

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

**BODIES AND SUBJECTS IN MERLEAU-PONTY AND FOUCAULT: TOWARDS A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL/POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST THEORY OF  
EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY**

A Thesis in

Philosophy

by

Julia Levin

© 2008 Julia Levin

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2008

The thesis of Julia Levin was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Shannon Sullivan  
Professor of Philosophy, Women's Studies, and African American Studies  
Head of the Department of Philosophy  
Thesis Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Nancy Tuana  
DuPont/Class of 1949 Professor of Philosophy  
Director, Rock Ethics Institute

John Christman  
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Political Science

Jane Juffer  
Associate Professor of English and Director of Latino/a Studies Initiative

\* Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

My dissertation is about embodiment, feminism, and liberation from oppressed ways of bodily being. My primary claim is that a feminist theory of embodiment must account for the phenomenology of multiple and varied embodied persons in multiple and varied social situations, for the genealogical history behind such positions/embodiments/subjectivities, and for the possibility of positive, progressive, liberatory change on both a personal and a political level. This work is important because women, non-whites, the differently abled, gays and lesbians, and others whose embodiments do not conform to the white-straight-male norm of the traditional, Western philosophical canon are still disadvantaged and excluded in many ways that are harmful and wrong. A better theory of embodiment will show why such exclusions and harms *are* wrong, and will indicate ways to go about righting these wrongs.

I approach a liberatory theory of embodiment using two traditionally divergent but in my view complimentary approaches: the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the postmodern/poststructuralist approach of Foucault. I argue that Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are both key figures who can serve as resources in the endeavor to construct the liberatory theory of embodiment that I seek, and I further argue that a feminist theory of embodiment will be stronger and more thorough if it draws on both than on either alone. Despite seeming conflicts between the two, their positions can be harmonized into a compelling, robust, and politically useful feminist theory of embodiment.

I argue that it is possible to read Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in concert with Foucault's postmodernism by showing where there are similarities and showing that their differences are complimentary rather than contradictory. For example, Merleau-Ponty reconfigures the concept of subjectivity away from the traditional category that Foucault's postmodernism calls into question in such a way that the two are more in agreement on the concept of subjectivity than is generally recognized. Furthermore, their different approaches can strengthen areas that are lacking in the other: Foucault's genealogical approach to matters of sexuality, for example, provide a destabilization of what could be read as overly sedimented in Merleau-Ponty alone, while Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on bodily knowing and doing point to avenues of potential progressive transformation. My claim is that both figures actually present similar theories of subjectivity as fundamentally embodied and contextualized, yet with different foci that offer different necessary components of a full theory: Merleau-Ponty focuses on the concrete, material aspects of embodied being in his discussions of habits, body images, and the like, while Foucault focuses on the discursive, cultural, historical forces that contribute to a body-subject's construction. Read together, the two provide a theory of embodiment as discursive yet still material; historically and culturally situated, yet still capable of agentic, liberatory transformation.

A feminist approach to embodiment that fully draws on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault has not yet been attempted. Most feminists see either the phenomenological or the postmodern approach as flawed and argue for rejecting one in favor of the other. My claim is that in so doing, they eliminate potentially valuable insights that I find in both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault and thus weaken their theories. In my dissertation, I seek to show that feminist and other liberation theorists will benefit from drawing on the strengths of both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1. MERLEAU-PONTY, EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY, AND FEMINISM .....	21
Introduction .....	21
Merleau-Ponty’s Feminist Potential: Phenomenology, Experience, and Embodied Subjectivity .....	22
1. Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology in Context: Intellectualism, Empiricism, and Feminism .....	22
2. Feminist Potential in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity ..	42
3. Intersubjectivity .....	61
Conclusion .....	65
Chapter 2. FOUCAULT, DISCIPLINED BODIES, AND FEMINISM .....	67
Introduction .....	67
Early Foucault: Genealogy, Power, and Bodies .....	68
1. Genealogy .....	68
2. Power and Bodies .....	72
Late Foucault: Subjectivity, Care of the Self, and Political Action .....	96
1. Subjectivity and Care of the Self .....	96
2. Foucaultian Feminist Politics .....	105
Conclusion .....	112
Chapter 3. PHENOMENOLOGICAL FEMINISM VS. POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM .....	114
Introduction .....	114
Phenomenological Feminist Critique of Foucault .....	117
1. The Experiencing Subject vs. the “Death of Man” .....	117
2. The Agentic Body vs. the Docile Body .....	126
Poststructuralist Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty .....	135
1. Poststructuralist Feminist Critique of Experience .....	136
2. The Anonymous Body .....	144
Conclusion .....	154
Chapter 4. HARMONIZING MERLEAU-PONTY AND FOUCAULT .....	157
Introduction .....	157
Resolving Problem #1: The Experiencing Subject vs. Discourse .....	158
Resolving Problem #2: Is There a Pre-Discursive, Anonymous Body? .....	173
Resolving Problem #3: The Body and Agency .....	191
Conclusion .....	208
Chapter 5. THE FEMINIST BENEFITS OF A COMBINED MERLEAU- PONTIAN/FOUCAULTIAN THEORY OF EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY: A CASE STUDY OF KARATE .....	210
Introduction .....	210

Overview of a Combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian Feminist Theory of Embodiment	.211
Why a Combined Theory is Better: Examples from Other Feminists	216
Why a Combined Theory is Better: A Case Study of Karate	.228
1. Bodies, Pleasures, Habits, and Karate	228
2. Intersubjectivity, Communication, and Political Action	.246
Conclusion	256
Bibliography	.259

## INTRODUCTION

Feminist theories of the body have developed along two tracks, inspired by poststructuralism on the one hand and phenomenology on the other. More specifically, some feminists draw on a Foucaultian notion of embodiment, others a Merleau-Pontian—but virtually no work has been done that considers the possibilities of drawing these two strands into dialogue. Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and the respective feminist schools of thought that employ them, have different emphases on bodily life and different theories of human embodiment. While much has been written on the strengths and failings of either school of thought, the question of what it would look like to read them together has received little, if any, attention from feminists thus far. This question deserves investigation, and it is this investigation that I carry out in this dissertation. I argue that the strengths of each school of thought combine in such a way as to offer a viable, progressive feminist theory and politics of the body that avoids the weaknesses inherent in the separate strands. Thus I argue that Foucaultian and Merleau-Pontian theories of embodiment can complement, rather than simply conflict with, each other, providing feminism with the robust theory of embodiment that it needs to ground feminist political and ethical liberatory aims.

To demonstrate that Foucault and Merleau-Ponty can fruitfully be brought together to inform a feminist politics of embodiment, I carefully examine obstacles to their union in the form of fundamentally different positions both they, and feminist schools of thought, take on issues central to the politics of embodiment. I examine why it is that among feminist theorists, Merleau-Pontians and Foucaultians tend to criticize each other, finding pitfalls rather than common ground in each others' positions. Issues that have been raised to argue that Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's work is not compatible include concerns about subjectivity (does it

exist?), agency (who has it—subjects [if they exist] or anonymous forces?), and the very nature of bodily materiality (is there a prediscursive body, or not?). Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied subjectivity centers on the claim that there is an intentional, agentic subject (although a bodily one, not a problematically disembodied Cartesian subject), a position which, according to some theorists, exists in polar opposition to Foucault's account of discursively constituted bodies that lack both subjectivity and intentionality, and hence cannot possess agency. Feminists who draw on Merleau-Ponty critique the perceived lack of agency, freedom, and resistance in Foucault; Foucault-inspired feminists, on the other hand, are concerned about Merleau-Ponty's assumption of a prediscursive anonymous (read white-straight-male) body. Not only do the feminist schools of thought diverge, Foucault himself has been openly critical of phenomenology, and (some argue) specifically rejects Merleau-Ponty, so there is a substantial challenge involved in bringing their philosophies, and the feminist schools of thought that employ one perspective or the other, together.

Given these differences, how can a feminist theory of embodiment draw on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault? What insights from each should a feminist employ, and what would it look like to draw them together? A point of departure is that both Foucault and Merleau-Ponty reject Cartesian dualism. Foucault writes about power working on the materiality of the body without the sidetrack of being filtered through a disembodied consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty writes about bodies *as* knowing subjects always already enmeshed in a world of meaning, without a disembodied cognitive/psychic component that imposes meaning on the physical/object component. If bodies *are* subjects, as a Merleau-Pontian framework would suggest, then perhaps it is possible to understand bodies both as shaped by power *and* as experiencing subjects without the filter of an

illusory disembodied ‘soul’. Foucault tells us that power directly impacts bodies, materially, and Merleau-Ponty tells us that these bodies are themselves subjects that can respond to and interact with their world. In this dissertation, I argue that it is possible, and indeed beneficial from a feminist perspective, to think bodies in both of these ways. I call on Foucault to argue that bodies are discursively constructed,<sup>1</sup> and I call on Merleau-Ponty to investigate the lived, experiential aspects of embodiment. In my view, it is not inherently contradictory to claim that bodies can be both discursive through-and-through *and* phenomenologically lived. Thus in this dissertation I propose a situated, genealogical phenomenology of embodiment that will contribute to feminist liberatory<sup>2</sup> aims.

A vital feminist contribution to philosophy arises from simply paying attention to the quotidian but historically disregarded fact that human beings have bodies. In stark contrast to a philosophical canon that names a disembodied rationality as the mark of the (ostensibly neutral but implicitly male) human, feminists emphasize that our varied and multiple embodiments are absolutely fundamental to our beings and subjectivities. But in my estimation, feminist theories of embodiment have not yet reached the strength and thoroughness that they can and should. My starting point is the claim that “Feminist philosophy, if it is to aid in the empowerment of women, must develop a better account of the relationship between reason, theory, and bodily, subjective experience” (Alcoff 2000, 251). Attending to bodily experience is crucial for a feminist theory of embodiment if it is actually to be helpful to women, because women’s bodies and bodily experiences are always already problematized in our Western culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “discursive” broadly. I understand discourse to encompass more than just linguistic or symbolic components; I use the term to include social, historical, conceptual, institutional, and other broadly conceived ways of framing and understanding the world.

<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, when I use the word ‘liberatory’, I do not intend to convey a liberationist philosophy in the sense of liberating something ‘natural’ from oppressive cultural confines or liberating the ‘real’ from the imposed. Rather, I use ‘liberatory’ in the sense of freedom-increasing rather than –decreasing, in the sense of opening up possibilities for new options and for self-directed change.



The history of Western philosophy not only binarizes but also necessarily hierarchizes according to value. According to traditional Western philosophical dualisms, mind is superior to body, rationality is other to emotion; and men are associated with rational minds while women are associated with fleshy, weighty, emotional, burdensome bodies. Furthermore, philosophy defines itself in terms of mind, and women in terms of body, so philosophy in its very structure excludes women. Thus traditional dualisms have contributed significantly to constructing the world in a way that denigrates and oppresses women. “As a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body” (Grosz 4). The problem, in part, is the historical philosophical construct that assigns rationality to the sole provenance of the subject, which is necessarily a mind, while defining women as bodies, and hence not rational subjects—thus not even fully human. “Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely the body and, through this identification, restricting women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms” (Grosz 14). In this dissertation, my contention is that feminists need both to understand/experience themselves as bodies and to theorize human being as bodily through-and-through in order to ground liberatory ethics and politics. I base this contention on an assumption that dualism is ontologically wrong, but I am not as interested in the ontology of anti-dualism as I am in the phenomenology of a unified body-subject and its historical, discursive relation to ethics and politics. I intend to show that dualism is ethically and politically insufficient; that pragmatically, it does not work (ostensibly *because* it is ontologically wrong, although I do not spend much time arguing that beyond elucidating and agreeing with Merleau-Ponty’s and Foucault’s anti-dualist starting points). I agree with Susan Bordo’s claim that

mind/body dualism is no mere philosophical position, to be defended or dispensed with by clever argument. Rather, it is a *practical* metaphysics that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representation, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture, and advertisements—a metaphysics which will be deconstructed only through concrete transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it (1993, 13-14).

It is this practical aspect that I investigate, exploring ways in which theory and practice can combine to undo the lived realities of the legacy of dualism for women in particular. Once we realize that all our experiences take place *between* body and mind, self and world, characterizing women as fundamentally Other to men on the basis of rationality versus emotionality or mindedness versus bodiliness is rendered incoherent.

Furthermore, my contention is that the best way for feminist philosophers to theoretically and pragmatically overcome dualism and construct a robust, liberatory theory of embodied subjectivity is to combine Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. Canonical Western philosophy denigrates bodies and defines humanity as a rational mind, which is necessarily male in the traditional canon, but bodies have not gone entirely unnoticed by canonical male philosophers: feminists' focus on embodiment finds allies in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of lived experience as fundamentally embodied and in Foucault's analyses of bodies as thoroughly inscribed and constructed by power. Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body resonates with a necessary tenet of feminist philosophy, which is that understanding the world relies crucially on lived, embodied experience, locating subjectivity, rationality and humanity in the lived experiences of human embodiment. Foucault also rejects dualism via his genealogical analyses of how bodies and subjects come to be who and what they are as constructs of power and other discursive forces. Understanding these discursive histories is a necessary prerequisite for positive change; thus Foucault offers feminists a method for understanding and overcoming

women's oppressive histories by focusing on the effects of power on the body and the empowering potential of self-chosen bodily disciplines.

Why, though, should feminists turn to embodiment rather than striving to include women in the traditionally male sphere of rationality in response to our historical exclusion from the realm of mind, rationality, and full human subjectivity? Because of the second prong of the problem I seek to address: not only have women been historically excluded, mind/body dualism problematizes the body for women (and all non-straight white males) in ways that it is *not* problematized for those whose bodies are the type that allow for subjectivity in the tradition. Many feminists, such as Iris Marion Young, Sandra Bartky, and Susan Bordo have addressed (and brilliantly elucidated) how women's bodies are problematized by historical philosophical dualisms. Overcoming these problems is and should be a central feature of feminism, and it is my contention that not only do we need to claim our rightful place as subjects, we need to do so by reclaiming our bodies.

In other words, despite my rejection of the canonical treatment of women in the history of philosophy, I still want to link women to bodies. But I must do this carefully; efforts to tie women to bodies are problematic. Due to the baggage of Western philosophies of self and other, body and mind, rationality and emotionality that define men as rational subjects and women as irrational bodily Others, "It is hardly surprising, given these attributions, that feminists have tended to remain wary of any attempts to link women's subjectivities and social positions to the specificities of their bodies" (Grosz x). And yet this is precisely what I seek to do in this dissertation, for I will argue that where the tradition has it wrong is not in associating women with bodies, but in not associating *everyone* with bodies—in severing the mental from the body and defining the subject as other to the body. Like Grosz, "I hope to show that the body, or

rather, bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social construction of nature itself” (Grosz x). And yet at the same time I hope to show that these inscribed social-historical bodies retain subjectivity and agency such that defining a woman by her bodily specificity does not entail denying her status as a human subject, and does not destine her to a biologically predetermined social role. For there are not only male and female bodies but an infinite variety of bodily differences that contribute to an infinite variety in human ways of being.

While feminists such as Bartky, Bordo, Grosz, Young, and many others have been working for years to correct this anti-body and correlative anti-woman philosophical bias, a robust, solid philosophy of embodiment and embodied subjectivity has yet to be constructed. Grosz’s work, for example, is excellent in its analyses of masculine bias in the social construction of bodies, yet offers no thoroughgoing argument for how feminists ought to think and live bodies/embodiment, no coherent non-dualist theory of embodied subjectivity. Similarly, Bartky and Bordo offer beneficial and insightful Foucaultian analyses of ways in which women’s bodies are problematized, but offer less in the way of potential solutions to these problems. On the other side of the spectrum, feminists like Young, Gail Weis and Carol Bigwood draw on Merleau-Ponty to reconnect women’s subjectivities to embodiment, but tend to overlook the discursive and historical strictures that contribute to those subjectivities. Thus, it is my aim to reconnect disparate strands in feminist philosophies of embodiment and subjectivity, drawing on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault to produce a more thorough, more inclusive theory that does a better job both of explaining how women come to be who and what we are and how we can effect change for the better.

However, this task is neither simple nor straightforward, and there are substantial problems to overcome. At face value, it seems inherently problematic to read Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together, for are their projects not fundamentally opposed? As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy depends upon the claim that there is such a thing as subjectivity; as a poststructuralist, Foucault (according to some readings) denies just that. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology locates agency in embodied subjectivity, while Foucault's poststructuralism describes bodies as constructed by and subjugated to external, discursive forces. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes intentionality while Foucault, it would seem, denies that it exists because poststructuralism in general posits that our 'intentions', to the extent we have them, are constructed by social/historical forces. Finally, Foucault explicitly rejects phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty, of course, is a phenomenologist. Poststructuralism and phenomenology, then, differ deeply on several counts, and these oppositions are reflected in feminist circles. To oversimplify in order to broadly outline a basic conflict, if a fundamental question of feminism is the question of figuring out what to do with the category "women," the Merleau-Pontian feminist might reply by saying: Yes, women exist; there are beings who inhabit that category, and they are their bodies. The Foucaultian feminist, on the other hand, might argue that genealogy problematizes the very naming of a category such that rather than trying to elucidate a better, non-patriarchal definition for members of the category, we ought to deconstruct the category itself and free ourselves from its confines.

The issue that surfaces as most immediately problematic—and that grounds other difficulties—is that Merleau-Ponty assumes a pre- or non-discursive, anonymous, generic body that exists untouched by cultural inscriptions, whereas Foucault (according to most readings of him) argues just the opposite—that the body is thoroughly and deeply discursive through and

through, such that there is no possibility of ever reaching, appealing to, describing, or in any way calling on an anonymous body of the sort upon which Merleau-Ponty relies. If the body is, as Foucault claims, an object thoroughly subjugated to historical forces of power, a troubling implication seems to be that there is no subjectivity or agency inherent in this imprinted, constructed body-thing. Merleau-Ponty's appeal to an anonymous body, on the other hand, grounds his claim that the body is the locus of both subjectivity and agency. Thus the question of bodily discursivity vs. bodily anonymity gives rise to the question of whether the body is best viewed as an object subsumed to construction by external forces or as an experiencing, intentional subject.

A corollary of this issue is the question of whether or not intersubjectivity and meaningful communication are possible. For Merleau-Ponty, bodies' basic, universal material anonymity provides a basis for intersubjective communication; for Foucault, bodies are thoroughly discursive with absolutely no pre- or non-discursive material excess, and thus cannot form a ground for mutual understanding. According to Foucault, not even the body is stable enough to provide common ground among subjects, while Merleau-Ponty claims that it is precisely the body in its generality and anonymity that allows differently situated individuals to access a fund of mutual, common meaning and understanding.

In addition to these problems of disagreement between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, elements of both Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's philosophies are problematic from a feminist point of view. I consider Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body-subject as both an ally and antagonist for feminist developments of gendered phenomenologies. His phenomenology provides a good starting point for a feminist focus on embodiment, but feminists rightly critique his concept of an anonymous body that ignores gender (and other) specificities. Thus, in this

dissertation I address feminist criticisms and re-appropriations of Merleau-Ponty that result in more compelling feminist phenomenologies. Also, feminists commonly critique Foucault for his apparent lack of a concept of agency. If he does do away with intentionality as poststructuralism indicates, it would seem we cannot have agency without intention; and if there is no agency, there can be no positive, self-directed change. Given that one of the founding tenets of feminism is to change things for the better for women, a theory that denies agency is antithetical to feminist work. Thus, I also address feminist critiques of Foucault and offer a reading of his work that does not succumb to the problems they raise.

Linda Alcoff (although not referring to Merleau-Ponty and Foucault specifically) elucidates the heart of the problem I address in attempting to mediate between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Foucault's poststructuralism. Alcoff explains that poststructuralists "say we cannot understand society as the conglomerate of individual intentions but, rather, must understand individual intentions as constructed within a social reality"; and while Alcoff finds this persuasive, she finds "less persuasive a total erasure of individual agency within a social discourse or set of institutions, that is, the totalization of history's imprint" (2006, 140). In other words, phenomenology and poststructuralism offer different, apparently disparate and incompatible, yet plausible analyses of the status of human subjectivity, intentionality, and agency. Each approach has its compelling aspects, but each also has problems. This dissertation is, in part, about how to mediate this interplay between social construction and individual agency via resolving the problems that arise in the opposition of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and bringing them to a place that is not opposition but mutual cooperation that offers feminist-friendly insights for a robust theory of embodied subjectivity.

The solution I propose to the seemingly irreconcilable differences outlined above starts by noting that Merleau-Ponty's subject need not be essentialistic, and is in fact strengthened when it is informed by the genealogical destabilization Foucault provides. I maintain that the category 'women' exists and has inhabitants, but it is a socially, historically situated and contextualized category, a mutable, multiple category that overlaps and intersects with many others. My solution continues with the contention that, rather than being opposed to each other, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are addressing different layers, levels, or aspects of embodied subjectivity: Merleau-Ponty looks close in, and the micro-level, analyzing the concrete, lived experiences of embodied subjects; Foucault takes a step back and looks at the bigger picture macro-level, analyzing how body-subjects come to be what they are via historical, social, discursive construction. These two layers are not only compatible, they are inseparable for a full and complete theory. Grosz's model (borrowed from Lacan) of a Möbius strip (as opposed to either a dualist or a monistic description of the relationship between body and mind as either substances or attributes) is helpful in elucidating this claim (xii-xiii). With a Möbius strip, both sides *are* each other and flow into each other.

The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside (Grosz xii).

Merleau-Ponty is one side of the Möbius strip, Foucault the other: Merleau-Ponty tells us what it is like as a subject to be a body, and Foucault tells us how that body is shaped and inscribed socially and historically. Neither side necessarily contradicts the other, and both are necessary for the Möbius strip/theory of embodied subjectivity to be complete.



For such a theory to be complete, it must be capable of grounding both personal and political resistance. I argue that combining Merleau-Ponty and Foucault is useful for this aspect of feminist theory as well. Thus part of what I look at in the chapters that follow is the problem of what to do with the intersections among one's own body image and acceptance of or repugnance towards one's own body, how one's body is read socio-culturally, and how to "use" the body politically. For example, if I feel shame towards my flabby tummy, to what extent is working out and changing my diet to bring my tummy in line with the cultural ideal of health and beauty going to improve my quality of life, and to what extent is the pursuit of this idealized body going to reinforce oppressive norms to my own detriment? A Foucaultian perspective helps to sort through such issues by demonstrating how the body is discursively constructed and thus malleable and not given or fixed; and a Merleau-Pontian perspective reconnects us to a sense of the body as lived, as our very subjectivity, thus helping to enhance positive self-bodying.

How exactly does the right theory of embodiment provide liberatory political ammunition and avoid the pitfalls of flawed theories of embodiment that reify and oppress? Such a theory must be situated so as not to be totalizing, and it must provide for the possibility of resistance. Foucault's genealogy provides the crucial understanding of our own contingency and situatedness, and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as agentic strengthens what many perceive to be Foucault's political weakness, his inability to ground resistance. While I do not read Foucault as rejecting, or antithetical to, political resistance, I do find that aspect of his work underdeveloped, and shoring up Foucault's understanding of bodily genealogy with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of bodily subjectivity provides a stronger basis for liberatory politics. Specifically, feminist resistance to oppressive bodily constructions can be grounded by looking

at Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's notions, respectively, of habit and discipline. I argue that disciplined bodies can be seen as habit-bodies, and that change and resistance can be possible through re-habitation, or self-discipline.

