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32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 42.
33. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 677.
34. Adrienne Rich, "Power and Danger: The Work of a Common Woman by Judy Grahn," in Judy Grahn, *The Work of a Common Woman* (California: Diana Press, 1978), 20.
35. Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 368. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 284-86.
36. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xxxv, 694.
37. Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1974), 52.
38. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xxv.
39. *Ibid.*, xxxv, 694; Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 448. See also Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Studies* 1:2 (Winter 1981):47-54. *Conference* (New York), 71.
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42. Jeffner Allen, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot, (New Jersey: Roman and Allanheld, 1984), 315-30.
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46. Carruthers, "Imagining Women," 289.
47. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 226, 277, 280.
48. From a cluster of derivative etymologies: love [old English *frēon*], caress [old Norse *fríð*], and free [old English *frēo*]. See *Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's International Dictionary*.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
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SEXUAL IDEOLOGY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF
MERLEAU-PONTY'S
PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

Judith Butler

Theories of sexuality which tend to impute natural ends to sexual desire are very often part of a more general discourse on the legitimate locations of gender and desire within a given social context.* The appeal to a natural desire and, as a corollary, a natural form of human sexual relationships is thus invariably normative, for those forms of desire and sexuality which fall outside the parameters of the natural model are understood as unnatural and, hence, without the legitimation that a natural and normative model confers. Although Merleau-Ponty does not write his theory of sexuality within an explicitly political framework, he nevertheless offers certain significant arguments against naturalistic accounts of sexuality that are useful to any explicit political effort to refute restrictively normative views of sexuality. In arguing that sexuality is coextensive with existence, that it is a mode of dramatizing and investigating a concrete historical situation, Merleau-Ponty appears to offer feminist theory a view of sexuality freed of naturalistic ideology, one which restores both the historical and volitional components of sexual experience and, consequently, opens the way for a fuller description of sexuality and sexual diversity.

In the section of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled "The Body in its Sexual Being," the body is termed a "historical idea" rather than "a natural species."¹ Significantly, Simone de Beauvoir takes

up this claim in *The Second Sex*,² quoting Merleau-Ponty to the effect that woman, like man, is a historical construction bearing no natural telos, a field of possibilities that are taken up and actualized in various distinctive ways. To understand the construction of gender, it is not necessary to discover a normative model against which individual instances can be gauged, but, rather, to delimit the field of historical possibilities which constitute this gender, and to examine in detail the *acts* by which these possibilities are appropriated, dramatized, and ritualized. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a "place of appropriation" and a mechanism of "transformation" and "conversion," an essentially dramatic structure which can be 'read' in terms of the more general life that it embodies. As a result, the body cannot be conceived of as a static or univocal fact of existence, but, rather, as a modality of existence, the 'place' in which possibilities are realized and dramatized, the individualized appropriation of a more general historical experience.

And yet, the potential openness of Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality is deceptive. Despite his efforts to the contrary, Merleau-Ponty offers descriptions of sexuality which turn out to contain tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality. Not only does he assume that sexual relations are heterosexual, but that the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body. Indeed, as we shall see, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the sexual relation between men and women on the model of master and slave. And although he generally tends to discount natural structures of sexuality, he manages to reify cultural relations between the sexes on a different basis by calling them 'essential' or 'metaphysical'. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality and sexual relations at once liberates and forecloses the cultural possibility of benign sexual variation. Insofar as feminist theory seeks to dislodge sexuality from those reifying ideologies which freeze sexual relations into 'natural' forms of domination, it has both something to gain and something to fear from Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality.

Merleau-Ponty's Criticisms of Reductive Psychology

In arguing that "sexuality is coextensive with existence," Merleau-Ponty refutes those theoretical efforts to isolate sexuality as a "drive" or a biological given of existence. Sexuality cannot be reduced to a specific set of drives or activities, but must be understood as subtending all our modes of engagement in the world. As an inexorable "aura" and "odour," sexuality is an essentially malleable quality, a mode of embodying a certain

