gradually if grudgingly being offered places—tolerated and profitably eased into the newer, hipper currents of mainstream commodity culture. In this context, Bill Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on gays in the military was only one very prominent articulation of a new backhanded change in the public face of gay tolerance and its link to national identity and state control. Indeed, tolerance was gaining more air-time; in the streets, in the media, and in the academy, “queer” was being promoted as a badge of pride and a standpoint for a new sexual politics that would extend beyond a liberal civil rights agenda. In the academy, and in the humanities especially, new knowledges—some of them under the signature “queer theory”—challenged traditional humanist understandings of the self and were nudging their way out of the embattled margins, moving closer onto center stage. British cultural studies had already crossed the Atlantic to join indigenous variants in the United States; in critical concert with the voices of feminist and race theorists, postcolonial, and lesbian and gay critics were redrawing the boundaries of traditional disciplines and redefining what counted as legitimate objects of study. Inside and outside the academy, capital accumulation was being pumped up with new cyber subjects as its prime promoters, even as profits

continued to rely on a very traditional source—the gendered and racialized division of labor.

As I will argue throughout this book, these and other contradictions are not so disparate as they may seem. Yet the complex social structures and power relations they span and that undergird the lived reality of late capitalism often remain invisible. This problem of visibility—which includes how we know and recognize certain identities (a very basic feature of the history of sexual identity)—will be one of the recurring issues in this book. It is now a given that we cannot see homosexuality as a monolithic or universal identity, and it has become axiomatic that all sexual identities as they are lived and experienced are intimately inflected by gender, race, nationality, ability, age. How these markers of difference have shaped lesbian and gay history and the history of sexuality in general is finally being studied, and in the process many of the cultural presuppositions and divisions on which the very concept of sexual identity is premised are being questioned. But often this work still leaves unexamined *why* the cultural differences that shape identities are organized as they are, and the relationship between sexual identities and capitalism remains for the most part an unexplored—even unspeakable—area of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Against this trend, I begin with the assumption that the history of sexual identity—in all of the varied ways it has been culturally differentiated and lived—has been fundamentally, though never simply, affected by several aspects of capitalism: wage labor, commodity production and consumption.<sup>2</sup> Because the relationship between capitalism and sexual identity is complex, indirect, and historically variable, and because there is not a readily accessible conceptual vocabulary for explaining these connections, I give some extended attention to concepts (late capitalism, gendered divisions of labor, ideology, patriarchal structures) that may not seem to be related to sexual identity in any obvious way. I invite the reader to be patient with these seeming detours. I offer them because I hope they will serve as interventions into the power of more obvious and perhaps more compelling ways of seeing.

Over the course of the past two decades, capital expansion has increasingly eroded traditional social relations. The drive to accumulate has drawn more and more women into waged work, more thoroughly rerouted the state's provision for human needs into the profit-making sector, increased the transnational migration of people and capital, extended commodity marketing farther than ever into the body and the unconscious, and heightened the manipulation of human needs and desires for

corporate profit. In the process, many of the prevailing structures of family, gender, sexual, and national identity have been altered. These changes are the effects of the historical condition of late capitalism.<sup>3</sup> “Late capitalism” is not just a vague abstraction; it is an array of contradictory global and local structural adjustments in the organization of production and consumption that are altering the way life is lived. These adjustments have registered in the work people do and in the conditions under which they do it, in the state’s relationship to the “private” sector, and in the forms of identity and the ways of knowing that make the world intelligible. While phrases like “contradictory,” “structural adjustments,” and “late capitalism” may seem quite abstract, the myriad ways they affect people’s lives are in fact concrete, immediate, and palpable. Under capitalism, most people’s lives are laced with contradictions. For most of us, the contradiction between being “free” to work yet barred from reaping the full value of our labor is a very basic one, but it may not be the contradiction we experience as the most distressing. In fact, what we experience more painfully may be the ways this contradiction is both compounded and played out in racist institutional practices, in the shaming effects of homophobia, or in any of the other oppressive ways difference is made intelligible and translated into strategies of exclusion and abjection. These include mechanisms for closing some people out of resources like food, housing, education, and health care, as well as the more amorphous but nonetheless vital array of material needs that also comprise one’s ability to thrive—for example, the need to be safe, loved, and treated with dignity and respect.

As an example of how identities are affected by the contradictions of capitalism, we might consider what it means to be a “woman.” The example of “woman” also indicates the ways sexual identity is sutured onto hierarchical organizations of gender, even though women are differently positioned in relation to one another and to men. Women are contradictorily positioned in capitalism as free workers and citizens, yet devalued as females. For many women, adding to the unpaid value of our wage work is the socially necessary yet unvalued and appropriated labor we perform in feeding, clothing, and educating people in our households, in caring for children, the elderly, and the sick, and in the myriad forms taken by our unpaid and underpaid caretaking in the workplace. In many developed and overdeveloped sectors of the world, the traditional mandate that women serve others is contradicted by capitalism’s prescriptions that we serve ourselves, be in control, and compete with others as fully autonomous individuals. While most women share some aspects of this contradictory structural

position under capitalism, for many it is compounded by their position within social structures that organize racial difference or by their position in the working class. Women provide most of the world's socially necessary labor—that is, labor that is necessary to collective survival—but much of it is rendered invisible, both in and outside the value system of commodity exchange, not least of all to women themselves.

The contradiction between the material realities that shape individual lives and our ways of experiencing them (feeling we are “good” women for the exploited work we do, blaming ourselves when we fail to juggle the pressures to compete and to serve, etc.) are inevitable in capitalism because capitalism relies on and continually reproduces ways of knowing and feeling that conceal the exploitative human relations that the accumulation of profit requires. Capitalism's contradictory social arrangements affect societies across the globe differently and unevenly, and yet the ways these effects register and are known—or are distorted—in local communities and individual lives may often share common patterns. Many contradictions are not seen or experienced as local instances of a global social system because the ways of knowing that are most available do not allow them to be understood this way. Moreover, the social mechanisms for keeping capitalism's structures and abuses invisible are long-standing, widely shared, often unconscious, and very effective.

Basic to the structure of late capitalism is a new global division of labor. Of course, capitalism has relied on an international division of labor since its inception, and so strictly speaking it has always been global. The industrial take-off in early-nineteenth-century Europe was possible because of the accumulation of wealth accrued from colonies all over the globe, and the development of monopoly capitalism in Europe and the United States depended on finding sources of raw materials and expanding markets in far-flung colonial territories. What distinguishes late capitalism's global division of labor is the way new technologies have accelerated the speed and dispersed the space of production to unprecedented levels. Although late capitalism has magnified the homogenization of social relations and cultural forms, it is also characterized by unprecedented fragmentation of the production process into subnational localities. Since the end of World War II, and to an intensified degree since the 1970s, production has become increasingly flexible as capital seeks out those spaces for production that offer the cheapest labor source and the least political interference. This has meant that production is no longer centered entirely in a single site, and it no longer takes place primarily on the assembly line. Instead,

production relies on heightened mobility, and on time and space compression — making use of profit-enhancing strategies like small batch, just-in-time production, and outsourcing, with the manufacture and assembly of component parts sometimes spread over continents or diffused into “private” homework. Late capitalism is also more intensely transnational in the sense that a network of industrial and service formations rather than a single nation serves as its center, and the transnational corporation is now the prime determiner of capital transmission.

These changes in production have challenged and recast the post-World War II division of geopolitics into first, second, and third worlds. The “second world” of the Soviet bloc has virtually disappeared; parts of the “undeveloped third world” are full and competitive participants in transnational capital exchange and are saturated with first-world corporations and commodities, while parts of the “first world” harbor relations of production and ways of life that are indistinguishable from conditions in many third-world countries. Flexible production has made organized resistance by labor more difficult and the terms for those who do not participate efficiently in late capitalist production more arrogant and absolute: nonplayers are simply moved out of capital’s pathways (Dirlik 32). Culturally this interplay between global homogenization and subnational fragmentation has registered in new forms of consciousness and transnational identity — multiculturalism for one, and more gender-flexible sexual identities for another — that coexist with or are being articulated into the prevailing values and norms of Europe and the United States (Dirlik 28–31).

Late capitalism’s new economic, political, and cultural structures have also intensified the relationship between global and local situations. Global transnational corporations rely on localities of many sorts as sites for capital accumulation through production, marketing, and knowledge-making. Global-localism has become both the paradigm of production and an explicit new strategy by which the corporation infiltrates various localities without forfeiting its global aims (Dirlik 34). From corporate headquarters, CEOs orchestrate the incorporation of particular localities into the demands of global capital at the same time that the corporation is domesticated into the local society. Thus it is in the interests of global capitalism to celebrate and enhance awareness of local communities, cultures, and forms of identification. But this cannot be done in a way that makes evident their exploitation, that is, in a way that makes visible the real material relationship between the global and the local (Dirlik 35). Against capitalism’s penetration of local communities, many “local” groups — indigenous

people's movements, ethnic and women's organizations, lesbian, gay, and transgender rights movements—have presented themselves as potential sites for liberation struggles. Undoubtedly, these struggles have indeed accomplished changes that have enhanced the quality of life for countless people. But the celebration of “the local” as a self-defined space for the affirmation of cultural identity and the formation of political resistance often also play into late capitalism's opportunistic use of local-izing—not just as an arrangement of production but also as a structure of knowing.

The turn to “the local” has also been the characteristic talisman of a postmodern culture and politics that has repudiated the totalizing narratives of modernity. The claims of indigenous and ethnic groups, of women, and of lesbian and gay people have been an important part of postmodern challenges to the adequacy of cultural narratives—among them enlightened humanism and Eurocentric scholarship—that do not address the histories of subaltern peoples. However, insofar as their counter-narratives put forward an alternative that de-links the interests of particular social groups from the larger collective that they are part of, they tend to promote political projects that keep the structures of capitalism invisible.

While capitalism has always relied on global and local relations of production, it has also encouraged and required forms of consciousness that keep us from seeing the relationship between them. “Local-izing” in this sense becomes more than a spatial, territorial, or geographic term. Although it may be these too, localizing is also a way of seeing or knowing the world that imagines any social entity—for example, a collectively shared identity or social practice—to be simply a temporary occurrence or a provisional point of departure for defining the goals of emancipation. One of the pitfalls in many of the strategies of various oppositional movements spawned in the wake of late capitalism has been that they have articulated their histories and political aims only in this local way. Such local responses to capitalism frequently have a powerful appeal, but they also have limited political scope. They authorize groups that have been disenfranchised, devalued, and excluded from the public spaces of a society to claim public legitimacy, to speak on their own behalf, and to act; they call attention to the oppression and in some cases to the extermination and erasure from historical memory of entire populations and cultures. And they promote a greater awareness of the ideological and political manipulation of social categories. All of these are important interventions. But when the frames for knowing and explaining the material situation of a

group of people fail to connect that community's history and forms of identity to the global social structures of which it is a part, the political effectivity of that project is undermined.

By the same token, the organization of group identity, including sexual identities, by late capitalism's global reach *is* played out in local situations. Because late capitalist production — of capital, commodities, and forms of consciousness — has so incorporated localities, an oppositional critique has to be able to explain the interpenetration of these local arrangements with capital's global structures. It has to be able to offer an analysis that explains the ways capitalism functions as a complex structured totality and to make visible the myriad ways these structures manifest across a range of local sites. By affirming that a global analysis includes inquiry into localized cultural formations, I am not advocating that local concerns and identities be subsumed to a mechanistic social theory. We need analyses that examine how structures of power function in concrete, local ways. Sexual identities are racially and nationally differentiated, for example, and they are differentially gendered in particular ways within and across social formations. These particulars are important components of the complex historical realities that people live by. Because localized understanding and local identities are the most available and intelligible ways of making sense of sexuality, however, they are often the most expedient and pedagogically useful points of entry for oppositional critical knowledge. But unfortunately, sexual identities are most often approached *only* in terms of their most immediate — and in that sense local — manifestation. The challenge for a sexual politics that is to be truly radical, that not only sees and changes the immediately apparent social forms but makes visible and aims to change their reasons for being, is to trade in this local perspective for another pair of lenses, one that can allow us to know the historical relationship between the contradictions we most immediately experience and the social structures they are shaped by and help support.

#### MARXIST FEMINISM: WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

My understanding of how new configurations of lesbian and gay identities are tied to late capitalism is based on a critical framework that is not often heard about these days, and that is marxist feminism. Historically, marxist feminism is the most theoretically developed feminist critique of capitalism and the reality of class in men's and women's lives. Since the late nineteenth



century, feminists have found in the theory of historical materialism concepts that could be used to explain the social structures through which women are exploited and oppressed. Two qualifiers are in order here. First of all, marxist feminists have not approached marxism—more formally known as historical materialism—uncritically (Hennessy and Ingraham 3). Out of several decades of feminist critical engagements with marxist social theory have come more powerful ways of understanding and combating social oppression.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, most of the archive of marxist feminist work has been more attentive to developing an analysis of gender oppression than developing a materialist approach to sexuality. Nonetheless, marxist feminism is a valuable theoretical resource for understanding the history of sexuality and sexual identity because it is the most fully articulated effort to explain two of the social arrangements through which sexuality has historically been organized: patriarchal ideologies of difference, and class relations.

Marxist feminists endorse the starting points of historical materialism as an explanation of social life. As Marx and Engels outline it in *The German Ideology*, historical materialism's first premise is real living individuals. That is, they take as the starting point for social theory the presence of real living individuals. Now, what is needed for living individuals to continue to be, to keep on keeping on, is that they produce what is needed to survive. The fundamental material reality of human life is the requirement that humans produce the means to meet their needs in order to survive and continue living. Under capitalism, the means to meet human needs are collectively provided by all human laborers, and yet they are owned and controlled by only a few. Without this structural class contradiction, the accumulation of profit on which capitalism is based cannot take place.

In a capitalist mode of production the accumulation of profit comes from only one place, and that is the extraction of surplus value from workers during the course of the working day. The working day is comprised of necessary and surplus labor time. Necessary labor time is the time the worker needs to reproduce the means for his own subsistence or to earn the wages that will allow him to buy food and shelter, health care, and so on. Surplus labor time is time the worker works for “free” because the value of this portion of his labor in the working day goes to the capitalist in the form of profits. This relationship between capitalist and worker—a relationship whereby the capitalist benefits at the worker's expense—is the basic “motor” of capitalism, and it is this relationship that the term

“exploitation” describes. In order for capitalism as a mode of producing social life to persist, this basic material inequality has to be agreed to and legitimized. This legitimation process takes place through the array of beliefs, norms, narratives, images, and modes of intelligibility loosely referred to as culture-ideology. Culture-ideology consists of a variety of different practices or ways of making sense (i.e., discourses) that displace, condense, compensate, mask, and contest the basic inequality of capitalism. Sexuality is one of them. So is gender, and so is race.

Before going on to address in more detail the ways culture-ideology legitimizes class relations, let me dwell for a bit on the concept of class. While there has certainly never been a strong marxist intellectual tradition in the United States, in the past few decades class analysis has been particularly embattled and suppressed in U.S. culture study and social theory. Many onetime marxists in the U.S. academy have either so revised their understanding of class that class relationships have lost all structural and causal force, or have abandoned attention to economic relationships altogether. I will address some of these positions in more detail in the chapters that follow, but a brief introduction will help here. Neo-marxists have claimed that class is only one of many factors (along with gender, race, sexuality, nationality, etc.) shaping social life. While acknowledging the continuing importance of class relations, neo-marxists have stripped class of any fundamental structuring or determining force. Post-marxists have gone even further. They focus on the fact that social life is only knowable through discourse and conclude that the social as such is a discursive effect, an ensemble of practices, always unstable and penetrated by its limits. From their perspective all social antagonisms are fluid and reversible, and power does not function through top-down hierarchies or structures but rather through diffuse forces. Finally, for post-marxists, class and relations of labor have no objective existence outside of the discourses that constitute them.

Despite these dismissals of class, some work in the last decade or so has in fact developed analyses of the complex ways class relations are cross-cut by gender and race difference, and my argument for historical materialism as the basis for developing class analysis builds on this work. It is worth acknowledging that the analysis I develop here is a position that revises my own earlier view somewhat. In *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* I did not emphasize class relations but rather argued that economic, cultural, and political facets of social life are mutually determining (Hennessy 1993). I was compelled to shift my thinking because I

came to see how systematic the effort to suppress consciousness of capitalism as a class system was becoming, and I suspected that my own position might be helping to support this trend. I saw, moreover, that the messages we receive in the media and in the academy are often double ones. The signs of an intensified class war are everywhere (even if we only look at the situation in the United States): the privatization of social resources for health, education, and housing; corporate downsizing that means loss of jobs and job security for so many workers; the growing number of unmet human needs as the social compact of the welfare state fast erodes. And yet, in contrast, we also witness an “economic boom” for the corporate sector. At the same time this inequity punctuates daily life for many of us, we are also being told left and right that class is no longer a viable fundamental category for social and cultural analysis. I began to contemplate this “double vision” as one aspect of a broader historical scenario that I would characterize now as the advance of neoliberalism, and in this context the retreat from class analysis in the academy in the eighties and nineties began to seem one of neoliberalism’s most effective ideological weapons. I now think that it is no accident that even as the gap between the rich and the poor widens and the middle class erodes in developed sectors of the world, the knowledges that can address this reality are being swept into the margins as “old-fashioned.” The new relations of production in late capitalism have brought together many people from formerly segregated (national, ethnic, gender) constituencies, and yet the captains of industry are deeply threatened by the prospect of people organizing across lines of difference. The broad-based strategies of free trade are deeply invested in preventing and have systematically worked to undermine or prevent any potential for developing class consciousness. In their place we are invited to embrace ways of thinking that compartmentalize how we see and know the world, knowledges that de-link components of the big picture, that invite us to disparage causal connections, to focus only on the local scenario, the provisional plan, the temporary solution.

In order to exist, capitalism requires certain basic social relations that are more than provisional and local; they are its very skeleton. So long as capitalism relies on the extraction of surplus labor to accrue profits, we need analyses that can make these basic social relationships of exploitation visible, analyses that will allow us to see both the social relations that comprise the big picture and the complex and often contradictory ways they are played out in particular, local, historical situations. And we need political projects that continually remind us of this “other” view.

Under capitalism, class relations are lived by collective actors—the two key oppositional collective actors being the bourgeois owners and the workers. In actual situations these distinctions are compounded, as alongside this pair there are the reserve army of laborers and the professional managerial class. Moreover, within the working class in overdeveloped areas of the capitalist world, there is also a difference between a primary sector where workers are relatively secure and a secondary sector where workers have less security because they have been poorly paid, lack many benefits, and are more apt to be laid off. These divisions between classes are cross-cut by others organized along culturally and politically constructed lines of difference (Rouse 361). The concrete collectivities through which people act do not always obey this formal outline of class relations, but take the shape of temporary coalitions that are often dominated by segments of a single class. Bourgeois-dominated coalitions form “ruling blocs” that rely on the machinery of the state as well as other institutions such as churches and the corporate controlled mass media (Rouse 361–62). The class processes and relations through which these ruling blocs operate and accrue capital are not fixed, but change and adjust to accommodate production needs, crises, and pressures from other class coalitions.

A brief look at the example of the contemporary United States shows how these class relations have shifted in the past fifty years. After World War II, combined emphasis on consumption and mass production with heavy government investment in the economy allowed the ruling bloc to restructure its relationship to labor, negotiating a social contract with labor unions that provided high wages and economic security in return for a more tightly regulated system of industrial relations. From the 1960s on, these arrangements were pressured by competition from other developed countries and protests from women and people of color. By the 1970s there was a crisis of accumulation that meant a fall in the rate of profits for the bourgeois class. The ruling bourgeois bloc responded with a range of strategies aimed at shoring up its losses—expanding the realms of profit-making, inventing new systems of accumulation, intensifying corporate financial speculation, reducing the costs of labor by undoing the postwar social compact, placing more emphasis on flexible forms of labor, and intensifying consumerism through the introduction of finer distinctions into consumer culture (Rouse 366). After World War II the new social compact helped form a broad “middle class” of primary-sector workers, and the reserve army of part-time or unemployed workers was relatively small. Access to the various class positions was still distributed unevenly, depending

on gender, race, and national origin. In the last two decades, as the bourgeois ruling bloc has pursued an aggressive transnational neoliberal regime, the fraction of the middle class recruited into the ranks of professional managerial bourgeois allies has widened, the once broad primary sector of the middle class has shrunk, while the secondary sector of the working class and the reserve army have grown. The result has been a widened gap between the rich and poor and intensified recruitment of the professional middle class into coalitions with the bourgeois ruling bloc. White men continue to dominate the upper levels, and the majority of immigrants remain in the secondary sector or unemployed. The narrowing gap between men and women in the workforce is mostly the result of white men losing their primary-sector jobs (Rouse 366–70).

As Roger Rouse has very astutely discerned, one of the greatest fears of the ruling groups is that subaltern populations might develop alliances with people in other positions in the class structure. In the face of this threat, the ruling bloc has had to devise a range of strategies to keep alliances from forming among all of those who are being exploited, the losers during these “boom times” for capital, those who have become discontent and frustrated. These strategies span many institutions and social practices. They include a growing emphasis on state repression and violence as well as efforts to shape ideas about how society should be divided—how to assign loyalties along lines of national, ethnic, racial, sexual, and gender difference. The ideological strategies of the ruling bloc have organized people’s attitudes toward work and consumption, pleasure and discipline. Above all, these strategies encourage people to think of class in terms of the visible forms of class status they see—income, occupation, consumption patterns. In other words, people are encouraged to confuse class with lifestyle (Rouse 371–78). There is no single class actor pursuing these projects, but rather different components of the bourgeois ruling bloc work through different coalitions that often improvise and draw on a wide array of discourses and institutional sites to address a host of concerns.

When we consider how crucial cultural forms (i.e., ways of knowing and seeing, forms of consciousness and identity) are to the ruling bloc, it is apparent that cultural and economic processes in capitalist production are never isolated from one another. Their historical interaction is often a complex of overlapping and contradictory discourses and practices. Within them, however, is a logic derived from the kernel of human relationships on which capitalism fundamentally relies—the relationships of

exploitation I described above as well as relations of domination and acquisitiveness. In historical materialism we have a way of knowing that recognizes that the accumulation of surplus value or profit on which capitalism depends is fundamentally based on human relations of exploitation, and that also recognizes that these relations are never lived in economic terms alone, leaving aside as less real the norms, the concepts, the cultures around which this mode of production is organized. Understanding capitalism as a mode of production as I outline it here stresses the materialist insight that the kernel of relations between those who produce surplus value and those who appropriate it—the profit-making relationships on which capitalism depends—has a determining force.

How we understand this determining force remains the subject of rigorous debate in marxist circles.<sup>5</sup> I have found Ellen Wood's recent turn to E. P. Thompson's understanding of this relation useful because it keeps our attention on the objective fact that capitalism is an organization of human relations. The aspect of understanding history Wood values in Thompson foregrounds "the real living individuals" who are the basis of materialist history and emphasizes that it is relations among real living individuals that are at stake in how we understand capitalism, the forms identity takes in its history, and the ways social change can be achieved. The virtue of Wood's argument lies in its acknowledgment that capitalism basically organizes human relations in exploitative ways, without denying either the determining effects of this organization or the historically specific ways it is lived. She reminds us that the base-superstructure metaphor that is often used to conceptualize the relationship between economic (base) and political-cultural-ideological (superstructure) relations actually deforms Marx's conception of social life. Indeed "base-superstructure" is not a concept Marx emphasized; he used it only rarely.<sup>6</sup>

Wood contends that the base-superstructure metaphor entered debates in Western marxism as the residue of a Stalinist orthodoxy that made the metaphor a first principle of marxist dogma. One of the problems with the base-superstructure paradigm is that it has often been associated with a way of thinking about social relations in terms of "spheres," with the economic "sphere" raised above the passive other spheres (Wood 49). Many contemporary culture theorists have objected that the base-superstructure model understood in this way is reductive because it doesn't give enough credit to ideology and to human agency. The problem is that this complaint has also often translated into a retreat from economic/class analysis entirely. In order not to fall into this trap, Wood returns to the debate between E. P.

Thompson and Perry Anderson. Thompson accused structuralist marxists, namely Louis Althusser, of identifying the mode of production (the abstract structural relations of capitalism) with the social formation (the specific historical instance of these structures).<sup>7</sup> Wood contends that even though Althusser distinguishes between a social formation and the capitalist mode of production, the tension between the abstract structures of capitalism's mode of production and the contingent or provisional and specific ways they are enacted in any social formation remains in his theory. The concept of "social formation" Althusser and his collaborator Etienne Balibar come up with implies that no historically existing individual society represents the capitalist mode of production pure and simple. In other words, the abstract formal capitalist mode of production never exists in the strong sense in reality; it only exists in particular "social formations" or actually existing social forms at particular times. One of the issues involved in theorizing the relationship between the mode of production and the ways it is played out in a particular social formation is how we are to understand any causal relationship between social structures (like capitalism's exploitative division of labor) and the ways they are lived in any particular time and place. Wood contends that the distinction Althusser and Balibar draw between the mode of production and social formations, like the distinction they make between social relations that are determinate and those that are contingent or temporary, finally only drives a wedge between the concepts of mode of production and social formation rather than formulating a way to answer the challenge posed by Marx himself, that is, "how to encompass historical specificity, as well as human agency, while recognizing within it the logic of mode of production" (Wood 59). Wood reminds us that Marx's own account of the connection between economic and political-ideological forms suggests the complex variability of empirical reality and the operation within it of a logic derived from and organized by production relations:

It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relations of sovereignty and dependence, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic base—the same from the standpoint of its main conditions—due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural, environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc.—from showing infinite variations and

gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances. (*Capital* III, 791–93)

Here Marx is understanding “the innermost secret” of capitalist relations—the economic relationship of owner and producer—as a determining logic. But this determining logic is not abstract and monocausal, but rather a structure that is both necessary to capitalism and always historically inflected. The relationship of owner and producer is never unaffected by historical influences, among them cultural forms like race, which Marx mentions (and we might add gender and sexuality).

Wood finds in E. P. Thompson’s work a valuable reminder that it is these basic relations of production that we need to pay attention to—what Thompson refers to as “the kernel of human relationships” through which surplus labor is appropriated, a kernel of relationships that imposes its logic at every “level” of society in relations of exploitation, domination, and acquisitiveness. In this regard Thompson does offer a way out of the two unacceptable responses to the base-superstructure metaphor: simplistic reductionism (basic economic relations are reflected in the superstructure), or abandonment (determination is postponed to some infinitely distant last instance). Marx’s profound intuition, for Thompson, is that “the logic of capitalist process has found expression within all the activities of a society and exerted a determining pressure upon its development and form” (*Poverty* 254).<sup>8</sup> The prevailing cultural and political expressions of a society will be marked by the “kernel of human relationships” of exploitation, domination, and appropriation that capitalism relies on (Wood 61). Wood wants to rescue from Thompson’s argument his proposition that the determinate effects of the mode of production are operative all the time and everywhere. In other words, the economy can’t be privileged over culture in any simple way. But by the same token, this is not to propose a process of mutual determination.

In explaining how culture-ideology is informed by this “kernel of human relations” that is fundamental to capitalism, Wood wants to resuscitate Thompson’s concept of experience. “Experience” has been a charged concept in culture study because within the tradition of liberal humanism it has been invoked to refer to an inchoate or even transparent knowledge that is often taken to be outside the historical production of social life. For Thompson, however, the concept of “experience” means that “objective structures” do something to people’s lives. I agree with Wood that we do not have an adequate theoretical vocabulary to convey the effect of material



conditions on conscious active beings and the infinite forms they take (Wood 97). And yet surely these theoretical complexities are crucial to any project for redressing sexual oppression. For this reason I think it is worth reexamining Thompson's concept of "experience."

At the bottom of Thompson's notion of experience is an understanding of class as a structured process rather than a structural position. Thompson concedes that class consciousness grows out of class struggle as people "experience" their class situations. His interest lies in investigating how "the structuration of society" in class ways "actually affects social relations and historical processes" (Wood 82). The concept of class as relationship and process stresses that the objective relations human individuals have to the means of production are significant because "they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles; that these conflicts and struggles shape social experience 'in class ways' even when they do not express themselves in class consciousness or in clearly visible formations; and that over time we can discern how these relationships impose their logic, their pattern, on social processes" (Wood 82). In other words, objective class situations matter. And while many people may participate directly in production and appropriation, class does not present itself to them so immediately. Certainly this is true of many of those who may feel most oppressed by experiences of homophobia or racism and who translate this oppression into the starting point of a politics of change. Thompson's theory of class allows the recognition of "imperfect" or "partial" forms of popular consciousness as authentic expressions of class struggle, and he gives them validity in their local historical circumstances.

As I will elaborate in the final chapter, I think that Thompson/Wood's concepts of "class process" and "experience" allow us to develop ways of linking global structures with some of the lived historical realities of sexual identity. They may also give us a way to think more creatively beyond the dilemmas of identity politics about the formation of collective consciousness and the process of social change.

From the perspective I have sketched out above, the cultural making of meaning is not random, but neither is it stable. And the concept "culture-ideology" conveys this. Culture includes all of the meaning-making systems, practices, and forms in a social formation—the prevailing truths as well as the contesting knowledges, residual and emergent forms of intelligibility, both formalized and informal, codified beliefs as well as inchoate structures of feeling. Those ways of knowing that legitimize and help to reproduce the kernel of human relations capitalism rely on comprise ideology.

Ideology offers ways of knowing that profoundly shape identity through the organization of social differences. Ideology naturalizes differences (between men and women, whites and blacks, straight and gay, able and disabled, rich and poor, etc.) and so legitimates human relations of exploitation and domination. For example, ideology invites us to think that the difference between those who succeed and those who don't is obviously persistence and hard work; ideology constructs women workers in electronics assembly plants as the best ones for the job because "those girls" are naturally nimble-fingered; ideology invites us to think that a romantic attachment to a man and a white wedding are naturally every young woman's dream. Ideology offers individuals an imaginary relationship to the material inequities they live, a relationship that has material consequences in that it shapes desires and actions, even though it may be at odds with other cultural knowledges or with what people may "know very well."

It is worth noting that for the historical materialist, the social differences that culture-ideology constructs and organizes are not simply a matter of linguistic or discursive relations, as they are for poststructuralists who have made much of *differance* as the basis for meaning. Expounding on the proposition of Ferdinand de Saussure that "in language there are only differences with no positive terms," poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and their followers find in Saussure the basis for a theory of meaning that dispels any referent for the sign systems of culture because "nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only everywhere, differences [among signifiers] and traces of traces" (Derrida 1972, 26). *Differance* is Derrida's "non concept" for the space-time that separates signifiers, the play among them that makes meaning possible (1986, 123). The poststructuralist denies that the differences out of which meaning is made have any referent outside these unstable relations among signifiers.

For the historical materialist, however, the codes of cultural difference, or the cultural signifiers on which meaning, consciousness, and identity depend, are socially and historically produced. In other words, to gloss Marx's famous words, "it is not consciousness [or signification] that determines life, but life that determines consciousness" (*Collected Works*, vol. 5, 37). The material requirements that allow human life to continue depend on social relations that encompass *more* than language, consciousness, identity, discourse—although they do depend on them too. It is this "more" that constitutes the material "outside" of language—those human relations through which needs are met—but which is only made meaningful through language.

The differences out of which cultural meanings are made are sites of struggle and contest because of their material connection to the inequitable relations of exploitation on which capitalist production depends. As I indicated earlier, however, this relationship is not a direct or a simply determined one. Antonio Gramsci's understanding of the relationship between ruling ideas or ideology and the ruling class is useful for conceptualizing the complexity of this connection.<sup>9</sup> Ruling ideas are not guaranteed dominance under capitalism because they are already coupled to the ruling class (Hall, "Guarantees," 44). Rather, it is the coupling of dominant ideas to a historical bloc that has acquired power over the means of production that ideological struggle is intended to secure. Class relations set the terrain for these struggles. As they are fought out, historical connections are established that map the ideological landscape of a particular social formation. These historical connections span bureaucratic and legal "official stories," the theories and empirical proofs of science, the traces and stratified deposits of popular philosophy Gramsci refers to as "common sense" (1971, 324). Ultimately, ideological struggle over all modes of sense-making is a struggle for mastery and control over the forces of production and the state. The process by which this control is secured by a historical bloc is called hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony comprises an array of practices that constitute a sense of reality for most people; it is a "realized complex of experiences, relationships, activities"—a culture that "also has to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes" (Williams 1997, 110).

Certain differences come to matter in the historical connections within a culture's prevailing knowledges because they are pertinent to the struggle for hegemony. Gender and race are two especially pertinent ways that difference has been made meaningful in the history of capitalism, and often they are coincident—that is, gender is racialized and race is gendered. What it means to be a woman or a man, how we name male and female—and even the distinction between them—are sites of struggle because these namings can and have been used to justify, legitimize, authorize, and explain away the contradictions on which capitalism's relations of production rely. To give a simple example: the differences among the signs "Ms.," "Miss," and "Mrs." as a way to name women are not simply differences among signifiers only, although they are that too. The emergence of "Ms." into the cultural system was a historical event brought about by political struggles over the hegemonic ideology of womanhood. The distinguishing feature of "Ms." is that it unhinges the definition of

“woman” from a relationship to men—either unmarried or married—in opposition to the patriarchal notion of “woman,” which always signified her relation to a man and which was used to legitimize women’s place in the division of labor, both in the workplace and in the home. The struggles over what it means to be a woman pressured the contradictions in the hegemonic notion of woman as free agent and exploited worker, citizen and property of father or husband. As these struggles were articulated, “Ms.” was read as interrupting the patriarchal gender system. When it first circulated in the United States, “Ms.” was synonymous with “feminist,” and at the same time it was a signifier that for some merely updated the hegemonic racial ideology of woman. “Ms.” was racialized as white because the campaign for this renaming of woman was orchestrated initially by the National Organization for Women, which had not made women of color or the problem of racism a priority, a political choice that had been a consistent characteristic of mainstream U.S. feminism since the nineteenth century. As a result, some black women were reluctant to embrace the signifier “Ms.”

The difference of sexual identity has also been pertinent to the struggle for hegemony, and there are many ways this pertinence has been displayed, both in dramatically public policies—in the state’s jealous protection of heterosexual marriage, heteronormative family, and heterosexual identity—and in more trivial manifestations in the myriad bureaucratic forms that request we identify ourselves in terms of marital status. The signifiers of sexual identity are sites of struggle, and the never smoothly shifting terms “invert,” “homosexual,” “gay and lesbian,” “queer,” “transgendered,” and “bi” convey this. As several of the chapters that follow will address, the relationship of new and established sexual identities to the basic social relations of capitalist production has shaped the history of this struggle, even though this relationship has been contradictory and often indirect.

The cultural discourses through which meanings are established are the material for the ruling bloc’s knowledges as well as subaltern ones. They provoke ideological ruptures and their smoothing over, and in this sense they are both site and stake in social struggle. In its emergent and established hegemonic forms, culture-ideology is never seamless, but fraught with cracks and failures, the indicators that the ruling ideas never completely succeed in dominating the field of meaning. Precisely because capitalist production to meet collective needs takes place through inequitable collective social relations, the potential for crisis is always present—

in relations of labor as well as politically and ideologically. These crises interrupt in a society's legitimating narratives in the form of gaps that various ideological strategies will attempt to smooth over. The symptoms of this ideological crisis management can be read in the textual contradictions that riddle the culture's various discourses. But the struggle over cultural meanings and forms is also evident in persistent contesting counter-hegemonic knowledges that challenge the dominant ideology's claims to truth. Despite the rationalizing of social inequities provided by the dominant or hegemonic ideology, people will persistently make sense of their social relations through cultural meanings that contest and resist these prevailing norms. It is this oppositional "sense-making" that E. P. Thompson refers to as "experience." For Thompson, the knowledge of "experience" is formed out of the dialogue between social being and social consciousness (*Poverty* 44). The knowledge of experience may not provide the concepts for knowing all of the real material relations that structure social being, but it is often a first and crucial step in this direction.

As I will explain in chapter 7, the concept of "experience" can be developed further, as it has a bearing on the "species needs" for sensation and affect. Under capitalism sensation and affect have been historically organized so that some ways of meeting these needs have been considered legitimate while others have been "outlawed."<sup>10</sup> Approaching a politics of sexuality from the vantage point of capitalism's continual construction of allowed and illegitimate needs offers a promising way out of the dead end of identity politics. One way oppositional political movement might recast coalitions among groups that have historically organized around identity categories is by addressing and connecting the ways capitalism has outlawed the meeting of so many basic human needs: for love and affection, for education, leisure time, health care, food, and shelter.

Sexuality is one set of discourses through which the human capacity for sensation and affect and the human need for social intercourse is historically organized. Its hegemonic form under capitalism is heterosexuality. Heterosexuality has been secured through discourses and social practices—romance, marriage, weddings, family values and traditions, eugenics, and social purity campaigns, to name a few—that have been variously organized and articulated depending on the social formation. Among the discourses of heterosexuality that have developed a fraught and sedimented history are the discourses of sexual identity.

Sexual identity has been historically constructed in many forms and lived through myriad everyday practices, and these contingencies have

been conditioned by persistent though varied patriarchal structures that organize sexual difference ideologically. From a marxist feminist perspective, patriarchy is a crucial concept for any analysis of sexual identity precisely because it allows us to make connections between the ideological formation of identities and the division of labor. Marxist feminists understand that patriarchal structures are historically variable and complex, organizing hegemonic meanings through the articulation of several axes of difference: racial, gendered, sexual.

Because “patriarchy” has become such a contested term—in some feminist and left analysis even a taboo term these days—before proceeding further I want to pause to explain how I am using this concept and why. As I understand it, patriarchy refers to the structuring of social life—labor, state, and consciousness—such that more social resources and value accrue to men as a group at the expense of women as a group. Patriarchy is a historically variant form of social organization that has been necessary to most socioeconomic systems in the world and has been fundamental to capitalism’s exploitative human relations.

Like capitalism, patriarchy is a politically urgent concept because it allows us to analyze and explain social hierarchies by which gender, sexuality, and their racial articulations are organized. Patriarchy is a variable and historical social totality in that its particular forms for organizing social relations, such as work, citizenship, reproduction, ownership, pleasure, and identity, have had a persistent effect on heterogendered structures in dominance at the same time these structures vary and are the sites of social struggle.<sup>11</sup>

Some patriarchal formations entail kinship alliances ruled by fathers, although in industrialized countries this form of patriarchy has been unevenly and gradually displaced as the ruling paradigm by bourgeois patriarchy. In bourgeois patriarchy, kinship alliances are subordinate to a social organization split between public wage economy and unpaid domestic production, both regulated by the ideology of possessive individualism. In advanced capitalist countries, public or postmodern patriarchy has recently begun to emerge as the prevailing form. It is characterized by the hyperdevelopment of consumption and the joint wage-earner family, the relative transfer of power from husbands to professionals in the welfare state, the rise of single mother-headed and other alternative households, and sexualized consumerism (Ann Ferguson 110). While any one patriarchal formation may dominate, it often coexists with other contesting or residual forms. Policy debates like the controversy over lifting the ban on gays in the U.S. military and the Defense of Marriage Act, as well as cultural

narratives of various sorts, can be read as articulations of the struggle between bourgeois patriarchal formations (and their accompanying moral ideologies) and postmodern patriarchy's newer forms of family, gender, sexuality, and work.

Finally, patriarchy is differential. This means that while all women as a group are positioned the same (as subordinate or other) in relation to men, they are positioned differently in relation to each other and at times in relation to men in subaltern groups. Some women have access to resources—a professional job, an urban condo, a cleaning lady, a vacation home, a fancy car—that are only possible because of the work of other women and men who do not have these resources. Because patriarchy functions in concert with a racial system of white supremacy, disproportionate numbers of people of color, men and women alike, have historically occupied these exploited, under-resourced social positions. That more women than men fill the ranks of the impoverished speaks loudly to the ways class exploitation is reinforced by patriarchal structures. Similarly, some men have more patriarchal power than others, sometimes power over and at the expense of other men. This difference means that not all men benefit the same from patriarchy. Because historically the division of labor has been racialized, and race difference is not necessarily congruent with class, people of color might gain entry into a class, but the cultural capital they gain can be canceled out or undermined by the operations of racism. Consequently, the white gay psychiatrist or lawyer is not in the same patriarchal position as his white straight colleagues, nor is he in the same patriarchal position as a black gay man of the same class. Some white women, lesbians among them, can claim patriarchal power over other women and men by virtue of their institutional privilege or relative class position. At the same time, women, lesbians included, in administrative or managerial positions can make use of their positions in the secondary sector of the working class to wield power over men and other women who work for them or are affected by the policies they draft. But even women who benefit from patriarchy in some areas of their lives are disadvantaged in a society that systematically accords men power over women. The pervasiveness of rape and wife-battering across classes and races and the general invisibility of lesbians in many cultures demonstrate the systematic persistence of patriarchy despite the claims of a postmodern cosmopolitanism that gender hierarchies no longer operate or are readily subverted.

In positing male and female as distinct and opposite sexes that are naturally attracted to one another, heterosexuality is integral to patriarchy.

Woman's position as subordinate other, as (sexual) property, and as exploited laborer depends on a heterosexual matrix in which woman is taken to be man's opposite; his control over social resources, his clear thinking, strength, and sexual prowess depend on her being less able, less rational, and never virile. As a pervasive institution within other institutions (state, education, church, media), heterosexuality helps guarantee patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, labor, and desires. Critiques of heterosexuality have often not acknowledged—in fact they often disavow—the relationship between heterosexuality and patriarchy. But the struggles of lesbians in groups like Queer Nation and other gay political organizations are testimony to the fact that gender hierarchies persist between men and women even when both are fighting against heterosexuality as a regime of power (Maggenti).

Capitalist patriarchal structures help to secure an exploitative system of social differences by way of ideologies of gender that naturalize and reproduce the asymmetrical social divisions that help to sustain, manage, and maximize the appropriation of surplus labor through a variety of complex arrangements. Patriarchy is historical and so not essentially given, fixed, permanent, or universal; in other words, it is an organization of human life that is made by people and is therefore essentially precarious and subject to change. Because patriarchy, like capitalism, is historical, it is continually being reorganized as the requirements of human (re)production in their varied and uneven formations shift and change. While patriarchal gender hierarchies are naturalized by ideology as the way things are or should be, this “natural” order of things has historically been undermined when feminist struggles have revealed its arbitrariness and the power relations it authorizes.

Historically, the success of bourgeois patriarchy has relied on ideologies that harness desire and labor according to the injunctions of a heterosexual social order. Bourgeois patriarchy depends on a heterogendered social matrix that includes imaginary identifications with opposite and asymmetrical masculine or feminine positions (naturalized as expressive attributes of males and females) as well as hierarchical gendered and racialized divisions of labor. By presenting heterogendered differences as fixed and natural opposites, patriarchal ideology makes invisible the precariousness of these imaginary identifications and the social order they help guarantee as well as the multiplicity of possible other engenderings of desire. As supplementary “other,” homosexual identity is a product of this discourse even as it threatens to belie the naturalness of the heterogender system.



As I am using it here, patriarchy is a struggle concept. Most of the disputes over the usefulness of patriarchy as an organizing concept have arisen from poststructuralist or postmodern feminism. A more detailed accounting of these debates would need to address their historical relationship to the crisis of the subject in late capitalism and in “second wave” feminism specifically and their links to the widespread “post-ideological feminism” that has come to dominate U.S. culture in the course of the last decade. Typically postmodern feminist critiques of patriarchy charge that it is necessarily a universalizing and over-general concept. But often these charges rest on misreadings of its use in the tradition of materialist and marxist feminism.

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, for example, understand patriarchy as an organizing concept that relies on the “very large social theories,” “large historical narratives,” or “large theoretical tools,” which they criticize for identifying the causes and constitutive features of sexism (Nicholson 1990, 34). In their essay “Social Criticism without Philosophy,” a piece that has been repeatedly cited as a succinct articulation of postmodern feminism, Fraser and Nicholson argue that “very large social theories” are problematic because “they tacitly presuppose some commonly held but unwarranted and essentialist assumptions about human beings and the conditions for social life” (Nicholson 1990, 27). While I would agree that ahistorical feminist analyses that explain all sexism as manifestations of *the* patriarchy are not very useful, postmodern feminist critiques like Fraser and Nicholson’s tend to confuse the universalizing of totalizing theories with materialist analyses of patriarchy as a social totality. Totalizing theories rely on the logic of expressive causality whereby the parts of a society are each seen to emanate from one central cause. In drawing on historical materialism’s understanding of social production, marxist feminists explicitly contest this totalizing approach. At the same time, however, marxist feminists insist that it is politically necessary to recognize that some social relations, while always being historically and differentially inflected, have the status of “social totalities,” or systemic structures, in that they have persistently (though never absolutely or in any monocausal way) organized people’s lives across social formations and specific situations. Among these are capital’s extraction of surplus labor, imperialism’s tactics of eminent domain and white supremacy, and patriarchal gender hierarchies.<sup>12</sup>

One of the primary aims of Fraser and Nicholson’s criticism of patriarchy is to dismiss the systemic analysis of social totalities marxist feminists pursue in favor of analysis limited to specific and local contexts.

However, this rejection is premised on a misreading of systemic analysis. One of the indicators of this misreading is evident in the repeated references to “very large” theories in their essay. “Very large” is hardly an adequate descriptor of analyses that extend from a high level of abstraction to a historically specific one, as historical materialism’s systemic analysis aims to do. By applying this phrase to several different feminist theories, Fraser and Nicholson collapse cultural feminism’s more universalist conception of patriarchy into materialist feminism’s systemic approach to social totalities. We see this explicitly in the way Fraser and Nicholson’s very brief summary-criticism of the work of materialist feminists (Ann Ferguson and Nancy Folbre, Nancy Hartsock, and Catherine Mackinnon) is sandwiched between and equated with conclusions drawn from their much more detailed readings of Nancy Chodorow’s and Carol Gilligan’s conceptions of mothering, women, and men as unitary and cross-cultural categories. Claiming that these materialist feminists use concepts “whose historical origins need not be investigated” (Nicholson 1990, 31), Fraser and Nicholson argue that feminist theory needs to stop looking for *the* causes of sexism and turn instead to “more concrete inquiry with more limited aims” (Nicholson 1990, 32). What is effaced in this assessment, however, is that much marxist and materialist feminism is distinguished from the work of cultural feminists like Chodorow and Gilligan precisely by its effort to historicize and investigate social hierarchies even as it insists on the persistent causal force of the kernel of relationships of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism.

This misreading of marxist feminism also overlooks the marxist and materialist feminist work from the last decade—the early books and essays of Michèle Barrett (1980) and Rosalind Coward (1983), as well as those by Maria Mies (1986), Chandra Mohanty (1988), Mary Poovey (1988), Dorothy Smith (1987), Sylvia Walby (1990), and others—that has developed more complex and specific understandings of the ways patriarchal formations situate women differently across multiple axes of social domination and exploitation. This work begins with the premise that the reproduction of social life takes place historically through divisions of labor, state power, and consciousness, and that patriarchal structures operate differentially and unevenly across all of them. Materialist and marxist feminists do not agree on how to understand the relationship among these social relations or on the determining force of capitalism’s divisions of labor.<sup>13</sup> Marxist feminists maintain that capitalism is fundamentally driven by the accumulation of profit through the extraction of surplus labor and

that it does so by way of historically varied patriarchal structures. They also insist that critical analysis extend to the historically specific ways patriarchal structures shape people's lives. Materialist feminists tend to eschew the causal link between capitalism's economic arrangements and its politics and cultural forms. Recently the "materialist" in materialist feminism has come to be synonymous with a cultural materialism that staunchly repudiates historical materialism's class analysis.<sup>14</sup> Marxist feminist critique has not relinquished attention to the specific cultural articulations of social totalities, even though it is continually misread as refusing nuanced cultural analysis or reducing social production to the economy. At the same time that the marxist feminist tradition I am alluding to has vociferously critiqued the equation of social life with culture, it also acknowledges that densely accumulated cultural practices are part of a complex ensemble of social relations that includes divisions of labor, law, and state.

At this historical juncture, any analysis of sexuality that begins with an emphatically marxist feminist starting point as I do has to acknowledge the historical situation of marxism today. It is an understatement to say that in the United States and Europe these days marxism is not a popular or well-received theory of social life, no less of sexuality. For the past decade or so, culture critics have been galloping away from marxism in one direction or another, disparaging its fundamental concepts of social structures, structural causality, class struggle, and objective historical truth—as well as the very concept of "concepts"—as the last vestiges of modernity's deluded "grand narratives." By the late eighties many culture theorists (quite a few of them former marxist feminists) had folded themselves in the banner of postmodernism and declared marxism dead. For many post-marxists the unraveling of the Soviet Union in 1991 seemed only the final act in the drama of marxism's demise, evidence of a failed social experiment and confirmation that marxism as an explanation of social life and a theory of radical change was hopelessly out of date. At the same time, in the early nineties in the West—and I am thinking here primarily of the United States and Britain—"cultural materialism" came to dominate cultural theory and culture study. While cultural materialism may target capitalism as a problem or even *the* problem, and so seem to be aligned with marxism's critique of capitalism, and while it turns away from idealist postmodern preoccupations with language, the "materialism" of cultural materialism is finally quite compatible with a whole array of cultural strategies late capitalism has deployed to sever the connection between culture and labor. The arguments I make for a return to historical

materialism call into question these knowledges, and they will be received by many who endorse them as preposterous, particularly for any discussion of sexuality. For this reason, in the chapters that follow I very deliberately read some of the arguments of the new cultural materialism and their implications for how sexual identity is being rethought in the work of Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Teresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Grosz, and others.

#### THE POLITICS OF THE NEW

New knowledges and new forms of identity are provoked by capitalism's progressive impulses. Capitalism is progressive in the sense that it breaks down oppressive and at times brutally constraining traditional social structures and ways of life. In this progressive capacity capitalism's need for raw materials and markets has always enacted a quest for the new through a modernizing impulse that is in many ways quite liberatory. Marx and Engels addressed this positive face of capitalism in an often quoted section of *The Communist Manifesto* where they assert the revolutionary connection between capitalism and modernity:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. (1955, 37)

Whereas feudal production was essentially conservative, the technical basis of modern capitalism is revolutionary because it never takes any existing aspect of social life to be definitive. This constant urge for newness, however, is one of the fundamental ways capitalism is contradictory. On the one hand, capitalism has a revolutionary aspect in that it frees up individuals and social relations from fixed, frozen, traditional constraints; on the other hand, the forms this quest for newness takes also close off the emancipatory

possibilities of its revolutionary drive. Motivated by the aim to accumulate through the exploitation of labor and expanding markets, innovation under capitalism may free people from fettered lives as peasants, but because the forces of production—raw materials and technology—are concentrated in the hands of a few, capitalism can never truly revolutionize life by distributing social resources widely and equitably.

As Marx and Engels indicate, capital's drive for innovation is not just played out in the development of new technologies but also in the accompanying development of new social relations. These entail new forms of consciousness and identity, including new forms of family and sexuality. Capitalism has both made use of and broken down traditional kinship structures and forms of family that long served economies organized primarily around household production. Historians of sexuality have helped make visible the complex and uneven ways the development of a wage economy in industrial and monopoly capitalism encroached on family alliances and household production and in so doing helped provide the conditions for the emergence of new sexual identities, among them homosexuals and heterosexuals. Beginning in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, capitalism's modernizing impulse gradually drew people from agrarian and household production into new work as "free" wage laborers in cities. The changes these developments wrought in people's lives cannot be measured by any simple standard of progress. As histories like Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* or E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* document, sixteen-hour workdays and squalid living conditions eroded the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. In many respects the move into wage work traded one set of oppressive arrangements for another.<sup>15</sup> It did, nonetheless, enhance many aspects of life: it provided more mobility as well as more opportunities for individual autonomy.<sup>16</sup> Through struggles fought out between labor, the state, and the capitalists, bargains were struck that brought improvements in the working day and in conditions outside the workplace. These reforms were not simply concessions to labor, however, as capitalists' own interests also lay in improving workers' education and health and in providing some forms of social security, as well as in promoting leisure-time activities that fostered new consumer markets. The emergence of the new identities "gay" and "lesbian" is part of this legacy.

Not all appeals to newness necessarily serve the interests of capitalism, of course, nor are all new knowledges directly or blatantly recruited to

further its ends. But many new knowledges are often less innovative or progressive than they purport to be. In my book *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, I looked at some of the ways appeals to the new often serve as a strategy whereby potentially oppositional knowledges and subjects are incorporated into the prevailing norms. In particular, I focused on the relationship between the figure of the “New Woman” in popular culture and the “New Women’s History” in the U.S. and British academy in the 1970s and 1980s. I argued that these examples demonstrate how invocations of “newness” have tended to rely on ways of thinking about identity as anchored in the body or in nature and so situated the “New Woman” outside history and change. Just as advertising in the late twentieth century made use of the progressive discourses of feminism to shore up a traditional and purportedly timeless view of woman, many postmodern critiques of identity were woven into an identity politics that was finally quite traditional in that it was unable to explain the different historical claims put on what it means to be a woman, the ways women have been positioned differently within patriarchal social relations and in relation to one another. While my book did not detail the history of women’s different positions under capitalism, I did treat the ways some feminist claims on “newness” actually advance forms of consciousness and identity that are quite compatible with the emergence of a new class fraction of women professionals. It seems to me now that quite a few of the new ways of understanding sexuality and sexual identity currently circulating in the U.S. academy have similar conservative effects.

The new conceptions of sexuality and sexual identity that circulate in what we might think of as “high theory” in the United States—knowledges that are primarily generated out of colleges and universities—arise out of historical circumstances that are not of course limited to these sectors. One of the most useful contributions of cultural studies has been to remind us that the gap between the university and its discourses and the broader culture is a spurious one. The historical conditions that produce the theories, films, fantasies, and fictions circulating at any given time are invariably related, although we are not often invited to consider or explain their relation to one another. It is precisely the continual insistence on reading the culture within its own segmented categories that comprises one crucial strategy of the ruling bloc. Consequently, making the historical connections between and among these segments (the philosophical and the popular, the public and the private, the individual and the collective, etc.) is one of the important charges of the intellectual as radical culture critic. To

historicize a particular cultural narrative is a process of making connections, linking the identities and practices it promotes, the shape it takes, its unsaids and gaps, to the historical conditions that have made it possible and intelligible. To historicize is to bring to light and explain the often invisible social connections between cultural forms and their conditions of possibility. These material conditions are culturally mediated, but they are not strictly speaking cultural themselves: relations of ownership, property, labor. Because the process of social reproduction depends on a vast array of cultural forms and because this process is so complex and uneven, historicizing in the sense I use it here can never be reductive or totalizing. Historicizing cultural forms does not limit the scope of analysis to cultural practices alone, to forms of meaning-making and consciousness, the uses of bodies, spaces, and other social rituals—what Foucault refers to as “discursive practices.” But it does endeavor to make apparent the connections between discursive practices and historical relations that are not discursive or cultural. In short, to historicize is to make visible the complex mediated relationships between particular or local cultural forms and global capitalism’s fundamental class structures of which they are a part.

The historicizing I have set out to do in this book engages several politically committed theoretical knowledges: marxism, feminism, lesbian and gay studies, as well as the body of work known as queer theory. There is no question that my own thinking on sexuality and capitalism has been shaped by the contributions of intellectuals in all of these areas, and some of this debt is registered in my critical readings of their works. Critical inquiry into the ideas that circulate in a culture, and especially those that have gained a certain prominence or share an affiliation with the ruling ideas, is the task of culture theory. The marxist feminist starting point I argue for claims its authority from the objective premises of historical materialism: under capitalism the means to meet human survival needs are collectively produced, and yet they are not collectively distributed. Its guiding normative principles arise not from abstract commitments but from the material reality of the collective human requirement to produce the means for survival of the species and the planet. Because historical materialism as a philosophy is also a product of history and is forged out of the cultural discourses where class relationships are fought out, it too is open to struggle and change. Being open to history pressures a critical practice like marxist feminism to be attentive to the limits of its own articulations by developing the habit of listening to workers, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed, and by gauging the adequacy of its explanations

of social life against their narratives and in relation to the commitment to social equality and justice it endorses.

In the past few years, as the painful effects of capitalism's profit-making strategies have registered among the middle classes in the form of extended workdays, promised careers replaced with part-time jobs or no job at all, lowered pay, endangered tenure, eroded social security, and lost benefits, there are signs of a growing recognition that capitalism is indeed the problem. In the study of culture, this recognition has manifested in signs of an increasing interest in moving beyond study of the material of culture alone in order to reconnect cultural forms to the material realities of capitalism.<sup>17</sup> The work of this "reconnecting" turns on debates over how to understand the link between culture and political economy—that is, debates over the material relationship between the discourses by which we make the world intelligible and the structures of accumulation and labor on which capitalism irrevocably depends. Despite the hopeful signs of interest in the relationship between culture and class, there are still very few extended studies of the relationship between sexuality and capitalism. While this absence is symptomatic of the postmodern left's contradictory relationship to the hegemonic culture, it is also the effect of a much longer history of atomizing sexuality and class.

In each of the following chapters I treat this contradictory historical position of the postmodern left from various angles and examine the ways it shapes our understanding of the materiality of sexuality. A set of related concerns and concepts binds the chapters to one another. One of them is this characteristic severing of sexuality (and other forms of social difference) from its historical relationship to capitalism, a disjuncture that characterizes the postmodern left but is by no means limited to it. In chapter 2 I examine this split as it appears in the few attempts within the tradition of historical materialism to theorize sexuality and in some of the efforts to redress it, before turning to the ways of understanding the materiality of sexuality proposed by queer theory. Because the study of sexuality is part of the study of culture and is often loosely housed under the rubric of cultural studies, in chapter 3 I consider the drift in cultural studies toward making representation, identities, and the politics of subjectivity its main concerns while leaving the structures of capitalism invisible. In diagnosing and helping to reverse this trend, I argue that we can usefully develop further the marxian concept of the commodity. Drawing on Marx and Lukacs, I treat the ways the production of social life by way of commodity exchange always entails modes of seeing—meaning-making processes—



that are themselves instances of commodity logic at work. Among these ways of seeing is a commodification of the human capacity for sensation and affect that emerged in late-nineteenth-century industrialized sectors and took the form of a heteronormative organization of sexual identity. In light of this history, I examine what it might mean to consider sexual identity from the vantage point of its relation to commodification, including its reconfiguration in various postmodern forms under late capitalism. Chapter 4 develops my inquiry into the relation of changing forms of sexual identity to commodity culture by attending more specifically to postmodern sexual identities. I offer a sustained critique of several postmodern theorists whose work on sexuality and identity might be said to contribute to the construction of a neoliberal public intellectual discourse (Diana Fuss, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler), and whose formulations of politics and social change either participate in the commodification of identities or intervene in this process only in very local ways. In an effort to demonstrate how ways of thinking about identity circulating in academic theories are part of a broad-ranging cultural syntax, I extend my analysis of commodification to the activist group from the early nineties in the U.S.—Queer Nation—who, far from ignoring commodity culture, took it as its focus. Reading the strategies of Queer Nation in relation to the history of the avant-garde highlights some of the ideological links that bind the reformulation of sexual identity in the discourses of theory, activism, and consumer culture.

