

## Chapter 7

### Sexual Differing

Feminist historiography writes histories of feminist thought as well as providing a specific definition of feminism. As such, “feminism” is not only reflected upon by feminist historiographers; feminism is also *created* in feminist historiography. We already saw how in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Joan Wallach Scott (1996, 3–4; original emphasis) specifies how “sexual difference,” in turn, structures and is structured by feminism:

Feminism was a protest against women’s political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate “sexual difference” in politics, but it had to make its claim on behalf of “women” (who were discursively produced through “sexual difference”). To the extent that it acted for “women,” feminism produced the “sexual difference” it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept *and* to refuse “sexual difference”—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history.

Sexual difference, then, serves two purposes at the same time, which (as Olympe de Gouges already remarked) is the cause of a sense of paradox: on the one hand, “exclusion was legitimated by reference to the different biologies of women and men,” whereas on the other hand, “‘sexual difference’ was established not only as a natural fact, but also as an ontological basis for social and political differentiation.” (ibid., 3) This

diagnosis implies a diversified and unusual ontology of sexual difference, an ontology not made explicit in the major historiographical tradition in gender studies. Its major tradition all too often involves the need to choose between (biological) essentialism and social constructivism as well as a *critique* of patriarchal politics, which does not allow feminism or gender studies to move beyond a merely reactionary stance. As we will show below, a critical stance re-affirms what is critiqued. A *radical* feminism does not allow itself to exist as encapsulated by the political mainstream. When feminism is constructed as *inherently* paradoxical, however, one's ontological condition as a woman/female feminist is not seen as predetermined by either biology or social construction (whether this is a strategic essentialism or a diversification of the category of "women"). Rather, (biological) essentialism and social constructivism are two discourses that feminism traverses, which implies a performative understanding of ontology. In other words, the category of woman materializes through the traversing of non-feminist and feminist discourses that make sexual differentiations. Here, feminism's opposition to biological determinism, translating into a social constructivism as of the dominant Anglo-American reception of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*, is shifted by allowing for "natural facts" or "sex" to have a place on the conceptual map, the leaving behind of biological *predetermination* notwithstanding. Such mappings of relations between the sexes do not seem to allow for nature and culture to be disentangled. An ontology that we have specified as "performative" implies diverting from the major tradition in feminist historiography (a tradition predicated on dualism structured by negation) and "reading for the historically specific paradoxes that feminist subjects embody, enact, and expose" (*ibid.*, 16).

Unconfined by the parameters of the dominant feminist historiography, Scott's analysis can be specified as an instantiation of Jean-François Lyotard's "rewriting modernity." Commenting on a teleological conception of the history of Marxism, Lyotard ([1988] 1991, 28) writes that whereas Karl Marx seems to have thought that by revealing the hidden source of "the unhappiness of modernity" humanity could reach full emancipation, the history of Marxism in fact shows nothing but the need for "opening the same wound again. The localization and diagnosis may change, but the

same illness re-emerges in this rewriting.” “[C]losure or resolution” (Scott 1996, 17) is not to be found on the horizon of (the history of) Marxism and feminism; all we find is a perpetual offering of historically specific paradoxes. These paradoxes, in the context of feminism, concern the false opposition between biological essentialism and social constructivism, a problem inherent to “the dualist logic of modernity” (Lyon 1999, 169). The double bind of biological essentialism and social constructivism shows how “biology” and ontology feature prominently in the history and historiography of feminism, or: have been dominating its discourses for a very long time. *Traversing* the poles of this dualism constitutes a minor tradition in feminist historiography that allows feminism to move beyond the intrinsically dualistic and reactionary stance we identified above. This tradition is minor, in the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1980] 1987, 105), when it is “different from that of the constant [...] by nature and regardless of number, in other words, a subsystem or an outsystem.” A minor tradition never gets stuck as it always finds itself, like Scott’s paradoxes, in creative movement (ibid.: 105–6). Exemplifications of this minor tradition in feminist historiography which work along these lines can be found in the so-called “French feminism” from the 1980s (think of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and especially Luce Irigaray) and in today’s new materialist writing as we see it at work in, for instance, Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz.<sup>1</sup> This chapter seeks to hook onto this minor tradition, and to re-read the work of de Beauvoir along the lines that it sets out. This chapter, by presenting a new materialist case study on sexual difference, zooms in on the way in which new materialism, by way of its traversing of dualisms, is always already a feminism that is not identity political.

According to Grosz, the majority of feminist theories, or feminist historiographies, which are theories of the history of feminism, are teleological. As Grosz (2005, 162) claims:

The future of feminism, on this understanding, is limited to the foreseeable and to contesting the recognized and the known. This limited temporality characterizes all feminist projects of equalization and inclusion as well as a number of projects within postmodern feminism.