that relation in corporeal terms. According to Merleau-Ponty, there are two prominent theoretical attitudes toward sexuality which are fundamentally mistaken. The one regards sexuality as a composite set of drives which occupy some interior biological space and which, consequent to the emergence of these drives into conscious experience, become attached to representations. This contingent relation between drive and representation results in the figuration of drives as 'blind' or motored by an internal teleology or naturalistic mechanism. The objects to which they become attached are only arbitrary foci for these drives, occasions or conditions for their release and gratification, and the entire life of the drive takes place within a solipsistic framework. The other theory posits sexuality as an ideational layer which is projected onto the world, a representation which is associated with certain stimuli and which, through habit, we come to affirm as the proper domain of sexuality. In the first instance, the reality of sexuality resides in a set of drives which pre-exist their representation, and in the second case, the reality of sexuality is a production of representation, a habit of association, a mental construction. In both cases, we can see that there is no intentional relation between what is called a 'drive' and its 'representation'. As intentional, the drive would be referential from the outset; it could only be understood in the context of its concrete actualization in the world, as a mode of expressing, dramatizing, and embodying an existential relation to the world. In the above two cases, however, sexuality is solipsistic rather than referential, a self-enclosed phenomenon which signals a rupture between sexuality and existence. As a drive, sexuality is "about" its own biological necessity, and as a representation, it is a mere construct which has no necessary relation to the world upon which it is imposed. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality must be intentional in the sense that it modalizes a relationship between an embodied subject and a concrete situation: "bodily existence continually sets the prospect of living before me . . . my body is what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there."³

Written in 1945, *The Phenomenology of Perception* offered an appraisal of psychoanalytic theory both appreciative and critical. On the one hand, Freud's contention that sexuality pervades mundane existence and structures human life from its inception is accepted and reformulated by Merleau-Ponty in the latter's claim that sexuality is coextensive with existence. And yet, in Merleau-Ponty's description of psychoanalysis, we can discern the terms of his own phenomenological revision of that method. Note in the following how Freud's theory of sexuality comes to serve the phenomenological and existential program:

For Freud himself the sexual is not the genital, sexual life is not a mere effect of the processes having their seat in the genital organs, the libido is not an

instinct, that is, an activity naturally directed towards definite ends, it is the general power, which the psychosomatic subject enjoys, of taking root in different settings, of establishing himself through different experiences . . . It is what causes a man (sic) to have a history. In so far as a man's (sic) sexual history provides a key to his life, it is because in his sexuality is projected his manner of being towards the world, that is, towards time and other men (sic).⁴

Merleau-Ponty's presumption that the Freudian libido is "not an instinct" does not take into account Freud's longstanding ambivalence toward a theory of instinctual sexuality, evident in the 1915 essay, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and in his later speculative writings.⁵ Unclear, for instance, is how strictly Freud maintained the distinction between drive (*Trieb*) and instinct (*Instinkt*), and the extent to which drives are viewed as a necessary mythology or part of the framework of a naturalistic ideology. Freud's theory of psychosexual development very often relies on a naturalistic theory of drives whereby the normal development of a sexual drive culminates in the restriction of erotogenic zones to the genital and the normative valorization of heterosexual coitus. Although complicated and varied in its methodological style, Freud's book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* nevertheless tends to subject the analysis of the body in situation to a description of the internal teleology of instincts which has both a natural and normal life of its own.⁶ Indeed, as a drive which develops along natural and normal lines, sexuality is figured as precisely the kind of naturalistic construction that Merleau-Ponty views as contrary to his intentional view. And as a "psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation,"⁷ the sexual drive is precisely the kind of arbitrary construct that Merleau-Ponty also wants to repudiate.

But even more curious is Merleau-Ponty's attribution to Freud of a unified agent whose reflexive acts are manifest in his/her sexual life. In arguing that "the psychosomatic subject" takes root and establishes him/herself in different settings and situations, Merleau-Ponty glosses over the psychoanalytic critique of the conscious subject as a product of unconscious desires and the mechanism of repression. In effect, Merleau-Ponty assimilates the psychoanalytic subject to a reflexive Cartesian ego, a position that psychoanalytic theory sought to criticize as much more limited in its autonomy than rationalist philosophy had presumed.