Making visible the global structures that inform a specific local cultural text entails a mode of reading that I demonstrate more pointedly in chapter 5 through a sustained critique of Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game*. The aim here is both to illustrate a way of reading culture and to use this popular postcolonial drag romance as an occasion to inquire into ambivalence as a structure of feeling that supports new sexual identities. Against neo-idealists who claim ambivalence is the trace of an unrepresentable Real and neoculturalists who claim that ambivalence is the mark of the indeterminacy of ideology, signification, or discourse, I argue that the ambivalence of new, more flexible modes of identity—and sexual identity specifically—needs to be read in terms of its historical relation to the contradictory structures of capitalism. This critical standpoint informs my analysis of the film and also my reading of the work of two prominent theorists of sexuality and desire—Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler. I return to Butler here in order to treat her thinking on ideology, desire, and the materiality of identity in relation to Žižek (whose work she has both endorsed and critiqued).

The overlaps in their thinking not only are relevant to how we read *The Crying Game* but, more importantly, highlight some of the mythologizing strategies of a more broad-based postmodern imaginary.

Theories of lesbian identity in advanced capitalist sectors are increasingly preoccupied with the subject of desire—a preoccupation they share with queer theory. In chapter 6 I situate this trend in the context of a pivotal shift in U.S. feminist thinking in the early 1980s. By way of a critical reading of Gayle Rubin’s two landmark essays, I set out to make visible the hidden class history of the “sex wars” and its legacy in the work of several contemporary theorists of lesbian identity (Elizabeth Grosz and Teresa de Lauretis) in order to examine the class effects of the desiring lesbian and her historical position in late capitalism. The chapter goes on to argue the benefits of reclaiming and elaborating a feminist standpoint that makes visible the transnational historical relations that bind some women’s desires to other women’s needs.

The final chapter returns to the topic of outlawed need I raised earlier and asks whether considering the production of affective needs might be a fruitful way to recast sexual politics. This chapter takes up this question in order to confront some of the political questions that have accumulated through the rest of the book: What exactly *is* a radical sexual politics? How can such a politics accommodate the material history of identity thinking—including its hold on the public imagination in certain social formations and its lived effects on individual lives—and also bring to sexuality a global analysis that begins in another, less fettered, place? But it is also an effort to insert into discussions of social movement a dimension of social life and of political struggle that borders on sexuality and yet often eludes academic work on it, and that is the human capacity and need for sensation and affect. Here I suggest that in critiquing the material organization of sexual identities we might fruitfully reorient our discussions to address how the human need for sensation and affect is historically organized, how forms of sexual identity displace these needs into structures of desire, and what alternative possibilities for meeting these needs are thereby eclipsed. It seems to me that critical culture study ignores this powerful dimension of social life at great cost to the effectivity of our interventions. What would it mean to extend our historicizing investigations of the ways affects are marshaled in the formation of subjectivities in the dominant culture to how affective needs feature in the formation of oppositional collective subjects? In simple terms, it may mean quite seriously asking, What’s love got to do with it?



The structural contradictions on which capitalism is based are finally not abstract at all. They shape the work we do, the food we eat, our mobility in the world, how we know, who and how we love—in other words, how we live and die. They register in my own life as they do in many others' in immediate and pressing ways. Although our experience of these contradictions may not make apparent their history and structural connections, that does not mean they are not there. The function of theory is to make evident these structures and their reasons for being as a step toward changing them. And it is this task that constitutes the underlying aim of *Profit and Pleasure*.

I began this chapter by situating the writing that became this book in the space between my own individual, historical position and some of the structures of late capitalism because it is this space—between individual lives and social structures, between the local and the global—that defines one of the more elusive horizons of sexual identity in late capitalism. While I lived them in individual ways, the contradictory positions I found myself in by the early nineties were shared by many other women workers: painfully juggling the unpaid labor of raising children and work for wages; relieved to have gotten a full-time professional job, yet struggling to make ends meet within the standards of need set by middle-class norms; despite fervent feminist convictions, constantly rerouting into denial and a host of individual distresses the racism and homophobia that hedge capitalism's prevailing form of family; embracing a sexual identity that interrupted the taken-for-granted coherence of heteronorms, yet finding there no relief from the alienations of daily life: the specter of shame, the fear of exposure, the lure of romance—structures of feeling that seductively displace history with individual blame or solace. The place where capitalism's kernel of relationships and the lived reality of sexual identity converge is one of the areas of life and of social struggle I would like these essays to speak to, although in my estimation they do so only unevenly and with difficulty. In fact, while much of the writing I did on sexuality in the early nineties did not develop my thinking at this level, it seems to me now that the interface between social structures and the experience of daily life—often understood in terms of “identity”—is a place where profit and pleasure, global and local forces powerfully and intimately converge. This is a region that late capital's modernizing impulses have most aggressively invaded and where global capitalism's contradictions are played out in structures of feeling that often elude rigorous critical examination. For this reason, this most nebulous zone is an area of social life that a radical sexual politics must find ways to address, explain, and marshal.

# THE MATERIAL OF SEX

## MARXISM'S SEXUAL MATERIAL

One of the most remarkable features of the history of sexual identities is the lack of any consensus over how to understand precisely what sexuality is. What *is* the materiality of sexuality? Is it libidinal desire? Bodies and pleasures? Discourses? Culture-ideology? How do presuppositions about the materiality of sex affect how we understand sexual identity and how we craft a sexual politics? As I mentioned in the previous chapter, histories of sexuality invariably do not allow us to know sexuality as part of a social system in which humans produce what they require to meet their needs. And yet there is now a fairly substantial archive of scholarship on sexuality and sexual identity that sees them as material. I want to review some of this work in order to consider several currently reigning ways of thinking about the material of sex in relation to other ways of understanding it that have been marginalized or suppressed. This review will also highlight the pervasive ideological mandate to disconnect sexuality from capitalist production.

Marxists themselves have been among the prime promoters of the fragmented thinking that has separated sexuality from social production.

Both the work of Marx and most of the canon of Western marxism has with rare exception dismissed or ignored sexuality, desire, and affect, and simply not seen heterosexuality as a normative institution. I do not think it is necessary to excuse Marx and Engels's inability to theorize the role of sexuality and domestic labor in capitalist production by saying that they were products of their time or by claiming their biographical history is irrelevant to their theories. Male homosexuality was criminalized in Russia in 1832, outlawed in Prussia in the 1860s, and added to the penal code of Germany in 1871; the United States developed anti-homosexual laws on a state-by-state basis from the mid-1800s onwards (Edge 6–7). Engels died the year of Oscar Wilde's arrest, but the Labouchere Amendment under which Wilde was accused was enacted a decade earlier as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. In other words, both Marx and Engels could—and perhaps should—have known about these struggles, and especially about the law reform efforts in their native countries (Edge 44). Throughout Marx's life feminist arguments were also in the air, most of them liberal, some socialist. Yet while Marx supported the general principle of the emancipation of women, he did not directly engage with these feminist knowledges or address the linked roles of sexuality and gender in capitalist production. Nonetheless, the material connections between gendered sexuality and labor were very immediate—perhaps too intimate—material concerns in the lives of both Marx and Engels.

In 1851 Marx had a son by Helene Demuth, a woman who had been his mother-in-law's faithful maid and who was sent to her daughter, Jenny, as a help during one of the Marx family's bouts of hard times. Affectionately known as Lenchen, she stayed with the Marx family for the rest of her life where she cooked, did housework, baked, washed, and was in many ways a second wife for Karl (Peters 60). Indeed, Lenchen became the linchpin of the Marx household (McLellan 271). Her son, Frederick Demuth, was born several months after Jenny Marx also gave birth—to her fifth child, a girl named Franziska (Peters 104). The fact of Frederick's birth was kept well concealed in Marxian history until the fairly recent chance discovery of a letter from Engels's housekeeper, Louise Freyerberger, revealed it.<sup>1</sup> Louise Freyerberger had kept house for Engels and was very close to Helene Demuth. This letter, written to August Bebel after Engels's death, indicated that Engels accepted paternity for Frederick and so “saved Marx from a difficult domestic conflict,” but he gave Freyerberger the right to reveal the truth should he be accused of treating his son shabbily. Lenchen's pregnancy posed quite a few difficulties for Marx, both

when it first became known and later as decisions about how to situate this child in relation to the Marx household had to be made. During the time of Lenchen's confinement, Marx retreated to the reading room of the British Museum, leaving her with responsibility for the children and his ailing wife (Peters 106). According to Freyerberger, "for Marx, separation from his wife, who was terribly jealous, was always before his eyes: he did not love the boy; he did not dare to do anything for him, the scandal would have been too great" (McLellan 272). Perhaps it was the fear of scandal that also kept Marx from confronting intellectually the political economy of sexuality in the domestic sphere, an economy that surely permeated his daily life. In any event, the sexual and affective relations between servant, wife, child, master, and husband that were entangled in the domestic space of the Marx family exceeded the veneer of a "proper" bourgeois household Marx tried to maintain. No doubt the decision to repress this reality was strategically done in order to keep his enemies from having the ammunition they would use to discredit him; perhaps it was even a wise choice. But the traces of this other, repressed domain of social life haunt his work and reinforce the bourgeois legacy of the segregation of public and private life in marxist history.

In one of Marx's few letters to his wife, Jenny, and in a somewhat facetious hyperbolic tone, he wrote of his unbounded love for her and made use of an interesting, self-mocking metaphor:

Who of my many slanderers and snake-tongued enemies has ever accused me of having a vocation to play the principal role of lover in a second-class theatre? And yet it is true. Had the wretches had enough wit, they would have painted "the relationships of production and exchange" on one side and myself at your feet on the other. "Look to this picture and to that," they would have written beneath. But they are stupid wretches and stupid they will remain. (McLellan 274)

Aside from the joke, this passage is interesting for the ways Marx's image of the two-sided coin both acknowledges and denies—or disavows—the relationship between a complex intimate bond to his life partner and the structures of capitalist production.

Of course, to say that Western marxism has never addressed the materiality of sexuality is to overstate the case. The archive of marxist work that has been done on sexuality has been so marginalized in current scholarship, however, as to be almost invisible. For this reason I want to offer a

brief critical overview of some examples within the marxist tradition of efforts to put forward a materialist understanding of sexuality or sexual identity. Alexandra Kollontai is one of the earliest marxist thinkers to address sexuality and its relation to the class struggle, to speculate on the connection between personal relationships and social change, and to insist that socialists recognize the importance of this question in their politics (Holt 19).<sup>2</sup> Beginning with her involvement in the Russian revolutionary activities of 1905, Kollontai wrote often on the exploitation and oppression of women. Despite a diplomatic career in the Soviet Union that spanned two decades, however, her writings were never embraced by the party, and under Stalin they were virtually suppressed. The dismissal of Kollontai's work occurred in part because she called attention to the gap between Soviet reality and the ideals of socialism, given the extent to which women's domestic labor and patriarchal gender structures generally were being ignored in party policy. Her critiques of private property and the family were often trivialized as wildly incorrect, and her ideas were distorted even by those who fought for the aims of the 1917 Revolution. Some socialist feminist scholarship in the seventies attempted to rehabilitate her ideas, but in the current anti-marxist climate, her work has once more been thrown into obscurity.

Alexandra Kollontai did not treat sexual identity *per se*, and her critiques of the family and bourgeois affective relations all presume a heteronormative organization of sexuality; nonetheless, she was a pioneer among marxists in suggesting that socialist debate and social theory need to address questions of sexuality and attend to the relationship between the personal and the political. While Engels had of course written on private property and the family and had condemned sexual practices that undermined the "true monogamy" of the individual couple, Kollontai was less enthusiastic about monogamy as an ideal. She drew attention to the dangers of exclusiveness and read the individualist rebellion against sexual mores at the turn of the century and in the early twenties as a symptom of an escapist desire to retreat from alienation into "a situation of warmth and creativity which alone has the power to disperse the cold spirit of loneliness from which the individuals suffer" (240). While her work is uneven, it is important for its assertions that the sexual crisis cannot be solved unless there is a radical reform of the human psyche, and that if the psyche is to be reformed there must be a basic transformation of socioeconomic relations (241). Kollontai wisely contended that eliminating oppression and exploitation in the family and wrenching sexuality away from prop-

erty relations would involve, along with much else, psychic changes and an expanse of the human potential for loving. In these respects she opened a neglected area of socialist thought—the domain of private life—to questions that had so far only been dealt with by representatives of bourgeois culture. Her isolation as an intellectual and the lack of political support she received not only were major material barriers that kept her from being able to extend her research but also indications that intense investments in keeping sexuality cordoned off from class struggle pervaded socialist as well as bourgeois politics and culture in the twentieth century.

To some degree Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* prepared the ground for this fragmentation. Engels's study begins with the crucial materialist assumption that the sexual division of labor has a material base rooted in the mode of production. But he ends with several problematic arguments that would haunt marxist and socialist positions on women and homosexuality for decades. He contends that the emancipation of women will be brought about with the reintroduction of women into public industry (137). Engels's mistaken prediction is indicative of the ways his thinking, like Marx's, was blocked by a historical inability to understand the role of domestic labor in capitalist production. He is unable to see how capitalism's relations of production in the wage economy had historically relied on a division of labor in the home and the extent to which the division of labor in both workplace and home in industrial capitalism had been historically regulated by patriarchal gender ideology. He is also blind to heterosexuality as a socially produced institution, even as he is quite articulate about the abhorrent nature of "the abominable practice of sodomy" (128).

Within the socialist movements of the Second International (1889–1914), Engels's arguments went largely unquestioned, and as a result, the nature of personal life and sexuality were not seen as vital areas for socialist analysis. Moreover, the way these concerns were being localized by bourgeois culture and political movements—that is, as individual or civil rights issues—was used as a reason to dismiss their importance. After Lenin's death, Leon Trotsky, one of the central figures in the 1917 Revolution and the chief opponent of Stalin's bureaucracy, continued to maintain the importance of women's emancipation and the reorganization of the family to socialism. But he had little to say about (homo)sexuality. In the 1930s the Stalinist counter-revolution exiled and murdered Trotsky, gave priority to the reproductive family, and ultimately revoked most of the legal gains of the earlier revolutionary period. By 1934 homosexuality was



once more a criminal offense in the USSR, abortions were illegal, prostitutes were arrested, and the maintenance of the family as an economic unit became a priority. The view that homosexuality was a decadent bourgeois deviation continued to dominate marxist orthodoxy after the 1930s (Weeks 3–5).

Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse are two marxist theorists who developed sustained materialist analyses of sexuality in the decades before and after Stalin, and although much of their work predates the Stonewall uprising, it was an important resource for the gay liberation movement. Both confront the ahistorical features of Freud's theories, although from very different angles, but in doing so they each attempt to materialize psychoanalysis. However, because for both of them the material is finally anchored in Freud's drive theory, their aim to combine the insights of psychoanalysis and marxism finally founders on one of the ways of thinking that would continue to punctuate theories of sexuality—that is, localizing sexuality in the body. To contend that sexuality originates in innate instinctual drives, as they do, places it outside history. Consequently, despite their efforts to bring our understanding of sexuality within a materialist frame, for both Reich and Marcuse sexuality remains in fundamental ways outside the social order.

Reich's work arose out of a general desire to explain the failure of revolution in the West in the twenties (Weeks 160). There is no question that his thinking is glaringly open to critique for its gender stereotyping, for setting up the norm of "heterosexual genital sexuality" as the height of sexual relations, and for positing homosexuality as a lapse from this standard. Yet because he insisted on an analysis that would join an understanding of sexuality to the varied demands of social production, Reich is an important maverick thinker. His expulsion from the two leading institutional bodies of psychoanalysis and marxism is another indicator of the intense ideological investment in the separation of sexuality and class analysis his work confronted in the early- to mid-twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Like Engels and few other U.S. and European socialist theorists, Reich acknowledges the impact of the patriarchal family and of capitalism on sexuality. During the twenties, Reich had achieved the professional status of director of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society's prestigious seminar in technique, but it was his work in the free clinics that showed him how poverty often contributed to neuroses. He soon became convinced that the problems treated by psychoanalysis were at their roots social problems, and by 1927 he joined the Austrian Social Democratic Party (Ollman xii).

The writings of his marxist period (1927–36) set out to integrate the insights of psychoanalysis with historical materialism’s analysis of social structures in order to develop a revolutionary strategy for the working class (Ollman xii). Reich built a movement for Sexual Economy and Politics—Sex-Pol—which was a consortium for youth groups, teachers’ and doctors’ groups, medical advisers, and others. Sex-Pol spoke to workers about housing and contraception, often trying to know more about the form of social organization that created problems like access to contraception (Reiche 14–17).

Reich’s main objective in his early, marxist work was to delineate the ways sexual repression undermines people’s ability to come to grips with their life situations. In this early writing he made a bold case for the uses of psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework that might lead us to understand the psychological effects of production conditions upon the individual and for clarifying the way socially produced ideologies take form “inside the head.” His answer to the question “Why does society repress sexuality?” is that the chief function of repression is to secure the existing class structure. In addition to his effort to materialize psychic processes, Reich adds a psychological dimension to Marx’s theory of ideology: emotions as well as ideas are socially determined. Despite these insights, however, Reich’s work finally falters on his inability to historicize sexuality, a failure that is most evident in his arguments that substantive social change can take place only through the release of sexual energy in heterosexual orgasm. In this sense his effort to connect sexuality to social forces was undermined by a very localized corporeal understanding of sexuality and social change: libidinal energy was the natural basis for sex and a social cure-all. These problems notwithstanding, his work is a noteworthy example in the archive of efforts to connect sexuality to capitalist social structures.

Like Reich, Marcuse links sexuality and capitalism in some groundbreaking and important ways. His recognition that changes in the organization of sexuality and libidinal pleasure are tied to changes in the division of labor and his contention that the reification of the body and of pleasure under capitalism are alienating violations of human capacities are suggestive contributions to a historical materialist theory of sexuality. And yet his integration of Freud’s historical and individual narrative of eros and civilization into a more materialist understanding of social relations is undone by the instinctual basis for the polymorphous, perverse sexuality he promotes. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) he argues that advanced capitalist societies have made sex a commodity and that commodified sexuality closes

down the diversity of sexual possibilities as well as critical and aesthetic pursuits that would allow a true sexual revolution to flourish (Ann Ferguson 59). While Marcuse is interested in the repressive effects of capitalism on sexuality, he is often overly general about the dynamics of that relationship. For example, like Freud, Marcuse sees Eros as life instinct. But this life instinct originates in a universal energy that exists prior to or outside of social life. Consequently, there is a mythic dimension to the history he plots.

Much as it is for Foucault, sexuality for Marcuse is based in pleasures and bodies, but his allegiance to a concept of power as repressive is, of course, quite unlike Foucault's. He does not connect sexuality to discourse or make use of the Marxian concept of ideology in theorizing it. Much like Eros, sexuality becomes an autonomous principle governing the organism. Once societal authority is absorbed by the individual, his erotic performance is brought in line with and repressed by his societal performance. Under the rule of capitalism's performance principle, body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor. The performance principle operates to unify the various objects of the instincts into one libidinal object of the "opposite sex" (*sic*) (48) and to establish genital supremacy.

Marcuse sees these unifying processes as repressive organizations of a sexuality that is by nature polymorphous. The perversions are a historical construction that express rebellion against the subjugation of polymorphous sexuality to the order of procreation and against the institutions that guarantee this order (49). They place themselves outside the dominion of the performance principle and challenge its very foundation (50). Marcuse's performance principle connects eros to the organization of work, but the relationship he draws between the organization of work and sexuality is finally oversimplified: under capitalism the libido is drained and used up by work, and sexuality/eros is relegated to leisure time and genital sex. This overly general analysis does not address the historically variant ways sexuality (even in its "perverse" forms) pervades the workplace and the investment of monopoly capital in certain forms of sexual identity. Moreover, neither he nor Reich was concerned with the relationship between gender and sexuality or between sexuality and the gendered division of labor. Finally, Marcuse's notion of a thoroughly administered society that absorbs and confines the individual and sexuality into alienated social arrangements dominated by repressive institutions like the media leaves little or no room for the possibility of social change.

While Marcuse certainly was an inspiration for the gay liberation movement of the seventies, most of the marxist work in the movement—

in England, Europe, and the United States especially — was intent on developing an analysis of sexuality that was not grounded in a corporeal and ahistorical entity like the libido. Rather, it attempted to integrate sexuality into explanations of global capitalism, and in the process called for a much more hopeful conception of political agency. The Stonewall uprising in New York City in June 1969 was the most immediate catalyst for the formation of the gay liberation movement. Before the end of the summer of 1969, the Gay Liberation Front had formed in the United States, and within the following year gay liberation groups sprang into existence across the country (D’Emilio 1983, 232–33). Gay liberation was itself an outcome of the adjustments of late capitalism that spawned the general international insurgency circa 1968. Most immediately, it was inspired by the black power movement and the rise of feminism — both of which included fractions that aimed to articulate the historical relationship between culture and class, local and global forces. As in much of the New Left, there was general agreement within gay liberation thinking that capitalism was oppressive. Many gay liberation manifestos at least rhetorically drew connections between capitalism and repressive sexuality, racism and imperialism. But the gay liberation movement was by no means thoroughly influenced by marxism or a united socialist front, and its internal debates sorted out in what seem in hindsight to be predictable ways. There were those who, despite references to capitalism, basically focused on and advocated for cultural change, and there were those more avowedly marxist groups that stressed that political and cultural concerns needed to be linked to more global economic structures in some way.<sup>4</sup>

One set of texts that succinctly demonstrates these different leanings is Carl Whitman’s “Gay Manifesto” and the reply to it written by the gay socialist group Red Butterfly (Blasius and Phelan 380–90). Although Red Butterfly supports Whitman for generally linking the individual effects of gay oppression to “the social and economic facts which are at once the cause and effects of this situation,” they note the tension in his manifesto between personal freedom and the need for collective action, and they critique Whitman’s promotion of “coming out” as an inadequate strategy for social change in itself because it can so easily separate personal liberation from changing the social conditions that foster gay oppression. Comprised of a loose network of collectives, journals, newsletters, study groups, conferences, and actions whose most intensive activity lasted only until the mid-seventies, the Gay Left represented a short-lived but vital willingness to make use of marxism as a critical framework to link sexual oppression

to global capitalism. In fact, however, there were more gestures in this direction than there were developed theoretical explanations from which to forge a fundamentally anticapitalist activist politics. Nonetheless, the fact that a broad sector of the discourse of gay liberation was at least in spirit directed toward connecting sexual oppression to the history of capitalism made this one of the most exciting flash points in the historical development of a critical and materialist understanding of sexuality.

Among the collectives that very pointedly did set out to develop a marxist or socialist analysis of sexuality as a basis for action were the Los Angeles Research Group, the Lavender and Red Union (Los Angeles), Red Butterfly (New York), the Gay Left Collective (UK), and the Gay Socialist Action Project (New York City). As the Collective Statement for the British socialist journal *Gay Left* announced in 1975, the aims of the Gay Left were to “contribute towards a marxist analysis of homosexual oppression . . . and encourage in the gay movement an understanding of the links between the struggle against sexual oppression and the struggle for socialism.” Like many socialist gay organizations forming at the time, the British Gay Left Collective brought together men who benefited from and were involved in the gay liberation movement’s dramatic interruption of the negative value attached to homosexuality. They strove to expand gay culture and community but also sought another basis for social organizing than personal change. Marxism offered a politics, a theory, and a practice that moved away from the spontaneity and localized countercultural emphasis that prevailed in gay liberation. But acceptance of a marxist standpoint did not preclude critique. They acknowledged that “there has not . . . been a properly marxist understanding of sexual oppression,” an understanding that, they suggested, would lie “in grasping the relationship between the economy, ideology, and culture and the insights supplied by recent developments in the study of sexuality” (Gay Left Collective 9). They rejected a marxism that stressed the economic system as the motor of change or saw social struggle solely in economic terms. Instead they contended that economic relations are mediated through complex ideological and political forms (10). In arguing that the workers’ struggle is not just about better wages and working conditions but also over social relations inculcated in the family and reinforced through bourgeois ideology, they hoped to expand the discussion of sexuality that occurred in the pre-1914 work of Engels and Kollontai (9). They aligned with the efforts of British marxists to address the role of ideology in social reproduction. But in contending that it is at the ideological level that most of our oppression as gays

is expressed (10), they ran the danger of separating ideology from capitalism's base and opening the door to an exclusive focus on ideological and political practices that would ultimately dominate the New Left.

The New York City-based Gay Socialist Action Project (which included among its members Jonathan Katz and John D'Emilio) formed on September 14, 1975, as a gay men's marxist study group whose one continuing activity was regular weekly readings and discussions. After beginning with the work of Marx—including six months devoted to reading volume 1 of *Capital*—they went on to read Eli Zaretsky's *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*, Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, and the writings of Trotsky, Lenin, and Mao. The group also called gay socialist caucuses and delivered talks at the Gay Academic Union Conference (1976), issued a newsletter, and worked on various political actions. Like the Gay Left Collective in the UK, they linked gay oppression under capitalism to the role of the family and the subjection of women in the capitalist system of production. Both of these groups understood that sexuality is inextricably linked to gender and that gender ideology ultimately serves to reproduce the sexual division of labor. They argued that because it is bound up with the gendered division of labor, sexual oppression probably wouldn't be eliminated under capitalism; consequently, it is essential for gay people to relate their oppression to the wider system of exploitation and oppression that capitalism operates (Gay Left Collective 2). The organizing efforts of the Gay Left pressured socialist organizations to address questions of sexuality and sexual identity, and some of them—like the Spartacist League—did, although they did not all develop or even promote the systematic analyses of sexuality of the sort called for by the Gay Left.<sup>5</sup> The American Workers Party, for example, supported "equal rights for gays" but stressed that democratic rights would not completely improve the lives of many working-class gays. Their publications and pamphlets emphasized that state-sanctioned gay oppression affected the quality of life for many gay people and limited their access to basic human resources.<sup>6</sup>

While I am stressing the value of analysis that would inquire into the ways the local histories of sexuality were shaped by the changing relations of production in global capitalism, I also do not want to minimize the accomplishments of the gay liberation movement. In very brave and bold terms they demanded changes in civil society that would end discrimination against anyone who was named, or known, or claimed an identity as "homosexual." It is important to remember that even in the mid-1970s

homosexuality was illegal in over half of the fifty United States, and in states where it was legal there were no provisions for gay families; next-of-kin privileges were refused homosexuals in hospitals; custody and adoption rights were routinely withheld from gay parents; gay men and lesbians were denied employment in federal government jobs; there were no laws to make discrimination in nongovernment jobs illegal; and landlords could also legally discriminate against gay people. In light of these oppressive conditions, the reforms achieved by the gay liberation movement permanently altered the quality of life for lesbians and gay men in the United States. By the end of the seventies the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of disorders; about half of the states had removed their sodomy laws; the Civil Service Commission eliminated its ban on employment of lesbians and gay men; and dozens of municipalities had passed antidiscrimination statutes. Lesbians and gay men were more of a public presence in academia, in the media, and in churches, and a gay subculture was growing (D'Emilio 1983, 239).

One of the glaring problems from the outset both in gay liberation and within the gay marxist left was the inability to develop a politics and theories that adequately addressed the particularity of lesbian oppression and the political contributions of women to the movement. By the mid-seventies in the United States, autonomous lesbian-feminist collectives were forming, as many women who had been involved in gay liberation circles became disaffected by the sexism of gay men. While there were numerous socialist feminist groups and collectives in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany, few lesbian feminist organizations turned to marxism to develop a materialist explanation of sexuality. Most lesbian collectives and groups tended to be radical feminist in their thinking; that is, they identified patriarchal structures as the primary cause of women's oppression. The Furies, based in Washington, D.C., are an interesting example of the overlaps and substantive differences between the two standpoints. The topics covered in articles appearing in their newspaper of the same name are indicative of the collective's concerns. They read Engels, focused attention on class privilege within the movement, confronted corporate capitalism, and called for a level of analysis that would surpass most of the current discussion of lesbianism as a personal, cultural, or civil rights issue. But the analysis they produced did not finally offer the more systemic explanations they called for. One of the significant features of the writings that came out of the Furies collective, and an aspect of their thinking that distinguished it from much of the discourse of gay libera-

tion, was their attention to heterosexuality as an institution. This was a substantially different focus from feminist politics that promoted women's liberation, lesbian feminist concerns with women-identified culture, or gay liberation's promotion of homosexual rights. Unfortunately, though, their work did not go on to develop how this institution is connected to capitalism. At times it even seemed that heterosexuality itself was the problem. Moreover, although they linked sexuality to class, they did not understand class as social relations of labor but rather as "classism." Classism stresses the cultural expression of class hierarchies—in income, consumer choices, and lifestyle—and understands class differences in terms of status. As a result, it redirects the focus of class analysis from exploitation to cultural oppression. In this way, the Furies were finally quite different from marxist and socialist feminists. While the group was short-lived, the radical feminist notion of intersecting oppressions they developed continues to define women's studies in the United States.

By the early 1980s the founding principles of the gay marxist left, always a small fraction of the gay liberation movement, had been dismantled or abandoned even by its chief promoters. Much of the reason for its demise lies in the intractable refusal of many of the existing socialist groups to meaningfully address sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. Many gay socialists finally found themselves exhausted and alienated from long and fruitless struggles in party organizations; some redirected their energies to work with autonomous gay groups and focused their scholarship on a cultural rather than historical materialism (Weeks 1979, 235). The legacy of this retreat from class analysis for sexual politics is evident in the understandings of culture and materialism that have shaped queer theory. While the rise of the right in the eighties was a time of crisis for marxism and of political fragmentation on the left, it was also the decade when cultural studies began to flourish in the academy. By decade's end, cultural studies was becoming an established academic entity whose retreat from marxism and alternative rush to Foucauldian materialism virtually dominated the analysis of sexuality. In the following chapter, I will develop further the ways marxist and New Left debates over the material in the eighties shaped cultural studies and the bearing of these debates on histories and theories of sexuality.

A few contemporary scholars are going against this grain, continuing the still groundbreaking effort to develop an understanding of how sexual identity features in and is shaped by capitalism. David Evans, Nicola Field, Kevin Floyd, Chrys Ingraham, and Donald Morton are notable examples.



One of the persistent challenges for those working on theories of sexuality has been to develop analyses that redress the disciplining of knowledge that has segregated sexuality from analysis of class and class analysis from sexuality. Ann McClintock is one culture theorist in a younger generation of scholars whose book *Imperial Leather* is a notable recent move in this direction. McClintock argues that the repudiation of unruly elements like sexual desire and the unconscious from materialist history marks these areas of social life as objects. Abjection is a social and psychic process whereby an object is rejected, yet that object nonetheless haunts the subject as its inner constitutive limit (72). McClintock contends that the logic of abjection not only shapes the cordoning off of the psychic from the social that has characterized the history of psychoanalysis and marxism but also defines their internal logics. She posits that “abjection shadows the no-go zone between psychoanalysis and material history but in such a way as to throw their historical separation radically into question” (72). Her use of the concept of abjection here is both intriguing and inadequate. The object points to a forbidden area in a culture’s logic, but it is not clear why this abjection exists. *Why* is a particular connection rejected as impossible or unintelligible? What are the *reasons* for this occurrence? A materialist history of psychoanalysis has yet to be written, but part of this story undoubtedly should include the segregation of psychoanalysis from class analysis that took place as these two formidable explanatory frames took shape at the end of the nineteenth century.

McClintock reads the process of abjection as a cultural or psychic event. But it seems to me that this is a limit in her thinking that is also the characteristic boundary of cultural materialism. (I will return to this problem in my discussion of Judith Butler below and also in the following chapter.) In opening up the psychic concept of abjection to both local and global historical forces, we can expand upon McClintock’s contention that historical materialism and psychoanalysis are not in fact historically separate social narratives and perhaps explain why markers of the “other” abjected areas of social life nonetheless litter the texts of these two grand theories of social and individual structures and relations. McClintock calls her readings of a variety of cultural texts a “situated psychoanalysis and a psychoanalytically informed history” (72), and in this sense she avowedly walks the line between these two explanatory frames. History is for her “material history,” which means that she is convinced “psychoanalysis and material history are mutually necessary for a strategic engagement with unstable power” (73). Hardly the classical marxist, her material history is a blend of

cultural and historical materialism that leaves questions about many of the historical reasons for some of the cultural processes she identifies unanswered. Still, her argument is a suggestive invitation to reexamine one of the still mystified areas in the legacy of industrial capitalism: the development of ways of knowing that separate labor from sexuality and affect. Her reading of the suppressed figure of the domestic servant in Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex and in several other nineteenth-century narratives provides an incisive account of the ways the erasure of women's labor in the bourgeois cult of domesticity underlies the culture of imperialism and the development of one of the most powerful theories of sexuality within it. That there are similar blind spots in Marx we know from some of the historical details I reviewed earlier and from the work of marxist feminists who have shown that Marx's theory of capital and his understanding of surplus value eclipse the reproductive labor of women, not only in the domestic sphere but also in the naturalized, affective realms of waged work.

McClintock's interest in the dynamics of unstable power relations emphatically focuses on ambivalent cultural practices like fetishism and cross-dressing. She understands practices of cultural ambivalence like these as the personal enactment of contradictions that cannot be resolved socially. While the contradiction that underlies class relations (that some profit only at the expense of the surplus labor of many) is not the determining social structure in her analyses, it is often a weighted one, especially as it features in women's invisible domestic work. Her historical renarration of fetishization opens the concept of the fetish to a more varied history in which race and class relationships play as formative a role as sexuality (184). She wrenches the fetish free from the logic of the phallus it is infused with in psychoanalysis (i.e., that the fetish is the overvalued object-substitute for the mother's missing phallus), develops a reading of the ways the Freudian fetish itself participates in the overvaluation of objects, and relates this overvaluation to the recurrent appearance of the fetish in an emergent imperial commodity culture. McClintock reads the repression of the domestic servant in Freud and the fetishizing of women's labor in photographs of working-class women, particularly in photographs by the British "gentleman" Charles Munby of Hannah Culwick, the woman who was his servant and eventually also his wife. Her readings help to situate the separation of class and sexuality in relation to the rise of new forms of commodity culture and go some way toward redressing the separation of class and sexuality in cultural theory. Although she makes visible the ways a domestic economy, and working-class women's labor especially,

comprises the hidden history of imperialism and of the emergent discourses of sexuality in the late nineteenth century, she does not directly relate this history to changes in capitalist production. Moreover, the fact that she does not treat the heteronormative dimensions of this history or the emergence of hetero- and homosexual identities places her work outside the critical insights of both the Gay Left and contemporary queer theory.

### THE COMING OF THE QUEER

Queer theory presented itself in the late eighties as an emphatically post-marxist critique of sexual identity politics. One of the defining features of queer theory is its effort to reorient a cultural and social movement based on identity politics and founded on the categories “gay” and “lesbian” in order to produce “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (de Lauretis 1991, iv). By the early nineties in academic theory, invoking the signifier “queer” paralleled the shift away from the terms “lesbian” and “gay” among some activists (Queer Nation, which gave the signifier “queer” national publicity, was founded in 1990). Claiming a queer identity is an effort to speak from and to the differences that have been suppressed both by heteronorms and by the homo-hetero binary: the transsexual, bisexual, and any other ways of “experiencing” and expressing sensuality and affect that do not conform to the prevailing organization of sexuality. It is an effort to unpack the monolithic identities “lesbian” and “gay,” including the intricate ways lesbian and gay sexualities are inflected by heterosexual norms, race, gender, and ethnic differences. Embracing the category used to shame and cast out sexual deviants, queer theory and politics defiantly refuse the terms of the dominant discourse, offering instead an “in your face” rejection of proper sexual identities that is both anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist. Touting queerness is a gesture of rebellion against compulsory heterosexuality’s pressure to be either hetero or invisible, either confidently normal or apologetically, shamefully, quietly queer. These knowledges carry an important critical force to the extent that they denaturalize how we think about sexuality and identity. Much of this denaturalizing draws from an array of post-modern theories that see sexuality and identity not as a fact of nature or a libidinal drive but rather as an unstable symbolic construction, a cultural effect. Queer theory distances itself from lesbian and gay identity politics because it sees any identity as internally divided and therefore not an apt

or effective rallying point for change. “Queer” is a mark of the instability of identity. It makes visible the ways that heterosexuality functions as a normative power regime and highlights the arbitrariness of the neat distinctions it enforces (between masculine and feminine, straight and gay, for example) in how sexuality and gender—and for some queer theorists race, too—come to be known. In all of these respects queer theory is a significant departure from lesbian and gay studies.

Queer theory is an ensemble of knowledges, many of them contesting knowledges. It is, in other words, a site of struggle, not a monolithic discourse. And yet, underneath the debates, there are some important ways in which the distinguishing features of queer theory share assumptions that are not new. A significant one is the fact that in most of this work capitalism remains completely invisible. Despite their diversity, knowledges that come under the signature “queer theory” invariably and at times insistently separate the primary object of their analysis—sexuality—from capitalism as a class-based system of production. The most widely circulating version of queer theory now is what I will call “avant-garde queer theory.” Emerging out of a decade of cultural work on several fronts, affected by new forms of political activism honed in the AIDS-dominated eighties, and tailored by a postmodern academic chic, avant-garde queer theory has challenged and redefined lesbian and gay studies. Some avant-garde queer theory that began to circulate in the early nineties makes no claims to a materialist analysis but remains primarily bound to a more textual approach to identity as signification. (I am thinking here of essays and books by Lee Edelman [1994], Diana Fuss [1991], Wayne Koestenbaum [1993], and Peggy Phelan [1993], for instance.) However, this variant of postmodern theories of identity is now losing credibility and is being displaced as another, more materialist avant-garde strand has become queer theory’s dominant discourse.

Michael Warner’s “Introduction” to the collection *Fear of a Queer Planet* is an exemplary instance. Unlike versions of queer theory that have been more preoccupied with identity as an effect of language and textuality, Warner’s perspective acknowledges the social and political dimensions of sexuality. He even addresses the market mediation of lesbian and gay culture in a “structural environment” where the institutions of queer culture “have been dominated by those with capital” (xvii). We do not learn any more about how Warner understands the power dynamics of domination by capital, the distinction between those with capital and those without, or how this difference shapes queer culture and community, however,

because Warner never mentions them again. While Warner hints that capitalism necessarily entails the difference between those who control and those who do not control capital and that this structure plays a determinative role in shaping queer culture, this hint is no substitute for analysis of sexuality's historical relation to capitalism as a class-based system. In fact, Warner goes on to disavow the need for any such analysis when he asserts that "class is conspicuously useless" for queer theory (xxiv). Warner's dismissive separation of class analysis from sexuality echoes the well-established convention of segregating the history of sexuality from the history of capitalism. This history is most often rendered opaque by appeals to the obviousness of their irrelevance to one another. Much of queer theory now continues this tradition; the very possibility of linking the changing organizations of sexuality to capitalism remains all but unspeakable. Because this strand of queer theory claims to be materialist, the difference between its cultural materialism and marxism's historical materialism needs further clarification.

Both cultural and historical materialist approaches to sexuality call into question cultural categories (gay, straight, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman; hetero vs. homo), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexual identity rely. Both break from traditional notions of sexuality as a personal or civil rights issue. And both refuse a politics in which identity is understood to be represented in a self-evident way through one's body or collectivity is reduced to group affiliation defined according to the standard of authentic embodiment. Cultural materialist queer theory at times acknowledges the work of materialist feminists. (Monique Wittig, for example, has been claimed by several prominent avant-garde queer theorists.) But the theories of the social and the modes of critical practice offered in cultural materialist queer theory are quite at odds with historical materialism even as it has been embraced and reworked by feminists.

This queer theory of the more cultural materialist sort can be loosely characterized as post-poststructuralist in that it extends poststructuralism's emphatically textual critique of humanism and empiricism to more overtly social concerns, usually framed in terms of cultural politics. (Among those developing this strand of queer theory are Judith Butler, David Halperin, Cindy Patton, Gayle Rubin, and Eve Sedgwick.) Drawing heavily on Michel Foucault's arguments that subjectivity is first of all historical and social, that identities are discursively constructed, and that these constructions are enacted through disciplinary technologies and

regimes of power, this strand of queer theory, like Foucault's genealogies, is a version of materialism. But what is meant by materialism here? The answer to this question can take us on a long detour into the history of cultural materialism that is in fact an important supplement to the emergence of queer theory and its post-marxist underpinnings. I outline some of this history in the following chapter. Here, however, I want to turn to Judith Butler's work for the exemplary "queer" answer to this question it offers.

Not only has Butler acquired enormous stature in defining queer critiques of heterosexuality, but the explicit endorsement of materialism in her book *Bodies That Matter* situates her arguments squarely within the discourses of post-marxism and characterizes it as a paradigmatic example of Foucauldian avant-garde queer theory. The following reading of Butler is meant to explore some of the informing assumptions of this approach and to question the limits of a post-marxist queer politics. Judith Butler is cited more persistently and pervasively than any other queer theorist. References to her work appear in dissertations, conference papers and journals, and new books and collections, as well as in more popular cosmopolitan venues like the *Voice Literary Supplement*.<sup>7</sup> This attention indicates that her ideas have struck a chord in a certain sector of the public imagination of new ways of knowing sexual identity.

One of the most notable and trenchant features of Butler's analysis is her extension of feminism's theory of gender as culturally constructed to the more radical argument that the internal coherence of the identities "man" or "woman" presumes institutional heterosexuality. Much of the oppositional force of her critique lies in its insistent claim that heteronormativity is absolutely central to the bourgeois ideology of expressive and coherent selfhood. This imaginary representation, she argues, "conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, gay, and lesbian contexts where gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire or sexuality generally does not seem to follow from gender" (1990a, 135–36). From this perspective, heterosexuality, which is generally assumed to be an expression of the core of oneself, is exposed as a precarious fabrication always potentially at risk.

In *Gender Trouble* Butler draws on various poststructuralist theories of language to present sexual identification as the effect of *discourses* (acts, gestures, practices) that assemble a provisional coherence on the surface of the body (1990a, 136). Her aim is to denaturalize heterosexuality and gender by showing them to be performative features of identity. "Being" lesbian or gay—or straight, for that matter—is for Butler not a mark of

one's essential identity but rather the effect of repeated performances of cultural signs and conventions, imitations that are always supplementary, always giving the lie to any original sexual identity. This performativity is not a matter of role playing or mere theatricality, which assumes an "I" that is already in place before the role or act is performed. Rather, identity is radically performative. It is through the repeated performance of certain significations of sex and gender that an "I" continually comes to "be."

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler extends these arguments about the performativity of identity by casting them in a much more emphatically Foucauldian materialist frame. From the opening pages of *Bodies* she asserts that she began this project trying to consider the materiality of the body, the constraints by which bodies are materialized as sexed, and how to link the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender (xi, 1). It quickly becomes clear, however, that materiality for Butler is simply a matter of norms. The materiality of the body, she argues, is inseparable from regulatory conventions that function in a performative fashion to constitute sex and to materialize the body's sex and sexual difference in the service of a heterosexual imperative (1993, 2). Norms achieve this materialization of sex through their forcible reiteration. It is through the repetition or reiteration of already established norms that one "performs" a sexual identity. In this sense sexual identity is what Butler calls a "citational" practice rather than an ontological or natural essence. Sex is not a raw material on which gender identities are constructed, a drive, physiological configuration, or bodily sensation, but rather a set of cultural conventions by which one becomes visible at all (1993, 2). Norms regulate in part by exclusion, and like McClintock, Butler argues that the exclusionary normative matrix by which sex is constructed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject categories. Any identification with these abjects is continually disavowed by the norms or laws of the dominant culture. It is that for Butler which constitutes the different citation of the law that this threatening abject puts forward as the critical space of a queer performative politics.

Several concepts are linked in Butler's critique of normative heterosexuality—discourse, materiality, performance—and all are loosely connected to history, power, and the social. Much as it is for Foucault, discourse in *Bodies That Matter* is a complex chain of social practices. These social practices are the vehicles for norms and the vectors of power. Performativity in this sense is the modality of power as discourse. For Butler, the historical force of discourse and of norms is their power over time to enact what they name (1993, 187).

Butler's emphasis on norms injects into poststructuralism's textualized understandings of identity as signification a social and historical analysis more attuned to the workings of power in language. But understanding the materiality of social life as so exclusively normative also limits social relations to the domains of culture and the law. Normative discourses are social practices that regulate action, behavior, rituals, and institutions. And in this sense, they encompass much more than language, speech acts, or signs. But a normative starting point also excludes in advance other important dimensions of social life from critical consideration.

Butler has recently had to address some of the challenges to her way of understanding sexuality. In an essay tellingly entitled "Merely Cultural," which was first given as a talk in 1996 at the Rethinking Marxism Conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, she answers the "explicitly Marxist objection that the cultural focus of leftist politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, failing to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, and failing as well to situate culture in terms of a *systematic* understanding of social and economic modes of production" (265). In response to the charges from what she calls an "orthodox" marxism, Butler defends poststructuralism's focus on culture for the interests of a queer politics. She does so by way of a rather high-handed misreading of marxism as aiming for a "racially cleansed notion of class" and deploying a rhetoric of unity that domesticates and subordinates movements that formed in opposition to oppressive efforts to erase their priorities. The problem here is that Butler ignores many of the historical materialist efforts to formulate the complex ways class relations never operate "on their own" or simply "subordinate" certain kinds of social difference. At one point she refers to the need to remember the reasons why new social movements, presumably feminism, gay, and black civil rights movements, "became articulated against a hegemonic Left," as well as against a complicitous "liberal center and a truly threatening right wing" (268). There is a problem here with Butler's presentation of the enemy of new social movements. It obscures some of the ways power was exerted not just through certain political "wings" and "centers" but through the bourgeois ruling bloc who were able to use the repressive power of the state to suppress groups like the Black Panthers and feminists who were forging collectivities based on much more systemic and revolutionary rather than identitarian ways of thinking. It is not clear who exactly Butler includes in the new social movements she refers to, but that she uses the term "semi-autonomous" is interesting. It suggests that identity-based groups can



maintain a link to *something*, though the something is unnamed. Is it to class relations? To the ruling bloc? Butler does not say, and the essay goes on to endorse an emphatic cultural politics, but her mention of semi-autonomous political relations is suggestive and important, and I will come back to this point later. What Butler refuses to acknowledge or perhaps even to see is that insisting on the vital role of the extraction of surplus labor in capitalism does not preclude developing analyses of how this process involves highly differentiated and inter-imbricated cultural processes.

It is true that the historical materialist position I am endorsing stresses that capitalism is fundamentally based on social relations of class, relations that are always mediated by other social differences. In other words, yes, class does have a certain priority in capitalism. But it is important to remember that class in this sense is a social relationship, not a reified cultural category. To see this historical materialist analysis as “subordinating” or “domesticating” identitarian interests to class is already to be thinking about class out of the very logic Butler herself disparages, a logic in which differences are “abstracted,” made falsely coherent and territorial in relation to one another.

When Butler turns to the topic of sexual difference, she protests against charges that she sees social life as “merely cultural.” She counters that, of course, sexuality is central to the functioning of political economy (270–71), then reviews some of the arguments of Marx, Engels, and socialist feminists that systemically tie “the regulation of sexuality” to the mode of production (271). For Butler, these examples serve to show that social reproduction cannot be understood without expanding the economic sphere to include the social reproduction of persons (271). But for her showing that sexuality is central to political economy finally means overwriting political economy with sexuality. The analysis has not advanced any further than the arguments of cultural feminists almost twenty years ago. The examples that she gives tell of lesbians and gays being denied rights—to freedom of assembly and speech, to family, as members of the military, as legitimate committed partners and parents. She is right to foreground that there are rules regulating relations of property and economic entitlement, and she is right to stress that this process is not about specific identities being excluded from cultural recognition but refers rather to a “specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family” (273). In the end, Butler does not explain how sexuality mediates relations of labor or has anything at all to do

with exploitation. Instead she emphatically situates her analysis of economic exchange within culture, using Levi-Strauss's concept of exchange as the lever to do so. Levi-Strauss does indeed confound the distinction between the cultural and the economic in his analyses, but the melding of kinship relations and divisions of labor in the societies he describes has not been the prevailing form of production under capitalism. Butler's turn to anthropology allows her to substitute kinship relations—which are cultural relations—for relations of production. This is a familiar ideological shift in the history of feminist encounters with marxism. As we will see later, it is the same substitution that Gayle Rubin makes in her early work. Consequently, in the end, social production remains what it has been all along for Butler—if not “merely,” then finally, cultural.

The emphasis on culture and the law in Butler's normative understanding of materiality is quite distinct from what materiality means in historical materialism, and precisely because historical materialism does not “discount the cultural,” as Butler charges, the differences between the two are important to consider. Historical materialism understands social life to be historically and materially produced through relations of labor through which people make what is needed to survive. But this process does not happen without the ways of making sense, normative practices (culture-ideology), and the laws (state organization) that are part of the material production of social life. That Butler, like Foucault, entirely drops social relations of labor out of her analysis marks her claims on the material as post-marxist. Indeed, this affiliation with post-marxism is evident in her laudatory appropriation of the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It is helpful to examine this debt to Laclau and Mouffe in sorting out what is at issue in the kind of materialism Butler's queer theory puts forth.

Butler's performative queerness and Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy share much in common. For Laclau and Mouffe, the material is a performative discourse. In their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), they develop a version of materialist performativity against the traditions of economic determinism and party vanguardism within marxism. Based on their reading of divisions within marxism, Laclau and Mouffe lay claim to a concept of hegemony more linked to mass (democratic) than class (marxist) politics, a concept whose genealogy they trace through Rosa Luxembourgh and Antonio Gramsci. But while their aim is to correct a construction of the class subject in marxism that they claim historically closed out any consideration of the contingent interests of the masses—women, anticolonial and antiracist, sexuality, youth, or ecology movements—their

arguments against a reductive economic determinism end up excluding entirely any consideration of capitalism's relationships of exploitation, accumulation, or domination in social life.<sup>8</sup> This exclusion is played out in a social theory that, like Butler's normative materialism, is premised on the notion that social organization is primarily symbolic. We see this in their understanding of class as an articulation of symbolic (subject) positions rather than as an effect of the organization of labor that inflects and is in turn affected by ideology and state. Above all, we see the erasure of capitalism's fundamental relationships of exploitation—the surplus labor capitalism relies on in order to function. The relationship between social differences (of sexuality, race, and gender) and capital's need for surplus labor, as well as the relationship of democratic rights to capitalism's fundamental relations of production, remains unexplained in its overriding attention to the cultural or symbolic dimensions of material life.

This distinctive post-Marxian equation of social life with the symbolic is most evident in the way Laclau and Mouffe unhinge the concept of hegemony from social production, one of the basic premises of historical materialism. Laclau and Mouffe claim that it is necessary to break from historical materialism's starting point—social production—because it conveys that “society” is a totality. Instead, they consider the openness of the social to be its constitutive ground, an openness in which “we are dealing with contingent relations whose nature we have yet to determine” (1985, 96). However, this argument against founding concepts like social production does not acknowledge that the concept of production in historical materialism is not totalizing in the Hegelian sense they imply; rather, it is a way of thinking that recognizes the historical openness of social relations. Moreover, their renunciation of foundational concepts belies that their own contingent social logic is also anchored in a founding concept, namely signification.

Laclau and Mouffe understand the historical materialist notion of production to be totalizing because they equate social production with economic production, which then becomes the Hegelian whole to which all aspects of social production are subsumed. This misreading ignores all of the efforts of contemporary marxists to address cultural practices as part of social production. Indeed, these efforts to theorize cultural production have been central to debates over the uses and limits of the base-superstructure metaphor in marxism, some of which I will address in the following chapter when I consider the impact of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology on cultural studies. For Laclau and Mouffe, in any social forma-

tion there is always a surplus of *meaning* that threatens to interrupt any necessary fixing of the nodal points or discursive axes for identity (e.g., what it means to be a woman, a man, black, or gay). Understanding what constitutes the materiality of this surplus of meanings and the (in)secure fixing of identities refers us to Laclau and Mouffe's founding conception, signification. What establishes the excessive, unstable symbolic dimension of every social identity is for them polysemy: "[S]ociety never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it" (1985, 113).

Drawing on the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, too, argues that the constitutive antagonism written into meanings—the nonclosure of definitions and identities—is assured by a contingency or provisionality that underwrites every discursive formation (Butler 1993, 193). This mobilizing incompleteness is guaranteed, she contends, by the instability in “any and all signifying practices” (Butler 1993, 193). Each of these post-marxists insists that the articulation of identities is not simply a linguistic process but pierces the entire density of a discursive formation. But founding their conceptions of materiality only in symbolic processes means that social struggle, or what they call antagonism, is anchored only in the sign—an effect of *differance*. *Differance* is the term Jacques Derrida invented for the continual subversion of any positive meaning (or identity) by the excessive proliferation of signifiers (sound-images in language) that refuse to be attached to a single signified (referent or concept). Laclau and Mouffe, like Butler, contend that the neat oppositions (like heterosexual vs. homosexual or man vs. woman) underlying positive identities are, by virtue of their discursive construction, always open to deconstruction. The materiality of identities, as well as the inevitability of their deconstruction, is presented as a given feature of signification, an effect of the provisional fixing of the sign.

How are we to understand the materiality of this fixing? *Why* are meanings secured in certain ways and not others? *Why* do certain “nodal points” in a culture's logic (heterosexual, for instance) constitute the naturalized axes for identity in some social formations? These questions mark the limits of postmarxism: the unspeakable causal logic elicited by the question “Why?” However, as Althusser's conception of overdetermination suggests, causality need not be reductive, totalizing, or expressive, even as it directs us to consider that the reproduction of the means to meet human needs is never entirely subsumed by cultural or symbolic forms.

Capitalism as a mode of producing the means for survival is tellingly absent in post-marxist cultural materialist analysis. Indeed, it must be if

social life is to be seen as constitutively symbolic. This symbolic openness, defined exclusively in relation to political (state) and ideological (normative) processes, is the basis for Butler's enthusiastic endorsement of Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy. Butler sets radical democracy against "a causal theory of historical events or social relations" (1993, 192) and insists that the basic ingredient in how we understand the social is its indeterminacy, always leaving open the possible production of new subjects (1993, 193). One problem with this argument for openness is that it potentially endorses *any*—even exploitative—social relations. Giving priority to political reform and to democratic ideals that recognize no relation between state formations, constructions of meaning, and *divisions of labor and wealth* has, of course, a long history in liberal reform movements where questions about "rights for what?" get suppressed under the impetus for equal rights *within* capitalism. If the aim for social movement is to secure democratic rights and privileges *within* capitalism, what responsibility does a radical queer politics have to confront the limits of this endeavor?

I want to approach an answer to this question by testing out Butler's critique of heterosexuality against the "performative" practice of marriage.<sup>9</sup> Although Butler doesn't treat marriage in much detail as the premier institution by which hegemonic heterosexual identity is policed, it is worthy of some consideration as such. Marriage is, of course, regulated by the state and so performed in and through the reiteration of laws. For Butler, it is these laws that secure the normative dimension of heterosexuality through a continual reworking of already operative conventions that are "grounded in no other legitimating authority than the echo-chain of their own re-invocation" (1993, 107). When applied to marriage, Butler's formulation of the performativity of the law suggests that marriage functions as a performative ritual just because it has always done so, and that its reach as a social practice is simply normative.

But is this all that the matrimonial relation to heteronormativity is about? Marriage secures heteronormativity not only through the naturalizing discourses of heterogender but also through the overdetermined relations between gender and class. Of course, marriage never absolutely succeeds in securing heterosexual norms. Many legally married men and women engage in same-sex practices or fantasies. However, according to Butler's performative argument, the myriad everyday rehearsals of the heterosexual imperative in the rituals and customs for honoring married life (ranging from the use of the titles "husband" and "wife" and the required identification of one's "spouse" on a host of bureaucratic forms to

expectations about coupling and public celebrations of weddings and anniversaries) belie in their reiteration the possibility that in fact marriage secures desire and affection within the heteronormative conjugal bond. Indeed, the very need to reiterate these rituals, like the monitoring of heterosexual coupling by the state and the church, betrays the insecurity of these social bonds that are in everyday practice continually thrown into crisis, fractured, loosened, or subverted.

Under capitalism the patriarchal heteronorms that the institution of marriage helps secure do not function apart from the relations of production, but the relationship between them and class is not a necessary or neatly causal one. Marriage has historically helped provide a system for ensuring women's unpaid household labor, but there is not a constant, direct, and predictable relationship between marriage, women's labor in and outside the home, and capitalism. Despite the recruitment of more women into the workforce, the division of labor in the home is not being dramatically effected. In the past two decades as vast numbers of middle-class married women have entered the wage-labor force, some of the labor wives once provided has been supplied by consumer markets, paid domestics, and child care providers. Although women's paid employment outside the home has dramatically increased, there has been no appreciable increase in men's participation in household labor. The cleaning, nurturing, and planning necessary for subsistence are still invariably the labor of women, and marriage still remains a prime institution for ensuring this patriarchal heterogendered arrangement.<sup>10</sup>

Census figures reveal that the number of unmarried couples in the United States is growing steadily. The state typically takes an ambivalent stance on fluctuations in marriage, at times fostering it, at other times fostering disincentives to marry.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. federal government passed a "Defense of Marriage Act" in 1996, and is currently considering a program for rewarding states that show a decrease in the numbers of unwed women on their welfare rolls. Yet many of the state's practices in defense of marriage can be shown to be inconsistent once you look more closely at exactly which marriages it defends. The state uses marital status to sanction many direct and indirect financial supports to middle-class couples. Among them are lower rates for health benefits and insurance for "partners" and their children, sick leave and parental leave care, reduced rate memberships, property tax exemptions, pension rights, and domestic violence protections (Ingraham 1999, 176). On the other hand, many tax and welfare regulations have made it more economical for the poor not to

marry. For those earning minimum wages or living below poverty level, the risk is that even a working husband's earnings may mean that a family exceeds the level to qualify for social welfare programs. The 1997 census data suggest that more and more couples are living together without getting married in order to avoid losing these benefits. As Chrys Ingraham has pointed out in her groundbreaking work on the wedding industrial complex, "marriage primarily benefits groups that are not disproportionately represented among the poor and that are able to maintain goods and property" (Ingraham 1999, 32).

