

UNDOING GENDER
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Introduction: Acting in Concert

The essays included here represent some of my most recent work on gender and sexuality focusing on the question of what it might mean to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life. Equally, however, the essays are about the experience of *becoming undone* in both good and bad ways. Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim.

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself).

Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender

itself and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire. What does gender want? To speak in this way may seem strange, but it becomes less so when we realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms.

The Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings. That view has its allure and its truth, but it also misses a couple of important points. The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human. These norms have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the model of the human entitled to rights or included in the participatory sphere of political deliberation. The human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity. Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life. If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not.

If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the "human" expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life,

and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence?

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction. Indeed, the capacity to develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from them, an ability to suspend or defer the need for them, even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live. The critical relation depends as well on a capacity, invariably collective, to articulate an alternative, minority version of sustaining norms or ideals that enable me to act. If I am someone who cannot *be* without *doing*, then the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence. If my doing is dependent on what is done to me or, rather, the ways in which I am done by norms, then the possibility of my persistence as an "I" depends upon my being able to do something with what is done with me. This does not mean that I can remake the world so that I become its maker. That fantasy of godlike power only refuses the ways we are constituted, invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside of us. My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility.

As a result, the "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the "I" becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this "I" fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place

in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.

The essays in this text are efforts to relate the problematics of gender and sexuality to the tasks of persistence and survival. My own thinking has been influenced by the “New Gender Politics” that has emerged in recent years, a combination of movements concerned with transgender, transsexuality, intersex, and their complex relations to feminist and queer theory.¹ I believe, however, that it would be a mistake to subscribe to a progressive notion of history in which various frameworks are understood to succeed and supplant one another. There is no story to be told about how one moves from feminist to queer to trans. The reason there is no story to be told is that none of these stories are the past; these stories are continuing to happen in simultaneous and overlapping ways as we tell them. They happen, in part, through the complex ways they are taken up by each of these movements and theoretical practices.

Consider the intersex opposition to the widespread practice of performing coercive surgery on infants and children with sexually indeterminate or hermaphroditic anatomy in the name of normalizing these bodies. This movement offers a critical perspective on the version of the “human” that requires ideal morphologies and the constraining of bodily norms. The intersex community’s resistance to coercive surgery moreover calls for an understanding that infants with intersexed conditions are part of the continuum of human morphology and ought to be treated with the presumption that their lives are and will be not only livable, but also occasions for flourishing. The norms that govern idealized human anatomy thus work to produce a differential sense of who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, and which are not. This differential works for a wide range of disabilities as well (although another norm is at work for invisible disabilities).

A concurrent operation of gender norms can be seen in the *DSM IV*’s Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis. This diagnosis that has, for the

most part, taken over the role of monitoring signs of incipient homosexuality in children assumes that “gender dysphoria” is a psychological disorder simply because someone of a given gender manifests attributes of another gender or a desire to live as another gender. This imposes a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived. The diagnosis, however, is crucial for many individuals who seek insurance support for sex reassignment surgery or treatment, or who seek a legal change in status. As a result, the diagnostic means by which transsexuality is attributed implies a pathologization, but undergoing that pathologizing process constitutes one of the important ways in which the desire to change one’s sex might be satisfied. The critical question thus becomes, how might the world be reorganized so that this conflict can be ameliorated?

The recent efforts to promote lesbian and gay marriage also promote a norm that threatens to render illegitimate and abject those sexual arrangements that do not comply with the marriage norm in either its existing or its revisable form. At the same time, the homophobic objections to lesbian and gay marriage expand out through the culture to affect all queer lives. One critical question thus becomes, how does one oppose the homophobia without embracing the marriage norm as the exclusive or most highly valued social arrangement for queer sexual lives? Similarly, efforts to establish bonds of kinship that are not based on a marriage tie become nearly illegible and unviable when marriage sets the terms for kinship, and kinship itself is collapsed into “family.” The enduring social ties that constitute viable kinship in communities of sexual minorities are threatened with becoming unrecognizable and unviable as long as the marriage bond is the exclusive way in which both sexuality and kinship are organized. A critical relation to this norm involves disarticulating those rights and obligations currently attendant upon marriage so that marriage might remain a symbolic exercise for those who choose to engage in it, but the rights and obligations of kinship may take any number of other forms. What reorganization of sexual norms would be necessary for those who live sexually and affectively outside the marriage bond or in kin relations to the side of marriage either to be legally and culturally recognized for the endurance and importance of their intimate ties or, equally important, to be free of the need for recognition of this kind?