A key benefit to reading Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together is that their respective limitations that can be strengthened by the other. Merleau-Ponty, for example, is difference-challenged: "Merleau-Ponty is clear that one's experience of one's body is mediated but he does not identify the social devices whereby differences are introduced," and he ignores the fact that "bodies are categorised differently and invested with different meanings, with the consequence, in many cases...that persons are treated differently—which, in the context of a world of interdependencies, amounts to a differential in agency capacity" (Crossley 39). Foucault's genealogical method is optimal for introducing and analyzing the differences in embodied meanings and capacities that Merleau-Ponty overlooks; thus, "Foucault's work provides a possible path for the realization, extension and development of Merleau-Ponty's work, in a fashion which overcomes the major problems therein" (111). Furthermore, "If we are to take Foucault's political project seriously, it is precisely to the work of writers such as Merleau-Ponty that we should turn because it is precisely these writers who, having dismissed the idea of human nature and essence, were concerned to examine the notion of situated self-creation" (1994, 131). In other words, Foucault's most frequently cited limitation from a feminist perspective, lack of attention to agency and intentionality, can be ameliorated by combining his work with Merleau-Ponty's strong theory of the body-subject as agentic and capable of self-directed change. In short, it is my contention that Merleau-Ponty and Foucault have the potential to work together to provide a thorough, complete, and robust theory of embodied subjectivity that can withstand the problems inherent in either approach alone.

A combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian feminist theory of embodied subjectivity, then, is what I attempt to ground in this dissertation. While I use the word ‘embodiment’ frequently throughout the dissertation, it is a problematic word for it implies a dualistic model: embodiment, or the insertion of subjectivity, rationality, consciousness, and agency *into* a body from which it is still ontologically distinct. Em-bodiment, in-body-ment, conjures images of the ghost in the machine, of a spirit animating what would otherwise be dead, inert material. This is not at all what I wish to conjure, but the language simply lacks words for the concept I seek to elucidate. Thus when I speak of ‘embodiment’ I mean bodies that *are* subjective, agentic and intentional; bodies that *are* conscious, that *are* knowledgeable, that *are* meaningful. Because women are embodied subjects in this sense, and because we have historically been genealogically and discursively constructed in ways that are oppressive, limiting, and harmful, it is my goal in this dissertation to provide a theory that can both help us better and more accurately understand our discursive pasts and provide paths to self-directed, individual and collective liberatory change for a freer and more open, yet still firmly embodied, future.

## **Chapter Summaries**

Chapter one is devoted to an investigation of Merleau-Ponty’s work on the body in order to lay the groundwork for what in his work is valuable for a feminist theory of embodiment. The concepts I focus on include those of attending to perception as a way of understanding the insufficiency of dualism; the body as a habitualized, knowing, body-subject; body image as a basis for agency; and embodiment as a basis for communication and intersubjectivity. In this chapter, I argue that in contrast to the Western philosophical tradition of denigrating the body as other to rationality, as an impediment to knowledge and understanding, Merleau-Ponty’s

reclaiming of the body as the basis of epistemology is groundbreaking. Merleau-Ponty's focus on lived experience offers a dramatic improvement over earlier body-denying dualistic accounts of human being, and I examine his richly insightful accounts of lived, experienced bodily activity as the basis of being, meaning and knowledge in/of the world. This chapter includes an investigation of how Merleau-Ponty grounds and justifies his account of the body-subject: the body as the locus and source of consciousness, of meaning, and of one's ability to know rather than as a sheer object essentially divided from subjectivity. I argue that his notion of the body-subject forms a promising basis for rethinking embodiment in a liberatory way: Merleau-Ponty's body-subject gets rid of the dualistic object-body *without* getting rid of subjectivity and agency, which are crucial concepts for liberation. Merleau-Ponty shows that I am agentic and I have subjectivity *not* because I am essentially a mind, but because I *am*, fundamentally, an embodied being engaged within an embodied world. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that attending to the experiences of body-habits and knowledge open me to myself as a being whose knowledge and consciousness, whose subjectivity, is rooted in bodily materiality, and in this chapter I argue that such a position is an ideal starting point for a feminist theory that seeks to reconnect women and women's subjectivity to bodily materiality in a progressive, rather than regressive, way.

Chapter two turns to Foucault's work on the body, again with a view to laying the groundwork for determining which Foucaultian concepts are useful for a feminist theory of embodiment. In this chapter I discuss the shifting, developing concepts Foucault employs throughout his work to explain embodiment and subjectivity. The themes I focus on include the body as normalized, disciplined, docile, and discursively constructed, yet also a potential source of pleasure and agentic resistance; Foucault's rejection of and return to the concept of subjectivity; and the feminist potential that emerges by looking at Foucault's work as a

developmental whole rather than as a series of disparate and conflicting projects. I begin by looking at Foucault's theory of power, which is, of course, central to his work on bodies. I investigate his notion of disciplinary power as the vast, various, complexly intertwined networks of societal, cultural, institutional, and historical forces that create and shape who and what we are, and I argue that Foucault (like Merleau-Ponty) presents a non-dualistic account of the ways in which individuals are subjectified and subjugated via power working on bodies. I also show why Foucault's understanding of power and of bodies as discursively constructed is beneficial to feminism, despite potential objections that he renders bodies docile and devoid of agency. By looking at the trajectory of Foucault's work, I argue that his later work on the care of the self does not entail ignoring or repudiating his earlier work on how power constructs the body, and that his references to subjectivities and resistances enhance his discussion of bodies such that they are treated not solely as objects but also as agentic, resistive, and empowered. I argue that Foucault's later work supports the position that while power is still central in shaping us, it is possible for us to contribute to our own self-constitution such that there is no contradiction inherent in drawing on both early and late Foucault to discuss embodied subjectivity, and that the differences between his early and late work reflect a different emphasis rather than a radical shift in position. Thus, I show that Foucault's work as a whole is a compelling resource for feminists in that it presents bodies as subject to the types of institutional, societal, and historical forces that feminists critique while also leaving room for agentic, bodily resistance to oppressive norms via care of the self and self-directed discipline.

In chapter three, I turn to the feminist schools of thought that draw on either Merleau-Ponty or Foucault and examine their criticisms of each other to unpack the difficulty in bringing the two together. I begin by looking at phenomenological feminist critiques of Foucault.

Feminists who find Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology insightful argue that Foucault's poststructuralism dangerously misunderstands and devalues concrete, fleshy bodily materiality, focusing on discourse at the expense of lived experience. I show how these feminists present a strong argument that feminist philosophy should attend to and take seriously women's experiences rather than risking women losing credibility by labeling their experiences as mere discursive epiphenomena. I also elucidate feminist objections to Foucault's early position on docile bodies, most notably the criticism that a docile body is one without agency, and thus a theory that subjects bodies to discursive forces outside their control deprives them of agency and denies opportunities for liberatory transformation. I then turn to the poststructuralist feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty. Foucaultian feminists disagree with phenomenological feminists' stance on experience, arguing that it is naïve to rely on accounts of experiences without examining the discursive forces that shape them. Furthermore, Foucault-inspired feminists argue that it is simply not possible to access the experiences of material bodies prior to or untouched by cultural/discursive constitution, and that attempting to do so undermines feminist theory by relegating women to precisely the 'natural' sphere in which they have traditionally been trapped. Feminists who find Foucault's work compelling also argue against a pitfall in Merleau-Ponty, his theory of the anonymous body, claiming that relying on materiality that is untouched by culture and thus universally accessible serves only to ignore differences and erase others' experiences and positions, reifying the notion that white, straight male embodiment is the norm. They also argue that Merleau-Pontian feminists' understanding of the body as 'natural' and generic is dangerously essentializing. In this chapter, I show that the two schools of thought disagree largely because of the political implications of each position: those who claim that there is an anonymous or prediscursive body argue that rejecting this body amounts to an erasure of bodily

materiality that rids us of the possibility of subjectivity, agency and resistance; those who reject the prediscursive body argue that an appeal thereto traps us in essentialistic, oppressive normativity regarding correlations between body and identity, and that it threatens to erase differences by overemphasizing bodily anonymity.

Given the difference between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty and the differing feminist schools of thought that take their points of departure from one or the other, is it possible to bring the two together without merely reducing one to the other, or glossing over significant and fundamental differences? In chapter four I argue that this is possible, that treating the body as discursive (Foucault) does not necessarily entail ignoring its materiality (Merleau-Ponty), and that recognizing bodily materiality does not necessarily lead to the pitfalls of anonymity or essentialism. I attempt to mediate the disparities elucidated in chapter three by arguing that a fruitful appropriation of Merleau-Ponty on the body can survive without the anonymous body—indeed, can be even more fruitful thus—and that Foucault’s emphasis on discourse need not eviscerate the materiality and lived-ness of the body and bodily experience. I argue that by looking at the development of Foucault’s stance on subjectivity, a degree of harmony can be found with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject—for if we take Foucault’s later claim that he has been talking about subjectivity all along seriously, then there is no contradiction in accepting both Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body-subject and Foucault’s early work on the body as well as his later work on the care of the self. Furthermore, while I argue that agency is not necessarily absent in nor antithetical to Foucault’s position, I still need to call on Merleau-Ponty to flesh out the concepts of agency and intentionality, in particular through his notion of the “I can.” In other words, Foucault’s position does not preclude agency, but it does not elaborate on it, either. Merleau-Ponty’s concept agency does not conflict with Foucault’s

position, and helps to flesh out and elucidate what is only vaguely implicit in Foucault. I also argue that Merleau-Ponty's habit-body is not necessarily opposed to Foucault's disciplined body, but can actually be thought together with it, and that this combination paves the way for agentic resistance to oppression by allowing for the possibility of self-discipline and rehabilitation. I argue that discipline as Foucault describes it, as a constructor of docile bodies, is only half of the picture: disciplined bodies are bodies that have been shaped by normative forces such that they become habituated in certain normative ways, but habits are not intractable—habits can change, and discipline can be (to an extent) self-chosen and self-directed. The concept of self-discipline comes out in Foucault's later work on care of the self, and I argue that looking at care of the self in phenomenological terms strengthens the argument that the body-subject can, to an extent, work on its own habituation in resistive ways. Merleau-Ponty's notion of habit helps to flesh out something that is underdeveloped by Foucault, for he talks about care of the self but does not specify how this happens. I argue that it happens via self-habitation. Thus not only is Foucault's work on disciplinary power not contradictory to Merleau-Ponty's work on the habit-body/subject-body, I argue that Foucault on discipline and care of the self combined with Merleau-Ponty on the body as subject and as habituated can ground resistance in a way that is stronger and more complete than what can be found in Merleau-Ponty or Foucault alone.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I discuss why bringing Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together specifically works for a feminist theory of embodiment. I argue that how I understand and experience my self/body can be informed by both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and that such understanding can ground both personal liberatory change and feminist ethics and politics. Chapter five illustrates the benefits of a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian stance on embodiment by looking at case studies of bodily habits and disciplines that are better



understood from a combined perspective than from either one or the other alone. I start by examining examples from other feminists: Iris Marion Young's essay on women's embodied habits, *Throwing Like a Girl*, Honi Fern Haber's analysis of bodybuilding as a potentially resistive Foucaultian discipline, and Ladelle McWhorter's example of line dancing as a use of bodies and pleasures to ground resistance. After showing how each of these positions could be strengthened by including both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, I turn to my own example: karate. I investigate my own practice of karate as a body discipline that I use to rehabilitate myself and alter my body image in a way that leads to more/different empowerment and freedom, more possibilities, and a less constricted and oppressed experience of living my discursively constructed body. I use my experience and understanding of karate to illustrate how bodies can be both disciplined and habitualized, fully discursive and lived, *and* involved in resistance to sexism and oppression. Finally, turning to the questions of intersubjectivity and collective resistance, I discuss why the combined approach works politically and as a basis for communication and community. I look at McWhorter's Foucaultian understanding of political action and Kruks's Merleau-Pontian analysis of feeling-with as a basis for community, and I explain why an approach that combines Merleau-Ponty and Foucault works better from a feminist point of view than either one alone. Again, I use karate as an example, arguing that the understanding of my body I gain from practicing karate is instrumental in allowing me both to experience myself as politically viable and to understand and communicate with others such that we can work together for feminist, liberatory political change.

## **CHAPTER ONE: MERLEAU-PONTY, EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY, AND FEMINISM**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore Merleau-Ponty's potential as a feminist resource, mining his work for tools towards a liberatory theory of embodiment. A grounding tenet of my thesis is that a strong feminist philosophy cannot ignore—on the contrary, must fundamentally embrace—the reality and lived experiences of embodiment in its construction and evaluation of theories and practices. Because Merleau-Ponty is a philosopher of embodiment, feminists have much to gain from reading him as an ally and resource in their discussions of embodiment; and given the anti-feminist historical hierarchization of male/active/rational/mind over female/passive/emotional/body, a philosophical focus on the body that undercuts dualisms, such as Merleau-Ponty's, is of immense value to feminist work. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body as a habituated, knowing, intentional, meaningful body-subject overcomes dualisms of body and mind, nature and culture, self and world, and self and other. I argue that Merleau-Ponty presents an experientially non-dualistic, phenomenological account of the body that is far preferable from a feminist perspective to accounts that uphold any of the above dualisms (and his focus on the body is key to undermining dualism in multiple forms). Furthermore, I show that his claims about habit, body knowledge, bodily meaning-making, and lived experience are essential to a robust feminist theory of embodiment. In this chapter, then, I follow the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's thought from his reworked understanding of the experience of perception to his conclusions about the experience and reality of embodied subjectivity.

As I do this, I discuss the positive value I as a feminist, and other feminist philosophers, find in these concepts by exploring moments in Merleau-Ponty's work with feminist potential.

A number of feminist thinkers have realized the benefits of adopting a Merleau-Pontian approach to embodied subjectivity, including Linda Alcoff, Elisabeth Grosz, Sonia Kruks, Shannon Sullivan, Gail Weiss, and Iris Marion Young. Specifically, two points frequently arise as to why Merleau-Ponty is valuable for feminists: 1) his understanding of the epistemic value of experience that rejects classical empiricism while retaining the centrality of experience to knowledge and meaning; and 2) his understanding of embodied subjectivity that undercuts classical dualisms which for so long relegated women to the hierarchical position of dominated, oppressed Other. In this chapter, I show how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological overcoming of the Western philosophical tradition's claim that human subjectivity is located in an autonomous, rational mind and that autonomy and rationality are characteristics of men, not women—a claim that entails that women are not human subjects; they are not people, they are things—is beneficial for feminism.

### **Merleau-Ponty's Feminist Potential: Phenomenology, Experience, and Embodied Subjectivity**

#### 1. Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Context: Intellectualism, Empiricism, and Feminism

Merleau-Ponty's corpus is a trajectory that works out an evolving rejection and replacement of classical, dualistic theories of the world. The bulk of this transformation occurs in his major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, where he focuses on reclaiming experience to illustrate the problematic nature of canonical philosophical concepts and develops his new theory of embodied subjectivity. In his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty shifts away from the experiential focus of his work on embodiment and discusses in more abstract, theoretical terms the ontology of embodied subjectivity. I focus primarily on

*Phenomenology of Perception* because I find it most beneficial for my project. Merleau-Ponty's earlier work, *The Structure of Behavior*, investigates psychology and gestalt theories, and while he begins to develop his non-dualistic understanding of mind, body, self, and world in that work, he does not fully work out this conception of embodied subjectivity until *Phenomenology of Perception*. Furthermore, although many feminists find his late work *The Visible and the Invisible* valuable as an ontological approach to reclaiming the body, my focus is on lived experience rather than on ontology; thus I do not specifically employ the arguments of *The Visible and the Invisible* because I find that work tangential to my project. To clarify: while I agree with the ontological claims in *The Visible and The Invisible*, for my purposes they do not add anything necessary to my project. The main concept in that work, that of flesh as a chiasmic interworking of consciousness and bodily materiality, is interesting enough as an ontological underpinning for the unity of mind and body, but because it gets out of the realm of experience and into the realm of Being, it is a separate project from what I am working on. Constructing an argument about the ontological nature of bodily being that abstracts and generalizes far beyond concrete experiences, as Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh does, goes beyond the realm of my argument. In my estimation, Merleau-Ponty's experiential, phenomenological approach in the earlier work grounds a pragmatic overcoming of dualism that is even more helpful to feminists than the abstract, theoretical, ontological arguments presented in the later work.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a response to and a rejection of previous centuries of canonical ontology and epistemology, from Descartes through Husserl. His *Phenomenology of Perception* argues against two traditional schools of thought which misunderstand perception and thereby misconstrue the nature of the relationships between body and mind, self and world, and self and other: intellectualism (or rationalism) and empiricism. Rationalists and idealists

from Descartes to Kant, along with the British empiricists, all fundamentally misunderstand what it means to be an embodied subject in a world because they all employ faulty epistemologies. Both schools of thought make mistaken dualist assumptions, and both attempt to theorize direct experience in a way that ignores the actual experience itself, the *what-it-is-like-ness* of the experience. Intellectualism and empiricism alike draw a sharp, substantial severing line between body and mind, denigrating the body's centrality to meaning and knowledge by positing the body as mere object and Self as constituting Ego. As Merleau-Ponty shows, such a position necessarily leads to a misunderstanding of perceptive experience.

The empiricist's mistake is theorizing perception as atomistic. The empiricist posits that perception is a matter of taking in individual bits of raw data (brown-rectangular-hard-here-now) and then performing a mental function on them to posit the existence of an object possessing certain qualities (brown wooden desk). According to this understanding of perception, I take in sense data as atomic, isolated *qualia* that my mind then actively combines into a more general perception; and while I see only one perspective on the object I posit the existence of the rest of it. I see the top and front of the desk, and posit that an underside and back exist to complete the object. But if I follow this move to its logical conclusion, I necessarily go beyond what experience actually gives me: "The positing of the object therefore makes us go beyond the limits of our own experience which is brought up against and halted by an alien being, with the result that finally experience believes that it extracts all its own teaching from the object" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 70). The empiricist experience *believes* it gets everything from the object, but this position is "Obsessed with being, *and forgetful of the perspectivism of my experience*" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 70, emphasis added). When I believe that the object gives me all of my knowledge, I have forgotten that I see only from *somewhere* and not from everywhere or

nowhere. Merleau-Ponty argues that when we attend to our actual experience rather than the theoretical prejudice that perception is the kind of thing the empiricists claim it is, we realize that there is no such thing as a primitive ‘impression’—we do not ever experience a sensation of pure here-and-now-thisness: “The pure impression is, therefore, not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception....An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable” (1962, 4). Experiences of atomic bits of sense data just do not happen; we do not experience sense data in immediately perceived, discrete units that are subsequently combined by the activity of a constituting mind.

According to Merleau-Ponty, intellectualism makes the same general mistake as empiricism, but in idealistic terms. For Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian project is problematic because it requires that I first look at *myself* before I can understand the world—as though I *could* sever myself entirely from the world—and posits that I then reconstruct knowledge of the world from knowledge of myself, where ‘self’ is understood as a disembodied, constituting Ego (1962, ix-x). In other words, for the Cartesian intellectualist, knowledge of the world is not found in the object, but is constructed in a purely cognitive, non-bodily subject which somehow has a privileged, disembodied view on the world it seeks to know. While the empiricist places too much emphasis on the object, claiming to account for the totality of the universe through the possibility of total perception of the object, the Cartesian tries to place too much significance on the subject, claiming that the subject has the ability to construct and synthesize total knowledge of the object. Cartesianism is flawed because it produces the world as a result of analysis rather than experience, failing to recognize that “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi-xvii). If I follow this totalizing line of thought, I end in idealism: “I detach myself from my experience and pass to the *idea*. Like the object, the idea purports to be

the same for everybody, valid in all times and places, and the individuation of an object in an objective point of time and space finally appears as the expression of a universal positing power” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 71). The intellectualist problem, then, is assuming a disembodied, all-seeing Mind, a god’s-eye view that is not actually available to the embodied knower, for I see from my particular, bodily situation, not from ‘above’ or outside of the world of materiality.

Thus for Merleau-Ponty, philosophy cannot begin with abstract analyses of atomic sense data or of “clear and distinct perceptions,” because both impose preconceptions about the nature of sensation and perception on the actual experience thereof. On the contrary, for Merleau-Ponty, “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions” (1962, x-xi). In other words, when I perceive, I am neither constructing nor analyzing a world; rather, perception itself is the always-present field which all other analysis of my experience requires. Perception is thus the foundation for all my experiences and meaningful interactions with the world. Furthermore, the world is “no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 92). The world is what is prerequisite for any and all experience and thought, rather than that which is either transmitted to or constructed by experience and thought.

Both empiricism and intellectualism make the same fundamental mistake, a mistake Merleau-Ponty attributes to a faulty mode of thinking he calls objective thought. The objective thinker mistakenly believes that total access to a universe of knowledge is possible, whether through perception of the object or through the synthesizing powers of the subject: “In fact, the

image of a constituted world where, with my body, I should be only one object among others, and the idea of an absolute constituting consciousness are only apparently antithetical; they are a dual expression of a universe perfectly explicit in itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 41). The mistake of objective thought is that it claims the power to exceed the actual experience of perception and sensation, thereby assuming that a total universe is available to our knowledge. Empiricism believes that we can learn everything from the object, intellectualism from the idea; “perception either mirrors a fully determinate object (empiricism) or constitutes an object in light of a fully determinate idea (intellectualism)” (Evans and Lawlor, 3). But for Merleau-Ponty both of these are the same type of mistake, a mistake that problematically ignores perspective and situatedness in its desire to exceed experience. In order to posit the object in its completeness, I have to posit infinite perspectives, most of which I never actually experience:

Thus the positing of one single object, in the full sense, demands the compositive bringing into being of all these experiences in one act of manifold creation. Therein it exceeds perceptual experience and the synthesis of horizons—as the notion of a *universe*, that is to say, a completed and explicit totality, in which the relationships are those of reciprocal determination, exceeds that of a *world*, or an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 71).

If I go too far in exceeding what I actually experience (e.g. positing the pieces of the desk that I do not actually see, or on a larger scale, bits of the universe that I do not see), I claim access to a totality or universe that I cannot actually know as opposed to a perspectival, situated world drawn from what I actually experience (the bits of desk and world that I can see from my own individual location) that I can actually know.

Attending to the actual experience of perceiving the desk reveals that meaningful perception presupposes the relationality and the thing-ness of the thing as localized and situated. I must recognize that I cannot divest perception of its already inherent relationality and meaning: “Each part arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is



therefore already charged with a *meaning*. . . . The perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field’” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 4). Merleau-Ponty also refers to the field as “a horizon of meaning” (1962, 15) whose existence is prerequisite for a percept to have any meaning. Merleau-Ponty has a holistic understanding of knowledge; knowledge is not a conglomerate of sense data (elements or atoms) but is the *sens* or meaning of a whole perceptual/embodied experience. Why else would I associate brown-here-now and hard-here-now and rectangle-here-now and come up with a ‘thing’ called ‘desk’, and be able to differentiate ‘desk’ from ‘floor’ and ‘wall’? If all I truly perceived were the isolated *qualia* with no previous concept of a desk, I would not *see* a desk; I would see brownness and rectangularity, nothing more. However, because I do have a concept of a desk and its difference from a floor or a wall, I am able to perceive holistically such that I *first* see the desk and then, upon analysis if I so desire, break it down into shape, color, size, texture, etc. Furthermore, it is my embodiment that precludes the possibility of the totalizing knowledge falsely assumed by objective thought: precisely because I *am* embodied, I am limited to perceiving from my body’s particular, local situation. I see only the top and front of the desk because my body is located in front of it, looking down on it from above. I cannot stay in one bodily location and actually experience the entire desk.