Historically, marriage has protected property by serving as a dense transfer point for land and inheritance, but it has also served property interests by sanctioning the privatization of the production of labor power. In order for a worker to exchange his labor power for wages, he needs to have the capacity for his labor power to be continually nurtured and reproduced. The labor of renewing labor power, that is, the labor of providing directly for subsistence needs, has taken place primarily in the home and has been naturalized as the responsibility of women. It involves preparing food and clean clothing; birthing babies and caring for the young, the sick, and the elderly; educating children; and offering comfort and affection to those who today or tomorrow will go back into the alienating grind of wage work. As the state-sanctioned institution for the normative family, marriage has fostered and protected the ideological construction of this gendered division of labor. In the feudal household structure of private patriarchy, heterogender norms help legitimize and secure the father/husband's full authority over the wife, his appropriation of her labor, property, and person.<sup>12</sup> To be a wife under private patriarchy is to spend blocks of time in the household preparing food, cleaning, caring, counseling, repairing—performing labor that is appropriated directly for others' use. It is just recently, and only in urban industrialized economies, that for most women there have been any alternatives to marriage as a route to subsistence, since the patriarchal household was the only place where women's economic security was protected, and the social as well as economic position of wife was often preferable to that of unmarried sister, daughter, or aunt. Across the globe, the economic security marriage continues to offer women is often an incentive to marry or for staying married. While 11 percent of households in the United States lived in poverty in 1990, 42 percent of displaced homemakers who headed households and 44 percent of single mothers were impoverished.<sup>13</sup> Single mothers and "displaced homemakers" are four times more likely to live in poverty than

the population as a whole, and as wage workers unmarried women are over represented in service jobs that offer low pay, few benefits, and part-time employment with little or no job security.

As Butler would have it, women's domestic labor would be seen as a series of continual citations of judicial laws, norms, and discourses, among them naturalized heterosexuality, gender asymmetry, marital duty, motherhood, and romantic love. Under capitalism, however, these domestic activities support more than a history of law and discourses. They provide the labor power for wage work, take care of needs that are not met on the job, and nurture a systemic gendered division of labor outside the household whereby women's labor is exploited and women as a group earn considerably lower wages than men. Capitalism does not structurally require patriarchal gender asymmetry, but historically it has made use of the institution of marriage and the heterosexual norms it regulates to reproduce gendered divisions of labor both in and outside the family. The heteronormative marriage arrangements of private patriarchy secured the bourgeois wife as a domestic worker whose labor, while not directly appropriated by the capitalist in exchange for a wage, was nonetheless essential for reproducing the physical well-being, health, and know-how of the workforce, and it did so through naturalized and racialized ideals of bourgeois womanhood. Throughout the nineteenth century, the heteronorms of private patriarchy also helped secure property relations through marriage and a racialized gender hierarchy required by the economic arrangements of slavery in global capitalism.

The racialized engendering of marriage had very different consequences for white and black women. White women of the elite class were viewed as the means to consolidate property through marriages of alliance, and by birthing and rearing the inheritors of that property. In the U.S. plantation economy in the nineteenth century, female heirs could inherit—sons received land, but daughters slaves (Carby 24). Clearly the slave woman was in a very different relation to the patriarch/plantation owner, as she gave birth directly to capital itself in the form of slaves (Carby 25). As Hazel Carby explains, "The sexual ideology of the period confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women and resolved the contradiction between the two reproductive positions by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on the other for its existence" (25). In the U.S. Deep South where slaves were predominantly agricultural workers, "the slave woman was first a full time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife,



mother, and homemaker” (Stamp, quoted in Davis 5). Desexed, required to be breeders, and seen as “masculine” as men in their work, black women were positioned outside white normative feminine gender codes in order to facilitate the ruthless exploitation of their labor. They enjoyed few of the benefits of the ideologies of womanhood and motherhood that organized bourgeois heteronorms (Davis 5). The (hetero)sexuality of black men was also not engendered according to the white bourgeois norm. Men and women worked alongside one another, but unlike working-class white men, outside of work black men were ideologically denied the patriarchal positions of family “providers” or family “heads.” Of course, as chattel, slaves were forbidden to marry. The norms that regulated family life among slave communities also differed from those governing whites, as did the cultural value of domestic life. While the organization of heterosexual norms through the institution of marriage generally has served the interests of capital, then, it has done so differently for different groups in various social formations, depending on how they are positioned in relations of production that are ideologically organized and justified through racial and gender differences.<sup>14</sup>

Historically the accumulation of profit has relied on the cheap though socially necessary labor of reproducing labor power through women’s unpaid or very low paid work in the home. However, in the past few decades, changes in the international sexual division of labor, in marriage law, and in the ideologies of gender suggest that there is no *necessary* relation between a domestic economy organized in terms of the heterosexual marital contract and capital’s drive to accumulate wealth for the few. At the same time we acknowledge that patriarchal domestic economies are historically varied and changing, it is important to emphasize that even as more middle-class women enter the paid labor force and private patriarchy’s prohibitions around sex outside marriage loosen, heterosexual marriage and the gendered division of labor remain the prevailing, pervasively naturalized social arrangements whose coherence is still assured and legitimized in law and common sense by reference to an abject homosexual other.

Sodomy remains a crime in just under half of the states in the U.S. *Bowers v. Hardwick* brought the state into private sexual spaces in order to reconfirm them as legitimately only heterosexual. Every year thousands of gay teenagers are cast out of their families and are three times more at risk of committing suicide than their straight-identified friends, and lesbian mothers still lose their children in custody battles. Still, there are signs that

a transition is under way from the private patriarchy of domestic spaces where heterogender is compulsorily reiterated through the husband's appropriation of the wife's labor and person to a more public patriarchy that may rely less on marriage and heterosexuality. In several cities, local ordinances have been passed that enable hetero- and homosexual couples to register as unmarried domestic partners and to receive some of the rights of married couples.<sup>15</sup> Several corporations have extended insurance benefits to the partners of lesbians and gay men. Without a doubt these are important and necessary achievements of political emancipation that challenge the heterogendered definition of family and household. But it is not enough for a left sexual politics just to focus its agenda on the attainment of these sorts of civil rights within capitalism.

One of the reasons I think it is not brings me back to why a discussion of heterosexual marriage and the family is relevant to a radical queer sexual politics. Avant-garde queer critiques of the arbitrariness of heterosexuality tend to keep invisible how the gendered division of labor has historically secured sexual identities to the family and consumer culture. Domestic partnerships and gay marriages that redefine sexuality only in terms of rights for gays (or straight marriage resisters) leave unquestioned or even indirectly promote capitalism's historical stake in the relations among family, labor, and consumption. The history of gay, lesbian, and queer identities is entangled in changes to the economies of patriarchal households that have accompanied the growth of capitalist consumption and an expanding middle class. Post-marxism does not allow us to address this history, nor does it confront the ways the lives of many lesbians and gays have historically been supported by or involved in the labor of domestics, factory, field, and service workers.

I endorse Judith Butler's argument that repudiating heterosexuals contradicts the anti-essentialism of queer politics (1993, 111–19). It attributes a false unity to heterosexuality (and to homosexual, butch, or femme identities as well) and misses the opportunity to work the weakness in heterosexual identity and to refute its logic of mutual exclusion. Repudiating all heterosexuals is a trap because it suggests, as Butler insightfully demonstrates, that on some level identification with that which is being repudiated (heterosexuals or femmes, for instance) has already taken place and been disavowed. But the politics of repudiation is also a trap because it can keep our understanding of the "economy" of sexual identity and of the grounds for resistance to its hegemonic patriarchal formation restricted to cultural politics.

At issue here is the question I raised earlier about the limits of radical democracy, limits that are implicit in how we understand the material basis on which hegemonic identities and resistance to them are formulated. If the discourses that construct identities are overdetermined by capitalism's contradictory class processes, the constitutive inability of any identity to secure its referent or to capture what it names—whether that identity be woman, homosexual, heterosexual, or queer—is not the result of an instability inherent to signification, but of the social contradictions on which capitalism is premised and which are condensed in the struggles over naming.<sup>16</sup> Understanding the ground for queer excess so exclusively in terms of the slippages or ambivalences of signification limits the possibility of radical queer intervention to the performative renaming or resignification of norms. Claiming that the materiality of sexual identity is founded on the overdetermined relationship of racialized and gendered discourses of sexuality to class processes does not reduce the history of sexuality to class but rather extends queer politics to queer-y the links between sexual identity and exploitation. From this vantage point, a radical sexual politics is more than a refusal or a resignification of the law. It is also a ruthless interruption of the often less visible relations of labor that have made use of dominant as well as counter-hegemonic sexual identities.

#### IT'S MY PLEASURE: CONSUMING DESIRES

As postmodernism is fast becoming the cultural common sense of postindustrial capitalism, it brings in its wake porous, gender-flexible, and playful subjects, subjects more adequate to the complexities of multinational commodity exchange where the expressive self and transcendent morality of liberal humanism have become embarrassingly inadequate (Zavarzadeh 1992, 8). The service sectors of postindustrial economies increasingly require a high-tech systems management consciousness that knows that identity, like knowledge, is performative. This consciousness appears in many zones of postmodern culture from the classroom and boardroom to the fashion runway. Undeniably, performative play with cultural codes is a postmodern fashion statement. Challenges to naturalized notions of identity and difference emanating from Madison Avenue and Wall Street share a certain ideological affiliation with avant-garde queer theory. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that both indicate the ways in which under late capitalism liberal ambivalence on homosexuality is in the process of

being transcoded from the moral and determinate terms of tolerance and disgust to the more postmodern, indeterminate forms of play and pleasure that are helping to consolidate a hegemonic postmodern culture. Postmodern incorporations of a queer “gender fuck” into commodity culture replace the binary logic of liberal moralism’s vacillation with the logic of the supplement. Here identities are fluid, open to resignification and re-contextualization. The fixed polarities of liberal morality dissolve into engenderings of pleasure-full erotic indeterminacy. “It is precisely the pleasure produced by the instability of these categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category [lesbian] to begin with,” announces Judith Butler (1991, 14). For many avant-garde queer theorists, these new cultural and sexual arrangements “occasioned by the movements and transmutations of pleasure in the social field” are not just the occasion for new forms of identity; they also serve as the ground for political organization (Fuss 1991, 5).

Since the late nineteenth century the growth of consumer culture has depended on the formation and continual retooling of a desiring subject, a subject who honors pleasures and may even see them as forces that drive one’s existence or as pressing needs. Alexandra Kollontai recognized this effect of capitalism at the turn of the century when she treated the family under capitalism as a legal arrangement concerned only with consumption (Holt 225). The increasing separation of sexuality from class analysis is one component of the cultural production of this desiring subject in the late nineteenth century, as it has helped guarantee that desire take on a life of its own. The important point here is not to dismiss desire and pleasure as bourgeois inventions irrelevant to materialist analysis. Quite the contrary; if we are to understand the historical and material components of sexual identities, we also need to know the social forces out of which the desiring subject and the subject of pleasure are formed.

As it has come to be understood in Western culture, desire has had an uneasy relationship to sexual identity, serving as a labile medium for affective and sensory needs. It is a structure for consciousness that binds sexual subject to sexual object and also perversely disrupts any neatly prescribed links between them. Most theoretical attention to the desiring subject has been developed from a psychologizing/psychoanalytic frame that has been largely responsible for an individualized understanding of desire as a psychic process whose materiality is rooted in the drives and conveyed through the symbolic order. Another strand of queer theory emerges out of postmodern versions of this theoretical frame and foregrounds the disruptive

face of desire for interrupting any coherent, generative agency. The effect on sexual identity is that any prescribed relation between sexual subject and sexual object is undone. One sticking point in this formulation of queer identity is how to understand the materiality of this desire.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983) has been embraced by many queer theorists as a monumental explanation of the materiality of desire under capitalism. Even more dramatically than Marcuse and Reich, however, Deleuze and Guattari locate desire outside of history. The libidinal energy that for Marcuse and Reich constituted a life force that is ultimately shaped by history (albeit a too mythic history) becomes for Deleuze and Guattari the very matter of life—manifest in pervasive, natural, human desiring machines. The premise of their argument in *Anti-Oedipus* is that desire in the form of energy flows between organ-machines—or what they call “desiring production”—is the starting point of social life. No longer understood in terms of lack, desire or libido is the primary connective “labor” of desiring production. Indeed, desiring production *is* social production. Opposed to psychoanalytic theory and practice for the ways it tames or “territorializes” desire by anchoring it in the Oedipus complex, Deleuze and Guattari dis-organize subjectivity, unchain it from socially restrictive forces, and recode it around concepts of plurality, multiplicity, decenteredness. In their schema, desire becomes the basis of social production. Instead of being the product of history, desire is historically invariant matter. The material of desire is the primordial matter of energy flows or of things connected by energy flows—“menstrual flow, amniotic fluid spilling out of the sac; flowing hair; a flow of spittle, a flow of sperm, shit or urine” (5).

Such a premise glorifies desire and makes it impossible to treat the ways its content and the forms the desiring subject has taken change from one historical formation to another and in different phases of capitalism. The desiring subject put forward in *Anti-Oedipus* has been embraced by quite a few queer theorists precisely because this is a subject that has no fixed identity.<sup>17</sup> In chapter 5 I will look more closely at one example in the work of Elizabeth Grosz. For Deleuze and Guattari, the distinctions between hetero- and homosexual identities are disjunctions forced upon subjects by the Oedipus complex: “Oedipus informs us: if you don’t follow the lines of differentiation daddy-mommy-me, you will fall into the black night of the undifferentiated” (78). The Oedipus complex is the representative of a symbolic order that represses desiring production in that it requires exclusive disjunctions (between masculine and feminine terms of

identification and desire). Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that capitalism liberates the flows of desire from the clutches of an oedipalizing culture, but it does so under social conditions that continually reterritorialize the desires it unleashes in order to accrue surplus value. As they see it, desiring production is revolutionary and capable of demolishing social form. But unfortunately and predictably, the alternative it aims for is not social justice but the “body without organs”—the undifferentiated subject of self-enjoyment.

Clearly in Deleuze and Guattari’s post-marxist theories we see an intensified emphasis on desire as the motor of history and an elevation of the desiring subject as history’s agent. Despite their references to capitalism, however, here the separation of sexuality from historical and material production has become complete. Desire and the desiring subject have assumed the center stage of history, and the structures of exploitation on which capitalist production depends have completely disappeared. Indeed, production has become consumption.

To the extent that they make desire the bedrock of history, Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring production shares an affiliation with Foucault’s now infamous stance on bodies and pleasures. Foucault argues that power and pleasure in a (post)modern disciplinary regime are entangled in a perpetual relay system. Discourses have traced around bodies and sexes “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (Foucault 1978, 45). In the form of an array of discursive mechanisms in the nineteenth-century industrialized West, power “took charge of sexuality, set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace” (1978, 44). But he also contends that the rallying point for resistance to this web of power-pleasure relations is “bodies and pleasures” (1978, 157). In this much quoted assertion, Foucault puts forward bodies and pleasures as the ground for resistance to power and in a manner that tends to set them outside their discursive construction and beyond history, much like Deleuze and Guattari’s desire.

The turn to pleasure and desire as categories of experience outside culture-ideology and prior to all social production has been one of the most significant features of culture study in the late eighties (Turner 1990, 218), and Foucault’s influence in this trend has been considerable. The effort to reclaim the core of identity in the form of an ahistorical pleasure (as *jouissance*, ritual, *chora*, or ambivalent consumer satisfaction) has been a crucial aspect of the formation of a new postmodern subject and needs to be un-

derstood in terms of the political and economic arrangements of an emerging neoliberal world order (post-cold war, postcolonial) and its effects on the historical pertinences that shape subjectivities. Recognizing that pleasure does not precede or exceed the social but is itself constituted through the often contradictory economic, political, and ideological production of social life means that its hegemonic articulation is always precarious. Like work, pleasure cannot be or mean as a basis for political affirmation outside its historical organization. But, in fact, this is often how pleasure is understood in the cultural politics of the postmodern left.

For example, in the anthology *Formations of Pleasure*, British cultural critic Colin Mercer argues that the contradictory *play* of ideology can no longer “be reduced to questions of meaning and truth. You can ask whether people ‘believe’ what they hear on the News or on *Nationwide*, but it’s by no means clear what people would ‘believe’ in light entertainment or comedy. Once enjoyment and pleasure are reintroduced—those jokes in the game—we have to change the rules and go beyond the message” (85). Picking up on his comment, Tania Modleski argues that ideology is effective because it bestows pleasure on its subjects rather than simply conveying messages, “and so it cannot be combated only at the level of meaning” (Modleski 1991, 57). For this reason, she continues, “a theory and practice of the performative are crucial to a politically engaged criticism” (Modleski 1991, 57). Although her comment implies a separation between pleasures and meaning-making that I think never quite occurs, she recognizes that pleasure is an important sensuous-affective dimension of human life that ideology taps into.

Neither the motor of production, nor a prediscursive matter or energy, the human capacity for sensation and affect is the basis for pleasure and it is always historically organized. It is powerfully solicited in the organization of sexual identities as well as in many other areas of culture and deployed in broad-ranging ideologies (of romance, sexuality, religion, patriotism, etc.) and practices (consumption, shaming, entertainment, education, social movement, etc.) that permeate the fabric of individual lives and collectivities. In other words, sensations (including “pleasurable” sensations) never speak for themselves but are always made sense of by the ways of knowing that circulate within a particular social organization or community; pleasures are never entirely outside the “structures of meaning-making.” When they are recruited by ideology, sensations and pleasures can be powerful ways to naturalize the historical social relations identities rely on. In part for this reason, they are also especially important areas of social life for

a politically engaged criticism. However, to conceptualize the interface between sensation-affect and meaning-making as performative in the terms set forth by cultural materialists risks forfeiting the crucial connection between local and global social structures that the concept of ideology entails. In other words, associated as it is with the cultural materialist notion of discursive play and of culture as the shifting basis for social life, performativity cannot make visible the varied, complex, and uneven historical relationship between pleasure and profit.

Having embraced the potential of sexual pleasure, avant-garde queer theory does indeed “change the rules” by founding its politics on a notion of performance that often not only implies a division between the conceptual and the performative but disparages interrogation and critical analysis. Diana Fuss’s assertion that the essays in the anthology *Inside/Out* “mark an important shift away from an interrogative mode and towards a performative mode” in queer theory signals just this sort of displacement of critical concepts (1991, 7).

A materialist approach to sexual identity that reclaims the attention to social totalities that constitutes the radical tradition of the Gay Left—that is, marxism’s critique of capitalism and feminism’s critique of patriarchy—can resist the pressure to separate sexuality off from capitalism and class relations off from sexuality and desire. It may even read this fragmentation as an ideological symptom. Such an approach to sexuality does not shrink from celebrating the human capacity for sensual pleasure even as it dares to think through—and change—the material relations among identities, norms, state power, and divisions of labor. Of course, by insisting that the more fluid boundaries of postmodern culture have not made patriarchy or capitalism any less viable, the radical sexual politics I am referring to is out of line with the post-marxist mainstream. You might even consider it excessively queer. That excessiveness may well be precisely its challenge and its strength.



CULTURAL STUDY,  
COMMODITY LOGIC,  
SEXUAL SUBJECTS

CULTURAL MANAGEMENT UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

As the reigning social policy guide for late capitalism, neoliberalism spreads its reach across the globe, leaving in its wake structural changes that are exacting a profound toll on human lives. We see the symptoms everywhere: contradictions in the global economic landscape have intensified, deepening “third world” debt and the mass poverty associated with globalization, provoking fiscal crises in overdeveloped nations, and reinforcing the victory of the market as challenger of the democratic state. Corporate downsizing and free trade agreements consolidate the reorganization of production and enhance the scramble for cheap labor supplied by expendable human lives. Increased privatization and deregulation have meant that services to meet basic human needs—welfare, health care, education—are being reduced, in some states in the U.S. channeled through profit-making agencies, and often snatched away from the most needy: the poor, many of them disabled, immigrants, single mothers.

The term “neoliberalism” refers to economic and political policies that have been shaped and enacted since the early seventies when the bourgeois ruling bloc responded to the falling rate of profit by way of an en-

semble of economic, political, and ideological strategies. Primarily fostered, promoted, and implemented by a relatively small group of private interests and the financial institutions they dominate, neoliberal economic policy has been a calculated offensive aimed at controlling social assets and state power in order to maximize profits. Drawing on the classical liberal arguments about the economy's proper relation to the state, neoliberalism holds that economic crises are the result of excessive government intervention and can best be remedied by redistributing income from labor to capital, returning state-supported economic ventures to the private sector, reestablishing the family as a cushion to absorb the social effects of hard times, and repersonalizing economic dependency, incentive, savings, and work (O'Connor 234). Neoliberal policies have been strategic offenses against the post-World War II social compact. Economically, neoliberalism seeks to free up the operation of the capitalist market from public (state) controls and regulations; at the same time it tries to extend the rationality of the market—its schemes of analysis and decision-making criteria—to areas of social life that have not been primarily economic. In maintaining its position as the dominant economic global force, the United States has made use of neoliberal trade and domestic social policies to shore up multinational corporate interests and support emergent transnational ones. But “less government,” “privatization,” and “free trade” have meant tax breaks and more profits for businesses at the expense of those most in need. Behind free trade agreements like NAFTA lies the expansion of the exploited cheap labor force of the maquiladoras, while less government domestically has meant cuts in food, health, and education programs that most affect the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. The damage wrought by this rollback of the New Deal's social contract is not a secret. Throughout the eighties and nineties the costs of neoliberal economic policy to workers was reported daily in our news sources, in headlines reading “U.S. Jobs Lose Out in Global Market” and “Record Profits, Fewer Workers,” “Number of Poor Children Soaring in the City” and “New York Study Finds Uninsured Are on the Rise.” The widening gap between rich and poor is neoliberalism's most glaring legacy. The measure of this gap varies from one report to another. The figures may indicate that the richest 1 percent own more than 30 percent of the total private wealth or that 90 percent of families hold a little less than one-third of the country's assets or any number of other obscene proportions. While headlines in the past few years have also announced that the U.S. economy is improving and is in fact better than ever, the small

print indicates that the gap between rich and poor, between workers and owners, is deeply entrenched.<sup>1</sup> While profits remain “spectacular” for the world’s largest corporations, payrolls are not expanding much. For most of the U.S. population, despite economic recovery, incomes have stagnated or declined over 20 percent in the past twenty years, and job security has diminished (Aronowitz and Cutler 37). The U.S. worker now produces about 12 percent more in an hour’s work than he or she did in 1989, but after adjusting for inflation the typical worker’s wages have increased only 1.9 percent, and the share of middle-income workers with some form of health insurance has actually declined in the past ten years (Schmitt). If the economy is on an upswing, this is in large measure because more workers have part-time, temporary, and contingent jobs that are counted as if they are full time.

Neoliberalism is the economic and political policy that steers this economic boom through the global restructuring of production and consumption. As every schoolchild knows, manufacturing jobs are flowing out of the United States. Massive layoffs have occurred at almost every major corporation since the early nineties, with the biggest layoffs occurring in the apparel and garment industries. (From 1971 to 1990 more than 8 million factory jobs were lost in the U.S., and over 700,000 workers lost their jobs in the textile and garment industries of the U.S. South alone in the 1990s) (Aronowitz and Cutler 43). The forces that are shifting workers in overindustrialized nations from jobs in manufacturing to jobs in service and have contributed to the building of a workforce of “symbolic analysts” rather than factory workers are rooted in shifts in production that have been global in scope. Neoliberal free trade policy has allowed capital, technology, and managers to flow freely over borders, and as a result capital’s unskilled manufacturing labor force is no longer primarily located in industrialized nations, but wherever unorganized cheap labor can be found—in offshore free trade zones or in domestic sweatshops. Globalization relies on “just-in-time” production that lowers warehousing and overhead; “lean production” that entails employing a cheaper and less specialized labor force for easy-to-assemble products; “reengineering the workforce” by replacing workers with software packages that perform tasks once done by clerks; and “outsourcing” production to nonunion workers who can be paid lower wages. These changes have been possible in part because businesses face less opposition from unions. Organized labor in industrialized nations has lost much of its clout, but corporations have also developed strategies for bypassing the striking power of unions.

To give one example: General Motors has lost every strike in the last decade while still managing to shrink its payroll by more than 100,000 jobs by relying on outsourcing—that is, by buying parts from outside companies.

The rise in part-time employment, which is much more difficult to organize and which requires few if any health and retirement benefits, is another facet of this picture. The increase in part-time employment makes it possible for economic forecasters to claim that employment is up and the economy booming. But there is more to this reality than the figures for the gross national product and the Dow Jones Industrial Average would lead you to believe. In fact, the overwhelming job growth has been in retail and wholesale, in food service such as McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King, in department stores and nonunion construction, and in businesses employing fewer than twenty-five workers (Aronowitz and Cutler 45). All of these jobs offer low wages and few benefits such as pensions, paid vacations, or health insurance. According to a study released in 1998, the number of people without health insurance in the United States is rising at a rate of over 100,000 persons losing coverage every month, despite the nation's "strong economic growth." One in six Americans now has no health insurance. While unemployment may be down, then, it is more likely for people to put together piecemeal jobs that are lower paying and offer fewer benefits than the full-time jobs they had before.

One of the reasons neoliberalism has succeeded so well is that it works best in countries where there is formal democracy but the public is diverted from meaningful participation in governance. In the United States this divergence happens in part because large corporations have access to the means to influence the information voters receive, and they do so. The richest 1 percent of Americans make 80 percent of all individual political contributions, and corporations outspend unions by 10 to 1 (McChesney 9–11). An effective democracy needs people to feel a connection to one another. In fostering consumption, neoliberalism provides the fabric for these connections, but it replaces community for critical citizenship with shopping malls. It is also important to remember that despite neoliberalism's antipathy for public subsidy, in fact it relies heavily on state support for corporate interests. Large-scale state interference in trade has been the leitmotif of neoliberal policy. Steel, automotive, aircraft, and semiconductor industries, to name only a few, have all relied on protectionist trade policies and government funding. In fact, virtually all of the world's core firms have been influenced by government politics or trade barriers and

“at least twenty companies in the 1993 Fortune 100 would not have survived at all as independent companies, if they had not been saved by their respective governments” (Ruigrock and Tulder, quoted in Chomsky 38). At the same time, neoliberalism is also bolstered by multinational corporate organizing such as the World Trade Organization or the Multilateral Agreement on Investment that is officially outside the parameters of any one nation’s public reach, intervention, or accountability.<sup>2</sup>

To some extent, there is nothing fundamentally new about this situation. Liberal free-market policies have been a guiding principle of democratic nation-states in the industrial world since the eighteenth century, combated more or less consistently by oppositional struggles of varying kinds and intensities, movements aimed at installing full democracy through revolution, socialist, or civil rights campaigns. It is not the game plan, then, but the form and articulations of liberalism now that are new.

Among these articulations are the ways of knowing that accompany neoliberalism’s advance. While obscene greed and staggering unmet human need are most rampant, the knowledges required to translate this evidence into action for change seem less and less available. Indeed, it might even be said that the success of neoliberalism is directly related to the triumph of ways of knowing and forms of consciousness that obscure its enabling conditions. It is the relationship between these forms of knowing and commodification that I want to address in this chapter, especially as they have an effect on new forms of sexual identity.

The knowledges that promote or demystify neoliberalism are varied and are generated from many social sites. They are most often identified with the advocacy of entrepreneurial initiative and individualism — in the form of self-help, volunteerism, or morality rooted in free will and personal responsibility. In the United States, the discourses of neoliberal individualism are generally perceived to be generated by conservative networks that informally link politicians, churches, right-wing think tanks, and the media, while universities are more typically seen as unorganized bastions of progressivism. Often represented as the last shelter of the fragmented left, universities have been linked in the public imagination with “politically correct” challenges to traditional values. Despite this public image, universities also have been caught up in the wave of neoliberal privatization both economically and ideologically. Tuition at state colleges and universities and the tenure system have been two targets of economic downsizing. Since most universities rely on some degree of public support, in the face of its erosion they have increasingly sought funding

from private, corporate sources for technological and ideological development. In the last decade, as privatization has become the order of the day, universities have scrambled to recover their losses in state funding through increased support from the corporate sector. As a result, business and university partnerships have proliferated. During the 1980s the U.S. Congress enacted legislation “which granted huge tax write-offs, along with the right to purchase patents derived from academic research, to corporations that engage in partnerships with universities” (Zaidi 52). Between 1980 and 1996 corporate dollars going to universities increased more than threefold (Soley 11). In the life sciences especially, the university is far from being an ivory tower isolated from the marketplace. In 1997 U.S. companies spent \$1.7 billion on university-based science and engineering research. More than 90 percent of life-science companies have some type of formal relationship with academic scientists (Shenk 12). While these alliances have resulted in important new discoveries, they have also generated enormous profits as well as an entrepreneurial atmosphere that has begun to alter the ethos of science (Shenk 13–14).

University administrators claim that corporate and foundation money is accepted with no strings attached. But this is not so. Centers like the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Center for Product Innovation conduct research for corporate clients, and the University of Arizona’s Karl Eller Center for the Study of Private Market Economy conducts research bolstering “free enterprise” (Soley 14). Can the outcomes of research projects with corporate sponsors ever be untainted by the client’s interests? While corporate funding for research, foundations, and institutes is now pervasive, a more subtle effect of neoliberal influence on colleges and universities has been a gradual but concerted pressure to reshape the priorities in higher education to conform with the goals of the marketplace. This transvaluation manifests itself in several ways, among them a growing emphasis on education for professional-technical skilling and a shift in the forms of consciousness universities produce in the liberal arts and social sciences.

The traditional function of the humanities and social sciences has been the production of subjects who are familiar with the history of their society and who are firmly situated within the prevailing codes and traditions of their culture. In this regard, universities historically often have served as the handmaidens of the free market and the liberal state. However, this function has never gone uncontested by knowledge workers who have promoted critical thinking as the “other” mission of education. While the liberal face of education may have prevailed, it has never done so without

ideological struggle, crisis provocation, and crisis management. One arena where this struggle has left its impact during the decades of neoliberalism's growing dominance is cultural studies.

Cultural studies has been seen as one of the "hot spots" of academic progressivism, a discursive and institutional magnet for leftists and queers of all sorts — feminists, marxists, theorists of popular culture, race, and sexuality. As cultural studies has been gradually incorporated into the academic mainstream in the last decade, however, some assessment of the supposedly "progressive" nature of its theoretical paradigms and critical concepts seems in order. I want to stress that I think cultural studies continues to hold tremendous potential for producing critical citizens who can demystify the dominant ideologies and support the formation of a broad-based movement for social change. Indeed, it is because of my belief in this potential that I think a critical assessment of its unsettled debates is important.

The Gay Left's absorption into the academy in the eighties was shaped by many developments that also inflected cultural studies; in fact, they follow parallel and overlapping tracks. Some of these developments also had an immediate bearing on the reformation of sexual identities, such as the emergence of the historical catastrophe of AIDS and its political wake, or the moral crusades of the religious right, or developments in feminist discourses on sexuality; others, like neoliberalism's growing global hegemony, registered more indirectly. Among the most formative forces to leave its mark on the understanding of culture in lesbian/gay/queer studies as well as on cultural studies during the decade of the eighties was the academic left's abandonment of marxism and the development of a compensatory post-marxist cultural materialism.

Cultural materialists maintain that culture may be historical and political, but it is not shaped by capitalism's division of labor in any determinate way. That is, cultural materialists renounce the causal link in marxism's systemic analysis between culture and economy. By the nineties, as cultural studies was becoming more and more institutionalized in academia, the debates over how to understand the relationship between culture and economy that had shaped its rise over the previous decade were considered to be settled or at least securely transplanted onto new ground, congealed into the cultural materialisms of Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and others. It is my argument that because they can only imagine social change as the struggle for discursive or cultural democracy within capitalism, these theories are not only limited but quite compatible, finally, with the forms of conscious-

ness encouraged by neoliberalism. In order to redress the limits of cultural materialism, I think we might beneficially return to some of the concepts that frame the debates out of which this now dominant version of cultural studies emerged. Before I do, however, I want to take a more deliberate look at cultural studies now.

Cultural studies is an extensive and eclectic transdisciplinary mode of inquiry, marked by contestations, internal divisions, disparate genealogies, and a rich diversity. I take the risk of offering some generalizations about it as a body of knowledge, not because I want to subsume this contentious plurality under a monolithic profile, but in order to highlight some of the ways the discourses and paradigms that came to prevail amid this diversity bear a historical relation to the process of commodification that has accompanied the triumph of neoliberalism in the past twenty years. Cultural studies is now a massively funded field, and in that sense, as in much other cultural production, its U.S. variant has become the leading global instance. In some very literal ways, cultural studies in the United States has been commodified in that its knowledges have entered the circuit of commodity exchange pervasively and profitably. What emerged twenty years ago as maverick institutes insecurely anchored in academic institutions has become a full-blown, funded discipline, complete with graduate programs and Ph.D.s, conferences and cross-continental networks, high-profile corporate publishers, course readers and histories. Some of the leading figures in cultural studies have commented on the perils of its success. Laurence Grossberg suggested in 1988 that the selling (out) of U.S. cultural studies was well advanced and that its success story has “all the ingredients of a made-for-tv movie” (Pfister 204).<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall has commented on this evolution, too, referring to it as a dangerous time for cultural studies in the United States precisely because of the incorporation of academia and the isolation of American intellectuals within the established confines of institutional academic life. If these are boom times for cultural studies, it may be no accident that these are also times when one of the potentially sharpest combatants of neoliberalism is losing its critical edge. “In the period of this Clinton administration,” Stuart Hall warns, “[cultural studies] feels like a deeply reactionary form of free enterprise modernity” (Morley and Chen 397).

The enormous outpouring of academic work in cultural studies over the past two decades has also been characterized by a distinct and emphatic erasure of capitalist economy from its knowledges, more specifically an erasure of the historical links between culture and capitalism that



is characteristic of cultural materialism. Critical notice of this de-linking has been a part of the history of cultural studies, too, however, and more of these critical voices are beginning to be heard in the United States. For example, the collection *Cultural Studies in Question*, edited by Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, takes this problem as one of its main concerns.<sup>4</sup> In their introduction, Ferguson and Golding contend that “cultural studies has neglected the deep structural changes in national and global, political and economic and media systems by eschewing economic, social or policy analysis” (xiv). In an essay in the same volume, Nicholas Garnham argues that in order to move on and fulfill the promises of its original project, cultural studies needs to “rebuild the bridges with political economy that it burnt in its headlong rush towards the pleasures and differences of postmodernism” (56).

In large measure this headlong rush took the form of Foucauldian cultural materialism. We can see this trajectory quite distinctly in the work of Stuart Hall himself, who finally abandoned his always somewhat tenuous endorsement of historical materialism by the late eighties in favor of the post-marxism of Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>5</sup> Hall’s contributions to cultural studies are formidable, as evidenced in his own work, his relationship to the many projects produced out of the Center for Contemporary cultural studies in Birmingham, England, and his transnational influence.<sup>6</sup> At the center, after a protracted engagement with Althusserian marxism throughout the seventies, Hall and other scholars shifted their attention from grappling with the problem of how to address the relationship between capitalism’s economic base and the cultural-ideological superstructure to elaborations of the internal articulation of the superstructure itself (Sparks 83). In the next decade and into the nineties concern with the complex causal connections between capitalism’s underlying structures and cultural forms and with any specifically marxist analysis virtually disappeared from the incorporation of cultural studies.

One index of the materialism that has come to define the British legacy can be seen in the Open University textbook series *Culture, Media and Identities*. These are glossy, well-packaged books aimed at introducing an undergraduate audience to cultural studies. Each of them follows a heuristic model called “the circuit of culture.” Through a circuit of interlocking relations—production, consumption, regulation, representation—this model illustrates the various processes by which identities come to be. The authors assert that it is “possible to start at any point” (2) in the circuit, but that an analysis has to go all the way round in order to be

complete. Two features of this heuristic are notable: capitalism's relationships of exploitation have no determining force on culture because "culture is now regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political processes." Not only this, the authors go on to confirm, "in recent years 'culture' has been promoted to an altogether more important role as theorists have begun to argue that because all social practices are meaningful practices, they are all fundamentally cultural" (duGay 2). In the Open University series textbook *Identity and Difference*, edited by Kathryn Woodward, the "production" and "consumption" of identities are also thoroughly cultural activities. The section on "Sexualities," by Lynn Segal, for example, treats the ways sexual identities are represented through cultural texts and symbolic systems. It includes a historical perspective that stretches from Anglo-European sexology to queer theory, and indeed it does mention scholarship that "correlate[s] shifts in scientific accounts of sexual difference with wider social changes and contests for power" (Segal 190). But there is no mention of what these "wider social changes" might be, what they might have to do with adjustments in capitalism's relations of labor or with forms of commodification.

The question remains whether abandoning all causal connections between culture and material relations outside of culture has strengthened cultural studies' critical edge. My own view is that it has not. It seems to me that no analysis of cultural forms that professes to critically intervene in the violence taking place in the wake of neoliberal social policies can evade the historical relationships between culture and capital. In promoting a view of culture severed from any ties to the fundamental structures of capitalism, cultural studies is helping to produce forms of consciousness that supplement neoliberalism's conservative individualism. While much work in cultural studies may seem overtly opposed to the privatizing tactics of neoliberalism, to the extent that cultural studies produces ways of understanding that exile meaning-making and identity in the realm of culture, sheltered from any link to capital or class, its discourses reiterate a cultural logic that has been one of capitalism's most potent ideological forms.

Surprisingly, this is a view that Stuart Hall himself intimates against the grain of his own later work. In an interview in 1992, he predicted that in the future class concerns will be more central to cultural studies than they were in the eighties. In fact, he added, "I am sure that we will return to the fundamental category of capital" (Morley and Chen 400).<sup>7</sup>

What would it mean to reverse this trend, to return cultural studies to the fundamental category of capital? How might we do so in a way that

would allow us to link culture to the development and meeting of human needs and yet not forfeit inquiry into the complex ways cultural forms and identities are historically articulated? Of course, I am especially interested in how the answers to these questions might affect how we understand sexual identity. Sexual identity has become one of the prime channels of cultural studies' "headlong rush toward the pleasures and differences of postmodernism." Not only has it provided the occasion for much new work on the libidinal economies of culture, but sexual identity also has been hailed as the basis for new postmodern models of political alliance and cited as an obvious index of the limits of class analysis.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the very possibility of linking the study of sexual identity to capital has become all but unspeakable. As a way into this hypermanaged forbidden zone of cultural work, I want to suggest that we revisit some of the abandoned debates in the encounter between cultural studies and marxism at the dawn of neoliberalism.

#### LINKING CULTURE AND CAPITAL

As I mentioned in chapter 1, one of the pivotal points of contention in materialist theories of culture is what precisely capitalist production involves. According to Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, social production entails making the means to meet human needs as well as the production of new needs. Producing the means to meet human needs involves a division of labor as well as the production of political structures and forms of consciousness. The debates in marxist culture theory in the past two decades that have most impacted cultural studies center on the question of how to theorize the relationship between these two kinds of production—cultural and economic. Many Western marxists have conceded that the organization of economic production may be responsible for the basic conflicts of a society, but that political, ideological, and cultural production have their own specific logics that often operate independently of economic structures and therefore need to be analyzed in their own right. Cultural studies' turn away from historical materialism in the eighties develops out of the formidable influence of two lines of marxist thought that engaged this question a decade earlier: the structural marxism of Louis Althusser and the humanist marxism of Raymond Williams. Both profoundly influenced the work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, and the development of cultural studies in the United States.

Althusser's theory of ideology grounds the social making of meaning, and by extension identity, in social reproduction. It begins with the marxist premise that in order to survive, humans need to be able to reproduce the means to meet their basic needs, including the know-how required to do so. For Althusser, ideology consists of all of the material practices of meaning-making that produce that know-how, including the production of individuals as proper, good social subjects who are willing to participate in their culture's norms. His structural marxism did not approach consciousness and subjectivity as the expression of lived experience nor as the reflection of a society's division of labor but as a set of practices in a complex totality. As I discussed earlier, E. P. Thompson and Ellen Wood, among others, have found Althusser's structuralism problematic especially when it comes to explaining the material links between capitalism's structures and the ways they are played out in particular, conjunctural historical situations. In theorizing this complex structure, Althusser acknowledges the limits of the classical marxist base-superstructure paradigm (in which economic relations, or the division of labor, form the base and political and cultural-ideological relations are the superstructure) because it is finally just a metaphor and not an explanation. But he did nonetheless endorse its object, which was "to represent above all the 'determination in the last instance of the economic base'" (1971, 135). He also contended, however, that culture or the superstructure is relatively autonomous from economic arrangements and has a reciprocal action on them. These last points pertain to the problem of how to understand the relationship between culture-ideology and political economy. Althusser's formulation of this relation opened the door to cultural materialist and post-marxist appropriations of his work that would transform his conception of ideology's relative autonomy and reciprocal action on the economy into culture's complete autonomy.

In fact, however, there is an unresolved tension in Althusser's work between his endorsement of the economy's determination in the last instance and his assertion that the ideological superstructure is relatively autonomous from the base. In his 1962 essay on "Contradiction and Overdetermination," he confronts the problem of how to resolve the seeming contradiction between "the determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production" on the one hand and "the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity" on the other (1971, 111). He reviews Engels's contention in his 1890 letter to Bloch that "the economic situation is the basis but the various elements of the superstruc-

ture . . . also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles, and in many cases preponderate in determining their form” (1971, 112). And he notes that Engels both asserts the economy’s determining force and subjects it to the “accumulation of effective determinations deriving from the superstructures.” It is this “accumulation of determinations on the determination in the last instance by the economic” that Althusser calls *overdetermination*. If we carry Engels’s logic through to its conclusion, Althusser asserts here, and say that overdetermination is a universal feature of any social formation, then “*the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state* [emphasis his] . . . from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (1977, 113). It is this assertion—“that the lonely hour of the last instance never comes”—that neo- and post-marxists have seized upon to support their dismissals of economic determinism and to affirm that “non-economic instances or levels of society are just as determinant upon economic aspects, as the latter participate in determining the former” (Resnick and Wolff 91). However, in Althusser’s own texts this conclusion is not so neat, for in his 1974 essay “Is It Easy to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?” he once again asserts his commitment to “last instance” economic determinism (1976, 115–87).

While the incoherences in Althusser’s work on the question of the relationship between base and superstructure are not resolved, at several points he emphasizes the close relationship between class relations and cultural forms. One of them is his insistence that ideology is both the site and stake in class struggle. Another is the concept of hegemony that he appropriates from Gramsci, which connotes that some knowledges are the ruling ideas while others are not, and the ruling ones are so because they are tied to class interests. While ideology may operate semi-autonomously from class divisions, class struggle is nonetheless expressed in ideological forms. It is significant that ideology “extends beyond these forms . . . because it is rooted elsewhere . . . in the relations of production, which are relations of exploitation and constitute the base for class relations” (1971, 147).

There are many problems with Althusser’s marxism, and they have been extensively documented and worked over by his critics.<sup>9</sup> His contention that marxism’s authority lies in the fact that it is scientific knowledge tends to locate marxism outside of history, and his overly structuralist approach tends to erase human relationships altogether. His conception of ideology fails to adequately treat the ways ideology is always subject to struggle. And while his explanations of how identification takes place through ideological interpellation has the virtue of opening up the possi-

bility of addressing how psychic investments are socially produced, his theory allows little space for elaborating how ideological resistance and change might arise out of them. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, he inadequately explains the relationship between mode of production and social formation. Nonetheless, overdetermination remains a useful concept for addressing the complex ways capitalism's fundamental social contradiction—its exploitative relations of production—is enacted and inflected ideologically in history.

Althusser's concept of overdetermination has become one of his most appropriated and reworked concepts in cultural and social theory. We might even think of it as the pivotal concept on which post- and neo-marxist theories have turned away from the premises of historical materialism. Before returning to address those aspects of Althusser's conception of overdetermination that remain useful for theorizing culture and sexual identity, I want to briefly review two of the ways it has been recast in order to eliminate any determinate relationship between culture and the extraction of surplus value on which capitalism depends. Both of these revisions have had a profound—and I would now add, a deleterious—effect on culture study. In fact, my own earlier work promoted a view of capitalism that shared some of the premises of the neo-marxism of Resnick and Wolff I outline below. Since the early nineties when I wrote *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, as neoliberalism's encroachment on the academy has intensified and academic culture study has more vigorously repressed consciousness of the integral role of political economy in setting the terms for cultural struggles, the perils of approaching capitalism as an ensemble of "spheres of production that mutually determine each other" have become increasingly apparent to me (Hennessy 1993, 30). Chief among them, as my comments earlier indicated, is that exploitation's role in capitalism is erased. Because many academics and our families are confronting the reality that professional security is only as firm as the next wave of downsizing, more of us are coming to recognize that the professional service worker shares an objective historical relationship with others in the working class.

In the mid-eighties, the post-marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe published the book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which has had a wide influence on culture theorists, including sexuality scholars.<sup>10</sup> Laclau and Mouffe misread Althusser's concept of overdetermination as a social instance of the play or indeterminacy of meaning in order to support their argument that "the social" as such does not exist because social relations are

radically open. They seize on Althusser's contention that cultural practices are overdetermined not to demonstrate that the cultural aspects of a social formation can operate semi-autonomously from its economic ones but rather to claim that social relations are entirely cultural or symbolic. For Laclau and Mouffe, "the concept of overdetermination is constituted in the field of the symbolic, and has no meaning whatsoever outside it" (1985, 97). As a result, they twist the meaning of Althusser's statement that "everything existing in the social is overdetermined" into the assertion that "the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order" (1985, 97–98). Despite their anti-foundationalist claims, for Laclau and Mouffe, the symbolic order *is* the sole fabric of social life. As they see it, overdetermination refers only to the surplus of *meaning* that threatens to interrupt or undo any secure boundaries between cultural categories or among what they call the "nodal points" of identification. The basis for the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of social identity is this surplus of meanings that undoes any fixed identity. Behind this concept of overdetermination is the poststructuralist notion that language or signification is radically unstable because of the play of signifiers—what Jacques Derrida calls *differance*. "Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point [or element of difference in the formation of identities] is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it" (1985, 113). This intertextuality is meant to stress that no one identity (hetero- or homosexual, for instance) has an essence; there is always in any identity a trace of the "other" through which it is defined to undo any claims to an identity's integrity.

There are several problems with this rewriting of Althusser's overdetermination. In making all social relations cultural/symbolic ones, Laclau and Mouffe forfeit quite a bit. They cannot explain why certain "nodal points"—no matter how unstable—come to be the ones around which identities are organized. The instability within cultural categories comes to be merely the result of effects within language, and any possibility of addressing the relationship between (in)essential identities and capitalism's relations of exploitation simply disappears.

The concept of overdetermination is also central to Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff's neo-marxist critique of economic determinism. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, however, they do not see overdetermination as merely an effect of the play of signifiers within the symbolic order, nor do they confine social dynamics to cultural processes. And yet they are intrigued by this concept for a similar reason—that is, for the postmodern dismantling of essentialism it connotes. Resnick and Wolff contend that

overdetermination is the logic at the core of dialectical materialism, and it is this logic that constitutes Marx's epistemological break from Western philosophy's rationalist and empiricist standpoints and the essentialisms they support. Essentialist epistemologies posit that one social aspect—such as the economy—can ultimately determine which process in a social formation will dominate or can in itself be the most important determinant in a society. An essentialist approach assumes that different levels of a social formation are independent of each other, and in this sense each has a freestanding “essence” (1993, 51). By extension, it also presumes that some social influences are inessential while others are essential or fundamental. In other words, essentialism claims that any “apparent complexity—person, relationship, historical occurrence and so forth—can be analyzed to reveal a simplicity lying at its core” (3). As they see it, marxism is anti-essentialist because it does not look for a determining essence but rather sees every social process as overdetermined as well as a participant in the overdetermination of every other process in society (24). To say that society is a totality made up of overdetermined processes means that no one aspect is *the* cause or determinant of all others. Rather, “each social entity bears within itself the traces of all the other social entities that, together, comprise its overdeterminants” (63). Resnick and Wolff claim that Althusser's concept of overdetermination radically undoes the base-superstructure paradigm because it means that noneconomic instances or levels of society are just as determinant upon economic aspects as economic ones are on noneconomic.

Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, however, Resnick and Wolff have not forfeited class analysis. They see class as one aspect of the totality of overdetermined processes that make up a society. “Processes” for Resnick and Wolff are the elements comprising social relationships and practices (1987, 116). Class does not refer to a group identity but to those processes that have to do with the production of surplus value. Individuals typically participate in more than one class process, and their interests and alliances are overdetermined by all the other processes of social life, not just class ones. Resnick and Wolff claim class as their point of entry into their analysis of society, but the reason they give for this choice is not because class has any particular priority in capitalism but because they see class as a repressed element in the consciousness of our time (279).

As in Althusser's work, there is a contradiction in Resnick and Wolff's theory between their emphasis on an epistemology that refuses any priority to class and their persistent choice of class as a point of entry for social analysis. This tension situates them in an ambivalent relation to the very



reason they give for choosing class as a starting point: the repression of class in the consciousness of our time. While they acknowledge the repression of class, they shy away from offering any reason why this might be so. Taking class as the entry point for their analysis might seem to give class processes a certain priority, but by asserting that all social processes overdetermine all others, they neutralize this priority and disavow that the general repression of class in the discourses of modernity might have anything to do with the ways knowledges secure class relationships of exploitation.

Finally, if everything determines everything else for Resnick and Wolff, determinism becomes meaningless. Following their logic, any social process in capitalist societies is both inextricably linked to and as important as any other. But is this so? Some forms of cultural-ideological oppression (racism, patriarchal gender hierarchies, heteronormativity) also appear in other non-capitalist modes of production. In some advanced capitalist sectors some of these forms of oppression have become less intense and theoretically might disappear without damaging capitalism's class processes. While capitalist social formations have historically made use of cultural-ideological oppression and the ideologies of identity and difference they employ in order to justify various ways of extracting and accumulating surplus value, in theory capitalism could persist without them. Some other systems of difference might justify and explain away capitalism's fundamental contradiction. While cultural-ideological forms change, then, and the particular organizations of class processes change too, capitalism persistently does require certain social relations of exploitation, and in this sense they *are* more essential than others. Without the human relationships of exploitation within the class processes by which surplus labor is produced and extracted, capitalism is not capitalism. Since exploitation is inherently an unequal social relationship (whereby some can only benefit at the expense of others), capitalism will always need some culturally oppressive ways to explain, justify, or legitimate this difference. While exploitation never occurs aside from oppressive forms of consciousness, of identity and difference, then, it nonetheless has a more fundamental material and historical function in capitalist production than they do. In order not to repress this persistent feature of capitalism, we need some form of determinism in social and cultural analysis that acknowledges the crucial role of relationships of exploitation in capitalism but that does not reify them into an economic "level" or "aspect" of society prior to or extracted from culture.

As Resnick and Wolff point out, the logic of overdetermination is a dialectical one, and this logic can indeed be very useful to cultural analysis

that does not erase the fundamental role of exploitation in capitalist production. There are several ways the concept of overdetermination can be elaborated that do not lapse into cultural determinism and that might be useful in developing a historical materialist approach to (sexual) identity. Let me review them briefly. One of the ways capitalism's contradictions are overdetermined is through the "survival" of non- or precapitalist modes of production. Some feudal forms of household production coexist within capitalism, and often capitalists directly benefit from these "survivals." Their relation to capitalism is more than a side-by-side coexistence; it is an overdetermining one in that they can affect how relationships of exploitation are organized. For example, feudal patriarchal gender arrangements can organize some forms of sweated labor and tourist-trade sex work. When sweated labor is exploited by means of a patriarchal kinship network that defines the relationship between manager and worker by means of the extraction of surplus labor through the wage, it is overdetermined. Cultural-ideological constructions of identity may also be overdetermined by the ways capitalism's contradictory relations of exploitation are played out and mystified in them. For example, as I will discuss in more detail below, social contradictions that cannot be resolved elsewhere are often displaced or condensed into cultural categories and identities, and in this sense their organization is overdetermined. Certain cultural-ideological categories (or, to use Laclau and Mouffe's term, "nodal points") of gender, race, and sexuality may also be in overdetermined relationships to one another so that no one category functions singly. These overdeterminations are not free-floating, though. For instance, we could say that heteronormativity is historically overdetermined by the contradictory role that race and gender have played in managing capitalism's extraction of surplus value. Its normative structure has been defined by layered and often incoherent logics: a heteropolar gender scheme and male- and white-privileged hierarchies—both of which conceal class dynamics, situate individuals in contradictory ways, and pit social groups against one another. Cultural categories can also overdetermine class relations through the ways they insert certain limits into the division of labor. For example, class relations of exploitation can be overdetermined by race. Not only have discourses of racism been used to legitimate the reproduction of a cheap labor force, but ideologies of white supremacy and white privilege have historically functioned to offer white workers a compensatory "psychological wage" that in fact translates into material benefits. W. E. B. Du Bois incisively describes how this process worked in the American South during Reconstruction:

The white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated for by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.

They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and public schools. The police were drawn from their ranks and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great affect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. (700–01)

In a similar way, embracing heteronormativity can offer many “nonwhite” workers an imaginary compensatory psychological wage of normalcy whose interface with the history of racism is varied and historically specific. The point here, of course, is that in both cases the compensations, both imaginary and material, keep those who benefit and those who lose from seeing their wider common interests.

These various and often layered senses of overdetermination I have outlined acknowledge that at times there is an accumulation of determinations on relations of exploitation in the sense that cultural categories can limit and shape how they are organized, and it also acknowledges that at times capitalism’s contradictions are displaced and played out in culture in overdetermined ways. This way of understanding overdetermination is not trapped in Althusser’s contradictory claims for a last instance that never comes, but is more in line with E. P. Thompson’s insight that “the logic of capitalist process has found expression within all the activities of a society and exerted a determining pressure upon its development and form” (1995, 254). For Thompson, the “kernel of human relationships” of exploitation, domination, and appropriation that capitalism relies on are determinate effects that are operative all the time and everywhere. This certainly does not mean that the economy is privileged over culture in any simple sense. While this way of understanding overdetermination acknowledges that culture has a shaping influence on relationships of exploitation, by the same token it does not claim that the two are in a relation of ceaseless play.

In some respects, the understanding of overdetermination I am offering shares some features with Raymond Williams’s theories. Williams’s contributions to cultural studies could not be more different from Althusser’s. As opposed to Althusser, whose structuralist and scientific marxism casts ideology as a set of abstract and irresistible injunctions, Williams

cherished knowledge gained through the experience of ordinary people and claimed that this knowledge was superior to that arrived at through abstract thought. His career was anchored in a more humanist understanding of culture as a whole way of life, and yet he also accepted the marxist premise that a culture must finally be interpreted in light of the underlying system of production. Williams's understanding of culture changed over the course of his writings. By the late seventies, when British cultural studies was drawing heavily on marxism, Williams was reformulating some of his earlier ideas in ways that would indelibly mark future formulations of the materiality of culture. And he did so through the appropriation of some of Althusser's concepts.

Williams had always been critical of the base-superstructure model in marxist theory, and in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) he developed one of his most fully formulated engagements with it. The real problem with base-superstructure, he argues here, is that it has been too often misused to abstract the economic base from the rest of social life. This is the fault of economism. Idealism's abstraction of ideas and economism are in some ways mirror images of one another. Economism abstracts economic relations, while idealism abstracts culture from the social process of which it is a part. For Williams, it is the separation of consciousness from the material social process as a whole—that is, its abstraction—that makes ideology (61). Therefore, critical analysis of ideology must involve restoration of the real connections between ideas and social and material process (66). Williams spends much of *Marxism and Literature* developing an explanation of how those real connections may be reestablished, and one of the key concepts in this endeavor is determination. As he understands them, social determinations are always of a whole kind—a complex and interrelated process of setting limits and exerting pressures rather than a matter of simple causal relations. As he explains it, “overdetermination” conveys this complex process because it emphasizes that social practices are ultimately interactive (88). When Williams says that the concept of “superstructure” is “not a reduction but an evasion,” he means that it fails to acknowledge this complex interdetermination of material production in which industry cannot be isolated from law and order or entertainment from public opinion (93). The problem with Williams's thinking here, however, a problem which he acknowledges in the essay “Base and Superstructure,” is the same one we see in Resnick and Wolff: when everything determines everything else, determination loses all meaning.

More importantly, in such an all-determining logic the human relations of exploitation on which capitalism's accumulation of profits relies begin to fade from the cultural analyst's view.

*Marxism and Literature* opens up the multiple, layered dimensions of culture and allows us to consider the ways that cultural forms and ideologies set limits on the conditions of living and making a living. But Williams's systemic analysis — what he calls here cultural materialism — finally reenacts the very problem of abstraction he so rightly critiques. The other side of the coin of economism is not just idealism, it is cultural materialism. If cultural analysis is not going to lose sight of the ways culture is conditioned by capitalism's fundamental relations of exploitation, we must find ways to make visible the complex historical and material links between the two and incorporate their overdetermined relationship into our analyses.

Within these problematic terms, Williams's contributions to culture theory are nonetheless formidable, and they can be usefully rearticulated within a historical rather than a cultural materialist understanding of the history of sexual discourses and identities. His notion of the limiting and pressuring affects of cultural practices is useful in addressing how particular formations of heterosexuality help to organize the division of labor or how the sexualized construction of the laboring body features in social production. His conception of cultural history's dynamic unfolding through residual, dominant, and emergent forms offers a vocabulary for explaining the complexity of uneven development that is useful in the history of sexuality. His concept of "structures of feeling" is also an untapped and suggestive formulation that might be recast to shed light on the inchoate, informal, felt dimensions of practical consciousness that are pertinent to sexuality's complex organization of human capacities for sensation and affect. Unfortunately, the mainstream of cultural studies has not seized so eagerly on these contributions so much as it has pursued the path of William's revamping of overdetermination into a cultural materialism that shares much in common with the post-marxisms of Butler and Laclau and Mouffe, or the postmodern marxism of Resnick and Wolff.