If a decade or two ago, gender discrimination applied tacitly to women, that no longer serves as the exclusive framework for understanding its contemporary usage. Discrimination against women continues—especially poor women and women of color, if we consider the differential levels of poverty and literacy not only in the United States, but globally—so this dimension of gender discrimination remains crucial to acknowledge. But gender now also means gender identity, a particularly salient issue in the politics and theory of transgenderism and transsexuality. Transgender refers to those persons who cross-identify or who live as another gender, but who may or may not have undergone hormonal treatments or sex reassignment operations. Among transsexuals and transgendered persons, there are those who identify as men (if female to male) or women (if male to female), and yet others who, with or without surgery, with or without hormones, identify as *trans*, as transmen or transwomen; each of these social practices carries distinct social burdens and promises.

Colloquially, “transgender” can apply to the entire range of these positions as well. Transgendered and transsexual people are subjected to pathologization and violence that is, once again, heightened in the case of trans persons from communities of color. The harassment suffered by those who are “read” as trans or discovered to be trans cannot be underestimated. They are part of a continuum of the gender violence that took the lives of Brandon Teena, Mathew Shephard, and Gwen Araujo.² And these acts of murder must be understood in connection with the coercive acts of “correction” undergone by intersexed infants and children that often leave those bodies maimed for life, traumatized, and physically limited in their sexual functions and pleasures.

Although intersex and transsex sometimes seem to be movements at odds with one another, the first opposing unwanted surgery, the second sometimes calling for elective surgery, it is most important to see that both challenge the principle that a natural dimorphism should be established or maintained at all costs. Intersex activists work to rectify the erroneous assumption that every body has an inborn “truth” of sex that medical professionals can discern and bring to light on their own. To the extent that the intersex movement maintains that gender ought to be established through assignment or choice, but noncoercively, it shares a premise with transgendered and transsexual activism. The latter opposes forms of unwanted coercive gender assignment, and

in this sense calls for greater claims of autonomy, a situation that parallels intersex claims as well. What precisely autonomy means, however, is complicated for both movements, since it turns out that choosing one’s own body invariably means navigating among norms that are laid out in advance and prior to one’s choice or are being articulated in concert by other minority agencies. Indeed, individuals rely on institutions of social support in order to exercise self-determination with respect to what body and what gender to have and maintain, so that self-determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency. Conversely (and as a consequence), it turns out that changing the institutions by which humanly viable choice is established and maintained is a prerequisite for the exercise of self-determination. In this sense, individual agency is bound up with social critique and social transformation. One only determines “one’s own” sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this “outside” to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself.

One tension that arises between queer theory and both intersex and transsexual activism centers on the question of sex assignment and the desirability of identity categories. If queer theory is understood, by definition, to oppose all identity claims, including stable sex assignment, then the tension seems strong indeed. But I would suggest that more important than any presupposition about the plasticity of identity or indeed its retrograde status is queer theory’s claim to be opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity. After all, queer theory and activism acquired political salience by insisting that antihomophobic activism can be engaged in by anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, and that identity markers are not prerequisites for political participation. In the same way that queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization. It does not follow, therefore, that queer theory would oppose all gender assignment or cast doubt on the desires of those who wish to secure such assignments for intersex children, for instance, who

may well need them to function socially even if they end up changing the assignment later in life, knowing the risks. The perfectly reasonable assumption here is that children do not need to take on the burden of being heroes for a movement without first assenting to such a role. In this sense, categorization has its place and cannot be reduced to forms of anatomical essentialism.

Similarly, the transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories. As Kate Bornstein points out, it can be a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity.³ But even if there are, in each of these cases, desires for stable identity at work, it seems crucial to realize that a livable life does require various degrees of stability. In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option.

The task of all of these movements seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group, and another way for another group. What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some. The differences in position and desire set the limits to universalizability as an ethical reflex. The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death.

None of these movements is, in my view, postfeminist. They have all found important conceptual and political resources in feminism, and feminism continues to pose challenges to these movements and to function as an important ally. And just as it no longer works to consider "gender discrimination" as a code for discrimination against women, it would be equally unacceptable to propound a view of gender discrimination that did not take into account the differential ways in which women suffer from poverty and illiteracy, from employment

discrimination, from a gendered division of labor within a global frame, and from violence, sexual and otherwise. The feminist framework that takes the structural domination of women as the starting point from which all other analyses of gender must proceed imperils its own viability by refusing to countenance the various ways that gender emerges as a political issue, bearing a specific set of social and physical risks. It is crucial to understand the workings of gender in global contexts, in transnational formations, not only to see what problems are posed for the term "gender" but to combat false forms of universalism that service a tacit or explicit cultural imperialism. That feminism has always countered violence against women, sexual and nonsexual, ought to serve as a basis for alliance with these other movements, since phobic violence against bodies is part of what joins antihomophobic, antiracist, feminist, trans, and intersex activism.

