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BEYOND SEXUALITY

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**Contents**

- Acknowledgments ix
- List of Abbreviations xiii

1 Introduction: Beyond the Couch 1
2 How to Read Lacan 22
3 Transcending Gender 61
4 The Psychoanalysis of AIDS 94
5 Safe-Sex Education and the Death Drive 134
6 Bodies That Mutter 174
6 Lacan Meets Queer Theory 215

Conclusion: The Ineluctability of Sublimation 269

References 281
Index of Names 297
Index of Psychoanalytic Concepts 303
Modernism is an age not of rhetoric, but of rhetoricality, the age, that is, of a generalized rhetoric that penetrates to the deepest levels of human experience.

—John Bender and David E. Wellbery, "Rhetoricality: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric"

Poststructuralist thought is in its operation a rhetorical machine: it systematically asserts and demonstrates the mediated, constructed, partial, socially constituted nature of all realities, whether they be phenomenal, linguistic, or psychological.

—Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric"

Rhetorical Machines

Contemporary rhetoric teachers commonly assign students the task of analyzing a magazine advertisement because—as even the most old-fashioned "modern" rhetoric manuals recognize—"Ad-writers are some of the most skillful rhetoricians in our society." The pedagogical advantage of such an assignment lies in its capacity to help students connect the otherwise dry study of rhetoric to the study of social and sexual relations, for if ads use rhetoric to help sell products, they also—students are keen to insist—use sex. And ads (such as Volvo's) that do not substitute pounds of flesh for their products nevertheless appeal to "sex" in the form of sexuality—that is, the network of institutions (such as the family) that sanctify sexual relations as social relations. In the terms of this chapter's first epigraph, we might say that the rhetorical analysis of advertisements converts rhetoric into rhetoricality, defined further by Bender and Wellbery as the "new conditions of discourse in the modern world, and, thus, the fundamental category of every inquiry that seeks to describe the nature of discursive action and exchange." Indeed, by converting rhetoric into rhetoricality, such analysis also converts sex into sexuality, disclosing sex as socially situated. Rhetorical analysis of advertisements thus can unfold the full range of demographic differentials—of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age—that, we maintain, are rhetorically, discursively, and culturally constructed (advertising and mass media playing a crucial role in this process of construction).

If it is easy to persuade students that ads sell forms of sexual and social relations rather than simply selling products, one cannot help wondering why the demystification of this process through rhetorical—or, in Roland Barthes's influential terms, semiological—analysis seems to leave advertising's suasive power spectacularly undiminished. Why does one form of persuasion—the rhetorical effect that disrupts conviction in the ad's promise—not cancel the opposing persuasive form—the rhetorical effect that convinces me this product will change my life? My suggestion is not that demystification or critique is pointless, but that rhetoricalist analyses, for all their suave power, are not persuasive enough. The poststructuralist "rhetorical machine" is faulty. Actually, its fault lies in our own readiness to be persuaded that sex is fully mediated, our eagerness to think of sex as constructed in—or materialized through—the imaginary and symbolic systems that permeate mass culture. For if student analyses of advertisements sometimes seem overenthusiastic in their assimilation of rhetoric to sex, their tendency to talk about body parts rather than, say, synecdoche, then critical analyses of rhetoric and sexuality exhibit the inverse problem of too quickly


assimilating sex to rhetoric. These critical analyses too readily assume, as Lee Edelman puts it, "that sexuality is constituted through operations as much rhetorical as psychological—or, to put it otherwise, that psychological and sociological interpretations of sexuality are necessarily determined by the rhetorical structures and the figural logics through which 'sexuality' and the discourse around it are culturally produced."

The common assumption that sexuality is rhetorically or discursively constituted explicitly grounds some of the most sophisticated lesbian and gay theories of sexuality, as exemplified by Edelman's *Homohapherism* and Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*. It is owing to this work's importance and influence that I devote so much space to criticizing it in this chapter. Whether we label the assumption poststructuralist, constructionist, or, for present purposes, rhetoricalist, this idea that sexuality is a product of rhetoric, discourse, culture, history, and social relations is widely held as the only viable alternative to the conservative notion that sex is grounded in nature. If, in Barthes's terms, myth transforms history into nature, the contemporary rhetoricalist demystification of "natural" sexuality transforms sex back into history, culture, discourse, rhetoric. So widely accepted is one or another version of this rhetoricalist position that we might even say rhetoricalism has naturalized itself in contemporary theory.

"Are bodies purely discursive?" Butler inquires in *Bodies That Matter*, framing the question in quotation marks to signal her appropriation of one of the most cogent objections to her earlier account of gender as performative. This question leads Butler to theorize bodily materiality in terms of materialization; that is, as an enforcement of bodily norms whose normative status depends upon a reiteration or citation wherein lies the possibility of disruption or "resignification." "Matter is always materialized," Butler argues, converting noun into verb, essence into performance, the pregiven into the yet-to-be-given or the to-be-given-again (9). Showing how materiality is always necessarily materialized introduces the linked notions of temporality and repetition, which Butler counterposes to what she repeatedly characterizes as the "stasis" of "heterosexist structuralism" (90). Repetition in Butler's poststructuralist model is not necessarily repetition of the same; instead, repetition or citation is always potentially repetition with a difference—hence the possibility for resignifying and subverting identities.

Are bodies purely discursive? Or, to rotate the question slightly into Edelman's terms, is sexuality purely rhetorical? The problem with framing the inquiry this way is that such questions are themselves rhetorical, instances of the trope of erotema, which subtly biases what answers are more and less plausible in response to the question. These kinds of questions are posed strategically in opposition to an essentialism or foundationalism that would ground bodies and sex in nature or biology, would position bodies and sex as pregiven or prediscursive. The foundationalist position thus opposes the rhetoricalist one, just as essentialism opposes constructivism. As Stanley Fish's brief history of rhetoric (from which this chapter's second epigraph is drawn) implies, most contemporary theories assume that critical thinking on corporeality and sexuality is fully exhausted by the coordinates these competing positions set. Fish maintains that "[t]he quarrel between rhetorical and foundational thought is itself foundational; its content is a disagreement about the basic constituents of human activity and about the nature of human nature itself." Thus the figure whom Butler refers to as "the moderate critic" is situated somewhere within this conceptual field, on some middle ground between essentialism and antifoundationalism, conceding that—as Butler characterizes the moderate position she's arguing against—"some part of 'sex' is constructed, but some other is certainly not" (11; original emphasis). I leave this moderate critic to Butler and intend to take on the stronger position exemplified by Butler's own account. Chapter this chapter aims to outline a theory of rhetoric, sexuality, biology, and gender that returns to the idea that bodies are historically and socially constructed but are not determined by discourse or culture alone.

and embodiment that is both immoderately antifoundationalist and antirhetorical.

While Butler’s fine-tuning of the poststructuralist rhetorical machine enables her to identify in deconstruction a methodological alternative to the constructivism-essentialism debate, I locate that alternative in psychoanalysis. Yet the notion that sex is discursively constituted derive, in part, from psychoanalysis—specificially, from what Edelman, acknowledging his book’s methodological debts, conventionally refers to as “the linguistically oriented psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan” (xiv)? Lacan’s reconstruction of the unconscious as an effect of language (“the unconscious is the discourse of the Other”), his interpretation of the primary process in terms of metaphor and metonymy, and his description of desire as structured metonymically all support this attribution. Yet this attribution leads to a basic misconception. We may begin clarifying the crucial point that distinguishes Lacanian psychoanalysis from other positions by referring to Lacan’s insistence that although desire is “in” language, desire is not itself linguistic. This distinction is not merely terminological or a question of emphasis, but is the basis for a specifically psychoanalytic conception of desire, sexuality, and rhetoric whose implications directly oppose those derivable from all the impressionistic and sophisticated constructions of sexuality churned out by the rhetorical machine.

In their failure to consider what in rhetoric or discourse exceeds language—the in-language-more-than-language, to rephrase Lacan’s formulation of desire (Four 263)—rhetoricalist theories of sexuality effectively evacuate the category of desire from their accounts. Without desire there can be neither rhetoric nor sexuality; without desire, advertising would not exist. To say that explicitly queer-identified theories, such as Butler’s and Edelman’s, evacuate desire from their accounts could be understood as saying nothing more than that such accounts eschew heterosexual desire, concerning themselves instead with queer desire. Correlative to such a glib interpretation would be the conviction that a psychoanalytic conception of desire is partially or wholly heterosexist, so definitively has psychoanalysis “been shaped by homophobic and heterosexist assumptions and histories,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it. While the larger argument of Beyond Sexuality attempts to dispel this popular misconception, the present chapter contends more pointedly that the rhetoricalist model dispenses with the psychoanalytic framework that enables nonheterosexist desire—as opposed to non-heterosexual practices—to be thought at all.

The irony of Butler’s and Edelman’s elisions of desire lies not only in their attempts to think sexuality without desire, but particularly in their use of psychoanalysis to do so. Both Butler and Edelman are “gay Lacanians”—or so I’ve been informed on various occasions through the network of “rumors and gossip” allegedly favored by queers. The problem with this common misapprehension is that too many people working in queer studies—and in other fields—remain content to take their understanding of psychoanalysis from accounts such as Butler’s and Edelman’s. Yet in my view these accounts neglect what is most useful in psychoanalysis for queer intellectual work. To clear up certain misunderstandings about Lacan, it is necessary to recapitulate his development of a psychoanalytic rhetoric.