#### COMMODIFYING SEXUAL IDENTITIES

The abstraction of culture's material history in cultural studies is itself a way of seeing that is deeply embedded in a mode of production characterized by commodity exchange. While Marx never addressed this particular

problem, of course, he does offer an analysis of the commodity that helps explain it. For Marx, the commodity is the linchpin of capitalist production. In *Capital* he provides a set of concepts that allows us to see how this linchpin functions, beginning with what the meeting of human needs through commodity production conceals. One of the brilliant features of Marx's reading of the commodity is the intimate connection he establishes between culture and capital, between knowing — that is, consciousness — and the structure of political economy. He shows us that under capitalism we are invited to know the value of commodities as if it were lodged in things themselves. This way of seeing — what he calls fetishism — eclipses the fact that material value is produced through human labor and its organization into particular historical relationships. To rehearse the well-known Marxian formula: commodity fetishism is a way of seeing whereby the definite social relations at capitalism's core assume the fantastic form of a relation between things. So, for example, when the value of a pair of sneakers is taken only to be equivalent to the value of \$80, this way of seeing the sneakers de-links one component of social life (the commodity-product — sneakers) from the conditions that make it possible (the hours of human labor, including the surplus labor, that make possible capital accumulation through a chain of commodity productions and exchanges).

What is most interesting about this formula is its implications for the connection between cultural meanings and the organization of labor in commodity capitalism. When commodity fetishism erases the material basis of value, it does so by attaching itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced. In the process, a distinction is created between what is visible and what is seeable. What seems the empirical reality of a commodity like a sneaker is not seeable in itself; it only becomes seeable because of the historically available ways of seeing we bring to knowing this thing. In this sense, perception — a historically produced cultural knowledge — is inseparable from the social relationships of labor and power commodity capitalism is premised on.

Commodity production and exchange entail therefore a “phenomenological matrix,” a form of consciousness or a cultural logic that alienates many aspects of human life from the network of social relations that makes them possible. This atomizing perspective comprises the very scaffolding of bourgeois visibility and is played out in a host of strategies that fragment components of social life: in the separation of consumption from production, private from public life, market from household, individual from collective, and culture from political economy. Like the cultural

logic of patriarchal gender and race relations, this structuration of consciousness is an ideological feature that is always historically articulated, and consequently its particular articulations will be varied, overdetermined, and specific.

Marx's suggestion that the "social hieroglyphic" branded on commodities involves both objective forms and forms of consciousness has been developed by other culture theorists, many of whom are indebted to Georg Lukacs's monumental elaboration of commodity culture in *History and Class Consciousness*. The concept of "reification" is Lukacs's famous formulation of the ways the social fragmentation required in the production of commodities registers in a fragmentation of consciousness. He predicts an increasingly important role for consciousness in capital's colonization of the lifeworld as "the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man [*sic*]" (93). For Lukacs, the cultural logic of the commodity is not confined to how the products of labor are seen and valued:

[I]t stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man [*sic*]; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can "own" or "dispose of" like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic qualities into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. We need only think of marriage. (93, 100)

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the example of marriage as a reified form of human relations. First of all, though, we note that in presenting the effects of commodified consciousness as alienation, Lukacs refuses to ground his critique in any a priori unalienated organic human essence, dispelling the notion that there can be an essentially "natural" form of unalienated existence or of human relations. Secondly, while it has been argued rightfully that Lukacs overemphasizes the pervasive invasion of consciousness by commodification, he does not finally see this process as all determining. The chapter on reification ends with his well-known consideration of the ways the worker, because of his historical position, can and does interrupt reification because wherever he imagines himself to be the subject of his own life he finds this to be an illusion, and this constant thwarting of agency forces upon him the seeds for the development of class consciousness—the

knowledge that the most elementary gratification of his needs is forfeited to the interests of capital production (167).

Finally, let's return to the passing reference to marriage. Lukacs goes on to say that "without troubling to point to the developments of the nineteenth century," we can remind ourselves of the way in which Kant described the situation as a "propertied relation based on the mutual possession of each other's sexual attributes." What interests me here are those nineteenth-century developments that Lukacs found too much trouble to dwell on, developments he significantly points out but then quickly passes over on his way to Kant. I want to suggest that we pause to consider those nineteenth-century developments, keeping in mind Lukacs's claim that the organization of human relationships and the deployment of sexuality are intimately bound up with the history of commodification. Might a history of these developments affect our understanding of changes in the heteronormative organization of sexual identity taking place in advanced industrial sectors in late capitalism? Might such a history affect how we imagine and practice both cultural studies and radical sexual politics now? Confronting these questions makes me aware of how much historical work on the parallel emergence of commodity culture and heteronormative sexuality still waits to be done. We know that in Western industrialized societies heteronormative sexual identity and its perverse others gradually coalesce at about the same time commodity culture does—at the height of nineteenth-century imperialism. Recent scholarship has begun to sort out the ways the formation of new sexual identities in metropolitan imperial centers cannot be untangled from the transnational cultures of imperialism or from the "other" formations of sexuality that fell under the imperial gaze. But we have very few studies that examine the historical relationship between the formation of new sexual identities and the reifying cultural logic of an emergent commodity culture.<sup>11</sup> The history of heterosexuality as a discursive ensemble that capitalism makes use of, as a vehicle for the legitimation of a gendered division of labor in the family and in waged work, and as an agent in the development of race and class consciousness has yet to be written, as does the history of hetero- and homosexuality's changing intimate links to commodity production and consumption. Certainly one chapter of this work will need to address the commodification of new homosexual identities in theoretical perspectives like psychoanalysis as well as the effects of commodity logic on emergent social movements organized around identity categories from the nineteenth century onward.



One of the lines of inquiry such a history could pursue might entail a critical encounter with Foucault's explanation of an evolving historical relationship between family alliance and an emergent new apparatus of sex. Foucault contends that by the nineteenth century sex was being deployed in new normative power mechanisms that increasingly took charge of existence. Foucault's rejection of historical materialism keeps him from being able to address *why* these changes happened and what they have to do with commodification or with capital. But his insights on the complex relationship between family and sexuality could be rearticulated within a history that began with these questions.

Like other historians, Foucault tells us that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe, the centers of commodity production gradually moved from the household to the market, a shift that meant economic and political powers would no longer rely so completely on the family alliance. The new apparatus of sex did not replace the family but was superimposed on it without completely supplanting it (Foucault 1978, 106). While family alliances continued to serve as conduits for property and inheritance, for social reproduction and control, sexuality extended that control into the body that produces and consumes; "the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, the nature of impressions" became fields for power (Foucault 1978, 107). In this complex relationship between family and sexuality lay the enabling conditions for the emergence of a full-blown commodity culture, conditions made possible and supported by overdetermined adjustments in the international sexual division of labor (Hennessy and Mohan).

By the late nineteenth century, the market economy in Europe and the United States was also drawing sexuality out of the family in many forms, in commercial entertainment and new kinds of nonprocreative intimacy (D'Emilio and Freedman 166–200). The recruitment of women into the workforce in the colonies and the metropolitan centers was a crucial component of these changes, negotiated ideologically through the often contradictory adjustments to women's and working-class men's positions as subjects of consent, of property, and of racial identity. For women, the discourses of sexuality often organized access to political agency and ownership. Women continued to provide invisible labor in the home, and a gendered division of labor within the family alliance remained essential to the production of labor power and by extension to the accumulation of surplus value in the marketplace. The new technologies of sex operated in a normative, dialectical way both to undermine and to resecure this arrange-

ment, and one of the ways they did so was through the reification of sexual identity. The reification of sexual identity in the late nineteenth century is overdetermined by a set of structural changes in capitalist production that involved technological developments, the mechanization and consequent de-skilling of work, the production boom brought on by technological efficiency, the opening of new consumer markets, and the eventual development of a widespread consumer culture (Hobsbawm 34–55). A new and growing mass media, including the advertising industry, displaced unmet needs into new desires and offered the promise of compensatory pleasures, or at least the promise of pleasure in the form of commodity consumption. The inducement of social demand and consumer desire was one of the key components of the new consumer culture and a crucial mechanism through which capitalist overproduction was managed ideologically. This process took place on multiple fronts and involved the formation of newly desiring subjects, forms of agency, intensities of sensation, and economies of pleasure that were consistent with the requirements of a more mobile workforce and a growing consumer culture. Most significantly, the position of desiring subject was gradually being opened to women who would eventually be recruited as the ideal and consummate consumers. Related to the formation of new desiring subjects was the emergence of the new identities hetero- and homosexual. These new subjects of sexual desire were at odds with a Victorian gender hierarchy that accorded the position of desiring subject only to men. As George Chauncy has argued, the differentiation of homosexual desire from cross-gender behavior at the turn of the century reflects a major reconceptualization of the nature of human sexuality. Basic to this change was a shift from a paradigm for human sexuality in which men were active sexual agents and women were passive or passionless sexual recipients. Active or passive sexual aim—which was taken to be paradigmatic for one’s masculine or feminine gender role—had formerly been more important than sexual object choice. More and more frequently, however, sexual object choice became the distinguishing feature of sexual identity, and it was on the basis of this standard that the distinction between hetero- and homosexuality was erected (Chauncy 1994, 92).

The emergence of new consuming and desiring subjects only gradually and unevenly displaced the Victorian social logic of gender with the modern logic of sexual object choice (100; Floyd 173). The dialectical process of “displacement” is a significant instance of overdetermination here. The new identity categories hetero- and homosexual disrupted the bourgeois

gender hierarchy that had supported a domestic economy of household production and property rights in that they accorded both men and women positions as subjects and objects of desire. But a patriarchal gender hierarchy was reinscribed in the emergent heteronorm and its homosexual other to the extent that the oppositions between femininity and active desire and between masculinity and sexual objectification remained intact. Heterosexuality became a normative identity whose stability was guaranteed through an array of reified perverse (sexual and racial) others but also through a modernized gender hierarchy. In other words, the organizational structures of gender and desire on which heteronormative identity relies prescribe a double reification of the human capacity for sensation, affect, and social intercourse. Heteronormativity posits a “natural” equation between sex (male or female) and gender (masculine and feminine) *and* it polices desire according to a gendered asymmetry between sexual subject (e.g., masculine) and object choice (feminine). At the same time, heteronorms reify homosexuality—defining, disciplining the human potential for sensation and social intercourse into an identity that complies with the heteronormative logics of gender and desire, only perversely so.

It was only gradually through the nineteenth century that homosexuals, predominantly men, came to be seen as discrete sexual identities whose perverse sexual desire (men for men) was interpreted (and sometimes lived) through a heteronormative gender scheme. Sexual identity as an identity organized around whom one desires to be sexual with was engendered out of the scientific effort to explain and to tame disruptions of the gender system. This gradual shift from gender (in)coherence to (homo)sexual desire as the basis for identity is evident in the writing of late-nineteenth-century sexologists. In the work of the first generation of sexologists, the “invert” or “third sex” is in fact a subject who presents an incoherently gendered identity. The term “invert” was first used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe not homosexuality but a broadly transgendered condition of which same-sex desire was one symptom (Hekma; Prosser 135–55). Generally the term “invert” is understood in terms of the classic description of “a woman trapped in a man’s body.” As an individual who makes sense of himself or herself as incoherently gendered, or as someone who is understood that way by others, the invert transgresses the gendered fabric of possessive individualism. After 1900 (which marked the publication of Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion*) the term “invert” fell out of common use as gender difference was increasingly being folded into a new conception of sexual difference based on a

desiring subject constructed in terms of aim or object choice. Freud, for example, refigures the transgendered components of inversion into perverse sexual object choice; other perversions and related sexual identities are understood to be deviations from a normative sexual aim. In this way the “invert’s” transgender identity becomes only one stop on the way to homosexual identity.

This shift to sexual object choice as the defining feature of sexual identity has a contradictory relationship to patriarchal gender ideology. The emergence of a new subject of sexual desire was conditioned by the gradual disruption of gender distinctions taking place through changes in the division of labor, property, and consent law. This was a subject that was not defined so much in terms of species needs for reproduction as in terms of individual consumer preferences or the objects he or she desires (Birken 49). But the challenge to the asymmetrical gender scheme of bourgeois culture was not so pat. In sexology, for example, we find that even as the promotion of this new consuming subject of desire opened up the possibility of challenging the gender differences that defined reproduction, it also erected a new version of them. By emphasizing the multiplicity of individual preferences and the idiosyncratic nature of desire, and by starting with the assumption that individuals are first of all free consumers — or subjects of desire — sexology disrupted the traditional bourgeois gender hierarchy. At the same time sexology performed the conservative function of reinstalling the heterogender paradigm within this new sexual ideology of desire. As sexuality was being wrenched free from reproduction and everyone was potentially being sexualized, the threatening possibility of a genderless sexual desire was contained by a new paradigm of sexual identity that articulated it in a heterogendered frame. The new identities hetero- and homosexual, based as they were on the appropriate gender of the object of desire, became ways of distinguishing sexual identities that not only tamed the potential threat to patriarchal gender difference but actually reincorporated it into a new (heterogender) ideology of sexual identity. The increasing differentiation of sexual identities (in the form of perversions) reflected the decline of older holistic concepts of gender and the articulation of newer, more object-oriented ones.

The implications of this transcoding of gender were most telling for women. That women were permitted a new sexual agency may have been a break from the bourgeois gender ideology of passionless womanhood, but the desiring feminine subject was acceptable only so long as she directed that desire toward a heteronormative goal in which she was not the

agent but the object of desire. The enfolding of bourgeois gender ideology within the new ideology of sexual desire helped forestall the possibility of even imagining lesbian desire in any other terms than female inversion. Consequently, until well into the twentieth century, sexologists and the culture at large could only conceive of the “real” lesbian who desires another woman by engendering her as “mannish” or butch (Birken 94–96; Chauncy 107). The heteronormative identity that was consolidated in the late nineteenth century, then, prescribes a double reification of the human capacity for sensation, affect, and social intercourse through the organizational structures of gender and desire: it proposes an equation between sex and gender *and* it organizes desire according to the gendered asymmetry, which we might call “heteropolarity.” At the same time, heteronorms reify what comes to be known as “homosexuality”—defining, disciplining the human potential for sensation and social intercourse into an identity that complies with the heteronormative logics of gender and desire, only perversely so. In other words, the heteronormative paradigm set the terms even for queer desire.

The emergence of this heterogendered, heteropolar normative paradigm and of the reified identities of hetero- and homosexual is an important feature of the historical formation of a new desiring subject. Sexology’s construction of a sexuality of desire separated the human capacity for sensation and affect from the ideology of family need. As a new subject of desire rearticulated bourgeois gender ideology in this and other cultural sites, the relationship between sexual identity and gender remained uneven, contradictory, and prescribed. The construction of sexual identity in terms of object and aim potentially made it possible to conceive of all combinations of desiring subject and object (masculine/feminine man or masculine/feminine woman desiring masculine/feminine man or masculine/feminine woman). But because capitalist investment in a heterogendered division of labor persisted, the potentially arbitrary boundaries between sexual identity and gender identity would continue to be secured through heterogendered norms, even as those boundaries were contested and unevenly articulated in mainstream and counterculture. By scripting desire in terms of heterogendered identities that are understood to be opposite sexes, the distinction between hetero- and homosexuality controlled the unruly possibility posed by the new desiring subject—the possibility that masculinity, femininity, sexual agent, and sexual object might indeed correlate in any number of possible desiring combinations within or between persons.

I am not the first to argue that the consolidation of two distinct social identities—hetero- and homosexual—is not simply a discursive event or a cultural phenomenon. Several historians have made this point. John D’Emilio’s well-known early essay argues that it was two aspects of capitalism—wage labor and commodity production—that allowed men and women to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity. D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman as well as other scholars (George Chauncy, Jeffrey Weeks) have suggested that commodity consumption was also a key material condition for the emergence of new sexual identities. The late-nineteenth-century shift to a consumer economy provoked a more widespread acceptance of pleasure, self-gratification, and personal satisfaction that easily translated to the province of sex. What I want to stress is that this cultural-ideological process was overdetermined by the logic of the commodity, a logic that binds ways of knowing and forms of identity to changes in the relations of production. In other words, the reification of sexual identity is overdetermined by the relationships that capitalist production came to rely on in the late nineteenth century, relationships that include forms of consciousness that are adequate to new demands of production and consumption. These new demands took place in several arenas—among them the recruitment of women into the workforce and consumer culture and the gradual unhinging of sexuality from its procreative function as regulated by the family’s patriarchal gender system. One of the most significant displacements was the conjuncture of rationalized production with the engineering of desire inducement.

Against the background of the Great Depression of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the expanding volume of overproduction fueled the rise of commodity consumption and a new consumer culture in industrialized nations. The competitive struggle for control of consumer demand generated the spectacular growth of advertising and innovations in the field of credit designed to increase consumption (Birken 120). At the same time, the technological developments responsible for overproduction also spurred new forms of rationalized labor that would eventually take the form of Fordism. In an excellent recent essay, Kevin Floyd astutely contends that this historical development is a significant one in the history of the subject of desire under capitalism. The conjuncture of engineered production and engineered desire inducement interfaced with the construction of men and women as sexual subjects and sexual objects and helped give desire a certain ideological independence. The result was a

reification of the erotic, ultimately inseparable from the retrenchment of capitalism (Floyd 178), a reification we might understand as overdetermined by the displacements of new forms of commodity production and consumption, by the transposition of need into desire, and by changes wrought in other cultural-ideological categories.

Emerging as the prime institution involved in the formation of sexual identity in the late nineteenth century, heteronormativity shaped this reification in the service of the kernel of human relationships essential to capitalism in several ways. One of them involved the contradictory and dialectical relationship between sexuality and gender. By the end of the nineteenth century, heteronormative sexual identity was becoming one of the historical components of labor and labor power insofar as it organized forms of consciousness on which social divisions—including but not restricted to the division of labor—would depend. In disciplining human affect and sensation into discretely gendered subjects and objects of desire, heteronormativity reinforced the sexual division of labor in the home as well as the exploitation of women's labor in the wage market. The distinction between a normative sexual subject and its abject other on which heteronormativity rested also served to contain the threat posed to patriarchal gender hierarchies by the unhinging of sexuality from family. In addition, the reification of sexual identity was an important part of a much broader process of moving human eros into the realm of exchange value. By consolidating human sensation into discrete and bounded sexual identities, heteronormativity helped shape the human potential and need for sensation and social interaction (or eros) in terms of objective aims or desires. This reification of the erotic would prove vital to the development of commodity culture insofar as it helped consolidate forms of desire that would be crucial in the marketing and consumption of commodities.<sup>12</sup>

Satisfaction of needs through exchange value is the most common phenomenon of alienation, and human sexuality has certainly entered commodity exchange through this process. But the less visible relationship between commodification and sexuality lies in the reification of the human potential for sensation and affect into sexual identities. Like all cultural practices in capitalist production, this process was and is a contradictory one. The freeing up of sensory-affective capacities from family alliances was simultaneously rebinding desire into new commodified forms. But while heteronorms organized desire and identity, they never did so completely or entirely successfully. Unlike the poststructuralist or cultural materialist who sees these failures as the effect of a radical instability in-

herent in discourses or in language itself, the culture theorist who returns her analysis to capital knows that heteronorms are insecure because they are sites of ideological crisis and symptoms of the social struggle over meaning and ultimately over resources. This struggle threatens to disclose not only the fabricated nature of sexuality but also the social relations that bind its organization to capital's contradictory structures. The narratives and social movements of nineteenth-century marriage resisters, "New Women," and some feminists disclosed many of these connections and indicated that heteronormative resistance was not always launched by homosexuals who only gradually as a group countered the sexual norms they themselves were being framed by.

Let me sum up some of the points I am making. First of all, heteronorms are cultural-ideological. They depend on the reification of sensory-affect into identities that legitimate and enable certain historical processes of capitalism. The gender foundation of heteronormative sexual identities is directly related to the extraction of surplus value through the gendered division of labor both in the family's role in the reproduction of labor power and in the workplace. To the extent that heteronormativity is premised on a gender hierarchy, it has served to legitimate and naturalize the gendered division of labor. However, just because capitalism has made use of heteronormativity does not mean that it is necessary for capitalist production. Capitalism does not require heteronormative families or even a gendered division of labor. What it does require is an unequal division of labor. If gay- or queer-identified people are willing to shore up that unequal division—whether that means running corporations or feeding families, raising children or caring for the elderly—capital will accept us, and in areas where production has moved far out of the patriarchal household and patriarchal gender ideologies have flexed or changed, it has done so, though unevenly and reluctantly. This limited acceptance is not just a freestanding cultural phenomenon any more than the emergence of "new families" includes all non-nuclear arrangements. While heteronormativity's dependence on gender difference continues to bolster an unequal division of labor in the home and in the marketplace, and the ideology of family shelters an *unwaged* domestic labor force—whether straight or gay—race still has to bear a great share of the burden for the production of surplus value. The companion to the "New (white) Gay Family" is the single workfare mother whose sexual identity is less relevant than her social status as excessive breeder.

Finally, I am arguing that reified sexual identities—straight, gay, queer—are tied to capitalism's class system in that they are ways of seeing



and knowing oneself and others that shore up the logic of commodity exchange on which capital is based. This is a logic that abstracts social phenomena, including human relationships, from the historical conditions that make them possible. In this regard, claiming a queer identity or claiming a straight identity can participate in the same cultural logic. The point I want to stress here is not that sexuality has a class character or that class trumps sexual identity, but that consolidation of new sexual identities that pursues the logic of commodification limits the development of collective agency. The occlusion of class in theories of sexuality and the disavowal of class struggle or class affinities in sexual liberation movements are part of the legacy of capital's commodification of consciousness. One of the costs of the reification of eros into heteronormative identity and its homo-alternative is the separation of class and sex analysis. Underlying this split is the loss of a way of seeing and a form of social organization that recognizes that human needs are collectively produced and that can address the immense human toll taken by the contradictory relationships through which this process is enacted under capitalism.

The rationalizing bourgeois subject Lukacs described so well in the 1930s still persists, but changes in the relations of production and the production of new commodity forms in late capitalism have adjusted its particular articulations. What are these new commodity forms and what are their effects on the ways of knowing and forms of identity—especially sexual identity—that are historically available, even prescribed now? By the mid-twentieth century, changes in the appropriation of relative and absolute surplus value under Fordism had made possible several important innovations in capitalist production: the penetration of capital into new geographical and social spaces, including the export of consumer capitalism to the third world, an increased scale of economic activity, and an expansion of the commodity form in everyday life (Lee 128). By the 1980s these innovations were already being displaced by the gradual introduction of new flexible technologies, deregulated labor markets, and the movement of standardized production to a “peripheral” position in the world economy. These adjustments to production increased the rates at which relative and surplus value could be procured, dramatically altering the structure of those core relationships capitalism relies on. The physical expansion of capitalism begun under Fordism continued through the creation and extension of markets, including the deeper penetration and commodification of the body and identity—the growth of health, food, fashion, and athletic markets, for example (Lee 131). Changes in the intensity and

organization of labor and to the means of production — the flexible character of modern production and consumption — issued in innovations to the ideal commodity-form. The key commodities of the 1980s were those goods best attuned to freeing up the previously static and relatively fixed spatial and temporal dimensions of daily life; products like the Walkman and microwave are two examples (Lee 133). The increased “fluidization” of everyday life in turn implied changes in the composition of needs and the cultural framework within which needs are made meaningful (Lee 133). The success of this new logic of consumption depended on and was accompanied by a resocialization of everyday consciousness, a historical condition generally referred to as “postmodernism” (Harvey; Lee).

While we have by now an almost exhaustive catalog of the cultural-ideological effects of postmodernism, less readily available are analyses that explain how ways of knowing and living sexuality are linked to the changing logic of the commodity as the keystone of capitalist production. What might some of these links be? We know that the dominant discourses of sexual identity in overindustrialized sectors, spun across national lines through media and travel industries, seem to be changing, albeit in uneven ways. In these parts of the world, the network of equations among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire on which normative heterosexuality as a matrix of intelligibility came to depend under Fordism is being disrupted. The discrete asymmetrical opposition between male and female is being thrown into question, pressuring the imaginary logic of opposites and sex-gender equations that the prevailing heterogender system once relied on. In the media images generated in overdeveloped capitalist centers especially, more permeable, fluid, ambiguously coded sexual identities are allowed, even promoted.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that even though heteronorms are being challenged and recast, capitalist production does continue to rely on compulsory heterosexuality as a way of organizing sex, gender, and desire, and it continues to exert its force on human bodies and imaginations through strategies of abjection, disciplinary, and brute violence. There is no question that normative sexual identity remains a battlefield on which the lives of lesbian, gay, and queer-identified people are damaged, even lost, nor that the nation-state remains a prime enforcer of prescribed sexual norms through public education, marriage, immigration, and other state-regulated social policies. Nonetheless, the fact also remains that middle-class professional lesbian, gay, and queer-identified subjects are being welcomed into the cultural and corporate mainstream, an incorporation that bears testimony to the fact that capitalism does not

necessarily need heterosexuality. New, non-normative sexual identities support innovative “lifestyle” marketing niches, and in the academy and publishing worlds of the United States especially, they also furnish lucrative marketing vehicles for the knowledge industry, often under the rubric of cultural studies. My concern is that these knowledges are producing subjectivities that seem all too congruent with the forms of reified consciousness required of the new stewards of capitalism, the middle-class fraction of professional-service workers.

What sort of consciousness is this? What are the qualities demanded of service workers? The answer reveals the degree to which new forms of cognition blur with new affective and physical demands on the laboring body. Service workers are primarily knowledge workers who need to be able to carry out multistep operations, manipulate abstract symbols, command the flow of information, and remain flexible enough to recognize new paradigms. Their work requires new affective and physical responses: habitual mobility, adaptability in every undertaking, the ability to navigate among possible alternatives and spaces, and a cultivation of ambivalence as a structure of feeling.

We are familiar with this postmodern subject. We see him in the deconstructions of hetero-homo identity that underscore the postmodern, performative queer whose identity is always open—not to history so much as to the shifting play of signification. We see her in the reformulations of sexual identity that take a Deleuzian productive desire as their point of departure. And she is often quite subtle, even appealing, in her free-form mobility. In the work of Elspeth Probyn or Elizabeth Grosz, for example, queer sexual identity does not *seem* to be reified—quite the contrary. It is a matter of continuing movement and making strange, of desire freed from any location in individual or historical necessity, desire aimed not to a person but to individual body parts (Probyn 14).

There is a rich and alluring evocativeness to much of this work, a mining of desire as a series of intensities that throws one onto the vagaries of the other, an exploration of the “psychic life of power,” to reference the title of one of Judith Butler’s books, that posits provocative ways of entertaining the desiring subject. But there is also an eerie if familiar immateriality to this new queer subject, who moves in a milieu of virtual relations, whose desire is the unleashed mobility of disconnected images (Probyn) and whose body becomes the site of provocations, reactions, disruptions, and blurred boundaries “so that it is no longer clear where one organ, body or subject stops and another begins” (Grosz, “Animal Sex,” 290). These more open, fluid, ambivalent sexual identities—what I call “post-

modern sexualities”—announce more flexible gender codes and performative sexual identities that are quite compatible with the mobility, adaptability, and ambivalence required of service workers today and with the new more fluid forms of the commodity. While they may disrupt norms and challenge state practices that are indeed oppressive, they do not necessarily challenge neoliberalism or disrupt capitalism. To the extent that they de-link sexuality from its historical connection to the human relationships of exploitation capitalism relies on, and to the extent that they reify desire, postmodern sexualities participate in the logic of the commodity and help support neoliberalism’s mystifications.

Certainly the restructuring of the labor market has not given all service workers more freedom and autonomy. Yet some members of this new professional class fraction are indeed an elite group who can live and travel globally and who are rapidly developing a certain homogeneity, fed by consumerism, the media, entertainment, and tourism. Theirs is a transnational culture that appropriates eccentricity, including the eccentricity of gay culture. As Dennis Altman has argued, it is fashionable to point to the emergence of the “global gay,” that is, the internationalization of certain forms of social and cultural identity based on homosexuality and often conceptualized in terms derived from recent American fashion and intellectual style (1996, 77). Most evident in cosmopolitan centers in Southeast Asia, South and Central America, and Eastern Europe, images and rhetoric of a gay culture linked to consumerism and the development of a gay and lesbian press spread from the United States to other countries after 1969. Their most obvious indicator is the development of commercial space: entertainment venues, restaurants, shops, catering to a homosexual—usually male—clientele (78).<sup>13</sup> In all of its unevenness, the consolidation of public gay identities transnationally follows in the wake of late capitalist commodification as it affects the growth of affluence and the formation of a free subject. Wealth and education seem to be prerequisites for the adoption of new counter-heteronormative forms of identity, though as authoritarian governments in the Middle East and East Asia make clear, the operation of state repression and traditional cultural codes are clearly mediating forces (88).

Seeing through the lens of historical materialism, the ways cultural forms, including identities and desires, follow the logic of commodification in itself cannot eliminate the exploitative relationships on which capitalism relies. But making visible the connections between forms of identity and capital’s historical processes can change the frame through which we might imagine the horizon for change and can perhaps enable us to forge new forms of sub-

jectivity and political alliance that might target for transformation the exploitative, oppressive, and acquisitive relationship neoliberalism protects.

My own professional work has offered me opportunities to travel to cities as far-flung as Sydney, Birmingham, and Berlin, where I have met and learned from lesbian, gay, and transgendered people and participated in the commercial and political spaces of gay and queer communities. I know that these privileges of mine have been made possible by some of the very forces I have described: the transnational network of knowledges that comprise cultural studies, queer identities, and the class relations of late capitalism that support them. I acknowledge my participation in capitalist relations not simply to display the contradiction between my historical position in the professional middle class and the horizon of social transformation I am committed to but in order to emphasize that in the short term it matters a great deal *what we do* with the contradictory historical positions that for many of us are accidents of birth. Cultural workers, in and outside of universities, have an opportunity to make use of our access to teaching arenas of many sorts to put into crisis the reified cultural forms we simultaneously strain against and enjoy, and—given the premium placed on identities as merely cultural constructs—I would say on identities especially.

Cultural theory and political activism that focus our attention only on the spectacle of sexual identity commodify sexuality by separating the organization of sexual identity from the complex historical ways capitalism shapes the human capacity for pleasure, affect, and social interaction. The kernel of human relationships that is characteristic of transnational late capitalism condition the terrain on which these capacities are enacted and felt; they set the cultural agenda (Garnham 71). We need to ask, “Are cultural theories of sexuality and their accompanying politics directing our attention to this terrain?” It is my contention that refusing transnational capitalism its foundational status as a mode of production makes impossible the cognitive mapping that needs to be the point of departure for radical sexual politics. This is a way of knowing and a politics that does not rally around identities but rather inquires into their reasons for being. It is a way of knowing and a politics attuned to the historical links between culture and political economy precisely because social reality is shaped by their connection. And finally, this is a way of knowing and a politics that does not dismiss the human capacities for sensation and affect, but rather attends to their historical organization, and their commodification under capitalism especially, precisely because these human abilities are so integral to the process of transformative social change.

# QUEER VISIBILITY IN COMMODITY CULTURE

For a lesbian and gay political project that has had to combat the heteronormative tyranny of the empirical in order to claim a public existence at all, how visibility is conceptualized matters. Like “queer,” “visibility” is a struggle term in gay and lesbian circles now—for some simply a matter of display, for others the effect of discourses or of complex social conditions. In this chapter I will try to show that for those of us caught up in the circuits of late capitalist consumption, the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others.

This argument needs to be prefaced, however, with several acknowledgments and qualifications. First of all, the increasing cultural representation of homosexual concerns as well as the recent queering of sex-gender identities undoubtedly has had important positive effects. Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection; affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media, like the growing legitimation of lesbian and gay studies in the academy, can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation from the dominant culture. These changes in lesbian and gay visibility are in great measure the effect of the relentless organizing efforts of lesbians

and gay men. In the past decade alone groups like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, GLADD, and ACT-UP have fought ardently against the cultural abjection and civic eradication of homosexuals. Like other gay and lesbian academics now who are able to teach and write more safely about our history, I am deeply indebted to those who have risked their lives and careers on the front lines to make gay and lesbian studies a viable and legitimate intellectual concern. Without their efforts my work would not be possible.

But the new degree of homosexual visibility in the United States and the very existence of a queer counter-discourse also need to be considered critically in relation to capital's insidious and relentless expansion. Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but, as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line.<sup>1</sup> In her analysis of the commodification of lesbians, Danae Clark has observed that the intensified marketing of lesbian images is less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than of capitalism's appropriation of gay "styles" for mainstream audiences. Visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects (Clark 192). The increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences. This process is not limited to the spheres of knowledge promoted by popular culture and retail advertising but infiltrates the production of subjectivities in academic and activist work.

Although I have been using the words "queer" and "lesbian and gay" as if they were interchangeable, these are in fact contentious terms, signifying identity and political struggle from very different starting points. The now more traditional phrase "lesbian and gay" assumes a polarized division between hetero- and homosexuality and signals discrete and asymmetrically gendered identities. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the more fluid and ambiguous term "queer" has begun to displace "lesbian and gay" in several areas of urban industrialized culture—under the signature of "queer theory" in the realm of cultural studies, in avant-garde, gay and lesbian subcultures, and in new forms of radical sexual political activism. Lending a new elasticity to the category "lesbian and gay," queer embraces the proliferation of sexualities (bisexual, transvestite, pre- and post-op transsexual, to name a few) and the compounding of outcast positions along racial, ethnic, and class as well as sexual lines—none of which

is acknowledged by the neat binary division between hetero- and homosexual. In other words, “queer” not only troubles the gender asymmetry implied by the term “lesbian and gay,” but potentially includes “deviants” and “perverts” who may traverse or confuse hetero-homo divisions and exceed or complicate conventional delineations of sexual identity and normative practice. “Queer” often professes to define a critical standpoint that makes visible how heteronormative attempts to fix sexual identities tend to fail because they are overdetermined by other issues and conflicts—by race or national identity, for example. To the extent that queer tends to advance a subjectivity that is primarily sexual, it can threaten to erase the intersections of sexuality with class as well as the gender and racial histories that still situate queer men and women differently. In this respect queer is, as Judith Butler indicates, a “site of collective contestation” (1993, 228) that is only partially adequate to the collectivity it historically represents.

While I may string together the terms “lesbian and gay” and “queer,” then, this is not in order to conflate them but to indicate that both expressions are being used to name homosexual identities now, even if in contesting ways. To the extent that my analysis focuses primarily on “queer” issues, this is because they are shaping postmodern reconfigurations of gay and lesbian cultural study and politics. Even though many formulations of queer theory and identity are to my mind limited, it does not follow that the viability of “queer” as a sign of collective history and action is to be dismissed. Instead I would argue for a renarration of queer critique as inquiry into the systems of exploitation and regimes of state and cultural power through which sexualities are produced. I agree with Judith Butler that the two dimensions of queering—the historical inquiry into the formation of homosexualities it signifies and the deformative and misappropriative power the term enjoys—are both constitutive (1993, 229). But I would add that these dimensions of queer praxis need to be marshaled as forces for collective and transformative social intervention.

#### QUEER THEORY AND/AS POLITICS

“Queer” began to circulate in public and academic writings in the early nineties, the sign of an unsettling critical confrontation with heteronormativity, a distinctly postmodern rescripting of identity, politics, and cultural critique. Although queer academic theory and queer street politics have



their discrete features and histories, both have participated in the general transformation of identities occurring in Western democracies now as new conceptions of cultural representation are being tested against the political and economic arrangements of a “New World Order”—postcolonial, post-cold war, postindustrial. The emergence of queer counter-discourses has been enabled by postmodern reconfigurations of subjectivity as more flexible and ambivalent and by shifting political pressures within the gay community. Among them are the new forms of political alliance between gay men and lesbians yielded by activist responses to the spectacle and devastation of AIDS and to a lesser extent by challenges to gay politics from radical race movements in the seventies and eighties. In troubling the traditional gay vs. straight classification, “queer” draws upon postmodern critiques of identity as stable, coherent, and embodied. Queer knowledges upset traditional identity politics by foregrounding the ways contested issues of sexuality involve concerns that, as Michael Warner puts it, are not captured by the languages designed to name them (1993, xv). By targeting heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality, queer theory and activism also acknowledge that heterosexuality is an institution that organizes more than just the sexual: it is socially pervasive, underlying myriad taken-for-granted norms that shape what can be seen, said, and valued. Adopting the term that has been used to cast out and exclude sexual deviants is a gesture of rebellion against the pressure to be invisible or apologetically different. It is a rejection of the “proper” response to heteronormativity from a stance that purports to be both anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist. Like lesbian feminism and the gay liberation movement, the queer critique of heteronormativity is intensely and aggressively concerned with issues of visibility. Chants like “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used To It” and actions like Queers Bash Back, Queer Nights Out, Queer Kiss-Ins, and Mall Zaps, which ushered in the public reclaiming of queerness in the early nineties, were aimed at making visible those identities that the ubiquitous heteronormative culture would erase. Politically the aim of queer visibility actions is not to include queers in the cultural dominant but to continually pressure and disclose the heteronormative.

Although their often distinct institutional positions situate queer theorists and activists differently in relation to the bourgeois ruling bloc and the regimes of power-knowledge they help organize, ideologically these contrasts are less neat than is often acknowledged. Both queer activists and theorists employ some of the same counter-discourses to expand and

complicate the parameters of sexuality; both set out to challenge empiricist notions of identity as grounded in an embodied or empirical visibility; and both recast identity as a version of performance: as drag, masquerade, or signifying play. Across the promotion of more permeable and fluid identities in both queer theory and activism, however, visibility is still fetishized to the extent that it conceals the social relations new urban gay and queer identities depend on. The watchwords of queer praxis in both arenas are “make trouble and have fun” (Berube and Escoffier 15). But often trouble-making takes the form of a cultural politics that relies on concepts of the social, of resistance, and of pleasure that keep invisible the violent social relations new urban identities depend on.

In order to examine some of these concepts and their consequences, I want to look more closely at academic and activist knowledges, returning first to the work of Judith Butler in conjunction with two other academic theorists whose edited collections helped shape the new queer theory and whose scholarly reputations rest on their work on sexual identity: Diana Fuss and Teresa de Lauretis. All three articulate a version of cultural studies with loose affiliations to poststructuralism. All three offer critiques of heteronormativity that, to paraphrase Teresa de Lauretis, are interested in altering the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of what can be seen and known (1991b, 224). And all three are concerned to vary-ing degrees with the invisibility of lesbians in culture.

Butler’s book *Gender Trouble* (1990a) offers one of the most incisive and widely read critiques of heterosexuality. Against what she calls “the metaphysics of substance,” or empiricist and humanist conceptions of the subject, Butler launches a rearticulation of gender identity aimed at making visible the ways in which the fiction of a coherent person depends on a heterosexual matrix. How we see sex and gender is for Butler a function of discourses that set the limits to our ways of seeing. From Butler’s post-modern vantage point, the seeming internal coherence of the person is not natural but rather the consequence of certain regulatory practices that “govern culturally intelligible notions of identity” (1990a, 16–17). Identity, then, is not a matter of a person’s experience, self-expression, or visible features but of “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (1990a, 17). Intelligible genders are those that inaugurate and maintain “relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (1990, 17). In this sense gender intelligibility depends on certain presuppositions that the dominant knowledges safeguard or keep invisible. Chief among them is the heterosexual “matrix of intelligibility”

that produces “discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ where these are understood to be expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (1990a, 17). All sexual practices in which gender does not follow from sex and desire does not follow from either sex or gender thereby become either invisible or perverse (1990a, 17).

Despite the efforts to safeguard these presuppositions, the fiction of a coherent identity is inevitably vulnerable to exposure as a representation, and it is the deliberate enactment of this fiction as a fiction, and not some utopian sexuality outside or free from heterosexual constructs, that for Butler serves as the site of resistance to heterosexuality. She argues that if sex is released from its naturalized meanings it can make gender trouble—subverting and displacing reified notions of gender that support heterosexual power. This process can only occur *within* the terms set by the culture, however, through parodic repetitions like drag that expose the heterosexual matrix as a fabrication and sex as “a performatively enacted signification” (1990a, 33). Drag for Butler is not merely a matter of clothing or cross-dressing. It is a discursive practice that discloses the fabrication of identity through parodic repetitions of the heterosexual gender system. As parody, drag belies the myth of a stable self preexisting cultural codes or signifying systems. Against the dominant reading of drag as a failed imitation of the “real thing,” Butler presents it as a subversive act. By turning a supposed “bad copy” of heterosexuality (butch and femme, for example) against a way of thinking that posits heterosexuality as the “real thing,” drag exposes this pseudo-original as itself a “copy” or representation. It follows for Butler that any identity is inevitably drag, an unstable, fabricated performative practice or set of practices that plays up the indeterminacy of identity and for this reason can be seized upon for political resistance.<sup>2</sup>

According to Butler, then, visibility is not a matter of detecting or displaying empirical bodies but of knowledges—discourses, significations, modes of intelligibility—by which identity is constituted. In this sense her work is a postmodern critique of identity, identity politics, and positivist notions of the visible. Her analysis of sexuality and gender undoubtedly has a strong social dimension: she speaks to and out of feminism and understands the processes that construct sexuality and gender as political. For Butler, heterosexuality is a regime of power and discipline that affects people’s lives. But her reconceptualization of the experiential and embodied self as only a *discursive* construct is a strategy that safeguards some presuppositions of its own.

As I discussed in chapter 2, one of them is her assumption that the social is equivalent to the cultural. Throughout her work, Butler's approach to the problem of identity begins with the premise that identity is only a matter of representation, of the discourses by which subjects come to be established. This notion of the discursively constructed subject is heavily indebted to Foucault, and, as I explained in the previous chapter, it is his problematic concept of materialism and of discursive practices that troubles Butler's analysis as well.<sup>3</sup> Given Butler's reduction of the social to discourses, it is not surprising that she understands history in very local, limited terms, a feature of her work that is in keeping with its poststructuralist roots. For example, at one point she admits that gender parody in itself is not subversive, but rather that its meaning depends on "a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered" (1990a, 139). She quickly passes over the problem of historical "context" (it appears in one of her frequent series of rhetorical questions). But it is, I think, a crucial issue for queer politics now. What does it mean to say that what can be seen as parodic and what gender parody makes visible depend on a context in which subversive confusions can be fostered? What exactly is meant by "context" here?

As Butler uses it, context would seem to be a crucial feature of the meaning-making process: its contingent foundation serves as a backdrop of sorts linking one discursive practice—drag, for example—to others; through these links, presumably, meaning is produced. But considering historical context is quite different from historicizing. Historicizing does not establish connections only in this local scene of reception—between one discursive practice and another—nor does it leave unaddressed the relationship between the discursive and the nondiscursive. As a mode of reading, historicizing takes place at several levels of analysis—connecting particular conjunctural arrangements in a social formation to more far-reaching ones. To historicize the meaning of drag among the urban middle class in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century would be to link it as a discursive practice to the social relations that make it possible and in so doing situate practices specific to a particular social formation in the United States within the larger frame of late capitalism's geopolitics and multinational economy. Because Butler's concept of social life favors an exclusive emphasis on the specific and the local (à la Foucault), she confines history to a very limited frame whose unspoken "context" has a very specific address: the new bourgeois professional class.

This historical address is most evident in her earlier conceptions of drag as subversive political practice. For Butler, drag challenges the notion

of identity implicit in “coming out,” the act of making visible one’s homosexuality. In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” she argues that coming out is a process one can never completely achieve. No homosexual is ever entirely “out” because identity, always undermined by the disruptive operations of the unconscious and of signification, can never be fully disclosed. This means that any avowal of the “fact” of one’s homosexual (or heterosexual) identity is itself a fiction. Performative activities like drag play up the precarious fabrication of a coherent and internal sexual identity by putting on display the made-up (in)congruity of sex, gender, and desire. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” she acknowledges these social limitations on signification—“one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable”—where performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments (279). But here as elsewhere the critical force of Butler’s commentary denaturalizes reified versions of sexuality but does not consider why they are historically secured as they are. Even though she concedes that the subversiveness of gender parody depends on the historical context in which it is received, most of her earlier analysis assumes that *anyone* might participate in exposing the fiction of sexual identity.

But of course they cannot. One reason is that, unfortunately, societies are still organized so that meaning is taken to be anchored in referents or signifieds; “lesbian” and “gay” are often read as referring to authentic identities, either benign or malevolent perversions of a naturalized norm. To date, the indeterminate meanings Butler assigns these words are not shared by all. Gay-bashings, at times with murderous outcomes, indicate that the insistence of the signified in the symbolic order continues to organize social life, as does the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. And in both cases the disclosure of the identity “homosexual” has definite consequences for people’s lives. A book like Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* or a film like Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, both of which document the ways “gender parody” often blurs into “passing,” each demonstrates the powerful hold on lesbian and gay imaginations of the notion that sex should align with gender. For many lesbians and gays who have not had the social resources or mobility to insulate themselves from heteronormativity’s insistence that sex equals gender, drag has been not so much playful subversion as a painful yearning for authenticity, occasionally with brutally violent results.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler addresses some of the ways Livingston’s documentary of the Harlem balls in *Paris Is Burning* tests her own earlier

arguments on performative subversion and the contextual boundaries of drag. As she reads their representation in *Paris Is Burning*, drag balls are highly qualified social practices that can both denaturalize and reidealize gender norms. But the murder of Venus Xtravaganza by one of her clients (for whom the discovery that Venus had male genitals is perhaps not at all a playful subversion of gender identity) dramatizes the limits of gender parody. In other words, as she puts it, “there is passing and then there is passing” (1993, 130). Unlike Willie Ninja, who “makes it” as a gay man into the mainstream of celebrity glamour, Venus is ultimately treated the way most poor women of color are treated in the United States. Butler’s reading of the film acknowledges the insistence of the signified in the symbolic order—Venus dies, she tells us, because the possibilities for resignifying sex and race, which the drag balls represent, are eradicated by the symbolic. Her death “testifies to a tragic misreading of the social map of power” (1993, 131) and suggests that the resignification of the symbolic order along with the phantasmic idealizations that drag enacts do have their limits, and these limits have their consequences.

There are moments in this essay when Butler hints that the social map of power, while discursive, also includes more than the symbolic order—for example, when she refers to the situation of the numbers of poor black women that the balls’ idealizations deny, or when she indicates that the balls’ phantasmic excess constitutes the site of women “not only as marketable goods within an erotic economy of exchange, but as goods which, as it were, are also privileged consumers with access to wealth and social privilege and protection” (1993, 132). But for the most part, here too the materiality of social life is ultimately and insistently confined to the ideological. While she makes use of concepts like “ideology” and “hegemony” to conceptually relate discourse, subjectivity, and power, the systemic connections among ideology, state, and labor in the historical materialist theories of Althusser and Gramsci she alludes to are dropped out. The result is that important links among social contradictions that materially affect people’s lives—uneven and complex though they may be—remain unexplained. I am thinking here especially of connections between the continual effort (and failure) of the heterosexual imaginary to police identities and the racialized gendered division of labor Butler refers to earlier.

To sum up, my reading of Butler’s work suggests several points about gender and sexuality that are politically important to queer theory and politics. First of all, if we acknowledge that the coherent sex-gender identities heterosexuality secures are fabrications always in need of repair,

their fragility need not be seen as the property of some restlessness in language itself but rather as the effect of social struggle. Second, the meanings that are taken to be “real” are so because they help secure a certain social order, an order that is naturalized as the way things are or should be and that “illegitimate” meanings to some degree threaten. Because it is the social order—the division of labor, distribution of wealth, resources, and power—that is at stake in the struggle over meanings, a politics that contests the prevailing constructions of sexual identity and that aims to disrupt the regimes they support will need to address more than discourse. Third, the naturalized version of sexual identity that currently dominates in the United States and the oppositional versions that contest it are conditioned by more than just their local contexts of reception. Any specific situation is made possible and is affected by social relations that exceed it. Historicizing is a way of reading that connects the local “context” with these other social relations. A social practice like drag might be historicized in terms of the conjunctural situation—whether you are looking at what drag means when walking a ball in Harlem or turning a trick in the Village, performing in a Hasty Pudding revue at Harvard or hoping to pass in Pocatello; in terms of its place in the social formation—whether this local scene occurs in an urban or rural area, in the United States, Germany, Nicaragua, or India, at the turn of the twentieth or of the twenty-first century; and in terms of the global relations that this situation is tied to—how even the option of drag as a flexible sexual identity depends on the availability not only of certain discourses of sexuality, aesthetics, style, and glamour but also of a global circuit of commodity production, exchange, and consumption specific to industrialized economies. Recognizing that signs are sites of social struggle, then, ultimately leads us to inquire into the social conditions that enable and perhaps even foster the slipping and sliding of signification. Is the subversiveness of a self-consciously performative identity like drag at risk if we inquire into certain of the other social relations—the relations of labor, for instance—that help enable it? What is the consequence of a theory that forecloses this kind of question?

As I have suggested, one consequence is the risk of promoting an updated, postmodern, reinscription of the bourgeois subject’s fetishized identity. Alienation of any aspect of human life from the network of social relations that make it possible constitutes the very basis of fetishization. By limiting her conception of the social to the discursive, Butler unhinges identity from the other material relations that shape it. Her performative identity recasts bourgeois humanist individuality as a more fluid and indeterminate

series of subversive bodily acts, but this postmodern subject is severed from the collective historical processes and struggles through which identities are produced and circulate. Moreover, in confining her analysis of the inflection of sexuality by racial, national, or class difference to specific historical contexts, Butler forecloses the possibility of marshaling collectivities for social transformation across differences in historical positioning.

This postmodern fetishizing of sexual identity also characterizes two essays by Diana Fuss and Teresa de Lauretis that treat visibility and sexual identity. While their intellectual projects are distinct and differently nuanced, they share an ideological affiliation in that the subjects their work constructs are in many ways much the same. Unlike Butler, both Fuss and de Lauretis reference commodity culture in the cultural forms their essays target—advertising and film—and, significantly, de Lauretis occasionally explicitly mentions the commodity. For some readers Fuss's emphatic psychoanalytic approach here and de Lauretis's more insistently political feminist analysis in this essay might seem to distinguish their theoretical frameworks both from Butler's and from one another's. But it is precisely these differences that I want to question.

In "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look" Diana Fuss is concerned with relations of looking that structure fashion photography, in particular the tension between the ideological project to invite viewers to identify with properly heterosexual positions and the surface structure of the fashion photo that presents eroticized images of the female body for consumption by a female audience (713). Her essay sets out to decode this tension, which Fuss formulates in terms of the "restless operations of identification" (716). Drawing primarily on psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity (Freud, Lacan, Kristeva), Fuss explains this restlessness of identity as an effect of the subject's entry into the symbolic and its subjugation to the law of the father, a law that mitigates against return to an always irretrievable presymbolic unity. Fuss argues that by persistently representing the female body "in pieces" (showing only a woman's legs, hands, arms, face, etc.), fashion photography reminds the woman spectator of her fetishization. But unlike Marx, who takes fetishization to be the concealment of a positive network of social relations, Fuss understands fetishization as Freud does, that is, as a lack (castration). For Freud, fetishization is the effect of a failed resolution to the oedipal romance whereby the child disavows his knowledge that the mother does not have a penis by substituting other body parts (a leg, a hand, a foot) for it. Through their fixation on women's body parts, Fuss argues, fashion photos dramatize the role woman plays in the



disavowal of the mother's castration, at the same time the fragmented body serves as substitute for the missing maternal phallus (720). Fashion fetishism is in this sense an effort to compensate for the "divisions and separations upon which subjectivity is based" (721). At the same time, it points to some of the mechanisms of primary identification, in particular the "fundamental female homosexuality in the daughter's preoedipal identification with the mother" (721). The fascination of fashion photography with repeated close-ups of a woman's face, Fuss argues, entails the ambivalent disavowal—denial and recognition—of the source of pain and pleasure invoked by the potential restitution of this lost object for an always imperfectly oedipalized woman.

The Freudian concept of the fetish Fuss appropriates might be read as itself a symptom of capitalism's fetishizing of social relations in that it condenses into the nuclear family circle and onto a psychically charged object—the phallus—the more extensive network of historical and social relations the bourgeois family and the father's position within it entail.<sup>4</sup> Fuss fetishizes identity in the sense that she imagines it only in terms of atomized parts of social life—a class-specific formation of the family and the processes of signification in the sphere of cultural representation. Her concepts of vision and the look participate in this economy of fetishization in that visibility is divorced from the *social* relations that make it possible and understood to be only a matter of *cultural* construction: "If subjects look differently," she asserts, "it is only the enculturating mechanisms of the look that instantiate and regulate these differences in the first place" (736–37).

Like Butler's theory, her analysis is not aimed at claiming lesbian or gay identity as a resistant state of being in its own right, but instead sets out to queer-y the dominant sexual symbolic order by exposing the ways it is continually disrupted by the homospectatorial gaze. Heterosexuality is not an original or pure identity; its coherence is only secured by at once calling attention to and disavowing its "abject, interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality" (732). For her, too, identity is postmodern in its incoherence and social in its constructedness, but because it is consistently framed in terms of the individual psyche and its history, the subject for Fuss is ultimately an updated version of the bourgeois individual. This individual, moreover, constitutes the historical frame for the images of fashion photography that "tell us as much about the subject's current history as they do about her already shadowy prehistory, perhaps even more" (734). The "perhaps even more" is significant here because it is this individualized "prehistory," a story of lost origins and mother-daughter bonds, that Fuss

emphasizes. Indeed, it constitutes the basis for the homospectatorial look. Although she insists that the lesbian looks coded by fashion photography “radically de-essentialize conventional notions of identity” (736), contradictorily, an essentially gendered and embodied spectatorial encounter between infant and mother anchors the “history” that constitutes the fashion text’s foundational reference point. If history is localized in Judith Butler’s queer theory, then, it is even more narrowly circumscribed in Fuss’s reading of fashion ads, where it is reduced to an individual’s presocial relationship to the mythic mother’s face (722).

Locating the basis for identity in a space-time outside history—in memories of an archaic union between mother and child—has the effect of masquerading bourgeois individualism’s universal subject—with all of the political baggage it carries—in postmodern drag. Like Butler, Fuss admits history makes a difference to meaning: “[M]ore work needs to be done on how spectators from different gendered, racial, ethnic, economic, national and historical backgrounds might appropriate or resist these images” (736). But the recognition of sexuality’s differential historical context so late in her essay echoes the familiar liberal gesture. Premised on a notion of history as “background,” this assertion thematizes difference by encapsulating the subject in individualized cultural slots, while the social struggles over difference that foment the “restless operations of identity” remain safely out of view.

Teresa de Lauretis’s essay “Film and the Visible,” originally presented at the conference “How Do I Look: Queer Film and Video” (1991), shares many of the features of Butler’s and Fuss’s analyses.<sup>5</sup> While she too draws upon psychoanalysis as well as a loosely Foucauldian analytic, her work is, I think, generally taken to be more “social” in its approach, and she will at times situate it as such against a more textual analysis. Her purported objective in this essay is indeed “not to do a textual analysis” but to “put into discourse” the terms of an autonomous form of lesbian sexuality and desire in relation to film (1991a, 224). While there are films about lesbians that may offer positive images, she argues, they do not necessarily produce new ways of seeing or new inscriptions of the lesbian subject (1991a, 224). De Lauretis presents Sheila McLaughlin’s *She Must Be Seeing Things* as an exemplary alternative because it offers spectators a new position for looking—the place of a woman who desires another woman. While the effort to articulate the dynamics of a specifically lesbian sexuality links de Lauretis’s work with Diana Fuss’s essay, unlike Fuss, she renounces formulations of lesbian sexuality founded in the mother-child dyad. At the same

time, for de Lauretis lesbian sexuality is neither contingent with heterosexual female sexuality nor independent of the oedipal fantasy structure. However, the presuppositions on which these two assertions rest belie her anti-textualist stance and link her “new subjectivity” with other fetishized queer identities in the poststructuralist strand of cultural studies.

De Lauretis reads McLaughlin’s film as a tale of two women who are lovers and image makers. One (Jo) literally makes movies, and the other (Agatha) does so more figuratively in the fantasies she fabricates about her lover. The film demonstrates the ways a pervasive heterosexuality structures the relations of looking for both women; at the same time, the two women’s butch-femme role playing flaunts its (in)congruence with heterosexual positions by marking these roles *as* performances. De Lauretis contends that this role playing is always at one remove from the heterosexual paradigm, and it is the space of this “remove” that constitutes for her the “excess” of the lesbian subject position. As in Butler’s similar argument about performative identities, however, lesbian excess is fundamentally and exclusively a matter of cultural representation. This partial frame of reference for the social is compounded by de Lauretis’s reading of Jo’s film-within-the-film as a lesbian revision of the psychoanalytic oedipal drama. Although she reads the interpolated film as a skewed rewriting of the primal scene from the perspective of a woman desiring another woman, de Lauretis’s endorsement of this origin story has the effect of equating generic lesbian identity with a very specific bourgeois construction, founded in highly individualized notions of fantasy, eroticism, scopophilia, and romance.

That the narrow limits of her conception of the subject are ultimately the effect of the historical position from which she is reading comes clear in the audience discussion of her essay included in this collection. The first question from the audience addresses a gap in de Lauretis’s text—one might even call it an “excess”—that is, her erasure of the film’s treatment of racial difference. Her response to this question reveals the fascination with form that underlies de Lauretis’s way of reading. Although she may seem more “social” in her orientation, like Fuss and Butler she too fetishizes meaning by cutting it off from the social and historical forces that make texts intelligible. In defense of her omission of any discussion of race, de Lauretis argues that she has “concluded that the film *intentionally focuses on other aspects of their relationship*” [emphasis added] (1991a, 268). Despite her initial disclaimers to the contrary, meaning for de Lauretis here seems to be firmly rooted in the text. Indeed, throughout the essay

she defines the “new position of seeing” McLaughlin’s film offers the viewer by reference to the various textual devices that comprise it—the film’s reframing of the oedipal scenario, its structuring of the spectator’s look, its title, and its campy use of masquerade, cross-dressing, and Hollywood spectacle. The audience’s insistent return to the problem of racial difference can be read as resistance both to this formalist approach to visibility and to the generic lesbian subject it offers.