The key difference between Merleau-Ponty’s position and the objective thought he rejects, then, is that for Merleau-Ponty our sense experiences, because embodied, are always local, situated, and relational rather than atomistic or total. Contra the objective thinker, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that we *never* have a perception or experience of ‘red here now’ because the red is always part of a larger whole and has meaning only as part of a larger whole. In order to perceive red, we have to already recognize its difference from blue; in order to

perceive the picture, we must recognize its distinction from and relationship to the wall on which it hangs. We would not be able to recognize what it is we are sensing if we did not already have a meaning constructed for it. Associations of data, rather than being actively constructed by the mind *after* receiving bare impressions, are always *presupposed by* meaningful perception. A structure of meaning is a prerequisite for recognizing any object of perception. Meaning is always already there.

By relying on objective thought, then, both empiricism and intellectualism deny the intertwining relationality that is required for any meaning, and posit fully determined objects that relate either purely externally (empiricism) or purely internally (intellectualism) to other objects *and* to subjects.<sup>3</sup> If we return to the what-it-is-likeness of experience, we get very different conclusions about perception and embodiment that lead us to understand that mind-body dualism fails as an explanation of our being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty argues that if we attend to actual experience, we will be led by “authentic reflection” to recognize the falsity of both intellectualism and empiricism (1962, 41). Because empiricists and intellectualists forget the fundamental fact that my body perceives from a localized perspective within an always relational field of meaning, they make the mistake of presuming the possibility of objective thought and therefore “intellectualism and empiricism do not give us any account of the human experience of the world; they tell us what God might think about it” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 255).

To expose the flaw in assuming that anyone can know “what God might think about it,” or have an external grasp of the world such that to see an object is to project all possible perspectives of it, Merleau-Ponty contraposes the objective view with the *experience* of seeing an object such as a house. According to objective thought, “...the house *itself* is none of these

---

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty recognizes the impossibility of having any one object determinate in itself because everything is constituted and meaningful relationally, as I will discuss later.

appearances: it is, as Leibniz said, the geometrized projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 67). But this understanding of the experience of seeing the house must be rejected, for “Is not to see always to see from somewhere? To say that the house itself is seen from nowhere is surely to say that it is invisible! Yet when I say that I see the house with my own eyes, I am saying something that cannot be challenged” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 67). In saying that the fact that I experience seeing the house is incontrovertible, “I am trying to express in this way a certain manner of approaching the object, the ‘gaze’ in short, which is as indubitable as my own thought, as directly known to me” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 67). This example shows that if we examine objective thought on its own terms, we rediscover experience behind it and conclude that objective thought is inadequate. Thus an adequate understanding of our place in the world and our perceptual grasp of it requires positing experience, as opposed to a view transcendently divorced from experience, as fundamental. Rather than questioning the veracity of experience as Descartes does, we must begin with experience because it is our only access to the world: “We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi). Thus we must “return to the world of actual experience” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 57) which is prior to, and obscured by, faulty objective thought.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument that pure, unmediated sensation is a myth and that pure impressions or *qualia* cannot be experienced has significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between body and mind: namely, that theories relying on mind-body dualism cannot account for the experience of perception as Merleau-Ponty describes it. Because I never experience an individual *quale* but always and only have meaningful perceptive encounters in

the world, I must recognize that more is going on with sensation than the senses operating as mechanisms to transmit information to a disembodied consciousness which then interprets and organizes the data. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (*sens*) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence. The pure *quale* would be given to us only if the world were a spectacle and one's own body a mechanism with which some impartial mind made itself acquainted. Sense experience, on the other hand, invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body (1962, 52).

In other words, we live in a world that is always already meaningful, and the always-already-there meaning arises in reference to our body, because the *body* is what allows sensations to occur as relational: *the body senses and perceives*, as one unified entity, as opposed to the dualist account which differentiates the mechanistic process of sensation from the conscious process of integrating sense data into meaningful perceptions. Attending to sensation and realizing that it is never atomistic and is always relational teaches us that we are not conscious minds substantially severed from mechanistic bodies. This is a crucial, key point of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigation of sensation and perception: simply attending to what actually happens during the experiences of sensation and perception confronts us with the inadequacy of dualistic theories. The senses cannot be understood as transmitters that convey data from external objects into a non-bodily consciousness; rather, bodily sensation and perceptual consciousness are inseparably wrapped up in each other (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 9). Merleau-Ponty argues that

normal functioning [of the senses] must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not so much copied, as composed. And if we try to seize 'sensation' within the perspective of the bodily phenomena which pave the way to it, *we find not a psychic individual, a function of certain known variables, but a formation already bound up with a larger whole, already endowed with a meaning* (1962, 9, emphasis added).

The subject, then, is not an atomistic, self-contained unit. There is no psychic individual inhabiting a substantially distinct, mechanistic body. Furthermore, the psychological and biological aspects of the human organism cannot be separated. “There is no physiological definition of sensation, and more generally there is no physiological psychology which is autonomous, because the physiological event itself obeys biological and psychological laws” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 9). For Merleau-Ponty, it is erroneous to attempt a separation of the biological from the physiological from the psychological. These various aspects of embodied being simply do not occur autonomously.

Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of intellectualism, empiricism, and objective thought, all of which rely on body-denying dualisms, is important for feminism because learning to recognize experience, rather than a transcendental Ego or consciousness, as primary is part of what is central to the feminist project: re-valuing the body. As a feminist I also reject the two schools of objective thought because both schools rely on splitting body from mind and self from world, and the history of dualism is the history of the exclusion of women. If only disembodied, rational minds can be legitimate knowers and thus full human subjects, and only men are admitted as fully rational, women are excluded from the realm of human subjectivity. Furthermore, divorcing experience and knowledge from situatedness (relying on a god’s-eye view or a view from nowhere) implicitly reifies and normalizes *a* perspective (usually the white, straight, male, able-bodied perspective) as *the* perspective. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s relational, situated, embodied approach to perception and experience removes the ground from positions that grant authority to one group of people at the expense of marginalizing and erasing all who are differently situated. The body, of course, is a fundamental locus of such differences, and thus Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on embodiment meshes well with feminist concerns. Shannon

Sullivan, for example, recognizes in Merleau-Ponty's work a wealth of resources for feminists, including "the primacy given to bodily existence...the importance of situation for understanding human engagement with and in the world...and the emphasis placed on lived experience" (2001, 65). These elements are important for feminist philosophy because if we ignore bodies and the fundamentally corporeal nature of existence, we are left with the dualist definition of subjectivity as purely mental and disembodied which has excluded women for most of the history of Western philosophy. Furthermore, according to Linda Alcoff, Merleau-Ponty offers feminists a better philosophical groundwork than the Cartesian/Kantian tradition that devalues the body, emotions, the feminine, etc.: "Phenomenology thus can offer to feminist theory the beginnings of an expanded conception of reason and knowledge, one that is not predicated upon the exclusion of the feminine, the concrete, or the particular, and one that will not require women to become manlike before they can participate in the sphere of philosophical thought" (2000, 265). Once we reject mind-body dualism, as Merleau-Ponty does, the whole house of cards comes tumbling down: no longer are rationality and the ability to gain impartial, objective knowledge associated with disembodied (read: male) subjectivity; no longer is having an invisible (read: male) body a prerequisite for subjectivity. Rather, on phenomenological grounds, we must recognize the primacy of experience—always embodied—in gaining knowledge and subjectivity. Thus women can now be recognized as subjects *without* having to reject the particularities of our embodiment, without having to try to become more manlike. On Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological grounds, we must refigure what it means to be a knowing subject for men and women alike, and no mode of embodiment is theoretically cut off from full inclusion in the sphere of the human, knowing subject.

Moving forward in the history of faulty ontology and epistemology, Merleau-Ponty's rejection of classical intellectualism and empiricism requires a concomitant refiguring of phenomenology, for phenomenology in its inception with Husserl maintains the problems of objective thought in its overly Cartesian approach. Thus Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology differs significantly from that of his predecessor, Husserl. For Husserl, phenomenology is entirely (and problematically, in my view) essentialist: essences are intuited, and they are universal and formal, and Husserl argues that phenomenology allows the thinker to grasp ideal essences in abstraction from concrete individuals. Everything of the same type has the same essential characteristics, and these can be known and grasped by a purely mental, cognitive function. By ignoring the primacy of experience and embodiment, Husserl's mentalistic, Cartesian approach perpetuates problematic masculinist assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's phenomenology because it ignores 'thisness,' the Other, the body, locatedness. It erases rather than deals with the problem of other subjectivities. (The existence and specificity of other minds is not a problem if we all share a universal, generic consciousness that grants access to a universal Truth, as Husserl claims). The flaw in Husserl is his attempt to separate essence from existence, bracketing off actual existence and dealing only with questions of essence. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, returns phenomenology to a concern with existence; hence Merleau-Ponty is an existential phenomenologist because existential questions are necessary for examining phenomenological questions (Priest 17). Husserl's phenomenology appropriates the Cartesian mistake and tries to get at a phenomenological understanding of the world, but because it is based on Cartesianism, Husserl's phenomenology fails for much the same reasons as the failure of intellectualism and

empiricism in producing an adequate account of our lived experience, our relationship with and knowledge of the world, and the experience of human embodied meaning.

Husserl's phenomenology rests on the notion of the phenomenological reduction. The phenomenological reduction is the suspension of belief in our natural attitudes or common-sense beliefs about the world, and for Husserl this is required in order to find essences (Priest 20). Merleau-Ponty argues that such a reduction fails because rests on the faulty assumption that it is *possible* to set aside or bracket the 'natural attitude,' the way in which we pre-reflectively apprehend and make sense of our experiences, and come to a deeper theoretical understanding of existence that will be more 'true' than our everyday experiences. For Merleau-Ponty this cannot happen because experience necessarily precedes theory; our theories are always already colored and shaped by our experiences so it is impossible to bracket everyday experience and engage in pure, abstract theory.<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that we have to bracket not everyday experience, but scientific/theoretical explanations, because theories are always secondary to experience rather than foundational so rather than trying to scientifically explain things, phenomenology simply seeks to describe (Matthews 32). Thus phenomenology as refigured by Merleau-Ponty starts with situated, localized experience and rejects universalism and essentialism.

Essentialism is inherently problematic from a liberatory point of view, and feminist critiques of essentialism are well known.<sup>5</sup> Essentialism demands adherence to rigid categories in ways that require women, for example, to be properly 'feminine' in order to be 'real' women or to count as women; furthermore, essentialist concepts of womanhood exclude, deny and erase

---

<sup>4</sup> Some argue that in his later works, Husserl actually comes close to Merleau-Ponty's position by rejecting the notion that consciousness and its ideal intended objects are fundamental, and arguing, to the contrary, for the need to bracket theories and go back to what experience itself tells us. In this reading of Husserl, the world that is always already there replaces consciousness as fundamental (Matthews 29). However, Merleau-Ponty is responding to a more traditional, Cartesian reading of Husserl.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Grosz 1994; hooks 1984; Lugones and Spelman 1983; and Spelman 1988.



differences among women in terms of sexuality, (dis)ability, race, class, and other factors that contribute to identity. This is precisely the type of thinking that a feminist theory of embodiment should challenge, and is part of why Merleau-Ponty's work is valuable for feminists. Not only does he undercut problematic dualisms, he recognizes the flaws of essentialism. An essentialist phenomenology, in fact, makes a similar mistake to dualist objective thought: the claim to intuit essences, as Husserl does, is a false claim to a total universe of knowledge. From a feminist perspective, such a claim is dangerous because to know the essence of woman is to define all women in a way that erases particularity and, again, reifies *a* way of being a woman as *the* way of being a woman. Most troublingly, essentialist misogynistic ways of thinking typically essentialize women in bodily terms, defining women by our biology and reproductive capacities (Grosz 14). This reduction of women to bodily functions tracks dualist thinking that treats men as rational subjects and women as bodily objects. By rejecting both objective thought and Husserl's essentialist approach to phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty provides feminists with a phenomenology that has the potential to shed light on women's lived experiences in non-essentialist and non-dualist ways.

Rejecting objective thought and Husserl's essentialist phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty argues instead for the primacy of experience via perception (although reconfigured away from intellectualist and empiricist understandings of perception). The goal of refiguring perception is to come to a fresh understanding and appreciation of embodied experience (an understanding, I argue, that bodes well for feminism). Merleau-Ponty states his goal of reconceiving perception and experience in his seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, thus:

The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and

to subjectivity its inherence in history. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system ‘Self-others-things’ as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise (1962, 57).

Returning to *experiencing* experience (rather than theorizing about it) entails recognizing that the experiencing being is *in* the world of experience, in-habiting that world, not analyzing it from without. To return to experience in this way is to redefine what is meant by *world*: the world is what I *inhabit*, not what I contemplate from ‘above’ or without (Matthews 45). “The world is there before any possible analysis of mine”: Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology seeks simply to describe what is experienced without constructing or imposing theoretical biases—which are always already perspectival—onto that experience (1962, x). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology “is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing” (1962, viii).<sup>6</sup> My experience in and with an always-already-there world grounds the possibility of everything I will know, be and do, so I must begin with attending to my experience as openly and directly as possible, while recognizing that experience is not an immediate, unproblematic direct access to the real via the senses to or to clear and distinct perceptions via the mind, but is always a situated, localized, opaque, interactive process of discovery among self, others, and world.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of perception and experience has key implications for his understanding of reality. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perception tells us that the perceived is ‘real’ in a different sense of the word than the classical sense, and that the

---

<sup>6</sup> This position does not necessarily oppose phenomenology to science, but places phenomenology prior to science, for Merleau-Ponty thinks a phenomenological understanding of lived experience is fundamental and foundational to a scientific description of psycho-social-biological life:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.

The whole universe of science is built on the world as directly experienced (Merleau-Ponty 1962, viii).  
Phenomenology, then, must come prior to science, because our lived experience impacts our very ability to engage in science.

real is inherently partial (1964a, 15-16). Reality is not immediately, objectively grasped in a positivistic manner, yet experience does grant us access to a different conception of the real. Objective thought “rejects the fact or the real in the name of the possible and the self-evident. But it fails to see that the self-evident itself is founded on a fact” (1962, 289)—the fact of our experiential grasp on reality, that the perceived *is* the real in the sense that the world *is* what we perceive. But by ‘reality’ Merleau-Ponty does not mean something universal and objective, shared by all. In fact, he recognizes that different experiencing subjects will report different experiences. This raises the question: do we trust the experiential claims of the mad person or the schizophrenic? The objective, empiricist or intellectualist philosopher will claim that the schizophrenic’s experiences are not ‘real’ in that they do not conform to what philosophical analysis proves to be objectively, universally true about the nature of reality (e.g. the room ‘really’ is of one stable size, the walls are not closing in as the claustrophobic person may report). Merleau-Ponty points to the contradiction faced by the objective philosopher, who wants to believe both that her analysis of perception begets a more ‘real’ or ‘true’ understanding of reality than, say, the schizophrenic’s reported experiences, *and* that perception grants self-evident, unmediated access to the real (in the classical sense of the term). As Merleau-Ponty points out,

We cannot have it both ways: either the person who experiences something knows at the time what he is experiencing, in which case the madman, the dreamer or the subject of perception must be taken at their word, and we merely need to confirm that their language in fact expresses what they are experiencing. Or else the person with the experience is no judge of what he experiences, and in that case the test of self-evidence may be an illusion (1962, 289).

In other words, we do need to trust experience as real, but where we may run into problems is in the fact that there are so many different experiences and different expressions of experiences that do not provide for one coherent, unified, whole of ‘reality’ that can be objectively analyzed and

universally accepted. This dovetails with Merleau-Ponty's claim that reality is inherently partial. I have access to my experiences, but not to yours. This does not mean that we each inhabit separate worlds, but that we each have partial and potentially overlapping experiences, each of which is real in the sense that I really do have the perceptual experiences that I have, as do you, but our perceptual experiences might not necessarily coincide (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 292). Charles Taylor concurs, arguing that Merleau-Ponty does away with antirealism such that while we cannot ever be absolutely right, we cannot ever be absolutely wrong either, because we are always experiencing a world and we *cannot* be wrong about that; only death will sever our contact in and with the world (38-40). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's claim about reality is an implication of his claim about embodied subjectivity:

For Merleau-Ponty, the purpose of existential phenomenology is not to ground absolute knowledge but to describe human existence as it is lived at the between point of world and consciousness. In this space what exists is a dynamic and developing synthesis incapable of total consistency or closure precisely because of our concrete, fleshy embodiment (Alcoff 2000, 258).

Bodily knowledge is our only possible access to knowing the world, and because bodies vary so greatly, the embodied nature of knowledge ensures that our knowledge is always partial and revisable, which is an element of a good feminist philosophy. By avoiding claims of totality and finality, room for differences and improvement remains.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of our partial yet meaning-grounding experience of partial and revisable realities, then, has great potential as a feminist resource. Feminists need to be able to describe experience, for part of the feminist project is understanding women's experiences to portray what women's lives are 'really' like; if we do not understand ourselves and our situations, we cannot have transforming or liberatory goals concerning ourselves and our situations. However, feminists recognize that experience cannot be taken as immediate and

unproblematic, as the British empiricists take it, because that goes hand-in-hand with the problematic assumption that knowledge can be totalized, the very assumption that upholds male supremacy. Thus Alcoff argues that phenomenology, particularly Merleau-Ponty's, is a good groundwork for a feminist theory of embodiment precisely because of his refiguring of experience. According to Alcoff, "Feminist philosophy, if it is to aid in the empowerment of women, must develop a better account of the relationship between reason, theory, and bodily, subjective experience. . . . If women are to have epistemic credibility and authority, we need to reconfigure the role of bodily experience in the development of knowledge" (2000, 251).

Merleau-Ponty can help in this reconfiguration because he recognizes the central, grounding role of experience in knowledge, yet reconfigures experience away from the problematic British empiricist understanding of it. For Alcoff, feminism only 'gets it right' if it is based on an accurate understanding of the way we are able to know, and the only way we are able to know is through experience (although not in the classical empiricist sense). Merleau-Ponty's understanding of how we come to know through experience is thus vital for feminism.

Experience "is and must be the basis of explanation. There is no conceivable alternative basis or ultimate justification for knowledge other than experience of my body in the world" (Alcoff 2000, 262). For Alcoff, we need to recognize the value of experience in producing (not just communicating) knowledge. This does not mean ignoring the crucial role of discourse in formulating knowledge; it simply means refraining from denigrating and denying experience, as some critics of modernity are wont to do. According to Alcoff, most critical responses to the problems of modernity have taken their critique too far in their distrust of experience. She writes, "I believe that, although poststructuralism has provided critically useful elaborations of how social meanings are produced and circulated, the pendulum has swung too far toward the

elimination of experience's formative role in knowledge, and that a renewed attention to Merleau-Ponty's work can provide a helpful corrective" (2000, 252). Experience *is* important, and feminists who reject modernity in its entirety, in their distrust of experience, reject along with it a potentially viable and crucial source of meaning and knowledge. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, on the other hand, can deal with the problems inherent in the empiricist understanding of experience without rejecting experience outright.

Furthermore, Alcoff argues that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of experience paves the way for a robust understanding of identities, including gender identities, because understanding identity requires focusing on concrete particularities and differences, on situatedness rather than sheer rational cogitation. If one of the questions of feminism is how to deal with the identity "woman," then feminism requires a better understanding of identity—an understanding that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can help to ground. To ground such an understanding, we must relate our experiences as members of certain identity categories to our theories thereof: "Feminist theory needs a better account of the relationship between theory and experience, one in which theory is understood as itself embodied rather than simply formative of, without being formed by, bodily experience" (Alcoff 2000, 256). This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty provides when arguing that embodied experience always precedes theory. A feminist theory will never be adequate if it ignores the fact that embodied experience is formative of our theoretical understanding of the world; thus, a feminist theory that starts with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of experience starts on the right track. As Alcoff puts it,

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment provides a nondeterminist, nontransparent account of experience. Experiences matter, but their meaning for us is both ambiguous and dynamic. We are embodied, yet not reduced to physical determinations imagined as existing outside of our place in culture and history. This account helps to capture the dialectics of social identities, in which we are both interpellated into existing categories as well as making them our own (2006, 111).

In other words, experience and identity are shifting, ambiguous categories that are mutable and open to interpretation; yet both, according to Alcoff, are necessary for feminism, because if a person does not understand her identity as both embodied and socially/historically situated, she will not have an accurate grasp of her situation in the world or of how to change it.

## 2. Feminist Potential in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity

In the previous section, I showed that for Merleau-Ponty, attending to the actual experience of perception leads to the conclusion that dualisms severing body from mind and self from world are fundamentally flawed. I now look in more detail at the implications of this conclusion for Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodied subjectivity and for feminist theories of embodiment.

A central tenet of Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic account of embodied subjectivity is that it does not conceive of the body as an object, as a sheer thing, from which my subjectivity is essentially divided, but it conceives the body *as me*, as my subjectivity, as the locus and source of my consciousness, of the meaning of my world, and of my ability to know (1962, 75; 82; 146; 198-199). For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy must begin by describing experience (because in-the-world-ness is foundational and abstract theorizing is not) and this starting point has significant implications regarding mind-body dualism: in describing my experience *of the world*, I *cannot* regard myself (as science might) as merely an object *in the world*. My first clue that my body is not an object is my experience of my body's permanence: it is always 'with' me and I cannot ever leave my body. The permanent presence of my body in all my perceptive experiences differentiates it from objects that can be separated from my perception. I cannot turn away from my body or leave my body the way I can objects; I can turn my back on my computer, but not on

my body because it turns with me—or more accurately, its turning *is* my turning. Furthermore, I can observe objects in a way that I cannot observe my own body: “I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 91). This observational difference is due to the fact that my body is what I perceive objects *with*:

What prevents its ever being an object, ever being ‘completely constituted’ is that it is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches. The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there. If it is permanent, the permanence is absolute and is the ground for the relative permanence of disappearing objects, real objects (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 92).

The experience of pain is also indicative of differences between bodies and sheer objects. For example, when I say ‘my foot hurts,’ I mean that I am feeling pain *in my foot*, bodily, not that my consciousness has performed some sort of cognitive assessment of the situation, e.g. *I stepped on a nail, therefore I must be feeling pain in my foot*. Physical sensations do not work that way: rather, the body is affective in a way ‘mere’ objects are not, so body is not an object (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 93).

The body’s non-objectivity is not pure, however; it is ambiguous. I can observe or consider parts of my body as objects, but never *only* as objects. When I step on a nail, for example, I can take an objectivizing attitude towards my injured foot and direct anger at it—*look at the trouble you cause me, stepping on that nail!*—as if I myself had not done the stepping, but as the pain constantly reminds me, the foot *is* me while the nail is not. My experience of my own body’s ambiguous fluctuation between thing and non-thing gives me experiential evidence that the dualistic definition of the body as a mechanistic object severed from an analyzing consciousness is flawed. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is not



mechanistically causal but is relational. I cannot understand that perception is relational rather than mechanistically causal if I ignore the experience of perception and think of the body as an object:

I cannot envisage this form which is traced out in the nervous system, this exhibiting of a structure, as a set of processes in the third person, as the transmission of movement or as the determination of one variable by another. I cannot gain a removed knowledge of it. In so far as I guess what it may be, it is by abandoning the body as an object, *partes extra partes*, and by going back to the body which I experience at this moment, in the manner, for example, in which my hand moves round the object it touches, anticipating the stimuli and itself tracing out the form which I am about to perceive. *I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 75, emphasis added).