**Psychorhetoric**

Both psychoanalysis and classical rhetoric are concerned with speech’s effects on the body, the capacity of speech to produce affect and desire. Lacan exploited this affinity by developing the implications of Freud’s account of “dream-work” in rhetorical terms. In his “Rome Discourse”

10. Margaret Morrison, “Laughing with Queers in My Eyes: Proposing ‘Queer Rhetorics’ and Introducing a Queer Issue,” *Pre/Text* 13, nos. 3–4 (1993): 22. It was as a response to the special double issue of *Pre/Text* on queer rhetoric that this chapter began. Perhaps it is also worth noting here that the index to *Bodies That Matter* contains more entries under Lacan than under any other name. Butler’s ambivalence vis-à-vis Lacanian concepts and terminology is signaled by her insistence efforts to qualify her psychoanalytic commitments—for example, by placing the term unconscious in scare quotes (22). However, this ambivalence is only compounded when such qualifications are framed in a Lacanian idiom: “The return to psychoanalysis, then, is guided by the question of how certain regulatory norms for a `Sexed' subject in terms that establish the indistinguishability of psychic and bodily formation” (22). This “return to psychoanalysis,” unlike Lacan’s “return to Freud,” explicitly claims fundamental “resignifications” of the theory to which it returns, assuming that, for example, it’s safer to speak of “The Lesbian Phallus” than “The Lacanian Phallus.”
in 1956, these alignments changed significantly. However, Lacan’s revisions of his earlier theory of dream rhetoric are complicated by the fact that, strongly influenced by Jakobson though he was, not only did Jakobson’s account diverge significantly from the classical divisions of rhetoric, but Lacan’s use of Jakobson subtly and inexplicitly revises Jakobson’s own revisionary model too.

Four years after Jakobson’s paper on metaphor and metonymy, Lacan characterized the rhetoric of the unconscious in this way:

In this formula [of the linguistic unconscious] ... the crucial term is the signifier, brought back to life from the ancient art of rhetoric by modern linguistics, in a doctrine whose various stages


12. In negotiating the complexities of these borrowings, divisions, and debts, I have been aided greatly by Russell Grigg’s linguistic analysis of metaphor and metonymy, which makes a series of useful distinctions. See Russell Grigg, “Metaphor and Metonymy,” *Newsletter of the Freedom Faith* 3 (1989): 58–79 (a revised version of Grigg’s essay appeared under the same title in *The Journal of Rhetorical Theory* 15 [1994]: 27–45). Differentiating between metonymy and three different structures of metaphor (substitution, extension, and apposition), Grigg shows that metonymy and substitution metaphors are produced through substitution, but extension and appositive metaphors are not. “Metonymy is structurally similar to the substitution metaphor, since both have a latent and a manifest term” (71), whereas appositive metaphors (such as “silence is golden”) or extension metaphors (such as “the mouth of a river”) do not require a latent term in order to function. Making this distinction shows that “while Jakobson’s analysis can be applied to metonymy ... it is unable to account for any form of metaphor” (65). Grigg proceeds to demonstrate that Lacan adopts Jakobson’s account of metonymy (in which a specific semantic relationship between latent and manifest signifiers holds), but that when Lacan speaks of metaphors he is referring to “substitution metaphors where those relations are absent” (66). My discussion restates Grigg’s distinctions in slightly different terms.

This remarkably succinct passage establishes a set of alignments that requires clarification and qualification. Lacan’s optimistic conviction concerning exact correspondences between rhetorical tropes and unconscious mechanisms is misplaced, for in the domain of rhetoric precise demarcations and unequivocal equations are impossible to maintain, as “Arts of Rhetoric” consistently lament. Perhaps this is another way of

13. Conceiving Lacanian theory in periodized terms enables us to view as a form of shorthand the apparent reduction to metaphor and metonymy of the various rhetorical schemes and tropes Lacan described in 1953, rather than as a “lethal generalized restriction” of rhetoric, as Borch-Jacobsen puts it in his critique of psychorhetoric: “Psychoanalytic rhetoric,” as it has been understood and practiced for nearly thirty years, is in reality restricted rhetoric, rhetoric restricted to the figures of speaking well (or, in this case, the impossibility of speaking well), and also, therefore, to a language unamplified from its effective, pragmatic, or persuasive dimension” (Mikkell Borch-Jacobsen, “Analytic Speech: From Restricted to General Rhetoric,” in *The Ends of Rhetoric*, ed. Bender and Wellbery, 129–30; original emphasis). Arguing that the Lacanian understanding of rhetoric is restricted by its confining attention to metaphor and metonymy (rather than attending to language’s affective, pragmatic, or persuasive dimension) is, undoubtedly, the mino-patho-logic of hypnotic suggestion” (132). However, our reintroducing to Borch-Jacobsen’s model the missing question of advertising’s persuasive powers reveals his model’s limits, for it is far more plausible that Madison Avenue exploits desire rather than hypnotic suggestion. Borch-Jacobsen’s conception of the unconscious in terms of “the mino-patho-logic of hypnotic suggestion” reduces the unconscious to an imaginary formation, while simultaneously reducing psychoanalysis to hypnosis. As I explain later in this chapter, Lacanian psychoanalysis theorizes persuasion through the crucial conceptual object of object a, which is linked to both affect and desire. Therefore Borch-Jacobsen’s avoidance of this concept, which then restricts his own characterization of unconscious rhetoric (as restricted), displaces the restriction to Lacan’s theory of rhetoric that in fact belongs to Borch-Jacobsen’s own theory.
saying that there is no way to talk about rhetoric that is not itself rhetorical, no metalanguage extricable from rhetorical discourse. In Lacan’s terms, there is no Other of the Other. Given that the appeal to exact correspondences—itself a form of hyperbole—may be read as a sign of this impossibility, we must examine how Lacan theorizes analytic rhetoric in a way that enables psychoanalysis to be assimilated to the rhetoricalist position.

By aligning the mechanisms of the primary process—condensation and displacement—with the rhetorical tropes of metaphor and metonymy, Lacan characterizes the unconscious as rhetorically structured. This alignment depends upon Jakobson’s account of metaphor and metonymy as principles of substitution and combination operative on the synchronic and diachronic axes of language respectively. These axes are also described as paradigmatic and syntagmatic, so that the metaphoric substitutions according to which unconscious condensation operates can be understood in literary terms as figuration, while the metonymic combinations according to which unconscious displacement operates can be understood in literary terms as syntax. These necessarily approximate alignments may be summarized thus:

condensation—metaphor—synchronic axis—substitution—paradigm—figure

displacement—metonymy—diachronic axis—combination—syntagm—syntax.

14. The consonance between this Lacanian formulation and the rhetoricalist commitment to the impossibility of metalanguage requires qualification. The rhetoricalist position is stated cogently by Derrida: “Concept is a metaphor, foundation is a metaphor, theory is a metaphor; and there is no meta-metaphor for them” (Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” trans. F. C. T. Moore, New Literary History 6 (1974): 23). The antifoundationalism foundation of meta-metaphoricity’s impossibility (no Other of the Other) does not entitle metaphor to encompass the entire field of discourse. Metaphor fails, and its failures are not only metaphoric. This distinction is highlighted in Butler’s “argument” over the Lacanian concept of the real when she asserts that “[t]he claim that the real resists symbolization is still to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance” (Bodies That Matter, 207). This assertion bespeaks a sophistic refusal to distinguish between symbolization, discursiveness, and conceptualization. The notion that a concept is reducible to its discursive conceptualization represents a symbolization of the real. Butler’s attempt to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance is still to predicate it in some way and to grant the real its reality apart from any avowed linguistic capacity to do precisely that” (Bodies That Matter, 207). Butler confuses true and false here. The validity of the “former claim” is independent of the validity of the “latter claim” (the real resists symbolization is a symbolization), and since Butler fails to consider the possibility that the first, rather than the second, claim is the only one that makes sense, her argument neglects the distinction that would recognize that not every statement (and not every conceptualization) represents a symbolization of the real.