The sense of paradox experienced by feminists is understood as a consequence of the teleological dialectics structuring the relation between the two feminist waves, and between feminism and patriarchy. An alternative position involves a historically specific, or *an-teleological* take on the history of feminism in which feminist subjectivity is seen as materializing, that is, in which the ontology of sexual difference is strictly performative. Whereas Scott is still in the process of opening up feminism to this new ontology by critiquing the major tradition in the historiography of feminist thought, Grosz seems to map a radically new materialism that has structural links to French feminism. Grosz indeed starts from "Irigaray, whose work on sexual difference has signaled the indeterminate, and possible indeterminable, necessity of feminist thought, a necessity which parallels or, in her terms, is isomorphic with, that of sexual difference, one of the incontestable and most inventive forms of biological and cultural existence" (ibid., 163). For Irigaray, feminism consists of the wish to restructure the relations through which the sexes are created as well as of the traversing of prevailing sexual differentiations on the personal, social, and symbolic level. These traversings, in addition, are always already at work in the practice of making sexual differentiations. Feminism as a restructuring and traversing exercise is in no way a dialectic, since all dialectics are prevented from affirming "the development of modes of action, thought, and language appropriate to and developed by both of the sexes" (ibid., 164). William James' radical empiricism already noted that any kind of position is necessarily preceded by a relationality thanks to which a position can be established. Along the same lines, while speaking about how gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their own realities, Brian Massumi (2002, 8) argues: "Passage precedes construction. But construction does effectively back-form its reality. Grids happen. So social and cultural determinations feed back into the process from which they arose. [...] To say that passage and indeterminacy 'come first' or 'are primary' is more a statement of ontological priority than the assertion of a time sequence."

Affirming such a development of traversing can engender what Irigaray calls a "revolution in thought," which does not imply "the overthrow of all previous thought, the radical disconnection from the concepts and language of the past," that is, a critique with reactionary consequences,

but rather “a certain kind of insinuation of sexual difference back into those places where it has been elided, the insistence on the necessity that every practice, method, and knowledge can be undertaken in another way” (Grosz 2005, 165). Feminism is now seen as a “practical philosophy” that focuses on “the singular point where concept and creation are related to each other” (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 11). The outcomes of such a practical philosophy remain unforeseen, because “[w]hat today is actual is sexual opposition or binarism, the defining of the two sexes in terms of the characteristics of one. Sexual difference is that which is virtual; it is the potential of this opposition to function otherwise, to function without negation, to function as full positivity” (Grosz 2005, 164). The practical philosophy it puts forward, then, is structured by a “performative understanding, which shifts the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices” (Barad 2003, 807).

In this chapter, we try to further the development of sexual difference as a performative ontology. We call this “sexual differing”: an allowance for sexual difference actually to *differ*. It involves a rewriting of sexual difference and sexuality not by means of dualist premises, but as a practical philosophy in which difference *in itself* comes to being. In a manner similar to how other important fields in contemporary cultural theory, circling around concepts like “race”/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and most recently age or generationality, are slowly crashing against the limits of critique, feminism too seems to get stuck within its emphasis on sexual difference as a social construction (gender) opposite to a biological essence (sex). Surrounded by a so-called post-feminist popular and academic imagery, gender studies scholars today find themselves paralyzed by the “paradoxes” that their pasts have offered on the basis of teleology, and dualism structured by negation. Earlier we argued for writing the modernist oppositions as a form of continuously rewriting them, and we can now add that there is no reason why feminism or gender studies should place themselves beyond or outside the dualist paradigms in which they have been circling for so long. Instead, the aim we set for ourselves is to find out in what way we are to develop a *different* feminism that sets itself to a radical and continuous rewriting of this opposition, postponing the epistemological finitude (to use Meillassoux’s term) that it suggests. The feminism to come then works with sexual

difference not as a paradox that needs to be solved, but rather as a virtuality, or as a discursive practice of sexual differing. Thus we set ourselves here to finding traces of sexual differing that can rewrite feminist theory, experimenting with the minor statements in the work of contemporary feminists, feminists of the past, and scholars who came from elsewhere but are equally engaged in the production of a performative ontology of sexual difference (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, but also Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad). For feminism to be indeterminate (infinite), not to be formed around *critique*, it has to allow for the provocation that practical philosophy offers sexual difference. This entails the affirmation of the fact that feminism *materializes* sexual difference described as paradoxical, and that feminism has to be understood precisely *as such*.