I have to *be* a body in order to perceive, and I have to live through my body in order to have any sort of understanding or knowledge of experience at all. A disembodied mind, or even a Cartesian ego somehow inhabiting a body-machine, simply is not equipped to understand bodily experience. Only a body can do that. When I have an embodied experience, then, my ability even to recognize perception as perception or experience as experience is testimony to the fact of my consciousness's deep inherence in, rather than ontological severance from, my body. Instead of turning the body into mechanistic object, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology takes the experientially much more plausible, simple position that I *am* my body. The word "I" has no meaning or sense apart from embodiment.

The word "I" *does* have sense and meaning, though, within a phenomenal field: a realm of experience, bounded by a perceptual horizon, made possible by the embodied nature of perception and sensation. Merleau-Ponty is clear that this phenomenal field to which he wants to return is *not* in any sense of the term mentalistic or idealistic: "This phenomenal field is not an 'inner world', the 'phenomenon' is not a 'state of consciousness', or a 'mental fact', and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in Bergson's sense" (1962,

57). Merleau-Ponty is explicitly rejecting the notion of privileged interiority that is accessible only by the Self and that is a pure, ideal, non-extended grasp of something external and extended. Not even I have privileged access to (or ‘clear and distinct perception’ of, to borrow a phrase from Descartes) my own internal states: “the philosopher himself could not be clearly aware of *what* he saw in the instant, since he would have had to think it, that is fix and distort it” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 57). Thus rather than the Self consisting of a privileged inner psyche or Ego inhabiting a mechanistic object-body, Merleau-Ponty posits the self as a unified body-subject in which consciousness is possible only as a phenomenon that is bodily through and through: “the consciousness of the body invades the body, the soul spreads over all its parts” (1962, 75). The body *is* conscious; the body *is* the soul. And what the body consciously perceives, as explained earlier, is defined as its access to meaningful reality: “Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only ‘the inner man’, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xi).

I discussed the feminist benefits of a non-dualist understanding of mind and body in the previous section, but I want to reiterate the importance and potential of Merleau-Ponty’s account of subjectivity as fundamentally embodied for feminist liberatory aims. If we no longer conceive of the body as an object and of the mind as the “inner *man*” and instead recognize that human consciousness and subjectivity take place between body and mind, we have no basis for aligning men with minds and women with bodies. Recognizing the epistemological and phenomenological untenability of substance dualism gives the lie to attempts to define women in terms of biological capacities and men in terms of rational capacities. Accepting Merleau-Ponty’s account of the fundamentally intertwined nature of body and mind, as I argue feminists should, entails recognizing that men and women have equal access to the realm of embodied

subjectivity (although our experiences thereof may well differ). Thus Merleau-Ponty's ability to lay Cartesian dualism to rest is a philosophical move with powerful potential towards overcoming the patriarchal hegemony that finds itself legitimized on the basis of mind/body dualism.

Merleau-Ponty's reworking of the phenomenology of perception also has implications for the relationship between self (now understood as a physiological-psychological-biological organism rather than as a consciousness inhabiting a mechanistic body) and world. Our state of being can be described as being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world implies much more than the mere spatial location of the embodied subject (e.g., my body/self is in-the-world in a fundamentally different way than the ice cream is in the freezer) (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 139-140). Being-in-the-world means I do not relate to the world as an object to which I am external and from which I am ontologically divided, but nor do I relate to the world an object to which I am internal (like the ice cream is in the freezer). Rather, my relationship with the world is a deeply intertwined, two-way street that is neither idealistic nor objectivistic. I know the world through my body, and my body through the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82).

To have 'being-in-the-world' in this sense is neither to be a mere object, passively suffering the influence of other objects, nor to be in the God-like situation of creating the world from a position that transcends it; it is to be part of a two-way interaction between ourselves and the rest of the world out of which a meaningful structure to the world emerges. 'Meanings' are thus both 'found in' the world and 'created' by our active dealings with objects (Matthews 54).

We can only know/perceive the world if the world is always already there. We can only perceive if there is something there to perceive, so we do not create, but discover the world, and the world always exceeds our ability to comprehend it and limits our abilities to perceive and create meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, everything is always contextual and relational, always situated. So there is not a body and a world, there is a body-in-world, and of course there is no ontological

subject/object distinction. The objects which surround me would be meaningless to a disembodied consciousness or cognitive function, but they mold into meaning in the context of a flesh-and-blood body that knows how to type on the keyboard, sip from the mug, grasp the pen, sit on the chair, etc. Being-in-the-world means that, “In short, my body is not only an object among others, but an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 236). In other words, I cannot have disembodied, noncontextual knowledge or understanding of anything; knowledge and understanding of self and world are necessarily and deeply implied by and inherent within each other. All knowledge is contextual and relational.

Everything in Merleau-Ponty’s work that I have been discussing thus far—the rejection of intellectualism and empiricism, of Husserl’s phenomenology, of dualism and objective thought, all of his analysis of perception and sensation—is grounded on and supported by Merleau-Ponty’s central, foundational realization, that “*I am my body*” (1962, 198, emphasis added). Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be summed up with this insight. The claim that “I am my body” is indicative of a relational subjectivity always intervolved in a pre-existing, meaningful, situated world: “a *cogito*, an “I” or “self” can exist only in relation to a situation, involving both a world of things and of other people. I can think only if I have something to think *about*, a world to relate my thoughts to; and I can conceive myself as an “I”, a “subject”, only if I am aware of other subjects, other “Is” [sic], from whom I can distinguish myself” (Matthews 33-34). “I am my body” means that my fingers, my toes, my eyes, even my liver are part of my subjectivity. I could not engage meaningfully with objects if I did not have these body parts. This is not to say, of course, that someone with a damaged liver is less of a subject,

but that the liver contributes to the way in which I am a being-in-the-world, to my experiences and actions in the world, even if I am not aware of my liver. I may not be able to describe a direct experience of my liver, but if my liver fails, my experiences of the world—without which my subjectivity is impossible—will certainly change. While Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly discuss internal organs’ contributions to subjectivity, certainly one needs sense organs to be a subject—bodily sense organs, not just a ‘mind,’ whatever that might mean, and not even just a brain. What follows is that *everything about my body is part of my subjectivity*, contributes to the way in which I am a being-in-the-world, an embodied subject. Of course, what follows from this is that my bodily specificity makes me into a different subject than you. And some bodily differences matter more than others. The health of my liver (since it is doing its job) does not particularly affect my everyday subjectivity, intentionality or meaning-making—the shape of my genitals and the color of my skin does, due to social and historical factors that have shaped the meaning of those aspects of my subject-body.<sup>7</sup>

Central to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied subjectivity is his understanding of habit. According to Merleau-Ponty, I know the world and create meaning not simply through any one particular, individual bodily experience or activity; rather, meaning is constructed, and knowledge gained, via habituation (1962, 142-147). Bodily meaning-making takes place in habituation as a specific, structured mode of bodily knowing, which “has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body, but in the body as mediator of a world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 145). Thus bodily activity is not random, but is functionally structured into what Merleau-Ponty calls the habit body, which refers to the set of patterns of behavior that allow us to actively

---

<sup>7</sup> While Merleau-Ponty himself sometimes seems to gloss over or even ignore key bodily differences such as sex, I will show in later chapters that recognizing such differences is compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied subjectivity, and bringing Foucault to the table to enhance our understanding of differences strengthens a feminist theory of embodiment.

engage in the world without constant cognitive guidance. As I live, my body develops habitual ways of being that enable it to interact directly and meaningfully with the world. The knowledge of my body is not knowledge in the abstract, disembodied sense of mental ideas; rather, my body knows how to go about living in the world because it becomes habituated to do so.

Bodily habituation allows me to move about easily in the world without having to cognitively calculate and direct my movements; habit is the basis of constant everyday subject-world interactions, experiences as simple as “go[ing] through a doorway without check[ing] the width of the doorway against that of my body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 143). My body knows that the doorway is wide enough. Bodily habits of motility allow me to go through a door without first measuring to see if I will fit, and even to extend this to objects I am habituated to using, e.g. keeping a car on the road or making allowances for the feather in my hat as to my height. “The hat and the car have ceased to be objects with a size and volume which is established by comparison with other objects. They have become potentialities of volume, the demand for a certain amount of free space” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 143). For example, the first time I drove a car, I was unsure of my position on the road because the setting was unfamiliar; over a decade later, having acquired the habit of staying on the road (most of the time), the width of a typical car vis-à-vis the width of a typical road is incorporated into my bodily understanding of space. That the object-space of the car literally becomes part of my bodily habituation is evidenced by an experience such as leaning my body (as well as steering the car) away from an oncoming car that swerves over the center line. My body, in a sense, sympathizes with the danger to the car and responds immediately, without cognitive calculation of the degree I need to turn the wheel to avoid danger. Similarly, the organist does not need to cognitively work out where to place her fingers in order to perform a Bach toccata; on the contrary, after sufficient bodily interaction

with her instrument, her fingers, habituated, know automatically where to go. This knowledge literally lives in the body: as I remember from my own piano-playing days, if I try to impose cognitive control over my body by stopping and thinking about where to put each finger, I am unable to play. Thus it is my embodied subjectivity that, through habit/knowledge, transforms an object in the world into a meaningful and productive organization.

Knowing how to play the piano is not a matter of being able to recite what note corresponds with each key, or which key the fingers must press and in which order. It is a matter of the instrument's space becoming a part of my habitual body-space. Habitual bodily communication with the world allows everyday functioning in a knowledge that is directly experiential rather than cognitive or symbolic. "My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying' function" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 140-141). As an inhabitant of the spatial, temporal world, my body knows things my 'mind' may not: for example, I do not have to mentally calculate where to put my fingers when I type—my body just knows. "When the typist performs the necessary movements on the typewriter, these movements are governed by an intention, but the intention does not posit the keys as objective locations. It is literally true that the subject who learns to type incorporates the keyboard space into his bodily space" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 145). So when I try to play the piano or cello, the instrument becomes a part of my body. Thus attending to the phenomenal experience of bodily habit strikingly illustrates the inadequacy of the traditional image of the knower as a disembodied mind and illustrates how it is that the unified body-subject creates meaning and sustains knowledge in a way that traditional mind-body and self-world dualisms cannot adequately explain. Attending to these experiences of body-habits and knowledge open me to

myself as a being whose knowledge and consciousness, whose subjectivity, is rooted in bodily materiality. My body-habits *are* me.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of body-habits as constitutive of subjectivity is helpful for feminist theory because habituation on Merleau-Ponty's account can ground an understanding of ourselves as both stable and capable of change. If a goal of feminism is to find ways for women to become aware of, and be able to change, how we exist and communicate with others as embodied beings, then Merleau-Ponty's understanding of habit can be helpful in providing a groundwork for understanding how bodies can change. Feminists have written much, for example, about deeply ingrained gendered habits of bodily comportment.<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty's understanding of habit provides feminists with a framework for understanding gendered ways of being as neither biologically determined nor irreversible, because habits for Merleau-Ponty cannot be understood apart from bodily interactions within a cultural, historical world, and while our habits do become deeply ingrained and sedimented, they are also plastic and malleable. Thus gendered habits that are oppressive to women are not our irreversible destiny.

To understand how deeply sedimented bodily habits can change, we must look at Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body image. Our existence as habituated body-subjects, as being-in-the-world, is a synthesis between mechanistic reflex and conscious projection such that neither term can accurately or adequately describe the embodied human situation. Thus Merleau-Ponty employs a third term to unite the psychic and physiological, explaining that the body-subject grasps its being-in-the-world, and apprehends itself as a unity, through a pre-objective bodily awareness which he calls body image or corporeal schema (1962, 101; 80). A body image on Merleau-Ponty's account is not a mental representation of the body; rather, according to Merleau-Ponty, "my whole body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Bartky 1990; Bordo 1991; Butler 1993; and Sullivan 2001.



in space. I am in undivided possession of it and I know where each of my limbs is through a *body image* in which all are included” (1962, 98). In other words, as a body-subject I possess a unified image of myself that allows me to directly know my body, all its various parts and their position in space, vis-à-vis my world: the body image’s unity “derives from the world within which the body is always situated and in reference to which the body continually orients and reorients itself” (Weiss 1999, 10). Because of this body image, I grasp my own unity without having to make any sort of mental or visual checklist (which would indeed be bizarre: left arm is on table, right hand is holding book, two feet are still intact...). This pre-objective, instinctive body-awareness and body-ability to be in the world is manifested in reflexes and basic abilities to do what we as bodies do: having a body image explains how we exist in the world neither purely consciously (I do not consciously think about how to sit, stand, walk, etc.) nor purely mechanically (I did have to learn to do these things and have become habituated to do them in certain ways, so they do not happen as a result of sheer physical cause/effect).

Not only does the body image unite psychology and physiology, bodily unity is central to an understanding of myself as a body-subject, because only in this way can I understand myself as a union of psychic and physiological that carves a middle path between ontological substance dualism and complete melting or erasure of self into world. Having a unified body-image is constitutive of my experience and contributes to a knowledge of the *experiential* (rather than ontological) distinction between my subjectivity and the world. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the unity of body image is important to keep the body-subject from simply melting entirely into the world, until there is no distinguishing me from world: “the body image is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world” (1962, 101), where “in-the-world” refers to a being involved in its environment while still maintaining a distinctiveness from its environment. Because I have a

body image, I can retain subjectivity and agency without dualistically cutting off my mind from the body that I am, and from the world with which I continuously engage.

Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty, the body image occurs prereflectively: I do not have to consciously, cognitively unify my existence as a body-subject—I am able to immediately, precognitively grasp my bodily unity via projection and activity. This is because the corporeal schema goes beyond an aggregate of images, the fact that I know where all my limbs are without thinking about it or looking for them, or even a global awareness of my body: it is the situation of my embodied subjectivity vis-à-vis a world of potential projects. Having a body image means that “my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 100): if an organist’s task, for example, is to play a Bach toccata, her body image is the source of knowledge that instantaneously flows out into the requisite hand and foot placement. She understands herself as a bodily unity in that she does not have to think about coordinating hands and feet to operate her instrument. Thus my body image is an awareness of the functionality of my body as being-in-the-world that allows me to act and carry out projects via bodily knowing. In other words, I am and understand my body because my body image presents me with the possibility of and ability to carry out projects in the world. Thus body image for Merleau-Ponty is an awareness of bodily capability, a prereflective knowledge of and intention towards abilities to act. “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82).

Merleau-Ponty provides an account of the body as in-the-world, and this vital connection is crucial for a feminist understanding body images. As Gail Weiss writes, “For Merleau-Ponty, the danger of viewing the body as a singular entity is that we may lose sight of the fact that the

body is never isolated in its activity but always already engaged with the world” (1999, 1).

Viewing the body as a ‘singular entity’ is what happens when we treat the body as an object wholly Other to mind/rationality, the Cartesian viewpoint that Merleau-Ponty rejects. Weiss argues that turning to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body image will help reinvigorate feminist theories in that, with his phenomenology of embodied subjectivity in mind, “a richer feminist understanding of how racial, gender, class, age, and cultural differences are *corporeally* registered and reproduced can be achieved” (1999, 10). Furthermore,

Without an adequate understanding of the crucial role that the body image plays in reflecting and sustaining individual, social, and political inequalities, there is a danger that positive social and political changes will not address the individual’s own corporeal existence in the intimate manner necessary to move successfully toward the eradication of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and ethnocentrism (Weiss 1999, 10).

Along with Weiss, I find Merleau-Ponty helpful in elucidating an “adequate understanding” of the corporeality of differences requisite for liberatory goals of overcoming oppressions based on these differences. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty gives feminists a theory of the body image as fundamentally impacted by one’s situation (which, of course, depends upon social and historical factors): “To say that the body does not impose any sort of pregiven structure upon the world, but is itself structured by its world, which in turn implies that the body image reflects from the start the particularities *and* generalities of a given situation, not merely the idiosyncrasies of its own physiological or genetic makeup and physical constitution” (Weiss 1999, 11). Body images are situated culturally and historically, offering feminists a way of understanding the cultural and historical influences that shape women’s bodies. Thus, gendered ways of embodied being are cultural through and through; biological determinism, essentializing women in terms of anatomical features, becomes incoherent. Body images tell us of our social situation, leaving

open the possibility that a change in body image could in turn change social situation from, for example, oppressed to non-oppressed.<sup>9</sup>

For change to be possible at all, some mechanism of agency must be present, and Merleau-Ponty provides us with an agentic embodied subject when he speaks of body image as the “I can” which allows the subject to act intentionally in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (1962, 137). The “I can” is a notion of practical being-in-the-world; it refers to the way we cope and get around at a very basic, prereflective, preconscious, everyday level. Walking, sitting, speaking, typing, eating, avoiding walking into a wall or tripping over a log or colliding with another person, are all bodily “I can’s” that allow us to go about our everyday lives. I do not have to think about, or even notice, *how* to achieve such basic, everyday motions because my body *is* the potentiality of so doing. As Merleau-Ponty says, the “body is the potentiality of a certain world” (1962, 106).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, the habituated subject-body is both conscious and intentional, but not in a mentalistic, purely cognitive sense. Due to the body image and the “I can” as manifestations of the body’s projection into its world, the body *itself* is the locus of consciousness and intentionality. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of bodily intentionality is, in a sense, what allows us to unite Descartes’ mind and body in a way that he himself could not after having ontologically severed them, and what allows us to go beyond the Sartrean dualism of *en soi* and *pour soi*: “What allows us to link to each other the ‘physiological’ and the ‘psychic’, is the fact that, when reintegrated into existence, they are no longer distinguishable respectively as the order of the *in-itself*, and that of the *for-itself*, and that they are both directed towards an

---

<sup>9</sup> How exactly this might happen Weiss does not speculate; but she is firm in her commitment (with which I concur) to the idea that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body image has powerful emancipatory potential for feminists. In chapter five, I discuss ways in which such corporeal change can occur (remembering that the body image for Merleau-Ponty *is* corporeal, rather than psychic).

intentional pole or towards a world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 87). In other words, our embodied habits and “I cans” take the form of an intentional relationship between self and world: the world presents the bodily self with possibilities, and the self reaches intentionally into that world to carry out projects via its bodily “I cans”. Furthermore, embodied intentionality for Merleau-Ponty is the thread that draws together the diverse elements of a situation into a meaningful field:

Let us therefore say...that the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 136).

The important point about intentionality is that it is not purely mental for Merleau-Ponty, and yet intentionality is still a matter of subjectivity—bringing in factors such as ideology, morality, and intelligence—rather than brute bodily reflex. For Brentano and Husserl, intentionality is simply the about-ness of thought; it is purely ideal and cognitive. But for Merleau-Ponty, physiological states, body-states, are intentional; for example when I reach towards the keyboard my *body* intends and carries out the movements as I type (Sullivan 2001, 67). Not only is intentionality not purely mental for Merleau-Ponty, it need not even be fully conscious. I do not need consciously to think about, or *mentally* intend, each keystroke; my body simply intends and follows through without conscious direction as I type. Projective intentionality for Merleau-Ponty “is a kind of bodily intentionality that outstrips my conscious awareness” (Weiss 2002, 197): my project is to type, and my body is my means of carrying out that project in a way that happens without constant, minute conscious intervention or direction.

Intentionality is made possible by the temporal sedimentation of habits. Temporality and the bodily habits and abilities that grow throughout time are necessary for subjectivity because if we were always ‘in the moment’ completely, so to speak, aware constantly only of here-now, we

would not have the learned experiences and knowledge of the past built into our bodily present and we would be rendered incapable of intentional action. “Thus it is by giving up part of his spontaneity, by becoming involved in the world through stable organs and pre-established circuits that man can acquire the mental and practical space which will theoretically free him from his environment and allow him to *see* it” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 87). Complete spontaneity would rob us of the ability to reflect and intend, so we are not simply mechanical creatures of immediate responses to stimuli; rather, we are still conscious subjects capable of thought, reflection and intention. The temporal sedimentation of bodily habits gives rise to embodied, intentional consciousness. “If a being is consciousness, he must be nothing but a network of intentions. If he ceases to be definable in terms of the act of sense-giving, he relapses into the condition of a thing” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 121). Thus consciousness is necessarily consciousness *of*, so it is intentional by definition; and while everything my body intends need not be directly conscious, if I do not have intentionality at all, I am not conscious and I am just a thing. Intentional, embodied consciousness differentiates, but does not ontologically separate, me from the world of things: “Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 138-139).

Retaining an agentic, intentional subject who can carry out projects in the world is vital for feminism, and feminist concerns with retaining agency are well documented.<sup>10</sup> Without agency, change and resistance to oppression and domination are mere pipe dreams. I take feminism itself to be goal-oriented, an orientation towards the world that views theory without the possibility of practice as insufficient at best and incoherent at worst. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of a subject with intentionality and agency works well with the liberatory orientation of feminist thought. An embodied subject equipped with bodily “I cans” and with

---

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Alcoff 2006, Deveaux 1996, Fraser 1996, Hartsock 1990 and 1996, McNay 1993, and Weiss 1999.

bodily intentionality is a subject that can envision and carry out projects in the world, including projects of resistance and transformation.

Merleau-Ponty demonstrates his claims about embodied subjectivity, habit, body image, and intentionality by looking at the phenomenon of the phantom limb. Phantom limb occurs when an amputee continues to feel sensations, usually pain, in the amputated limb. Merleau-Ponty argues that this phenomenon cannot be explained either purely physiologically or purely psychologically, so we need new terminology to integrate physiology and psychology into a unified whole; we need “un-Cartesian terms” that will “force us to form the idea of an organic thought through which the relation of the ‘psychic’ to the ‘physiological’ becomes conceivable” (1962, 77). ‘Body image’, ‘body schema,’ and ‘corporeal schema’ are the un-Cartesian terms Merleau-Ponty employs (more or less interchangeably). Only if we posit the body as being-in-the-world with a pre-objective body image can we understand the phenomenon of the phantom limb (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 81). If we think of ourselves as neither purely conscious nor purely mechanical, the phenomenon makes sense—our bodies are habituated to a certain way of being, and habits give rise to a resilient corporeal schema such that even if I lose a limb my body image remains, at first, unchanged, so I still feel the pain my body schema leads me to expect I would feel in this limb that is no longer there. Phantom limb pain is clearly not a matter of a simple, mechanical stimulus/response because there is nothing physically stimulating pain in the limb; it is equally clearly not a purely conscious phenomenon because the sufferer *feels* the pain, physically. The only coherent explanation is that the phantom pain stems from the pre-objective bodily being-in-the-world that I am. My body image is such that I am habituated to having this limb to be able to carry out my projects in the world, so in a way that is neither purely cognitive

nor purely physiological, but is the result of the sedimentation of my habits into a relatively stable body image, I still experience the limb as being there.