While de Lauretis insists that race “is not represented as an issue in this film” (1991a, 268), clearly for her audience this is not the case. Their questions suggest the need for another way of understanding meaning, not as textual but as historical—the effect of the ways of knowing that spectators/readers bring to a text, ways of making sense that are enabled and conditioned by their different social positions. For some viewers this film may not deal with Freud or Oedipus, show Agatha sharing a common fantasy with Jo, or any number of the things de Lauretis sees in it, but it may deal with a Latina who is also a lesbian and a lawyer in love with a white woman. The “visibility” of these issues is not a matter of what is empirically “there” or of what the film intends, but of the frames of knowing that make certain meanings “seeable.” From this vantage point, a text’s very limited “dealing” or “not dealing” with a particular social category can be used to make available another possible telling of its tale, one that might begin to inquire into the historical limits of any particular construction of social reality.<sup>6</sup> At the very least the problem of Agatha as a Brazilian Latina pressures de Lauretis’s closing assertion that *She Must Be Seeing Things* “locates itself historically and politically in the North American lesbian community” (1991a, 263).

In another essay, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,”<sup>7</sup> de Lauretis acknowledges that lesbian identity is affected by the operation of “interlocking systems of gender, sexual, racial, class and other, more local categories of social stratification” (1993, 148). However, the conception of the social hinted at here and the notion of community it entails are somewhat different from those offered above. For in this essay de Lauretis uses Audre Lorde’s image of the “house of difference” (“[O]ur place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference”) to define a social life that is not pluralistic and a community that is not confined to North America, but (in de Lauretis’s words) “at once global and local—global in its inclusive and macro-political strategies, and local in its specific, micro-political practices” (1993, 148). If taken seriously, the social and historical frame de Lauretis alludes to briefly here

would radically recast the fetishized conception of identity that leads her to suggest that in order to address the issue of race we would need to “see a film made by or about lesbians of color” (1993, 269). But even in her allusion to a more systemic mode of reading, the connection between sexuality and divisions of labor remains entirely invisible, an excess whose traces are hinted only in passing references to the commodity. What would it mean to understand the formation of queer identities in a social logic that did not suppress this other story?

Two of de Lauretis’s brief remarks on commodification provide glimpses of this unexplored way of seeing. One of them appears in a fleeting comment on Jill Dolan’s contention that “desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity, but can be exchanged, with a much different meaning, between women,” an assertion de Lauretis reads as either “the ultimate camp representation” or “rather disturbing. For unfortunately — or fortunately as the case may be — commodity exchange does have the same meaning between women as between men by definition — that is by Marx’s definition of the structure of capital” (1993, 152). The other appears in her argument that the critique of heterosexuality in films like *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *The Color Purple* is “suppressed and rendered invisible by the film’s compliance with the apparatus of commercial cinema and its institutional drive to, precisely, commodity exchange” (1993, 153). Both of these remarks suggest an order of (in)visibility that queer theory’s critique of heterosexuality does not explore. What is the connection between the ways commodity exchange renders certain social relations (in)visible and the ways of looking that structure heteronormativity or even queer theory? Do fetishized versions of identity in queer theory comply with the institutional drive to commodity exchange in the academy?

#### QUEER NATIONALISM: THE AVANT-GARDE GOES SHOPPING

If academic queer theory for the most part ignores the relationship between sexuality and commodification, it may seem that groups like Queer Nation did not. Founded in New York City in 1990 by a small group of activists frustrated by ACT-UP’s exclusive focus on AIDS, Queer Nation grew into a loosely organized collection of local chapters stretching from coast to coast.<sup>8</sup> The list of affinity groups that comprised Queer Nation is too long and too variable to list here; included among them were the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP), Queers Undertaking Ex-

quisite and Symbolic Transformation (QUEST), and United Colors, which focused on the experiences of queers of color.<sup>9</sup> Queer Nation was less committed to ACT-UP's strategies of direct action through civil disobedience than to creating awareness and increasing queer visibility. Often representing their tactics as explicitly postmodern, Queer Nation shared many of the presuppositions of queer theory: deconstructing the homo-hetero binary in favor of a more indeterminate sexual identity; targeting a pervasive heteronormativity by miming it with a campy inflection; employing a performative politics that associated identity less with interiority than with the public spectacle of consumer culture.

The signifier "nation" signaled a commitment to disrupting the often invisible links between nationhood and public sexual discourse as well as transforming the public spaces in which a (hetero)sexualized national imaginary is constructed in people's everyday lives — in shopping malls, bars, advertising, and the media. In seizing the public space as a "zone of political pedagogy," Queer Nation, like ACT-UP, advanced some useful ways of thinking about pedagogy as a public political practice.<sup>10</sup> My concern here, however, is with how their anti-assimilationist politics understood and made use of the commodity as part of a campaign for gay visibility.

For Queer Nation, visibility was a crucial element in guaranteeing gays a safe public existence. To this end they reterritorialized various public spaces through an assortment of strategies like policing neighborhoods by Pink Panthers dressed in "Bash Back" T-shirts or Queer Nights Out and Kiss-Ins where groups of gay couples invaded straight bars or other public spaces and scandalously made out (Berlant and Freeman 160–63). In its most "postmodern moments," Queer Nation used the hyperspaces of commodity consumption as sites for political intervention. Queer Nation is not interested in marketing positive images of gays and lesbians so much as inhabiting and subverting consumer pleasure in commodities in order to "reveal to the consumer desires he/she didn't know he/she had" (Berlant and Freeman 164). Tactics like producing "Queer Bart Simpson" T-shirts and rewriting the trademarks of corporations that appropriate gay street styles (changing the "p" in Gap ads to "y") were meant to demonstrate "that the commodity is a central means by which individuals tap into the collective experience of public desire" and to disrupt the heterosexual presupposition on which that desire rests (Berlant and Freeman 164). To this end, the Queer Shopping Network of New York and the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program of San Francisco (SHOP) stage mall visibility actions. By parading into suburban shopping spaces dressed in full gay

regalia, holding hands, and handing out flyers, they inserted gay spectacle into the centers of straight consumption. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman argue that the queer mall spectacle addresses “the consumer’s own ‘perverse’ desire to experience a different body and offers *itself* as the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale at the mall” (164).

If in postmodern consumer culture the commodity is a central means by which desire is organized, how are Queer Nation’s visibility actions disrupting this process? I want to suggest that while Queer Nation’s tactics attend to the commodity, the framework in which the commodity is understood is similar to the informing framework of much queer theory. It is, in short, a cultural one in which the commodity is reduced to an ideological icon. Like queer theory, Queer Nation tended to focus so exclusively on the construction of meanings, on forging an oppositional practice that “disrupts the *semiotic* boundaries between gay and straight” (Berlant and Freeman 168 [emphasis added]), that social change is reduced to the arena of cultural representation. Condensed into a cultural signifier, the commodity remains securely fetishized. Infusing consumer space with a gay sensibility may queer-y commodities, but “making queer good by making goods queer” (Berlant and Freeman 168) is hardly anti-assimilationist politics! If the aim of mall visibility actions was to make the pleasures of consumption available to gays too, and to commodify queer identity as “the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale at the mall,” then inclusion seems to be precisely the point. Disclosing the invisible heterosexual meanings invested in commodities, I am suggesting, is a very limited strategy of resistance, one that ultimately nourishes the commodity’s gravitation toward the new, the exotic, the spectacular.

As in queer theory, many of the activities of Queer Nation took visibility at face value and in so doing short-circuited the historicity of visibility concealed in the logic of the commodity. In *Capital* Marx demonstrates that this sort of “oversight” is very much a part of the commodity’s secret and its magic: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163). Marx’s analysis of the commodity explains this “first sight” as a fiction, not in the sense that it is false or merely a copy of a copy but in the sense that it confuses the seeable with the visible. The visible for Marx is not an empirical but a historical effect. Indeed, it might be said that much of Marx’s critique of the commodity redefines the nature of vision by establishing the connection between visibility and history.<sup>11</sup> In *Capital* Marx demonstrates

that the value of a commodity is material, not in the sense of its being made of physical matter but in the sense that it is socially produced through human labor and the extraction of surplus value. Although the value of commodities is materially embodied in them, it is not visible in the objects themselves as a physical property. The illusion that value resides in objects rather than in the social relations between individuals and objects Marx calls commodity fetishism. When the commodity is fetishized, the labor that has gone into its production is rendered invisible. Commodity fetishism entails the misrecognition of the structural effects of certain social relations as an immediate property of one of an object, as if this property belonged to it outside of its social history. This fetishizing is enhanced and encouraged under late capitalism when the spheres of commodity production and consumption and the social relations they encompass are so often widely separated.

Certainly Marx was not theorizing commodity fetishism from the vantage point of late capitalism's flexible production and burgeoning information technologies and their effects on identities and cultures. Nonetheless, because his reading of the commodity invites us to begin by seeing consciousness, state, and political economy as interlinked historical and material forces by which social life is made and remade, it is a more politically useful critical framework for understanding and combating the commodification of identities than a political economy of the sign. When the commodity is dealt with merely as a matter of signification, meaning, or identities, only one of the elements of its production—the process of image-making it relies on—is made visible. The exploitation of human labor on which the commodity's appearance as an object depends remains out of sight. Changing the Bart Simpson logo on a T-shirt to "Queer Bart" may disrupt normative conceptions of sexuality that infuse the circulation of commodities in consumer culture, but it offers a very limited view of the social relations commodities rely on, and to this extent it reinforces their fetishization.

#### QUEER-Y-ING THE AVANT-GARDE

Some of the problems in queer theory and politics I address above are reminiscent of the contradictions that have punctuated the history of the avant-garde in the West over the past hundred years. It is a history worth examining because the modes of reading in culture study and queer intellectual activity are now in the process of repeating it. The genealogy of the



concept of the avant-garde in radical political thought dates from the 1790s, when it signaled the progressive romantic notion of art as an instrument for social revolution (Calinescue). Early-twentieth-century avant-garde movements, provoked by the enormous social upheavals of the First World War and the 1917 Revolution, promoted a critical rejection of bourgeois culture. Like the aesthetes at the turn of the twentieth century, the avant-garde reacted to the increasing fragmentation of social life in industrialized society. But while aestheticism responded to the commercialization of art and its separation from life by substituting reflexive exploration of its own processes of creation for social relevance, the avant-garde attempted to reintegrate art into meaningful human activity by leading it back to social praxis (Burger). As Raymond Williams has pointed out, there were innumerable variations on avant-garde complaints against the bourgeoisie—often articulating quite antithetical political positions—depending on the social and political structures of the countries in which these movements were active (54). Despite these variations, like queer theory and activism, avant-garde movements—among them Dada, Surrealism, Italian Futurism, the German Bauhaus, and Russian Constructionism—attacked the philosophical and political assumptions presupposed in the reigning bourgeois realist conceptions of representation and visibility. Like Queer Nation, Dada was a broad and disparate movement, crossing national boundaries as well as the ideological divisions between art, politics, and daily life. It too found expression in a variety of media: poetry, performance, painting, the cinema, and montage. Attacking the cultural, political, and moral values on which the dominant social order relied, it set out to “shock the bourgeoisie” (Plant 40–41). The Surrealists, many of whom had participated in the Dadaist movement in France, rejected Dada’s shock tactics and its purely negative approach and aimed instead to try to make use of Freud’s theory of the unconscious in order to unleash the pleasures trapped in experience and unfulfilled by a social system dependent on rationality and the accumulation of capital (Plant 49). Convinced that the union of art and life, of the individual and the world, was “possible only with the end of capitalism and the dawn of a new ludic age,” nonetheless, like other avant-garde movements, they pursued their experiments mainly in the cultural domain (Plant 52).

The Situationist International movement that surfaced in France in the late fifties and lasted through 1972 is an interesting example of a political project that attempted to reclaim the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde and supersede the limitations of its cultural politics. The Situationists

acknowledged the historical importance of their avant-garde antecedents' efforts as an effective means of struggle against the bourgeoisie, but were also critical of their failure to develop that spirit of revolt into a coherent critique. Consequently, they set out to transcend the distinction between revolutionary politics and cultural criticism once and for all, and in some respects went further than their predecessors in doing so (Plant 55–56).<sup>12</sup> Several of their strategies for disrupting the spectacular organization of everyday life in commodity culture share much in common with those of queer activism.

The tactic of *detournement*, for instance, is one — that is, the rearrangement of a preexisting text like an advertisement to form a new and critical ensemble. The SI's critique of consumer society, political agitation in commodity culture, and efforts to form an international collective had both a revolutionary and a more playful, aesthetic dimension. Sorting out the contradictions in their vision and accounting for the failures in their attempt to revamp the avant-garde might be a useful project for queer intellectuals to pursue and learn from.

Historically, the dissolution of the more revolutionary aspirations and activities of the early avant-garde movements cannot be separated from political forces like Stalinism and Nazism that were responsible for the suppression of their potential oppositional force by the mid-twentieth century. But their critical edge was also blunted by their own participation in the increasing commodification of social life by retreating to cultural experimentation as their principal political forum. That the term "avant-garde" now connotes primarily, even exclusively, artistic innovation is in this regard symptomatic. Seen from this vantage point, the distinction between the direction the avant-garde finally pursued and aestheticism seems less dramatic — as does the distinction in contemporary theory between poststructuralism's fixation on representation and more recent formulations of social postmodernism. Many of the aesthetic features of the avant-garde reverberate in this more worldly "social postmodernism": a tendency toward formalist modes of reading, a focus on performance and aesthetic experimentation, an idealist retreat to mythic/psychic spirituality, and the disparity between a professed agenda for broad social change and a practice focused exclusively on cultural politics. One way to begin to understand this gravitation toward cultural politics in the history of the avant-garde is to consider it in relation to the more general aestheticization of everyday life in consumer capitalism.

At the same time that oppositional intellectuals struggle against the separation of art from daily life, capitalism's need for expanding markets

has in its own way promoted the integration of art and life—but in accordance with the requirements of commodity exchange. The aestheticization of daily life is one consequence of this process. By “the aestheticization of daily life” I mean the intensified integration of cultural and commodity production under late capitalism by way of the rapid flow of images and signs that saturate myriad everyday activities, continuously working and reworking desires by inviting them to take the forms dictated by the commodity market. Advertising epitomizes this process and is its primary promoter. Along with computer technology, advertising permeates the fabric of daily life with an infinity of visual spectacles, codes, signs, and information bits. In so doing it has helped erase the boundary between the real and the image, an insertion of artifice into the heart of reality that Baudrillard has coined “simulation.”

One effect of the aestheticization of daily life in industrial capitalism is that the social relations cultural production depends on are even further mystified. The aestheticization of everyday life encourages the pursuit of new tastes and sensations as pleasures in themselves while concealing or backgrounding the labor that has gone into making them possible. In keeping with the aesthetic emphasis on cultural forms, “style” becomes an increasingly crucial marker of social value and identity. While the term has a more restricted sociological meaning in reference to specific status groups, “lifestyle” as a way of making sense of social relations crystallized in the 1980s in the United States as new forms of middle-class professionalism became the focal point for heightened involvement in consumption and the promotion of cosmopolitanism (Clarke 67–68). The concept of identity as “lifestyle” serves to manipulate a system of equivalences that structures the connection between the economic functions of the new middle class and their cultural formation (Clarke 68).<sup>13</sup> The economic remaking of the middle class depends on the rising significance of the sphere of circulation and consumption and the invisible though persistent extraction of surplus value through exploited human labor. Although their cultural formation is increasingly flexible, “middle-class identities” continue to be organized by gender and racial hierarchies as well as by a residual individualism. “Lifestyle” obscures these social hierarchies by promoting not only individuality and self-expression but also a more porous conception of the self as a “fashioned” identity. Advertising, especially, champions a highly coded self-consciousness of the stylized construction of almost every aspect of one’s everyday life: one’s body, clothes, speech, leisure activities, eating, drinking, and sexual preferences. All are regarded as indicators of

individuality and style, and all can be acquired with a few purchases (Featherstone 83; Goldman). Reconfiguring identities in terms of “lifestyles” serves in some ways, then, as a linchpin between the coherent individual and a more porous postmodern one. “Lifestyle” consumer culture promotes a way of thinking about identity as malleable because it is open to more and more consumer choices rather than shaped by moral codes or rules. In this way “lifestyle” identities can seem to endorse the breakup of old hierarchies in favor of the rights of individuals to enjoy new pleasures without moral censure. While the coherent individual has not been displaced, increasingly new urban lifestyles promise a decentering of identity by way of consumer practices which announce that styles of life that can be purchased in clothes, leisure activities, household items, and bodily dispositions all dissolve fixed status groups. Concern with the stylization of life suggests that practices of consumption are not merely a matter of economic exchange but also affect the formation of sensibilities and tastes that in turn support more flexible subjectivities. At the same time, the capacity for hyperconsumption promoted by appeals to lifestyle, as well as the constituent features of various “lifestyles,” is class specific. For example, in the 1980s in the United States the class-boundedness of stylization became evident in the polarization of the mass market into “upscale” and “downscale,” as middle-class consumers scrambled to shore up symbolic capital through stylized marks of distinction: shopping at Bloomingdale’s or Neiman Marcus as opposed to Kmart; buying imported or chic brand-name foods (Becks or Corona rather than Miller or Budweiser) or appliances (Kitchen Aid or Braun vs. Sears Kenmore) (Ehrenreich 1989, 228).

Aestheticization in consumer culture is supported by philosophies of the subject in postmodern theory that for all of their “social” dimensions nonetheless pose art—not social change—as the goal of a new ethics. In one of his last interviews, for instance, Michel Foucault protests,

But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an object, but not our life? . . . From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. (“Ethics” 236–37)

The aestheticized technology of the self here, and in Foucault’s later writings generally, is taken straight from Nietzsche’s exhortation to “give style to one’s character—a great and rare art!” (290).<sup>14</sup> Queer theory and activism’s conception of identities as performative significations anchored in

individual psychic histories is not very far from this notion of identity as self-fashioning. For here, too, visibility is theatrical, a spectacle that shows up the always precarious stylization of identity. Foucault's equation of lamp, house, and life as "created" objects elides the different social relations that go into their making by securing them in individual creation. But the answer to why everyone's life couldn't become a work of art could take us somewhere else, to another story, one that makes visible the contradictory social relations the aestheticization of social life conceals. For even as the regime of simulation invites us to conflate style and life, some people's lives are not very artful or stylish, circumscribed as they are by limited access to social resources. How might the woman earning \$50 a week for 60 hours of work operating a sewing machine in a sweatshop in the South Bronx and the exhausted migrant worker in the San Joaquin Valley harvesting tomatoes for 12 hours a day at \$2 an hour make their lives an art? How artful was the life of Venus Xtravaganza, forced to support herself as a sex worker until she was murdered? Unless "art" is so re-understood as to be disconnected from individual creation or choice and linked to a strategy for changing the conditions that allow so many to suffer an exploited existence, making one's life an art is an intelligible possibility only for a leisured class and their yuppie allies. When queer theory reconfigures gender identity as a "style of the flesh" (1990, 139), to use Judith Butler's phrasing, or as "the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale in the mall" (Berlant and Freeman 167), it is taking part in the postmodern aestheticization of daily life.

#### IN THE LIFE(STYLE): POSTMODERN (HOMO)SEXUAL SUBJECTS

It is not accidental that homosexuals have been most conspicuous in the primary domains of the spectacle: fashion and entertainment. In 1993 no fewer than five national straight news and fashion magazines carried positive cover stories on lesbians and gays. One of the most notable among them was the cover of *New York* magazine's May 1993 issue, which featured a dashing seductive close-up of k.d. lang dressed in drag next to the words "Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave World of Gay Women." Every imaginable facet of gay and lesbian life—drag, transsexuality, gay teens, gay parents—has been featured on daytime talk shows. In the early nineties the *New York Times's* "Styles of the Times" section included,

along with the engagement and marriage announcements, regular features on gay and lesbian issues explicitly figured as one of many life “styles.” The drag queens RuPaul and Lady Bunny were both profiled in “Styles of the Times,” and in 1993 the front page of the section carried full-page stories on the Harlem balls and gay youth.

Gays and lesbians have been increasingly visible in arts and entertainment, despite the industry’s still deeply entrenched investment in heteronormativity. Tony Kushner’s “joyously, unapologetically, fabulously gay” *Angels in America* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and was nominated for nine Tony Awards. The list of commercial film and video productions on gay subjects grows monthly and in the early nineties included such notables as Neil Jordan’s transvestite love story *The Crying Game*, Sally Potter’s film version of Virginia Woolf’s transsexual *Orlando*, Jonathan Demme’s AIDS courtroom drama *Philadelphia*, Barbra Streisand’s film production of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, and HBO’s adaptation of Randy Shilts’s AIDS exposé *And the Band Played On*. While the movie industry still fears a subject it wouldn’t touch ten years ago, it goes where the money is, and in the nineties “gay” became a warmer if not a hot commodity.

Nowhere is gay more in vogue than in fashion, where homoerotic imagery epitomizes postmodern chic. Magazines firmly situated in the middle-class mainstream such as *Details*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Mademoiselle* have all carried stories addressing some aspect of gay life and/as fashion, and it is here that gay and lesbian visibility blurs readily into a queer gender-bending aesthetic. The June 1993 issue of *Details*, for example, featured a story on couples that included one gay and one lesbian couple, another story that offered a gay man’s perspective on lifting the ban on gays in the military (including a graphic account of his one-night stand with a marine who is “not gay”), and a favorable review by gay novelist David Leavitt of Michelangelo Signorile’s *Queer in America*. The first volume of *Esquire*’s new fashion magazine, *Esquire Gentleman*, carried a feature on “The Gay Factor in Fashion” that declared: “Just about everyone dresses a little gay these days. . . . It is now a marketing given that gay sensibility sells to both gay and straight” (Martin 140). *Esquire*’s regular June 1993 issue included a review of Potter’s *Orlando* as well as a short story by Lynn Darling entitled “Single White Male Seeks Clue.”

Darling’s story is a symptomatic example of the incorporation of a queer aesthetic into the gender structure of postmodern patriarchy. “It’s not easy to be the scion of a dying WASP culture,” the cover blurb announces, “when women have more confidence, gay men have more style,

and everyone seems to have the right to be angry with you.” This is a tale of young urban professional manhood in crisis, a crisis managed through nostalgic detours into the “now vanished set of certainties” preserved in the world of boxing. As the story draws to a close, John Talbot, the single white male of the title, and his girlfriend look out of their hotel room and find in their view a gay couple “dry-humping” on a penthouse roof right below them. “Talbot was tempted to say something snide, but he checked himself. In fact, it was really sweet, he decided, and in his happiness he saw them suddenly as fellow travellers in the community of desire” (Darling 104). Talbot’s inclusion of gays in the diverse community of “fellow travellers” offers an interesting rearticulation of cold war moral and political discourses that once made all homosexuals out to be communists. Here gays are included in an elastic community of pleasure seekers and a tentatively more pliant heterosexual sex-gender system.

As Talbot’s story suggests, the once-rigid links between sex, gender, and sexual desire that the invisible heterosexual matrix so firmly secured in bourgeois culture have become more flexible as the gendered divisions of labor among the middle class in industrialized countries have shifted. While these more accommodating gender codes are not pervasive, they have begun to take hold among the young urban middle class particularly. There are hints, for instance, that wearing a skirt, a fashion choice once absolutely taboo for men because it signified femaleness and femininity, is now more allowed because the gender system’s heteronormative regime is loosening. The designers Betsey Johnson, Matsuda, Donna Karan, and Jean Paul Gaultier all have featured skirts on men in their spring and fall shows for the last few years. Some rock stars (among them Axl Rose of Guns N’ Roses) have worn skirts on stage. But skirts for men are also infiltrating more mundane culture. The fashion pages of my conservative local newspaper have featured sarongs for men, and when my fifteen-year-old daughter, Kate, returned from the two-week coed camp she attended in the summer of 1993 she reported that at least one of the male counselors wore a mid-calf khaki skirt almost every day.

As middle-class women have been drawn into the professional workforce to occupy positions once reserved for men, many of them are now literally “wearing the pants” in the family, often as single heads of household, many of them lesbians and/or mothers. The “New Man,” like Talbot, has managed the crisis of “not having a clue” where he fits anymore by relinquishing many of the former markers of machismo: he expects women of his class to work outside the home and professes to support

their professional ambitions; he “helps out” with the housework and the kids, boasts one or two gay friends, may occasionally wear pink, and perhaps even sports an earring. Men of Talbot’s class might also read magazines like *GQ* or *Esquire* where the notion of the “gender fuck” that queer activists and theorists have presented as subversive cultural critique circulates as radical chic—in essays like David Kamp’s piece on “The Straight Queer” detailing the appropriation of gay codes by hip heteros, or in spoofs like “Viva Straight Camp” that parody ultra straight gender codes by showing up their constructedness (Powers).

Much like queer theory, the appropriation of gay cultural codes in the cosmopolitan revamping of gender displays the arbitrariness of bourgeois patriarchy’s gender system and helps to reconfigure it in a more postmodern mode where the links between gender and sexuality are looser, where homosexuals are welcome, even constituting the vanguard, and where the appropriation of their parody of authentic sex and gender identities is quite compatible with the aestheticization of everyday life into postmodern lifestyles. In itself, of course, this limited assimilation of gays into mainstream middle-class culture does not disrupt postmodern patriarchy and its intersection with capitalism; indeed, it is in some ways quite integral to it.

The gender flexibility of postmodern patriarchy is pernicious because it casts the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared. But behind this facade corporate interests are delighting in the discovery of new markets. Among the most promising are gays and lesbians in the professional/managerial class fraction. Among them are “lifestyle lesbians” like the Bay Area vice president of a lesbian-owned business group who announced, “Here I am, this funny, warm person that you like and I happen to be a lesbian. I am bourgeois. I have a house in the suburbs. I drive a Saab” (Stewart 56). Given the increased “visibility” of this sort of gay consumer, “tolerance of gays makes sense” (Tobias). Increasingly marketers of mainstream products from books to beer are aiming ads specifically at gay men and lesbians; *Fortune* magazine contends that “it’s a wonderful market niche, the only question is how to reach it” (Stewart). Reaching it has so far involved manufacturing the image of a certain class-specific lesbian and gay consumer population. “Visibility is what it is all about,” says David Ehrlich of *Overlooked Opinions* (Gluckman and Reed 16). These stereotypes of wealthy freespending gay consumers play well with advertisers and are useful to corporations because they make the gay market seem potentially lucrative; they cultivate a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool and help to integrate gay people as gay people



into a new marketing niche (Gluckman and Reed 17, 18). But if gay visibility is a good business prospect, as some companies argue, the question gay critics need to ask is “for whom?” Who profits from these new markets?

#### OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Commodification structures much more than the exchange of goods on the market; it affects even as it depends on the knowledges that mediate what and how we see. The commodification of gay styles and identities in corporate and academic marketplaces is integrally related to the formation of a postmodern gay/queer subjectivity, ambivalently gender coded and in some instances flagrantly repudiating traditional, hetero, and homo bourgeois culture. Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, to a great extent the construction of a new “homosexual/queer spectacle” perpetuates a class-specific perspective that keeps invisible the capitalist divisions of labor that organize sexuality and in particular lesbian, gay, queer lives. In so doing, queer spectacles often participate in a long history of class-regulated visibility.<sup>15</sup> Beginning around the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie mediated their experience of the working class through spatial as well as cultural/ideological arrangements. The erection of physical barriers—subway and rail construction and the siting of retail and residential districts—structured the physical arrangement of the city so as to foreclose the trauma of seeing the laboring classes (Kester 73). This physical regulation of class visibility was also compounded by the consolidation of a characteristically “bourgeois” mode of perception through an array of knowledges, the philosophic and aesthetic chief among them. The notion of an autonomous aesthetic perception, first developed by eighteenth-century philosophers (Kant, Hume, Shaftesbury), whereby perceived objects are abstracted from the social context of their creation, provided the foundation for a way of seeing that has dominated modern culture and aesthetics (Kester 74). This mode of perception reinforces and is indeed historically necessary to commodity exchange and comes to function as a “phenomenological matrix” through which the bourgeoisie confront an array of daily experiences through modes of seeing that erase the differently valued divisions of labor that organize visibility (Kester 75). In early-twenty-first-century “postindustrial” societies like the United States, the (in)visibility of class divisions continues to be spatially regulated by urban planning, but it is also reinforced by changes in first-world relations of

production as industry has been increasingly consigned to sites in “developing countries” outside the United States. Capital has not been significantly dispersed or democratized in first-world economies as a result, but simply transferred to more profitable sectors (the so-called tertiary or service sectors: banking, finance, pension funds, etc.) (Evans 43). The escalating domination of the ideological—the proliferation of information technologies, media images, codes—in post-industrial cultures has helped to reconfigure bourgeois modes of perception in first-world populations, producing subjects who are more differentiated and less likely to experience capitalism collectively through production relations and more likely to experience it through relations of consumption. As a result, the neat subject-object split of Kantian aesthetics has been troubled and to some degree displaced, even as the invisibility of social relations of labor in corporate and intellectual commodity spectacles persists.

In the early nineties gay-friendly corporations like Levi Strauss, for example, reinforced the gender-flexible subjects its advertising campaigns promoted through gay window-dressing strategies by way of public relations programs that boasted of the company’s progressive corporate policies for lesbians and gays. Levi’s gives health insurance benefits to unmarried domestic partners of its employees, has created a supportive environment for employees who test HIV positive, and has a lesbian and gay employees association. Members of this association prepared a video for the company to use in its diversity training in which they, their parents, and their managers openly discuss their relationships (Stewart 50). But Levi’s workers in the sweatshops of Saipan, who live in cramped and crowded barracks and earn as low as \$2.15 an hour, remain largely invisible. Although Levi’s ended its contracts with the island’s largest clothes-maker after an investigation by the company found evidence of unsatisfactory treatment of workers in his factories, it continues to make shirts at five plants there (Shenon). Meanwhile, back in the United States, Levi’s closed its San Antonio plant in 1990, laying off 1,150 workers, 92 percent of them Latino and 86 percent of them women, and moved its operations to the Caribbean, where it could pay laborers \$3.80 a day, roughly half the average hourly wage of the San Antonio workforce (Martinez 22). Displaying the gay-friendly policies of “progressive” U.S. corporations often deflects attention from the exploitative international division of labor they depend on in the interests of a company’s bottom line—profits.<sup>16</sup>

The formation of a gay/queer imaginary in both corporate and academic circles also rests on the suppression of class analysis. There have been

all too few books that treat the ways gay history and culture have been stratified along class lines.<sup>17</sup> With several notable exceptions, studies of the relationship between homosexuality and capitalism are remarkably sparse, and extended analyses of lesbian and gay poverty are almost nonexistent.<sup>18</sup> To ask the more pointed question of how the achievement of lesbian and gay visibility by some rests on the invisible labor of others is to expose the unspeakable underside of queer critique.

The consolidation of the professional middle class during the 1980s brought with it an array of social contradictions. The recruitment of more and more women into the workforce bolstered the legitimation both of the professional “New Woman” and of academic feminism. The increasing, albeit uneven and complicated, investiture of lesbians and gays into new forms of sexual citizenship and the relative growth of academic gay studies accompanied and in some ways were enabled by these changes. But these were also decades when the chasm between the very rich and the very poor widened and poverty became more than ever feminized. As the 1990s began, 33 million people in the United States—more than 13.5 percent of the population—were officially living in poverty. While estimates of the numbers of people who are homosexual are notoriously unreliable (ranging from the 1993 Batelle Human Research Center’s 1.1 percent to the 1948 Kinsey Report’s 10 percent), assuming that somewhere between 1 and 10 percent of the population is homosexual, it would be fair to say that there are between 1.65 and 3.3 million impoverished lesbians and gay men in the United States today.<sup>19</sup>

Most lesbians are leading less glamorous lives than their chic commodity images suggest, and poor lesbians of color are the most invisible and worst off. Women as a group do more than half of all the work in this country and make less than half of what men do (Abelda et al. 52). Of all poor people over 18, 63 percent are women, with 53 percent of poor families headed by women (Macionis 282). While there are no reliable data available on the numbers of poor who are lesbian or gay, the racialized and gendered division of labor suggests that there are more lesbians than gay men living in poverty and proportionately more of them are people of color.

Redressing gay invisibility by promoting images of a seamlessly middle-class gay consumer or by inviting us to see queer identities only in terms of style, textuality, or performative play helps produce imaginary gay/queer subjects that keep invisible the divisions of wealth and labor that these images and knowledges depend on. These commodified perspectives blot from view lesbians, gays, and queers who are manual workers, sex workers,

unemployed, and imprisoned. About a quarter to a half million homosexual and bisexual youths are annually thrown out of their homes and subjected to prostitution and violence in the streets (Galst). Severing queer and homo sexuality from the operations of class keeps these lives from view, forecloses consideration of the ways sexual identities are complicated by the priorities imposed by impoverishment, and keeps a queer political agenda from working collectively to address the needs of many whose historical situation is defined in terms of counter-dominant sexual practices. That so little work has been done in the academy, even within lesbian and gay studies, to address these populations and the invisible social relations that maintain their marginality and exploitation speaks loudly to the ways a class-specific “bourgeois (homosexual/queer) imaginary” structures our knowledge of sexual identity, pleasure, and emancipation.

#### READING VISIBILITY: CRITIQUE

Critique is a political practice and a mode of reading that establishes the intimate links between the visible and the historical by taking as its starting point a systemic understanding of the social. A radical critique of sexuality understands that the visibility of any particular construction of sexuality or sexual identity is historical in that it is shaped by an ensemble of social arrangements. As a way of seeing sexuality, critique insists on making connections between the emergence of a discourse or identity in industrialized social formations and the international division of labor, between sexy commodity images and labor, between the spectacle and the sweatshop, style and class. This sort of critical intervention into heterosexuality, therefore, does not see sexuality as just the effect of cultural or discursive practice, merely the product of ideology or institutions, but as a regulatory apparatus that spans the organization of social life in the modern world and that works in concert with other social totalities — capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

As a political practice, critique acknowledges the importance of “reading” to political activism. Understood broadly as all of those ways of making sense that enable one to be conscious, to be literate in the culture’s codes and so to be capable of acting meaningfully in the world, reading is an activity essential to social life. Although they often go unacknowledged, modes of reading are necessary to political activism. Paying attention to how we read and considering its implications and consequences are

key components of any oppositional political work. To ignore this crucial dimension of social struggle is to risk reproducing the very conditions we seek to change. The ways of making sense available in any historical time will tend to support the prevailing social order, but they are also contested. A critical politics joins in and foments this contest not just to reframe how we interpret the world but in order to change it. It is radical in the sense that it does not settle just for a change in the style or form of commodities but demands a change in the invisible social relations that make them possible.

I have tried to show that this way of reading is not just a matter of widening the scope of what we see, but of starting from a different place in how we see. Understanding social life to be “at once global and local” requires that we analyze what presents itself on first sight as obvious in order to show its connection to social structures that often exploit and oppress. While local situations (the commodification of pleasure in suburban malls, for instance) are necessary and important places to disrupt heteronormativity, they do not exist on their own, and we read them as such only at a cost. I am suggesting that a radical sexual politics that is going to be, in Judith Butler’s words, “effectively disruptive, truly troubling,” needs a way of explaining how the sexual identities we can see are systemically organized. We need a way of understanding visibility that acknowledges both the local situations in which sexuality is made intelligible and the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption, and exchange.

If the critical way of reading I am proposing is not very well received now in the academy or in activist circles — and it is not — that may be because in challenging the postmodern fetishizing of social life into discourse, culture, or local contexts, critique puts into crisis the investments of middle-class academics and professionals, queers among us, in the current social order. For this reason it is undoubtedly a risk. Perhaps it is also our best provisional answer to the question “What is to be done?”

# SEXUAL ALIBIS, COLONIAL DISPLACEMENTS

## Materializing Myth in *The Crying Game*

Myth hides nothing; its function is to distort.

—*Roland Barthes*

With shades and shadows the illusion industry  
populates the spaces left empty by capitalism.

—*W. F. Haug*

This chapter addresses some of the historical conditions of possibility for reading the mythical representation of sexual difference in contemporary Western commercial film. I have taken as my primary tutor text Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* because the film's promotion and reception in the United States crystallized some of the salient ways sexuality is being re-configured and how its narration functions in an increasingly transnational geopolitical order.

There have been much talk and writing in the past few years that affirm a new epistemology of the self figured in terms of ambivalent border identities, the in-between subjectivities of postmodern culture—racial,

national, gendered, sexual. In academic cultural theory, some of the most recent discussion of indeterminate identities has drawn upon the discourse of materialism to make its points. But because many of these formulations of identity ultimately evade the historical dimensions of the materiality of identity, their cultural materialism is limited. My reading of *The Crying Game* as mythic representation works against this veer toward cultural materialism because it raises issues about the making of meaning, identity, and history in a transnational symbolic economy. In foregrounding the film's mythic absorption of the transvestite and its displacement of neocolonialism, I want to offer an alternative instance of how we might begin to understand some of the historical conditions of possibility on which contemporary cultural representations of sexuality at times depend. This is to say that in opening ways of thinking about sexual identity in terms of ambivalence, masquerade, and transvestism to history, and the history of neo-imperialism in particular, I want to do more than provide a reading of one film. My aim is to raise questions about some of the current thinking on the cultural representation of ambivalent sexual identities and to draw our attention to its allegorical (i.e., historical) uses. In the final section of the chapter I will situate my reading of *The Crying Game* in relation to some current theories of the materiality of the real and address the implications of my differences with this work for the critical practice of seeing film.

#### WHAT IS SEEN, WHAT HAPPENS, AND WHAT IS SAID

As one of the most pervasive forms of cultural narrative in industrialized societies, commercial film serves as an extremely powerful vehicle of myth. The mythic status of Hollywood films is of course enabled and buttressed by corporate endorsement and financial backing for distribution and promotion. To some extent the scripts that do get picked up manage to be supported because they already articulate a culture's social imaginary—the prevailing images a society needs to project about itself in order to maintain certain features of its organization. This social imaginary is not simply reproduced by the discourses or images encoded in a film or decoded by the viewer from the film's formal structures. Rather, the mythic meanings of films are the effect of a social and dynamic process of meaning-making in which their production and reception participate. Any film text comes to make sense by means of the historically available

modes of intelligibility—a variety of assumptions about reality—through which the spectator chains together the film’s signifiers into a meaningful story.

In constructing what Mas’ud Zavarzadeh has called the “tale” of a film, the viewer fashions a map of reality and as a result situates herself in the particular set of social relations the culture prescribes as allowed or forbidden.<sup>1</sup> The social values promoted by the tales of commercial films offer imaginary representations of reality, allegories by which subjects live, come to identify, and take up their proper places in social life. One of the significant aspects of Zavarzadeh’s concept of the tale is that it directs our understanding of the process of meaning-making away from the persistent hold of formalism on film theory. The “tale” of a film does not lie in its formal features but in the historical conditions that make that particular narrative form and its reading possible—the historically dominant social relations and contradictory assumptions by which a film instructs its audience to make sense. As Zavarzadeh explains,

Constructing the tale, then, is a necessary cultural skill by which the spectator learns how to sort out the diverse codes of culture, such as gender, sexuality, class, parenting, and to establish a relation among them. In other words, producing the tale, the spectator learns the ideological syntax of his culture (its class relations) and demonstrates his ability to provide coherent tales—as maps for dealing with the real—and thus proves that he is a symbolically competent and ideologically reliable person. (11)

The cognitive map a film’s viewer produces is not lodged in its particular narrative sequences, images, or structured gazes so much as it is the effect of the social and historical frames of sense-making the spectators (and filmmakers) inhabit. The dominant tale of a film is its most obvious reading, and it is this reading that comprises a film’s mythic resonance.

The concept of the tale is premised on an understanding of the real as historically constructed. However, this notion of the real is quite at odds with realist cinema’s mimetic conventions, which for the most part still dominate Hollywood commercial film and invite the viewer to equate the real with the visible. Drawing on the conventions of realism, viewers construct tales that take the visible reality on the screen as representative of the way things are or should be. While the tale is the reading of a film that produces the most obvious and culturally sanctioned meanings (Ridley



Scott's *Aliens*, for instance, might be read as a tale about a team of corporate scientists pursued by a giant black insect and her offspring), it does not exhaust all possible meanings (the reading of *Aliens* as a race- and class-specific set of instructions on how to know good and bad mothers). Because the available ways of making sense through which films come to be meaningful are not homogeneous but rather contestatory sites of struggle, the dominant realist or obvious tale of a film is always unstable, always different from itself. This difference is the site of suppressed but nonetheless possible other tellings.

What makes it possible for the viewer to see against the grain of the cultural obvious and renarrate the tale of a film is her historical position within those knowledges that refuse or refute the dominant culture's myths. A critical reading of a film as myth renarrates the materials that the film offers as obvious or visible by drawing on those knowledges that contest its commonsense telling. While a resistant reading would merely reject or dismiss the commonsense tale, and a formalist reading would search for a film's hidden meanings in the dynamics of the filmic apparatus, a critical reading considers the historical conditions of possibility by which the visible comes to be seeable and the forms of subjectivity this version of reality helps reinforce or undermine.

Roland Barthes's assertion that "myth hides nothing; its function is to distort" acknowledges the oblique relation between the visible and the seeable in myth. As myths, films address the contradictions undergirding a social community not by hiding them but by parading them right in front of our (unseeing) eyes. In this sense, mythic display operates in the realm of the imaginary. The mythic tale is imaginary not because it is false or untrue but because it resolves contradictions that remain unsolvable in other areas of lived history. This resolution takes place through a variety of strategies through which the tale is assembled. Chief among them is the tactic of naturalizing social differences as the way things are. "The very principle of myth," Barthes asserts, "is its transformation of history into Nature" (116). Myths are experienced as innocent not because their intentions are hidden but because they are naturalized (Barthes 118). This naturalizing feature is crucial to myth's imaginary function and constitutes one of its main distortions.

Myth also distorts through displacements. As an imaginary representation of a society's values and order, myth is an allegorical narrative "at one remove" from history. Its structure, Barthes contends, reproduces that of the alibi: "I am not where you think I am, I am where you think I am not"

(Barthes 121). As historical alibi, myth's displacements share a structural affiliation with masquerade: both have an uneasy relation to the mimetic. The construction of meaning in myth and masquerade is always different from itself, and this difference does not simply and directly refer us to alternative facts or essential identities. But unlike myths that naturalize their distortions and differences, masquerade flaunts them. In this sense myth and masquerade are the inverse of one another. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that masquerade is a structure of identity that resists the naturalizing tactics of myth. Unlike disguise, which connotes a false appearance that hides an "authentic" or primary identity, masquerade is associated with the performative. The obviousness of its fabrication undermines mimetic conventions and raises the possibility that identities might be radically unstable, permanently displaced from any prior original.

One of the ways mainstream realist film functions mythically is to incorporate seemingly resistant cultural objects into the social imaginary. This is indeed the major mythic strategy in the sexual tale of *The Crying Game*. Touted as a film about "love, loyalty, identity, courage" (Corliss 63), with a shocking moment of revelation, *The Crying Game* managed to fill theaters "with the sound of breath being held, of assumptions being up-ended, of everything you think you've seen until then going cockeyed" (Harris 17). At first glance, Dil's incendiary masquerade seems to be one of those resistant cultural objects. Reading the ways the transvestite is absorbed into myth can tell us quite a bit about how ambivalent sexual identities are articulated in the cultural dominant heterosexual imaginary. What is even more instructive about *The Crying Game*, though, is the double axis on which its mythologizing turns, as fascination with sexual ambivalence becomes the displaced ground for a postmodern mythology of empire.

One of the mythic functions of commercial film in late capitalism is to articulate cognitive maps for postmodern subjects whose historical situations—conditions of work and family, community and pleasure—are in a variety of ways distinct from those of social subjects in industrialized countries a generation ago. Two of the most notable features of these new historical situations are the consolidation of the structures of neo-imperialism, whereby colonial power is no longer exercised as directly or as visibly as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, and the proliferation of sexualities increasingly unhinged from kinship alliances, property, and the reproductive couple. The media have played an enormous role in this process, enhancing both the invisibility of empire and capital's ability to create and make use of sexuality and the sexualized body as new colonies.

To paraphrase W. F. Haug, “the illusion industry” in late capitalism — advertising, television, computer, video, and film — “has populated the spaces left empty by capitalism” in its former phases. While the imaginary medium of myth’s displacements is in one sense a matter of “shades and shadows,” as Haug contends, in another sense this new colony is profoundly embodied. Indeed, the body has become the premier commodity and marketing niche of late capitalism; corporeal fashion, engineering, simulation, and management have created a host of new needs and accompanying new modalities of power, knowledge, and control.

The eruption of the discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth-century West and their saturation of everyday life throughout the next century is intimately entangled with shifts in policy and capitalist production that comprise the second and third phases of empire. And yet this history is for the most part a matter of shades and shadows.<sup>2</sup> We have yet to map out very clearly or explain very well the historical relation between the proliferation of sexual identities and empire. To what extent, for instance, is empire one of the constitutive features of the emergence of homosexual identities in the West? In what ways did the structures of colonialism enable and shape the emergence of a homosexual imaginary in the imperial metropolises of Europe? And how, in turn, was the exercise of colonial power affected by changes in kinship alliances and the possibility of counter-heterosexual identities? These are still largely unasked and unanswered questions.

Myth works by atomizing, sorting, reducing — robbing images of their history. That the stories of sexuality and empire do not connect very well or very easily in our cultural archives is perhaps one of the most unattended lingering grand myths of modernity. If this is so, it is predictable and symptomatic that *The Crying Game*’s two tales — of empire and of sexuality — are both entangled and yet in some ways entirely opaque to one another. If myth robs cultural representations of their history, the transvestite in *The Crying Game* is doubly plundered. For at the same time she is naturalized back into the heterosexual imaginary, Dil serves as a site of mythic displacement for the loss of imperial phallic power. As the switchpoint between *The Crying Game*’s two tales of political and sexual intrigue, she bonds one to the other. In the critical attention the film has received, it has not been read this way. Instead the two tales are separated — the sexual one highlighted, the political one erased. This sorting and erasure are crucial to the film’s mythic function and consistent with the ways sexuality has featured in representations of empire.

## THE THINGS A GIRL HAS TO PUT UP WITH

Review after review reiterates the tale of *The Crying Game* in more or less the following account: This is the story of an IRA member, Fergus Hennessey (Stephen Rea), who befriends his kidnapped prisoner, a black British soldier named Jody (Forest Whitaker). After Jody's death (ironically not by Fergus's or the IRA's doing but by the British Saracen sent to rescue him), Fergus pursues his (homoerotic) attachment to Jody by looking up and eventually falling for Jody's girlfriend, Dil (Jaye Davidson), a London hairdresser and (perhaps) prostitute. But Dil — who both Fergus and the audience have assumed is a woman — turns out to be a man. The disclosure of Dil's "true sexual identity" takes place in a very deliberately choreographed scene in which the camera slowly follows the unveiling of her penis. This is the pivotal moment of disclosure, shock, and fascination when an audience unfamiliar with the codes of transvestism and gay male culture learns that they have been mistakenly reading the marks of Dil's gender as an expression of her sex (genitals).

What makes *The Crying Game*'s sexual tale a postmodern myth is the way it confronts the very problem of identity, of confusing the visible and the seeable, and its consequent seeming resistance to the simple resolution of the classic comic romance. But this story that demystifies the stability of identities — racial, national, sexual — ultimately remythologizes them. Playing the transvestite's masquerade against the disguises of other characters is one of these remythologizing tactics. "False" identities provide the very texture of terrorist and romantic negotiation and success: Fergus's female IRA comrade, Jude (Miranda Richardson), passes as a floozy in order to entrap a British soldier — although viewers, like Jody, learn this only in retrospect; when Fergus is on the lam he disguises his Irish identity with a haircut, a new name, and a new nationality; when Jude turns up in England she has traded in her blond hair and blue jeans for "a tougher look" — black hair and a suit. The burlap hood Jody is made to wear as hostage operates as a double-sided mask — protecting the identities of his captors and veiling his humanity from them.

The dangerous knowledge that sexual identity is a masquerade — and the even more threatening possibility that sexual desire might not be rooted in a natural heterosexual order — are the scandalous secrets of *The Crying Game*'s sexual tale. If this knowledge is quickly mythologized, it is in part because the film's promotion helped ensure that it would be. Probably this film's most notable feature for U.S. audiences was the hype over

its “secret” that Miramax invented and capitalized on.<sup>3</sup> As one of the frames for knowing identity, this marketing strategy has an insidious effect on the film’s tale.<sup>4</sup> By translating the transvestite’s masquerade into the rhetoric of disguise, the film’s “secret” helps anchor Dil’s “true” identity in the disclosure of her penis. In other words, the tactic of asking audiences and reviewers not to reveal the film’s “secret” helps redirect the viewer’s misreading of Dil away from the incendiary revelations that gender identity is not grounded in biological difference and that sexual desire needn’t be generated by attraction to “the opposite sex” and toward the more acceptable notion that we, like Fergus, were merely fooled into mistaking Dil for a woman. In conjunction with a variety of disguises and naturalizing discourses that encourage this conclusion, the “secret” displaces the dangerous notion that gender and sexuality have no authentic foundation. In this way, the “secret” collaborates with one aspect of the heterosexual imaginary that ultimately structures the film’s sexual tale.

The heterosexual imaginary is the cultural myth that explains male and female sex as a naturally asymmetrical biological given that masculine and feminine gendered traits express.<sup>5</sup> It organizes and legislates sexual desire so that a gendered subject’s sexual aim is directed toward a coherently gendered member of the supposedly “opposite” sex. Historically, capitalism has relied on the heterosexual imaginary to harness desire and labor according to the injunctions of a patriarchal social order. By presenting heterogendered differences as fixed and natural opposites, the heterosexual imaginary robs this form of sexuality of its history, makes invisible the precariousness of its imaginary identifications, erases the social order they help guarantee, and obscures the multiplicity of possible other engenderings of desire.

From the opening scene of *The Crying Game*, the viewer is invited to draw on a heterosexual imaginary that will provide the basis for “misreading” Dil. Although Jody’s entrapment by the IRA takes place at a carnival—that traditional site of bawdy subversion and temporary liberation from prevailing truths—the seduction scene between him and Jude induces the viewer to naturalize gender and heterosexuality. Jude’s sexual “pickup” is interrupted by Jody’s need to urinate. He dodges into a makeshift latrine but continues to hold Jude’s hand. The “visible” evidence seems to confirm the obvious conclusion that Jody is both a real man—he has a penis—and, desiring Jude, he is clearly heterosexual.

The fascination provoked by media images is a dynamic process whereby human sensuality comes to be incorporated—and I use this word

here in all of its layered connotations—by means of a series of already available cognitive maps a film’s reading draws on, reinforces, or disrupts. Viewing *The Crying Game*, particularly its fascinating images of sexual ambivalence, takes place through the negotiation of several strategies of incorporation that filter through and flex the heterosexual imaginary. The first urinating scene and its complement—the scene after Jody’s capture when Fergus holds Jody’s penis so he can piss even though his hands are tied behind his back—are two instances when bodies serve to ensure gender identity. At the same time, both scenes also open up a possible space of difference within this myth by troubling the corporeal guarantees of the heterosexual imaginary; the first retrospectively when we realize that Jody does not neatly fit into a heterosexual identity, and the second by the homoerotic charge between the two men that lurks on the edges of the dramatized “proof” of natural male sexual identity. But the heterosexual imaginary recurs despite and against these disruptive openings. The most striking instance is the unveiling of Dil’s penis that so profoundly disturbs the equation between bodies and meanings. This spectacle is immediately incorporated into the heterosexual imaginary by Fergus’s physical revulsion by the sight of it (he runs to the bathroom, vomits, and then abruptly leaves). Heterosexuality is redeemed, and homoerotic desire—for which Dil is after all only the vehicle—is allowed to stay safely secured in the shadows of fantasy. The interpolated moral tale Jody tells Fergus—the fable of the frog and the scorpion—which seems at first only to naturalize the difference between Fergus and his IRA comrades, is readily available to explain Fergus’s disgust. Like the scorpion, he can’t help himself—“it’s in his nature.”

That Dil “remains” a woman rather than becoming a freak—even when she is later disguised in Jody’s cricket uniform she doesn’t make a very convincing man—tells us something about how the gendered dimension of the heterosexual imaginary is being flexed over and against the appeals to authenticity, nature, and instincts it simultaneously depends on. Despite Fergus’s initial repugnance, the transvestite ultimately does not become the villain or the object of derision. Having followed their courtship, complete with all of the conventional romantic props—the vanquished competitor, the genteel first kiss, flowers, dinner, and a cheek-to-cheek slow dance—the audience is already committed to Fergus and Dil as a straight couple. Through the continued proddings of the heterosexual imaginary, both Fergus’s homoeroticism and Dil’s transvestism find a secure place within the heterosexual matrix.

*The Crying Game* is a myth for a postmodern patriarchy where heterosexuality remains the dominant paradigm for family, sexuality, romance, gender, parenting, reproduction, even feminism . . . at the same time its boundaries have become more permeable. This permeability is most allowed in the form of cultural or state pluralism where homosexuals are added in as part of the multicultural mix of human communal life.<sup>6</sup> Clearly this inclusion is also a site of struggle, as the well-organized efforts of the right to eliminate homosexuals from civic society testify. In Britain and the United States, as well as in other industrialized countries, heterosexuality is still naturalized, sanctioned, and implicitly required by the state, and resistance to these imperatives is still policed and punished.

The debates in Britain over the passage of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 are part of the recent history of this struggle, a history that the tolerantly mythologized transvestite in *The Crying Game* both displays and obscures. Section 28 proscribed the promotion of homosexuality and “pretended families” in school and local government-funded events.<sup>7</sup> Although the campaign to defeat the bill failed, and the new law has not had wide-ranging repressive effects, the parameters of this legislation indicate the ways homosexual difference is being sanctioned without eroding heterosexuality. The discourse of conservative supporters of Section 28 never promoted a purely homogeneous heterosexual Britain, nor does the law set out to eliminate homosexual difference. But it does differentiate “responsible” (private, closeted, discrete) gays from “dangerous” ones (Anne Marie Smith).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, this danger is seen to lie not in homosexual difference per se but in what gays make of it: dangerous gayness flaunts, invades, disrupts the heterosexual imaginary. Responsible gays are closeted.

That tolerance for “invisible” homosexual difference was the starting assumption of Section 28 is both the law’s perversity and its significance. Tolerance for closeted gays is not new, of course, and it may not herald the demise of patriarchal heterosexuality as a compulsory social organization, but making the closet a matter of public policy (much like Clinton’s “don’t ask; don’t tell” executive order) is a new twist in the fragile civic gains comprising the uneven development of homosexuality’s history. The achievement of these measures lies in what they are forced to disavow.

When *The Crying Game* appeared in the United States, the religious right had already launched a massive moral crusade against homosexuals — with the muscle of the Republican Party already flexing it in many states. But at the same time the conservative backlash intensified, the love

that dared not speak its name had become a major public discourse (Evans 25). In fall 1992, the debate over gays in the U.S. military was in full force, the commodification of gay “lifestyles” was increasingly proving a lucrative new market, and the promotion of ambivalent, performative sexualities had become a signature of the postmodern avant-garde. Nonetheless, celebrations of the increasing acceptance of homosexuality still ignored the ways this increased tolerance is persistently framed within an ambivalent heterosexual imaginary that leaves public patriarchy intact.

The phallus, so central to Lacanian and feminist psychoanalytic theory, is a useful concept that can be renarrated to map some of the characteristic features of the uneven operation of (hetero)sexual ambivalence in public patriarchy. In psychoanalysis the phallus is not a body part but a cultural sign, the arbitrary signifier of sexual difference and the mark of an always irretrievable Presence. In Lacan’s scheme, to be a man is to *have* the phallus (and yet never actually attain it); to be a woman is to *be* the phallus—the object of desire (for him) who is therefore never quite present to and for herself.<sup>9</sup>

As a signifier of power, the phallus functions much like myth, in that it orients one in culture. Both are mechanisms by which subjection to the social order (conceptualized by Lacan as the Law) takes place by way of an always deferred promise of coherent identity. That this promise is also always a deception is for Lacan the consequence of castration—the entrance of the father or third term into the imaginary union of mother and child. This castration simultaneously stands for the moment of rupture or lack underwriting the subject’s entry into the symbolic order. The phallus is an index of power, then, but also of prohibition—marking off those who *have* it (men) from those who *are* it (women). At the same time, because it is a cultural *sign*, its status is a fraud: “having” or “being” the phallus is never finally achieved. Once the subject enters into the symbolic order—through speech or any meaning-making system—she loses any guarantee of self-presence because she can always only re-present herself through language. Consequently, any gendered subject’s identity—male or female, masculine or feminine—is only achieved through representations, and is not only a fabrication but a fabrication that is premised on a loss of self-presence. For Lacan, it is this loss that constitutes desire.

Relying as it does on so many transcendent categories and universals—like this notion of desire/loss on which all identities are based—the theory of sexual difference and identity offered by psychoanalysis is ultimately an ahistorical one. Rethinking the formation of sexual identity under capitalism in a



more materialist framework would require re-locating the “loss” underlying the precarious fabrication of sexual difference not in terms of a transcendent ideal but in relation to the contradictory class processes that always link profit for some to loss for many. It would also mean making visible the ways these losses are displaced and played out in symbolic processes.

Turning once again to the sexual tale of *The Crying Game*, we might say that the transvestite’s fascination for audiences can be ascribed to her exposure of the phallic myth, flaunting the dangerous knowledge that the phallus as the mark of difference is a fraud.

The transvestite displays that the sexual differences distinguishing man from woman are merely the effects of a cultural sign system. In manipulating them a man or a woman can in fact be read as both having and being the phallus. In the long run, however, the film’s sexual tale secures this ambivalence—both having and being the phallus—within the Law of a patriarchal heterosexual imaginary: both before and after we know Dil is not female, she nonetheless remains a “real” woman. Even the viewer who all along reads Dil as the transvestite—and so maintains her gender ambivalence—has to confront the narrative’s insistence that she be positioned against Jude and the lessons in heterogendered femininity this juxtaposition teaches. As Dil’s counterpart, Jude is a woman who can “be” the phallus (the female object of desire able to entrap and lure a man through the masquerade of femininity). In the tale’s closure, however, Jude’s death instructs us that for a woman to be and to have the phallus finally is forbidden. In other words, after we know that Jude is not a “real woman” she is still a woman. Jude is punished for betraying her proper feminine position, while Dil (like Jody and Fergus) is allowed more gender flexibility. Even though being a “real” woman seems to be not necessarily dictated by one’s biology, sexual ambivalence nonetheless turns out to be a strictly heterogendered affair.