Despite the fact that the major tradition in feminist historiography features her work differently, we aim to show that the conclusion to *The Second Sex* neatly mirrors the Irigarayan undecidability affirmed by Grosz. We justify this claim by following Sara Heinämaa (1997, 33–4, n. 4) who has suggested that “we should reject the sex/gender distinction and Sartre’s existentialism [which is also based on dualism structured by negation] as keys to de Beauvoir’s texts” without, however, fully affirming Heinämaa’s subsumption of the work under a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology instead.<sup>2</sup> Following a full description of sexual difference, de Beauvoir ([1949] 2010, 765) states that “new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive will be born between the sexes.” In other words, she finds that the asymmetries between the sexes are traversed while installed and maintained in patriarchy. Read as a practical philosophy, thus restructuring and traversing the gendered dualist logic of modernity, *The Second Sex* opens the way for the indeterminacy of sexual differing; right after the previous quote de Beauvoir claims that she “do[es] not see [...] that freedom has ever created uniformity” (ibid., 765). We will demonstrate in this chapter that opening up the dominant historiography of feminism by re-reading de Beauvoir has the potential to break through the multiple paralyzes experienced by contemporary feminists. Along with that, the re-reading can offer us a way out of dualist thought per se that might be equally important to other minor streams of culture, that is, to those interested in searching for a meaningful alternative to how the concepts of

“race”/ethnicity, class, sexuality and age have been equally paralyzed by this “binary” take on dualism. Rewriting feminist historiography thus builds up to a materialist rewriting of academia as a whole.

### Neither Sex Nor Gender But Sexual Difference

The received view on de Beauvoir<sup>3</sup> is laid out in Judith Butler’s “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” which is a philosophical meditation on de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 283). Butler (1986, 35) explains how de Beauvoir has disconnected sex and gender thus allowing for “a radical heteronomy of natural bodies and constructed genders with the consequence that ‘being’ female and ‘being’ a woman are two very different sorts of being.” “Gender,” then, “must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form. In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities” (ibid., 36). This passage is important for its two implications that obviously structure Butler’s own later work on the concept of gender (cf. Sönser Breen and Blütenfeld 2005).

First, Butler does not qualitatively shift ontology’s assumed fixed status. In gender theory, natural bodies are implicitly ascribed to, albeit that the traditional assumption that sex defines gender is reversed. When gender defines sex, sex or bodily matter, however malleable, is still assumed to be passive. Butler (1986, 35) argues that “the female body is the arbitrary locus of the gender “woman,” and there is no reason to preclude the possibility of that body becoming the locus of other constructions of gender.” In Butler’s reading of de Beauvoir, a strict dualism is installed, now articulated by gender as it refers to a form of expression, and sex as it refers to a form of content. The relation created between how both content and expression are formed is not relative but absolute. Extracting a signifier from the word (gender) and from the thing (sex), a signified in conformity with the word, subjected to the word, Butler restricts herself to an oversimplified idea of language which refuses to see how the politics active in sex and gender

build upon a series of statements and states of things that have always already been intrinsically entwined with one another and that are always in processes of morphogenesis corresponding to one another. The ever-changing flows of matter and meaning would never allow themselves to be reduced to one signifier and one signified creating one sign. When Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 1987, 67) speak of the “discursive multiplicities” of expression and the “nondiscursive multiplicities” of content they refer precisely to this infinite (not one-on-one) enfolding of matter and meaning, which has always already led to the “material-discursive,” as Barad (following Donna Haraway) conceptualizes it. In terms of Butler’s feminism, the (female) body is *not* understood to be performative, or, in Vicki Kirby’s terms, “telling flesh” (Kirby 1997).

Second, and following from its fixed position as a signifier (of a signified), gender gets a fixed meaning too by suggesting that it is a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities. Grosz (2005, 106) has argued for the need to import the Bergsonian distinction between the conceptual pairs virtual/actual and possible/real in feminist theory, conceptual pairs that are defined as follows:

The real creates an image of itself, which, by projecting itself back into the past, gives it the status of always-having-been-possible. The possible is ideally preexistent, an existence that precedes materialization. The possible, instead of being a reverse projection of the real, might be better understood in terms of the virtual, which has reality without being actual (*ibid.*, 107).

Despite Butler’s great hopes, conceptualizations along the lines of the possible/real limit biological or anatomical sex to the culturally foreseeable, recognized, and known (which is the equally limited “gender”). Grosz claims that “[t]o reduce the possible to a preexistent phantom-like real is to curtail the possibility of thinking the new, of thinking an open future, a future not bound to the present, just as the present is itself a production of the past” (*ibid.*, 108). Butler’s Lacanian re-reading of de Beauvoir, then, read along with Grosz, severely limits the potential of feminism to make a difference as its ontology and epistemology are confined by historically established gendered patterns, predicated on a linear and causal theory of



time. Locating gender ultimately in the female body, that is, projecting the word into the thing like the present is projected back into the past, turns the future of feminism into a descriptive historicism, enslaved by a major History (Deleuze and Guattari's abovementioned "constant") according to which its paths are set out.