The phenomenon of phantom limb illustrates both the stability and the mutability of body images. If I lose a limb and subsequently try to do something I can no longer do but that I am habituated to being able to do, then my embodied interactions with the world are forced to readjust: the world appeals to a limb I no longer have—I cannot pick up that object with the hand that is gone. The object beckons, it is still an object related to an intentional, agentic body, but the body's response to the object must change. An ability I rely on unthinkingly, habitually, is erased:

Thus are delimited, in the totality of my body, regions of silence. . . . This paradox is that of all being in the world: when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions, and which nevertheless exist for me only in so far as they arouse in me thoughts or volitions. . . . the ambiguity of knowledge amounts to this: our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at this moment (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82).

Habit is temporal and structured over a temporal horizon, and the body can be seen in two interrelated ways: the habit-body as the body's general function and the now-body, or the body at this moment, as a more immediate temporal slice of the habit body. The two do not always fully coincide: “the problem how I can have the sensation of still possessing a limb which I no longer have amounts to finding out how the habitual body can act as a guarantee for the body at this moment” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82). There is some generalization which happens here: I see the object that I can no longer move with my missing hand, yet due to the resilience of my habit-body I still recognize that this object is moveable. If I did not have the habit-body I would not be able to recognize the object as moveable in the first place. It would not appear to me as something that can be acted upon by my projection and intention. My body is my specific past,



so even when the arm is gone, its trace remains within my habituated body image. It is not just a dream or mirage: I *feel* that arm, not just any arm, but *my* arm because my body still contains that in its past, which is its presence. “The imaginary arm is, then, like repressed experience, a former present which cannot decide to recede into the past” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 85). The memory of phantom limb is delimited within a temporal horizon: “But it would not be memory if the object which it constructs were not still held by a few intentional threads to the horizon of the lived-through past, and to that past itself as we should rediscover it if we were to delve beyond these horizons and open time” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 86). Embodied memories are of capabilities, abilities to cope; memories are bodily sedimentations of habit.

The phenomenon of the phantom limb, then, demonstrates that habit and body image are best explained and understood as *between* body and mind, as not only bridging but abolishing Descartes’ ontological abyss: “habit has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body, but in the body as mediator of a world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 145). Thus by attending to experience, Cartesian dualism is overcome. “The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually exclusive terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 88-89). I experience my existence as a body with intentionality and agency, as an embodied subject acting within a meaningful horizon.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the phantom limb phenomenon crystallizes the way in which his phenomenology can aid a feminist theory of embodiment, for this example demonstrates the body’s concurrent stability and mutability, a combination crucial to a theory that can both embrace women’s bodies and free us from the specter of biological (or, for that matter, cultural) determinism. In this vein, Weiss suggests that while “the plasticity and stability of the body

image can serve to maintain an oppressive ‘status quo’”, it is also the case “that a greater awareness of the ‘body power’ we have at our disposal through this very plasticity and stability can result in new, perhaps subversive, body images that can be used to fight oppression on a corporeal front (Weiss 1999, 10). This plasticity and stability is precisely what we get through Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body image/corporeal schema and habit, in that it is relatively stable but can change, as evidenced by the phantom limb phenomenon: the amputee’s body image retains the missing limb for a time (stability) but eventually the phenomenon fades, and the body image’s plasticity allows for a new body image without the amputated limb. Thus if Merleau-Ponty is correct about the nature of the body image, and I believe he is, then bodies that are habituated to engage in oppressive ways of being are not trapped within cages of undeniable biological and cultural construction. For example, a woman’s bodily habit of constricting her movements to take up less space (a habit ingrained from centuries of cultural imperatives that women be demure, submissive, and not take up space that could be inhabited and used by men) is a habit that can change, opening the woman to new possibilities of interaction in the space available to her as an embodied subject in the world.

### 3. Intersubjectivity

A final element of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that is useful to feminists is his notion of intersubjectivity. As I understand it, feminism includes a desire to understand our ability to communicate with one another to avoid both solipsism and domination; and some feminists, such as Sonia Kruks and Linda Alcoff, argue that Merleau-Ponty provides a basis for such an understanding (Kruks 2001, 33-34; 155-156; 163-169; Alcoff 2000, 264-265).

Intersubjectivity is a key theme in Merleau-Ponty's work; for Merleau-Ponty, communication is inherently social and intersubjective: "I express my life in social institutions (language, for example) that I alone do not create, that are an intersubjective milieu, that express themselves in me and help frame and articulate my experience" (Low 2001, 72). This intersubjectivity is possible because of Merleau-Ponty's redefinition of consciousness, meaning and knowledge: bodies open on to the world and interact within the world to gain knowledge of meaningful objects within a world. Such a construction of meaning is always intersubjective, because part of my understanding of objects in the world is that I recognize others also see and construct meanings for the objects. For example, I come to know a particular shape of carved wood as a cultural artifact, a cello, because I note the meaning others find in the cello through their embodied interactions with it. Furthermore, because my embodied being and yours open onto the world in similar ways, via perception, we have a basis for shared understanding: "in so far as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 353).<sup>11</sup> I recognize the cultural significance of the cello both in recognizing others' interpretations of the instrument and in recognizing that others apprehend the instrument via embodied perception in the same way I do.

Merleau-Ponty's focus on intersubjectivity is helpful from a feminist perspective. A philosophy that recognizes our interconnectedness is more conducive to feminist attempts at opening communication and understanding of others than is a philosophy that leads to solipsism. While feminists highlight problems with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity

---

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the fundamental similarity of embodied subjects is the basis of a significant feminist critique of his work, which I will address in chapter three. Briefly, the criticism is that if bodies are fundamentally the same or anonymous, differences are erased, and we fall back into the trap of reifying one way of being an embodied subject with a meaningful grasp of the world as *the only* way. As I will explain in chapter four, I do not think that adopting a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology necessarily entails falling into this trap.

(which I will address in later chapters), the general direction of his phenomenology is a dramatic improvement over earlier canonical theories precisely because he does ground intersubjectivity in embodiment in a way that reduces tendencies to objectify the Other. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity lays the groundwork for non-agonistic communication with others because his non-dualistic ontology recognizes that self and others are equally beings-in-the-world rather than positing the Self as a subject for whom all other aspects of the world, including other potential selves, are objects. As Kruks argues, for Merleau-Ponty, “the commonalities of embodiment point beyond the solipsistic tendencies of Sartrean subjects each of whom objectifies the other” (2001, 33). In other words, recognizing the other as an embodied subject who opens onto the world and constructs meanings in ways similar to my own bodily opening and meaning-making provides for the potential of understanding and communicating with others in non-objectifying ways.

Sonia Kruks argues strongly for a feminist philosophy that focuses on bodily materiality as a source of intersubjectivity. According to Kruks, feminists need to appeal to something like Merleau-Ponty’s anonymous body in order to ground community and resistance. Kruks argues for what she calls “feeling-with” as a means of establishing intersubjective communication and grounding ethical and political relations with others. She posits that only by recognizing a degree of bodily commonality with others on the basis of our material similarities can we understand the suffering of others and act to reduce it; such commonality is only possible if we accept Merleau-Ponty’s argument that all body-subjects perceive/experience/interact with the world in certain generic, anonymous ways. Ethics, communication, and resistance to oppression are only possible for Kruks if one appeals to a material body that exceeds discourse; in other words, if one rejects Foucault’s approach in favor of Merleau-Ponty’s. With regard to feminism,

Kruks argues that “common experiences of feminine embodiment...can furnish what I will call an *affective predisposition* to act on behalf of women other than and different from oneself: a predisposition toward forms of feminist solidarity” (2001, 151) and that “if we are ever to struggle toward wider forms of feminist solidarity, we will do so by being attentive to one another as embodied and affective subjectivities and not only as discursively constructed subjects” (2001, 152). Kruks argues that by attending to commonalities of women’s embodied experiences, we are able to feel-with the other and form an affective desire to improve her situation. For example, Kruks discusses our ability to feel-with, and bodily understand, the pain of another:

We are...capable of an immediate intersubjective apprehension of another’s experience of pain. This apprehension takes place in the dimension of sentience and is not primarily a function of conscious evaluation or discourse. Moreover, this immediate apprehension does not involve an appropriation of the other in which I claim her suffering as my own or an identification in which I claim I can fully enter into her experience (2001, 166).

And indeed, when I see someone in pain, my body recoils. Even just reading about Kruks’ discussion of a battered woman, not seeing the injured woman myself, causes my gut to wrench and my fingers to curl as Kruks describes her wounds (2001, 166). The woman Kruks describes is a poor Nigerian immigrant, and therefore her embodied situation and experiences are vastly different from both Kruks’s and my own. Still, Kruks’s point is that we, as middle-class white women, are able to feel-with the pain of the battered, poor Nigerian woman because our bodies immediately apprehend that hers is in pain—because despite our situational differences, there is a bodily commonality, a materiality that exceeds and escapes the constraints of our particular situations and allows us to recognize and commune with one another. It is this affective, bodily response that moves us to want to help the Nigerian immigrant and other victims of domestic

violence, to want to work towards ending domestic violence altogether. Thus bodily feeling-with, which comes from material similarities, can ground feminist solidarity and political action.

## **Conclusion**

A central claim I am making in this dissertation is that bodies need to be reclaimed and revalued as the locus of human subjectivity in order for feminism to be productive. Something feminist theory needs to get right is that we are embodied subjects capable of reflective thought and agency, but the nature of reflective thought and agency is such that they are always already contextualized within an embedded, embodied, material whole/world of meaning. Feminists find a theory of such a contextualized, embodied world of meaning in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied subjectivity. As Grosz claims, Merleau-Ponty's "emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism's major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges—its necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates" (94). As I have shown, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides resonances and resources for just such a bodily reclamation. This is because Merleau-Ponty constructs a new way to think about mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity, psyche and machine, that integrates them into a third term, the body-subject which is characterized by habit, body image, and the "I can". Merleau-Ponty arrives at this position by returning to experience as fundamental to knowledge and meaning, yet neither unproblematic nor universal. I have also shown that Merleau-Ponty's position is good for feminism because dualism carries a heavy history of oppression towards woman as other, as less-than rational male subject Mind, and because it focuses on experience. Merleau-Ponty's theories

of experience and embodiment are precisely the types of theories feminists need to make sense of our embodied experiences. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject can assist in developing a feminist account of embodied subjectivity. How, exactly, and with what limitations, will be spelled out in later chapters.

## CHAPTER TWO: FOUCAULT, DISCIPLINED BODIES, AND FEMINISM

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the work of Michel Foucault as a feminist toolbox. I discuss the development of Foucault's thought regarding power, bodies, subjects, and resistance, with an emphasis on the liberatory feminist implications of Foucault's analyses. The themes on which I focus include the body as normalized, disciplined, docile, and discursively constructed, yet also a potential source of pleasure and agentic resistance; the development of Foucault's concept of subjectivity; and the trajectory of his views on the possibility and desirability of ethics and politics through the concepts of limits, refusal, transgression, and care of the self. I argue that these Foucaultian concepts are valuable tools for feminists to use in constructing a robust theory of embodied subjectivity. Central to my analysis of Foucault on bodies and subjects is my claim that there are threads and constancies that run throughout his corpus—threads with *political* potential. I argue that these political continuities coincide with the various phases of Foucault's work on the body. Foucault's early notion of docile bodies corresponds with the first, negative, pole of his politics, refusing who we are, because in order to refuse we must first recognize how we have been shaped and normalized by power. The second, constructive pole corresponds with his later turn to the care of the self. I argue that Foucault's later work on techniques of self-subjectivation dovetails with this second political pole in his thought, and that care of the self can begin with a focus on bodily pleasures as a site of resistance. I see Foucault's work as a potential feminist vehicle for positive change from a more oppressed state of being to a less oppressed state of being. This is the thread I follow throughout the chapter, aiming to demonstrate how the various phases of Foucault's work, from his earlier work on bodies to his later work on subjects, all provide elements of a process of personal and political liberatory transformation.



Many feminist thinkers note converging interests with Foucault and recognize that he is, in a sense, a fellow traveler with them in his consuming attention to marginalized voices and oppressed groups. Foucault and feminists alike focus on issues of power and oppression, the body as a site of power and locus of subjectivity, issues regarding sexuality, the dangers of social norms that exclude and marginalize, and the role of discourse in maintaining hegemonic orders and excluding subjugated knowledges. Both reject the humanist concept of ‘man’ as rational and disembodied, and both are politically motivated in their critique of the status quo (Diamond & Quinby *x*). However, Western, white feminism has been rightly and thoroughly critiqued for ignoring differences among women and has been as hegemonic and discriminatory as the patriarchy it seeks to undermine by using the structures and tools of that very patriarchy: claims to universal, absolute, Enlightenment ideals; Truth; Womanhood; etc. Foucault offers a way out of these problems *without* annihilating the possibility of centering resistance on gender-related issues. As I show in this chapter, we can be women and feminists without succumbing to totalization if we take a page from Foucault’s book, first recognizing the contingency of our genealogical history and then focusing on the possibility of change beginning from the constructed identities we are and striving, not for some utopian, idealistic universal notion of freedom and liberty, but for new, multiple ways of being and living as constructed, embodied, yet agentic and free subjects.

## **Early Foucault: Genealogy, Power, and Bodies**

### 1. Genealogy

Foucault’s early historical works take two forms: archaeology and genealogy. His archaeological works (*Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*,

and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) investigate systems of discourse that determine what allows knowledge to be produced and what counts as knowledge in fields such as psychology, medicine, economics, biology, and philology. In other words, the archaeologies analyze how discourse (in a broader sense than just language, also including social practices) determines what it is possible to consider as truth. Thus the archaeological work provides a stark contrast with and rejection of the philosophical tradition in which the pure, rational Subject discovers Truth independently of historical and social contexts. Foucault's genealogies (*Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *A History of Sexuality*) take a step beyond the archeological method and investigate not only what counts as truth and knowledge, but also the judicative elements of discourse/experience by looking at the history of what counts as lawful, legitimate, or normal. The general point of Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies, if I may be allowed to generalize and oversimplify for a moment, is to demonstrate the contingency of what is taken to be true and legitimate. In both of these types of histories, Foucault writes about the epistemic context that allows for truth claims to be intelligible, not about specific 'facts' or bodies of knowledge. His archaeologies and genealogies study the history of discursive practices, the function of truth, knowledge, and power in different historical locations. These studies, however do not exist for the purpose of uncovering some new Truth about the past, but rather to problematize the present; they are, Foucault says, histories of the present (1977, 30). Showing the historical, discursive construction of past truths and legitimacies throws our present truths and legitimacies into question. Our knowledge comes into existence as the product of discursive formations, and because discursive formations are changeable and contingent, what one historical, discursive location considers a true statement about the nature of femininity, for example, might be unintelligible in another epistemic context.

In this chapter I focus primarily on Foucault's genealogies, as these are the works that focus more explicitly on how bodies (not just knowledges) are shaped by discursive practices. But the general point remains the same: how we regard bodily truths and legitimacies is a function of a discursive history and as such is neither universal nor immutable. Foucault's genealogies allow us to realize, for example, that it is possible rationally to believe an entirely different truth about what it means to have a female body than what the Western tradition has ingrained in us. As Linda Alcoff explains,

This is the way the genealogical method of...Foucault...works: to show that the route we took to arrive at one of our absolute commitments might have gone another way, that we might believe differently and still be rational, though perhaps we would no longer be who we are now (2006, 55).<sup>12</sup>

In other words, genealogy as a history of the present awakens us to the possibility of being other than who and what we have been historically constituted to be. An "absolute commitment" to the idea that because women's bodies are capable of childrearing, women are better suited to motherhood than to careers is an example of the type of commitment that Foucault's work can problematize (although Foucault himself does not focus on the discursive histories of women's bodies). Claims about women's 'natural' call to motherhood are precisely the types of statements that might have seemed to be straightforward, obvious truths not so long ago (and still are, for some people), but feminists (most notably Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*) have shown that it is actually the patriarchal stranglehold on the production of truth that has tied women's biology to their 'natural' purpose. Again, although Foucault himself does not focus on women's bodies specifically, his genealogical investigation of how discourse and power shapes bodies allows us to recognize the contingency of our current state of 'knowledge' about our bodies and the possibility for future change.

---

<sup>12</sup> Other feminists also draw on Foucault's genealogical method because of its value in showing the contingency of our present state. See, for example, Sawicki and McLaren.

With regard to the possibility of future change, the genealogical method is significant because of the tactical way in which Foucault employs this mode of thought. Foucault's genealogy "shifts the model for a historical understanding...from hermeneutical text and interpretation, to strategy and tactics" (Flynn 1994, 34). Rather than treating history as something with a truth to be uncovered via interpretation, Foucault approaches history as a battlefield: "The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning" (Foucault 1980, 114). In other words, doing history does not lead us to straightforward and immutable truths; it provides us with strategies to manipulate the networks of power that have historically formed us and will continue to shape our future. According to Foucault's definition of genealogy, "a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection [to a unified, 'sovereign' model of science and knowledge], to render them, that is, capable of opposition and struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (1980, 85). Foucault's genealogies are not concerned with focusing historical analysis at the level of abstract, theoretical interpretations; they are fundamentally committed to struggle, to action. The purpose of genealogy is not simply to show the contingency of how we have arrived at the present, but to provide us with tactics for taking hold of the future.

The notion that 'truth', 'knowledge', even 'facts' are contingent upon epistemic contexts and discursive formations is a crucial claim for a feminist theory of embodiment, because the ways in which women's bodies have been problematized, essentialized, erased, excluded, and ignored must be addressed and corrected for feminism to be successful. Feminists need to be able to establish that change is possible; Foucault teaches us that change is inevitable. Feminists need to be able to establish that biology is not destiny; Foucault teaches us that biology without

discursivity is an illusion. Thus a genealogical approach to embodiment is crucial for feminism: if we understand the historical, discursive forces and power relations that have shaped women's bodies, we understand that we are not bound to our bodies in the way the history of Western philosophy would have us believe. Our tradition, as feminists well know, constructs bodies problematically for women because the history of Western philosophy equates men with minds, rationality, and subjectivity, and women with bodies, emotionality, and objectivity in such a way that women, due to our embodiment, are not classified as full participants in the human (read: male) world. Yet by adopting a genealogical approach to embodiment, we need not theoretically jettison our embodiment in order to rectify historical inequalities; we merely need to show the contingency of traditional concepts of women's bodies and adopt new, more liberatory ways of being embodied women. Perhaps the best definition of Foucault's genealogy that I have come across is Bernauer's: "Genealogy is permanent critique in the interest of an endless practice of freedom" (Bernauer 19). As a feminist I find this appealing: permanent critique shields us from the danger of re-inscribing the very hegemonies we seek to undo, and practicing freedom—freedom to re-imagine and recreate womanhood away from naturalistic, essentialistic, biologicistic definitions thereof—is an apt description of the type of feminist liberation I seek. As a feminist, I find in Foucault's genealogy a strong theory to support the claim, which I see as necessary for feminism, that bodies are not pure natural entities with nature-given biological functions that delineate necessary social roles. I turn to that theory now.

## 2. Power and Bodies

Foucault's genealogy of power is the first part of his analysis of the possibility of transformation within power structures that allow us to move from more restricted to less

restricted, more open ways of being (or, to put it another way, from more oppressed to less oppressed ways of being). Presented primarily in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault offers a paradigm of power that departs significantly from the traditional understanding thereof. Foucault intends his analysis of power to replace what he calls a juridical or sovereign account of power, according to which power is always negative, rule-bound, exercised through prohibition and censorship, and perceived as a uniform, external law opposed to an obeying subject (Foucault 1978, 83-85).

Foucault terms the period from the Middle Ages into the 18<sup>th</sup> century the monarchical regime, which, he writes, was characterized by juridical power. In this era power did operate largely according to its traditional conception: it was held and exercised from a unified locus at the top of the social hierarchy, and it operated negatively through rules and prohibitions. Juridical power was the power of the sovereign, who embodied both law and legitimacy, determined what was right and true, prohibited what is not, and punished transgressions. Unlike the newer forms of power which eventually grew out of the monarchical regime, juridical power did not infiltrate all aspects of people's lives; it was limited and discontinuous. However, juridical power was effective in its ability to protect the sovereign's determinations of law because of its mode of punishment, which Foucault calls "deduction" (1978, 136): the sovereign had the power to seize, to take away. If those subject to sovereign power threatened the sovereign's legitimacy via lawbreaking, the sovereign protected itself by seizing time, property, bodies, or even life (Foucault 1978, 135-136). Foucault's gruesome depiction of the torture and execution of the regicide Damien in the opening passages of *Discipline and Punish* serves as a graphic example of juridical power. Damien's punishment for threatening the sovereign was to have this body literally seized and 'deducted' bit by bit until the message was seared into the

subjects: threatening sovereign power results in one's own body being taken into the possession and power of the king.

Under this traditional model of power, the sovereign need not literally be a monarch but could be any figure who embodies a unified of legitimacy and truth, such as a monarch, a father, a master, etc. In any case where an authority was opposed to a disciple or subject, power operated, for a discrete historical period, in the juridical way: repressive, top-down, and enforced by taking something away from the transgressor (Foucault 1978, 85).<sup>13</sup> But as Foucault's genealogy of power shows, the operation and exercise of power is historically contingent. Where contemporary theorists of power err, according to Foucault, is in assuming that the sovereign form of power is still operative, and that liberation from current instances of abuse of power (oppression) requires a struggle against sovereign power. Foucault argues that political thought has not yet rid itself of this outdated model: "At bottom, despite the differences in epochs and objectives, the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (Foucault 1978, 88-89). Countering this outdated mode of political thought, Foucault argues that the monarchical or juridical model of power cannot make intelligible the power structure currently in play.

According to Foucault, a new field of power, which he interchangeably calls disciplinary or normalizing power (more on what Foucault means by those terms in a bit), emerged during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and remains effective in our contemporary world. In contrast to thinking of power as unified, limited, negative, repressive, and external to that which it subjects, "power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (Foucault 1978, 92). In other words, Foucault sees power not as something that can be possessed or wielded by an

---

<sup>13</sup> For a more thorough analysis of Foucault's concept of juridical power, see Rouse.

individual or group, or be exercised or imposed from a unified locus at the top of the social hierarchy, but as a ubiquitous and capillary network of forces that are internal to the sphere of social relationships and that operate from the bottom up to construct and maintain social hierarchies from within. Rather than a unified power-holder such as a state, a dominant class, or a sovereign wielding power over its subjects, structures such as the state and generalized relationships of domination between the privileged and the oppressed arise from and are the overall effect of the all-pervasive, multiple and complex web of power relationships throughout society. Disciplinary power infiltrates all aspects of our lives and operates not by seizure, negation and repression, but through ever-shifting and ever-present relationships. Power “is the moving substrate of force relations” and is all-pervading “not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1978, 93).

Because normalizing power is everywhere and all-encompassing, it is multiple rather than unified, and must be understood nominalistically: “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault 1978, 93). In other words, while it might have been accurate in the monarchical regime to speak of power as an entity, with the emergence of disciplinary power, *Power* per se no longer exists; there is no form or essence of Power, only individual relationships and exercises of power.<sup>14</sup> Power occurs (as opposed to exists, for power is something that *happens* rather than something that *is*) only in relationships, in exchanges; furthermore, such exchanges are not simple, unambiguous exercises of force from

---

<sup>14</sup> For more on Foucault’s nominalistic understanding of power, see Flynn 1994.



a dominant position over a subordinate. (Although such exchanges do exist, they fall under the category of *domination*, which Foucault differentiates from power: domination is a solidification of power relationships into institutions that systematically oppress. Foucault writes, “Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations” within the network of power relations (1978, 94)). Power exchanges depend upon their situation within a *network* of forces (rather than a simple binary exchange). In other words, ‘power’ is only *powerful* when an instance of its exercise has some sort of institutional backing: “Power is exercised through an agent’s actions only to the extent that other agents’ actions remain appropriately aligned with them” (Rouse 108). For example, I can exercise the power to grade students only in relationship and cooperation with the institution and with the students; my exercise of power will be molded and constrained by institutional grading guidelines, student performance, etc. If I give an ‘F’ and the student objects to the head of my department, the power conveyed by my action in giving that grade is dependent upon the subsequent actions of the department head. Furthermore, if my action does receive institutional support, then power has been exercised in a way that maintains the institution: this student’s work has been deemed unacceptable by the institution, and the institution maintains its legitimacy through its power to penalize the student for work it finds substandard.