In light of Merleau-Ponty's curious appropriation of psychoanalysis, it seems clear that he rejects any account of sexuality which relies upon causal factors understood to precede the concrete situation of the individual, whether those factors are natural or unconscious. Moreover, he refuses to accept any normative conception of sexuality such that particular social

organizations of sexuality appear either more normal or more natural than others. We will later see, however, that while he does not assert such a telos, he nevertheless assumes one at various crucial points in the theory. Despite the alleged openness and malleability of sexuality in Merleau-Ponty's view, certain structures emerge as existential and metaphysical necessities which ultimately cast doubt upon Merleau-Ponty's nonnormative pretensions. Indeed, despite his trenchant critique of naturalistic accounts of sexuality, it becomes unclear whether Merleau-Ponty is himself wholly freed of naturalistic ideology.

The Constitution of Sexuality: Nature, History, and Existence

For Merleau-Ponty, the various expressions of human sexuality constitute possibilities arising from bodily existence in general; none can claim ontological priority over any other. Sexuality is discussed in general terms as a mode of situating oneself in terms of one's intersubjectivity. Little more is said, not because Merleau-Ponty thinks sexuality is abstract, but because the multifarious expressions of sexuality have only these expressive and intersubjective qualities in common. In its fundamental structure, sexuality is both reflexive and corporeal and signifies a relation between the embodied subject and others. The individual who is clinically considered asexual is misunderstood by the vocabulary that names him or her; 'asexuality' reveals a definite sexual orientation, what Merleau-Ponty describes as "a way of life—an attitude of escapism and need of solitude— . . . a generalized expression of a certain state of sexuality . . . the fact remains that this existence is the act of taking up and making explicit a sexual situation."⁸ On the other hand, sexuality is never experienced in a pure form such that a purely sexual state can be achieved: "Even if I become absorbed in the experience of my own body and in the solitude of sensations, I do not succeed in abolishing all reference of my life to a world. At every moment some intention springs afresh from me."⁹

As "a current of existence," sexuality has no necessary forms, but presents itself as having-to-be-formed. Sexuality is not a choice inasmuch as it is a necessary expression of bodily existence and the necessary medium of 'choice'. In opposition to Sartre's claim in *Being and Nothingness* that the body represents a factic limitation to choice, the constraining material perspective, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is itself a modality of reflexivity, a specifically corporeal agency. In this sense, then, sexuality cannot be said to 'represent' existential choices which are themselves pre- or non-sexual, for sexuality is an irreducible modality of choice. And yet, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that sexuality cannot be restricted to the various re-

flexive acts that it modalizes; sexuality is always there, as the medium for existential projects, as the ceaseless 'current' of existence. Indeed, in the following, Merleau-Ponty appears to invest sexuality with powers that exceed those of the individual existence which gives it form:

Why is our body for us the mirror of our being, unless it is a natural self, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces that bear on us are its or ours—or with the result rather that they are never entirely either its or ours. There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than there is any sexuality enclosed within itself.¹⁰

This 'natural' current is thus taken up through the concrete acts and gestures of embodied subjects and given concrete form, and this form thus becomes its specific historical expression. Thus, sexuality only becomes historical through individual acts of appropriation, "the permanent act[s] by which man [sic] takes up, for his own purposes, and makes his own a certain de facto situation."¹¹

Here it is clear that while each individual confronts a natural sexuality and a concrete existential situation, that situation does not include the history of sexuality, the legacy of its conventions and taboos. It seems we must ask whether individuals do not confront a *sedimented* sexuality, and if so, are not the individual acts of appropriation less transformations of a natural sexuality into a historically specific sexuality than the transformation of past culture into present culture? It is unclear that we could ever confront a 'natural' sexuality which was not already mediated by language and acculturation and, hence, it makes sense to ask whether the sexuality we do confront is always already partially formed. Merleau-Ponty is doubtless right in claiming that there is no outstripping sexuality, that it is there, always to be reckoned with in one way or another, but there seems no *prima facie* reason to assume that its inexorability is at once its naturalness. Perhaps it is simply the case that a specific formation of culturally constructed sexuality has come to *appear* as natural.

According to his own arguments, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty would discount the possibility of a subject in confrontation with a natural sexuality. In his words, "there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only insofar as he is historically situated."¹² Yet, to say that the subject is historically situated in a loose sense is to say only that the decisions a subject makes are delimited—not exclusively constituted—by a given set of historical possibilities. A stronger version of historical situatedness would locate history as the very condition for the constitution of the subject, not only as a set of external possibilities for choice. If this stronger version were accepted, Merleau-Ponty's above claim

with regard to a natural sexuality would be reversed: individual existence does not bring natural sexuality into the historical world, but history provides the conditions for the conceptualization of the individual as such. Moreover, sexuality is itself formed through the sedimentation of the history of sexuality, and the embodied subject, rather than an existential constant, is itself partially constituted by the legacy of sexual relations which constitute its situation.