It is worth noting that Butler discusses ontology in de Beauvoir (and "women" in feminism; see Butler 1993, 187–222) in terms of *paradoxes*.<sup>4</sup> She states that for de Beauvoir "[w]e never experience or know ourselves as a body pure and simple, i.e. as our 'sex,' because we never know our sex outside of its expression of gender. Lived or experienced 'sex' is always already gendered. We become our genders, but we become them from a place which cannot be found and which, strictly speaking, cannot be said to exist" (Butler 1986, 39). Here we see that, indeed, sex is the Lacanian signified which needs to be coded by a (linguistic) signifier which is gender (only revealing itself temporarily and fragmentarily through metonyms and metaphors). Later on in the article, Butler states that "[n]ot only is gender no longer dictated by anatomy, but anatomy does not seem to pose any necessary limits to the possibilities of gender" (*ibid.*, 45), thus ultimately affirming the body as fully malleable. The temporality underlying all of this is one according to which "gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself with respect to those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world" (*ibid.*, 40). This is where we find Grosz's observations confirmed: the past (sex) is constituted in the present (gender) and so is the future along the lines of a realization of possibilities. The possible in Butler's reading of de Beauvoir is a reverse projection of the real; we cannot know the possible outside of the real just as it has no active role in signification. The real, then, is sexual opposition or binarism indeed, which is projected back into the past. Flesh appears as mute; Butler's seeming revolution in thought vis-à-vis de Beauvoir is undone by the representationalism implied by the possible/real and the signifier/signified couplings (cf. Colebrook 2004). But how, then, should de Beauvoir be read so as to ascribe this Irigarayan undecidability, affirmed by Grosz, to the work?

In "de Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look," Moira Gatens (2003, 274) clearly states that de Beauvoir's "point in *The Second Sex* is not that

the natural body has no hold on social values or that it is 'value all the way down.'" Gatens reads de Beauvoir as affirming "an interactive loop between bodies and values" (ibid., 274) and gives two examples from *The Second Sex* of the entanglement of, rather than the unilinear causality between, sex and gender, one of which she discusses at length (the post-menopausal woman [ibid., 278–9]) and the other she mentions only in passing (women's eroticism [ibid., 273]). The post-menopausal woman, Gatens affirms, proposes an important challenge to the Butlerian grid laid over the work of de Beauvoir by allowing for the *bodies* (sex) of these self-identified *women* to influence their cultural interpretation, namely as *non-feminine* (gender). The body that is no longer menstruating is one of those examples that show how a body cannot be grasped with signifier/signified or possible/real, as this sexed body refuses to conform to the word "gender" nor to a realization of sexual binarism. The same goes for women's eroticism, the other example Gatens comes up with. Like Gatens, Karen Vintges ([1992] 1996, 47) clearly states in *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* that intersubjectivity, despite Jean-Paul Sartre debunking the notion, "comes about because both partners undergo a metamorphosis into flesh (*chair*) through emotional intoxication, and experience themselves and the other simultaneously as subjectivity and as passivity." In a slightly different register, then, making love allows for a "becoming 'flesh' [also: incarnation] through emotion" resulting in "a unification of body and consciousness" (ibid., 48). Vintges presents another convincing argument about de Beauvoir's anti-representationalism and her usage of the virtual/actual coupling; the love-making de Beauvoir finds enabling is not modelled on certain modes (e.g. the Marquis de Sade's sadomasochism, or marital sex), and affects both sexes in unforeseeable ways (ibid., 48–9). Gatens (2003, 283) indeed states that the future, for de Beauvoir, is open and as yet unknowable to the mind (unfeelable by the body), due to her strong belief in truths as unfixed, as ambiguous, as inherently paradoxical. She affirms that "the incessant play between the two terms of a pair, say, nature and culture, is what constitutes our situation as always ambiguous, always involving a free 'becoming,' rather than mere 'being'" (Gatens 2003, 282).