15. The “symptomatic” approach of hunting for parapraxes (as opposed to the “thematic” approach of hunting for symbols) is epistemologically problematic when dealing with highly revised and carefully edited written texts, rather than with unscripted spoken utterance. Nevertheless, critics such as Jane Gallop have had a good measure of success with the symptomatic approach, an ingenious method that seems appropriate when a published text—such as Butler’s reading of Žižek—is peppered with terminological slips and conceptual slippages that could be seen as crying out for interpretation. And more recently, in “What Are Feminist Criticism?” Critical Inquiry 24 (1998): 878–902, Susan Gubar interprets a repeated grammatical error in Butler’s prose: subject–verb disagreement. Gubar not only identifies an impressive series of instances in which Butler uses the singular verb form when referring to plural grammatical subjects, but she also treats these errors as indicating more than mere sloppiness or faulty grammar on Butler’s part. Thus Butler not only identifies an impressive series of instances in which Butler uses the singular verb form when referring to plural grammatical subjects, but she also treats these errors as meaningful, as indicating more than mere sloppiness or faulty grammar. Furthermore, conceiving unconscious processes linguistically immediately deindividualizes the unconscious: once the unconscious is understood in terms of the discourse of the Other, then the unconscious necessarily exceeds the individual and becomes more readily thinkable as social and cultural (if not “collective” in the Jungian sense). Of course, it’s just a hasty step from this conception to the notion that the subject is constructed by social discourses and practices. I’ve tried to suggest why we should think long and hard before taking that easy step. Although irreducible to social constructionism, psychoanalytic formalism is not
by that token narrowly formalist, for by revealing the degree to which formal properties of discourse are determined by extratextual, historically specific constraints, this psychoanalytic model lays the groundwork for a more nuanced account of what connects a text to the world beyond itself. In maintaining that textual forms are extratextually determined, this account does not suggest that history or culture completely determines texts, or that such determinations operate in a one-to-one fashion. Although psychic determination tends toward overdetermination, these multiple networks of determination and displacement effectively render overdetermination always incomplete, and thus no single sociohistorical, cultural, or subjective determinant can occupy the position of primary cause. The concept of overdetermination does not entail a psychically determinist model, for that would return psychoanalysis to foundationalism. Indeed, by connecting a text’s formal or rhetorical features to ostensibly nonformal, historical determinations, psychoanalytic formalism is exonerated from the stereotypical charge leveled at psychoanalytic methods—that they are ahistorical and universalizing.

Yet the psychoanalytic model I’m describing remains troublingly schematic. This can be confirmed by noting that the alignment of metaphor with the substitution axis, on the one hand, and the alignment of metonymy with the combination axis, on the other, ignores “the fact that not all metaphors are substitutions (there are also appositive and extension metaphors) while all metonyms are substitutions,” as Grigg indicates. Thus, despite the classical understanding of metaphor as substitutive—the etymology of met-aphor, a transfer of burden, suggests this—metaphor intuitively seems to belong on the combination axis (the substitution metaphor “combines” a tenor and vehicle), while metonymy, as necessarily substitutive, seems to belong on the substitution axis, rather than vice versa, as Lacan, following Jakobson, aligns them. Furthermore, understanding metonymy in terms of substitution would seem more readily to align metonymy, rather than metaphor, with the substitution axis, since metaphor’s alignment with condensation presupposes prior substitutions or displacements that combine various chains of association to form condensation, as Freud suggests in The Interpretation of Dreams (SE 5:339 ff.).

Although the passage from “Subversion of the Subject” quoted above appears oblivious to the costs of schematism, Lacan anticipated this problem in his seminar The Psychoses (1955–56) by showing how the metonymic principle of substitutability is metaphor’s condition of possibility. Acknowledging that “[w]hen one reads the rhetoricians, one realizes that they never get to an entirely satisfactory definition of metaphor, or of metonymy,” Lacan notes the outcome of this difficulty: “This results in, for example, the formula that metonymy is an impoverished metaphor. One might say that the thing is to be taken in exactly the opposite sense—metonymy exists from the beginning and makes metaphor possible” (SII 227). This excursus on rhetoric in the seminar on psychoses is not tangential but central, a point of some significance given that psychosis represents the most serious—that is, ostensibly the least rhetorical—form of psychical disturbance. In other words, if the most extreme instance of mental illness is to be understood in rhetorical terms, then there seems precious little that would escape this psychoanalytic rhetoricalization of psychic life. Indeed, with respect to rhetorical operations Lacan insists: “This is the heart of Freud’s thought. His work begins with the dream, its mechanisms of condensation and displacement, of figuration—these are all of the order of metonymic articulation, and it’s on this foundation that metaphor is able to intervene” (SII 228).

Given Lacan’s painstaking discussion, in the seminar, of the distinctions between metaphor and metonymy and the implications each has for the other, what are we to make of his subsequent failure in “Subversion of the Subject” to perfectly formalize psychorhetoric? Besides signifying the impossibility of metalanguage, this failure of formalization may be viewed psychoanalytically as a sign of the real: if the real is defined as that which resists symbolization, then symbolization’s failures are legible as “signs” of the real. This leads me to suggest that beyond psychoanalytic formalism lies desire—a desire that is structured metonymically but is not itself wholly linguistic. In his Four Fundamental Concepts, Lacan explains in highly figurative language how desire is a product of lapses in symbolization:

17. Grigg makes the same point, arguing that one crucial difference between metaphor and metonymy lies in the fact that “there is an established semantic link between latent and manifest terms in metonymy,” whereas “metaphors do not just operate by means of a semantic relation between a manifest and a latent signifier, but make use of any means the language has at its disposal” (71–72). Thus although this restriction makes metonymy look like “an impoverished metaphor,” Grigg’s distinctions enable him to show that nevertheless “the substitution metaphor depends upon the metonymic support the latent term derives from the manifest terms” (73).
CHAPTER FIVE

In this interval intersecting the signifiers, which forms part of the very structure of the signifier, is the locus of what, in other registers of my exposition, I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child’s 'whys' reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a Why are you telling me this? ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult’s desire. (Four 214) 18

Suggesting that desire originates from negative instances and is therefore not a product of positive linguistic or rhetorical constructions, Lacan’s colorful imagery for the mobility of desire provides a useful antidote to the misconception, reiterated in Bodies That Matter, that the Lacanian conception of desire is, in its structuralist fixity, intrinsically heterosexist. If Butler’s project in Bodies That Matter is, as she says, “to challenge the structural stasis of the heterosexualizing norm within the psychoanalytic account” (22), then one has only to conjure Lacan’s ferret to see how misplaced the charge of “structural stasis” is. 19

In the spirit of psychorhetoric, both Butler’s and Edelman’s accounts make much of Lacan’s reversing the conventional relation between metaphor and metonymy—his reversing, that is, the place of metonymy for that of metaphor as “foundational” rather than secondary and impoverished. Butler and Edelman exploit this reversal in the process of their rethinking the conventional relation between heterosexuality (as foundational and original) and homosexuality (as secondary and imitative). Since Butler’s and Edelman’s arguments share a number of misconceptions that nevertheless develop in different directions, it makes sense to consider their arguments in turn. In what follows, I want to suggest that by assimilating the category of sexuality to imaginary and symbolic formations, Butler’s and Edelman’s accounts paradoxically produce queer bodies bearing egos but devoid of subjective desire. That is, their accounts describe subjects of the signifier, not subjects of desire. 20 While the subject of desire is produced through language’s impact on bodily materiality—that is, the way language “penetrates to the deepest levels of human experience,” in Bender and Wellbery’s terms—the subject of desire differs significantly from the subject of imaginary and symbolic identifications. The subject of desire emerges not when an identification (with the father, the mother, or a signifier) is made, but when it fails to be made. In Lacanian terms, we could say that the rhetoricalist account of subjectivity confuses alienation (into the signifier, A) and separation (from an object, a). Failing to distinguish others from Others, Butler’s and Edelman’s accounts offer us undersubjectivized bodies, bodies so completely rhetoricalized that paradoxically they are devoid of desire. 21 Such suave bodies are queer indeed, though not in any way liberated or liberating.

Suave Bodies

I’d like to begin by characterizing Edelman’s titular neologism, homographesis, since the terms of his substantial, complex, and sophisticated argument require unpacking. Taking seriously Foucault’s canonical account of the late-nineteenth-century invention of homosexuality as a discrete ontological identity, Edelman develops the implications of Foucault’s description of this new sexual “species” whose sexuality was “written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.” 22 Linking Foucault’s characterization of homosexuality as something written on the body to the ancient tradition of treating homosexuality as “the crime not fit to be named,” Edelman persuasively delineates “the historical relationship that has produced gay


19. In the context of this value-laden opposition between fixity and mobility, I should emphasize that my argument here is consonant with Joan Copjec’s crucial point that “fixity does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so” (Read My Desires, 211), because the heterosexist conception of sex depends upon an imaginary complementarity, whereas the psychoanalytic conception of sex as real implies the impossibility of complementarity, the failure of sexual relation. It is because sex is real, unsymphonyable, that “sex does not budge.” Both Butler and Edelman miss this psychoanalytic point by making sex performative and graphemic—that is, by situating sex at symbolic and imaginary levels of construction, rather than at the level of the real.


22. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 1:43.
CHAPTER FIVE

sexuality within a discourse that associates it with figures of nomination or inscription” (4). Associated with writing (graphesis), homosexuality thus figures in Edelman’s rhetoricalist account as a “dangerous supplement,” undermining all heterosexuality’s claims for originality, priority, and naturalness in the way that, for Derrida, writing as supplement undermines similar claims made on behalf of speech.