Merleau-Ponty's anthropological naiveté emerges in his view of how cultural conventions determine how the lived body is culturally reproduced. He distinguishes, mistakenly I believe, between biological subsistence and the domain of historical and cultural signification: " 'living' (*leben*) is a primary process from which, as a starting point, it becomes possible to 'live' (*erleben*) this or that world, and we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and lights through sight, to sounds through hearing, to the body of another through sexuality, before arriving at the life of human relations."¹³ When we consider, however, the life of the infant as immediately bound up in a set of relationships whereby it receives food, shelter, and warmth, it becomes impossible to separate the fact of biological subsistence from the various ways in which that subsistence is administered and assured. Indeed, the very birth of the child is already a human relation, one of radical dependence, which takes place within a set of institutional regulations and norms. In effect, it is unclear that there can be a state of sheer subsistence divorced from a particular organization of human relationships. Economic anthropologists have made the point various times that subsistence is not prior to culture, that eating and sleeping and sexuality are inconceivable apart from the various social forms through which these activities are ritualized and regulated.

In accounting for the genesis of sexual desire, Merleau-Ponty once again reverts to a naturalistic account which seems to contradict his own phenomenological procedure. In the following, he attributes the emergence of sexuality to the purely organic function of the body: "there must be, immanent in sexual life, some function which insures its emergence, and the normal extension of sexuality must rest on internal powers of the organic subject. There must be an Eros or Libido which breathes life into an original world."¹⁴ Once again, it appears that sexuality emerges prior to the influence of historical and cultural factors. And yet theorists such as Michel Foucault have argued that cultural conventions dictate not only when sexuality becomes explicit, but also in what form. What leads Merleau-Ponty, then, to safeguard this aspect of sexuality as prior to culture and history? What dimensions of 'natural' sexuality does Merleau-Ponty wish to preserve such that he is willing to contradict his own methodology in the ways

that he has? Although Merleau-Ponty is clearly concerned with sexuality as the dramatic embodiment of existential themes, he distinguishes between those existential themes that are purely individual, and those that are shared and intersubjective. Indeed, it appears, for him, that sexuality dramatizes certain existential themes that are universal in character, and which, we will see, dictate certain forms of domination between the sexes as 'natural' expressions of sexuality.

Misogyny as an Intrinsic Structure of Perception

Not only does Merleau-Ponty fail to acknowledge the extent to which sexuality is culturally constructed, but his descriptions of the universal features of sexuality reproduce certain cultural constructions of sexual normalcy. The case of the sexually disinterested Schneider is a rich example. In introducing the reader to Schneider, Merleau-Ponty refers to his "sexual incapacity," and throughout the discussion it is assumed that Schneider's state is abnormal. The evidence that Merleau-Ponty provides in support of this contention is considered to be obvious: "Obscene pictures, conversations on sexual topics, the sight of a body do not arouse desire in him."¹⁵ One wonders what kind of cultural presumptions would make arousal in such contexts seem utterly normal. Certainly, these pictures, conversations, and perceptions already designate a concrete cultural situation, one in which the masculine subject is figured as viewer, and the yet unnamed feminine subject is the body to be seen.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, evidence of Schneider's "sexual inertia" is to be found in a general lack of sexual tenacity and willfulness. Deemed abnormal because he "no longer seeks sexual intercourse of his own accord," Schneider is subject to the clinical expectation that sexual intercourse is intrinsically desirable regardless of the concrete situation, the other person involved, the desires and actions of that other person. Assuming that certain acts necessitate a sexual response, Merleau-Ponty notes that Schneider "hardly ever kisses, and the kiss for him has no value as sexual stimulation." "If orgasm occurs first in the partner and she moves away, the half-fulfilled desire vanishes"; this gesture of deference signifies masculine "incapacity," as if the normal male would seek satisfaction regardless of the desires of his female partner.¹⁶