This is but one example of the way disciplinary or normalizing power works. For Foucault, contemporary society is saturated with these types of power relationships to the point that power structures and shapes not only law and legitimacy, but knowledge, truth, and even bodies and materiality. A fuller understanding of how power pervades knowledge and embodiment is required. To provide it, I begin by examining Foucault’s understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge.

A central tenet of Foucault's theory of power is that power is so ubiquitously effective in society because of society's inseparability from power. Knowledge—and hence truth—is created through power relationships, and power, in turn, is legitimated by the seal of truth. Foucault claims that “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (1980, 133) and that “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (1980, 93). In other words, truth, for Foucault, is not something to be scientifically discovered or uncovered—on the contrary, it is *produced* by relationships of power, which are in turn bolstered by the appearance of solid, objective, scientific truth. Foucault argues that we must recognize “that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (1977, 27). Power and knowledge mutually presuppose and reinforce one another, and because knowledge exists in relationship to power structures, there is no such thing as pure, immediate, True Knowledge independent of cultural interpretation: “The connection [Foucault] proposes between power and knowledge is not just a particular institutional *use* of knowledge as a means to domination. Foucault objects to the very idea of a knowledge or a truth outside of networks of power relations” (Rouse 99). Thus neither power nor knowledge can be said to exist as an entity unto itself.

Furthermore, the subject is also implicated in this network. Subjects do not gain knowledge from outside or above power/knowledge nexuses:

These ‘power-knowledge relations’ are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not freed in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of

power-knowledge and their historical transformations. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge (Foucault 1977, 27-28).

By placing the knower firmly within power/knowledge relationships, Foucault rejects the possibility of a God's-eye view for the knowing subject. Quite to the contrary: one's knowledge depends upon one's situation within networks of power, and one's power within social institutions concomitantly depends upon one's knowledge. For example, within the institution of psychiatry, only the knowledgeable practitioner has the power to declare a patient mentally ill or healthy; but at the same time, the practitioner has become knowledgeable precisely by working with patients declared healthy or ill by the institution of psychiatry. The more the psychiatrist knows, the greater her diagnostic power and the greater her authority in her field; similarly, the greater her authority, the more legitimate her knowledge is taken to be: a renowned, authoritative psychiatrist's diagnosis will be considered more accurate, more true, than the diagnosis of someone not recognized in the field. Her diagnosis is deemed to be an instance of knowledge precisely because of her powerful position within the institution, and because her diagnosis is deemed to be an instance of knowledge, she has the power to declare others healthy or ill, normal or abnormal. Disciplinary power, then, works through societal institutions that define norms of health, sanity, sexuality, and so on, and that delimit normal bodies and subjects from deviant ones, rewarding or punishing accordingly.

Because the knowledgeable one is the one with power to divide normal from abnormal, the effect of juridical/disciplinary power is normalization. Mutually engendering power/knowledge nexuses operate to structure society because the knowledge generated by disciplinary power creates separations and distinctions: those seen as knowledgeable—scientists,

doctors, psychiatrists, professionals—are those who have the power to delineate norms, to divide healthy from ill, sane from insane, normal from delinquent. Power creates knowledge which bestows power in a pervasive network encapsulating all social relationships and exercising normative control over individuals and institutions by determining what is intelligible as normative judgments: individuals become intelligible, definable, only via their placement within a grid of knowledge that delineates norms and deviations. This grid both homogenizes and individualizes—homogenizes to the extent that all must fit within the grid in order to be intelligible, and individualizes to the extent that all are placed *specifically* within the grid, specific placement being determined by the degree of deviations from various norms. As Foucault explains,

the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences (1977, 184).

In other words, normalizing knowledge both individualizes *and* groups people according to type—simultaneously individualizing and homogenizing. This in turn produces hierarchization: some types of individuals are higher, better, more ‘normal’ than others. Thus, power/knowledge exercises normalizing power over individuals and institutions. Individuals are situated vis-à-vis norms of mental health, physical health, criminal behavior, sexual behavior, etc., and those who deviate from the norms become undesirable, excluded from institutions of truth, knowledge and intelligibility.

The reason Foucault refers to this new type of power as ‘disciplinary’ is because it emerged in what Foucault calls disciplinary institutions—schools, prisons, militaries, etc.—and because normalization occurs via discipline. In disciplinary institutions, control is crucial; the

teacher must control the students, the warden must control the inmates. Disciplinary measures solidify that control: soldiers, for example, are disciplined to control every aspect of their bodily comportment and movement (Foucault 1977, 135-136). Foucault's investigation of disciplinary power takes the form of an analysis of "the micro-physics of power" (1977, 139), looking at how power works in minute yet pervasive ways on all aspects of bodily being (e.g. directives for every muscle in a proper stance for a soldier). Only the well-disciplined soldier, in complete control of his body, is manageable and useful within the military institution. And making bodies useful is a primary focus of disciplinary techniques. While the earlier juridical power operated by seizing and frequently destroying bodies (as in the case of Damien), disciplinary power works to shape bodies into useful mechanisms by actively constructing and determining its abilities and skills. Not only is the well-disciplined soldier more easily controlled, his body is more skillful and better able properly to carry out the tasks of a soldier. Thus, a defining aspect of disciplinary power is that its method of operation actually *constructs bodies* in their operations, their movements, their possibilities. Disciplinary power, then, combines institutional control of bodies with increasing their functionality: "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (Foucault 1977, 138). Combining usefulness and control produces a new type of body; disciplinary power most fundamentally works at the level of bodily materiality. Thus with a new type of power, new types of bodily being arise.

Disciplinary power working on bodies has significant implications for subjectivity. Disciplinary control of bodies is equivalent to disciplinary control of subjects; Foucault writes that the point of his work on power is to "try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces,

energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc. . . . *to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects*” (1980, 97, emphasis added). The implication is that for Foucault there is no separation between subject and body. Consequently, he emphasizes that discipline and normalization work at the level of bodies directly, not through the directives of a disembodied consciousness,<sup>15</sup> and argues that it is bodies (as opposed to immaterial agents) that are the conduits and the effects of power. The bottom line is that power is not an abstract or ideal concept but is a network of forces with real, material, bodily effects that is exercised by and on real, material bodies (Foucault 1980, 97). And the result is controllable, normalized subjects. Bodies—and hence subjects—that comply with disciplinary power and align (insofar as is possible) with societal norms are what Foucault calls *docile bodies* (1977, 138): bodies that are constituted through and through by power relations in their movements, gestures, and comportment, in their very materiality and being, such as the body of the well-trained soldier or highly disciplined schoolchild, that conform mechanically to commands and expectations. The docile body is the body (person) who comports and manages itself in conformity to institutional and societal norms and expectations, and docility for Foucault goes beyond institutions such as prisons or the military, for he argues that while disciplinary power began in such settings, it has expanded to the point that it now pervades all aspects of our lives. One need not be a soldier or a prison inmate to be a docile body.<sup>16</sup> Foucault’s analysis of the emergence of disciplinary power in prisons has implications far beyond a history of punishment; his work provides insight into how bodies and subjects are constructed by power throughout society.

---

<sup>15</sup> Foucault does talk about the internalization and self-subjectification that occur in a panoptic society, indicating that bodies are not simply sheer objects.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Bartky (1990) has written a brilliant analysis of ways in which women’s bodies in contemporary Western society are disciplined and rendered docile.

Another important piece of the picture of disciplinary power—also drawn from a study of prisons but with much broader implications—is that disciplinary power operates through surveillance and the internalization of norms. Foucault exemplifies this process through his analysis of Bentham’s Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977, 195-228). The panoptic prison design, in which all cells are visible from a central watchtower, ensures that all prisoners are potentially visible to an overseer at all times. With the threat of discovery and punishment of proscribed (abnormal) behavior ever-present, the prisoners internalize the gaze of the watcher and become self-policing. Whether or not there actually is a guard in the watchtower, the Panopticon inmate very quickly learns which behaviors are sanctioned and which are not, and, internalizing these rules, comports his bodily behaviors accordingly. His constant visibility to a potential other is enough for him to behave always as though subject to the gaze of the other. This, Foucault argues, is an extremely effective and efficient method of control, for there need not be an actual overseer constantly exercising power in order for the effects of power to become ingrained. By utilizing the tool of visibility, disciplinary power renders itself so effective that it becomes self-exercising in its own subject. “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault 1977, 201). Foucault’s broader point is that society at large is panoptic. We do not need literal overseers to remind us of norms of social behavior; we internalize the societal demand, for example, to be straight, and comport our bodies accordingly so that we will be seen by others as conforming to social expectations surrounding sexuality and gender expression.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Again, see Bartky (1990) for an analysis of how women self-police and internalize norms regarding womanhood

The nexus of power/knowledge that Foucault claims structures society does so in part by being constitutive of subjectivity, identity, and even bodily materiality. Foucault relates the power/knowledge connection to pleasure in order to discuss the construction of sexual identity in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Here, Foucault investigates how we have come to be the sexual subjects we are by looking at the connections among power, knowledge and pleasure in discourses on sex since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Such an investigation aims to show how what we know about sex, and thus the kinds of sexual beings we are and the kinds of sexual pleasures that are sanctioned or proscribed, have been constituted by power. He explains that “the essential aim will not be to determine whether these discursive productions and these effects of power lead one to formulate the truth about sex, or on the contrary falsehoods designed to conceal that truth, but rather to bring out the ‘will to knowledge’ that serves as both their support and their instrument” (1978, 11-12). In other words, Foucault’s work does not reveal discovered truths about sexuality, but rather demonstrates that “truth” is constructed and contingent—that there is no natural, inner, or “deep” true sexuality. On the contrary, power produces sexual identities by means of its relationship with knowledge and pleasure, and by so doing, it creates new types of sexual subjectivities, new identities, which have normalizing force within society. Foucault’s claim is that the increase in discourses on sex since the 17<sup>th</sup> century not only created a proliferation of sexualities, but also tied sexuality to identity such that sex became an identity rather than an act: one does not *have* sex, one *is* one’s sex (1978, 42-43). The important point is that sexual identity is not “natural,” but is contingently and historically constructed by power; power creates sexuality, and it does so normatively by equating sexuality with identity and by drawing strict lines between normal and abnormal.



Furthermore, a central claim in Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* is that not only is sexuality constructed, but sex itself—bodily, material sex—is created as an effect of power at the bodily level.<sup>18</sup> He writes:

In any case, the purpose of this present study is in fact to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another, as in the evolutionism of the first sociologists, but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective. Hence I do not envisage a 'history of mentalities' that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a 'history of bodies' and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested (1978, 151-152).

In other words, bodies do not become what they are due to an external Knower discovering their truth and declaiming their true meanings and functions; rather, bodies become what they are due to how they are impacted and shaped by impersonal, diffuse networks of power/knowledge.

Thus Foucault explicitly rejects the claim that there is any such thing as “natural” sex upon which cultural constructs of sexuality are overlaid. There is no natural, sexed body to which discourses on sexuality and power apply and against which they are opposed; on the contrary, not even material bodies are external to networks of power/knowledge, but are constructed within such networks (Foucault 1978, 152). Foucault insists that “it is precisely this idea of sex *in itself* that we cannot accept without examination” and asks rhetorically, “Is ‘sex’ really the anchorage point that supports the manifestations of sexuality, or is it not rather a complex idea that was formed inside the deployment of sexuality” (1978, 152)? In other words, Foucault holds that it is the deployment of sexuality that creates what is then taken to be “natural” sex: sexuality precedes, rather than follows from, biological sex (1978, 154). Out of discourses

---

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler capitalizes on this claim in her influential Foucaultian discussions of sex and gender in her book *Gender Trouble*.

concerning sexuality came discourses concerning and defining sex itself. It is discourse, not natural necessity, that determines how bodies and functions are aligned according to a concept of biological sex:

All along the great lines which the development of the deployment of sexuality has followed since the nineteenth century, one sees the elaboration of this idea that there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomico-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures; something else and something more, with intrinsic properties and laws of its own: 'sex' (Foucault 1978, 152-153).

Discourses demanding certain sexual behavior (heterosexuality), then, produced the concept of bodily sex. This is one way in which bodies in their very materiality are constructed and determined by power and are not 'natural' entities with predetermined, nature-given essences and destinies. For Foucault, nothing about human bodies and subjectivity escapes constitutive power networks; even that which is taken to be most "deep" and "natural" about us—our physical sex—is an effect and conduit of power.

One way in which power/knowledge networks impact and construct bodies is exemplified in Foucault's analysis of the confessional. For Foucault, confession, particularly about sexual matters, is an instrument and effect of disciplinary power: confession is demanded by social power structures, and through it, sexuality and sex become powerful normative constructs. Confession is constructed and presented as a way to greater freedom, self-knowledge, and truth, but in fact operates as a continuation of power constructing bodies and desires by furthering internalization of social norms and deepening self-policing. The confessional, for Foucault, is an example of the unfreedom of truth: the production of truth is imbued with power relations (Foucault 1978, 60). Foucault writes that "the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (1978, 59). What happens in the confessional is indicative of how normalization works: people confess their secret sexual

desires; a range of desires and sexual behaviors are then codified and norms delimited (Foucault 1978, 63-64). Then, people are individualized and made intelligible by where they fall within the grid of sexual desires and behaviors; they are told by the confessor that they are normal or abnormal, and frequently try to change their behavior, even their bodily desires, as a result. Thus confession ties together power, knowledge, and the material impact on bodies. Confession produces knowledge (the more people confess, the greater the confessor's knowledge of how people experience sexual desire), knowledge produces normalization (the confessor's knowledge allows him to construct frameworks and ranges of sexual desires and behaviors), normalization constructs bodies (those who have confessed must now strive for conformity to prescribed norms), and finally, constructed bodies produce the need to confess (those who fail to adhere to a norm must confess their deviation to be liberated from its stain). However, the end result is not subjects who gain access to the truth about their bodies and sexual desires, but subjects and bodies who are constructed and molded by the very process they are told is liberating.

The confessional is just one locus of power/knowledge working to normalize. Foucault argues that disciplinary power has pervaded society completely, beyond the examples of prisons and confessionals: "the new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus" (Foucault 1978, 89). Disciplinary power, then, is everywhere, and 'power' names that which structures, forms, and maintains social institutions from within, not from the outside. Not only does power structure society from within, the "within," for Foucault, is all there is. We cannot get "outside" of power or struggle against it from a position external to it, because there *is* no outside to power; everything about our world exists and is defined by virtue of being caught up in networks and

relationships of power. Foucault's claim is that the way things are is entirely constituted by power relationships such that there is no way to step back and influence or affect our lives, ourselves, politics, or society from a neutral position "above" or "outside of" power relationships. Thus Foucault is resistant to the notion that liberation from oppression can come about by throwing off our chains and rebelling against the powerful oppressor class—liberation does not come about via full-scale revolution or an overthrow of those at the top of the social hierarchy. However, Foucault is also emphatic that resistance and power go hand-in-hand (which will be a key point for feminists, who need to be able to account for resistance). Foucault writes, "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances" (1978, 95-96). While all-out revolution and ultimate utopian liberation from power may be impossible, multiple loci of resistance to power structures form an irreducible part of the web of power relations that structures society.

These multiple resistances are made possible, indeed necessitated, by Foucault's concept of power. It would be a mistake to think that because there is no 'outside' to power, Foucault's philosophy is fatalistic or overwhelmingly negative. Rather, power for Foucault is a positive, creative concept. Those who seek liberation tend to view power negatively, as that from which we must be liberated. On this view, if power is everywhere and power is 'bad,' then our entire situation is inescapably bad and cannot be made good. But Foucault sees things differently: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad" (Foucault 1982, 231). Thus being shaped in all aspects by power networks cannot properly be characterized as 'bad,' or as a state from which escape is necessary; the particular power networks that structure us might be dangerous, but while power networks are

inescapable, they are also mutable. Dangerous relations can be creatively altered. Power is a positive concept for Foucault because precisely because it emphasizes *production*, not repression. Power creates. Therefore, although power may create structures and subjectivities that oppress and constrain, it can equally well create new subjectivities open to new possibilities and pleasures; in fact, Foucault insists that such resistance is part and parcel of the very working of power. He is emphatic that power and resistance must co-exist:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned...? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. . . . by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. . . . They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite (1978, 95-96).

In this passage Foucault seems to anticipate a potential criticism that disciplinary power leaves its subjects trapped in a cage not of their own making: he says such a view would be a misunderstanding of his account of power. On the contrary, power and resistance constantly cooperate in a mutually constitutive struggle; rather than Foucault's account of power eviscerating the very possibility of resistance, resistance for Foucault is as ubiquitous as power. Freedom, too, is coextensive with power.

For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it can never be undermined. Instead I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the 'agonism' between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence (Foucault 1982, 223).

Thus power is inescapable, but it is not the kind of thing from which we *need* escape in order to possess agency and freedom and in order to resist power structures that dominate and oppress.

Foucault writes, "at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence

there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom,” which means that “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least *in potential*, a strategy of struggle” (Foucault 1982, 225). ‘Power’ as Foucault sees it is simply descriptive of how society operates, and as it is anything but stagnant, it offers constant opportunities for change and transformation.

Feminism has much to gain from Foucault’s understanding of power and its bodily effects. First, Foucault’s genealogical approach to writing about bodies tells us that things do not necessarily need to be the way that they are, including what we take to be our most rational, bedrock beliefs about the nature of our own bodies. By looking at the micro-physics of power, Foucault addresses the ways in which epistemic contexts and discursive formations—not mere biology—impact bodies. The micro-physics of power working on bodies, as Foucault shows, literally makes us who and what we are, and could have been otherwise, and can and will be otherwise in the future. This is a valuable claim for feminists because part of our project is to show that bodies which do not measure up to socially approved norms—i.e., bodies that are not strictly in line with bimorphic ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ ideals—are not ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’, are not *unnatural*, but are constructed just as are the bodies that are supposedly natural and normal. Indeed, Foucault’s genealogy of bodies as constructed by power shows that there is no ‘natural’ body to which to appeal in an effort to separate the ‘normal’ from the ‘abnormal’ body. Thus a woman’s body can no longer be deemed naturally fit for only ‘feminine’ ways of being. As McLaren puts it, “Foucault’s genealogy raises questions about many of the things that we take for granted, for example, that sex is a natural biological category, that particular behaviors are unnatural, and that one’s sex prescribes what an individual can do” (33). In sum, Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power indicates the contingency of the construction of categories, and

this is a necessary starting point for a feminist reclaiming of embodied being that leaves behind the Western philosophical tradition of hierarchizing male above female, a hierarchy justified by claims about the supposedly essential, immutable nature of women's bodies. If Foucault is right and nature has not dictated the proper ways for bodies to be, then the contingency of bodily construction opens up new fields of possibility for women's bodily being.

Furthermore, from the point of view of seeking change, Foucault's concept of power is actually superior for feminist purposes to the traditional, monarchical view which treats power as an entity (something that can be possessed, like money) and in which liberation is a matter of throwing off the repressive chains of the oppressor and seizing power. This is a view feminists have traditionally taken as well, positing feminism as a recognition of an opposition between men and women in which men are clearly and straightforwardly power-holders over women and in which liberation requires transfer and equalization of power such that women and men are on a level playing field. Susan Bordo, however, argues that Foucault's view of power is more descriptive of current forms of oppression than the traditional, men-vs.-women construction. She writes, "Where power works 'from below' [referring to Foucault's notion of disciplinary power as an all-pervading network of forces shaping society from the bottom up], prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may certainly contain such elements), but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms" (Bordo 1993, 27). In other words, women are oppressed today not because men literally possess power and forcibly hold women back, but because disciplinary power fields construct women as beings who strive to maintain a normativity that is oppressive/harmful to them. This is an apt description of how women are oppressed in certain ways, such as appearance: women discipline themselves to

achieve an appearance dictated to them as ‘normal’ and desirable, and their internalized, self-policing ways of maintaining this norm are limiting and inhibiting.<sup>19</sup> Taken to an extreme, self-policing to achieve societal dictates of physical beauty can be not only limiting and inhibiting to women, but extremely unhealthy and even deadly.<sup>20</sup> Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power as opposed to sovereign power allows feminists to examine and deconstruct the subtle, often unnoticed ways in which women are oppressed, the oppressions from which we currently need liberation, in a way that goes beyond and is more accurate than the outdated model of seizing Power (juridical power, power as an entity) from the oppressor.<sup>21</sup>

Foucault’s concept of power is also beneficial from a feminist perspective because of his understanding of how power and resistance co-exist. Jana Sawicki writes,

according to [Foucault’s] analysis of power and resistance, freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant culture’s characterizations of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures (1988, 186).

In other words, resistance to oppression that leads to freedom occurs entirely *within* power structures. Foucault’s picture of freedom and resistance does not doom us to strive for an impossible goal, breaking out of power altogether, but rather shows us that there are myriad possibilities for change without succumbing to illusory utopianism. Bordo favors Foucault’s concept of power because of his realization “that power relations are never seamless but are

---

<sup>19</sup> Bartky (1990) has also written on women’s physical self-disciplines as constitutive of our bodies and as oppressive.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Bordo provides a powerful Foucaultian analysis of how anorexia, a frequently deadly disease, is a manifestation of women’s internalization of society’s demand for slimness taken to an extreme. See Bordo 1993, 139-164.

<sup>21</sup> To clarify, I do not use the terms ‘oppression’ and ‘liberation’ in the traditional, revolutionary sense, but to point out that even within a Foucaultian framework, one can identify socio-cultural constructs that work to limit possibilities and restrict ways of being (which is what I mean by ‘oppression’), and one can work to resist those limitations, thereby opening up and expanding possibilities for less restricted ways of being (which is what I mean by ‘liberation’).



always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new opportunities for transformation” (Bordo 1993, 27). Thus the idea that power and resistance are, in a way, two names for the same types of events shows that freedom is not freedom *from* but freedom *to*: freedom to create and engage in new possibilities, new ways of being. As a feminist I find this appealing because it treats resistance and liberation not as a simple power transfer (which could amount to trading one hegemony for another, as indeed white, Western feminism has been accused of doing) but is a proliferation of possibilities achieved by *using* power.