Although some feminists have worried in public that the trans movement constitutes an effort to displace or appropriate sexual difference, I think that this is only one version of feminism, one that is contested by views that take gender as an historical category, that the framework for understanding how it works is multiple and shifts through time and place. The view that transsexuals seek to escape the social condition of femininity because that condition is considered debased or lacks privileges accorded to men assumes that female-to-male (FTM) transsexuality can be definitively explained through recourse to that one framework for understanding femininity and masculinity. It tends to forget that the risks of discrimination, loss of employment, public harassment, and violence are heightened for those who live openly as transgendered persons. The view that the desire to become a man or a transman or to live transgendered is motivated by a repudiation of femininity presumes that every person born with female anatomy is therefore in possession of a proper femininity (whether innate, symbolically assumed, or socially assigned), one that can either be owned or disowned, appropriated or expropriated. Indeed, the critique of male-to-female (MTF) transsexuality has centered on the "appropriation" of femininity, as if it belongs properly to a given sex, as if sex is discretely given, as if gender identity could and should be derived unequivocally from presumed anatomy. To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open

to a continual remaking, and that “anatomy” and “sex” are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown). The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself. Terms such as “masculine” and “feminine” are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose. That the terms recur is interesting enough, but the recurrence does not index a sameness, but rather the way in which the social articulation of the term depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender. Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade.

The concept of gender as historical and performative, however, stands in tension with some versions of sexual difference, and some of the essays included here try to broach that divide within feminist theory. The view that sexual difference is a primary difference has come under criticism from several quarters. There are those who rightly argue that sexual difference is no more primary than racial or ethnic difference and that one cannot apprehend sexual difference outside of the racial and ethnic frames by which it is articulated. Those who claim that being produced by a mother and a father is crucial to all humans may well have a point. But are sperm donors or one-night stands, or indeed, rapists, really “fathers” in a social sense? Even if in some sense or under certain circumstances they are, do they not put the category into crisis for those who would assume that children without discernible fathers at their origin are subject to psychosis? If a sperm and egg are necessary for reproduction (and remain so)—and in that sense sexual difference is an essential part of any account a human may come up with about his or her origin—does it follow that this difference shapes the individual more profoundly than other constituting social forces, such as the economic or racial conditions by which one comes into being, the conditions of one’s adoption, the sojourn at the orphanage? Is there very much that follows from the fact of an originating sexual difference?

Feminist work on reproductive technology has generated a host of ethical and political perspectives that have not only galvanized feminist

studies but have made clear the implications for thinking about gender in relation to biotechnology, global politics, and the status of the human and life itself. Feminists who criticize technologies for effectively replacing the maternal body with a patriarchal apparatus must nevertheless contend with the enhanced autonomy that those technologies have provided for women. Feminists who embrace such technologies for the options they have produced nevertheless must come to terms with the uses to which those technologies can be put, ones that may well involve calculating the perfectibility of the human, sex selection, and racial selection. Those feminists who oppose technological innovations because they threaten to efface the primacy of sexual difference risk naturalizing heterosexual reproduction. The doctrine of sexual difference in this case comes to be in tension with antihomophobic struggles as well as with the intersex movement and the transgender movement’s interest in securing rights to technologies that facilitate sex reassignment.

In each of these struggles, we see that technology is a site of power in which the human is produced and reproduced—not just the humanness of the child but also the humanness of those who bear and those who raise children, parents and nonparents alike. Gender likewise figures as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity. If there is important coalitional thinking to be done across these various movements, all of which comprise the New Gender Politics, it will doubtless have to do with presumptions about bodily dimorphism, the uses and abuses of technology, and the contested status of the human, and of life itself. If sexual difference is that which ought to be protected from effacement from a technology understood as phallogentric in its aims, then how do we distinguish between sexual difference and normative forms of dimorphism against which intersex and transgendered activists struggle on a daily basis? If technology is a resource to which some people want access, it is also an imposition from which others seek to be freed. Whether technology is imposed or elected is salient for intersex activists. If some trans people argue that their very sense of personhood depends upon having access to technology to secure certain bodily changes, some feminists argue that technology threatens to take over the business of making persons, running the risk that the human will become nothing other than a technological effect.