Central to Merleau-Ponty's assessment of Schneider's sexuality as abnormal is the presumption that the decontextualized female body, the body alluded to in conversation, the anonymous body which passes by on the street, exudes a natural attraction. This is a body rendered unreal, the focus of solipsistic fantasy and projection; indeed, this is a body that does not

live, but a frozen image which does not resist or interrupt the course of masculine desire through an unexpected assertion of life. How does this eroticization of the decontextualized body become reconciled with Merleau-Ponty's insistence that "what we try to possess is not just a body, but a body brought to life by consciousness?"¹⁷

Viewed as an expression of sexual ideology, *The Phenomenology of Perception* reveals the cultural construction of the masculine subject as a strangely disembodied voyeur whose sexuality is strangely non-corporeal. Significant, I think, is the prevalence of visual metaphors in Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of normal sexuality. Erotic experience is almost never described as tactile or physical or even passionate.¹⁸ Although Merleau-Ponty explains that 'perception' for him signifies affective life in general, it appears that the meaning of perception occasionally reverts to its original denotation of sight. Indeed, it sometimes appears as if sexuality itself were reduced to the erotics of the gaze. Consider the following: "In the case of the normal subject, a body is not perceived merely as an object; this objective perception has within it a more intimate perception: the visible body is subtended by a sexual schema which is strictly individual, emphasizing the erogenous areas, outlining a sexual physiognomy, and eliciting the gestures of the masculine body which is itself integrated into this emotional totality."¹⁹

As Merleau-Ponty notes, the schema subtending the body emphasizes the erogenous zones, but it remains unclear whether the "erogenous areas" are erogenous to the perceiving subject or to the subject perceived. Perhaps it is significant that Merleau-Ponty fails to make the distinction, for as long as the erotic experience belongs exclusively to the perceiving subject, it is of no consequence whether the experience is shared by the subject perceived. The paragraph begins with the clear distinction between a perception which objectifies and decontextualizes the body and a perception which is 'more intimate', which makes of the body more than 'an object'. The schema constitutes the intimate perception, and yet, as the schema unfolds, we realize that as a focusing on erogenous parts it consists in a further decontextualization and fragmentation of the perceived body. Indeed, the 'intimate' perception further denies a world or context for this body, but reduces the body to its erogenous (to whom?) parts. Hence, the body is objectified more drastically by the sexual schema than by the objective perception.

Only at the close of the paragraph do we discover that the "normal subject" is male, and "the body" he perceives is female. Moreover, the sexual physiognomy of the female body "elicit[s] the gestures of the masculine body," as if the very existence of these attributes 'provoked' or even necessitated certain kinds of sexual gestures on the part of the male. Here

it seems that the masculine subject has not only projected his own desire onto the female body, but then has accepted that projection as the very structure of the body that he perceives. Here the solipsistic circle of the masculine voyeur seems complete. That the masculine body is regarded as "integrated into this emotional totality" appears as a bizarre conclusion considering that his sole function has been to fulfill a spectatorial role.

In contrast to this normal male subject is Schneider, for whom it is said "a woman's body has no particular essence." Nothing about the purely physical construction of the female body arouses Schneider: "It is, he says, predominately character which makes a woman attractive, for physically they are all the same."²⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, the female body has an "essence" to be found in the "schema" that invariably elicits the gestures of masculine desire, and although he does not claim that this perception is conditioned by a natural or mechanistic causality, it appears to have the same necessity that such explanations usually afford. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how Merleau-Ponty, on other occasions in the text, makes general claims about bodies which starkly contradict his specific claims about women's bodies, unless by 'the body' he means the male body, just as earlier the 'normal subject' turned out to be male. At various points, he remarks that "bodily existence . . . is only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world,"²¹ a 'presence' which one might assume to be the origin of attractiveness, rather than the sexual schema taken alone. And rather than posit the body as containing an 'essence', he remarks that "the body expresses existence."²² To maintain, then, that the female body has an essence qua female and that this essence is to be found in the body contradicts his more general claim that "the body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence comes to its own in the body."²³ And yet, female bodies appear to have an essence which is itself physical, and this essence designates the female body as an object rather than a subject of perception. Indeed, the female body is seemingly never a subject, but always denotes an always already fixed essence rather than an open existence. She is, in effect, already formed, while the male subject is in exclusive control of the constituting gaze. She is never seeing, always seen. If the female body denotes an essence, while bodies in general denote existence, then it appears that bodies in general must be male—and existence does not belong to women.