Here, then, we have arrived at a radically different reading of de Beauvoir, as her model of becoming a woman now involves something that

is *not* to be grasped with social constructivism (gender defines sex).<sup>5</sup> By not ascribing to biological essentialism (sex defines gender) either, de Beauvoir opens the way for a performative understanding of ontology, or better yet, of *ontogenesis*. de Beauvoir introduces a sexual differing, the fulcrum of which, we want to propose, is to be found in her concept “flesh.” In *The Second Sex*, flesh is one of those singular points at which the conceptual and the creative meet. It is a term usually associated with Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who also make use of it in order to come closer to the morphogenetic essence of the human body. With de Beauvoir the concept functions as the point of departure from which she taps into the ongoing rewriting of sexual difference, since flesh allows her to traverse the signs that stick to the body, that decide the “situation of woman.” In the end—and this is crucial—conceptualizing flesh allows her to be undecidable about the relations between the sexes that are to come.

First she provides a diagnosis of sexual difference via flesh, or incarnation, engaging herself with the psychoanalytical idea of the phallus.<sup>6</sup> The phallus involves signification—“the apprehension of a signification through an analogue of the signifying object” (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 56). Signification is the source of alienation: “the anxiety of his freedom leads the subject to search for himself in things, which is a way to flee from himself” (ibid., 57). This process of “bad faith” differs for the two sexes. For man, “the fleshy incarnation of transcendence” (ibid.) happens through the flesh of the penis, whereas woman “does not alienate herself in a graspable thing, does not reclaim herself: she is thus led to make her entire self an object, to posit herself as the Other” (ibid., 57–8). So whereas de Beauvoir immediately reminds us that “[o]nly within the situation grasped in its totality does anatomical privilege found a truly human privilege” (ibid., 58), the relation between the sexes is dualist when considering the phallus. In the context of the phallus or the totem, women can do nothing but “perpetuat[e] carnal existence” (ibid., 82) whereas men can incarnate transcendence via the phallus, a dualism which has asymmetrical consequences:

Woman is sometimes designated as ‘sex’: it is she who is the flesh, its delights and its dangers. That for woman it is man who is sexed and carnal is a truth that has never been proclaimed

because there is no one to proclaim it. The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth. [...] since the coming of patriarchy, life in man's eyes has taken on a dual aspect: it is consciousness, will, transcendence, it is intellect; and it is matter, passivity, immanence, it is flesh (ibid., 162–3).

The current representation of sexual difference, de Beauvoir shows, is projected back into the past—as if sexual binarism precedes and thus justifies patriarchy, and as if young girls are destined to become woman.

Second, the way out of sexual difference (that is, the road to sexual differing) presents itself equally in *The Second Sex* through the flesh, and we have already seen this in our discussion of eroticism. Only by starting with the flesh, de Beauvoir moves towards an Irigarayan undecidability of sexual difference, a *true* becoming woman. Examples of this are the experiences of women in natural environments. In women's literature, among other things, de Beauvoir has found instances that, away from the house and the city, “show the comfort the adolescent girl finds in the fields and woods” (ibid., 376), which leads her to the important claim that here:

[e]xistence is not only an abstract destiny inscribed in town hall registers; it is future and carnal richness. Having a body no longer seems like a shameful failing [...] Flesh is no longer filth: it is joy and beauty. Merged with sky and heath, the girl is this vague breath that stirs up and kindles the universe, and she is every sprig of heather; an individual rooted in the soil and infinite consciousness, she is both spirit and life; her presence is imperious and triumphant like that of the earth itself (ibid., 376–7).

Much like Artaud (1971) and his use of flesh, de Beauvoir proposes to think from a very *naïve* stance, which is not romanticizing a kind of youthfulness (think for instance how the same argument can be found when she talks about the post-menopausal woman), nor do we need to undo or forget how the processes of subjectification, of becoming a woman, are at work in our lives (a kind of Aristophanic return). What she instead asks us to

do is to *rethink* sexual difference from a very pragmatic or empirical point of view. In fact, de Beauvoir introduces us to a naïve *ethics* that, as its point of departure, is not willing to accept received sociobiological or socio-cultural differences between the sexes. As with Artaud, it is an ethics that starts from the soil within which a force of life that gives form to flesh and spirit is at work. In contrast to the way de Beauvoir is usually read in feminist theory, she takes here an affirmative stance, trying to think of feminism not as a *critical* but as a *vitalist* project.

Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 1987, 276–7) appear to be very much inspired by de Beauvoir's materialist feminism of the flesh as they equate her becoming-woman with "the girl." It is a thoroughly vitalist concept that performs the hysteric reality of *all* bodies-to-come:

Doubtless, the girl becomes a woman in the molar or organic sense. But conversely, becoming-woman or the molecular woman is the girl herself. [...] She never ceases to roam upon a body without organs. [...] Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce *n* molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through. The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between. [...] It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl.<sup>7</sup>

By opposing the molar to the molecular and by favoring this molecular stance, Deleuze and Guattari do the same as de Beauvoir: they favor becoming over being, they study movement and affect instead of signs and codes. Contrary to Butler, who seems to be chasing a molar narrative, Deleuze and Guattari affirm de Beauvoir (and Artaud) in proposing a feminism that is an equally materialist and equally vitalist search for de Beauvoir's fleshy future.