Similarly, the call for a greater recognition of bodily difference made by both disability movements and intersex activism invariably calls for a renewal of the value of life. Of course, "life" has been taken up by right-wing movements to limit reproductive freedoms for women, so the demand to establish more inclusive conditions for valuing life and producing the conditions for viable life can resonate with unwanted conservative demands to limit the autonomy of women to exercise the right to an abortion. But here it seems important not to cede the term "life" to a right-wing agenda, since it will turn out that there are within these debates questions about when human life begins and what constitutes "life" in its viability. The point is emphatically not to extend the "right to life" to any and all people who want to make this claim on behalf of mute embryos, but rather to understand how the "viability" of a woman's life depends upon an exercise of bodily autonomy and on social conditions that enable that autonomy. Moreover, as in the case with those seeking to overcome the pathologizing effects of a gender identity disorder diagnosis, we are referring to forms of autonomy that require social (and legal) support and protection, and that exercise a transformation on the norms that govern how agency itself is differentially allocated among genders; thus, a women's right to choose remains, in some contexts, a misnomer.

Critiques of anthropocentrism have made clear that when we speak about human life we are indexing a being who is at once human and living, and that the range of living beings exceeds the human. In a way, the term "human life" designates an unwieldy combination, since "human" does not simply qualify "life," but "life" relates human to what is nonhuman and living, establishing the human in the midst of this relationality. For the human to be human, it must relate to what is nonhuman, to what is outside itself but continuous with itself by virtue of an interimplication in life. This relation to what is not itself constitutes the human being in its livingness, so that the human exceeds its boundary in the very effort to establish them. To make the claim, "I am an animal," avows in a distinctively human language that the human is not distinct. This paradox makes it imperative to separate the question of a livable life from the status of a human life, since livability pertains to living beings that exceed the human. In addition, we would be foolish to think that life is fully possible without a dependence on technology, which suggests that the human, in its

animality, is dependent on technology, to live. In this sense, we are thinking within the frame of the cyborg as we call into question the status of the human and that of the livable life.

The rethinking of the human in these terms does not entail a return to humanism. When Frantz Fanon claimed that "the black is not a man," he conducted a critique of humanism that showed that the human in its contemporary articulation is so fully racialized that no black man could qualify as human.⁴ In his usage, the formulation was also a critique of masculinity, implying that the black man is effeminized. And the implication of that formulation would be that no one who is not a "man" in the masculine sense is a human, suggesting that both masculinity and racial privilege shore up the notion of the human. His formulation has been extended by contemporary scholars, including the literary critic Sylvia Wynter, to pertain to women of color as well and to call into question the racist frameworks within which the category of the human has been articulated.⁵ These formulations show the power differentials embedded in the construction of the category of the "human" and, at the same time, insist upon the historicity of the term, the fact that the "human" has been crafted and consolidated over time.

The category of the "human" retains within itself the workings of the power differential of race as part of its own historicity. But the history of the category is not over, and the "human" is not captured once and for all. That the category is crafted in time, and that it works through excluding a wide range of minorities means that its rearticulation will begin precisely at the point where the excluded speak to and from such a category. If Fanon writes that "a black is not a man," who writes when Fanon writes? That we can ask the "who" means that the human has exceeded its categorical definition, and that he is in and through the utterance opening up the category to a different future. If there are norms of recognition by which the "human" is constituted, and these norms encode operations of power, then it follows that the contest over the future of the "human" will be a contest over the power that works in and through such norms. That power emerges in language in a restrictive way or, indeed, in other modes of articulation as that which tries to stop the articulation as it nevertheless moves forward. That double movement is found in the utterance, the image, the action that articulates the struggle with the norm. Those deemed illegible,

unrecognizable, or impossible nevertheless speak in the terms of the "human," opening the term to a history not fully constrained by the existing differentials of power.

These questions form in part an agenda for the future that one hopes will bring a host of scholars and activists together to craft wide-ranging frameworks within which to broach these urgent and complex issues. These issues are clearly related to changes in kinship structure, debates on gay marriage, conditions for adoption, and access to reproductive technology. Part of rethinking where and how the human comes into being will involve a rethinking of both the social and psychic landscapes of an infant's emergence. Changes at the level of kinship similarly demand a reconsideration of the social conditions under which humans are born and reared, opening up new territory for social and psychological analysis as well as the sites of their convergence.