That Schneider finds only women with character arousing is taken as proof that he suffers from a sublimation of his true desires, that he has rationalized the object of his desire as a bearer of virtue. That Schneider conflates a moral and a sexual discourse is, for Merleau-Ponty, evidence of repression, and yet it may be that after all Schneider is more true to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of bodily existence than Mer-

leau-Ponty himself. By refusing to endow a woman with an essence, Schneider reaffirms the woman's body as an expression of existence, a 'presence' in the world. Her body is not taken as a physical and interchangeable fact, but expressive of the life of consciousness. Hence, it appears that Schneider is a feminist of sorts, while Merleau-Ponty represents the cultural equation of normalcy with an objectifying masculine gaze and the corollary devaluation of moral concerns as evidence of pathology.

The Sexual Ideology of Master and Slave

The ideological character of *The Phenomenology of Perception* is produced by the impossible project of maintaining an abstract subject even while describing concrete, lived experience. The subject appears immune from the historical experience that Merleau-Ponty describes, but then reveals itself in the course of the description as a concrete cultural subject, a masculine subject. Although Merleau-Ponty intends to describe the universal structures of bodily existence, the concrete examples he provides reveal the impossibility of that project. Moreover, the specific cultural organization of sexuality becomes reified through a description that claims universality. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty wants sexuality to be intentional, in-the-world, referential, expressive of a concrete, existential situation, and yet he offers a description of bodily experience clearly abstracted from the concrete diversity that exists. The effect of this abstraction is to codify and sanction one particular cultural organization of sexuality as legitimate. Hence, the promise of his phenomenological method to provide a non-normative framework for the understanding of sexuality proves illusory.

Central to his argument is that sexuality instates us in a common world. The problem arises, however, when the common world he describes is a reification of a relation of domination between the sexes. Although he argues that sexuality makes us a part of a universal community, it becomes clear that this 'universality' characterizes a relationship of voyeurism and objectification, a nonreciprocal dialectic between men and women. In claiming that this universal dialectic is to be found in lived experience, Merleau-Ponty prefigures the analysis of lived experience, investing the body with an ahistorical structure which is in actuality profoundly historical in origin. Merleau-Ponty begins his explanation of this structure in the following way: "The intensity of sexual pleasure would not be sufficient to explain the place occupied by sexuality in human life or, for example, the phenomenon of eroticism, if sexual experience were not, as it were, an opportunity vouchsafed to all and always available, of acquainting oneself with the human lot in its most general aspects of autonomy and dependence."²⁴

The dynamics of autonomy and dependence characterize human life universally and "arise from the metaphysical structure of my body." Moreover, this dynamic is part of "a dialectic of the self and other which is that of master and slave: insofar as I have a body, I may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person, and no longer count as a person for him, or else I may become his master and, in my turn, look at him."²⁵

Master-slave is thus a metaphysical dynamic insofar as a body is always an object for others inasmuch as it is perceived. Perception designates an affective relation and, in the context of sexuality, signifies desire. Hence, a body is an object to the extent that it is desired, and is, in turn, a subject, inasmuch as it desires. Hence, being desired is equivalent to enslavement, and desiring is equivalent to mastering. Taken yet further, this dialectic suggests that the master, as the one who desires, is essentially without a body; indeed, it is a body which he desires to have. In other words, active desire is a way of dispensing with the existential problematic of being a body-object. In phenomenological terms, active desire is a flight from embodiment. The slave is thus designated as the body that the master lacks. And because the slave is a body-object, the slave is a body without desire. Hence, in this relationship, neither master nor slave constitute a *desiring body*; the master is desire without a body, and the slave is a body without desire.