However, Edelman’s rhetoricalization of sexuality is more complex still, since homographesis bears the double valence of, on the one hand, indicating the regulatory regime that demands homosexuality be legible (hence necessarily inscribed, textualized) as a discrete identity separate from heterosexuality in the first place; while, on the other hand, homographesis suggests the deconstructive possibility inherent in any textualized form for revealing the artificial, secondary, and derivative status of the “natural.” Edelman summarizes thus: “Like writing, then, homographesis would name a double operation: one serving the ideological purposes of a conservative social order intent on codifying identities in its labor of disciplinary inscription, and the other resistant to that categorization, intent on de-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively inscribed (10). In this way homographesis reveals how heterosexuality is founded not in nature but in the repression of homosexuality, the latter of which then claims a certain priority—not as natural, but as the primary differential in sexuality’s constitution. By virtue of its scriptive, rhetorical nature, homosexuality’s deconstruction of heterosexuality enables Edelman to claim that gay sexuality “functions in the modern West as the very agency of sexual meaningfulness, the construct without which sexual meaning, and therefore, in a larger sense, meaning itself, becomes virtually unthinkable” (xv). Treating “meaning itself” as an extension of “sexual meaning,” Edelman’s position in fact directly opposes Lacan’s, since Lacan spoke of sexuality in terms of metaphor, not metonymy. Like Foucault, Edelman implies—without ever directly stating—that “the emergent field of psychoanalysis” formed part of “the ethnographic imperative of nineteenth-century social science” that enabled—indeed required—the shadowy figure of “the homosexual” to “emerge into cultural view.” Edelman reads the historically coincident emergence of homosexuality and psychoanalysis metaphorically rather than metonymically, in that he figures their coincident emergence as essential and therefore causally related, rather than as contingent.

Like Foucault, Edelman implies—without ever directly stating—that the failure of meaning. To be more precise, we should say that Lacan considered meaning as a substitute for sexuality: “Everything implied by the analytic engagement with human behaviour indicates not that meaning reflects the sexual but that it makes up for it.”

This crucial difference notwithstanding, Edelman frames the reversal of priority between hetero- and homosexuality in terms of Lacan’s reversal of priority between metaphor and metonymy. That is, Edelman rewrites the Foucaultian narrative of homosexuality’s invention “as a transformation in the rhetorical or tropological framework through which the concept of ‘sexuality’ itself is produced”:

a transformation from a reading of the subject’s relation to sexuality as contingent or metonymic to a reading in which sexuality is reinterpreted as essential or metaphoric. When homosexuality is no longer understood as a discrete set of acts but as an “indiscreet anatomy,” we are in the presence of a powerful tropological imperative that needs to produce a visible emblem or metaphor for the “singular nature” that now defines or identifies a specifically homosexual type of person. That legible marking or emblem, however, must be recognized as a figure for the now metaphorical conceptualization of sexuality itself—a figure for the privileged relationship to identity with which the sexual henceforth will be charged. In keeping, therefore, with the ethnographic imperative of nineteenth-century social science, “the homosexual” could emerge into cultural view through the attribution of essential meaning—which is to say, the attribution of metaphorical significance—to various contingencies of anatomy that were, to the trained observer, as indiscreet in revealing the “truth” of a person’s “sexual identity” as dreams or somatic symptoms would be in revealing the “truth” of the unconscious to the emergent field of psychoanalysis. (8)

Like Foucault, Edelman implies—without ever directly stating—that “the emergent field of psychoanalysis” formed part of “the ethnographic imperative of nineteenth-century social science” that enabled—indeed required—the shadowy figure of “the homosexual” to “emerge into cultural view.” Edelman reads the historically coincident emergence of homosexuality and psychoanalysis metaphorically rather than metonymically, in that he figures their coincident emergence as essential and therefore causally related, rather than as contingent.

What is at stake in Edelman’s rhetorical that encourages us to read homosexuality metonymically but psychoanalysis metaphorically? By suggesting how the cultural project of making homosexuality visible operates through a tropological imperative to produce vital signs, Edelman argues that “sexuality” as sexual orientation is produced when desire as metonymic is misrecognized as metaphoric—in other words,
CHAPTER FIVE

When the contingent is mistaken as essential. In figuring the relation between psychoanalysis and homosexuality as metaphorical, is Edelman performing a misrecognition in the very gesture of unmasking one? Explicitly alluding at this point in his argument to Lacan’s conception of desire as metonymically structured (and, indeed, Lacan’s reversal of the conventional relation between metaphor and metonymy), Edelman misrecognizes the cultural force of psychoanalysis, for it is psychoanalysis that discloses the cultural misrecognition whereby sexual identities and orientations are solidified and hierarchized. Freud’s insistence that sexuality undermines identity rather than consolidating it entails a metonymic reading of sexuality at the very moment such metonymies were being culturally misrecognized as metaphorical. Freud’s position in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality was, as we know, “most decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character” (SE 7:145 n.). Thus far from reading sexual signs metaphorically, Freud emphasized such signs’ metonymic significance, since he was convinced “that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious” (SE 7:145 n.).

In pointing to Edelman’s misrecognition of psychoanalysis at the very moment he identifies a cultural misrecognition of sexuality, I am not suggesting that psychoanalysis ever could be completely free from social and cultural biases. But I am suggesting that the tropological and ethnographic imperatives Edelman describes should be viewed as less consistent and totalizing than he would have us believe. Edelman’s account does have the benefit of delineating a far more elaborate, more explicit way of conceiving resistance to these cultural imperatives than Foucault’s notoriously undertheorized notion of resistance. But where Edelman locates resistance in the deconstructive force of writing or language itself, I would locate that resistance more specifically—perhaps more historically—in psychoanalysis. My objection to situating the possibility of disrupting cultural norms at the level of deconstructive “graphesis,” in Edelman’s case, or “resignification,” in Butler’s case, is that despite their best efforts they fail to conceive sexuality in anything but binary, overwhelmingly Manichaean terms. Permit me to explain why their conceiving sexuality in this way paradoxically entails evacuating desire from the theoretical picture.

Both Butler and Edelman write about lesbian and gay egos; they treat subjectivity and sexuality as if these dimensions of psychic life were a function of one’s self-image rather than, as psychoanalysis insists, a function of the unconscious. Yet neither Butler nor Edelman is up front about this; they imply that Lacan theorizes subjectivity and sexuality as effects of the imaginary order, the realm of ego formation. Hence, for example, in “The Lesbian Phallus” Butler suggests:

[E]very effort to inhabit fully an identification with the imago . . . fails because the sexuality temporarily harnessed and bounded by that ego . . . cannot be fully or decisively constrained by it. What is left outside the mirror frame, as it were, is precisely the unconscious that comes to call into question the representational status of what is shown in the mirror. In this sense, the ego is produced through exclusion, as any boundary is, and what is excluded is nevertheless negatively and vitally constitutive of what ‘appears’ bounded within the mirror. (262 n. 23; original emphasis)

While it is true that the ego is constituted through exclusion, by means of a perceptual gestalt, it is not the case that this drawing of boundaries produces sexuality or the unconscious. Human sexuality cannot be construed as in any way a result of the mirror stage. However, by relying on Jane Gallop’s interpretation of Lacan, Edelman likewise reads sexual identity formation in terms of the mirror stage:

[T]he symbolic (hetero)sexual order established by the reading of sexual differentiation through the polarizing narrative of the castration complex imposes a (not necessarily necessary) fiction of sexual identity. That fiction reenacts the contradictory temporality of the Lacanian mirror stage, a temporality in which totalized identity is posited by a decree that phobically disavows the definitional incoherence of the bits and pieces imagined as having preceded the constitution of the subject, precisely because the subject anxiously anticipates the possibility of succumbing to such an incoherence once again. The sexual identity so structured is endlessly paranoid in its need to assert the inevitability and security of its narcissistic totalization, and thus the subject actively refuses—indeed, aggressively attempts to efface—whatever would ironize its claim to an identity intrinsic to and coextensive with the fact of its existence. (225–26; original emphasis)
CHAPTER FIVE

It is precisely because the ego produced through this mechanism of identification “is endlessly paranoid” and aggressive that these persistent mischaracterizations of sexuality in imaginary terms are so self-defeating. For by focusing solely on the ego, Butler’s and Edelman’s accounts not only misrepresent the subjective level at which sexuality is formed and operates, they also seem unable to escape the impasse of paranoid, highly defensive binarity typical of the imaginary structure within whose terms they theorize sexuality. And despite all their loudly proclaimed awareness of constructedness and contingency, lesbian and gay egos—by virtue of being egos—are no less paranoid or aggressive than heterosexual people’s egos.

Against Rhetoricality

From a Lacanian viewpoint, all binary relations are imaginary in the sense that they are structured by relations of identification and opposition, one-to-one relations. And all imaginary relations are essentially binaristic. From this it follows that to theorize sexuality in imaginary terms—in terms, that is, of the ego or the self—is to conceptualize sexuality binarily, even if, like Butler and Edelman, one intends otherwise. No amount of subtle theorizing will get you outside a binary system if your model of subjectivity remains focused on the self. All you get from an imaginary relation is an ego and lots of trouble. By “trouble” I mean imaginary aggressivity—imaginary not in the sense of unreal, but in the sense of the extremely violent policing of inside/outside borders by which the ego maintains itself. This is not the kind of subversive trouble Butler intends in Gender Trouble. Yet as I suggested in chapter 2, in my discussion of Gender Trouble, theorizing gender and sexuality in imaginary terms leaves aspects of subjectivity other than the ego calmly untouched.

The production of what Butler, following Derrida, calls a “constitutive outside” offers a useful way to think about ego formation, including the formation of collective egos. But in psychoanalytic terms, the subject is not formed through the production of a constitutive outside; neither is this exterior equivalent to the category of the unconscious, as Butler seems to think (22). Furthermore, this “constitutive outside” is quite distinct from what Lacan means by the real: “The non-ego is not to be confused with what surrounds it, the vastness of the real” (Four 245).