For it is no coincidence that de Beauvoir does not say that the girl becomes the woman. There is not a projection backwards of the woman, of sexual binarism, onto the girl. The sexed body of the girl is not fully captured by the word "woman." de Beauvoir says here that there is

becoming from the girl to the woman. It is a naïveté to come, an Irigarayan undecidability. It is a discovery of the flesh that is always already taking place. The virtual (the girl: sexual differing) has reality without being actual (because we are subjected to femininity: sexual difference). de Beauvoir's practical philosophy, which culminates in the flesh, asks us to commit ourselves to an ethics of rethinking feminism from its most elementary basis.

### What Is Practical Philosophy?

In an interview Guattari tells us how he and Deleuze worked with this life force they found in the work of Artaud and de Beauvoir, amongst others, by always starting their analysis with "desire." This is true not least place when they come to speak of the woman:

If Gilles Deleuze and I have adopted the position of practically not speaking of sexuality, and instead speaking of desire, it's because we consider that the problems of life and creation are never reducible to physiological functions, reproductive functions, to some particular dimension of the body. They always involve elements that are either beyond the individual in the social or political field, or else before the individual level (Guattari and Rolnik [1982] 2008, 411).

By starting with desire, Guattari and Deleuze radically ward off the critical perspective that turned out to be so central to feminist theory built on the dominant (molar) reception of de Beauvoir. It places fundamental question marks after its emphasis on power, which they replaced by an emphasis on desire. Power ascribes to the representationalism underlying sexual difference, whereas with desire the qualitative shift towards sexual differing can be made. Only in a short comment regarding the work of Michel Foucault, Deleuze (1997, 186) explains in a nutshell this important shift when claiming:

In short, it is not the *dispositifs* of power that assemble [*agenceraient*], nor would they be constitutive; it is rather the *agencements* of desire that would spread throughout the formations of power following one of their dimensions.

Again, though we are now mainly concerned with feminist theory and sexual difference, this argument not only shifts the critical perspective as practiced in gender studies, it also offers an alternative to the way in which concepts like “race”/ethnicity, class, and age have been dominating the discussions within other fields in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1980’s.

Let us first of all ensure that this concept of desire, which traverses the aforementioned categories and which might give one the impression that only the mind is now at stake (and not the body), is actually a materialist concept with Deleuze and Guattari. For although Guattari especially has a strong background in (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, their idea of desire is without a doubt Spinozist. Spinoza, and most of all the Spinoza of the *Ethics*, might very well be considered the first (the foremost) new materialist. Especially his formula—being the mind is an idea of the body, while the body is the object of the mind—is undisputedly the starting point of all new materialist thinking, and it has for that reason appeared in various guises throughout the work of new materialists. Spinoza’s definition of desire starts from the sameness of the mind and body as it composes our nature, or as he puts it:

All our efforts or desires follow from the necessity of our nature in such a manner that they can be understood either through it alone as their proximate cause, or in so far as we are a part of nature, which part cannot be adequately conceived through itself and without the other individuals (Spinoza [1677] 2001, E4App.1).

Desire, according to Spinoza and to Deleuze and Guattari, thus points at an *essence* that is formed in terms of the body and the mind created in its relation to other individuals which it is either affected by (that gives it joy) or that it tries to move away from (that offers it sadness). Of course, essence with Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari is never the biological determinist type of essence re-affirmed in contemporary scholarship. It is a concept that allows them to express how our nature is taking up a form that necessarily re-creates itself in its relations to others, *ad infinitum*.

Essence equals the desiring flesh that does not know (yet) of sexual difference. Essence is a cut-out in nature (as de Beauvoir would put it), and equally within God (as Spinoza would put it) that acts as one, yet always in relation to how it pertains to others, and vice versa. The emphasis on desire and essence, then, does not deny the existence of male and female, of sexual difference, but instead denounces the ignorance with which epistemologies have folded into nature and cut it up into genus and species. A vitalist emphasis on desire, essence and the flesh, allows us to rethink such categorizations in a most revolutionary way. Indeed a Spinozist or Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, as it claims that the essence is determined by what affects the thing and by how it is affected, starts from how life is being formed and how categories like sexual difference are created in it by the actions of the mind *and* the body.