Psychoanalysis has sometimes been used to shore up the notion of a primary sexual difference that forms the core of an individual's psychic life. But there it would seem that sexual difference gains its salience only through assuming that sperm and egg imply heterosexual parental coitus, and then a number of other psychic realities, such as the primal scene and oedipal scenario. But if the egg or sperm comes from elsewhere, and is not attached to a person called "parent," or if the parents who are making love are not heterosexual or not reproductive, then it would seem that a new psychic topography is required. Of course, it is possible to presume, as many French psychoanalysts have done, that reproduction follows universally from heterosexual parental coitus, and that this fact provides a psychic condition for the human subject. This view proceeds to condemn forms of nonheterosexual unions, reproductive technology, and parenting outside of nuclear heterosexual marriage as damaging for the child, threatening to culture, destructive of the human. But this recruitment of psychoanalytic vocabularies for the purpose of preserving the paternal line, the transmission of national cultures, and heterosexual marriage is only one use of psychoanalysis, and not a particularly productive or necessary one.

It is important to remember that psychoanalysis can also serve as a critique of cultural adaptation as well as a theory for understanding the ways in which sexuality fails to conform to the social norms by which it is regulated. Moreover, there is no better theory for grasping

the workings of fantasy construed not as a set of projections on an internal screen but as part of human relationality itself. It is on the basis of this insight that we can come to understand how fantasy is essential to an experience of one's own body, or that of another, as gendered. Finally, psychoanalysis can work in the service of a conception of humans as bearing an irreversible humility in their relations to others and to themselves. There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability. We are, to an extent, driven by what we do not know, and cannot know, and this "drive" (*Trieb*) is precisely what is neither exclusively biological nor cultural, but always the site of their dense convergence.⁶ If I am always constituted by norms that are not of my making, then I have to understand the ways that constitution takes place. The staging and structuring of affect and desire is clearly one way in which norms work their way into what feels most properly to belong to me. The fact that I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself follows from the fact that the sociality of norms exceeds my inception and my demise, sustaining a temporal and spatial field of operation that exceeds my self-understanding. Norms do not exercise a final or fatalistic control, at least, not always. The fact that desire is not fully determined corresponds with the psychoanalytic understanding that sexuality is never fully captured by any regulation. Rather, it is characterized by displacement, it can exceed regulation, take on new forms in response to regulation, even turn around and make it sexy. In this sense, sexuality is never fully reducible to the "effect" of this or that operation of regulatory power. This is not the same as saying that sexuality is, by nature, free and wild. On the contrary, it emerges precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints. Sexuality, though, is not found to be "in" those constraints as something might be "in" a container: it is extinguished by constraints, but also mobilized and incited by constraints, even sometimes requiring them to be produced again and again.

It would follow, then, that to a certain extent sexuality establishes us as outside of ourselves; we are motivated by an elsewhere whose full meaning and purpose we cannot definitively establish.⁷ This is only because sexuality is one way cultural meanings are carried, through both the operation of norms and the peripheral modes of their undoing.

Sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you “are” determines what kind of sexuality you will “have.” We try to speak in ordinary ways about these matters, stating our gender, disclosing our sexuality, but we are, quite inadvertently, caught up in ontological thicket and epistemological quandaries. Am I a gender after all? And do I “have” a sexuality?

Or does it turn out that the “I” who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality I do not fully author? If that is so, then gender undoes the “I” who is supposed to be or bear its gender, and that undoing is part of the very meaning and comprehensibility of that “I.” If I claim to “have” a sexuality, then it would seem that a sexuality is there for me to call my own, to possess as an attribute. But what if sexuality is the means by which I am dispossessed? What if it is invested and animated from elsewhere even as it is precisely mine? Does it not follow, then, that the “I” who would “have” its sexuality is undone by the sexuality it claims to have, and that its very “claim” can no longer be made exclusively in its own name? If I am claimed by others when I make my claim, if gender is for and from another before it becomes my own, if sexuality entails a certain dispossession of the “I,” this does not spell the end to my political claims. It only means that when one makes those claims, one makes them for much more than oneself.

1. Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy

What makes for a livable world is no idle question. It is not merely a question for philosophers. It is posed in various idioms all the time by people in various walks of life. If that makes them all philosophers, then that is a conclusion I am happy to embrace. It becomes a question for ethics, I think, not only when we ask the personal question, what makes my own life bearable, but when we ask, from a position of power, and from the point of view of distributive justice, what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable? Somewhere in the answer we find ourselves not only committed to a certain view of what life is, and what it should be, but also of what constitutes the human, the distinctively human life, and what does not. There is always a risk of anthropocentrism here if one assumes that the distinctively human life is valuable—or most valuable—or is the only way to think the problem of value. But perhaps to counter that tendency it is necessary to ask both the question of life and the question of the human, and not to let them fully collapse into one another.

I would like to start, and to end, with the question of the human, of who counts as the human, and the related question of whose lives count as lives, and with a question that has preoccupied many of us for