Indeed, the tale of the transvestite and her nemesis, the phallic woman, can be read as a set of instructions on the limits of being a “real” woman in postmodern patriarchy. It is no accident that ads for the film featured Jude as the gun-wielding vamp, while the most talked about frame in the film was the spectacle of Dil’s unveiled penis. The inversion of the fetishist’s primal scene is a companion to the phallic woman’s murder. Both are intelligible because of the symbolic economy of postmodern patriarchy, and together they “map” one layer of its gender economy. In the Freudian primal scene (culled from the history of private or classic bourgeois patriarchy), the woman/mother who is thought to have a penis is discovered

not to have one, and her status as woman is thereby real-ized even as this knowledge is disavowed by the fetishist's perversion. In the cultural logic of postmodern patriarchy enacted here, the woman who is thought not to have a penis is discovered to have one; how the consequent disavowal of this discovery is handled depends on whether her womanhood is perceived as "real" or not. When Dil shoots the phallic woman she shouts, "I bet you used those tits and that cute little ass to get him." The message is clear: justice is being served against the woman who both is and has the phallus and who betrays her masquerade by using it (rather than "being" it)—in other words, by becoming a man. Despite its play with sexual ambivalence, the tale of *The Crying Game* finally endorses a classic and familiar heterogendered script. There is in the end very little irony in the opening and closing tunes. Together they provide the heterogendered articulating structure for understanding this tale of sexual difference: "When a Man Loves a Woman" it is because she knows how to "Stand by Her Man."<sup>10</sup>

What social and historical conditions have engendered these symbolic adjustments to the "heterogendered real"? In the Lacanian narrative, the instability of phallic power is seen to be the effect of an indeterminacy internal to signification, a result of the irreparable loss of Presence that follows the subject's passage into desire. Because it ascribes the instability of phallic power to the workings of desire in a symbolic order that has no outside, no history, Lacan's theory is idealist, yet it is also frequently appropriated by cultural materialists. While feminists, and feminist film theorists especially, have made use of Lacan's theories to denaturalize gender difference, and have even challenged his idealist assumptions, their rearticulations of subjectivity, like Lacan's, take for granted that desire and the lack that underscores it are ahistorical events. Human needs come to be pitted against or at the very least effaced by this notion of desire; in fact, they are irretrievable except through representation.<sup>11</sup> One of the aims of materialist feminism has been to theorize the phallus as a historically variable effect of contradictory social arrangements that are not reducible to the symbolic, signifying dimension of culture. Rearticulating the concept of the phallus in a historical materialist framework situates its symbolic function in relation to the structures of social production that include language but are also outside and mediated by language. In so doing, historical materialism connects the production of ambivalent, desiring subjects in the realm of ideology and cultural representation to the uneven satisfaction of human needs under capitalism. As a result, the persistent, variable,

and precarious circulation of phallic power and the incoherent desiring subject it legislates are seen to be no longer simply effects of the indeterminacy of signification, but of a contradictory set of social relations under capitalism in which the production of desire is historically bound up with exploited labor. In attending only to the desiring subject and to desire as signification, cultural materialists reify this historical effect and eclipse its relation to the new and persistent patriarchal and imperialist dimensions of late capitalism.

In the professional and managerial sectors of overdeveloped industrial capitalism, the more malleable heterogender system of late bourgeois patriarchy cannot be disconnected from new global divisions of labor. As increasing numbers of women have been recruited into the formerly masculine public sphere of professional and corporate wage work, normative divisions of labor under capital's monopoly phase have been reformed, reorganizing the taken-for-granted separation between private and public, domestic and market spheres of social life. At the same time, classic bourgeois gender ideology has adjusted to the impact of these modifications. Changes in the working day—to part- and variable-time schedules—as well as the proliferation of information technologies, have made the formerly “separate sphere” of home a site of wage labor for more middle-class men and women. During the economic recession of the eighties, many unemployed middle-class fathers were recruited into child care and unpaid domestic labor out of economic necessity, and more flexible gender ideologies accommodated these changes. The requirements of a post-cold war military have helped create the space for redefining masculinity in a state institution that traditionally safeguarded and reproduced the hard-line gender codes of private patriarchy. In the culture generally many middle-class men have also been allowed to be more vulnerable and sensitive than their fathers and to eschew a militaristic machismo, and the eroticized commodification of the body has extended the parameters of the spectacle to embrace men's as well as women's physical appearance. Middle-class women are allowed to exercise to a degree more phallic authority than their mothers had. Recruited into the formerly masculine public sphere of professional wage labor and the law, they are increasingly serving as the single breadwinners in a family, and they can even represent (à la Attorney General Janet Reno) the phallic power of the state at its highest levels.

Like other commercial U.S. films released around the same time—*A Few Good Men*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Philadelphia*—*The Crying Game* encapsulates

the gender myths epitomized in the Clinton presidency. While these revisions to classic bourgeois patriarchy's more rigid gender arrangements are producing a more pliable, postmodern patriarchal gender ideology, they have not dramatically undermined the usefulness of patriarchal hierarchies to capital's global divisions of labor. If in postmodern patriarchy the phallus can circulate somewhat more freely among middle-class white men and women, the range of resources and mobility this circulation affords is still more limited for women than for men, even for professional women. The persistence of the double day, the glass ceiling, rape, and a host of other social practices (dieting, plastic surgery, compulsory deference, romance, motherhood, etc.) whereby women incorporate femininity at great cost to their social well-being, all indicate women's limited phallic power. Narratives of Hillary Clinton's public persona as First Lady are exemplary instances of these limits even for a white middle-class woman in an inordinately powerful position. This is the historical context for the tale of Dil and Jude, two sides of the same coin of sexual ambivalence.

The ideological flexibility of postmodern patriarchy is conditioned by changes in the relations of production under late capitalism, but the bottom line for extracting surplus value under the regime of flexible accumulation is still rigidly gendered: women remain the most desirable source of cheap and malleable labor. That so many women across the globe labor for low wages and minimal overhead, on schedules responsive to part- or just-in-time production needs, often in subcontracted domestic family labor systems, and with minimal opportunity to organize, is in part made possible because more rigid patriarchal regimes underlie and sustain the more flexible gender systems of postmodern patriarchy.

The transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation that has taken place since the 1970s has been accompanied by the emergence of a postmodern imaginary in industrial centers. Even though the relationship between ideology and divisions of labor is not neatly integrated, direct, or monocausal, the epistemological shift to more ambivalently coded identities is historically linked to the reliance of the more flexible motion of capital on the ephemeral, the fleeting, the fugitive. Multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Benetton, Levi Strauss, and Mattel are among those who have adopted new "multilocal" systems to enhance the accumulation of relative surplus value through production strategies that involve "adapting rapidly and flexibly to local conditions."<sup>12</sup> These new structures of work are accompanied by new structures of consciousness, desire, identity. It is no coincidence that the marketing strategies for these companies'

products, which range from soft drinks to dolls, rely on the ambivalently gendered postmodern imaginary we see reiterated in films like *The Crying Game*. Tales of ambivalent subjects emanating from industrial centers and circulating across the globe offer palatable alibis that mystify the objective historical conditions, binding these new identities to the uneven satisfaction of human needs. Mythologizing a more flexible heterogender system in films like *The Crying Game* empties the ambivalent, desiring subject of its history, obscures the contradictory relation between ideology and labor, and forestalls inquiry into why more fluid pleasures and sexualities have become the signature claim of a postmodern common sense.

#### GETTING RID OF A SHIT-HOT BOWLER

The tale of sexual ambivalence is, of course, only part of the story of *The Crying Game*. Jude is not Hillary Clinton or the government lawyer of *A Few Good Men*, but an IRA terrorist. That the political tale is finally just a backdrop for a story of sexual intrigue is both a familiar convention of Hollywood cinema and an index of one of the ways sexuality can function in late capitalism. Fascination with transvestism and homoerotic fantasy in the sexual tale does not so much deflect attention from another site of phallic power—colonialism—as it works to confound any relation between them. As myth, the film does not conceal its colonial context; IRA activities comprise its narrative premise. But the avowal of a seemingly more freely circulating phallus in the tale's endorsement of sexual ambivalence works mythically to disavow the legitimacy of an anticolonialist epistemology and collective affiliation and to deny the persistence of racist phallic power. I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting that the relationship between the two tales of *The Crying Game* is simply a matter of politics being absorbed by the bourgeois private sphere of sexuality. However, I do want to argue the slightly different point that renarrating the sexual tale of the film from the vantage point of neocolonial history shows up the ways Fergus's "impossible" sexual relationship with Dil and Jody serves as mythic displacement of anxieties and losses that are specific to this late phase of imperialism. From this perspective, we can see the ways the phallic economy of colonialism persists in a sexualized postcolonial guise.

In calling for a more historicized understanding of the phallus, Laura Kipnis has suggested that the relation between phallicism and colonialism is such that a disturbance of the colonial order is in a certain anal-

ogous relation to a disturbance in the phallic order (198). One way this analogy registers is in the condensation and displacement of the phallic economy of colonialism onto female sexuality as a screen allegory for “psychic wounds” occurring in other spheres. Kipnis argues that the decline of empire and accompanying shifts in geopolitical spheres of influence may now be in the first-world political unconscious such a volatile signified as to summon the figure of the woman as a mythic discursive displacement for this global crisis (197). She examines this dynamic in two historical film epics of empire, *Out of Africa* and *A Passage to India*. But her argument can be extended to more ambivalently gendered figures in other film narratives of empire (for instance, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *M Butterfly*, and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, as well as Jordan’s 1986 film *Mona Lisa*) where the signified of an unfinished, restless colonial history is displaced onto an unfixed, ambivalently gendered figure or relation.

*The Crying Game* tells the story of colonial loss from a slightly different vantage point than nostalgic epics like *Out of Africa* and *A Passage to India*, for it offers the perspective of the Irish (colonized) subject in the metropolitan center who gradually rejects the dichotomies of empire as a viable epistemology. The opposition between colonizer and colonized provides the foundation for the IRA’s actions, loyalties, and sense of national identity; it is a way of thinking Fergus—and the viewer—eventually disowns. In breaking rank with anticolonialist struggle and with his revolutionary comrades, Fergus maps out a postcolonial position.

The “post” of postcolonialism signifies the interrogation of the hierarchy colonizer-colonized as a structure of knowledge and power. Postcolonialism is not a sign for a period “after” colonialism in a linear model of history but a term for the disruption of a binary and hierarchical relation of dominance. I find it helpful to distinguish the symbolic order of postcoloniality as the symbolic order of the historical condition of neo-imperialism. Postcoloniality is the system of representations through which the “West” or “North” represents the global economic and political arrangements of neo-imperialism to itself and its comprador cultures. As with patriarchy, colonialism has not disappeared under late capitalism, it has merely taken new forms. Since the wars of independence in the former colonies in the second half of the twentieth century, the former colonizing nations—mostly industrialized, Caucasian, and technologically advanced—have not abandoned colonialism’s phallic economy but rather reconfigured and at times displaced it. “Post” marks the trace of that displacement in the symbolic order of neo-imperialism.

Sexuality has historically been a site where the reconfiguration of colonial policies has been mythologized and colonial anxieties have been played out.<sup>13</sup> One of these persistent anxieties is the possibility of anti-imperial collective resistance. As divisions of labor and sites of production fall less neatly into the three worlds schema and the demands of formerly colonized immigrants redraw the political boundaries of nationhood, one of the anxieties of the neo-imperialist state is the specter of resistance erupting “at home” from collectivities formed within and against its imaginary public sphere. Various mythic strategies serve to keep intact a new multicultural conception of “the people” that will forestall this threat. *The Crying Game*’s romantic tale coalesces several of them—fetishizing ambivalence while nonetheless transcending or naturalizing difference and displacing the possible third terms of collective subjectivity and social transformation with romantic individualism.

The ambivalent situation of the postcolonial subject has been touted as a dangerous supplement to the inside-outside paradigm of colonialism, a situation that troubles any easy coordination of national affiliations with colonizer-colonized status.<sup>14</sup> In many ways the principal figures of *The Crying Game* are intelligible as this sort of postmodern subject. Despite its indulgence of playfully indeterminate postcolonial identities, the film’s political tale has no trouble demonizing the IRA. Early on, Fergus’s humane treatment of Jody is received by his comrades as a suspect sign of weakness, even betrayal. As Fergus increasingly sets the moral standard for the viewer, Peter and Jude appear more and more unfeeling and ruthless. We are invited to see only their rough treatment of Jody, their assassination attempt against the British judge, and Jude’s retaliation against Fergus and Dil. The film proves Jody’s distinction between Fergus and his “people” to be true: the IRA are “all tough, undeluded motherfuckers.” Although we know that Fergus does not really betray the cause—he is kept from his appointed post when Dil ties him to the bed—this knowledge makes little difference in the tale’s assessment of the IRA. When Dil shoots Jude the villain has been removed. The limited information we are given on the Irish Republican Army rehearses familiar stereotypes of terrorism. Like members of the IRA splinter group in *Patriot Games* who train in the Libyan desert and the IRA prisoner of *In the Name of the Father*, their objectives and extreme measures seem obviously fanatical—because their history and rationale remain entirely opaque. It is significant that both of these examples pit collective political alliances against nuclear family kinship ties in order to devalue the legitimacy of the former. In *The*

*Crying Game* the audience demonizes the IRA not just because it rehearses already well-known codes for terrorists, and the IRA in particular, but because the standards of moral worth gathering around Fergus, the main focalizer, endorse Anglo values that are meant to seem obviously “universal.”

While Fergus never articulates an alternative credo, we can stitch it together from his various actions—in his kindness to Jody, in his attention to the person as opposed to the collective, and in the tale of the scorpion and the frog that he repeats at the end of the film. That he abandons the IRA’s nationalist objectives and pursues reparations to one British soldier endorses an individualism that purports to transcend political, national, sexual, even racial differences. As the primary focalizer of the film, his values guide the viewer. His turn to England situates him and us less and less in the position of insurgent colonialist and more and more in the familiar dominant liberal way of knowing.

It is no accident, then, that the state finally protects Fergus’s stance since his perspective and the state’s are much alike. Narrative closure occurs by way of the state’s intervention—Fergus is arrested and goes to jail—and as a result, both heterosexual and imperial imaginaries are kept, albeit tenuously, intact. Justice has indeed been served—Fergus expiates his crime against Jody, the state suppresses one more outlaw, and the impossible romantic couple is safely managed. Above all, any political relation among colonized collectivities has been forestalled.

The ideological pressure to forfeit identification with and across colonized collectivities is one of the historical conditions of postcoloniality.<sup>15</sup> In her rewriting of the psychoanalytic account of identity formation, Judith Butler argues that gender identity involves a process of incorporating a lost identification with the same sex, a loss that is literalized on the heterogendered body. The disavowal of this loss results in an encrypting fantasy that deadens the body, masks its genealogy, and produces the body as naturalized. Much as Kipnis does with psychoanalytic feminism’s limited concept of the phallus, we can translate Butler’s insights into a historical frame and renarrate them in terms of the dynamics of postcoloniality’s mythic identity formation.

One of the mythic traces of postcoloniality is the encrypting or incorporation of the loss of colonized collectivities in sexualized bodies and impossible relationships. Hanif Kureishi’s novels and films can be read from this vantage point, I think, as can Jordan’s earlier film, *Mona Lisa*, and Fergus’s relationship to Jody and Dil. From the vantage point of the dominant metropolitan culture, anxieties over the loss of imperial phallic



power are often displaced onto diseased or degenerate women or foreigners. *The Crying Game*'s quasi-art film conventions and seeming anticolonial perspective give this myth a slightly different twist. Here postcolonial losses register in "impossible" sexual relationships that purport to suspend binary difference by playing with ambivalent genders and biracial affiliations. But within this tale of evaporating difference, a critical renarration can detect a hetero and racially gendered neocolonial imaginary. We come to know the humanist individualism of the main focalizer, Fergus, through the lens of a heterogendered imaginary that regulates the circulation of the phallus and disciplines his and Dil's "ambivalent" sexualities. Similarly, the seemingly free-floating phallic power of postcoloniality is distributed along an asymmetrical racial axis that also limits the circulation of power.

In describing the tale of the film, reviewers often fail to mention race at all or comment that race is not a factor in it.<sup>16</sup> The assertion that racial differences don't matter indicates how successfully the color of gender has been naturalized in this postcolonial romance. An already familiar racialized gender system is inscribed in the heterosexual imaginary that structures the relationship between Fergus and Dil. As a black woman, Dil "obviously" has less phallic power than Fergus; her services to him sexually and otherwise and her dependence on him are in this sense doubly allowable. Making this black woman a transvestite neutralizes the cultural threat posed by black immigrants and by miscegenation especially. Dil's potentially dangerous sexuality and her fertility are non-issues.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it is not just the codes of R and X ratings in the United States that forbid Dil an erect penis in the unveiling scene. It is a necessity of postcolonialism that the effect of a black man's penis in a white man's face be softened.

This requirement is also enacted in Jody's emasculation, which can't be separated from his position as formerly colonized subject. Jody is both soldier and cricket player, but he is not the standard masculine version of either. Like most others in a "volunteer" army, he enlisted because "it was a job." Hardly the staunch loyalist, he finds himself in Northern Ireland wondering, "What the fuck am I doing here anyway" in "the only place in the world they call you nigger to your face?" But we see him exclusively as hostage and cricket player—never in uniform. And it is as cricketer that he is most mythologized in Fergus's homoerotic dreams. There are several oddities about Jody as dreamy icon of the black cricketer, all of them, I would argue, the effects of postcolonial mythic displacements. First of all,

Jody's physique — just shy of fat — is far from the muscular and trim bodies of the cricket players that people the British national imaginary. Just as the image of the black British soldier mythologizes the West Indian as loyal colonial subject, the fleshy homoerotic sexual charge that gathers around the image of Jody as cricketer empties out the phallic threat West Indian cricket has historically posed to Britain. Jody tells Fergus, "Well, in Antigua cricket's the black man's game. The kids play it from the age of two. My daddy had me throwing googlies from the age of five. Then we moved to Tottenham and it was something different. . . . Toff's game there. But not at home."

Jody's story effectively erases the fraught emergence of cricket as a black man's game in the United Kingdom and its function as a vehicle for empire and neocolonial resistance. Like membership in the British military, during the first half of the twentieth century playing cricket "proved you were part of the English design" (Searle 1990, 32). From 1928, when West India played its first test match against England, until the 1960s, when the first black captain led the international side, that design meant a sport managed from Westminster, one in which only white men were appointed captains by the West Indian cricketing hierarchy. In *Beyond a Boundary*, his classic statement of the link between emergent nationalism, anticolonial struggle, and sporting culture, C. L. R. James documents the Caribbean-wide campaign that led to the appointment of Frank Worrell as first black captain of the West Indian cricket team. During the 1960s a cricket of resistance erupted in the Caribbean along with nationalist liberation struggles. By the 1980s this resistance had consolidated into the West Indian domination of world cricket through the batting of Antiguan Viv Richards and others. As the treatment of players like Richards in the British press and playing fields demonstrates, "the prospect of an exceptionally fast Caribbean man with a cricket ball carries the same threat as a rebellious, anti-imperial black man with a gun; they want him suppressed, disarmed" (Searle 1990, 38).<sup>18</sup> The symbolic threat that gathers around the virile black athlete is fed by the fantasy that this virility might rise up elsewhere.

Any imaginary threat that might gather around the black cricketer in Britain is disarmed by cricket's role in the relationship between Jody and Fergus. It is significant that cricket seals the bond of friendship between the two soldiers and that its discussion is sparked by one of the film's only explicit acknowledgments of racism. When Jody repeats the racist epithet hurled at him in Ireland and explains it's "no use telling them I come from Tottenham," Fergus's reply — "And you play cricket?" — indicates the

ways cricket here serves to mediate and neutralize the phallic economies of race and national identity. Playful banter about whether hurling or cricket is the better sport obscures the contradictory position of the West Indian cricketer and displaces both a charged colonial encounter and a potential counter-colonial affiliation onto the homoerotics of sport. It is to a great extent because Jody is more a sportsman than a British soldier that Fergus (and the audience) comes to bond with him. It is only after Jody announces, “So when you come to shoot me, Paddy, remember you’re getting rid of a shit-hot bowler” that Fergus tells him his name. Later, interfaced with the “crying game” of his romance with Dil, cricket continues to be the medium for Fergus’s connection to Jody and his new identity as a Brit. White cricket players across from the construction site where he works invite us to see sport more as an activity separate from work than as a site of imperial power. Fergus even participates vicariously in this game one day by imitating the players’ moves. While his boss’s reprimand (“As long as you don’t think you’re at Lords!”) is a faint reminder of cricket’s imperial hierarchy, this history is erased in the dreamy icon of Jody in his white flannels.

Cricket carries, then, a layered mythic and imaginary investment as a discursive field through which colonized subjects are incorporated. In the tale of *The Crying Game* this other game constitutes a “sexual alibi” whereby the “formerly” colonized subject is encrypted into the social imaginary in a way that “masks his genealogy.” After Dil is disclosed as a transvestite, the cricket field provides the backdrop for her reincorporation into the heterosexual imaginary; the workers’ catcalls as she walks across the field signal their recognition of a “real woman.” When the drama is all played out and Fergus looks one final time at the photo of Jody in his flannels, he tells him, “You should have stayed at home.” Whether the referent of this ambivalent signifier of national identity is Antigua or Britain seems hardly to matter, for the difference between Antiguan—or Fenian for that matter—and Brit, between old home and new, have all evaporated as the disarming image of a “shit-hot bowler” from Antigua is incorporated into the erotics of a transnational postcolonial imaginary.

Regardless of whether *The Crying Game*’s commercial success is finally the effect of its appeal to straight audiences, its sexualized postcolonial myth can’t entirely be separated from a global symbolic economy that is increasingly transnational and transsexual. That the gender-bending of heterosexuality and homosexuality has become globalized is one of the historical

conditions of the film's possibility. Computer technology, satellite communications, and the general mobility of fast capitalism have enhanced and accompanied the available range of sexual "choices," spectacles, and spaces across the world. Contemporary gay culture and postmodern patriarchy are both certainly part of this. Gay tourism, disco, political literature, magazines, organizations, and films have become more international than ever. At the same time, they circulate in the global marketplaces of late capitalism within and against the metropolitan gender-flexing of postmodern patriarchy's images of transnational sexuality. (One example of the marketing of transsexual, transnational identities was Benetton's *Colors* magazine.) The globalization of homo- and transsexuality takes place within the limits of metropolitan Euro-American geopolitics. There are certainly many countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Arab sector, where this "globalization" has hardly occurred (Plummer 17). But the success of the religious right's campaigns against homosexuals in the name of "family" among working-class, Latino, black, and Asian populations in metropolitan centers like New York City indicates that while the "transnational" reach of a more flexible sex-gender system emanates from the industrialized centers, it does not pervade them or preclude the successful political manipulation of a rigid conservative heterosexual imaginary as a scapegoat for the frustrations incurred by racism, poverty, and institutional neglect.<sup>19</sup>

Like the eroticized inventions of Orientalism and of Afro-Caribbean peoples that typified earlier phases of colonialism, many of the transnational flows of cultural representation constitute the new imperial myths of the age of information. Cultural texts like *The Crying Game* that trouble national identities have a wide appeal in the United States and Britain in part because they offer cognitive maps for negotiating national identity crises by reconfiguring them within a new yet familiar framework. Following the Second World War, the world's imperial powers were transformed by the aftershocks of their earlier colonial encounters. The waves of postwar immigration to the imperial centers, including in England the influx of large numbers of nonwhite people from Africa and the Caribbean, pressured old conceptions of national identity. Postmodern notions of identity, including multiculturalism, have deployed a variety of strategies to assimilate immigrant subjects into the social fabric of cosmopolitan late capitalism. Among them are the strategies of incorporation I have discussed in *The Crying Game*.

The heterosexual imaginary and the postcolonial imaginary are two "scattered hegemonies" through which colonial subjects are articulated in

terms of transnational, ambivalent postmodern identities.<sup>20</sup> This is to say they both participate in naturalizing “global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination and legal-judicial oppression on multiple levels” in many social formations (Grewal and Kaplan 17). They also inflect and intersect with “global gay formations”<sup>21</sup> and global racial hierarchies that are differently articulated and resisted depending on where they circulate. The fact that metropolitan cultural texts like *The Crying Game* are intelligible across national boundaries indicates the transnational availability of certain structures in dominance through which they are read. Reading against its obvious tale is not just a matter of reclaiming a suppressed political meaning but an effort to make visible the history of these structures in dominance and their particular articulations in order to interrupt and recast one of the major vehicles for the material production of reality — seeing films.

#### MATERIALIZING REALITY

Theories of sexuality, like film, can also function mythically to the extent that they empty the representation of reality of its history. I want to close by turning to the work of Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler, whose thinking on drag, romance, and the politics of sexual representation reinforces in the domain of cultural theory the mythology of postmodern ambivalence we see in *The Crying Game*. The intersections among these texts and writers are noteworthy. Žižek has written an essay on *The Crying Game*, and Butler includes in *Bodies That Matter* a sustained critique of Žižek. Both have been touted as two of the foremost contemporary theorists of desire. Both are known for the range of their readings—drawing as freely on Hegel, Marx, Lacan, Freud, and Irigaray as on popular culture, and in Žižek’s case especially, on film. And both, though from different vantage points, are applauded for their conceptions of identity as ambivalent and performative.

In other respects, however, these two may seem an unlikely pair, not the least because Butler has launched a rigorous critique of Žižek. Žižek is of interest to Butler because they both see identity as an unstable and performative practice and both promote a post-marxist radical democracy. But she contends that despite these democratic affiliations, Žižek puts forward a way of seeing and knowing (sexual difference, gender, romantic love, nationalist struggles, the Real) that is finally quite conservative. I aim

to suggest, however, that while Butler critiques Žižek's idealist notion of the Real—a reading that could by extension apply to his essay on *The Crying Game*—her own understanding of the materiality of ambivalent, performative identities collaborates with his more reactionary standpoint to the extent that both empty history, and the history of late capitalism in particular, from cultural representation.

In his essay “From Courtly Love to *The Crying Game*,” Žižek promotes a gender-flexible, performative, and stylized subject that is nonetheless wedded to the myths of contractual individualism and patriarchal heteronormativity.<sup>22</sup> Žižek reads *The Crying Game* as “the ultimate variation on the motif of courtly love,” a form of human interaction, he contends, that has persisted in a fairly undifferentiated way since the thirteenth century and whose “logic still defines the parameters within which the two sexes relate to each other” (1993, 95). For Žižek, the perseverance of the matrix of courtly love bears witness to sexual difference as a Real that resists symbolization. In courtly love, sexual relationship is condemned to remain an asymmetrical nonrelationship in which the Lady functions as an inaccessible object—a sort of “black hole” or lack, a traumatic otherness designated by Lacan through the Freudian term *das Ding*—the Thing—around which the subject's desire is structured. The “impossible love” between Fergus and Dil, emblemized in the final scene of *The Crying Game*, where Fergus, now in prison for Dil and divided from her by a glass partition, reiterates the game of courtly love in which the object of desire is rendered inaccessible even as the love itself is unconditional. For Žižek, Fergus and Dil's love “is absolute precisely insofar as it transgresses not only the barriers of class, religion, and race (in today's ‘permissive’ epoch, all these barriers are obsolete) but also the ultimate barrier of sexual orientation” (1993, 107). As Žižek sees it, this is the film's charm—that it does not denounce heterosexual love but rather renders the circumstances in which it can retain its unconditional character (1993, 107).

Žižek rewrites the Lady in the tradition of courtly love as an emblematic figure for the Real, the fundamental concept in his neo-idealist, Lacanian intervention into historical materialism. In this narrative, the absent cause of the symbolic order is not the objective material contradictions engendered by the capitalist mode of production, but an impossible *jouissance*, the trauma that cannot be represented yet gives rise to an indelible inconsistency in the symbolic field (1994, 31). Like Lacan, Žižek contends that this founding, almost ontological negativity lingers as a symptom in the formation of the subject and constitutes an ambivalent,

never-coherent identification. By unHINGING them from the social, Žižek's concept of the Real reifies the contradictions and incoherences traversing subjectivity. Indeed, by reducing the absent cause of the Symbolic to a universal and irrecuperable negativity, he erases any historical connection between the formation of the symbolic order or consciousness and social struggle. Contradictions, gaps, crises in the representation of race or gender or sexual difference are ascribed to the irruption of this Real and their relation to socially produced relations erased.

Perpetually undermined by the Real, sexual identity, like all identity, is for Žižek inherently ambivalent. But because this ambivalence is the effect of an unexplainable universal difference, it has no history, and through the ahistorical metaphor of courtly love it is condensed into a private, queerly heterosexual frame. Elsewhere in his work, Žižek contends that the castration threat establishes oedipal differentiations and the Law of the Father at a prediscursive level. In her chapter of *Bodies That Matter*, "Arguing with the Real," Butler takes Žižek to task for using psychoanalysis in the service of the heteronormativizing law it interrogates. Butler points out that the Law of the Father is premised on a patriarchal gender hierarchy that naturalizes heterosexuality and is ultimately asocial (194). She astutely details the consequences of these presuppositions for men and women and relates them to Žižek's defensive posture against feminism.

Extending Butler's critique to Žižek's reading of *The Crying Game*, we might say that his metaphor of courtly love not only transcends history and social change, but in doing so, much like the myth of sexual ambivalence in the tale of the film, also naturalizes ambivalence into the familiar asymmetrically gendered heterosexual imaginary. Žižek insists that it would be a mistake to identify the Lady in the courtly love scenario — this unconditional ideal of the woman — with "the everyday 'tamed' woman with whom sexual relationship may seem possible" (1989, 96). Keep in mind, he tells us, "this is a man's fantasy" (1989, 96). But his essay endorses and indeed celebrates this "man's fantasy" as the authentic, idealized rendering of love. Beginning with the premise that courtly love still defines the parameters within which "the two sexes *relate to each other*" [emphasis mine], his reading forcefully reiterates and endorses all of the salient features of the heterosexual imaginary that structure the film's romance. The "two sexes" are a given; heterosexuality is naturalized and universalized in the veneration of a timeless sexual difference; the traumatic effects of capitalism and imperialism on the economy of desire are erased, and an underlying misogyny is endorsed.<sup>23</sup>

Even more severely than in mainstream reviews of the film, in Žižek's reading of *The Crying Game* the political tale is almost entirely swallowed up by the romance tale. Consequently, its marginal irruption in his text is especially significant. In one brief paragraph at the end of his essay, Žižek asserts that the film, much as de Sade does, demands sexual revolution as the consistent accomplishment of political revolution (1993, 107). By this he means that the "vertiginous revolution in his most intimate personal attitudes" Fergus is compelled to confront is also an important site of struggle for Irish republicans (1993, 107). But what exactly is revolutionary about romance as Žižek sees it? If sexual difference is "that which resists symbolization, the traumatic point which is always missed but nonetheless always returns" (1993, 96), it would seem that this impossible Real would inhibit—and indeed guarantee the failure of—any political revolution. Precisely because Žižek understands the social as fundamentally psychic, his glancing recognitions of the public sphere are, like this one, reabsorbed into psychodynamics. Sexuality and sociality in this schema are fundamentally private, and it is in this sense that the metaphors of courtly love and sadomasochism function as mythic explanations of the radically ambivalent interpersonal sexual relations he celebrates.

For Žižek, sadomasochism is a historical explanatory trope for two dimensions of sexuality that never finally cohere—a public, communal relation and a private, contractual, performative one. Sadism is a figure for the splitting of the law into its ego-ideal—the symbolic order that regulates social life—and its obscene, superego reverse (1989, 98). The deepest bond that holds together a community, Žižek argues, is the guilty identification with the law's suspension or transgression. In a footnote, he illustrates this notion through the example of the U.S. military's resistance to lifting the ban on homosexuals; the open acknowledgment of homosexuality would sabotage the perverted underside of heterosexual machismo that forms the very axis of the military community (1989, 8). But because both guilty association and community spirit are ahistorical symbolic figures, the question of how—or even if—these relations should or could be changed is moot. Instead, masochism's staged sexual game becomes the idealized postmodern alternative.

The element of theatricality in the gender reversals of the typical masochistic scenario (man-servant and woman-dominatrix) concedes the fictionality of the identities it enacts and flexes the gender component of the heterosexual matrix. In other words, the masochistic scenario recognizes that the phallus is permanently insecure. Žižek is particularly interested in



lesbian S/M because it enacts the circulation of the phallus. So-called lesbian sadomasochism, he argues, is more subversive than “the usual soft lesbianism which elevates tender relationship between women in contrast to the aggressive-phallic male penetration” because the contractual form of lesbian S/M mimics “aggressive phallic heterosexuality” (1993, 99). At the same time, however, Žižek’s endorsement of the performative phallic lesbian as the new “real” woman is founded on the premise that sexuality is a private/psychic/symbolic ritual traversed by the irrecuperable difference of desire. Consequently, it functions much like the mythic tale of *The Crying Game* to empty the representation of ambivalence of its history. As my earlier argument implies, the history of the recoding of values around the sign “woman”—passive, soft, weak, versus aggressive phallic, penetrating—can be read as one effect of the impact of more flexible class divisions on the formation of postmodern patriarchy. The signature lesson of postmodern patriarchy is, however, precisely that a circulating phallus—even among women and especially in private—does not necessarily mean that capitalism’s oppressive and exploitative use of patriarchal structures against “softies” of all sorts has ended.

An important component of the performative postmodern masochism Žižek endorses is its private contractual dimension. That Žižek values the performative *and* the contractual subject is on the face of it a bit of an anomaly. At the same time, this contradiction articulates quite well the postmodern bourgeois myth of *The Crying Game*. Sexuality is a private and fleeting ritual. Mythologized outside of history and social institutions, “our most intimate desires become objects of contract and composed negotiation . . . [but] once the game is over, the [lover] again adopts the attitude of a respectful bourgeois” (1993, 99). Exchange between free and equal subjects—which is, significantly, the only alternative to the courtly model Žižek is able to imagine—can be achieved sexually only in the form of the masochist’s contract, “in which, paradoxically the very form of equal contract serves to establish the relationship of inequality and domination” (1993, 108). What better paradigm for love in late capitalism?

In sum, Žižek’s reading of *The Crying Game* is about much more than this film. It promotes a gender-flexible, performative, and stylized subject still wedded to the myths of contractual individualism and patriarchal heteronormativity. It valorizes a way of seeing and knowing (sexual difference, gender, romantic love, nationalist struggles, the Real) that is, despite his affiliation with a project for “radical democracy,” quite conservative.

Drawing heavily on Lacan's theory of the subject (and much less explicitly on Althusser's), Žižek contends that the subject is constituted by a founding foreclosure.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the subject is never coherent or self-identical. What remains "outside" is a defining negativity. For Žižek, this negativity is the universal effect of an invariant Law, the trauma of castration. This is what he calls the Real, and it appears as a contingency or lack that prevents coherent identification in any discursive formation. As Butler points out, however, this Law is premised on a patriarchal gender hierarchy that naturalizes heterosexuality and is ultimately asocial (1993, 194). For Žižek, the castration threat establishes oedipal differentiations at a prediscursive level. Consequently, the Law of the Father—which is the effect of a social and historical symbolic order—comes to be somehow prior to discourse. Žižek's contingency is saturated with social significations that have become reified. Butler's critical reading astutely details the consequences of these reified presuppositions for men and women and relates them to Žižek's defensive posture against feminism.

As part of her effort to counter Žižek by historicizing the process of identity formation, Butler puts forward an alternative understanding of the real as the *de-symbolized unspeakable*. As she conceptualizes it, the foreclosure that remains "outside" symbolic identifications is not a realm prior to discourse but rather consists of signifiers that have been separated off from symbolization. This separation or foreclosure of particular signifiers is a mechanism for policing the borders of intelligibility, and it occurs in order to avert the trauma certain significations have been invested with. What Butler is less clear about is why this foreclosure and policing occur. What is the history, the materiality, the cause of the trauma coalescing around some signifiers?

Butler's starting point here is certainly not Žižek's. Her conception of identity as performative displaces the contractual, willful subject and any trace of sexual difference as an entity prior to discourse. In this respect, her theoretical framework is more progressive than conservative—that is, it is compatible with a sexual politics aimed at social change. But there is a troubling circularity to her conception of the materiality of discourse that ultimately limits her effort to historicize identity. If discourse materializes subjects and bodies at the same time it secures the borders of materiality, what exactly is its materiality?

The answer Butler provides takes her to Laclau and Mouffe's project for radical democracy. They too argue for a social and material notion of identity. Both Butler and Žižek accept Laclau and Mouffe's starting point

that the social is founded on a fundamental antagonism. For Žižek this fundamental impossibility is the Real, the kernel resisting symbolic integration, the void or discontinuity opened in reality by the trauma of castration. In Žižek's Lacanian schema this founding antagonism ("the sublime object of ideology") marks the site of an impossible referent in language and identification, a "surplus" that eludes retrieval (1989, 50). In an effort to rewrite Žižek's asocial notion of the difference internal to identity, Butler returns to Laclau's argument that the constitutive social antagonism that forestalls any coherent identity is founded in the sign's indeterminacy. In this case, the referent is suspended not because it is essentially impossible (à la Žižek) but because it is signified in a set of differential relations that is always open to resignification. For Butler, this openness of language in the social practice of discourse constitutes the historicity and materiality of social life. Against Žižek, Butler argues that the phantasmatic investment of identification needs to be thought in relation to the historicity of signification, and she even employs the term "ideology" to convey this historicity. But because the referent is absorbed into discourse, historicity and ideology for Butler finally apply only to symbolic processes.

Still, there are hints in her essay of another way of understanding historicity and materiality. They appear in statements like this one: "If 'women' within political discourse can never fully describe that which it names, that is . . . because the term marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity" (1993, 218). Here a sign—"women"—can never coherently secure its referent because "*the term marks a dense intersection of social relations.*" What is the materiality of these social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity? They are the sign's historical referents, social relations like imperial appropriations of land, law, and labor or the violent enactment of patriarchal privilege over bodies, communal reproduction, work, and pleasure. Butler asserts that these social relations involve exclusions that haunt the terms of identity, the "violences that a partial concept enforces" (1989, 221). But she avoids affirming that these "violences" constitute a dimension of the materiality and historicity of reality that are not entirely encompassed by discourse or signification.

In my reading of *The Crying Game* I have argued that we might think of the film as a myth that both indulges and closes down the indeterminacy of the sign "woman." While the film's tale smooths over the crisis of indeterminacy that the transvestite foments in the culturally dominant meanings of "woman," we can still see against the grain of the tale—in a

way that makes visible the dense intersection of social relations fused in the romantic figure of the British West Indian transvestite and her lovers. My reading of the film implicitly claims that the materiality of this indeterminacy and the more closed phantasmatic investments its tale secures are the effect not only of signification or chains of iteration, but also of a historicity of social struggle over changing divisions of work and imperial policy. In other words, the sign's historicity involves social relations that are more than a matter of discourse and norms. The potential openness and provisional fixing of signification and discourse are also the effect of persistent social forces like public patriarchy and neo-imperialism. These encompass divisions of land, work, wealth, and political power that are made intelligible through discourses (like the eroticized discourse of cricket, for instance) but whose materiality (the persistent exploitation and disenfranchisement of black immigrant peoples in Britain being one aspect of it) cannot be completely explained in terms of discursive reiterations. Those unspeakable signifiers foreclosed from the symbolic because they qualify to unravel the subject are historically and systematically produced. By this I mean not only that their status as unspeakable is not fixed but also that the social relations of power that produce them — capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism — are not entirely contingent either.

When I argued earlier that *The Crying Game* teaches lessons about being a “real” woman, I used “real” to signify the ways the imaginary operations of myth draw on a symbolic order whose limits are historically organized by social relations like divisions of labor and state policy. If this “real” promises unity but never succeeds in achieving it, this is not, as Žižek argues, because of a universal and irrecuperable lack or “existential void.” Nor is the materiality of the exclusions that haunt the claims of identity just a matter of discourse, as Butler for the most part claims. *The Crying Game* secures its mythic “real woman” into the heterosexual imaginary only by desymbolizing the masculinized woman, the phallic neocolonial, the transsexual, the lesbian, the collective political subject. Their exclusion from the “real” is not just the effect of an accumulation of cited discourses or a chain of prior usages. In claiming that late capitalism's neo-imperialism and public patriarchy are the unspoken persistent social structures, the historical conditions of possibility and of material production that underwrite and are in turn affected by this mythic formulation, I am not arguing that these social totalities are in any way the simple or reductive origins for meaning. The intersection of social relations in the textuality of culture is always dense and multiply mediated. I am arguing, however, for a mode of

seeing and reading that sets out to make visible the connections between the symbolic economy of subjectivation performed by increasingly transnational commodities like commercial film and the persistent hierarchical global structures of power and labor that condition them.

Materializing the tales of popular film is an oppositional political practice of disidentification, which I will explain further in chapter 7. Disidentification is not the failure of phantasmatic investment because of an irrecoverable prior loss (Žižek). Nor, like the poststructuralist “radical democrats,” does it assert the instability of all meaning as the basis for a “more democratizing affirmation of internal difference.” Rather, disidentification with the cultural obvious is the starting point for a radical renarration of contemporary cultural texts that seizes on the differences internal to them in order to make visible their historical conditions of possibility. To disidentify with a rapidly reconfiguring cultural obvious that draws on postcolonial and postmodern epistemologies is to claim a vantage point for knowing that is itself an increasingly excluded, barely speakable, critical knowledge. Such a standpoint recognizes that full democracy will require social transformations that span the organization of material life. In the face of postcolonial and postmodern patriarchal celebrations of ambivalence, difference within, and gaming, the disidentifying viewer asks, “Why this sort of subject here?” “Why now?” and speculates whether those differences that have been rendered unspeakable—the difference between rich and poor, hetero and homo, white and black, neocolonizer and colonized—have indeed disappeared or just become the shades and shadows of late capitalist myth.

# DESIRE AS A CLASS ACT

## Lesbian in Late Capitalism

### THE CULTURAL TURN: FROM CLASS POLITICS TO SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE

The opportunities in industrialized sectors of the world for women to live and work independent of traditional kinship ties have created the conditions where it is possible for more and more women to refuse marriage and to shape our lives around affective, sexualized bonds with one another. On the one hand, lesbian relationships, identities, and desires are more possible and allowed—increasingly destigmatized, incorporated into the mainstream, and even glamorized in popular film, television, and advertising. More and more young women in their teens and twenties are experimenting openly in sexual relationships with other women (and I think “experimenting” may be the key word here). Nonetheless, even in youth culture, to identify as “lesbian” is still to risk derision (as opposed to claiming the more palatable “bisexual”), and lesbians are still persistently “overlooked” in social policy, social services, health care, and other areas of social life.

The historical situation of lesbians has a specificity that is unacknowledged by the categories “queer” and “gay.” Despite the troubling of neatly

bifurcated hetero- or homogendered identities by sex-radicals and queers, the organization of consciousness, labor, and state power still persistently appeals to the divisions between man and woman, hetero- and homosexual. Being (taken for) a man continues to offer more social value and opportunity than being (taken for) a woman. Queer transgender outlaws who defy any simple identification as man or woman do indeed threaten the social arrangements that a tightly policed heteronorm traditionally secures. But most female heterosexual resisters are still historically positioned as women — who may be more or less queer — and as such we bear a collective identity whose social consequences are more oppressive than those that fall upon gay men. As women, most lesbians are subject to the gendered division of labor and to myriad instances of patriarchal oppression and violence. Certainly, patriarchy punishes gay men, too, for violating heterogendered norms, and the repercussions for these transgressions can be brutally oppressive. Gay bashing and sexual harassment hedge the lives of many gay men. But to the extent that they are also treated as men, gay men can — and many do — reap more social advantages than lesbians.

This situation has been complicated by the recruitment of middle-class women, many of us lesbian, into the professional workforce in postmodern patriarchy's most advanced capitalist sectors. Historically, lesbian identifications and cultures have been enabled by changes in the division of labor that accompanied industrialization and that allowed women in urban settings, especially, to break out of the circuit of heterosexual exchange mandated by the division of labor in traditional kinship alliances. Lesbian practices and identities have never been wholly outside or oppositional to the dominant social organization of labor and sex, however, and many of them are increasingly being absorbed by capital's expanding markets. Since the late nineteenth century, lesbians have been both public spectacles and invisible social subjects, represented in the discourses of science, romance, and pornography as fascinating sexual agents, at the same time as we continually hover on the threshold of invisibility. The figure of the lesbian in feminist theory reiterates these contradictions, at times excluded or dismissed as a threat to feminist credibility and legitimacy, more recently celebrated as the *ne plus ultra* of female sexual desire.

In the 1990s in the United States, when gender-bending became fashionable and queers garnered a certain legitimacy in avant-garde and celebrity circles, the lesbian, too, gained some prominence, even in the academy. An enormous number of books on lesbian topics have been published recently by distinguished presses, many authored by professors working at prestigious

universities and colleges.<sup>1</sup> Most recently many of them take as their focus the problem of lesbian desire. I am not so much interested in applauding the fact that lesbians are more visible in the academy now or that lesbian desire is a topic of debate, as I am in questioning what makes this visibility possible. In the recent flurry of lesbian celebrity, one enabling condition often left unsaid is its class affiliation. The stories of identity and desire theorists tell, like all narratives, have the effect of advancing forms of consciousness, or what I will call *subject-effects*. Inquiring into the subject-effects of recent narratives of lesbian identity and desire is a step toward coming to understand their class dimension. When I say this, however, I am actually making a much larger claim, and that is that there are material connections that link academic knowledges, their impact on the formation of consciousness, and class.

It should be clear by now that when I use the concept “class” I do so in a very specific way, as a marxist feminist. For marxist feminism, class is not a matter of status or cultural codes—the clothes you wear (silk, leather, or synthetics), where you shop (at Bloomingdale’s or at Wal-Mart), or where you live—although class is often used in this sense as a category that marks differences in consumption. Marxist feminists understand class as objective historical social relationships of property ownership and labor that capitalism requires, relationships between those who own and profit and those whose surplus labor makes that profit possible. For marxist feminists, this division between owners and workers so basic to capitalism is reproduced, though never simply or directly, through the forms of consciousness that legitimize, naturalize, or conceal this arrangement. The complex mediations through which class knowledges are formed mean that knowledges that seem to have very little if anything to do with class can represent the interests of a ruling bloc quite indirectly. One of the favored ways is to offer as natural or obvious forms of identity that maintain the supposedly “free” possessive individual—that is, the premier subject form capitalist commodity production and consumption rely on. Even though not all knowledges reproduce the interests of the bourgeois ruling bloc, nonetheless, the “free” individual, now updated and postmodernized, remains the most pervasive subject-effect in late capitalism, her autonomy often concealing the class history to which her tenuous freedom is tied.

Keeping this concept of class and its relation to subject-effects in mind, I want to consider some of the ways class has featured in the history of U.S. feminist sexual politics and more recently in feminist theories of desire.

In 1975, addressing a Socialist Feminist conference at Antioch College in Ohio, Charlotte Bunch asserted that any politics aimed at confronting



heterosexuality would also have to be fundamentally class politics. She argued that for lesbians the “material experience of class realities produces real commitment to struggle and to the class question not out of idealism but as integral to our survival.” “Idealism,” she added, “can be abandoned at any time. Survival cannot” (180). The issue Bunch raised—that “real commitment to class struggle” is fundamental to feminist sexual politics—was axiomatic for many early second-wave feminists. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the late seventies were an important transition time in the feminist struggle in the United States. Groups like the Furies, of which Charlotte Bunch was a member, were speaking and writing about areas of women’s life experience that had never been heard, and they were doing so in ways that were trying to explore the connections between women’s oppression and the power relations that organized capitalism and imperialism. But they were also translating marxist and socialist feminist concepts like “class” into a politics whose premises were more culturally focused. I am not interested in a nostalgic recuperation of the debates that differentiated radical, socialist, and cultural feminists on the class question, but I am interested in refusing to forfeit concepts whose usefulness has yet to be really developed for feminist struggles around sexual identity. One of these is class.

The late seventies and early eighties were a pivotal time for feminism in the United States because they marked a moment of transition when feminism, along with other wings of the “New Left,” was beginning to be incorporated (though not without resistance) into the professions—in universities, state agencies, NGOs, and more slowly in the private sector. Socialist and marxist thinking was under siege and was being displaced by a general turn to culture and cultural politics. The “sex wars” of the eighties mark an important turning point in this history because out of these debates the discourse of desire began to challenge critiques of patriarchal sexual politics that had been trying to forge the links between sexuality and class only a few years earlier. Radical feminism, in particular, was taken to task for unduly emphasizing sexual danger and the patriarchal heterosexual monopoly on sexuality. From this perspective, it was argued, women were seen exclusively as victims and sex was reduced to violence.<sup>2</sup> As a result, women’s sexual agency as well as nonnormative forms of sexuality went unacknowledged as sites of pleasure and political opposition. Unfortunately, affirming sexual agency and nonreproductive sexualities also often came to mean that pleasure and sexuality were unhinged from the social structures that organize them. As sexual desire moved further

onto center stage in feminist debates, historical materialism, and with it marxist feminism, came to be dismissed by many feminists as a narrow and reductive class analysis in which sexuality was at worst irrelevant or at best a textual figure or trope.<sup>3</sup> Heterosexuals, lesbians, gays, and queers, it was argued, appear across all class categories. When class was mentioned in relation to sexuality it was more often presented in the sorts of ways the Furies had treated it—as a set of cultural practices associated with a particular group but with no systemic connection to the formation of sexual identities or desires. In the ensuing decade, this thematizing approach to class and sexuality was reinforced by an energetic and widespread emphasis on identity as a cultural construction and on identity politics. In the humanities and in social theory this meant a lot of attention was being devoted to analysis of the formation of identity and desire through discourses whose connection to other facets of social life, and the division of labor especially, remained unspeakable. How these arguments have come to be taken for granted in feminist theory, their implications for contemporary theories of lesbian desire, and the alternatives they cut off are the subject of this chapter.

The same year that Charlotte Bunch made her speech in Ohio, Gayle Rubin published her now-famous essay on “The Traffic in Women.” The concept of a “sex-gender system” Rubin put forward here has become a cornerstone of feminist theory, even as her argument has been challenged or abandoned, most notably by Rubin herself. In the essay “Thinking Sex,” published almost ten years later, Rubin revokes both her concept of the sex-gender system and its historical materialist underpinnings and promotes instead a thoroughly autonomous theory of sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Because these two landmark essays delineate so clearly the drift toward increasingly atomized notions of sexuality and desire in feminist thinking on sexuality, I want to offer a reassessment of them as important pre-texts for gauging the class politics of pro-sex lesbian theories of desire.

Gayle Rubin opens “The Traffic in Women” with the argument that “the place to begin to unravel the system of relationships by which women become the prey of men is in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud” (158). Contending that marxism has failed to fully conceptualize women’s oppression, Rubin nonetheless proceeds to frame her essay in terms of its insights, beginning with Marx’s understanding of the historicity of survival and human need. Rubin admits that Marx’s labor theory of value can be elaborated to show women’s usefulness to capital as an unpaid labor force, but she claims that it does not sufficiently explain

the oppression of women, especially in societies that are not capitalist. Even if sexuality were to be included within the “historical and moral element” of the worker’s necessary wants in a free enterprise system, such an approach would still leave vast areas of sex and gender unexplained. In Engels’s *Origins of the Family*, however, Rubin finds the possibility for a theory of society that more fully integrates sexuality into social production. Engels contends that social organization is determined by the production of food, clothing, shelter, and tools, as well as the production of human beings. Rubin proposes the concept of a sex-gender system to refer to this second aspect of production, the “set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner” (Rubin 1975, 165). She reiterates this conceptual frame in the conclusion of the essay when she once again calls for a Marxian analysis of the “political economy of sex” (Rubin 1975, 204). By this she means that “in the final analysis sexual systems are always parts of total social systems and are always tied into economic and political arrangements” (Rubin 1975, 209, 207). This way of thinking sex, she tells us, is what Engels tried to do

in his effort to weave a coherent analysis of so many diverse aspects of social life. He tried to relate men and women, town and country, kinship and state, forms of property, systems of land tenure, convertibility of wealth, forms of exchange, the technology of food production, and forms of trade, to name a few, into a systematic account. (1975, 210)

While the frame of “The Traffic in Women” endorses this project, the core of its argument does not. In fact, the substance of Rubin’s analysis actually undermines the “integrated” theory she promotes with a line of thinking that so pursues the distinction between sexual and economic systems that they become virtually autonomous from one another and from the concept of social production. The first move in this direction occurs when Rubin segues from Engels back to Lévi-Strauss and Freud in order to suggest that the ultimate locus of women’s oppression lies within kinship or the traffic in women (1975, 175). Founding the analysis of sexuality on kinship as Lévi-Strauss understands it—that is, as a symbolic system of exchange—subsumes sex entirely within the domain of culture. The result, as Nancy Hartsock has argued, is an analysis that focuses primarily on relations of exchange rather than production, and in so doing abstracts the material realities of women’s lives (Hartsock 300). From this vantage

point, the historical emergence of lesbian identities and desires as a possibility for women in industrialized urban centers would be understood simply as the consequence of changing kinship arrangements. (Indeed, it is in the context of the family romance that Rubin offers the most sustained treatment of female homosexuality.) A kinship perspective obscures the changes in the division of labor globally, and the sexual division of labor in particular, that often interrupt traditional family alliances and recruit women into wage work in industrial centers where they can establish new sex-affective relationships with other women. This perspective also does not allow us to see the ways breaking the circuit of patriarchal kinship relations through these new sexual identities did not exempt some lesbians from participating in social relations of labor and institutional power in which they were able to profit at the expense of other women.

Against the urgings of her own earlier reading of Engels, Rubin claims that in order to understand the production of sexuality “we need to forget, for a while, about food, clothing, automobiles, and transistor radios” (1975, 166). Certainly, no analysis can attend to every facet of social life at the same time. But in “The Traffic in Women” forgetting *for a while* about sexuality’s relation to commodity production translates into forgetting it *entirely*, as kinship becomes the sole lens for examining the oppression of women.

When Rubin considers kinship as a symbolic exchange system, the historical and social difference between men and women is reduced to a matter of rights—rights to women that are held by men. Understanding sexuality in terms of this model of exchange effectively reduces the historical and material differences between men and women under patriarchy to cultural politics. This strategy has two effects. It forfeits the possibility of explaining how the production of sexual power relations between men and women in kinship alliances never functions as an isolated social system independent of the sexual and gendered division of labor. And it puts in place a way of thinking about the sexual subject as a subject of rights, the traditional understanding of the individual from the vantage point of free enterprise.

Both of these effects are reinforced when Rubin turns to psychoanalysis as a theory that explains how the rules of kinship are inculcated in children. Like anthropology, psychoanalysis takes as its starting point the cultural symbolic structures of kinship, but kinship defined according to the bourgeois family model. Rubin’s narrative of the oedipal scenario as an apparatus for the production of sexual subjects, including the girl’s disavowal of her (homosexual) love for her mother, circles around the topic

of lesbian sexuality, a concern that clearly underlies her reading of Freud. In keeping with her earlier analysis of the exchange of women in kinship systems, Rubin explains the circulation of the phallus within the symbolic order of the family primarily in terms of possession, property, and rights. Only those who possess the phallus have the “right to a woman” (1975, 194); “the Oedipal complex confers male rights upon the boy, and forces the girl to accommodate herself to her lesser rights” (1975, 198).

The invocation of “rights” is not an obvious or universal standpoint, however. It is a way of making sense of social actors that binds the subject to accompanying notions of property, individuality, legal power, and citizenship—in short, to a history of modernity. The link between sexuality and the right to control one’s mobility in the world and one’s relations to others is not merely the effect of the Oedipus complex or of kinship systems but of a larger network of social forces. Distilling sexuality into rights among kin eclipses this history as well as the operation of phallic power across the public-private divide in all manner of social activities that also take place in and outside the family household and that shape the child’s inauguration into the rules of a patriarchal gender system: the role of women’s domestic labor in meeting socially necessary needs, women’s exploited wage labor, and the role of patriarchal heteronorms in naturalizing these practices and in naturalizing sexual harassment, as well as domestic and media violence against women, to name only a few.

At one point in Rubin’s retelling of the castration story she briefly acknowledges the interface between kinship and other realms of social production when she asserts that kinship alliances and child care are governed by a sexual division of labor reinforced by the institution of heterosexuality. In considering the seeming arbitrariness of this arrangement, she comments,

If the sexual division of labor were such that adults of both sexes cared for children equally, primary object choice would be bisexual. If heterosexuality were not obligatory, this early love would not have to be suppressed and the penis would not be overvalued. (1975, 199)

If these causal connections now seem overly reductive, they are nonetheless important for the way they acknowledge that the production of sexual identity and desire even within kinship alliances is necessarily shaped by the political economy of labor. This glancing recognition that the formation of sexual object choice in the family is mediated by the satisfaction of

human needs through the division of labor recasts Freud's psychoanalytic story of identification and desire as well as Lévi-Strauss's notion of kinship. In Rubin's brief renarration, sexual object choice and gender identification do not originate in erotogenic drives, perceptions of lack drawn from genital comparisons, or a phallogentric symbolic order. Rather, in their specific and complex relation to the division of labor and the satisfaction of needs, sex affective production and kinship alliances are founded in a system of social relations that both includes and exceeds symbolic exchange.<sup>5</sup>

While Rubin's insight here suggests that the historicity of desire and kin does in fact exceed the universalized family romance on which psychoanalysis is premised, her conclusion that if "adults of both sexes cared for children equally, primary object choice would be bisexual" unwittingly reiterates the myth of the monadic family unit. Changing the sexual division of labor within the family would not necessarily dispel obligatory heterosexuality, especially if the sexual division of labor outside the family were not also transformed. The production of identity and desire in the family is profoundly affected by the impact of the gendered economy of labor on child care as well as the production of desire in other institutions—in the media especially, but also in schools, churches, the law, and cultural practices in general—all of which infiltrate the organization of sexual desire in the domestic arena.<sup>6</sup> Reengineering the labor of child care would counter the dominant paradigms of mothering and family, and these differences would undoubtedly register in the structures of feeling, desire, and identity that shape individual histories, but this change would not cancel out or even necessarily revise compulsory heterosexuality or the valuation of the phallus in an individual's social world "outside" the family, if such a discrete "outside" can even be said to exist.