Such an affirmative vitalism allows us to rethink feminism (and all other minor fields in cultural theory) not by critiquing the “being” of a woman, but rather by affirming the molecular ways in which the body and mind can be conceptualized as “female” in how they are created (as one), or in how they affect and are affected. That is why Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 1987, 291), re-reading de Beauvoir, claim that a becoming-woman “necessarily affects men just as much as women.” That is why the girl deterritorializes all forms of life (as well as the non-organic). For just as a becoming Jewish affects the non-Jew as it affects the Jew, as they stated before this last quote, men also, in the ongoing questioning of their essence, enter the trajectories of “femininity” as it moves them away from the dominant (molar) socio-cultural (male-oriented) stance from which society is organized. Starting with the body, with the affections that befall the body and how they present us with ideas in the mind (see e.g. Spinoza [1677] 2001, E2P16), this then allows us a radical complexification of the asymmetry indicated by de Beauvoir, “For the two sexes imply a multiplicity of molecular combinations bringing into play not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but the relation of each to the animal, the plant, etc.: a thousand tiny sexes” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 213).

Deleuze ([1981] 1988, 124) already noted that “[...] if you define bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected, many things change.” In terms of its consequences for feminism, Grosz (1994) sees



this as the starting point for a way of rethinking sexual difference not as a meaning imposed upon bodies, but as the expression of bodies (earlier we called this material-discursive). In other words, sexual differing is about the way the body is able to sediment itself or form itself within the socio-cultural according to the practices in which it acts:

So an animal, a thing is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior. The speed and slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions, link together to constitute a particular individual in the world (Deleuze [1981] 1988, 125).

In sum, then, the move from sexual difference, as it has dominated feminism over the past half-century, to sexual differing, as we can already find in de Beauvoir, means an emphasis on the *agencements* of desire and the way they allow us to think of the flesh and its nature in the way it becomes actualized and realized within practices. Then power is an action upon an action, as Foucault already put it. Or rather, power sets itself to the structuring of the socio-cultural by means of prohibition, as Claire Colebrook describes it. For she claims: "There is only a phallus rather than a penis, through the process of collective inscription" (Colebrook 2002, 134). This materialist stance does not want to critique collective (molar) inscription, but rather asks us how, in life, the creation of the woman (and the man) comes about in the (mute, fleshy, molecular) affects to which these collective inscriptions *respond*.

### **From Sexual Difference to Sexual Differing**

Let us end with a close reading of the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, as it is here that de Beauvoir's practical philosophy comes to full fruition. In the text, de Beauvoir ([1949] 2010, 758) is truly opening up for a sexual differing, a pushing of sexual difference to the extreme, because she claims that neither men nor women have so far been willing to "assum[e] all the consequences of this situation that one proposes and the other undergoes." What happens when we do assume all the consequences of sexual

difference? When we no longer critique the collective inscription of sexual difference, but ask an affirmative question instead?

First, de Beauvoir states that “today’s woman is torn between the past and the present” (ibid., 761). She is torn, that is, between collective inscriptions, and the linear, causal theory of time with which they work, and creative evolution, which, speaking with Henri Bergson, comes with the virtual/actual, with *durée* as it opens up a world to come. The collective inscriptions need not be critiqued as in equality or postmodern feminism, but one must ask to what materialist, fleshy desires these collective inscriptions respond. Patriarchy utilizes what it finds for its own self-perpetuation. But a revolutionary feminism does not have a model. We could say that for women, the molding into utilities of affects, of life forces leads to a being torn between past and present, between sexual difference and sexual differing. And this is actually something we can affirm, as it shows how sexual difference implies sexual differing all along. de Beauvoir describes the situation as follows:

[M]ost often, she appears as a ‘real woman’ disguised as a man, and she feels as awkward in her woman’s body as in her masculine garb. She has to shed her old skin and cut her own clothes. She will only be able to do this if there is a collective change. No one teacher can today shape a ‘female human being’ that would be an exact homologue to the ‘male human being’: if raised like boy, the young girl feels she is an exception, and that subjects her to a new kind of specification (ibid.).

An upbringing like a boy and masculine clothing (that is to say, emancipation) is what de Beauvoir’s woman wants to move away from, similar to the way in which she wants to move away from an unemancipated world. Neither the inscriptions of equality feminism nor those of an androcentric world fit her flesh. Woman, according to de Beauvoir, has to rid herself of these inscriptions. This means, following an ethics of affirmation, that *she has to cut her own clothes*. Despite the dominant reception of her work even in French feminism, de Beauvoir thus clearly speaks the language of difference. As she states:

Woman is defined neither by her hormones nor by mysterious instincts but by the way she grasps, through foreign consciousness, her body and her relation to the world [...] it would be impossible to keep woman from being what she *was made*, and she will always trail this past behind her; if the weight of this past is accurately measured, it is obvious that her destiny is not fixed in eternity (ibid., 761; original emphasis).