To conceptualize subjectivity in terms of exclusion and the regulation of inside/outside or human/abject borders is simply to think subjectivity imaginarily, to remain caught in binary categories. Thus although Butler at one point notes the Lacanian distinction between subject and ego (261 n. 22), subjectivity—in Bodies That Matter, as in Homographesis—constantly falls back into the ego.

Neither subjectivity nor sexuality is an effect of imaginary relations. Although some of Lacan’s vocabulary when describing the specular construction of the ego—the “lure of the mirror” and suchlike—sounds as if it might have something to do with sexuality, we should be clear that for Lacan sexuality and desire are not produced through binary structures. Since lesbian and gay theorists often remain ambivalent about psychoanalytic methodologies because the binary pairings male/female, masculine/feminine, activity/passivity make psychoanalysis look suspiciously like conceptual support for compulsory heterosexuality, I would like to emphasize that Lacan theorizes sexuality in terms not of gender but of jouissance. As I elaborate more fully in the next chapter, this underappreciated dimension of Lacanian theory makes psychoanalysis the ally of theorists—such as Butler, Edelman, and Eve Sedgwick—struggling to think sexuality outside the terms of gender.24

For the sake of distinctions that usually evaporate even when people bother to make them, let me summarize Lacan by characterizing the ego as an effect of the imaginary order, the subject as an effect of the symbolic order, and sexuality as an effect of the real order. This leaves us with at least two questions. First, of what is the desiring subject an effect? Second, how are we to understand relations among imaginary, symbolic, and real orders—that is, among the ego, the unconscious, and sexuality? This brings me to the crucial concept of object a. Without

24. In Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), Sedgwick makes axiomatic for antihomophobic theory “the imperative of constructing an account of sexuality irreducible to gender” (34); and, in an interview, Sedgwick specifies the following preference: “I like the notion of there being institutional places to think about the likelihood that for some people the most important thing about sexuality is not the gender of sexual object choice” (Sarah Chinn, Mario DiGangi, and Patrick Horrigan, “A Talk with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” Pre/Text 13, nos. 3–4 [1992]: 86). Butler seems to be approaching a similar commitment to thinking sexuality outside the terms of gender when, in “The Lesbian Phallus,” she remarks, “it is unclear to me that lesbians can be said to be ‘of’ the same sex or that homosexuality in general ought to be construed as love of the same” (Bodies That Matter, 65–66). And in the final chapter of Homographesis, Edelman similarly criticizes the way “sexual orientation in Western culture is persistently polarized through its often contradictory assimilation to the discursive categories associated with differences historically and culturally elaborated to distinguish between the sexes” (197).
a concept of the object, it is practically impossible to maintain a distinction between subject and ego, as *Bodies That Matter* repeatedly shows.

"It is necessary to find the subject as a lost object," Lacan gnomically remarks, adding that "this lost object is the support of the subject and in many cases is a more abject thing than you may care to consider" ("Of Structure" 189). For all their psychoanalytically derived preoccupation with the construction of homosexuality as a zone of abjection, Butler and Edelman never consider the meaning of the abject object. As "the support of the subject," this object counterintuitively (ungrammatically?) appears to precede the subject, to found the subject. Indeed, his notion of object a represents the principal foundation that Lacan posits for subjectivity. Yet the apparent foundationalism of object a betokens a radically contingent foundation, since as Ellie Ragland points out, "[w]e humans are grounded in objects that are not themselves grounded."25

The contingent foundation provided by object a is that of desire, an unstable foundation indeed. Lacan refers to the object a as "cause of desire." By virtue of its being the cause rather than the aim of desire, object a conceptually precedes gender or any particular kind of sexual activity. The place and corporeal form of the object, as it is conceived by Lacan, cannot be deduced from any gender configuration or sexual practice. This status of the object helps explain why it is so easily overlooked in theoretical accounts of desire, but also why the concept of object a holds such potential for queer critiques of sexuality. If desire is originally independent of gender, how can Lacanian theory legitimately be accused of promoting a heterosexist model of desire? The heterosexist assumption that desire heads toward the opposite sex is challenged by Lacan's contention that desire heads toward nothing in particular except satisfaction. The object-cause of desire takes so many gender-neutral forms—the gaze, the voice, the phoneme, the lips, "the rim of the anus," and "the slit formed by the eyelids" (E 314–15)—that it seems to offer the conceptual basis for a radically nonheterosexist account of sexuality and desire. While it is fairly clear how body parts such as the lips, the nether lips, and "the rim of the anus," may function as object-causes of desire thanks to their direct involvement in sexual activity, it is much less obvious how the gaze, the voice, and the phoneme function as causes of desire.26


26. In his ambitious reading of Otto Preminger's 1944 Hollywood movie *Laura*, Edelman argues that "the gaze comes to carry the very force of gay sexuality itself" (Homology 220). Edelman's argument in his book's final chapter may be summarized thus: "This association of the male homosexual with the aggressive deployment of vision, on the one hand (i.e., in his "habit of gazing at . . . male partners"), and with his passive susceptibility to visualization or perceptual recognition on the other (i.e., as the object of the cultural enterprise that seeks to render the gay body legible) makes the cinema a particularly important institution within which to consider the function and effect of gay inscription or homographesis" (200). The problem with his account of the function of the gay gaze in cinema—as with my assimilation of the desiring cruising gaze to the Lacanian concept of the gaze as object a—is in the failure to distinguish between vision and gaze. Without this distinction, we lose the conceptual force of Lacan's account of the gaze as cause of desire. My point is not that this much-misunderstood Lacanian concept cannot be useful to theorize sexual dimensions of sexuality, but that the relation between vision and gaze, between cruising and desire, is much more richly complex than gay studies accounts usually allow. Lacan's account of the gaze as object a is given in his *Four Fundamental Concepts* (67–119). A useful gloss on the distinctions involved in Lacan's account and their pertinence for theorizing perverse desire may be found in Julia Saville, "The Lady of Shalott: A Lacanian Romance," *Word and Image* 8 (1992): 71–87.
and its ambition no more specific than satisfaction. In Lacan’s account, this lack of specificity represents not so much a cover for universal sexual norms as the multiplication of possibilities for desire’s outcomes.

Gaze, voice, and phoneme connect our bodies to society and culture in a way that suggests the conceptual potential of object a for theorizing sexuality as culturally inflected, mediated, even “technologized,” without reductively describing sexuality as culturally constructed. Indeed, the concept of object a can help us appreciate the way advertising incites desire, as Lacan suggests:

The features that appear in our time so strikingly in the form of what are more or less correctly called the mass media . . . are illuminated by the reference to those two objects . . . namely, the voice—partly planetarized, even stratospherized, by our machinery—and the gaze, whose ever-encroaching character is no less suggestive, for, by so many spectacles, so many phantasies, it is not so much our vision that is solicited, as our gaze that is aroused. (Four 274; original italics)

This passage suggests the sensitivity of Lacan’s account of desire to technological shifts in the organization of social space; in other words, this passage implies that a psychoanalytic understanding of desire need not remain indifferent to historical change. Furthermore, Lacan expands the potential of his account of desire by characterizing object a dynamically: “in some cases it is something done” (“Of Structure” 189). If the object that causes desire can take the form of a verb as well as a noun, then we begin to appreciate its multivalent explanatory possibilities.

Lacan’s provisional list of the forms object a may take centers on the common feature of what he describes somewhat enigmatically as “the mark of a cut.” This “cut” refers to bodily borders, wherever inside meets outside. If we can understand how object a results from a cut that produces simultaneously subject and object, then it becomes clearer how object a can be “something done.” This object appears as the effect of some action on my body, rather than preexisting in object form. If, as Butler suggests, matter is always materialized, then we might say that objects a are always objectified or objectivized. Lacan explains: “The a, the object, falls. That fall is primal. The diversity of forms taken by that object of the fall ought to be related to the manner in which the desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject” (“Names” 85). The object’s fall is “primal,” because in falling the object founds the subject and its desire. But what causes the object to fall? In providing an answer to this question, we shall discover how object a links imaginary, symbolic, and real registers. We shall also discover—in Lacan’s conception of the body in imaginary, symbolic, and real terms—an alternative to the unidimensional “suave body” of rhetoricalist theory.

Broadly speaking, when language hits the body its impact produces not merely the subject of the signifier but also the subject of desire. The symbolic order has a ripple-like effect on human subjects. Think of the symbolic order as a net settling over the corporeal form, penetrating the body, as Bender and Wellbery say, and slicing the body into erotogenic zones by drawing bodily jouissance into pools at its corporeal borders. This process does not happen in a uniform way because there is no single symbolic order that we all inhabit. We move through different, interwoven discourse networks that affect people’s bodies unevenly; nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that this process of creating desire begins very early in life, well before anatomical matura-

Language is the agent of the cut that produces subject and object through the same action. The result of language’s impact on the body, object a can be thought of as the leftover of jouissance, what Lacan calls the plus-de-jouir. Without language, desire would not exist. But this does not make desire linguistic. Although object a is not prediscursive in the sense that it does not precede language, it also is not a discursive effect in quite the way that rhetoricalism understands the subject and his or her sexuality as discursive effects. Object a links the body to language and therefore is crucial for conceptualizing rhetoric, which has a demonstrable effect on bodies. Lacan describes corporeality, subjectivity, and sexuality not simply as discursive or rhetorical effects; rather he provides a way to theorize language’s impact on the body in three dimensions—imaginary, symbolic, and real.