Although the myth of mother as single-handed primary child-care provider still organizes people's lives and imaginations, in many families this is not in fact how children are raised. In many parts of the world where mothers work outside their homes, children are cared for by neighbors, aunts, and grandmothers, and more than ever in overdeveloped countries child care is a collective undertaking rather than the work of one woman. In professional middle-class households and in poor families alike, other caregivers—professional day-care staff, relatives, and baby-sitters, most of them women—now "fill in" for the birth mother, and many children typically have two or more women involved daily in their care from early infancy. But in these day-care situations and extended "families" as well as in families where child care is divided according to the nuclear

family model, the transformation of a child's needs into structures of desire and identification simply never occurs outside the mediated effects of a division of labor that crosses the public-private divide.

Rubin's retreat from thinking of sex in relation to a broader system of social production aims to liberate not just women but forms of sexual expression and human personality from the straitjacket of gender, but in so doing she also constricts the aims of feminist sexual politics to "a revolution in kinship" (1975, 199–200). I have been trying to show not only that the revolution in kinship Rubin calls for here is a limited view of the social parameters of family-households but also that no change in kinship organization is viable without also effecting broader social change. This gap between a revolution in kinship and broader social transformation raises the question of what women's lives, activities, and interests a political project that is so narrowly centered on the family and sexual expression might speak for. Rubin's attention to symbolic change and to a sexuality that can be autonomous from other aspects of social production will reach its full flowering in "Thinking Sex." That this critical focus on symbolic change is so uneasily linked in "The Traffic in Women" with her endorsement of historical materialism's systemic analysis is one of this essay's most notable contradictions, marking it as a pivotal text in the history of feminist theory.

Rubin's analysis has other notable features that also deserve some mention. She does not treat the ways family alliances under capitalism have been affected and eroded by what Foucault calls the apparatus of sexuality, by capital's changing divisions of labor, processes of commodification, or state formations. Perhaps because her examples of kinship societies are exclusively precapitalist, she does not acknowledge in any way that the history of capital accumulation relied on a political economy of race, including ideologies of racism to justify and structure labor and state power, kinship and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> However, these features of the "political economy of sex" might have been addressed through the historical materialist premise with which she begins. If Rubin does not pursue analysis of the social forces that separate sexuality from the rest of social production, if she neglects her own proposal for an analysis of sexuality that recognizes "the mutual interdependence of sexuality, economics, and politics without underestimating the full significance of each in human society" (1975, 210), this forsaken strand in her thinking nonetheless provides a useful starting point for such a project.

"Thinking Sex" does not redress these limits, however. Indeed, it exacerbates them even as she pursues the important task of widening the domain

of symbolic exchange to include sexualities that the focus on kinship and marriage in “The Traffic in Women” ignored. In doing so, this essay thoroughly abandons the basic tenet of Rubin’s earlier argument, the premise that sexuality has to be seen as an integral part of social reproduction. My own position is that this strategy—which has come to dominate theories of sexuality since the 1980s—has been debilitating to the development of a global analysis of sexuality by first-world feminists and is symptomatic of a more general abstraction of sexuality in postmodern culture.

“Thinking Sex” originally appeared in the anthology *Pleasure and Danger* (Vance), a collection of papers from the Scholar and Feminist IX Conference on sexuality at Barnard College in 1982. This conference and Rubin’s essay are watershed events in U.S. feminist theory. Both articulate a shift in feminist thought that came to be identified as the pro-sex or sex-radical position, an emergent discourse that would affect the discussion of sexuality among feminists for the next decade. Pro-sex feminists set out to create a movement that would speak as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it did against sexual danger, redirecting feminism’s attention to female sexual agency as “a fundamental right” (Vance 2, 24).

Rubin’s essay launches this project by rejecting both feminism and marxism, a gesture that marks it retrospectively as one of the earliest formulations of queer theory. An even more striking reversal in Rubin’s thinking, however, is her appeal to “lust” and “erotic taste or behavior” as the foundation of sexual desire (1984, 307–8). In this respect, the notion of sexuality “Thinking Sex” puts forward is consistent with that of other sex-radicals who posit desire as a powerful natural force or drive. This is the position taken by Dorothy Allison, Pat Califia, Amber Hollibaugh, Joan Nestle, Carole Vance, and others, a position captured by Allison’s contention that “when anyone acknowledges and acts on their desire, it does us all some good . . . it is sexual repression that warps and hurts people” (142).

In the writings of sex-radicals like Allison, who so eloquently documents the experience of poverty, when desire is naturalized as lust, it functions much like other transcendent categories to provide an ideological safe haven from the historical conditions in which sexuality is inevitably entangled. When desire is understood as lust, where lust is equated with a basic human drive, its historical production becomes invisible. More to the point of my argument, invocations of lust as a natural experience to which women have a right can limit our thinking about human agency, including sexual agency, to individual terms and so forestall the possibility of linking this aspect of human life and agency to a more collective endeavor.



Desire remains abstracted and reified, and so we are also not enabled to see that this particular form of desire is not even available to all women. That it is most accessible to those who are already materially poised to occupy the position of pleasurable, consuming subjects is a class issue. I am suggesting, in other words, that the drift in feminist theory toward celebrating sexual agency in terms of lust and pleasure is not simply a matter of feminists voicing a formerly unspeakable topic; it also marks an unfortunate missed opportunity to develop understandings of women's sexuality and agency in relation to the bigger picture of social relations under capitalism; it is, moreover, a dramatic redirection away from feminism's insistence that the forms sexuality and desire take are historically connected to the organization of human survival needs.

Clearly, the integral link Rubin proposed in "The Traffic in Women" between these two aspects of material life is being irrevocably wrenched apart in "Thinking Sex." As she sees it now, the problem with her own earlier concept of a sex-gender system is twofold: it does not distinguish between lust and gender, and it treats both as modalities of the same underlying social process (1984, 307). This "same underlying social process" would seem to be social production, the foundation of both historical materialism and socialist feminism. By 1982 the notion of social production has become for Rubin the hallmark of an undesirable totalizing theory. When she uses the phrase "totalizing theory," Rubin means one that generalizes from one aspect of social life to all others. But this criticism, which has practically become the mantra of lesbian and gay studies, is premised on a misreading of historical materialism, a misreading that is itself a product of the struggles redefining U.S. feminism then.<sup>8</sup> It simplifies socialist and marxist feminism and it confuses the founding premise of historical materialism (social production) with one aspect of its analysis of capitalism (class). As a result, in this sweeping sentence Rubin forecloses the most incisive presupposition of her own earlier theory of sex-gender.

In reviewing the history of this essay ten years later in an interview with Judith Butler, Rubin commented that she sees "Traffic" as an intervention into both marxism and feminism. Her retrospective outlines some of the social and political shifts that were being registered on and in feminism. As she saw it at the time—and of course many other feminists did too—marxism

could not get at some of the core issues which concerned feminists: gender difference, gender oppression, and sexuality. So there was a general

effort to differentiate feminism from that political context and its dominant preoccupations. There were a lot of people looking for leverage on the problem of women's oppression, and searching for tools with which one could get different angles of vision on it. (1994, 64)

One of the tools that Rubin and others found was the structuralism and post-structuralism of thinkers like Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and Lacan. In hindsight, she sees "Traffic" "as a neo-Marxist, proto-pomo exercise . . . written on the cusp of a transition between dominant paradigms, both in progressive intellectual thought and in general" (66). This is true. But in setting out to compensate for marxism's "weak grasp of sex and gender" (1994, 66), she threw away some of its most valuable insights. As I have indicated in the previous chapters, there are many reasons why historical materialism's class analysis is not only still pertinent but urgent for our time precisely because gender, sexuality, and sexual identity are so integrated into the cultural and political and economic dimensions of late capitalism. It is interesting to note that in her 1994 commentary Rubin has said that she finds the current neglect of Marx "a tragedy," that "the failure to engage important issues of Marxist thought has weakened social and political analysis," and that she hopes to see a revival of interest in his work (1994, 90). It is hard to know quite what she means by this when her representation of historical materialism and marxist feminism have painted both as such theoretical dead ends. As I see it, the point is not to revive interest in Marx's work for its own sake but to make use of historical materialism as a frame for explaining how capitalism bears down on people's lives, and to extend that analysis to the ways sexuality and gender, political oppression, citizenship, sensuality, social reproduction in the broad sense, and everyday experience feature in them.

To be fair, Rubin's contention that the marxist wings of the left didn't take women's concerns and feminist concepts seriously is accurate. But of course it was precisely these problems that pushed the marxist feminists with whom Rubin was aligned to develop their critical engagements with marxism in order to really further materialist critique of capital. However, by 1984 Rubin had abandoned the possibility of advancing this groundbreaking work to analysis of sexuality. And in order to take this turn she has to represent both marxism and feminism as knowledges that generalize by subsuming all social relations to one facet of social life. She concludes that both feminism and marxism are inadequate for analysis of sexuality because in the same way that feminism generalizes from gender,

marxism generalizes from class.<sup>9</sup> As she puts it, marxism was “fashioned to handle very specific areas of social activity”—class relations under capitalism—and it wrongly extends this local interest into a general theory (1984, 308). It is hard to see how under capitalism class is a *local* interest, although this misreading is consistent with the general direction of *localizing* class—as well as gender, sex, and race—that would redefine the U.S. left in the eighties as a rainbow of identity politics. Given this reorientation in her thinking, it is not surprising that Rubin’s retraction of “The Traffic in Women” as “surely not an adequate formulation for sexuality in Western industrial societies” (1984, 307) does not engage critically at all with the socialist feminist frame of that essay. She simply replaces it with Foucault’s assertion that “a system of sexuality has emerged out of earlier kinship forms and has acquired significant autonomy” (1984, 307). As a result, her thinking on sex is somewhat more coherent, as the tension between a theory grounded in social production and one founded on cultural exchange is resolved in favor of symbolic exchange. But while she (unlike Foucault) is willing to admit a repressive state into the matrix of power relations that organize and police sexuality, capitalism and the exploitation of labor are entirely dropped out. Understanding sexuality as a regulatory system consisting of a differential and normative set of practices seals sexuality squarely in the domain of habits and expectations, subsumed within the “historical and moral element” of social production. As Rubin’s own earlier work asserts, limiting analysis of sexuality to ideological norms (even when they are seen to be policed through the state) cuts off the political economy of sex from the political economy of labor. However, theorizing sexuality as strictly normative in this way makes it difficult if not impossible to address how the emergence of new forms of sexuality from the nineteenth through the late twentieth century might be related to other aspects of social production in the capitalist world system.

“Thinking Sex” remains an important essay because it articulates the inauguration of a new critical discourse that speaks to forms of sexual identity and sexual practices that feminism’s focus on gender and even lesbian feminism’s attention to homosexual identity had eclipsed: transsexuality, public sex, pederasty, “prostitution,” fetishism, S/M. One of the historical conditions that made possible the emergence of this discourse and the discourse of pro-sex feminism is the contradictory relation between a more gender-flexible division of labor for the middle classes in postmodern patriarchy and the feminization of poverty worldwide. The role of pro-sex feminism in this situation has been occluded by the terms

in which it has been articulated, that is as an assertion of rights, of lust, or as an internecine feminist war. Certainly, patriarchal arrangements that have historically positioned women as objects of exchange and desire for men have been oppressive to women and should be eliminated. But in abstracting these features of the historical production of sexuality in advanced industrial centers from the gendered and racialized division of labor, pro-sex liberation and the subject of desire it promotes avail sexual agency and freedom only to those women who are already materially positioned as “free” subjects. Desire can be readily understood as a matter of bodily drives or “free” spaces unrelated to labor and struggle over survival needs only from a class position that makes this sort of abstraction intelligible as the basis for one’s activities in the world.

Analyses of sexuality proliferating in conferences, Internet exchanges, journal articles, and books over the last decade typically approach it in this way — as a social construction autonomous from any relationship to labor in human social reproduction. While much of this work has not pursued Rubin’s rejection of feminism, it does take for granted her contention that historical materialism is an inadequate theoretical framework for historicizing sexuality. It is time to call the question on this presumption and to examine its conditions of possibility as a step toward reopening the question of class for sexual politics. If the pressing issues Charlotte Bunch outlined — the material links between lesbian sexuality and class — now rarely appear in feminism’s vocabulary, I do not think that this is because they have become irrelevant. How, then, do we measure their disappearance? Do theories of sexuality and desire tell a class story even though they never mention class? If so, how do we discern it? What are the implications of these (class) narratives when their subjects are also lesbian?

#### IMAGINARY LESBIANS

A brief look at work by Teresa de Lauretis and Elizabeth Grosz suggests that a consistent thread binds their writing on lesbian desire to the pro-sex position promoted by Rubin and others. Of course, unlike many sex radicals, de Lauretis and Grosz are staunch feminists concerned primarily with lesbian subjectivity. Their attention to lesbian desire is quite at odds with the promotion of transgendered queer identities and implicitly challenges the sexual in-difference in queer theory, feminist theory, and the culture at large for erasing lesbian sexuality.<sup>10</sup> But the differences between

their arguments and the sex-radicals' are less significant than the more profound commonality they share. That the lesbian constitutes both object of inquiry and exemplary desiring subject in their work is in itself neither shocking nor particularly transgressive at a time when gender flexibility and lesbian chic have been appropriated by an increasingly mainstream postmodern commodity aesthetic. Much more unspeakable is their class affiliation. Both de Lauretis's book-length study *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994) and Grosz's essay "Refiguring Lesbian Desire" (1994b) exemplify the ways new bourgeois subjects are reproduced ideologically even in knowledges that profess a progressive reformulation of desire.

*The Practice of Love* is an origin story told through a rigorous rereading of Freud that traces the genealogy of lesbian desire to a particular structuring of the drives. Completely subsumed by her sexuality, the desiring lesbian emerges as the most compelling subject position for feminism, the female subject of desire par excellence. The seductiveness of this imaginary lesbian, like the allure of the sex-radical position, lies in its projection of a subject-effect that is both familiar and new.

As I mentioned earlier, many pro-sex feminists put forward their arguments for sexual agency through an appeal to the human capacities of lust and pleasure, understood as sensations that women experience and have a right to express.<sup>11</sup> However, de Lauretis's desiring lesbian is not premised on this version of the self-possessed, expressive self nor on any simple notion of essential pleasures. Rather, for her, subjectivity is always the effect of a set of practices and social constructions. Her desiring lesbian is in this sense a more thoroughly postmodern one. However, because this postmodern desiring subject is anchored in a universal psychic kinship structure, originating outside or at least in an oblique relation to the dominant social order through which desire circulates and is produced, she shares some residual features with the "free," modern possessive individual. In this respect, she offers a seductively familiar, coherent basis for lesbian identification. Before elaborating how this story of desire and its postmodern subject-effect reinforce the reification of sexual identity that has been part of the class history of consciousness under capitalism, I first need to summarize briefly some of the key points in de Lauretis's argument.

I will begin where she does, with the question "Why turn to psychoanalysis to explain lesbian desire?" Her answer is that psychoanalysis, in particular Freud's theories of perversion, provides the occasion to explain homosexuality not as a pathology but as an alternative form of desire. By

way of the writings of Laplanche and Pontalis, Lacan, and various feminists, de Lauretis returns to Freud's notions of desire and castration in order to formulate a model of perverse (lesbian) desire.<sup>12</sup> Against feminist theories of identity founded on the daughter's ties to a preoedipal mother, de Lauretis maintains the centrality of the oedipal mother and of castration to any theory of subjectivity and desire. The centerpiece of her argument is that castration need not be understood exclusively in relation to the penis/phallus, but that it might also be traced along the alternate route of the perversions.

As in the Oedipus complex, the pivotal event in Freud's story of perverse desire is when the male child both recognizes that his mother does not have a penis and, defensively protecting his own ego from the fear of castration, disavows this knowledge by substituting the fetish object for her "lost" phallus. De Lauretis finds in this story the possibility for a theory of female desire. In this scenario, the castration fantasy associated with a narcissistic wound to the female child's ego is not based on her perception of a lost penis/phallus but on the denial to her of a female body that her mother can love. For the heterosexual woman, this blow to the ego is "healed" when she takes up her position as object of her father/husband's desire and as mother of his heirs. While the straight woman is also forbidden to desire/have a female body, she accepts her castration primarily in terms of the symbolic order of the phallus and only secondarily in terms of her prohibited access to the female body. For the lesbian subject of perverse desire, however, the denial or loss of the female body constitutes her primary narcissistic wound. This loss is in turn defensively disavowed through the choice of a "fetish" or substitute in the person of another woman as the object of her desire, or in her self-presentation through fetishized signs of the desire for a woman's body—that is, "butch" practices, styles, and attire.

Out of this counter-narrative emerges de Lauretis's imaginary lesbian: a subject-effect premised on a structure of desire definitively distinct from heterosexuality and established in preconscious or very rudimentary phases of child development in the nuclear family. De Lauretis goes to great lengths to explain that these foundational psychic structures are affected by other social forces. The drives are organized by representations channeled through the parents' fantasies and habits, which are themselves constructed through public images. But it is the imaginary lesbian of perverse desire that carries the day in her narrative, not the public, social dimension of desire. This imaginary lesbian is the female subject of desire

who reverses the patriarchal prescription to devalue the female body and whose capacity to do so is lodged in the sociopsychic events of her “own” very early life. She is the subject whose desire is irrevocably organized in a pivotal moment in childhood when, for reasons that are never completely explained, the prohibition against having/desiring the female body wounds her irrevocably and differently than her straight sister.

De Lauretis reads Freud’s work as a “passionate fiction” and intimates that her own rescripting of lesbian desire might be understood this way as well (1994, xiv). As with all cultural narratives, I think it is necessary to ask who this passionate fiction speaks for. What is the use of this story of lesbian desire? Does the subject it imagines enable us to confront the heterosexual question in a way that will make the wide-ranging social effects of this institution less oppressive? What possible feminist stance does this story of lesbian desire allow?

De Lauretis presents her book’s objective as “figuring out a theory of sexuality non-heterosexual and non-normatively heterosexual, perhaps a theory of sexuality as perversion, that may account for my own sexual structuring and perverse desire” (1994, 227). Drawing explicitly on the concept of self-analysis in Freud, Pierce, and Foucault, her narrative’s generative reference point is a familiar subject-effect—that is, the notion of “my own” life. The subject that emerges from her story turns out to offer a more porous instance of this life than the traditional possessive individual. The organization of psyche and desire she details troubles traditional divisions between private and public, psyche and culture, and opens the notion of the individual and of desire to social forces that spill beyond the familiar boundaries of these categories. But this “opening” is foreclosed by the limited conception of the social put forward in her psychoanalytic starting point. The result is a narrative that revises rather than transforms the fetishized subject-effect of possessive individualism.

When I use the word “fetishize” here I do so in its historical materialist sense to connote the processes of reification inscribed in the dominant modes of intelligibility under capitalism, one of which is the free, rational, and coherent individual abstracted from the system of social relations that produce it. The modern rational and self-possessed individual is gradually being displaced, however, by emergent postmodern subjectivities like de Lauretis’s socially porous imaginary lesbian. This subject acknowledges that it is divided and incoherent, socially constructed rather than expressive, even as the freedom to transcend this historicity—so necessary to the reification of consciousness—is maintained through var-

ious strategies. One of these is the restriction of its social construction to representation.

De Lauretis opens her second book, *Technologies of Gender* (1987), by citing Gayle Rubin's concept of the sex-gender system as "always intimately connected with political and economic factors in each society" (1987, xix). But within a few paragraphs this intimate connection between the sex-gender system and political and economic forces evaporates as the material reality of gender is reduced to representation. By the time she writes *The Practice of Love* there is no glimmer at all of a systemic link between a sex-gender system and other material aspects of social life. Instead, ideology—or more accurately, discursive practices—constitute the sole referent for social reality. In focusing her view of the social so exclusively on discursive practices, now shorn from any connection to "political and economic factors," de Lauretis essentially abandons the materialist feminist perspective that informs Rubin's concept of the sex-gender system. As in "Thinking Sex," the political economy of sex has become merely normative, completely autonomous from the systemic operation of racialized and gendered divisions of labor.

As I mentioned earlier, part of the problem here is psychoanalysis. Invented at a time when new forms of capitalist accumulation were redefining property and pressuring traditional structures of consciousness and feeling, psychoanalysis has always had a contradictory relation to possessive individualism. On the one hand, the concepts of ego and id, of the unconscious, and even of the drives pose a profound challenge to humanist self-possession. Freud's narrative of the perversions also undermines the coherence of the phallic order and of heterosexual desire—both of which possessive individualism relies on. On the other hand, because the psychoanalytic narrative of psychic formation and desire begins with the individual—albeit an incoherent, preconscious individual in process—situated within a narrow and historically specific kinship alliance, it has also been an extremely effective technology for remapping the modern capitalist self, both clinically and theoretically. As a result, for all of its oppositional potential, psychoanalysis has been a politically limited *starting point* for radical critical knowledge. Feminists who concede that the individual and the family are historical effects and who also want to make use of the insights of psychoanalysis have had to grapple with and reframe these limits.

De Lauretis's counter-narrative of perverse lesbian desire does not, however. Although she refuses to naturalize perverse desire as the effect of one's biology or body proper, the Freudian psychoanalytic frame she



deploys reinforces one of the founding myths of individualism, the notion of an authentic sexual orientation. As an origin story, the tale of lesbian perversity focuses our attention on the root causes of *the* lesbian's sexual orientation and away from the ways "lesbian" functions within a system of social differences by which women are positioned. The notion of an authentic sexual orientation keeps us from considering the ways sexual (as well as other) desires and identities are historically organized or how gendered sex-affective relations are infused with ideologies of race and mediated by relations of labor. When the materiality of lesbian desire is anchored in a psychic structure originating in early childhood, claiming the identity "lesbian" comes to depend on already having been in it for all of one's conscious life. In suggesting that sexuality solidifies into discrete forms at such an early age, *The Practice of Love* reproduces an exclusionary and divisive identity politics that has been intensely damaging and distracting to the feminist social movement and the left generally, keeping the focus of attention on deep-seated differences within oppressed groups rather than on our mutual and differential sources of oppression and the collective requirements of social change.

In addition, the concept of desire on which the perverse "authentic lesbian" is premised abstracts the production and circulation of sexual desire from other desires. In this passionate fiction, for better or worse, the term "lesbian" refers only to a *sexual* relation, "the conscious presence of desire in one woman for another" (1994, 284). When feminist knowledge reifies sexual desire in this way, the heterogeneous production of desire is circumscribed by individual sexual aims and object choices. Countering this move would mean shifting the question of female sexual agency and desire outside the domains of subject constitution and culture entirely. As Gayatri Spivak has argued, one effect of this reframing would be to show how the two emergent technologies of the self circulating in advanced capitalist centers beginning in the nineteenth century—the discourse of woman as sexual subject and the psychoanalytic story of castration—are linked to new international divisions of labor, regimes of accumulation, and shifts in imperial policies (Spivak 1990). If we take this assertion seriously, it may lead us to conclude that psychoanalysis, for all that it has to offer in developing explanations of psychic processes, is not the most productive *starting place* for a global feminist sexual politics.

Elizabeth Grosz's essay "Refiguring Lesbian Desire" offers a version of this argument, but from a very different standpoint than mine. This short experimental piece published in *The Lesbian Postmodern* develops

and extends the analysis of sexual difference Grosz initiated in her book *Volatile Bodies*.<sup>13</sup> Like de Lauretis, Grosz is compelled by the problem of how to conceptualize lesbian desire, even though she is less interested in where lesbian desire might originate or in how it develops. Along with all paradigms of desire premised on lack and depth, phallocentrism, and “homosexual” circuits of exchange, Grosz rejects psychoanalysis as inadequate for theorizing lesbian desire. Instead, she turns to a subordinated tradition in Western thought (by way of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Guattari) that formulates desire primarily as production. Grosz contends that embedded in the psychoanalytic notion of desire as lack is a polarized gender system in which women and the feminine are relegated to a passive position. In order to redress this problem, she proposes that desire be understood instead as a matter of surfaces, “immanent, positive, and productive” (1994b, 75).

Unlike socialist or marxist feminist theories that begin with social production, Grosz takes desire itself to be the foundation for social activity and meaning. For her, desire is not produced by, but rather produces reality. The materiality of desire lies in matter itself, albeit a pulverized, fragmented matter in the form of micro-units of energy (1994b, 78). This recourse to atomized matter also underlies the lesbian subject-effect her narrative proposes—less an agent than an assemblage of fragments and relations. For Grosz, lesbian is not a being but a becoming, through myriad flows of energy and surface excitations. As she puts it, “[T]he question is not am I or are you a lesbian, but rather what kinds of lesbian connections . . . what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, with what bodies of our own” (1994b, 81). Lesbian identity does not dissolve into queerness or indeterminacy, but it is also not anchored in social structures that depend on the inside-outside, psychic-public paradigm de Lauretis employs and reworks. Grosz’s imaginary lesbian is a cyborg “lesbian-machine” who invests time and energy in bodies that are both her own and other, a cyborg that collapses, even erases, social differences—between ideas and things, human and animal, male and female. She is a permeable subject-effect, relating “through someone to something else, or . . . through something to someone” (1994b, 79). That the reference points for desire—things, surfaces, libidinal energies, and a way of looking that levels hierarchical relations (1994b, 81)—are “free” spaces where one can embrace pleasure for its own sake gives her lesbian subject-effect an ideological affiliation with the residual “free” bourgeois possessive individual.

At one point Grosz suggests that the concept of desire as a lack to be satisfied is useful to capitalist acquisition (1994b, 71). This brief opening to history is, I think, a fruitful lapse from her main argument. Here she intimates that desire is perhaps not so simply and universally productive, that the forms it takes are in fact historically variable and under capitalism, at least, entangled with the profit motive. Taking Grosz's own lead, I want to suggest that knowing desire as freely mobile, indiscriminate micro-energies is itself an effect of late capitalism.

One of the conditions that makes possible and encourages the "obviousness" of the notion of desire as energy flows is a new regime of capitalist accumulation whereby labor and capital itself have become increasingly abstracted through the more flexible production systems of a transnational digital economy. As I indicated earlier, these more flexible modes of accumulation have also been accompanied by changes in consumption and in the production of desire and all are firmly rooted in the hyperexploitation of labor, much of it women's labor. As desire in advanced capitalist sectors is increasingly produced through the digital networks of media technologies, the forms it takes have shifted. The postmodern subject's renunciation of depth and rescripting of body and consciousness as a variable matrix of signs and pleasures are an accompaniment to this process — which has not, of course, gone uncontested. While the conservative right struggles in the arenas of culture and politics to preserve the traditional authorities of God and patriarchal family against the increasingly dematerialized values of late capital, an emergent postmodern sensibility scrambles for the center, celebrating the displacement of humanist depth by a less coherent, socially constructed subject-effect of fluidities and surfaces.

Returning to Grosz, I am suggesting that we might read her desiring lesbian as an imaginary subject-effect whose proliferating pleasures constitute an ideological exchange-value that obscures the objective historical connections between some women's desires and other women's needs. Since the early phases of industrialization, bourgeois knowledges have figured the relation between desire and need as both an intimate and an opaque one. On the one hand, as Thomas Lacqueur has pointed out, "the discourses of sexual passion and desire reiterate, reinforce, and intertwine the imaginative connections between the worlds of the body and the worlds of the market" (1992, 187). And yet, on the other hand, these two domains of capital's history — the sexual desires of the body and the economic needs of consumers and producers in the marketplace — are persistently

considered altogether distinctive. Imagining desire as production the way Grosz does reiterates this tradition by anchoring sexual desire in matter. In addition, the notion of desire as energy flows is particularly well suited to a capitalist regime of hyperconsumption and accumulation that recasts the boundaries between psyche and social, private and public, nation and colony, body and market in order to produce desire as a transnational-sexual-psychic-commodity structure. This is “a truly nomad desire unfettered by anything external, for anything can be absorbed into its operations” (1994b, 79).

In this context, the lesbian as preeminent agent of unfettered lust is a suspicious mythic figure whose abstracted pleasures displace a more collective and historical feminist knowledge of sexuality. Like de Lauretis’s imaginary lesbian, the postmodern lesbian in Grosz’s essay is premised on the urgency of refiguring desire as the province of women, or more properly lesbians. As I indicated earlier, however, these reversals of the traditional masculine proprietary claims on desire and social agency risk abstracting lesbians as sexual subjects from our historical and social relation to a gendered and racialized division of labor and hence to other women. As feminist theorists writing against the grain of pro-sex feminism have emphasized, the construction of female sexual agency has never been autonomous. The cultural value attached to the bourgeois exchange of women as sexual property depended on the labor and sex work of poor black and white women working as servants, slaves, or prostitutes in or on the periphery of middle-class households. In this “other” domain of sexual economy, women’s sexual agency has been both allowed and devalued.

In advanced capitalism’s industrial sectors, middle-class women have increasingly been invited to see themselves as sexual agents, as “women on top”—with or without boys on the side—as professional managers in charge of their subordinates and of their own orgasms, competing equally in the marketplace with men, “fighting fire with fire.” But this process, too, has not happened in isolation from the historical construction of the needs of other women on the edges of these privileged lives. It is not irrelevant to feminist sexual politics today that celebrations of lesbian desire occur at the same time as (but often in no connection to) welfare reform debates in which the sexuality and needs of unmarried poor women and their children have become the punitive targets of state-mandated “personal responsibility.”<sup>14</sup>

For centuries, suturing desires of many sorts to the proper subject has been one of the ways in which capitalist class interests have been reproduced.

In the advanced industrial sectors of late capitalism where the flows of capital are less grounded in earlier forms of portable property, where capital accumulation takes place through more flexible divisions of labor, and patriarchal gender systems rely less on the equation of gender and biology or the division between private and public spaces, this proper subject is no longer the experiential self of possessive individualism. The apparent contradiction in de Lauretis and Grosz between their purported disinterest in identities and the subject-effects that motivate their work on sexuality—their “own” lesbian experiences—is testimony to the uneven displacement of this experiential self. That the perverse desiring lesbian in their work ultimately eludes the historical production of desire through the escape hatches of family and matter situates her in a long history of bourgeois propriety that has secured this safe haven for the individual by separating sexuality and desire from the larger context of human needs.

#### NEW LEFT LEGACIES

I argued earlier that the sex debates of the eighties had the consequence of suppressing the connections between sexuality and survival that some socialist and radical feminists had promoted. At the same time, the sex wars foregrounded a preoccupation with the female subject of desire that would prevail in feminist theory for the next decade. Let me emphasize that in questioning this new direction in eighties feminist thought I am not underestimating the oppressive effects of the patriarchal insistence that women be the sexualized objects of exchange between men. Feminist critiques of this assumption have been empowering for women and have provoked important social reforms in the areas of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, and cultural critique, enabling many women to become more capable social actors, to enter and shape public debate, and to forge critical thinking on the representation of women in culture, law, and science. Nor do I want to dismiss as unimportant the tyranny of heteronorms that narrowly and violently legislate how human affective and sensuous capacities can be practiced. The issue for feminists and transformative social movement generally should not so much be whether or not to endorse and celebrate female sexual desire in all of its possible forms, but how to understand the production of desire and subjectivity as a dialectical historical possibility and how to intervene in the ways that it works—often un-

evenly—in concert with capitalist advancement to open liberatory possibilities for some women but often at the expense of others.

It is generally agreed that the history of sexuality in industrial capitalism has been punctuated by phases when sexuality has been more sharply contested and more intensely policed than in others. The late nineteenth century and the postwar years of the late twentieth century have been identified as two of these phases. Out of the late-nineteenth-century debates on sexuality the modern homosexual was born. That these years also mark shifts in capital production and imperial policy that fomented the rise of the professional middle class and the emergence of feminism as a political movement is not insignificant. A century later, the turn in feminist discourse away from the effort to link sexuality to questions of survival and need also took place during a phase of capitalist revamping when the professional middle class in the United States was consolidating itself more securely in the aftermath of social upheavals. The “New Left” was to a large extent comprised of the sons and daughters of this class whose material position was advancing most rapidly (Ehrenreich 1979, 30). What came to be thought of as feminist theory in the United States was formulated primarily by women from this new class constituency who not coincidentally generated feminist knowledges in and around universities—in women’s studies programs, feminist journals, and conferences organized and run by academic experts.

Many academic feminists were critics of the more direct role of the university in the corporate state, even as they became the bearers of the university’s class privilege (Ehrenreich 1989). Some of us, mostly white and middle-class, came to feminism through our experiences in the university. As student or young faculty activists, we challenged the university’s authority, tying the interests of technological experts and academic researchers to patriarchal power and to the military-industrial complex driving U.S. economic and imperialist ventures globally. Yet we also stood to benefit materially from the professional credentials the university offered. The dilemma for many women like myself, feminists and marxists both, turned on how to make a living in this institution without betraying either our radical politics or our class backgrounds. For many of us who found our way out of this contradictory situation by becoming oppositional intellectuals on the margins of the university, the economic recession of the seventies exacted heavy penalties. Many middle-class lesbians like Charlotte Bunch who forfeited their alliance with the institution of

heterosexuality for the hardships of life and work as lesbians learned lessons about survival that many lower- and working-class women had always known. By the eighties, many feminists, lesbians among them, working in or near universities and colleges or entering the workforce equipped with educational credentials, had been almost thoroughly integrated into the professional middle class (Ehrenreich 1989). The new subject produced out of the sex wars and the suppression of socialist feminism it exacted are part of this class history.

As feminism has taught us again and again, however, suppressed knowledges are not irretrievably lost. To reclaim undervalued feminist thought is to engage in a struggle over the political consequences of what and how we know, a struggle that has been an ongoing feature of feminism's history. Despite the popularization of sex-radical feminist and queer perspectives, there have been feminists who have persistently worked to make visible the ways the regulation of female sexuality and respectable womanhood under capitalism has been thoroughly saturated by racialized class relations between men and women as well as among women (Spillers 1987; Wiegman). Their analyses disclose that the female subject of desire may have been stigmatized, but she was invisible until the late twentieth century. Some of these feminist critics have made clear the ways respectable nineteenth-century womanhood in the United States was historically tied to a racialized sexual division of labor. Hazel Carby has detailed the relation between the glorification of white mothers in the plantation system and the sexualization of black women as breeders who were effectively excluded from the category "woman" (Carby 2006). In her work on historicizing whiteness, Kate Davy develops this line of argument and details the ways respectable womanhood is thoroughly racialized as white at the same time that class serves as its structuring principle. The German socialist feminist Maria Mies elaborates these relations within the context of global capitalism, outlining the relations between what she calls "housewifization and colonization," an international sexual and racial division of labor that has historically bound the woman of leisure to the peasant and slave woman. This saturation of feminine sexuality by racialized class relations also permeated the emergent knowledges about lesbians in the late nineteenth century. The sexologist Havelock Ellis's "pioneering" work on *Sexual Inversion*, for example, explains what a lesbian is and looks like through many references to studies of Native American, Balinese, Arab, Turkish, and Chinese women, as well as European and British prostitutes, prisoners, and working women,

while white middle-class (respectable) lesbians remain invisible (Ellis 195–263; Hart 4–6).

In the 1980s and nineties, under pressure from realignments in the relations of production, new state formations, and advanced capitalism's search for new markets, the forms of respectable womanhood are changing. One place these changes register is in various transvaluations of female sexuality that were once considered disreputable and perverse. The sex-radical's "bad-girl" rejection of bourgeois respectability transcodes the negative valence once associated with (nonwhite, non-middle-class) female sexual agency. At the same time, the sex-radical has the mobility and freedom to flaunt being bad, to choose her sex partners, and to buy her sex toys. The class and race components of this transvaluation are the hidden history of the sex wars. Even as it was being constructed, however, this history was being contested. As Hortense Spillers commented at the Barnard Conference in 1982,

[T]he discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides between the haves/have nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or the accident of birth, benefit from the dominative mode, and those who do not. Sexuality describes another type of discourse that splits the world between the "West and the Rest of Us." (Spillers 1984, 79)

Spillers turns to the women narrators of John Gwaltney's *Drylongso*, who perceive their sexuality in a poignant connection with the requirements of survival, to remind us that the ability to contemplate sex as an isolated ontological category is a privilege many women do not have (Spillers 1984, 94).

In 1986 B. Ruby Rich concluded her assessment of "Feminism and Sexuality in the 1980s" by contending that

the global context of contemporary life rarely enters into the theoretical debates, as though to indicate that sexuality is not really as socially constructed as claimed, as though sexual issues were not so deeply affected after all by history, the economy, the Cold War, disease, the new conservatism, or even fashion. (1986, 551)

More than a decade later, the situation is much the same, perhaps worse. Embracing a homogeneous imaginary lesbian as the exemplary subject of female/feminist desire obscures the historical reality that the relation of



lesbians to the prevailing patriarchal production of sex and affection has never been monolithic but rather differentially and hierarchically inflected by the social arrangements that divide the haves from the have-nots. In other words, lesbians are never simply women who desire other women; we are always much more. At stake in understanding that “more” is a feminist project Gayatri Spivak, speaking in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, called “unlearning our privilege as our loss” (1990, 163).

If feminism is to offer an analysis of sexuality that does not “split the world,” we cannot simply appeal to the idealisms of lust, family romance, or nomad desire. We need to see sexuality, including lesbian sexualities, as part of a bigger picture. A politics built on abstracted desires may be the privilege of those for whom survival is not a pressing daily concern, but it also lures those whose struggle to survive is laced with sexual oppression into a collectivity that splits their sexuality from their survival needs. For some of us, unlearning the privilege of rallying around our sexual desires may indeed be a loss, but the loss of this privilege does not require that we forfeit critical attention to sexuality. On the contrary, developing critical knowledge of the *class* dimensions of (sexual) identity and desire could be one of the most fruitful contributions of a new generation of feminists to the collective global agenda for transformative change.

IDENTITY, NEED,  
AND THE MAKING OF  
REVOLUTIONARY LOVE

*Déjeme decirle, a riesgo de parecer ridículo, que el revolucionario verdadero está guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor.*

At the risk of sounding ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is moved by great feelings of love.

—*Che Guevara*

Shaking thoughts of her, I wonder — may be  
Life is finally simple: breathe in, breathe out.  
Wind biting at the mouth, hunger  
Gnawing in the gut, feet folding fast  
The furrowed snow, cold and weary,  
A body trudges home.  
And if no food nor drink await me,  
Would want grow monstrous, need demanding  
Nothing more than next week's meal?  
Scarcely living on the edge, might I  
Forget the face that stalks my day  
On this new year's fretted road:  
Woman who warms my spirit, fills me up,  
Steals my breath away . . . ?  
Perhaps. I do not think I would.

## NOT MEAT NOR DRINK

The first of these two epigraphs appears in bold script over an image of Che Guevara printed against a background of women, men, and children-in-motion on a poster made by Syracuse Cultural Workers. The poster hangs above my desk in the English Department at the State University of New York at Albany. Looking at it when I walk in the door or during a pause in conversation with a student always braces me because its message is such a contradiction to the academic environment my office is nestled in. Che's confession bristles against the grain of acceptable academic discourse I know so well in which words like "revolution" and "love" are never paired and where to talk of revolution is considered as old-fashioned, romantic, and even embarrassing as it is to claim that love is your motive for anything. His words inspire me for the possibility they hold out against these and other historical attainments. They remind me that the fight for social justice inside and outside the university is not just fired by rage and indignation but is also generated from this most complex of human capacities we call "love." Certainly, I can question what "love" meant as Che lived it, how it was compromised and hedged in by the movements he provoked, and how it may be dismissed, trivialized, or commodified by those who embrace his image or carry on his legacy. But at another level, taking the risk of admitting love's importance as he does urges me to take the leap of seeming ridiculous, too, by pursuing my conviction that indeed we do have to talk about love when we grapple with how to understand what motivates social movement. His words also remind me that for many people in the world outside of U.S. academia, some of them motivated by Che's life and commitments, revolution is still a word that rumbles with hope and promise.

The second epigraph to this chapter is a poem I wrote in January 1997. It was inspired by Edna St. Vincent Millay's beautiful sonnet "Love Is Not All: It Is Not Meat Nor Drink" and echoes the closing lines of her verse. "It may well be," she writes, "that in a difficult hour . . . I might be driven to sell your love for peace, Or trade the memory of this night for food." Walking home one shockingly bright snow-covered New Year's morning, I wondered about love and need, about the exchange Edna Millay considered, and the price of love's betrayal she imagined: trading the memory of just one night of love for the satisfaction of a more pressing human need. This was a time in my life when the long-term partnership I had with my

lover was coming undone, and the pain of that loss was much with me. The intensity of those feelings and the emotional work I was doing to come to terms with them haunted daily my other work of reading, writing, and teaching about theories of desire and need. I was often puzzled by the power of my grief to overwhelm me and astonished by its paralyzing grip. I knew that in the long history of my relationship my love and attachment often took forms in my imagination and actions that were modeled on the romances I had grown up on. I knew that the “subject-effects” I participated in and that shaped my actions and my feelings often conformed to ideologies of individualism and bourgeois couple-love that reify human desires and affections . . . and yet, knowing all of this could not keep me from feeling as I did. There was no way around it: the intimate bond I had formed with this one woman, the companionship and sense of family we had built, felt as vital for me as any need.

Placing this poem next to the words of Che as I have done here opens a wide chasm between two very different forms of love: the love for a collective people, *el amor por la gente*, and the love for one other person, a love of the being-in-love sort, committed couple-love. To say that one kind of love is less important or real than the other, or that one is purchased at the expense of the other, seems to me a foolish calculation. To endorse the first, collective love, without acknowledging other kinds of love that are more individual—the long-term commitment or the deep and lasting ties of affection between friends, the bond between a child and her caretaker, or any number of other loves that take even less conventional forms—loves that also have an intense hold on us, would be not just dishonest but a costly political mistake.

Perhaps an even wider chasm opens between these two versions of love along the boundary of heterogender difference. Che Guevara’s face has become a commodified sign, appearing on posters and T-shirts, calendars and postcards, and it signifies a political identity that is implicitly dissociated from “queer” love. As an icon for revolutionary struggle, Che’s image has come to stand for a political culture that is often explicitly heteronormative, masculinist, misogynist, and tacitly homophobic, a political culture associated with Latin American liberation movements. Any effort to claim Che’s invocation of revolutionary love as a banner for collective identity that includes queers cannot help but confront the residue of these associations. José Muñoz addresses this problem when he reads a scene from the documentary *Cholo Joto* (1993) by Augie Robles. The scene Muñoz examines

treats the contradictions evoked by Che's image and his words for a young queer Chicano, Valentín, who grew up seeing them on a mural in his neighborhood park.

"There was a mural of Che Guevara," Valentín recounts, "that is still there, with the quote 'A true rebel is guided by deep feelings of love.' I remember reading that as a little kid and thinking, what the fuck does that mean? Then I realized, yeah, that's right. That I'm not going to fight out of anger but because I love myself and my community." (14)

For Muñoz, Valentín's memory is a striking reinvention of Che because it "unearths a powerful yet elusive queer kernel in revolutionary liberationist identity," (14) a queer kernel of suppressed desire for Che that underlies identification with him and his message. Muñoz reads this renarration of Che's image as a "queering" that takes the now recognizable form of opening up the possibility of homoerotic desire within heteronormative discourse, a reading strategy that has become the signature claim of queer studies. Queer critiques do disclose the suppressed homoerotic other side of heteronormative formulations of desire; they reveal the ways a certain "disidentification" with the prescribed heteroscript traverses cultural texts and cultural politics. Desire here is historicized, but only so far as to reveal its heteronormative dimensions and its suppressed homoerotic other side. The "disidentification" that Muñoz describes and promotes involves assent to and renunciation of the normative invitations that solicit the subject. Disidentification in this sense results in a new formulation that is the epitome of the postmodern hybrid identity. It involves the characteristic postmodern double move of simultaneous identification with (or desire for) and renunciation of the normative axes of race, gender, and sexual identity. Queer disidentifications for Muñoz are "improper" in that they may "desire the white ideal but with a difference." But they are also "proper" in that desire remains caught within the very terms of normative thinking. That is, the rules circumscribing identity become the sole stake in social struggle. Moreover, the non-normative alternative values and desires that are generated by the disidentification are directed toward a movement leader. Whether it subscribes to the straight norm or shimmers beneath the surface as a more forbidden homoerotic desire, this sort of (dis)identification marshals desire in its most familiar form, toward an eroticized individual.

It seems to me that in fostering a queer reading that transposes communal identification with El Che into desire for El Che, Muñoz closes down the potential implied in Robles's alternative formulation of identification and desire, an alternative that connects his renunciation of self-shame with love for his community. In this chapter I am interested in considering how we might return the concept of "disidentification" to this terrain that Robles hints at and that is in fact much closer to the grounds for disidentification as Michel Pecheux first proposed it. I will come back to Pecheux's notion of disidentification and its uses for explaining collective forms of political agency that are not trapped in normative compliance or transfigured hero worship. The concept of disidentification deserves further consideration both for its political usefulness and because it is being embraced quite problematically by other culture theorists now.<sup>1</sup>

If the challenge for social movement lies in getting out of the cul-de-sac of identity politics, it certainly also lies in not dismissing the persistent historical pressures exerted by identity categories, including the exclusions that occur when sexual identity and desire are set within the terms of heteronormativity. I have been arguing that promoting queer desire—desire with a difference—however, may not finally make very much difference at all. The more politically needed and more difficult task lies in tapping contradictory forms of identification and the affective force they rely on in order to make visible the fundamental social (not just cultural) structures identities are part of. This is a disidentification of a different order than Muñoz's—a disidentification that shifts the ground for knowing our desires and identifications, and the horizon for revamping them for collective struggle, from capitalism's inside to its outside—the space of unmet needs. I opened this chapter by offering two different versions of love because they raise the question of how we deal with the disjuncture between our efforts to forge collective political agency and everyday lives that are propelled by other kinds of attachments and identifications. I do think that the tension between them is an important political issue. But I do not know that trying to resolve that tension is the most fruitful political path to pursue. In fact, it might be best to approach the problem of love's relation to political agency from another place. I chose these texts because both place the human capacity for love up against the insistent pressure of human survival needs, and it is with questions of need that I think considerations of love and political agency might more productively begin. How might needs serve as the basis for forging political agency in a way that

would not foreclose from critical intervention and agendas for social change our human capacities for affective bonds and the sensations and the identities formed around them?

Of course, Edna Millay had it right: the desire to give love and be loved intimately in return—and the fantasies and identifications this loving breeds in memory and desire—are not meat nor drink. But are they necessary nourishment all the same? How indeed are we to understand the ties that bind this human capacity to love (and the desires that often fuel and shape it) to human survival needs? Are love and the larger domain of human affect it is part of ever at one remove from a more basic set of vital human needs? If the equation that sets human affect against need is somehow wrong, must we not then find ways to understand not only how this realm of who we are as humans is folded into the ways we socially meet—or do not meet—our other human needs, but also figure out how to marshal our human affective capacities in the struggle to redress the inequitable meeting of other human needs? If we no longer ignore affect in the calculus of human needs, then in forging a collective standpoint for oppositional—even revolutionary—forms of consciousness we will need to acknowledge how political agency, practice, and commitment are motivated, complicated, and undermined by our human capacity for affect, perhaps especially the emotion Che names “love.” What relationship would this revolutionary love have to the prevailing ways love and desire are sutured into sexual identities, and how love is practiced—and experienced—in individual terms? What would it mean to redirect the problem of identity that has so preoccupied cultural politics to this relation between affect and need?

Well, these are only some of the knotty questions the space between these two texts provokes for me. References to the relationship between desire and need have punctuated my discussion of sexual identity in the previous chapters. These references have been fairly oblique and have not broached at all the topic of love. So it is in order to explore more fully the relations among sexual identity, desire, and need and to bring this inquiry around to the question of love that I offer the following discussion. Finally, there is little that is final about this last chapter. In fact, it is more an opening than a summary or last word. While I only begin to address here the many implications of the questions I have raised above, I remain convinced that these questions are important to ask now, mostly because they presume a new ground for thinking and practicing a sexual politics whose implications spill beyond the boundaries of sexual identity. I hope that the

arguments I make—in all of their provisionality—will provoke others to pursue further and more rigorously some of the questions I lay out here.

#### RELINKING: NEED, AFFECT, SEXUAL IDENTITY

In discussions of sexual identity over the past decade or so, two major preoccupations have organized debate. One is the concern to rethink identity in ways that would open up identity categories—man, woman, white, black, straight, gay—to the difference within them. Queer theory and politics have been inspired by this effort in that “queer”ing sexual identity has meant refusing the presumed difference between hetero- and homosexuality as a place to begin. This refusal involved disclosing the forms of sexual identity that the categories hetero- and homosexual do not include—for example, transsexual, bisexual, transgendered identities—as well as non-normative sexual practices or “perversions” that are not necessarily included under the sign “homosexual”: sex work, S/M, pederasty. Queer critiques have also emphasized that sexual identities do not function independently of other forms of racial, gendered, or national difference, and they have explored some of the ways these differences have been articulated with one another. This effort to rethink sexual identity has also prompted considerations of new forms of political agency.

Many of these discussions cast the stakes for political agency in terms of citizenship, and much of this work is offered as a way to bring sexual identity more fully into the public sphere. However, even when these new formulations recast citizenship from traditional liberal and neoliberal models of individual rights, the paradigm for agency remains circumscribed by a political imagination, often couched in terms of “radical democracy,” that takes little or no notice of capitalism. I have suggested throughout the previous chapters that the disappearance of capitalism in cultural and social theory is not an oversight but is itself the mark of certain affiliations between a new bourgeois ruling bloc and the emergence of new forms of consciousness for late capitalism. The preoccupation with identity politics during the 1980s was one way this new consciousness was played out. In the nineties, a general consensus began to form that identity politics is a dead end, or at the very least has its limits, and many of the more recent discussions of citizenship and radical democracy have been efforts to go beyond it. It seems to me, however, that these debates suffer from the same shortcomings that identity politics does; in both cases,



change is only being imagined and discussed in terms of cultural transformation or rights to representation within the existing state, with little or no consideration of the relationship of cultural forms and state formations to the structures of capitalism. However, while the academic left ignores capital, its systematic accumulation nonetheless proceeds at great human cost. There is no question that how we know and live identities and how political agency is exercised remain pressing, even urgent, concerns. But in order to develop a political platform that addresses them in such a way that their operation in and against the accumulation of capital is made visible, I suggest that we need to radically reorient the discussion and begin in a different place. The new ground for beginning I offer is the arena of social needs.

Historical materialism begins with the premise that meeting human needs is the baseline of history. Needs are corporeal—because they involve keeping the body alive—but they are not “natural,” because meeting these corporeal needs always takes place through social relationships. In this sense social interaction itself translates into a vital need. As people produce the means to meet their needs, they also produce new needs. Vital human needs are those that are necessary to species life and include the requirement for food, clothing, and shelter. Because human needs are themselves historically produced, the parameters constituting what counts as a vital need are varied and changing. Sanitation and health care, for example, are vital needs in the sense that not having access to them can put the survival of individuals or groups at risk, but the acknowledgment of these as vital needs, as well as the standards for what qualifies as adequate means and technologies to meet them, has varied throughout history and has been widely contested. No matter how they are historically met, however, human needs have an individual corporeal dimension and a social one in that meeting them is always a historical, collective practice.

Human needs also include the ability to exercise certain human potentials. As a species, humans have many capacities—for intellect, invention, communication; the capacity for sensation and affect and for affective social relations is another. In the research done on infants who have not been touched and fail to thrive there is some evidence that satisfaction of the human capacity for sensation and affect is a vital need. Moreover, many human affective capacities are integrated in the satisfaction of vital human needs in that they mediate the social relations through which these needs are provided. Affective needs are inseparable from the social component of most need satisfaction, then, but they also constitute human needs in

themselves in the sense that all people deserve to have the conditions available that will allow them to exercise and develop their affective capacities.

Some recent work in contemporary culture theory has begun to call attention to affect as a vital social medium, but it remains an undeveloped area in culture critique. Most of this work pays little attention to the archive of research on affect in the social sciences, and because of their different disciplinary histories, the two lines of inquiry tend to approach affect and the related field of emotion from different premises. Work in the sociology of emotion falls into two at times overlapping orientations: the organicist tradition (that traces its genealogy through Darwin, Freud, James) that focuses on linking emotive expressions to visible gestures, on instincts and their conscious and unconscious channeling through the libido or the brain's reaction to stimuli; and the interactionist tradition (Dewey, Mills, Goffman) that stresses the social factors that organize the expression of emotion in a social context (Hochschild 210–22). More recent research in the sociology of emotion has developed new conceptual vocabularies for the social dimensions of emotion, stressing the function of “naming” in the historical and cultural construction of emotion, and opening up new areas of analysis, in particular emotional labor, for critical consideration.

Arlie Hochschild has been a pioneer in this area, one of the first feminist sociologists to develop the concept of emotional labor and to analyze its commodification as a basic component of the gendered division of labor in the service industry.<sup>2</sup> Hochschild distinguishes between feeling and the naming of feeling that is directed by the culture, and her interest lies in exposing how the naming of feeling and its management have alienated workers in the service industry from their affective capacities as it turns these capacities into capital. She examines the ways emotional exchanges—a smile, a greeting—that were once privately negotiated become regulated by a company's personnel standards, how they are subordinated to a commercial logic and changed by it. As Hochschild points out, it doesn't take capitalism to turn feeling into a commodity, but capitalism has pushed the process further and organized emotion management more efficiently. One consequence of the pervasiveness of the corporate management of human emotion is the compensatory emphasis in the culture on “unmanaged feelings,” on authentic, “natural,” or spontaneous feeling, especially as it is popularized in a wide array of self-help therapies (Hochschild 190). While this longing for an artless natural self may not in fact “capture” that integrity, it at least points to a gap between the ways of

managing affect provided by commercial and corporate structures and workers' actual feelings. This is a gap that many service workers recognize as they joke about or try to separate their feelings from the company's naming and management of them.

In contrast to the sociology of emotion, culture theory in the humanities has emphasized the language-based construction of consciousness. This work has been shaped by the presuppositions of poststructuralism, which stresses the radical loss of authenticity (a true or coherent self), not as an effect of capitalism's alienating management and commodification of human capacities but of the subject's entry into a symbolic system of representation where the subject of language is always so to speak "at a loss" because the subject of the enunciation ("I") is always split from the "self" it refers to. This view dismisses a concept like "alienation" because it connotes either a true "self" somewhere "behind" language, or suggests a utopian vision for overcoming losses that for the poststructuralist are irrecoverable. In the postmodern frame of reference, the subject's coherence is mitigated by the radical difference (the loss of self-presence or a splitting of the self) that is the condition for taking up a position in a symbolic order where the instability of cultural signifiers will always undo any provisional or projected self-coherence. It is clear by now that I see these postmodern formulations as extremely limited and actually quite conservative, because they foreclose ways of knowing the world that connect the symbolic order (culture) to material social relations that are not symbolic. My point here is that while postmodern theories have developed a vocabulary for addressing the construction of the subject, however problematic it may be, most of this work has largely ignored emotion and affect.

Brian Massumi rightly contends that we have very little critical vocabulary specific to affect (88), but he also reminds us that there is an archive—though marginal in culture theory—that does address the affective, a tradition he traces through Benedicto Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze. Massumi's work is unusual because it draws upon (post)modern cultural theories as well as empirical research in the field of communications on the physiology of affect as it operates in the reception and processing of images. As I indicated in chapter 2, there are problems with Deleuze's concept of desire as productive energy, and to the extent that Massumi's analysis finally leads to the conclusion that "affect is the whole world," a similar reduction of the material to matter undercuts his insights. Massumi's ideas are suggestive, however, because of his insistence

that human affect is an area of life that culture study should attend to and for his effort to conceptualize its corporeal and social dimensions.

In “The Autonomy of Affect” Massumi argues that image reception — how people read images — takes place on at least two levels. One is a level of what he calls “intensity,” the other is a semiotic order of signification. Both register in the body: semiotic ordering registers in modulations of heartbeat and breathing as we follow and anticipate the sequencing of images; intensity registers on the surface of the skin. While the more linear processing of images dips into the autonomic register, intensity remains outside that loop, disconnected from meaningful sequencing. Language is not opposed to intensity but can resonate, interfere with, dampen, or amplify it (87). Every event takes place on both levels and between them as they resonate together. Massumi equates intensity with affect. Drawing on Spinoza, however, he clarifies that emotion and affect are not the same. An emotion is the

socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of intersection of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. (88)

But even once intensity enters conscious thought it still “doubles like a shadow that is always almost perceived, and cannot but be perceived, in effect” (89). The result is that “intensity and experience accompany one another, like two mutually presupposing dimensions, or like two sides of a coin” (94). Intensity is asocial but not presocial in that it includes social elements. Traces of past actions as well as traces of their contexts are conserved in the brain and the flesh and incorporated into intensity as an incipient action and expression, as tendencies, or potential pathways of action and expression (85)

While Deleuze and Massumi stress the facet of intensity that is unassimilable to consciousness and symbolic ordering, and they value it as a radically productive desire, I find the more fruitful aspect of their thinking to lie in the insight that there is an interface between affect and social elements. It is here in this interface that ideology — but also education for social movement and class consciousness — can intervene. Massumi’s analysis opens up

ways to begin to conceptualize the relationship between affective intensities and consciousness. He invites us to consider how powerful this dimension of “experience” is in a society where the media is being used so pervasively in information-based economies and where we are bombarded with images “at every step of our daily rounds” (104). However, he does not give us a way to work with its effects nor a way to understand how they are linked to capital in what he calls a “post-ideological world.” The forms in which power operates do indeed make use of affect, and they do so most intensely through media technology. But calling them “post-ideological” as he does implies that they are beyond the reach of social intervention, and I think this presumption can lead to a very dangerous political quietism. Instead, I suggest that we need to develop ways to understand how affect accompanies and is organized through its interface with social relationships through the ruling bloc narratives and the counter-narratives to them that people live by. For it is in this “space” of what we call “experience” that desire, fear, anger, and resistance might also be marshaled for social movement.

Although Massumi does not elaborate very far the relationship of affect to the social organization of affective intensities, his discussion suggests that that we might develop this corporeal-social aspect of experience in terms of human needs. Affective capacities are tied to cognition and to the traces of social contexts that register in them. But as only one of a host of human potentials, they also have a relationship to the body’s other material needs—its dependence on sustenance, shelter, recovery from illness or injury—all of which require some form of social cooperation in order to be met. Ann Ferguson’s marxist feminist perspective has stressed this social dimension of affect, highlighting not so much its corporeal excess as the social contexts that organize it. For Ferguson, the human capacity for sensation and affect, like other material needs (i.e., hunger or the need for shelter), is one aspect of social being that is always historically produced. It is disciplined in the organization of labor, monitored by the state, expressed and made meaningful through culture-ideology. What Marx said of hunger is also applicable to the human capacity for sensation and affect: “Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail, and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption.” In a similar way, the satisfaction of the need for sensation and affect is historically produced and takes different forms in various social formations. What Ferguson has

called “sex-affective energy” is a key component of all human social relations. Sex-affective energy has no natural objects or bodily functions; it is a social product that is variously organized into social relations and identities—into friendship, maternal and paternal bonds, affective community ties, reproductive-sex relations, romantic love, and multiple forms of sexual desire (Ferguson 1989, 78). Sex-affective energy is historically produced as social relations and bodily feelings.