Another element of Foucault’s theory of power, his distinction between power and domination, allows feminists to account for the ability to resist and change sedimented, deeply ingrained, oppressive power structures without the misstep of seeking an escape from power altogether. While power is ubiquitous and unavoidable, domination—and the oppressive structures that feminists seek to change are frequently instances of domination—is not. Sawicki explains, “Whereas ‘domination’ refers to a situation in which the subject is unable to overturn or reverse the domination relation—a situation where resistance is impossible—‘power’ refers to relations that are flexible, mutable, fluid, and even reversible” (1996, 170). Domination, then, is problematic in ways that power is not. McLaren explains it like this: “Whereas power is always subject to reversal, states of domination are static, ossified relations of power. . . . Domination is a state of asymmetrical power relations that persists over time and may seem fixed” (39). Thus Foucault can maintain that power as a force is not held and exercised by some over others, yet can still account for systematic inequalities and general asymmetries of power by noting that oft-repeated power relationships solidify into patterns and institutions that constitute domination. This understanding of power works well with feminist concerns because it accounts for the possibility of resisting sedimented power structures that work to oppress women without denying

the positive, em-powering aspect of power as a network of ever-shifting forces rather than a purely repressive tool of the dominant. Foucault's understanding of power, then, enables ways of resisting that oppose sedimented hegemonies and deeply inscribed categories, such as traditional femininity. Understanding power as a tool that can be used even by the dominated (rather than as a possession of the dominant only) shows that women living under a traditional, oppressive norm of femininity are not, in fact, powerless and ineffectual (a notion which is part of the image of traditional femininity as weak and in need of protection) but are able to resist and effect transformation.

For Foucault, power implies freedom, so if there is power everywhere it is because there is freedom everywhere. But in the case of domination there is much less freedom; there are fewer options. However, resistance is still possible.<sup>22</sup> "Among the specific types of resistance that he mentions are, 'violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation'. Feminist interest may be best served by acknowledging that resistance can occur in a variety of situations in a variety of forms both collective and individual" (McLaren 40).

Foucault's understanding of power, then, does permit change and resistance when situations of domination occur.<sup>23</sup> For Foucault "states of domination are subject to reversal through collective action. . . .in a situation of domination by one group of people over another, for instance, the colonizers over the colonized, liberation is possible" (McLaren 39, 40). Foucault does recognize that states of domination can come to an end. This does not mean, however, that *power* goes away; quite the opposite, it means that the formerly dominated gain/learn new ways to use and

---

<sup>22</sup> McLaren cites *Lysistrata* as an example (40): women in ancient Greece lived in a society in which their subordinate role was well sedimented, yet in this play the women come up with a creative way of resisting men's ability to dictate the course of their lives by refusing to have sex with the men until they stop engaging in war. Although this is a fictional play written by a man, the point remains that even in a situation of extreme domination, there are always possibilities, always things oppressed individuals can do to resist and challenge their situation.

<sup>23</sup> I emphasize this point because some feminist critics of Foucault, such as Nancy Fraser and Nancy Hartsock, claim that his theory of power *cannot* account for systematic structures of oppression. I argue that by missing what Foucault has to say about domination, Fraser and Hartsock misread his theory of power.

affect power relationships in ways that lessen dominating structures, thereby achieving new possibilities for freedoms to live and be in new ways. Liberation and freedom for Foucault do not mean an end of power but a utilization of power to create new possibilities; freedom occurs not by throwing off power, but by exercising it. As McLaren puts it, “Freedom is not a final state to be realized, but occurs only in its exercise through reversal, resistance, and other practices of freedom” (41). Thus on Foucault’s terms domination can be overcome through the very interplay of the power/resistance network that is constitutive of social institutions. McLaren concludes, “The fact that resistance is possible even in situations of domination—the prolonged, static, locking together of power relations—bodes well for social change” (40).

Furthermore, even Foucault’s picture of bodies as constructed by disciplinary power and molded into docile bodies has positive feminist implications, counterintuitive as that may seem. The reason even the disciplinary control of bodies is important is because, again, for Foucault, power is positive and creative. Resistance and power are inseparable, which means that bodies *cannot* be entirely passive for Foucault but must be sites of resistance—for while they are shaped by power, power cannot exist where resistance is not. For Foucault, “bodies are both active and passive; it is bodies that resist and increase their forces through discipline, as well as being shaped by disciplinary practices” (McLaren 56). As bodies are disciplined and normalized, not only do they become docile, but they also acquire new strengths and skills; as Foucault puts it, “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (1977, 136). For example, military training requires a tremendous amount of discipline that forms the body into perhaps rigid habits of stance, posture, movement, etc., but also grants new strengths and abilities that the body previously did not have. And gaining new strengths and abilities can be empowering. For example, Honi Fern Haber discusses

bodybuilding as a discipline that has the potential to empower women. Bodybuilding, like any other discipline, requires strict training and control of one's body, habituating it to the proper movements and stances; but at the same time, it not only challenges traditional gender norms, but also imparts new strength, and, potentially, an empowering increase in self-confidence (Haber 145, 153-154).<sup>24</sup> Such an example indicates that even within the ever-shifting flux of power/resistance, bodily discipline itself not only (necessarily) controls and constrains the body in certain ways, but also empowers it, enables it, allows it to grow, change, and open to new experiences (McLaren 58-59). The bottom line is that, for Foucault, a disciplined body is never *only* a docile body: for disciplines grant bodies new skills, which in turn grant new possibilities. These possibilities are ripe with potential for feminists to explore and engage new, empowering ways of disciplining our bodies in rejection of the disciplines that would render them docile.

As I have shown, Foucault's analysis of power entails a destabilizing of identity categories (particularly, for Foucault, with regard to sex and sexuality) because it is power, not nature or pure biology, that produces bodies, and subjects and identities are inseparable from bodies. Feminists can capitalize on Foucault's postmodernist approach to subjectivity that shatters identity categories. A deconstructive genealogy of subjectivity is liberating, and in itself political, because it allows us to question oppressive "facts" we formerly took for granted—for example, the notion "that particular behaviors are unnatural, and that one's sex prescribes what an individual can do" (McLaren 33). Questioning the identity categories presumed to be "natural" allows us to realize that they can change; for example, a genealogy that deconstructs heterosexual identity reveals that persons with a certain set of body parts are not mandated by nature to assume a particular, specified subject role and only experience "natural" or

---

<sup>24</sup> In chapter five, I discuss Haber's analysis of bodybuilding in greater detail, including a critique of its potential weaknesses.

“appropriate” sexual desire for persons with a different set of body parts. Thus knowing that identities are contingent and historically constructed paves the way for the realization that change is possible, that what is “natural” and “normal” is not writ in stone—or in the body. Feminist critiques of Foucault’s analysis of sexuality, such as Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, is an example of a way in which feminists can engage with Foucault’s work to examine aspects of women’s embodied being that cry out for resistance and change.

### **Late Foucault: Subjectivity, Care of the Self, and Political Action**

#### 1: Subjectivity and the Care of the Self

Foucault’s later work is also of value to feminists, and, I argue, is a continuation of his earlier work with a different emphasis. While Foucault’s genealogies of power and sexuality focus on the construction of bodies, his later work focuses on another aspect at work: the subject’s role within the scheme of power, knowledge, and bodies. With McLaren,

I see this later work not as a departure from his earlier work or a return to Enlightenment values, but as a continuation of his earlier project to think through a new conception of subjectivity that is embodied and manifests itself through practices. These practices both enable and constrain, and freedom is conceptualized as situated within material, institutional, and disciplinary matrices (McLaren 3).

In his later works, Foucault undertakes what some see as a radical shift: rather than talking about historical forces and discursive practices constituting bodies and identities, Foucault returns to talk of the very subject whose death he predicts in his earlier work, *The Order of Things*, where he argues that the classical notion of the subject is a finite, historical moment in human genealogy, doomed to inevitable death in a manner similar to Nietzsche’s death of God. In his latest works, written shortly before his death, Foucault seems to backtrack, focusing on subjects as agents capable of self-work rather than as bodies subject wholly to the dictates of disciplinary

power. However, this turn to the subject is neither a backtracking nor a discontinuity, but simply a further refinement and fleshing out of his work. Discussing the subject's role in its own self-constitution is but another piece of the overall puzzle of how bodies/subjects come to be who and what they are: not only constrained by power, but also loci of agency, able to act within power networks to (at least partially) construct themselves. Retrospectively, Foucault recognizes that he has been doing a genealogy of how *we* (present-day subjects) have become subjects all along; and just as normalizing discipline is in our genealogy, so is active self-constitution or self-subjectivation. Foucault claims that throughout his corpus his focus has been coming to understand how subjects are constituted: he writes, in a late essay, "I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. . . . My objective...has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1982, 208). I take him at his word here, and read his return to the subject not as a contradiction or repudiation of the death of the subject, but simply as another layer in the genealogy of human subjectivity, for the subject whose death Foucault heralds in *The Order of Things* is not the subject who emerges as a result of disciplinary power, with self-constitution as an element in its history.<sup>25</sup>

The return to the subject is important for feminism, because feminist theory needs a concept of an agentic subject who is capable of resistance. If docile, disciplined, normalized bodies were the end of the story of who and what we are, it would be a grim picture indeed, for it would seem to offer no way to respond to power structures or to attempt to change oppressive hegemonies: how can mechanistically controlled bodies—robots—change their programming?

---

<sup>25</sup> I delve more deeply into this subject in chapter four, where I argue that Foucault's repudiation of the subject does not entail an irreconcilable difference with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on subjectivity. There, I flesh out the argument that the subject rejected in *The Order of Things* is but one type of subjectivity, in fact one that is akin to the Cartesian, dualistic subjectivity that Merleau-Ponty also rejects.

But Foucault does not give us a picture of persons as mechanical objects or robots incapable of input into our situations and beings. By extending an analysis of Foucault into his later years, feminists are able to keep his valuable account of power without losing the possibility of an agentic subject, for nowhere in his discussion of self-subjection does Foucault indicate that agentic action and disciplinary power are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, by returning to the concept of a subject with agency, Foucault simply elaborates yet another node within power networks, for the actions of subjects are just as much exercises of power as are the demands of institutions and social norms. Foucault's subject avoids the problems of the Cartesian subject, as well, for as I have already discussed, he argues that bodies and subjectivities are inseparable. Furthermore, because the subject is always situated and embodied, it is not the pure, autonomous rational knower that has been problematic for feminism. "Foucault's subject is neither entirely autonomous nor enslaved, neither the originator of the discourses and practices that constitute its experiences nor determined by them" (Sawicki 1991, 104). Such a subject is ideal for the feminist project, for it neither ignores the reality of situation and power nor fatalistically relegates subjects to utter external domination and control, and a good feminist theory must account for both the situations in which women find ourselves and the possibility of resisting and changing those situations which are oppressive.

Foucault says that practices of the self, or "techniques of self-government," can counter governmentality (which refers to ways in which disciplinary, normalizing power structures society all-pervasively) (McNay 1993, 68). Although for Foucault, subjectivity is socially constituted, it still possesses the agency necessary for resistance (McLaren 53-54). In his later works Foucault discusses selves working on themselves, actively, via what he calls technologies or practices of the self. Foucault discusses these practices primarily in *The Use of Pleasure*, *The*

*Care of the Self*, and his later essays and interviews. *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, which are volumes two and three of his *History of Sexuality*, discuss self-subjection in ancient Greece and Rome. Foucault details at length the practices and regimens that went into the ancients' self-constitution (at least, for free men)<sup>26</sup> and presents this as a type of discipline that is *not* normalizing, because the aim of these techniques is not to mold oneself in accordance with a socially approved normative ideal within a prescribed identity category. On the contrary, techniques of the self have to do with the self's relationship to itself, its active self-constitution (Foucault 1990, 65). The goal was to combat the ascendancy of pleasure—not to let pleasure rule oneself—and thus to combat oneself (Foucault 1990, 66-67). The result: *self*-subjectivation—subjecting oneself to *oneself*, not to a norm; actively constituting one's own subjectivity.

True, when Foucault discusses technologies or practices of the self and care of the self, he is talking about antiquity; and true, he denies that he looks to antiquity for solutions to contemporary problems. In fact, he insists that such a move simply is not a possibility—we cannot go back to antiquity, adopt ancient Greek ethics, and live as ancient Greek self-constituting selves (and, of course, women in ancient Greece were not permitted to take part in these practices anyway). We live in a different era, a different arena of power relationships; we cannot simply erase the history of normalizing disciplinary power that separates us from antiquity. What use, then, are Foucault's later works to feminists seeking to disrupt oppressive gender norms?

There is evidence that Foucault thinks the disciplined, normalized subjects we are now *can* engage in self-care and self-subjection in certain ways and to a certain extent: he

---

<sup>26</sup> Feminists sometimes criticize Foucault for writing only on male self-constitution; however, Foucault recognizes—and does not valorize—the androcentrism of the cultures he is analyzing (1990, 22-23).



indicates that while living the life of antiquity is clearly impossible (and probably undesirable), we can look to antiquity as a model of non-normalizing discipline. Furthermore, Foucault's later work on techniques of the self can be read as a continuation of his earlier projects, which are intended as a history of the present, and thus intended to shed some light on our current situation. McNay writes that "In retrospect, Foucault argues that in order to reach an adequate understanding of the modern subject, an analysis of techniques of domination must be counterbalanced with an analysis of techniques of the self" (1992, 49). Normalizing discipline, then, is only one way in which we are made subjects. And there is no contradiction in suggesting that contemporary, normalized subjects might engage in projects of self-constitution, for even in his work on disciplinary power, where his critics locate their accusation of determinism, Foucault writes that "Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and *exercising* this power. *They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation*" (1980, 98, emphasis added). Thus Foucault does not intend his picture of power to paint a completely determined and dominated subject; the embodied subject of Foucaultian power *is not inert* and can *exercise* the very power which constitutes her. Even the disciplined, docile body remains (at least potentially) powerful and agentic. Just as power cannot exist without resistance, power for Foucault cannot exist without freedom; the free agency of the subjects of power is a necessary condition of power's being power. Foucault writes, "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse compartments may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of

freedom...” (1982, 221). If that which I dominate is not free to react, no power is present in the domination thereof; if, for example, I kick a stone, the stone is not free to react in any way other than to move according to the laws of physics, and so my kicking is not an exercise of power. If I am a schoolyard bully, though, and kick a smaller child, it is only the child’s freedom to retaliate, to run away, to report me to her teacher, etc. that makes my action an exercise of power. The bully has no power over stones, only over those she seeks to intimidate, and the freedom to *be* intimidated *or* to respond in another way is necessary for the power of intimidation to work.

In later essays and interviews, Foucault discusses technologies of the self in more contemporary terms, suggesting that such techniques are not the sole provenance of the ancients. In his essay *What is Enlightenment*, for example, Foucault argues that we *can* work on ourselves as free beings; he writes, “I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as *work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings*” (1984b, 47, emphasis added). In other words, the very act of doing a genealogy of the self is a technique of the self—a practice that has transformative potential for the self that can be freely carried out by means of a subject’s reflexive, critical insight into her own formation. As McLaren explains, “Technologies of the self aim at self-transformation. Self-transformation is to become other than what one is, to realize ‘the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think’; it is the creation of new possibilities, new forms of life achieved through technologies of the self” (McLaren 146, quoting Foucault 1984b, 46). In other words, by doing philosophy (for example—and it is one of Foucault’s examples of a contemporary technique of the self) one opens oneself to new, yet still historically and socially situated, possibilities. Foucault discusses

philosophy and self-writing as potentially empowering and freeing techniques of the self in which modern, normalized subjects can fruitfully engage, and these strategies can be particularly liberating and effective for feminists.

Foucault's work on the care of the self and his suggestions that techniques of the self can be employed by normalized subjects presuppose a subject who, while she may be constructed and constrained in many ways by normalizing disciplines, still retains the capacity to critically reflect on the ways in which she is constituted, to realize the contingency of social structures and to creatively imagine and strive for new possibilities. These capacities are the locus of resistive agency, and this is a theory with positive feminist implications. As McLaren puts it,

If we consider carefully what Foucault says about the subject and power, and take seriously his distinction between power and domination, Foucault's subject seems constituted by social relations, yet capable of resistance. This social subject capable of resistance that emerges out of my reading of Foucault is compatible both with feminist aims of capturing the specificity of women's experience and the political and social transformations necessary to end the oppression of women (63).

In other words, women can utilize Foucault in our struggle against oppression. How? By adopting his concept of 'bodies and pleasures'.

Just as Foucaultian change is local, resistance to oppressive disciplinary normalization is possible on Foucaultian terms, and it begins with the personal. One can take hold of a disciplinary practice for one's own purposes, in order to mold oneself into a new type of subjectivity—a subjectivity that seeks out and experiences new pleasures and freedoms. Resistance and power cannot be separated, and thus resistance can be created even in the very techniques by which power constitutes and normalizes subjectivities: although it often results in docility and stagnation, discipline has the potential provide avenues of personal transformation and empowerment. Beginning with Foucault's suggestion that "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and

pleasures” (Foucault 1978, 157) and drawing on his later concept of techniques of the self, feminists can seek non-normalizing practices focused on bodies and pleasures to achieve personal freedom and transformation.

Taking up her own example of a technique of the self, Ladelle McWhorter discusses line-dancing as an example of a self-chosen, self-imposed, self-directed discipline that changed her in ways she experienced as positive. She writes, “I disciplined myself to the dance, and I became something I never imagined I could become. I strayed afield of myself. And in the process I discovered and cultivated immense capacities for pleasures I’d never dreamed of before” (1999, 187). Based on her experience with the discipline of dance, McWhorter argues that the pleasure she finds in dancing is resistive to normalizing power in that disciplines whose goal is pleasure (as line dancing is for her), unlike normalizing disciplines, increase the body’s capacities *without* increasing its docility (1999, 177). Hence this is an example of what a technique of the self could look like that enables one to carry out positively transformative work on one’s self within a society rife with normalizing disciplinary power—an example of discipline that *increases*, rather than decreases, freedom. As McWhorter reminds us, on Foucault’s terms, “Freedom is the expanse of possibility; as such, it is not opposed to discipline at all” (1999, 172).

Helen O’Grady also argues for the possibility and desirability of individual-level change empowered by the Foucaultian realizations that identities are fluid rather than fixed and that freedom and resistance are integral to the very nature of power. O’Grady argues that keeping track of the history of such changes in one’s own life and the lives of friends and relatives is itself a resistive strategy because such a history reinforces the notion that change, even within one’s self, is possible (99). The woman who is unhappy with her constructed yet deeply lived identity as submissive, guilt-ridden, apologetic, always putting the needs of others ahead of

herself, is not trapped in this role. She can act upon herself, change her relationship with herself. By practicing different ways of relating to and evaluating herself, she is able to change the shape of the forces that construct her identity.

The significance of such transformative moments [e.g. an anorexic realizing that no one's perfect so feels less need to be perfect herself] lies in their demonstration of the illusory nature of taken-for-granted, seemingly fixed notions of identity. Once this has been experienced, a more fluid notion of identity becomes possible. Discovering that aspects of the self can be superseded through active interventions in one's own life gives rise at least to the possibility of ongoing destabilization of fixed categories of identity (O'Grady 100).

As an example of remembering a history of such transformation, I think of my mother. My mother is by no means a feminist (as far as she is concerned, 'feminism' is a four-letter word), yet she has had transformational experiences that speak to me of the possibility of resistance to the constructed identity of submissive femininity. When she was promoted to a supervisory position at work, she hated it initially; she hated having to be in a position of authority over men, not because she was unqualified, but because her entire personal history had taught her to defer to men. She had never had an experience in which she was not only allowed but *expected* to critique, correct, and command men, so her repertoire of behaviors simply did not contain acts of that sort. She worried she would fail at her new job and felt deeply uncomfortable having to disagree with or stand up to a male subordinate. However, I will never forget the day my mother came home from work after a confrontation with a male employee amazed to discover that she *could* perform in an authoritative role, that she *could* act out, and eventually become, an identity that was knowledgeable, confident, and firm (and this change in identity includes, fundamentally, a change in bodily comportment in her interactions with men.) She had changed, at least in one area of her life, from the constructed identity of the submissive woman into another identity—perhaps equally constructed, but no less real and certainly no less powerful—

of a confident, commanding woman. Most importantly, she had effected that change by *working on herself* in concert with the power network into which she was thrown. She realized that in order to succeed at her new job, she would have to learn new ways of behavior, so she practiced new ways of being (including changes, seemingly insignificant but ultimately transformative, in such things as posture and eye contact—bodily habits) until they became habitual and ‘normal’ to her. My mother discovered the possibility of change by practicing that very change.

Although she herself might deny the feminist implications of her transformation, watching her growing confidence provides me with an example of the type of history O’Grady recommends as an element of Foucaultian feminist transformation. Knowing that change is possible because it has happened before is, for O’Grady, a central step in the Foucaultian process of care of the self.

Care of the self and individual transformation is the first step. The next step: political action on a larger scale. In the following section, I show that collective political action is possible within a Foucaultian theoretical framework. But even large-scale political change, for Foucault, begins with personal transformation on the basis of his concepts of limit and transgression.

## 2. Foucaultian Feminist Politics

The concepts of limit and transgression ground Foucault’s critical philosophy (Foucault 1984, 45). Limits result from the normative operation of power that shapes us—for example, social norms surrounding sexuality limit how we understand ourselves as sexual beings. But for Foucault, limits are both inhibiting and enabling, constricting and empowering, for there is no absolute, metaphysical limits: limits are constructs. The realization that normative limits themselves are limited (constructed) awakens us to the political potential of transgression—both

refusing limits, and moving beyond them. Foucault's politics, then, has two poles, the oppositional and the affirmative. Oppositionally Foucault encourages refusing what we are, refusing *assejuitissement*, but we must also embrace the affirmative pole, constructive self-subjectification, or care of the self. We must recognize that we are delimited within the strictures of our cultural institutions, and this recognition is the first step to refusal, which must precede remaking oneself. On Foucault's terms, then, resistance and change involve recognizing limitations as conditions of possibility (Simons 3): I recognize that I am who and what I am because of normative limitations, and only after that recognition can I engage in self-care and self-creation. Thus Foucaultian politics requires a recognition of how the present operates, of the types of subjectivities and other categories that are presently viable. Politics is not a matter *only* of trying to escape the present, but rather requires *recognizing* the present and starting our resistance from where we are. Sawicki elaborates the point: "Foucault did not believe we could escape the present *tout court* and install a new society on the basis of a pre-social human nature—but he did believe that we could effect very specific changes through a practical attitude oriented toward testing the limits of the present" (2004, 170). In other words, we start from where we are, in the present: how does the present limit us? Then we move on to transgress those limitations as a way of forming new ways of being. "Foucault advocates social criticism...as an immanent critique located within particular social and historical contexts, and from one's specific situation" (McLaren 36). Foucault writes that the political ethos he cultivates is one "in which the critique of what we are is at the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (1984, 50).

McWhorter provides an example of how Foucaultian feminist politics works on an individual level by describing her own experience with realizing the status of the present and using that as a starting point for creating a new way of relating to herself (which is how Foucault defines ethics). As McWhorter realized when she finally embraced her homosexual identity (even though that label had been oppressive—almost deadly—to her when it was imposed on her unwillingly, as she writes in her book *Bodies and Pleasures*), constructed identities, and constructed embodied subjectivities, are simply all we have to work with and are the necessary starting place for any political activism. But just because identities/subjectivities are constructed does *not* mean that they are politically useless: on the contrary, McWhorter writes that Foucault's genealogical work

showed me how I could be a homosexual fully and completely while at the same time I could refuse to be a homosexual essentially. It showed me how to begin to think of homosexuality as something other than a given, reified object. *The reductive categorization could be undermined even while the social position and identity could be acknowledged and affirmed* (1999, 30, emphasis added).