Consider the terms in which Lacan formulated the relation between body, language, and desire by defining desire as “neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)” (E 287). Distinguishing desire from biological or physical needs, Lacan conceived desire as the excess resulting from the articulation of need in symbolic form. Thus where bodies may be said to have needs such as biological sustenance and physical protection,
CHAPTER FIVE

subjects have desires—principally, overcoming the loss constitutive of subjectivity as such—hence the requirement to “find the subject as a lost object.” It is because desire remains distinct from need that sexuality is cultural rather than biological. Yet the widespread insistence on various constituencies’ subjective “needs” effectively eclipses desire. Hence the incoherence betrayed in Edelman’s account of sexuality by his reference to “the pressure of more immediate psychic needs” (229). No psyche “needs” anything. The confusion indicated by this oxymoronic formulation of “psychic needs” can hardly be excused as merely terminological or rhetorical because, according to Edelman’s own account, terminology and rhetoric should be understood as constitutive. This rhetoric of “needs”—which is prevalent in, though not specific to, queer cultural critique—effectively misrecognizes desire in just the way that heterosexist cultural assumptions denigrate and trivialize homosexual desire.

To appreciate the paradox whereby queer cultural critique sometimes unwittingly participates in the conceptual logic of mainstream heterosexist consumer culture, we may extend the argument of this chapter’s opening section and suggest that where, from Barthes’s semiological perspective, myth transforms history into nature, advertising transforms desire into need—not literally, but rhetorically. The rhetorical effect of this transformation depends on understanding that while desire is impossible to satisfy, need is not. Thus to speak in terms of consumer “needs”—for example, the “communication needs” telephone companies promise to satisfy—is to convert the unsatisfiable into something that ostensibly can be satisfied (that is, need) and so promote capitalist consumption while simultaneously perpetuating desire. The demystification of advertising—which so often takes the form of exposing the fallacy that such-and-such completely trivial product could have any significant effect, could change one’s life—thus misses how advertising capitalizes on our willingness to confuse need and desire. Since the relatively simple satisfaction of need produces significant effects (a drink of water can save, and therefore immeasurably change, one’s life), advertising’s notion that desires are needs effectively persuades us that desires can be satisfied, thereby encouraging consumption.

The paradox of the distinction between need and desire is that what can be satisfied (need) sounds so much more legitimate than desire, whose satisfaction remains forever out of reach in a Lacanian framework. Given this distinction, our attention to desire can seem like a luxury, a triviality we should think about only once the more urgent political work of attending to “needs” is accomplished. This hierarchy of political priorities is always implicit in materialist critiques of psychoanalysis.27 Yet needs concern the biological organism and therefore have little to do with sexuality, which concerns the subject of desire. The issue, then, is how to theorize sexuality in terms of the body without resorting to either a rhetoric of needs—which would return theory to biological foundationalism and hence heterosexism—or a rhetoric of “the body” as pregiven and immutable.

THE BODY: IMAGINARY, SYMBOLIC, REAL

Butler begins her account of morphogenesis by mimicking a question with which she was reproached in the wake of her theory of gender performativity: “What about the materiality of the body, Judy?” (ix). 

Bodies That Matter suggests how “the materiality of the body” can be theorized according to the model of performativity proposed in Gender Trouble. My problem with Butler’s model differs from those critiques of performativity that charge Butler with failing to take account of “the body.” Instead, I am skeptical about the way performativity theorizes the body unidimensionally. This problem becomes clearer when we consider the distinction between the body (which needs) and the subject (which desires). Butler allows no distinction between the body and subjectivity; subjectivity thus collapses back into the ego (American style) and desire is effectively reduced to need (capitalist style).

Arguing for “the indissolubility of the psychic and the corporeal,” Butler develops an account of the production of “a ‘sexed’ subject in terms that establish the indistinguishability of psychic and bodily formation” (66; 22). This account makes all subjectivity imaginary and mistakenly locates sexuality at the level of the ego. Exploiting Freud’s axiom, in The Ego and the Id, that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego” (SE 19:26), Butler’s analysis provides a nuanced description of nonnormative egos without, however, contributing much to a theory of queer

27. For an example of this kind of ordering of political priorities, see Donald Morton, “Birth of the Cyberqueer,” PMLA 110 (1995): 369–81.
CHAPTER FIVE

Desire. Hence her characterization of "the lesbian phallus" as "transferable" and "plastic property" (62) eloquently describes the play of identifications through which lesbian egos exchange dildo—rather than manifest—desire. Butler's conclusion to her celebrated meditation on "The Lesbian Phallus" makes explicit this emphasis on egos, without considering its psychoanalytic or political implications: "to speak of the lesbian phallus as a possible site of desire . . . is simply to promote an alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary" (91; original emphasis). Arguing for the consubstantiality of body and ego—the way bodies do not precede egos as models but are themselves embodied, materialized through what Freud calls "the projection of a surface" (SE 19:26) Butler misses the crucial psychoanalytic insight that desire is predicated on the incommensurability of body and subject.

We are now in a position to extend our account of language's effect on the body. Although both Butler and Edelman are correct in insisting that we have no unmediated access to our bodies, the forms this mediation takes are more complex than rhetoricalist models allow. The category of "the body" so often invoked in recent theory requires specifying in terms of real, symbolic, and imaginary, as much as in terms of gender, race, and class. If in the realm of the imaginary the body produces—and is indeed produced through—the ego, how should we understand the symbolic order in this production of a visualizable bodily self?

Like Butler, Edelman views the symbolic as essentially an extension of the imaginary. Referring to the "policing" effects of what Butler calls "regulatory norms," Edelman argues that "this policing bespeaks the extent to which the symbolic order is mobilized to defend an imaginary self-image against those forces that are seen as threatening to unmask it as always only imaginary" (229; original emphasis). Treating the symbolic as a support of the imaginary effectively imaginarizes the symbolic and reduces to the level of the ego the subjectivity of "the gay male body" that Edelman constantly invokes. And, of course, the irony of Edelman's reducing subjectivity to corporeality lies in his insistence that homographesis as "a normalizing practice of cultural discrimination" involves "the process whereby the homosexual subject is represented as being, even more than as inhabiting, a body that always demands to be read, a body on which his 'sexuality' is always already inscribed" (10). To insist on reading the "homosexual subject" in terms of "the gay male body," rather than in terms of that subject's constitutive disembodiment, is thus to perpetuate unwittingly the "normalizing practice of cultural discrimination" at which Edelman levels his critique.

If "the gay male body" is to be credited with a desire beyond that of maintaining his ego—that is, beyond narcissism—this desire will be the result of his disembodiment through language, its subjectification. The symbolic order's action on dumb corporeal density produces a desubstantialized, symbolic body—the subject ($)—and, as I suggested above, an equally desubstantialized remainder of bodily jouissance—the object (a). This process of disembodiment that produces the subject and its causes of desire effectively splits (i) body and subject; (ii) subject and object, thereby constituting desire and the impossibility of its satisfaction; (iii) subject against itself as a consequence of the multiple-causes of desire that support or contingently ground the subject.

This disembodied, split subject is central to the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality; and it is by conceiving of desire in terms of multiple, partial, not necessarily gendered, not necessarily genital objects that one most fully extricates a model of desire from heterosexist assumptions. By contrast, the unidimensional suave body of the rhetoricalist account—however gussied up in outlandishly queer or sophisticated finery—is simply a product of culturally constrained symbolic and imaginary systems. This "subject's" desire is simply the product of meaning, of a signifying chain; whereas the psychoanalytic subject's desire is a product of that chain's disruption. Regarding this rhetoricalist conception of the subject, Lacan observed that "this subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is no more than such an [object]" (E 315).

28. The cultural association of homosexuality with narcissism—which stems from the assumption that both homosexuality and narcissism involve love of the same—requires interrogation rather than the endorsement this part of my argument seems to confer. Edelman provides an acute critique of the use of narcissism as a term of censure in AIDS activist rhetoric, arguing thus: "It is all the more painful, therefore, when the rhetoric of 'activist,' in its resistance to the dominant discourse, redeploy the ideology of that discourse in order, narcissistically, to reinforce an 'activist' identity by stigmatizing as narcissistic the community, already so-stigmatized, from which they emerged" (Homographesis, 108). In "Homo-Narcissism; or Heterosexual," in Engendering Men: The Quantom of Male Feminin Concom, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), 190–206, Michael Warner also provides a strong critique of this association between homosexuality and narcissism. I develop this critique in "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness," in Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

29. In Read My Desire, chap. 6, Joan Copjec argues for the political purchase of understanding the subject psychoanalytically as disembodied, nonconcrete, universal.
CHAPTER FIVE

This idea that in language the subject’s subjectivity becomes nothing more than “such an object” suggests the difference between a psychoanalytic account (which grounds the subject in the object) and a rhetorical account (which more straightforwardly grounds the subject in language). Lacan’s idea suggests also the complex dynamism of a structure in which the language that impacts and dices corporeal density, reducing the subject to an abject object, comes as much from inside the body as outside it. It is for this reason that the phoneme is included in Lacan’s catalog of objects a. As the smallest linguistic unit capable of signifying difference between otherwise identical words, the phoneme is distinct from Lacan’s notion of the signifier, since to make the signifier an object a would be to reduce psychoanalysis to rhetoricalism by treating desire as purely linguistic. Our alienation in language is so intense because it is so intimate—that is, because speech operates at the body’s borders. Speech comes out of our very mouths, connecting our insides to our outsides. Hence Lacan’s reference to “Respiratory ergonomy” (E 315), the potential for breath itself—not to mention particular words carried on the breath—to produce desire. And thus despite the elaborate protocols surrounding what can be said and to whom, freedom of speech is defended in this culture that seeks to eliminate all other sounds and substances emitted by the body’s orifices or at its borders.