Unlike the psychoanalytic model of desire, which generalizes from the vantage point of the bourgeois kinship alliance and highlights sexual desire as erotogenic drives, the concept of sex-affective production allows us to consider sexual desire as only one form of sex-affective production and to see the intersection of the symbolic or cultural dimension of sex-affective relations with the political economy of labor and the formation of the state. The social organization of affect is not just a tool to meet other needs, as some functionalist marxists have assumed, nor is it a corporeal energy autonomous from the division of labor. We might even say affective potential is included in what Marx means by labor—that is, the capacity to satisfy and freely develop vital human needs, a capacity that is always socially exercised. Though he does not explicitly name them as such, affective needs are part of the human potential for “self-realization” that Marx often refers to when he contends that the development of needs is historically contingent on the development of human potential.

Under capitalism, workers do not retain control of very much of their human potential, and the outlawing of so much human potential is, in fact, one of the sites of struggle between capital and labor. Under capitalism’s wage-labor system, the worker trades away the positive potential for self-realization inherent within his or her labor power when he or she commodifies it on the wage market. During the working day, labor power becomes detached from the individual’s full range of human needs and potentials, and it is in this sense that capitalism is an impoverished mode of social organization. We might even say that outlawing the development of full human potential comprises the very scaffolding of human relationships in commodity exchange. This outlawing takes place at several material levels. In the encounter between the worker and the capitalist, the worker exchanges his labor for a wage, but the capitalist has the power to decide what counts as the value of this labor based on the minimum he decides is needed for the worker’s survival measured against the maximum surplus labor the capitalist wants to extract for profit. In other words, it is the capitalist (as a member of a class that works in conjunction with the

state) who estimates and decides on the minimum wage that is necessary to maintain the worker as a laboring individual. He decides the amount in wages that will allow the worker to meet his survival needs sufficiently in order to be able to return to work the next day. In this exchange of labor power for wages several things occur. First of all, the worker's "species life," to use Marx's phrase, is taken from him. What this amounts to is that the worker is forced to forfeit certain needs — aspects of his human potential — embodied in what Marx calls labor. In order to survive within the minimum standard, the worker is forced to give up "time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free play of his bodily and mental activity, even the rest time of Sunday" (*Capital*, vol. 1, 264).

The companion to the production of surplus value, then, is the production of "outlawed need." Outlawed need is a very useful concept that Deborah Kelsh has proposed as a way of understanding an important consequence of the commodification of labor under capitalism. When the worker meets the capitalist in the marketplace and exchanges his labor power for a wage many of his human potentials and needs are excluded as the unnamed price of the exchange. One portion of these outlawed needs is encoded in the calculation of the minimum wage. The minimum wage is of course invariably not the same as a living wage. Because the minimum wage cannot cover even the most basic needs for living — food and clothing and housing and health care, no less education and time for intellectual and creative development — many unmet needs for living a full human life are virtually "outlawed." Another area of outlawed need is embedded in the production of labor power outside the workplace. Because the need to reproduce labor power is not part of the calculus of socially necessary labor covered by wages, the domestic labor of feeding and clothing and caring constitutes an outlawed set of needs. The labor to satisfy these needs is either underpaid or not paid, invariably not valued, and often made invisible *as labor* by being understood as a woman's natural role.

Another way that needs are outlawed is in the commodification of consciousness that occurs as a necessary accompaniment to the production of commodities, the process that Marx describes in his section of *Capital* on the commodity fetish. Within capitalist production, sensation and affect often get separated from the meeting of human needs, sometimes directly, as workers' bodies and minds are abused in the interests of profitable production, and sometimes indirectly through forms of consciousness that ab-

stract mind from body, public from private, ways of knowing from their historical material conditions. In commodity capitalism, not only do people lose sight of the social relationships that make possible the marketable goods they consume, but this process also requires a fracturing of our objective human capacities as sensuous, social beings. Alienation from sensation and affect underpins the organization of commodity production and consumption and the logic of exchange value. In capitalist divisions of labor, the extraction of surplus value requires that workers alienate themselves from their human potentials, including their sex-affective potentials. It is only by severing her human potential to labor from her needs that the worker can present herself as “owner” of her labor power. It is only in this way that she can commodify her capacities and even her personality into a thing that she can sell.

Because bodily senses cannot speak for themselves—they have to be *made* “sensible”—the human capacity for sensation and affect is inevitably organized by the discourses of culture-ideology. Under capitalism, sensation and affect have been produced historically such that some ways of meeting these needs have been consolidated into legitimate “experiences” and social relations while others have been outlawed. In chapter 3 I addressed some of the ways we might think of sexual identities as forms of consciousness that emerged out of the history of commodification. I argued that during the late nineteenth century, as commodity capitalism inaugurated a new culture of mass consumption, the organization of desire shifted, and along with this shift emerged new categories of identity, of allowed and outlawed human needs. My contention was that we need to consider the historical relation between the emergence of new “desiring subjects” of consumer culture and the ways in which the consolidation of heteronormativity, and the accompanying formation of hetero- and homosexual identities, reified the human potential for sensation and affect. Reification is a process whereby the history of social relationships underlying identities becomes occluded or made invisible, and identities come to be seen as natural “things in themselves.” In the process of reifying consciousness into forms of identity, whole areas of human affective potential are effectively outlawed. In constructing sexual identity, for example, the discourses of sexuality provide the social contexts whereby sensations and affects are made intelligible in terms of normative and perverse sexual identifications and desires. “Outlawed needs,” however, are not just those sensations and affects that the normative discourses shame—by naming them “gay,” “lesbian,” “perverse,” or any other illegitimizing name. They



are also those unspeakable sensations and affects that do not fall easily into any prescribed categories. In other words, the interface between the available modes of intelligibility and human affective and erotic capacity is never complete. Massumi's conception of affect is helpful here for his suggestion that the relationship between affect and the "social context" that organizes it and makes it intelligible is always incoherent. The human potential for sensation and affect that comprises "experience" is always much richer than sanctioned identity categories capture. What is left over are "tendencies" or human potentials for action that normative discourses cannot name.

Critical psychology has developed a conceptual discourse for addressing the relationship between human potential and its restriction under capitalism that I think provides a useful contribution to rethinking sexual identity in these terms. Critical psychology emerged in Europe in the early seventies as a marxist protest against mainstream bourgeois psychology and was led by the work of the West German Klaus Holzkamp. It puts forward a paradigm for scientific psychology that would serve the genuine interests of working people and also take the side of the individual human subject (Tolman 3, 5). At the philosophical level, critical psychology is historical materialist in that it views human phenomena historically as the outcome of material processes of development (Tolman 7–8). This means that psychological phenomena as well as scientific theory and practice are seen as historically embedded, and so-called psychic processes are understood to be thoroughly penetrated by societal existence. For the critical psychologist, what is specific to human existence is its societal nature; individual human needs are not satisfied directly or even individually but are governed by the society we are born into and the places we occupy in it (Tolman 14). Between human need—the need for food, say—and the satisfaction of this need lies a complex set of societal relations, among them divisions of labor. For instance, in the case of hunger, this human need is mediated by the conditions and human relationships in place for production and distribution of food, as well as a host of cultural practices and attitudes attached to them (Tolman 15–16). For the critical psychologist, human needs do not refer directly to their objects but to our capacity to participate in the mediating societal arrangements by which the objects of need are produced and distributed. Critical psychologists call this capacity "having control over the conditions of production" (Tolman 16).

One of critical psychology's main concepts is the notion of "action potency." Action potency refers to the individual's ability to do things that she feels are necessary to satisfy her needs and assure an acceptable quality of life. My interest in this concept is that it mediates individual reproduction with societal reproduction by linking consciousness and agency (how one feels about oneself) with "the actual possibilities for need satisfaction through cooperative effort with other members of society" (17). Action potency in capitalist societies is organized by class divisions in that possibilities for fulfilling needs of all sorts are less restricted for those who own and control resources. Critical psychologists use the concept of action potency to address the ways individuals relate to the possibilities available for fulfilling their needs—whether by making the best of the options at hand or by going beyond the limits and extending existing possibilities. These two options they designate *restricted action potency* and *generalized action potency* (Tolman 18). The restrictive strategies are often the easiest to adopt in the short run—getting along and receiving the benefits of the good or accommodating subject. But no matter how understandable or "ideologically available" the restrictive framework is, in the end by exercising this option "people become their own enemies" because restrictive forms of action are characterized by modes of thinking that fail to reflect the social mediatedness of existence, including the option to extend existing possibilities. Restrictions are taken to be the effects of one's immediate environment. Unhappiness is blamed on one's family, partner, workers, or oneself. Social conditions are personalized and psychologized. This sort of interpretive thinking is widespread and encouraged in capitalist society. It makes good consumers and docile subjects. It also makes reified identities. In contrast, comprehensive thinking does not transcend, replace, or move beyond interpretive thinking so much as it sublates it (Tolman 19). The point here is to comprehend our immediate life situation, including the attraction of restrictive ways of thinking, within its social and historical context and in so doing devise generalized or more comprehensive strategies for action.

I want to propose that sexual identities—indeed, all reified identity categories—might be thought of as forms of restrictive action potency. Sexual identity categories restrict the power to act to the extent that they atomize human potential and social relationships. By this I do not only mean that the organization of gender and desire into the heteropolar norm is an example of restrictive action potency. To the extent that the

queering of this binary has tended to close off more comprehensive ways of thinking about sexual identification and desire, it also restricts our ability to understand the history of social relationships that identity formation depends on. Sometimes these restrictions take the form of individualizing, as critical psychology notes, but they also take more postmodern forms where identity is rescripted as a complex of culturally constructed positions. When a way of thinking about identity that promotes restrictive action potency is the starting point for social movement, the consequence is that the power to collectively change existing possibilities and structures becomes restricted as well. The challenge for social movement committed to addressing forms of oppression that target sexual identity is to fold those ways of thinking that encourage restrictive action potency into those that foster more comprehensive action potency. In the next section I look at some of the ways academic social theorists have proposed we might get out of the restrictive action potency of identity politics and redirect social movement by making use of appeals to social justice and democracy. The reorientation I am proposing endorses the aim of full democracy, but from a different starting place: a deeply democratic because fundamentally anticapitalist project. Rooted in the reality of collective human needs, it displaces identity politics with a practice of disidentification that draws attention to the role of human affect in social life and in social movement through the cultivation of what I would call the more comprehensive action potency of “revolutionary love.”

#### REVOLUTIONARY LOVE

As we enter the new millennium, organized oppositional social movement in the United States is stymied by the lack of viable forms of political agency, the absence of any credible vision of an alternative to the present order, the failure to connect a politics of identity to a politics of equality, and what is really the context for these developments—a resurgence of economic *laissez-faire*. This situation is both an effect of the hegemony of two decades of neoliberalism and the legacy of the New Left. By the nineties, both in the academy and in community activism, various versions of postmodern identity politics had become the reigning paradigm, sometimes understood in terms of a logic of intersecting class, race, gender, and sexual oppressions. One consequence of the installation of the conservative bourgeois ruling bloc in the eighties has been the privatizing not only of

the welfare state but also of citizenship. In the previous chapters I have tried to show how this conservative, privatizing turn is evident in the discourses of postmodern identity politics that relinquish the fight against structural inequalities for local strategies and a more flexible cultural politics. Now, at century's end, critical examination of the left's political failures is beginning to call attention to their class dimensions and the role of identity politics in them.

In her book *Justice Interruptus* Nancy Fraser addresses this transformation in the grammar of political claims-making that has taken place in the United States over the past two decades. She sees it as a shift from a socialist political imaginary that is primarily concerned with the problem of redistribution of wealth and resources to a politics of identity in which the central problem of justice is cultural recognition (2). I want to take some time to review her position, as I think there are many who find her diagnosis of the split within the left apt. Yet it seems to me that her arguments also have a certain affiliation with the identity politics she wants to go beyond. While she sees the mobilizing of social movements around various categories of cultural identity to be an unfortunate result of the decentering of class, Fraser does not explain why class is not a viable starting point for social theory, what the relationship is between the concept of political economy that she uses and class, or for that matter between the politics of redistribution and class. The frame for her understanding of socioeconomic injustice is "a rough and general" one, loosely referring to exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation (13), and informed by a commitment to egalitarianism. One of the consequences of this general model of economic injustice is that her concept of "redistribution" can actually obscure the basis for socioeconomic inequities under capitalism (the fact that the unpaid labor of many is the source of profits for the few). At worst, the concept of redistribution can be taken to imply that social welfare programs rather than fundamental structural changes are the way to remedy economic inequities. Most of all, conceptualizing political economy in terms of distribution forfeits the opportunity to acknowledge that under capitalism there are and historically have always been uneven, complex material connections between the unequal relations of production (another way of understanding class) and the production of identities, knowledges, and culture. That Fraser relinquishes a systemic understanding of social life premised on the human requirement to produce what is needed to survive also points to her ambivalent relationship to socialist feminism—a tradition she

draws on and was herself part of but that her own postsocialism seems to have disowned.

Fraser is certainly alert to the inequity that capitalism as a social system has wrought and its damaging effects on people's lives, and her references to contemporary neoliberalism detail the global dimension of this violent social system. But she does not explain what it is about late capitalism and neoliberalism that has provoked the interruption of justice that is her subject. My concern is that Fraser's reluctance to spell out the class character of capitalism's deep structures finally undermines the adequacy of her conceptual maps to the emancipatory project she espouses. Nonetheless, Fraser's core argument that "the project of transforming the deep structures of both political economy and culture appears to be the one overarching programmatic orientation capable of doing justice to *all* current struggles" (32) is a statement worth highlighting and embracing. Despite the ways her analysis might strain against it, this call for attention to deep structures is exactly what has been so absent on the left.

In the chapter "From Redistribution to Recognition?" Fraser distinguishes two different kinds of claims for justice. Recognition claims understand justice as cultural or symbolic, and they tend to reinforce group specificity and differentiation (affirmative action programs would be one classic example). Redistribution claims understand justice as socioeconomic and aim to abolish the political economic arrangements that underpin group identity as well as the group differentiation they effect (e.g., feminist demands to abolish the gendered division of labor). Fraser contends that the two can be merely two different sorts of claims, or they can interfere with and undermine each other. In treating some of the complex relationships between competing claims for justice, Fraser complicates the "intersecting oppressions" approach to difference and identity that is so pervasive in U.S. feminism now. She argues that different conceptions of injustice and possible remedies to them can be situated within a four-celled matrix. Groups whose claims of injustice she sees as primarily rooted in cultural misrecognition (lesbians and gay men) are positioned at one end, and groups whose claims of social injustice are primarily rooted in economic injustice are positioned at the other (the exploited working class). As Fraser sees it, lesbians and gay men suffer from injustices that are rooted in cultural misrecognition, and any economic injustice they suffer is attendant on that. Consequently, the solutions to the injustices against them will need to be cultural. Between the two extremes of sexuality and class are bivalent groups whose claims for social justice derive

from roots in both economic inequity and cultural misrecognition (groups organized or identified by gender and race). In addition, she outlines two broad categories for remedying injustice that traverse these options—affirmative remedies that do not change basic social structures and transformative ones that do. While her heuristic is basically descriptive, Fraser does end by recommending that for all bivalent collectivities transformative economics and a “deconstructive” as opposed to an “identity” cultural politics work best.

There are a number of problems with this schema, and most pertain to the groups at the two extremes. One problem, which Fraser herself acknowledges, is that this heuristic tends to reinforce the fallacy that individuals occupy only one group. Some lesbians, however, might well be unjustly treated in all four respects. In addition, class becomes merely another cultural category commensurate with race, gender, and sexuality rather than being the social condition that a transformative economics would be aimed at undoing. Furthermore, by beginning with the assumption that claims for social justice organized around sexuality are rooted in cultural misrecognition, Fraser participates in the very logic her argument sets out to dispel—that is, the separation of culture from political economy.

Some thorny implications for how we formulate a radical sexual politics follow from this vexed starting point. First of all, Fraser’s heuristic presents a historical effect—the emergence of sexual identities—as an ontological given. Furthermore, even though she acknowledges the transformative value of “deconstructing” the binary distinction between hetero- and homosexuality, nonetheless, her heuristic is premised on this binary. Consequently, a whole host of questions—including how sexual identity historically has been “interimbricated” in the (gendered) division of labor, in the accumulation of surplus value, and in the advancing processes of commodification—is bracketed off.

Fraser is absolutely right that a split between cultural and economic assessments continues to govern the prevailing ways of understanding social injustice and much of the political strategizing to change it; this is the line that has hamstrung progressive politics and theory. Her recommendations for how to heal this rift are passionately visionary and problematically pluralist. She pragmatically suggests we look for solutions that try to soften the conflict between recognition and redistribution, and yet she also promotes the transformation of capitalist political economy and what she calls a cultural “deconstruction” of cultural identities. A more fully socialist

vision might emphasize the reasons why economic inequities and social identities are historically related under capitalism and stress ways of disidentifying with the reified forms of “cognition” and identity on which a politics of recognition is often premised. Fraser makes the important point that both deconstructing identities and socialist feminist politics can seem “far removed from the immediate interests and identities of most women, as these are currently constructed” (30). The challenge for knowledge workers both inside and outside of the academy is to provide the concepts that will reconstruct those interests by helping to translate the collective, lived experience of social injustice into ways of knowing that are emotionally, politically, and structurally transformative.

I am suggesting that one way to do this is to reorient the politicizing of identities to begin with human needs and in the process politicize capitalism. In order to politicize capitalism we need to make visible the strategies of displacement that have helped remove class from view and that have abstracted identities from their social conditions of existence. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant looks at some of the ways capitalism has been depoliticized through the disappearance of the public sphere in the United States.<sup>3</sup> When Berlant asserts that the public sphere has disappeared, she means that there are almost no contexts for communication that allow ordinary citizens to feel that they have influence on the state. She addresses how this has been achieved in part because citizenship has been privatized in the wake of Reaganomics and examines many of the technologies used by conservative ideologies to convince citizens that the core of politics should be the sphere of private life. Chief among them is the use of intimacy rhetoric that “helps displace from sustained public scrutiny the relations between congealed corporate wealth and the shifting conditions of labor” (8). The rhetorics of intimacy have become one means whereby “the causes of income inequality and job instability in all sectors of the U.S. economy can be personalized, rephrased in terms of individuals’ power to act and capacity to respond flexibly to the ‘new opportunities’ presented to them within an increasingly volatile global economy” (8). She looks at how advertising, film, television, and political campaigns make explicit the routes by which persons might give a name to their desires. Among them are sentimental notions of nationality that draw fragments of identity into an imaginary whole.

One effect of this rhetoric of intimacy and sentimentality is that discussions of the politics of sex and bodily identity have become absorbing at

the same time that “a concern with the outrages of American class relations has been made to seem trite and unsexy” (8). Berlant highlights the effects of Reaganite conservatism on the left in the upsurge of identity movements that “celebrate the ways U.S. subalterns develop tactics for survival from within capitalist culture: forms of activity like gay marriage, critically motivated acts of commodity consumption, and identity based economic investment zones” that are supposed to make marginalized groups more powerful (9). One of the suggestions of Berlant’s strongest readings is that the task of culture analysis now is not to pit the “merely personal” against the “profoundly structural” or vice versa but to attend to the ways intimacy, sexuality, the personal—that is, the realm of the “private”—are being used in the formation of a new bourgeois hegemonic bloc that is the outcome of late capitalism’s structural changes

One of the ways the left is being incorporated into the formation of a new ruling bloc has been through a substitution of the politicizing of identities for the politicizing of capitalism. This process is in fact a basic tactic of liberalism. Wendy Brown has traced the disappearance of capitalism in contemporary theory and the accompanying resurgence of identity politics through the history of liberalism that has dominated the formation of politicized identity in the United States and the West generally. Within the longstanding liberal understanding of the individual’s relation to the state there is a latent conflict between a universal “we” and particular “I”s, between the state’s profession that it guarantees freedom and equality to “the people” and a civil society where differences and inequities among individuals remain. Liberalism succeeds so long as the “I”s are willing to subordinate or abstract their needs in order to remain part of the “we”—even if it means accepting a status as supplementary, tolerable, different, or in any of a variety of ways partly outside national identity.

In “On the Jewish Question” Marx addresses the ways the liberal formulation of the national subject—the “we”—separates the rights and identities honored by the state from the real lived conditions of people’s lives and prevents recognition of the persistent differences of inequality as political differences. He argues that encoded in the requirements for membership in the liberal state is the necessity to abstract from one’s social being. In other words, Marx shows that accepting the terms of liberalism’s politicized identity as it is offered by the state entails outlawing social differences and unmet human needs. The liberal state serves capitalism by smoothing over the enduring unmet human needs capitalism requires



through invitations to identify politically with a democratic project that guarantees freedom and equality for an imaginary “all.”

The fantasy of a collective “we” offered by the liberal state is an abstract, universal identity that is empty of content, and in this sense we might call it a “dead identity.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time the liberal state promotes identification with this universal dead identity, it has to avert social crisis by responding to the unmet needs in civil society. In late capitalism the state has done this through measures that actually increase individuation through the disciplinary production of a wide array of behavior-based identities. The welfare state, for example, attends to the needs arising from civil society by producing subjects who are themselves subdivided into categories according to motherhood, disability, age, and so on (Wendy Brown 53). In this way the state contradictorily helps produce these categories — rather than the universal “we” — as the basis for political identities.

In considering the occlusion of class effected by identity politics, Wendy Brown has astutely argued that politics organized around individuated identities was purchased at the cost of naturalizing capitalism. But she also observes that identity politics is in fact bound to capitalist class relations through a disguised form of class resentment, a resentment that is displaced onto forms of social injustice other than class. Using Nietzsche’s concept of *resentiment*, she explains that resentment is a way of marshaling affect into rage or righteousness around a history of injuries. Resentment takes suffering as the measure of social virtue and points to “privilege” as the self-recriminating luxury of those who have not suffered. She contends that identities structured around a history of group suffering can also tend to become invested in their own subjection. This investment is evident in practices like placing blame and seeking revenge. Both are “reverse discourses” that turn the tables of power without subverting or getting beyond the structure of “us vs. them” (70). As a reactive position, identity politics can take the form of moral reproach and punishment (“I Hate Straights” or “Get Whitey”). As a result, the self-affirmation of identity politics often stops short of developing a critique of liberal universalism’s economy of inclusion and exclusion that identity politics protests so vigorously against.

One of Brown’s most incisive arguments is that an identity politics structured out of resentment retains a real or imagined bond to the reviled subject that constitutes its suppressed object of desire. Politicized identities of race, gender, and sexuality participate in this structure of resent-

ment in the following way: even though they abjure a critique of class power, they require a limited identification *through class* “precisely insofar as these identities are established vis-à-vis a bourgeois norm of class acceptance, legal protection, and relative material comfort” (60). Brown contends that the point is not to dismiss the needs that identity politics can speak to but rather to recognize that its claims often rest on “an unspoken appeal to a standard internal to existing society—the white masculine middle-class ideal—which preserves capitalism from critique and sustains the invisibility and inarticulateness of class” (61). In fact, she speculates that this class bond is one reason why class is often named but rarely theorized or developed in multicultural invocations of “race, class, and gender” (61).

If identity politics emerges in this analysis as in fact an unspeakable class position, Brown takes care not to name this a “middle-class” stance. Instead she encourages us to consider “middle class” as an articulation that depends on naturalizing rather than politicizing capitalism. The “phantasmic middle-class” is a conservative entity insofar as it refers to an idyllic, uncorrupted time in the past when life was good. It is not a reactionary ideal (like stronger versions of white supremacy); rather, it is the figure of the nonclass ideal many nonclass identities refer to (Brown 61). I would suggest that we consider the phantasmic middle class as one of the organizing structures of a postmodern bourgeois ruling bloc that depends on naturalizing or denying capitalism’s systematic outlawing of human needs. As ideology, it is also a representation that is endorsed by many people whose material needs are not represented by that bloc.

As class ideology, identity politics suppresses the potential to name and know capitalism’s deprivations:

When not only economic stratification but other injuries to the human body and psyche enacted by capitalism—alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement, disintegration of sustaining albeit contradictory social forms such as families and neighborhoods—when these are discursively normalized and thus politicized, other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight; indeed they may bear all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism. (Brown 60)

This evaluation of identity politics as ideology invites consideration of it as one way class struggle under late capitalism is being displaced.

At the heart of the process of displacement that identity politics entails lies the emotional field Brown has called resentment. Resentment entails a way of knowing that overwhelms and channels the affective, physical, and material pain of unmet needs. The identities that are articulated through this organization of experience are, to some degree, like the identity “middle-class,” “dead” identities in that they restrict the potential (action potency) to change the structures of power in order to meet human needs more adequately, and they hamper the ability to imagine and enact a more comprehensive vision of the future. Dead identities reify human experience and potential.

Lauren Berlant has used the term “dead citizenship” to epitomize the equation of identity with iconicity — what I have called the reification of identity. Dead identities are not open to history, or they admit only a very narrow history. They are fixed or frozen, presented as natural or restricted to being understood as merely cultural constructs. Dead identities accept that limiting the range of human potential into categories of identity is natural or pragmatic. They may take the form of sexual or gender or race or any other identity complex that narrows the field of possible action and accepts the outlawing of certain human needs.

Outlawed needs are “an unassimilable outside of capitalism” (Kelsh). They are a radical outside because they cannot be brought back into capitalism without abolishing the very terms of the extraction of surplus value. And yet it is this same domain of outlawed need that must be continually reckoned with “because to leave it out there is to leave out there a constant and growing threat to capitalist interests”; it is the “monstrous necessity” to capitalism that haunts it (Kelsh 76–77). Claiming outlawed needs as the ground for politicizing can reorient social movement onto the new ground of this monstrous necessity. I mentioned in chapter 1 that if we approach a politics of sexuality from the vantage point of capitalism’s continual construction of allowed and illegitimate needs, we find that human capacities for sensation and affect are only one domain of outlawed needs. One way oppositional political movement might demystify the dead identity of the middle class and forge coalition among workers and the unemployed is by addressing how capitalism has outlawed the meeting of so many basic human needs: for food, housing, health care, and also for love and affection, education, leisure time.

Of course, this task of reorienting would also have to address the persistence and even short-term political uses of identities with all of their affective baggage. If it is not to be utopian, social movement must begin

with the existing realities and devise levels of organizing that can demystify them so that their reasons for being can be brought to light and connected to “the big picture.” The reorientation I am suggesting does not deny the ways capitalism exercises its violence through state-supported institutions that regulate and discipline identities. Heterosexual marriage and the gendered division of labor remain the prevailing, pervasively naturalized organization of human sensation and affect whose coherence is assured and legitimized in law and common sense by reference to an abject homosexual other. Just as social movement cannot dismiss but has to work on the ways people’s experiences are organized through reified categories, this work and the new consciousness it produces arise out of people’s collective activity as they measure their outlawed needs against the ways of making sense offered by the dominant culture.

The process of organizing collective subjects for social change does indeed involve “movement” on many levels, and one of them undoubtedly entails forging forms of collective consciousness. This process is not merely cognitive and rational—though it is that, too; it also works on the affective investments people have in the identities they claim. One of the steps in forming collective agency entails “disidentification.”<sup>5</sup> Disidentification is a practice of working on existing ways of identifying that we embrace and live by. This “work” is a process of unlearning that opens up the identities we take for granted to the historical conditions that make them possible. It involves uprooting these identities not just from ways of thinking that invite us to construe them as natural but also from a history of suffering—the fertile ground for resentment to grow—and resituating how we know them in a different historical frame, a frame that allows us to see how this suffering is the product of a mode of production that outlaws a whole array of human needs. The disidentifying subject taps into the ways her outlawed needs, including her affective needs, are channeled by culture-ideology. She replaces the narrow resentment of identity politics with the potentially much more powerful and monstrous collective opposition of all of capitalism’s disenfranchised subjects.

I have referred to disidentification as a form of “work” because it involves the critical e-labor-ation or working over of normative identities. This process is a discomforting one because it literally shakes the ground we are used to standing on. When the forms of identity we have been invited to inhabit are called into question, the effect is not just a cognitive shock but also an affective one. A range of affects may be provoked at the prospect of losing firm footing within identity categories we may not have

been entirely comfortable with but that we had at least been able to take for granted. Destabilizing this familiar ground can provoke fear, anger, and frustration. But this discomfort can also be the groundbreaking inauguration of a new standpoint of critical mindfulness that can fold deeply held forms of identity into a new way of seeing.

Michel Pecheux used the term “disidentification” to distinguish a critical relation to subjectivity distinct from the stance of the good or the bad subject. The good subject is the one who conforms to the prevailing norms, the subject who at least tries to accommodate and abide by prescribed expectations. The bad subject, on the other hand, is the rebel who rejects convention, but her rebellion does little to change the existing social system. We might even say bad subjects actually reinforce normative identities by providing the “other” against whom the norm constructs itself. Identity politics can work like the “bad subject” offering a story of suffering, resentment, and rebellion against the limited possibilities offered by capitalism’s ruling bloc. But doing so in these terms promotes forms of political agency that themselves offer only restricted action potency.

In contrast, disidentification is not a refusal of the normative forms of identification that summon us or that we may more or less inhabit but rather a critical “working” on them. I am suggesting that this work arises from a standpoint or position that indeed counters the dominant knowledges, a position whose empirical reality lies in the monstrous outside of capitalism’s unmet needs. It is a standpoint that does not claim any single group identity but rather the collectivity of those whose surplus human needs capitalism has outlawed. Disidentification is a critical practice that de-reifies identity by opening the identity form “I am” to history. This does not mean a simple renunciation of identities—gay, straight, man, woman—but a critical working on them to make visible their historical and material conditions of possibility. The process of disidentification entails a continual effort to sublimate rather negate what is into what can be. This means that the process of working on the subject transforms even as it preserves parts of the existing historical reality. This critical work does not replace the prevailing identities offered us by capitalist culture but takes them as the place to begin to provoke the formation of a more comprehensive, collective agency.

One of the ways to make use of existing identity forms is to highlight the gap between identities promoted by the dominant culture and the lived “experience” of social relations that is not summoned by these terms.

This is the “excess” that is often “experienced” as an inchoate affect of not belonging, of not fitting in or not feeling at home within the terms that are offered for identity. The process of disidentification can zero in on the affective component of this misrecognition and invite consideration of the ways it is named and routed into emotions (of shame, denial, resentment, etc.) that can naturalize the existing categories. Disidentification invites the renarration of this affective excess in relation to capitalism’s systemic production of unmet need. At the same time it works on forms of misrecognition, disidentification also makes visible the ways the dominant organizations of sexual desires and identities are real sites of affective investment, and through this critical awareness invites a process of unlearning. Unlearning these investments is always an incomplete, unfinished business, and recognizing this is an important lesson on the limits of one’s historical position. But this ongoing lesson in historical limits does not have to be dismissive or belittling; it can also fold the forms of affective identification we historically and critically inhabit into a more ambitious political project that claims the radical outside of unmet human needs as the starting point for a much needed anti-capitalist project.

It is this dialectical relation between forms of love, between what is and what can be, that I find so beautifully conveyed in the song “Te Quiero” by Mario Benedetti:

*Si te quiero es porque sois  
 Mi amor, mi complice, mi todo  
 Y en la calle codo a codo  
 Somos mucho más que dos.  
 Somos mucho más que dos.*

“If I love you,” it begins, “it is because you are my love, my accomplice, my everything. And on the street, shoulder to shoulder, we are more than two. We are more than two.”

Disidentification is a historically necessary strategic step right now in the United States, especially where a sedimented history of identity politics and the operation of an imaginary middle class have worked very successfully to eclipse the persistence of class structures. Considering the formation of sexual identities in relation to human need as I am suggesting we might do opens a way to imagine and form collective class agency that does not reify “the proletariat,” foreclose sexuality, or relegate it to a secondary status. Resituating sexual politics on the ground of human

needs links the human potential for sensation and affect that the discourses of sexual identity organize to the meeting of other vital human needs and calls for a movement for full democracy to begin there. Above all, this reorientation is an argument that full democracy cannot be achieved within capitalism. This means that eliminating the social structures of exploitation that capitalism absolutely requires and so violently enacts at the expense of human needs must be on the political agenda, at the very least as the horizon that sets the terms for imagining change.

# NOTES

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## CHAPTER 1

1. John D’Emilio’s excellent but brief essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” written in 1979–80, remains the primary source that directly addresses this history. See also D’Emilio (1989); Field; Gluckman and Reed; and Ingraham (1999).

2. My objective is an effort to elaborate and develop John D’Emilio’s thesis in “Capitalism and Gay Identity” as he states it in the preface to the reprint of the essay: “I argued that two aspects of capitalism—wage labor and commodity production—created the social conditions that made possible the emergence of a distinctive gay and lesbian identity” (3).

3. Several accounts of late capitalism are especially useful, among them Dirlik; Harvey; Myoshi. I am especially indebted to Arif Dirlik for the following outline.

4. For summary overviews of marxist feminism see Gimenez and “Introduction” in Hennessy and Ingraham (1997).

5. For examples of various positions on these debates from neo- to classical to post-marxist see Resnick and Wolff; Zavarzadeh and Morton; Laclau and Mouffe.



6. One example can be found in the “Preface to a Critique of Political Economy,” commonly taken to be the source of the base-superstructure metaphor: “In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness” (1955, 362–63).

7. The concept “social formation” was chosen by Althusserians in favor of “society” because “society” signals a deceptive unity whereas social formation stresses that “the diversity of human practices in any society is irreducible to economic practice alone” (Anderson 67).

8. For the original essay of Thompson’s see *New Left Review* 7 (1961): 28–29.

9. Quite a bit of the cultural theory that has appropriated Gramsci has disconnected his attention to ideological processes from class. For a useful critique of this trend see Harris.

10. I am grateful to Deborah Kelsh for the phrase “outlawed need.” I refer the reader interested in a fuller discussion of this concept to her dissertation.

11. For a more detailed discussion of the concept “heterogender” see Ingraham 1994.

12. For other examples of materialist and marxist feminism see Hennessy and Ingraham; an extended discussion of materialist feminism can be found in Hennessy (1993). Examples of materialist feminist work can be found in Ebert (1991, 1996); German; Vogel (1979, 1995). While I do not agree with their assessments of materialism, Landry and MacLean’s overview of materialist feminism in the past twenty years in Britain and the United States is a useful introduction to the positions and discourses it draws on.

13. Recently some postmodern feminists have begun to call their work “materialist,” when in fact they do not offer the sort of systemic analysis I am describing. I will treat this reworking of materialism in my discussion of Judith Butler’s work below. Because materialist feminism is being so conservatively reformulated, I think it is important to stress through the use of the phrase “marxist feminism” that the materialist understanding of social life I refer to is historical materialism.

14. For useful discussions of the differences between marxist and materialist feminism see Gimenez, “Marxist feminism,” *Feminist Theory Web site* ([www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism](http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism)); Hennessy and Ingraham.

15. In the towns, “the houses themselves were better than those to which many immigrants from the countryside had been accustomed . . . until we arrive at the appalling conditions revealed by the housing and sanitary enquiries of the 1840s. It is true that conditions in rural villages or weaving hamlets may have been quite as bad as conditions in Preston or Leeds. But the size of the problem was certainly worse in the great towns and the multiplication of bad conditions facilitated the spread of epidemics.” Consequently, conditions in the cities were felt to be more offensive and inconvenient (Thompson 319).

16. On the conditions for women workers in the cities in the early years of the industrial revolution see Alexander; E. P. Thompson tells us how difficult it is to draw a balance of pluses and minuses in the changing conditions for women: “On the one hand, the claim that the Industrial Revolution raised the status of women would seem to have little meaning when set beside the record of excessive hours of labor, cramped housing, excessive child-bearing and terrifying rates of child mortality. On the other hand, the abundant opportunities for female employment in the textile districts gave to women the status of independent wage earners. The spinster or the widow was freed from dependence upon relatives or upon parish relief. Even the unmarried mother might be able, through the laxness of ‘moral discipline’ in many mills, to achieve an independence unknown before” (*Making of the English Working Class* 414).

17. See, for example, Ferguson and Golding. For a fuller discussion of debates in cultural studies over these issues see chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 2

1. According to David McLellan, Marx’s biographer, “Marx told the story to a distraught Eleanor on his deathbed, writing it on a slate as he had lost his voice” (272). Freyerberger’s letter goes on to indicate that Frederick came every week to visit his mother—“curiously enough, however, he never came in through the front door but always through the kitchen” (McLellan 272).

2. For a selection of her works in English and a bibliography, see Holt.

3. In 1933 Reich was expelled from the Communist Party because they found his emphasis on sexuality intolerable; the following year he was dismissed from the International Psychoanalytical Association, who were frightened by his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

4. See Toby Marotta, quoted in Blasius and Phelan 377. It is also worth noting here that the group that sparked the homophile movement in the United States was the Mattachine Society, whose founder, Henry Hay, was a member

of the Communist Party and devoted his energies to the party from 1933 through 1948. However, marxist analysis had little place in the society. The Mattachine Society did not set out to treat sexual oppression as a feature of the history of capitalism. Their aim was simply to address the situation of homosexuals as an oppressed cultural minority.

5. Others (among them the Communist Party USA, the Revolutionary Union, and the Socialist Workers Party) dug in their heels and clung to the official anti-homosexual Communist Party line.

6. For an anti-marxist account of some of the homophobic practices of marxist and Communist Party groups, among them the Socialist Workers Party, see Edge.

7. See, for example, Michael Warner's report on queer theory in the *Voice Literary Supplement* (1992), which highlights the attention Butler's work was getting in the early nineties as well as the controversy it initially provoked. Routledge is now preparing the tenth anniversary issue of *Gender Trouble* and anticipates record sales.

8. For more detailed critical readings of Laclau and Mouffe see Geras (1987); Hennessy (1993); Larsen (1990).

9. Eve Sedgwick's essay on queer performativity (1993) is another notable example of an argument for queer identity that sets the securing of queer identities through the performative "Shame on you!" against the performative "I do" of marriage. Because she sees both practices merely as individuating speech acts, however, Sedgwick never addresses the material relationships between institutionalized heterogender and the much more diffuse material discourses of shame, between discursive identity performances and other social relations.

10. Several studies support this assertion. One indicates that in recent history women who enter the paid labor force increased their total work time by 14 to 25 hours; another reveals that an overriding majority of working mothers continue to prepare dinner and clean up afterwards alone. For more detailed citations see Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff (1994, 49–50).

11. Associated Press. "More Americans Living out of Wedlock." *Albany Times Union*, 27 July 1998. A1

12. The concept of the feudal patriarchal domestic economy is developed in Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff. The distinction between private and public patriarchy has been theorized by Ann Ferguson (1989) and also by Walby (1990).

13. According to the *New York Times* (20 February 1994), a study by Women Work.

14. See Spillers (1987) on some of the implications of this history for representations of family and incest in African-American culture.

15. Some of these include visitation rights at hospitals and jails, unpaid leaves for a new child, or rights to the same status as married couples in qualifying for apartments or insurance benefits.

16. Butler alludes to this sort of economy when she addresses the ways the constitutive instability of “woman” is the effect of a dense intersection of paternal social relations (1993, 218). But her normative materiality omits the gendered division of labor from these social relations.

17. Guy Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire* extends Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of the oedipal family to develop a more specific theory of homosexual oppression as part of a wider system of exploitation; in line with their thinking, he proposes “fusions of desire” as the basis for social revolution.

### CHAPTER 3

1. As of this writing, the latest data from the Congressional Budget Office indicate that “the gap between the rich and poor had grown into an economic chasm so wide that this year (1999) the richest 2.7 million Americans, the top 1 percent, will have as many after tax dollars to spend as the bottom 100 million,” a ratio that has more than doubled since 1977 (Johnston).

2. The MAI is a draft of an agreement that has been negotiated secretly in Paris since 1995 by the 29 largest industrial states organized in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). The public was only informed of these negotiations when the draft was leaked in 1997. Since then, thousands of organizations and groups representing civil society have opposed it. Seen as “the final consequence of neo-liberal globalization,” the MAI overrides any political control of capital that might be exercised by the nation-state; economically the MAI offers protection, security, and limitless freedom for investment, where “investment” is given a very broad definition—including everything from penetrating existing markets to extracting raw materials, laundering money, or dealing in drugs, arms, and women. According to Cynthia Von Werlhof, the sort of investor the MAI has in mind is a “global player” who functions as an absentee landlord. His investment is run like a “colonial enclave,” whose owner is unreachable and sometimes disappears overnight (Von Werlhof 9–10).

3. For an incisive critical assessment of cultural studies in the United States and its relationship to the history of American Studies see Pfister.

4. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, one of the other contributors to this volume, have been longtime critics of cultural marxism’s tendencies to

push economic determinations to the background, and for this reasons their position was one that the Birmingham Center rejected.

5. The collection *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Routledge 1996), offers an extensive overview and assessment of Hall's contributions to cultural studies. For a useful critical history of Hall's relationship to marxism see Sparks.

6. Hall and his colleague Paul Gilroy have been credited with opening up a history of cultural studies that questions its British/European origins and presents it as more of an international undertaking from the outset, rooted in the flow of labor and migration. Their treatments of the cultural politics of race and ethnicity have been extremely important contributions despite an overriding emphasis on culture and nation.

7. These comments were made in an interview at a conference in Taipei, Taiwan—the first cultural studies conference outside the English-speaking world—in answer to the interviewer's suggestion that questions of class have been silenced in cultural studies.

8. For an example of the latter see Warner; Parker.

9. See, for example, Hindess and Hirst; Barrett; Hall (1996); Thompson.

10. See, for example, Barrett; Butler (1993); Giroux and McLaren; Hall (1996); Kipnis; Kobena Mercer; Smith; Žižek (1994, 1989).

11. As I have mentioned, Ann McClintock's incisive analysis of the commodity fetish in her recent book *Imperial Leather* is one excellent contribution to this sort of historical endeavor, but the formation of heteronormative sexuality and the emergence of homosexual identities are notably absent in her study.

12. One of the most provocative features of Floyd's argument is his historicizing of tensions that continue to shape lesbian/gay/queer politics into the twenty-first century, tensions between a minoritizing discourse of homosexuality and an alternative emphasis on a less containable homoerotic, irreducible to identity as part of this restructuring. Floyd's larger argument, which touches on my concern with the polarizing of sexuality and class, is that this splitting is not rooted in recent developments like the fragmentation of the New Left but in a series of intertwined material and ideological events, including the reification of the erotic, that took place in the nineteenth century.

13. Altman stresses two important points about the unevenness of this transnational consolidation of an imaginary, reified, homosexual identity: (1) that there is a far greater variety of understandings of sex and gender arrangements than is recognized by the official discourse, and (2) that the concept of the modern homosexual falls on deaf ears in a culture where homoerotic practices

are highly generalized and where the differences between male and female are regarded as more important than between homo- and heterosexual (81, 84).

## CHAPTER 4

1. The following discussion treats activist practices that were promoted in the early nineties. Since I first wrote this essay in 1993, queer politics has abandoned many of the strategies I mention here, retreating from these sorts of collectively organized public spectacles. My sense is that even though queering commodity spectacles has become more institutionalized—in performance art and film, for instance, if not further incorporated into mainstream advertising, fashion, and entertainment—many of the assumptions that underlie these actions continue to define queer culture.

2. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler qualifies her earlier position by asserting that drag may not always be unproblematically subversive. Nonetheless, due to the theatrical gender trouble drag incites, it remains for her a commendable practice, perhaps the only viable form of political resistance to heterosexuality's regulatory power.

3. For a more detailed critique of Foucault's concept of discursive practice see Hennessy (1993, 37–46).

4. While the concept of the fetish has been taken up in some recent work in cultural theory (a few of the many recent examples include Adams; Apter; Findlay; Kobena Mercer), the relationship between Freud's theory of the fetish and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism has not been very rigorously addressed from a materialist perspective. Most analyses tend to draw upon one theoretical framework or the other, with the Freudian version receiving most attention. Žižek's work on ideology, for example, makes use of Lacanian analysis and poststructuralist reconceptualizations of the social (*vis-à-vis* Laclau and Mouffe) to elaborate and extend the post-marxist return to idealism in cultural theory; his endorsement of the Freudian concept of the fetish as "lack" ignores the possibility that the very notion of castration might be read as the effect of a positive network of (patriarchal) social relations.

5. I will discuss further some of the ways de Lauretis treats sexual identity in her book *The Practice of Love* in the following chapter.

6. For a much fuller elaboration of this distinction between the seeable and the visible and its bearing on the reception of film see Zavazadeh.

7. I have chosen this essay of de Lauretis's for its attention to issues of visibility but also because of its institutional impact, which is indicated by its publishing

history. Originally appearing in *Theatre Journal* (1988), it has since been reprinted in *Performing Feminisms* (Case 1990) and in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove et al. 1993). The page numbers I am using are from Abelove et al.

8. For summary-analyses of Queer Nation's history see Baker et al.; Berlant and Freeman; Berube and Escoffier; Bull; Chee; Duggan; Signorile 88, 317–18; Smyth. For more critical assessments see Fernandez; Maggenti; Mitchell and Olafimihan; Barbara Smith. After 1992 Queer Nation, like ACT-UP, was riven by internal strife over whether its focus and political actions should also address issues of racism and sexism; as a result, several chapters were dissolved or fragmented.

9. For more extended lists of affinity groups see Berlant and Freeman 152 n.3 and Berube and Escoffier 16.

10. For a more detailed analysis of the concept of nationhood in Queer Nation see Berlant and Freeman.

11. Ann Cvetkovitch's chapter on *Capital* in her study of Victorian sensationalism offers an incisive reading of the relationship between visibility and the commodity.

12. On the Situationist International see Knabb; Marcus; Plant.

13. On the former connotations of lifestyle see Bourdieu; Sobel; Rojek. On the latter see Ehrenreich (1989); Featherstone.

14. See Callinicos 62–91; 168–71 on the connection between poststructuralism and aestheticism, particularly in Foucault. See also Hennessy (1993, 55–59) on the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in Foucault.

15. Grant Kester's fine essay on the imaginary space of postindustrial culture prompted my analysis of the class dimensions of visibility here; the phrase "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" is in part a reference to his title.

16. I am grateful to Catherine Sustana for pointing out to me the following detail: Levi's is owned by Robert Haas, the great-great-grandnephew of the company founder; when Haas staged a successful leveraged buyout to take the company private in 1985, profits rose by a staggering 31 percent (Sustana).

17. Among the books that address the class dimension of lesbian and gay history and culture are Bunch; Faderman; Kennedy and Davis; Moraga; Nestle. Essays include D'Emilio; Franzen; Weston and Rafel.

18. On the relationship between (homo)sexuality and capitalism see Altman (1982, 1996); D'Emilio; Evans (1983). Most of the little work on gay poverty has, not accidentally, focused on lesbians and has circulated mostly in alternative/activist presses. Notable examples include Egerton; Helmbold, Lavine.

19. The accuracy of the federally funded Batelle Human Research Center's findings has been questioned for a number of reasons: the study was aimed at addressing behavior related to AIDS, not homosexuality per se; the survey was based on self-reports from men; the interviewers were exclusively women who were not trained in sex research; and the questions about sex with men had a 30 percent nonresponse rate.

## CHAPTER 5

1. The "tale" of the film is the viewer's translation of what Neil Jordan describes as the film's essentials—"what is seen, what happens, and what is said"—into historically available frames for knowing (xi). The following analysis of the ideological work of film is drawn from Zavarzadeh (1991), chapters 1 and 3 especially.

2. The separation of empire and sexuality in cultural history has been affected most profoundly in the past two decades by the influence on cultural studies of Foucault's history of sexuality, which all but erases empire from nineteenth-century Europe. The role of psychoanalysis in shaping theories of sexuality has been an important factor in this displacement as well.

3. Miramax's strategy to promote the film by asking viewers not to reveal its secret proved a profitable marketing gimmick. *The Crying Game's* record-breaking \$50 million plus in box office earnings alone has earned it the status of the most successful art house release in motion picture history (Goldman). Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Miramax's founders, who purchased distribution rights for \$1 million, stood to earn more than \$10 million in profits from the film in 1993 alone. *The Crying Game* received six Oscar nominations that same year and was the Academy Award winner for best screenplay. In Britain the film did less well but was expected to reach an audience of 4 to 5 million when it aired on Britain's Channel 4 in the fall of 1994 (Dugdale).

4. The effects of marketing and publicity on a film's reception are, of course, not always predictable or direct. For an interesting example of the skewed relationship between promotion and reception see Hilary Hinds's reading of the BBC production of Jeanette Winterson's lesbian bildungsroman *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (aired in 1990), whose promotion in terms of its "explicitly lesbian" sex scenes was at odds with its reception within the frame of "high art."

5. For a fuller explanation of this concept see Ingraham 1994, 1999.

6. Some examples from film and television in the early nineties include *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Melrose Place*, and *Roseanne*. Films like *The Bird*



*Cage*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* demonstrate cultural fascination with cross-dressing, an indulgence that ultimately incorporates transgender into the heterosexual matrix.

7. For a detailed description and analysis of the bill see Evans 125–46.

8. Anne Marie Smith discusses the ways lesbians feature in recent legislation in Britain either as nonentities in legal discourse on deviant sexuality or as dangerous mothers in legislation on artificial insemination and foster parenting.

9. For Lacan's oft-cited explanation of the phallus see chapter 8 of *Ecrits*, "The Signification of the Phallus."

10. It makes little difference that a tune typically sung by a female vocalist is here performed by Lyle Lovett. Note the ways the gender of the multiple performers of the title song engender the tale of Dil's sexual identity: we hear Ann Dudley's version when Dil first lip-synchs in the Metro, Dave Berry's version after Fergus sees Dil's penis, and Boy George's version when Dil holds Fergus captive.

11. See, for example, Doane; Heath; Kipnis; Silverman.

12. In the case of Coca Cola, at least, the connection has been quite direct. In 1991 Coke hired Michael Ovitz, the leading Hollywood agent, as a consultant. Coke's director of global marketing explained the choice: "The cultural agenda of the globe is set by the U.S. film and entertainment industry and Mr. Ovitz sits at the apotheosis of that" (Cohen).

13. Some useful studies of the place of (hetero)sexuality in imperial policy making include Hennessy and Mohan; Mani; Pedersen; Ware.

14. This position is widely held; two well-known British promoters of it are Bhabha and Kobena Mercer.

15. One consequence is that the history of cross-national anticolonialist affiliations is little known, certainly in mainstream culture. One of these is the solidarity between Irish indentured servants and insurgent slaves in the Caribbean. These ties are one reason English planters switched to using exclusively slave labor (Rolston). Another example is the U.S. Army's San Patricio Brigade of Irishmen who were sent to Fort Cherubusco, Mexico, in 1847. When these soldiers realized they were fighting in support of imperialist forces they themselves knew so well, they crossed over and fought with the Mexicans. The men from this brigade who died are honored as martyrs in Mexico.

16. Examples include Gerber; Lesser.

17. For an interesting analysis of these issues in Jordan's *Mona Lisa* see Young.

18. On racism in the British press coverage of the West Indian team see also Searle (1993).

19. See Lee, Murphy, and Ucelli on the ways the organizing efforts of the radical right in New York City over the inclusion of homosexual families in the Children of the Rainbow Curriculum mobilized a multiethnic and multiracial coalition of parents by making use of sexuality to obscure the rampant racism and general failure of the city's schools for black, latino, and Asian people. Why sexuality can so readily become a lightning rod for parents' frustrations with a public sphere that does not serve them is a crucial piece of the ongoing story of how sexuality, especially in its fraught and uneven relation to "family" and kinship alliances in industrialized countries, can readily be seized upon as a displacement for economic and other issues.

20. This phrase from Iderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's anthology of the same name conceptualizes the transnational effects of "mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject." Their concept is important for addressing the ways "what gets *theorized* in the West as hybridity remains enmeshed in the gaze of the West" (7).

21. The concept "global gay formations" is Katie King's. She uses it to convey the ways the production of gay identities takes place within transnational paths of commodification that are simultaneously layered with local homosexualities.

22. A later revised version of this essay appears as the chapter "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," in *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (1994).

23. Žižek contends that the perseverance of courtly love in *The Crying Game* and other films "bears witness to a certain deadlock in contemporary feminism" because "by opposing 'patriarchal domination' woman simultaneously undermines the fantasy support of her own 'feminine' identity" (1993, 108)—that is, as lack or other. Against feminism's contention that "patriarchal domination" is a social and historical construction subject to change, Žižek posits it as an inescapable difference, the bedrock of all identity.

24. Žižek's Lacanian theory of ideology claims to be returning to the "repressed" knowledge in Louis Althusser's work—a "traumatic kernel which had to be quickly forgotten" and that he argues accounts for the sudden eclipse of the Althusserian school (1989, 1). But Žižek's Lacanian renarration of identity and difference evaporates the historical materiality of the misrecognition by which ideology and subjectivation operate in Althusser.

## CHAPTER 6

1. In addition to the work of de Lauretis and Grosz that I will read in this chapter, other examples can be found in the following collections: Creekmur and Doty; Doan; Grosz and Probyn; Nestle; Stein; as well as books by Allison; Califia; Hart; Jagose; Meese.

2. Two collections of the debates that sparked the sex wars are Vance (1984) and Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson (1983). See also Rubin (1984); Faderman (1991, 246–70).

3. On the latter see Parker (1993, 21).

4. This turnabout in Rubin's work continues to set the terms for lesbian and gay studies, an influence that is signaled by its prominence as the lead piece in the mammoth *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Routledge 1993); for other invocations of "Thinking Sex" see Sedgwick (1990); Parker (1993). For an incisive reading of Rubin see Ebert (1996).

5. My argument here challenges Judith Butler's critique of "The Traffic in Women" and her own reduction of social life to symbolic exchange (1990a, 73–77). Butler's reading of this essay claims that Rubin fails to distinguish between sex and gender and proceeds to deconstruct the undifferentiated ontological status Rubin reserves for sex before the imposition of the Law of culture. As she sees it, the engendering of desire through social practices like the incest taboo is not the effect of the imposition of a repressive law on an already existing sex; rather, sex is produced through the requirements of the Law. I agree with Butler that sex is not an ontological given and that it is discursively produced; at the same time, I am arguing that it is also produced by more than discourses and the requirements of the Law. Butler's position not only closes off the production of sex from the effects of capitalist divisions of labor, it also implies that critical opposition or change can take place solely through symbolic rearticulations. It is this narrow focus on cultural materialism and symbolic change that I am arguing feminist sexual politics needs to redress. On this point see also Hartssock (1983, 293–303).

6. Carolyn Kay Steedman's excellent *Landscape for a Good Woman* confronts the occlusion of class in the psychoanalytic story of desire and details the ways the development of class consciousness is structured by the formation of multiple and entwined desires. Steedman reads the history of her own working-class family at a pivotal historical moment when "the traffic in women" was shifting from a private to a more public, state-regulated patriarchal organization. Her narrative directly addresses the inadequacy of Rubin's analysis to the circumstances of modern working-class women who are seen as owning

their labor and the babies they produce, and who can use these capacities to bargain — with the state, not their husbands — for their means of subsistence. Her “case studies” also outline the limits of the oedipal scenario for children whose fathers “don’t matter” or whose birth is hedged by impropriety.

7. The history of racism and its impact on the historical position of African Americans as “outside” kinship alliances altogether or in a subordinate relation — as (nonhuman) chattel — to the dominant (white) ones, is also not autonomous from the political economy of capital. See, for example, Spillers (1987, 1989); Callinicos (1993).

8. The predominant wave of post- and anti-marxist thought in academic queer theory needs to be considered alongside other instances of “queer” anti-marxism that segue with the assimilationist currents of post-cold war New Left politics — for example, the opposition to Melinda Paras as director of the Lesbian and Gay Task Force because her “former” marxist political organizing tainted her credibility (Gallagher 1994).

9. Rubin challenges the assumption that any feminism “is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality” because she construes it so narrowly as “the theory of gender oppression” (1984, 307). As many radical and socialist feminists have made clear, however, gender may be a concern of feminism, but this does not mean that it is feminism’s sole concern. Classic radical feminism, as I read it, for example, takes the social system of patriarchy as its starting point and in so doing understands gender to be one axis through which patriarchy organizes social life. At the same time, this framework acknowledges that patriarchy operates in concert with systems of class and racial division. Socialist feminists recognize the importance of gender but take as their starting point the ways capitalist production has structured, made use of, and revised patriarchal formations.

10. De Lauretis (1993) explicitly argues with Rubin’s separation of sex from gender in “Thinking Sex,” which she sees as caught in the paradox of sexual indifference.

11. Many of these writers pitch their pro-sex arguments against white and middle-class feminist notions of female sexuality that assume sex is the same for all women. As in the work of many poststructuralist sex-radicals, however (Creet 1991; Lamos 1994; Meese 1992), desire is ultimately equated with lust. As a result, its historical relation to class, including the class politics of both pro- and antiporn feminism, remains unexamined.

12. “Perverse” in the Freudian sense does not connote deviance or disease but rather an alternate path taken by the drives in their cathexis or choice of object (de Lauretis 1993, xiii).

13. This essay is part of a trilogy on queer sexuality and theory that also includes Grosz (1991, 1994a).

14. At the time of this writing the Republican majority had submitted to the U.S. Congress a welfare reform package, the “Personal Responsibility Act,” which included in its recommendations the denial of Aid to Dependent Children to women under 18 who had children out of wedlock, to any children whose paternity was not established (except for victims of rape or incest), and to any children born to AFDC parents.

## CHAPTER 7

1. In addition to Muñoz, see Butler (1993); Žižek (1989).
2. Her study (1983) of flight attendants for Delta (the U.S. airline that prides itself for its reputation for service) remains a classic.
3. In this book Berlant revises somewhat her earlier position.
4. The term “dead identity” is from Berlant (1997), who uses it quite incisively in relation to heteronormative identity.
5. For further discussion of disidentification, see Hennessy (1993, 95–97).

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