This fragment, even though it has been read as existentialism *par excellence*, is not only crystal clear about collective inscriptions. It also clarifies how we could read the evolution de Beauvoir alluded to in the previously given quote. This evolution—which after postmodern feminism seems wholly individualized in this fragment, but throughout *The Second Sex* appears as (equally) collective—we can read in a manner similar to how we read de Beauvoir’s interpretation of young girls’ naiveté. Equality feminism is a narrative of progress, predicated on the coupling possible/real, on a linear and causal theory of time. It wants sexual difference to be solved once and for all. Difference feminism thinks of emancipation differently: “To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them” (ibid., 766). The latter feminism allows for bringing along the past that shadows woman for life; it has gotten rid of the habit of narratives of progress, and speaks the language of true duration, of becoming a thousand tiny sexes, of sexual differing.

Where, then, is this new conceptualization of emancipation to be found? It is not to be found in our fearful imaginings of a future *without* sexual difference, because, says de Beauvoir: “Let us beware lest our lack of imagination impoverish the future; the future is only an abstraction for us; each one of us secretly laments the absence in it of what was” (ibid., 765). de Beauvoir does not want women to be confined by sexual difference, nor does she want to deny them relations with men. Although it has often been remarked in feminist scholarship that de Beauvoir seems to say that *men* are to liberate women by giving up their privileges, our reading of de Beauvoir suggests an alternative take on the following, oft-discredited fragment, in which she ends her masterpiece by saying:

*Within the given world*, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and *beyond their natural differentiations*, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood (ibid., 766; emphasis added).

What we see here is that it is *in* sexual difference that we can find *sexual differing*. Sexual difference is nothing but a collective molar habit of mind, and, up until the conclusion, *The Second Sex* has described this habit as well as where it undid itself. Sexual differing is not found in the future, but between the linguistic codes of sexual difference where it always already roams, materially and vitally.

## Notes

1. For the intrinsic link between these exemplifications, see van der Tuin (2009).
2. Note, however, that Heinämaa (1997, 27) reads this phenomenology as breaking through the nature/culture divide. She also states that with de Beauvoir as well as Butler we can break through the divide between the mental and the bodily (ibid., 22).
3. Let us state clearly that we are aware of the fierce criticism that the received view of de Beauvoir in general, and of *The Second Sex* in particular, has received from feminist scholars in both the United States and Europe. We are also aware of the translation problem surrounding *The Second Sex* prior to when Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier's 2010 translation appeared. A huge body of work has been produced around these issues that is impossible to reference even when one privileges, with Donna Haraway, a partial perspective. We thus refrain from the referencing, albeit that these discussions form the background of this chapter. It might be argued that this chapter is to be placed in the tradition of post-poststructuralist scholarship on de Beauvoir, as Sonia Kruks (2005, 290) calls it, moving beyond biological essentialism and social constructivism indeed. It might also be seen as an attempt to move out of another double bind that is so often to be found around de Beauvoir. Attempts to free *The Second Sex* from Sartre often confine the text to another Master, and, consequently, it is again not subjected to a close reading (ibid., 294).
4. Feminist scholarship dismissing or criticizing the paradoxes in the work of de Beauvoir is rampant. Although many scholars try to affirm the paradoxes as a necessary part of de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy, it is hardly ever affirmed that these paradoxes actually are (her) feminism. For very recent examples, see Changfoot (2009a, 2009b).
5. Note that by not accepting the sex/gender distinction as a key to *The Second Sex*, we arrive at conclusions that differ from those of Hughes and Witz (1997).
6. Remember that de Beauvoir is as ambiguous about Marxism as she is about psychoanalysis. Throughout *The Second Sex*, both are subscribed to for their accurate

descriptions as well as utopianism and critiqued for their genderblindness. The virtue of the latter, in particular, is that it proposes that “the existent is a body” (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 68), even that

[t]he existent is a sexed body; in its relations with other existents that are also sexed bodies, sexuality is thus always involved (ibid., 55).

7. Bergson ([1907] 1998, 313) makes the same argument concerning a boy which supports Deleuze’s argument all the more. His version runs as follows:

The truth is that if language here were molded on reality, we should not say ‘The child becomes the man,’ but ‘There is becoming from the child to the man.’ [...] In the second proposition, ‘becoming’ is a subject. It comes to the front. It is the reality itself; childhood and manhood are then only possible stops, mere views of the mind; we now have to do with the objective movement itself [...].