BODIES THAT MUTTER

Treating everything except speech that comes out of the body as execrable, North American culture would rather heed the vital signs emanating from bodies, for to recognize bodies that mutter would require attending to desire, which capitalism prefers to misrecognize as need. Bodies that mutter, that speak almost inaudibly, unintelligibly, are heeded in our culture by psychoanalysis, which first took hysteric symptoms as a form of communication. By producing signs that are not immediately legible even as something requiring reading, bodies that mutter obliquely indicate desire in the form of a failure in the Other’s discourse. (Here we might recall Lacan’s remarking that “the desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other.”) Bodies that mutter testify to something lacking. Unlike consumer culture, psychoanalysis provides a space in which desire is taken seriously rather than exploited. Whereas rhetoricalism pays attention merely to ego—bodies that matter through imaginary morphogenesis—psychoanalysis pays attention to bodies that mutter, recognizing in the ego a dangerously aggressive façade (“the projection of a surface”) that obscures the subject of desire and his or her suffering. Thus we might say that while the ego matters, the body mutters.

Is “bodies that mutter” merely a figure of speech, a play on words? The difference between muttering and speaking concerns the distinction involved in a notion of desire as something in language but not itself linguistic. While speech comprises signs and signifiers, muttering comprises the symptom, which represents a literally unspeakable desire. It is a rhetoricalist error to assimilate hysterical symptoms to a model of language or discourse that contains no place for object-causes of desire; if symptoms were simply signs or signifiers, they would be spoken or written. It is because the speaking subject is a disembodied subject that the body mutters. Thus Edelman’s unquestioned assumption—that sexuality is written, inscribed, or otherwise textualized on the body—is mistaken in its assigning meaning and legibility, rather than ineliminable opacity, to corporeal marks. Bodies that mutter are bodies whose desire, enmeshed in the symbolic order, is struggling to be heard. The symptom signifies that that desire has not been heard, has not found its signifier. This lack of a signifier is a serious matter, for bodies that mutter are in pain; their muttering is an index of that pain. Yet their muttering also perpetuates that pain. This paradox is what Lacan means by jouissance, which Jacques-Alain Miller glosses as “that secret satisfaction which . . . is at the heart of the symptom and attaches the subject to his sickness.” By muttering I mean a form of signification that condenses and carries with it jouissance in a way that ordinary language cannot, since jouissance and language conventionally are conceived as antithetical. Bodies that mutter reveal a relation among language, the body, jouissance, and object a that illuminates rhetoric—and thence mass culture—as a discourse of persuasion. Desire in language, propelled by

30. Butler makes this point very clearly in a discussion recorded at a 1991 symposium, “The Identity in Question.” "My position is that subjects are constituted in language, but that language is also the site of their destabilization" (October 61 [1992]: 113).

objects a, perturbs language into rhetoric. We might modify the rhetoricalist notion that all language is performative, productive of effects, by saying that language becomes rhetorical only when it produces effects—that is, when it is imbued with desire. This distinction between language and rhetoric derives from that elaborated earlier between the rhetoricalist grounding of subjectivity in language and the psychoanalytic grounding of subjectivity in objects a. Lacan emphasized this distinction by differentiating signification from discourse: signification comprises a chain of signifiers, but discourse is made up of both signifiers and objects a. As Lacan’s discourse structures show, there are different ways of working within language, different ways of speaking, of relating to the Other, of desiring. As I elaborate in the next chapter, the plurality of objects a suggests great potential for this psychoanalytic theory of desire to conceive of sexuality outside the terms of normative heterosexuality. If the plurality of objects a finds distorted expression in the range of rhetorical figures that spoil the fantasy of representational transparency, then appreciating this link between rhetoric and desire should spoil rhetoricalism’s subtler fantasy of “the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning.”

The rhetoricalist model treats some version of this “absolute randomness of language” as the highly contingent foundation of discursive effects (rhetoric) and subjective affects (guilt, in de Man’s example). By contrast, the psychoanalytic model treats the loss that forms objects a and hence the subject as foundational. This loss is initiated by language; and language in the form of rhetoric or discourse—that is, language infused with desire—tries to overcome this loss. In the face of this foundational loss, language, “resignification,” and deconstruction remain ultimately inadequate. Thus although psychoanalysis works with nothing but language, psychoanalytic therapeutics are not directed toward overcoming loss. Instead, psychoanalysis is directed toward admitting desire, finding ways to inhabit desire.

CHAPTER FIVE

of sexuality. My critique of rhetoricalism is, in the end, a political critique, because I see a certain version of psychoanalysis as offering a more radical and workable sexual politics than anything Butler’s model promises.

To state my disagreement with Butler in its strongest terms, let me just say that in her rhetoricalizing of psychosis, in “Arguing with the Real,” Butler’s argument and the politics it implies are psychotic. I hope I will not be misunderstood as suggesting that Judith Butler herself is psychotic; I’m concerned instead with the logic of her argument and its implications for sexual politics. Butler’s project to “resignify” the symbolic order by means of psychosis is not political but psychotic. Her turn to psychosis for a politics of sexuality indicates the impasse of Butler’s antinormativism and marks the dead-end limits of her thoroughlygoing suspicion of all norms.36

Butler claims that “[t]he rallying force of politics is its implicit promise of the possibility of a livable and speakable psychosis. Politics holds out the promise of the manageability of unspeakable loss” (209). I have suggested why the “unspeakable loss” immaterialized in object a cannot be overcome, and that without this constitutive loss, desire simply would not exist. The “promise of the manageability of unspeakable loss” perpetuates the common fantasy of a world without desire, perhaps even a world without psychoanalysis. To suggest that politics enables a “livable and speakable psychosis,” or to advocate “a politically enabled deployment of psychotic speech” (280), nullifies both psychosis and politics by refusing to distinguish between them.

If the category of psychosis represents nothing more than an ideological construction that excludes certain social groups—principally women and queers—by making them the abject real that shores up compulsory heterosexuality, one then must ask exactly what ails clinically diagnosed psychotic patients beyond the interpellation of a normatively deployed diagnosis. A discursive idealism blinds this rhetoricalist position to the seriousness of its argument’s implications: by declining to acknowledge any legitimate psychosis beyond its disciplinary mobilization (no original apart from its normative citation), Butler’s argument euphemizes psychotic suffering as the consequence merely of hegemonic misnaming. If psychosis represents nothing more than a diagnostic category produced and enforced by heterosexism’s regulatory regime, mental illness would be curable through political resignifications, according to Butler’s model. This logic returns us to the 1960s antipsychiatry of David Cooper and R. D. Laing, which implied that even the most serious forms of psychic suffering are amenable to political redemption, since society and its regulatory norms alone are responsible for driving people mad. What leads Butler to this point of maintaining that there is a political purchase to psychotic speech?

Psychotic utterances, crazy though they may sound, are formulated according to a distinct logic, what we may call psychotologic, which is traceable through the use of psychorhetoric. As I suggested above, Lacan shifted the psychoanalytic understanding and treatment of psychosis by conceptualizing this most serious form of psychic suffering in rhetorical terms—that is, in terms of linguistic disorder. Conceiving of psychosis as a specific structural relation between symbolic and real orders, Lacan questioned the psychoanalytic orthodoxy that maintained psychosis was untreatable via the talking cure. In challenging this orthodoxy, Lacan also discredited the conventional fear that engaging the psychotic’s symbolic economy through the discursive link of a psychoanalytic encounter necessarily would make the analyst psychotic too. In other words, he spoke to the fear that entering the psychotic’s world via the talking cure would send the doctor mad.

There are various ways of engaging psychotologic—some analytic, some crazy, and some neither analytic nor crazy but simply failing to engage. Psychotologic often produces arguments of startling rigor, as Freud discovered with President Schreber, whose impressive erudition confirms, among other things, that Lacan’s definition of psychosis as a foreclosure of part of the symbolic order should not imply an equation between psychosis and silence or gobbledygook. Far from being beyond or outside discourse, psychotologic regularly elaborates an intricate and brilliant—if bizarre—discourse of its own. As psychoanalyst Micheline Enriques comments, psychotic discourse “very often presents this double aspect of being at once a madness delusional discourse outside reason,
CHAPTER FIVE

and at the same time a passionate and often pertinent denunciation of disorders and evils 'glaring within reality.' " 37 I want here to disentangle the steps that lead Butler to promote a form of discursive psychosis as a viable political option.