We can speculate yet further upon this 'metaphysical' structure of bodily existence. The desire of the master must always be the desire to possess what he lacks, the body which he has denied and which the slave has come to *embody*. The slave, on the other hand, is not a person—a body expressive of consciousness—much less a person who desires. Whether or not the slave desires is irrelevant to the master, for his desire is self-sufficient; it posits the object of its desire and sustains it; his concern is not to *be* a body, but to have or possess the body as an object. But what does it mean to say that the master does not have a body? If the body is a "situation," the condition of perspective and the necessary mediation of a social existence, then the master has denied himself the condition for a genuine presence in the world and has become worldless. His desire is thus both an alienation of bodily existence and an effort to recapture the body from this self-imposed exile, not to be this body, but this time to possess and control it in order to nurse an illusion of transcendence. Desire thus signifies an effort at objectification and possession, the master's bizarre struggle with his own vulnerability and existence that requires the slave to be the body the master no longer wants to be. The slave must be the Other, the exact opposite of the Subject, but nevertheless remain his possession.

If the slave is a body without desire, the very identity of the slave forbids desire. Not only is the desire of the slave irrelevant to the master, but the emergence of the slave's desire would constitute a fatal contradiction in the slave's identity. Hence, the liberation of the slave would consist in the moment of desire, for desire would signal the advent of a subject, a body expressive of consciousness.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not equate the master with the male body or the slave with the female body, he does tend, as we have seen, to identify the female body with a sexual schema of a decontextualized and fragmented body. Read in light of Simone de Beauvoir's later claim in *The Second Sex*, that women are culturally constructed as the Other, reduced to their bodies and, further, to their sex, Merleau-Ponty's description of the 'metaphysical' structure of bodily existence appears to encode and reify that specific cultural dynamic of heterosexual relations. Strangely enough, Merleau-Ponty's effort to describe lived experience appeals to an abstract metaphysical structure devoid of explicit cultural reference, and yet once this metaphysical structure is properly contextualized as the cultural construction of heterosexuality, we do, in fact, seem to be in the presence of a widely experienced phenomenon. In effect, *The Phenomenology of Perception* makes gestures toward the description of an experience which it ultimately refuses to name. We are left with a metaphysical obfuscation of sexual experience, while the relations of domination and submission that we do live remain unacknowledged.

Toward a Phenomenological Feminism

In his incomplete and posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre for maintaining the subject-object distinction in his description of sexuality and bodily existence. In the place of a social ontology of the look, Merleau-Ponty suggests an ontology of the tactile, a description of sensual life which would emphasize the interworld, that shared domain of the flesh which resists categorization in terms of subjects and objects. It may well be that by the time Merleau-Ponty undertook that study at the end of his life, he had achieved philosophical distance from the sexual Cartesianism of his phenomenological colleagues, and that the reification of voyeurism and objectification that we have witnessed would no longer conform to that later theory. At the time of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, however, Merleau-Ponty accepts the distinction in a limited but consequential way. As a result, he accepts the dialectic of master and slave as an invariant dynamic of sexual life. Both 'subject' and 'object' are less givens of lived experience than metaphysical constructs

that inform and obfuscate the theoretical 'look' that constitutes sexuality as a theoretical object. Indeed, the greatest obfuscation consists in the claim that this constructed theoretical vocabulary renders lived experience transparent.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the 'subject' is additionally problematic in virtue of its abstract and anonymous status, as if the subject described were a universal subject or structured existing subjects universally. Devoid of a gender, this subject is presumed to characterize all genders. On the one hand, this presumption devalues gender as a relevant category in the description of lived bodily experience. On the other hand, inasmuch as the subject described resembles a culturally constructed male subject, it consecrates masculine identity as the model for the human subject, thereby devaluing, not gender, but women.

Merleau-Ponty's explicit avoidance of gender as a relevant concern in the description of lived experience, and his implicit universalization of the male subject, are aided by a methodology that fails to acknowledge the historicity of sexuality and of bodies. For a concrete description of lived experience, it seems crucial to ask *whose* sexuality and *whose* bodies are being described, for 'sexuality' and 'bodies' remain abstractions without first being situated in concrete social and cultural contexts. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's willingness to describe a 'natural sexuality' as a lived experience suggests a lamentable naiveté concerning the anthropological diversity of sexual expressions and the linguistic and psychosomatic origins of human sexuality. In the end, his version of 'lived experience' commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, giving life to abstractions, and draining life from existing individuals in concrete contexts. What is the historical genesis of the 'subject' that Merleau-Ponty accepts as an a priori feature of any description of sexuality? Does this 'subject' not denote a given history of sexual relations which have produced this disembodied voyeur and his machinations of enslavement? What social context and specific history have given birth to this idea and its embodiment?