The first step to note in her argument with the real is Butler's synecdochic sleight of hand that makes Slavoj Žižek stand for Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis in general. Žižek is one of the most important contemporary psychoanalytic theorists; his work has repoliticized psychoanalysis and shown Lacan's enormous potential for cultural studies. But Žižek's work increases, not diminishes, our responsibility to read Lacan. Working with and against a number of psychoanalytically oriented theorists—Žižek, Lacla and Mouffe, Michael Walsh—Butler's argument relies on secondary sources rather than on Lacan's own texts. Symptomatic of this problem is the fact that, in a long, dense chapter simply a failure of rigor in a critic consistently noted for rigorousness?

quoted as "the feminine as a `stain,' `outside the circuit of discourse' (75)" (Butler, 196) ilek a shred of direct evidence. Her reliance on secondary sources gives the much as the limitations of a certain fantasy about Žižek as theorist of prohibitions and their heterosexualizing injunctions are taken to be in-

variant (189). While the Lacanian real undoubtedly raises the question of limits and limitations, Butler's argument underscores nothing so much as the limitations of a certain fantasy about Žižek as theorist of the political.

Should we interpret Butler's refusal to engage Lacan directly as simply a failure of rigor in a critic consistently noted for rigorousness? Since Butler's chapter is full of parapraxes involving persistent misquotation and mischaracterization of Žižek, her reliance on secondary sources perhaps should be read as a sign of something more than intellectual laziness. 38 If, as Butler suggests for Žižek, the Lacanian real is embodied by queerness and the feminine, then this characterization might prompt the question of what functions as the real in Butler's psychic economy. I have little interest in defending Žižek. However, in my reading of "Arguing with the Real" I would like to avoid as much as possible psychologizing Butler in the way that her reading of Žižek psychologizes him. I am interested more in the logic of Butler's argument—a logic that, contra rhetoricalism, I take to be irreducible to the rhetoric in which it is formulated. To reduce logic to rhetoric, or to suggest that no logic exists apart from that of rhetoric, is an imaginary fallacy that bespeaks a refusal to recognize the nonrhetorical logic of the real. Hence my disinclination, in this chapter, to discuss the relation between sexuality and rhetoric in terms of either "a rhetoric of sexuality" or "a sexuality of rhetoric," since both these approaches collapse sexuality into rhetoric in a way that forecloses desire.

Given this qualification, a rhetorical analysis of Butler's argument might begin by investigating her strategic use of erotema, the form of rhetorical questioning that implies an answer and so produces an assertion by indirect means. Butler's arguments proceed by posing series of questions whose answers subsequently are assumed as if they were the product of logical argumentation rather than the product of insistent erotema. For example:


38. Trivial in themselves, the cumulative effect of these parapraxes is serious, suggesting a systemic problem rather than merely superficial or local accidents. For more on Butler's parapraxes, see n. 15 above. In The Sublime Object, Žižek describes the symptom as "a stain which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse" (75); in Bodies That Matter this description is glossed and misquoted "the feminine as a `stain,' outside the circuit of discourse" (75)" (Butler, 196). Žižek characterizes Foucault (admittedly somewhat oddly) as one "fascinated by marginal lifestyles con-

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CHAPTER FIVE

How might those ostensibly constitutive exclusions be rendered less permanent, more dynamic? How might the excluded return, not as psychosis or the figure of the psychotic within politics, but as that which has been rendered mute, foreclosed from the domain of political signification? How and where is social content attributed to the site of the “real,” and then positioned as the unspeakable? Is there not a difference between a theory that asserts that, in principle, every discourse operates through exclusion and a theory that attributes to that “outside” specific social and sexual positions? To the extent that a specific use of psychoanalysis works to foreclose certain social and sexual positions from the domain of intelligibility—and for all time—psychoanalysis appears to work in the service of the normativizing law that it interrogates. How might such socially saturated domains of exclusion be recast from their status as “constitutive” to beings who might be said to matter? (189)

The theory that attributes to the real specific social and sexual positions is Butler’s own, since Lacan characterizes the real as asubstantial, unsexed and ungendered. Constructing a Slovenian straw man, Butler proceeds to misrecognize this rhetorical construction and claim that “[t]he production of the unsymbolizable, the unspeakable, the illegible is also always a strategy of social abjection” (190). From this mistaken assumption, produced through erotema, Butler proceeds to deconstruct this “strategy of social abjection” in the name of “being who might be said to matter.”

Butler’s characterization of the real as involving “a strategy of social abjection” makes the real far more intransigent and uncompromising than Lacan conceives it. By describing the real in structural rather than substantive terms, Lacan theorizes the real as a variable limit to the speakable and the thinkable. This distinction is politically significant because it implies that although a homophobic culture may figure gay sex, for example, as unspeakable, that figuration is culturally and historically less permanent, more dynamic? How might the excluded return, not as psychosis or the figure of the psychotic within politics, but as that which has been rendered mute, foreclosed from the domain of political signification? How and where is social content attributed to the site of the “real,” and then positioned as the unspeakable? Is there not a difference between a theory that asserts that, in principle, every discourse operates through exclusion and a theory that attributes to that “outside” specific social and sexual positions? To the extent that a specific use of psychoanalysis works to foreclose certain social and sexual positions from the domain of intelligibility—and for all time—psychoanalysis appears to work in the service of the normativizing law that it interrogates. How might such socially saturated domains of exclusion be recast from their status as “constitutive” to beings who might be said to matter? (189)

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the same trauma, and that what is historically textured about each of these sites of trauma is itself indifferent to and ontologically distinct from the lost and hidden referent that is their traumatic status. They are by virtue of this "same traumatic kernel" equivalent to one another as traumas, and what is historical and what is traumatic are made absolutely distinct; indeed, the historical becomes what is most indifferent to the question of trauma. (202)

I think Žižek is arguing not that traumas are historically or ontologically equivalent, but that the Lacanian concept of trauma enables a different kind of historical understanding. Trauma offers a different perspective on historicity by showing—as Fredric Jameson glosses this Lacanian position—that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization.40 Far from making "what is historical and what is traumatic... absolutely distinct," Žižek suggests that history and trauma can be conceptualized only in relation to each other.

Butler’s invoking "the lost and hidden referent" in the passage above points to another common point of confusion—confusing fantasy and reality, or, to put it slightly differently, confusing psychic reality with referentiality. Butler’s argument with the real depends upon her substantiating the real as reference—that is, her attributing a content to that zone of psychic negativity that Lacan calls the real. Butler does this by persistently referring to Žižek’s use of the Lacanian ‘real’ to establish the permanent recalcitrance of the referent to symbolization” (208).41 Her confusing the real with referentiality connects to Butler’s confusing subject and ego, for she initially characterizes the Lacanian position thus: “Following Lacan, Žižek argues that the ‘subject’ is produced in language through an act of foreclosure (Verwerfung) (189–90). Conceptually, this is complete nonsense. Unsupported by any citation or even allusion to a particular psychoanalytic text, Butler’s claim misrecognizes as a theory of subject formation Lacan’s explanation of psychosis as following from foreclosure of the Names-of-the-Father, a process I described in chapter 3. In effect, Butler is saying that subject formation is a psychotic process. Whether or not she actually believes that, it is hardly fair to characterize Lacan or Žižek as having made such a claim. Lacan argues instead that the subject, as subject of the unconscious, is produced through repression (Verdrängung).

Taken together, these common points of confusion—between real and referent, between subject and ego—enable Butler to conclude that performativity can overcome the real: “Insofar as performatives are their own referent, they appear both to signify and to refer and hence to overcome the divide between referent and signification that is produced and sustained at the level of foreclosure” (209; original emphasis). Even more strangely, Butler then proposes performativity as that which might overcome referentiality, as if the fact that words refer to things in the world were in itself a kind of conspiracy: “If referentiality is itself the effect of a policing of the linguistic constraints on proper usage, then the possibility of referentiality is contested by the catachrestic use of speech that insists on using proper names improperly” (217–18).42 Confusing the real with referentiality, and foreclosure with repression, Butler furthermore conflates la femme with women, arguing that women are effectively policed into the real by Lacan and thus excluded from political intelligibility: “if women are positioned as that which cannot exist, as that which is barred from existence by the law of the father, then there is a conflation of women with that foreclosed existence, that lost referent, that is surely as pernicious as any form of ontological essentialism” (218–19). A pernicious conflation indeed, one that derives from Butler’s psychotologic itself, since it is not “the law of the father” that bars existence, just as foreclosure does not produce a “lost referent.”43


41. This mischaracterization of the real as referentiality is repeated throughout Butler’s chapter (207, 208, 209, 215, and 217).
This chapter envisions a dialogue between Lacan and queer theory, a sort of roundtable in which various contemporary theorists of sexuality would directly engage Lacan—and he them. But, of course, Lacan died well before queer theory emerged as such; and, as Thomas Yingling observed, queer theorists prepared to grapple with Freud nonetheless have remained relatively shy of tackling the corpus of speculative work bequeathed by Lacan. 1 Furthermore, I discovered to my disappointment at an International Conference on Sexuation (in New York City, April 1997, where I first presented a preliminary version of this chapter) that for their part Lacanian analysts proved far less willing to engage queer theory than I, perhaps naively, had anticipated. Yet spurred on by my conviction that psychoanalysis is a queer theory, I've persisted with this imaginary encounter, a dialogue between—to invoke Yeats—self and antiself.

In Encore, his seminar devoted most directly to the topic of sexuality, Lacan speaks often of homosexuality, but with the crucial qualification that as far as love is concerned, gender is irrelevant: "quand on aime, il ne s'agit pas de sexe" (SXX 27). What should we make of this idea that the gender of object-choice remains ultimately inconsequential in

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