Merleau-Ponty's original intention to describe the body as an expressive and dramatic medium, the specifically corporeal locus of existential themes, becomes beleaguered by a conception of 'existence' which prioritizes hypothetical natural and metaphysical structures over concrete historical and cultural realities. A feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty necessarily involves a deconstruction of these obfuscating and reifying structures to their concrete cultural origins, and an analysis of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's text legitimates and universalizes structures of sexual oppression. On the other hand, a feminist appropriation of Merleau-Ponty is doubtless in order. If the body expresses and dramatizes existential themes, and these themes are gender-specific and fully historicized, then sexuality becomes

a scene of cultural struggle, improvisation, and innovation, a domain in which the intimate and the political converge, and a dramatic opportunity for expression, analysis, and change. The terms of this inquiry, however, will not be found in the texts of Merleau-Ponty, but in the works of philosophical feminism to come.

NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 170.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952), 38.
3. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.
4. *Ibid.*, 158.
5. Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitude," *General Psychological Theory*, Philip Rieff, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 84-90; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (London: William Brown, 1950), 43, 44, 55-57; *Civilization and its Discontents*, Philip Rieff, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1961).
6. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962). See pages 13-14, "we have been in the habit of regarding the connection between the sexual instinct and the sexual object as more intimate than it in fact is. Experience of the cases that are considered abnormal has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object are soldered together—a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to be part and parcel of the instinct." Not only is the instinct ontologically independent of the object, but it follows a development toward a reproductive telos whereby "the sexual object recedes into the background" (p. 15). The normal development of this 'instinct' dictates active sexual behavior for the male, and passive sexual behavior for the female (p. 26) with the consequence that the reversal of roles signifies an abnormal sexuality, i.e., one which has not developed according to the proper internal teleology. Sexuality which is not restricted to the erotogenic zones characterizes "obsessional neurosis" (p. 35). The perversions thus characterize underdeveloped stages of instinctual development, and are in that sense 'normal' inasmuch as these stages must be lived through. For Freud, however, they come to represent abnormalities when they are not relinquished in favor of heterosexual coitus. This link between normal sexuality and reproduction is recast in his theory of Eros in *Civilization and its Discontents*.
7. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 34.
8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 169.
9. *Ibid.*, 165.
10. *Ibid.*, 171.
11. *Ibid.*, 172.
12. *Ibid.*, 173.
13. *Ibid.*, 160.
14. *Ibid.*, 156.
15. *Ibid.*, 155.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 167.
18. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published work,

his discussion of sexuality focuses on tactile experience and marks a significant departure from the visual economy of the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

19. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 156.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 165.

22. Ibid., 166.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 167.

25. Ibid.

THE LOOK IN SARTRE AND RICH

Julien S. Murphy

Crucial to feminist theory is an understanding of the oppression we experience as women in patriarchal society. The category "woman," which dooms us to sexist oppression, is a category which none of us can entirely escape. "Woman" is also a category that none of us can deny if we are to understand our lives in patriarchy. We make even the most liberating of choices in the midst of sexist constraint. No matter how we shape ourselves, we live in a society in which we are seen by others as women.

The oppression we experience is so ever present that any feminist theory needs clear and concrete insights into its structure. As feminist philosophers, moreover, we are immersed in oppression even as we theorize about it. A phenomenological approach to the nature of sexist oppression can reveal the lived situation by which the oppression of women is maintained through daily acts that manifest an oppressive kind of seeing. Enlightening views on the experience of oppression can be found in the phenomenological work, *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre, especially Sartre's theory of "the look." Although Sartre does not address sexist oppression and has only the barest sketch of a theory of liberation, his theory of "the look" is integral to a feminist phenomenological analysis of oppression and liberation. Without intending to, Sartre has provided us with a particularly useful description of women's experience of devaluation in a world where men are dominant. I will show the relevance of Sartre's theory of "the look" for feminist philosophy by juxtaposing his analysis with images of women's oppression in the early work of a feminist poet—Adrienne Rich—tracking the development of women's consciousness through a phenomenological style. By moving through the Sartrian look and beyond to images of liberating vision among women in Rich's recent works, *The Dream of a Common Language*, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, and *Your Native Land*, *Your Life*, we can develop an incisive analysis of the movement out