On Foucault's terms, even while identity categories are destabilized and undermined, they can still be affirmed, lived, and called upon for political struggle; in fact, it is the very destabilization that is so crucial to political progress, for only after McWhorter came to understand her homosexuality as historically constructed rather than natural or essential could she begin to fight back against the stereotype of herself as *nothing but* a reified, essential, homosexual deviant. McWhorter's realization follows Foucault's insight that once an identity such as homosexuality is constructed, those it names can take up the discourse that defines them for their own purposes in what he calls reverse discourse. Foucault writes that while the 19<sup>th</sup>-century discursive invention of homosexuality as an identity undoubtedly had perverse effects on those it subjectified, "it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began



to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (1978, 101). This is an example of the irreducibility of resistance: the power structures that give rise to oppressive categorizations *at the same time* offer potential for personally and politically freeing use of these categories.

Foucaultian change is local and specific, and begins with the personal. However, this does not mean that change cannot also be collective and political. Foucault’s work is politically useful for feminists, and his later work in particular seeks a connection between personal transformation and political engagement. McLaren writes,

Foucault’s later work has much to offer feminists, not only because it extends his notion of embodied subjectivity, but also because it elaborates a connection between ethical subjectivity and ethical and political context. The politics of the body and the practices of the self do not begin and end with the individual. They are social, cultural, and historical. Recognizing techniques of the self as political does not reduce politics to the personal, or preclude collective action or structural change. Instead, it broadens the political arena to include social and cultural factors that have political implications (145).

At the very least, then, personal change has a political dimension simply because, in a world of socio-historically constituted subjects, there is never any such thing as the purely personal divorced from social connections and interactions. The next question: how, on Foucaultian terms, is it possible to turn personal transformation into political activism? This question must be answered because a good feminist theory must include the possibility of large-scale, collective social and political change. As a feminist I will not be satisfied if the only effect of Foucault’s work is to provide a basis for personal change only for those women who happen to read him. What about women, and other oppressed groups, as a whole?

The question, then, is this: once we have done our genealogy and recognized how the present limits us, how, exactly, do we transgress and go beyond those limitations in ways that are

politically and collectively transformative? The insight that the historicity of identity categories does not rob them of political viability is the basis on which Foucault advocates political activism. He speaks in terms of mobilizing groups in a definitive way, and grouping resistance to (localized) liberatory effect, saying,

the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior...*And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible*, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships (1978, 96, emphasis added).

This implies that resistance *can* be agentially utilized, in strategies such as reverse discourse.

Furthermore, there is no limit, so to speak, to ways in which collective political struggle can be enacted. As Sawicki explains,

Foucault claimed that the possibilities of resistance might be found anywhere—presumably at the center as well as the margins of the social. . . . Accordingly, there is no reason to assume that the liberal strategy of securing the rights of gays and lesbians to marry is any less likely to produce new forms of subjectivity and new cultural forms than participation in more radical erotic subcultures (2004, 174).

In other words, there is nothing anti-Foucaultian in struggling collectively for political change such as laws allowing gay marriage. This could be resistive in that the very allowance of a different type of marriage breaks away from traditional marriage and its traditional, gender-defined roles. Creating the political space for freedom to marry allows for the possibility of creating new types of subjectivities, relationships, and identities within marriage which would be just as much an expansion of possibilities and freedoms as attempts to expand on sexual behaviors. Appealing to such seemingly classical liberal concepts as ‘freedom’ in this sense (freedom to marry: political freedom of a subject to choose her own way of life) is not anti-Foucaultian despite Foucault’s rejection of such humanist concepts, because Foucault recognizes above all that the result of genealogy is to highlight the condition of the *present*, and our present

is one in which concepts such as freedom and humanism carry much political weight. “In spite of his indictment of humanism and liberalism Foucault recognizes the need for a variety of political practices and strategies, including appeals to human rights and freedom. . . . Foucault advocates political engagement aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom and he endorses a variety of political strategies” (McLaren 7). On Foucaultian terms we can still appeal to justice and rights and liberty because these are the categories currently in use—they are what is ‘real’ to us, they are what has been constructed and are the categories available, the only ones that make sense right now (Sawicki 1991, 100-101). So if we want to create room for Foucaultian freedom—freedom that is an exercise of power within preexisting social power/knowledge networks—then we must act within the power/knowledge networks that are our present.

Foucaultian political transformation is local, specific, and never finished; it is always self-critical and always entails room for more work to be done. There is no revolution after which utopia reigns; rather, liberation and transformation consist of on-going specific struggles, e.g. women struggling for reproductive freedom. Each limited area of struggle may provide a little more freedom and a little less pressure for women to conform to oppressive norms, but we will never reach an end state where everything is perfect. There is always room for more struggle, always—to return to Foucault’s model of history as a battlefield—another battle to fight. And this is not a pessimistic or nihilistic view, it is simply a description of how power and resistance operate in contemporary Western cultures. Faced with this reality, feminists must constantly be on the lookout for our resistances being co-opted, or for our own strategies to be dominating and oppressing someone else, but also always aware that liberatory transformation is always possible and that there is always scope for empowerment.

Foucault's politics is valuable for feminism because it is non-prescriptive. "Foucault's theories do not tell us what to do, but rather how some of our ways of thinking and doing are historically linked to particular forms of power and social control; his theories serve less to explain than to criticize and raise questions. His histories of theories are designed to reveal their contingency and thereby free us from them" (Sawicki 1988, 189). This is one of the things I like best about Foucault, that he does not offer a prescription for political action or personal self-relation or transformation, because any such prescription will inevitably fall into the same old story of hegemony, exclusion and marginalization of those whose lives, bodies and behaviors the prescription cannot encompass. Also, a non-prescriptive politics is 'guilt-free,' which is crucial for feminism, as it seems women and other oppressed groups generally have more guilt to deal with in our political struggles and our relationships to ourselves, particularly when the two do not seem to coincide: for example, if one of my political aims as a feminist is to break away from and destabilize traditional femininity, what if I were to enter into a traditional, man-woman marriage—would I not be betraying my cause, succumbing and subscribing to the very tradition I ostensibly seek to eradicate? Not necessarily, if I approach the situation from a Foucaultian perspective. If everywhere there is power, there is also resistance and freedom, and the traditional construct of husband and wife is certainly saturated with power, then by entering into a marriage, a woman could engage in points of resistance *within that power structure*: she could be a different kind of wife. This applies to images of femininity as well. A Foucaultian political perspective enables women to positively embrace and claim our bodies, even if what that means for a particular woman is shaving, using makeup, looking traditionally feminine. For by so doing, she is enacting a power-constructed identity, yes, but as Foucault's later works emphasize,

*she is still a subject* enacting that identity and there are always points of resistance, ways of opening new spaces, from within that power/knowledge construct.

To summarize, what I see in Foucault's work as a whole is a theory of embodied subjectivity that is always culturally and historically situated and discursively constructed, yet also still an agentic subject with the capacity to act *within* power networks to alter and shift relationships of forces in ways that open new spaces and create new possibilities for embodied being. This is just the kind of theory that feminists can capitalize on politically: non-prescriptive, non-guilt-inducing, and yet with the possibility for collective political struggle for things such as women's rights and equality still possible within this framework.

## **Conclusion**

Jana Sawicki claims that "Any self-critical and historically inflected feminism will find Foucauldian genealogy indispensable" (1991, 66), and I find myself in agreement. The simple act of reading Foucault in itself can be a political practice for feminists. Foucault offers feminists this schema: we, in our embodied, material subjectivity, are socio-historically constructed by power such that our identities are neither natural nor essential, but are nonetheless real and effective in the world. By engaging in genealogy and critique, we become aware of the processes that lead to the formation of identities and social structures, and this awareness empowers us by enabling us to take up an active response and actively engage in our own construction. Foucault's postmodern approach has positive potential for feminist work. We must first genealogically examine the forces that constitute our social reality, we have the power and potential to then take hold of power/resistance for our own pleasurable ends and that we can increase our freedom by self-consciously engaging in the workings of power, and normalized,

historically constituted subjects who engage in practices of the self have the ability to take the ethical/political step of engaging critically with their social environment and struggling to change those structures that oppress. Thus, I find that Foucault is conducive to feminist appropriation.

A reading of Foucault that emphasizes the possibility and desirability of political engagement is correct in part because of Foucault's own commitment to political activism and change. I have McLaren to thank for strongly supporting this insight; based on Foucault's work on authorship, she argues that Foucault's interviews, articles, political activism, should be considered as part of his *oeuvre* to be used in interpreting his overall project. McLaren concludes,

if one takes Foucault's claims that the critical investigation that characterizes a philosophical attitude defines a life, that the work of an author has vague and ambiguous boundaries and that one's work on oneself (but always in social and political contexts) is the paramount ethical task, then the case can be made that one should not only include all of Foucault's published works in his corpus, but also that his own 'aesthetics of existence' regarding his political activism should be seen as part of his attempt to create a new nondisciplinary, nonnormalizing ethics (47-48).

Foucault did not separate critique as theory from the rest of his life; his philosophy and his political activism fed each other as mutually co-constituting aspects of a politically and philosophically motivated life project. Thus, politically speaking, feminists have much to gain from Foucault. His work offers a productive and compelling account of how oppressive and marginalizing categories and structures arise, thereby points to the potential for their transformation, and offers incentive and hope for political activism and positive social change.

## **CHAPTER THREE: PHENOMENOLOGICAL FEMINISM VS. POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM**

### **Introduction**

As I have shown in the first two chapters, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are each useful for feminists. Merleau-Ponty provides a theory of subjectivity as embodied in a way that allows feminists to account for the importance and relevance of women's real, embodied experiences and to work towards positive change via his concepts of habits and body images, and Foucault gives feminists the tools to deconstruct and critically analyze discourses and social practices that have contributed to women's construction in unhealthy, restrictive ways while at the same time allowing for the possibility of change via techniques of the self. Given these benefits, one might expect feminists to use the two together frequently; but thus far, that has not been done. Before I can expound a theory that does bring the two together, we must understand why feminists do not tend to read Merleau-Ponty and Foucault as compatible. Furthermore, chapters one and two presented Merleau-Ponty and Foucault in a very positive light from a feminist perspective; not all feminists, however, read them so positively. There are important criticisms of both figures that a good feminist theory must be able to deal with. Thus in this chapter, I look at reasons why a feminism incorporating elements of both Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Foucault's poststructuralism has not been attempted due to disagreements between the two schools of thoughts and among feminists who draw on them, and I explore the most significant feminist critiques of each figure.

This chapter is primarily about the current state of the literature in feminist philosophy. It shows why a philosophy incorporating both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on the body has not been done by looking at the arguments employed by phenomenological feminists on the one

hand and poststructuralist feminists on the other. I focus on two major aspects in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is in tension with Foucault's postmodernism and which are major areas of disagreement among feminists who draw on either Merleau-Ponty or Foucault to construct their theories of embodiment: 1) the relationship between, and status of, experience and discourse in constructing theories, particularly regarding the status of the experiencing subject; and 2) whether or not feminists can and should appeal to an anonymous, prediscursive body, or, put differently, the relationship between materiality and discursivity in theories of embodiment.

The basis of the first set of tensions between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault is that phenomenology (particularly Merleau-Ponty's version of it) takes experience to be foundational, while poststructuralism argues that experience is always already ideologically infused, that how I experience my world is shaped by discursivity even before my experiences begin. Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's differing approaches to mental health exemplify these divergent starting points: to understand the psychological and cognitive implications of brain injuries, Merleau-Ponty investigates the brain-damaged Schneider's experiences as reported by the patient himself; Foucault, on the other hand, studies the development of the category of the mentally ill in *Madness and Civilization* by looking into the discursive formations and power networks that grant a physician or psychiatrist the authority to proclaim someone mentally normal or abnormal. In short, Merleau-Ponty's position implies that at least some experience escapes and precedes discourse and theory; Foucault's does not. In turn, some feminists, such as Sonia Kruks, Carol Bigwood, and Gail Weiss, argue that acknowledging and making visible women's experiences is vital to any good feminist theory, while others, such as Judith Butler, Joan Scott, and Judith Grant, claim that because such experiences are always already discursively constituted, they are



not 'authentic' or informative about who or what the woman 'really' is and thus provide no epistemological or explanatory privilege in understanding women's oppression.

This tension between phenomenology and poststructuralism presents feminists with a chicken and egg problem: which comes first, experience or discourse? And how does the answer to that question impact one's theory of subjectivity? Phenomenology is a philosophy of the subject; Merleau-Ponty's aim in *The Phenomenology of Perception* is to elucidate and clarify what it is to be a human subject. Foucault, on the other hand, famously discusses the death of subjectivity in *The Order of Things* and explicitly rejects phenomenology because of its retention of the concept of subjectivity. For a poststructuralist, the autonomous, independent, rational subject is a relic of an outdated Enlightenment system of thought and must be rejected in favor of a commitment to the primacy of discourse. Feminists also disagree over the adequacy and usefulness of the concept of the subject. Those who take a Foucaultian approach argue that the concept of subjectivity is over-laden with the patriarchal baggage of its history such that it cannot be salvaged; those who prefer Merleau-Ponty claim that rather than rejecting the concept of subjectivity altogether, feminists must reclaim women's status as full human subjects.

The second major area of discord between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, the question of the prediscursive body, requires theorists to figure out to what extent—if at all—the materiality of bodies 'escapes' or precedes discourse, and why the relationship of discursivity to materiality matters for a feminist theory of embodiment. This problem is based on the fact that Merleau-Ponty calls on a prediscursive body while Foucault (as I read him) does not. Similarly, some feminists (e.g. Bigwood) argue for the need for feminism to reclaim a sense of the natural, real, material body in order to affirm women's differences and specificities, while on the other hand, some feminists (e.g. Butler) argue that appealing to a body that exceeds discourse serves only to

reify an image of womanhood and femininity that have oppressed women by tying us to bodies and nature.

In this chapter, I look at why phenomenological feminists and poststructuralist feminists have disagreed on these issues. Their disagreements stem in part from fundamental differences between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, which I highlight, but the focus is on the state of feminist literature and feminist concerns on these issues.

### **Phenomenological Feminist Critique of Foucault**

For the purposes of this chapter, I use the phrase “phenomenological feminist” to refer to feminists who rely on (among other things) a strong theory of the experiencing subject, the validity and necessity of a concept of experience as a starting point for philosophy, and an affirmation of bodily materiality that exceeds or to some extent escapes discourse to understand both embodiment and liberatory struggles. In this section, I present critiques of Foucaultian feminism (a feminism akin to what I presented in chapter two) from the viewpoints of phenomenological feminists. I present phenomenological criticisms of a feminist position that is based on a deconstruction of subjectivity such as Foucault carries out in his early to middle works, and I discuss why phenomenologists think it dangerous and misguided for feminists to follow Foucault in his theory on the body as a construct of networks of power and in his philosophy of subjectivity.

#### **1. The Experiencing Subject vs. the “Death of Man”**

According to feminist readings of them, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault differ significantly on the status of the experiencing subject. Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience, but

poststructuralists are skeptical of experience because they view history, culture, theories, etc. primarily as texts—shifting and symbolic rather than foundational and “real”.<sup>27</sup> Rather than claiming that direct, experiential contact with the “real” and the world grounds theories about the world, poststructuralists argue that what one experiences is always already discursively infused: it is a product of the history, language, symbols, and theories that have already contributed to shaping us before experience is even possible. Foucault’s archaeology, for example, is based on the notion that the human subject is not foundational but is a speaker within a pre-existing system of discourse such that lived experience does not contribute to meaning because the possibility of making statements is fully discursively constituted. In other words, if all is text, then the subject is not a substantive entity that grounds experience—it is an effect of its discursive history. In chapter two, I showed how Foucault relies on discourse (in a broad sense, including nonlinguistic cultural and historical institutions and practices) in his genealogical deconstruction of subjects and identities.

Furthermore, perhaps the greatest challenge to theorizing the body using both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault is that Foucault himself sees his project as antithetical to the phenomenological project concerning the status of the subject. Foucault’s *The Order of Things* discusses the birth and death of the concept of the subject. According to Foucault, ‘man’ was invented around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only to die in the 1960’s; thus Foucault is predicting the death of man right around the time Merleau-Ponty is resurrecting him in the form of his new mode of embodied subjectivity. Foucault writes,

I wanted to see how these problems of constitution could be resolved within a historical framework, instead of referring them back to a constituent object (madness, criminality or whatever). But this historical contextualization needed to be something more than the simple relativisation of the phenomenological subject. I don’t believe the problem can be solved by historicising the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a

---

<sup>27</sup> I place “real” in quotes to illustrate the poststructuralist skepticism surrounding the word.

subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history (1980, 117).

In other words, Foucault explicitly rejects not only the classical concept of the autonomous, rational, Enlightenment subject, but also the phenomenological reworking of the subject as historically and culturally embedded. "To say that 'man's' time was up [as Foucault does] was another way of saying that a philosophy grounded in subjectivity [as Merleau-Ponty's is] had no future—was, in fact, already obsolete" (Paras 26). However, phenomenological feminists such as Kruks, Bigwood, Weiss, and to an extent Alcoff, are critical of poststructuralists, Foucault in particular, because of their dismissal of the experiencing subject as a basis for theory. These feminists argue that it is crucial for feminism to retain a strong concept of experience and of subjectivity so that women's experiences as full human subjects can be recognized and valued. Alcoff comments that "The rising influence of poststructuralism has worked to discredit phenomenology on the grounds that it takes subjectivity and subjective experience as cause and foundation when in reality they are mere epiphenomenon and effect" (2000, 252). Phenomenological feminists argue that experience is too important a concept for feminism to ignore, reject, or discredit because only by validating and acknowledging the reality and significance of women's experiences can feminism proceed.

For this reason, in her critique of Foucault, Monique Deveaux argues for "the need to place the subject's interpretation and mediation of her experiences at the center of our inquiries into the hows and whys of power" (233). In other words, while Foucault argues that subjects are constructed by external power networks and forces, Deveaux counters that this view is too

narrow because “it obscures many important *experiences* of power specific to women” (222, emphasis added). In other words, understanding women’s experiences of power is just as important as, if not more so than, understanding how women are externally constrained and shaped by power. Deveaux argues that feminism is useless if it does not provide a way for the subjected to understand their subjection, and their experiences thereof are a crucial part of such an understanding. She writes, “To understand the workings of power and the responses that power elicits, it is necessary to ask how women experience freedom and barriers to freedom” (223), an element that she claims is missing from Foucault’s discussion of power. A reading of *Discipline and Punish* yields information about forces applied to bodies, but provides no insight into the experiences of the individuals in question or their potential responses to discipline. Deveaux claims that “feminists need to look at the *inner* processes that condition women’s sense of freedom or choice” (223-224, emphasis in original), and it is precisely the concept of ‘inner’, of interiority, that is missing from a theory that says that one is not a subject but is a discursive construct. Furthermore, Deveaux argues that by leaving out experiences of power, Foucault has also omitted experiences of freedom:

Women’s ‘freedom’ does not simply refer to subjects’ objective possibilities for maneuvering or resisting within a power dynamic but concerns whether a woman *feels* empowered in her specific context. Because Foucault’s account of the freedom of the subject determines the presence of power or ‘conduct’—as well as its opposite pole, violence or domination—based on the existence of objective points of resistance, it obscures the subjective aspects of power (224, emphasis in original).

In other words, Deveaux’s critique is that Foucault’s account of power as a relationship among forces does not provide any inner resources of freedom for women to draw upon, and ignoring or glossing over the centrality of women’s inner experiences denies their freedom and is therefore antithetical to feminism.

For Deveaux, women's empowerment is not solely about removing external objects/barriers, it is even more crucially about how women feel and experience. Deveaux's claim is that Foucault's power model is too conflictual and agonistic to allow for women to feel empowered or to experience empowerment. She writes, "Foucault's agonistic model of power, skewed as it is toward a dynamic of *acting upon*, thus cannot provide feminists with the conceptual tools needed to understand empowerment and disempowerment, freedom and nonfreedom" (224). It cannot explain how women *experience* power. For example, a Foucaultian feminist might explain my mother's aversion to being in positions of authority over men by looking at the history that constructs women as submissive and subordinate, arguing that social forces have positioned her in such a way that her relationships with men will necessarily be agonistic, as though she were merely a vector in an equation with no choice but to operate in accordance with the laws of the equation. Deveaux's point is that such a model ignores and cannot account for how my mother actually *feels* about and *experiences* being in this equation; it does not reference her actual experiences of authority over men or acknowledge that her interiority and experiences could affect and shift power relationships; and, most problematically, it does not give her a way to change. If she has an externally constructed identity, if all her experiences are the results of discursive forces out of her control, she will never have an experience in which she exercises authority over a man *comfortably* rather than antagonistically. Deveaux wants her to be able to do that, and argues that a purely poststructuralist feminism cuts off that possibility. (Although Deveaux does not reference the bodily implications of women's experiences of power, I would argue that a large part of the change Deveaux wants feminism to be able to account for requires bodily awareness. On my mother's part, for example: a starting point for positive change in her relationships with male subordinates might be simply learning

physically to relax; if her body is less tense when exercising authority, she is much more likely to have an empowered experience of authority than an antagonistic one).

Like Deveaux, Alcoff argues that experience is a crucial category for feminism and that reducing experience to discourse is a danger in Foucault. Alcoff elaborates on the dangers of relying too heavily on discourse at the expense of experience in her analysis of rape. According to Alcoff,

a position that links experience to discourse too securely might hold that, prior to the discourse of date rape, the experience itself could not occur, or at least not the sort of experience with such traumatizing aftereffects as we now associate with rape.... Thus date rape is said to be a fiction invented by feminists that is now having material effects in needlessly traumatizing young impressionable women. Such a view would gain credence from the claim that experience and language are coextensive (2000, 256).

In other words, the poststructuralists' position on the relationship of experience to discourse is that experience is meaningless, uninformative, even *impossible* unless it signifies something within a recognized discursive<sup>28</sup> system. There is no such thing as pure, meaningful experience in and of itself; so in a system that does not provide a linguistic and social meaning for the act of date rape, a woman undergoing such an experience does not "really" experience oppression, because there is no "real" basis to her experience outside of the particular discourse that defines it. Alcoff argues that Foucault's poststructuralism denies any authentic basis of experience prior to discursive construction such that before "date rape" was accepted terminology, women's experiences of unwanted sexual advances simply did not signify anything, did not count for anything, and thus could not be a basis for resistance. "Date rape" had to be admitted into our vernacular before any actual date rapes could legitimately be said to have occurred. The same could be said of marital rape. Before it was recognized that rape could occur within marriage, sex between a husband and wife by definition signified consent, even if the woman's experience

---

<sup>28</sup> Alcoff uses the term "discursive" more narrowly than I do; for her, it is more or less interchangeable with "linguistic".

was that of being forced or violated. By marrying, by saying “I do”, she signified her consent within the recognized linguistic schema; therefore, she could not *not* consent. Her experience of violation signified nothing and therefore could not be said to exist. Not only does a discursive (in the linguistic sense, as Alcoff uses the term) system that does not recognize date rape or marital rape deny and erase experiences thereof, it leaves no room for those who experience such traumas to make recognizable claims of injustice or oppression. Alcoff writes, “Experience sometimes exceeds language; it is sometimes inarticulate. Feminism has not invented sexism out of whole cloth; it has provided new language by which to describe and understand old experiences and that then alters present and future experience” (2000, 256). In other words, feminism must recognize the reality of women’s experiences of rape and other forms of violence and oppression and provide ways to talk about those experiences—not erase them by declaring them discursively illegitimate, because such experiences *do exist*, whether they signify intelligibly or not.

To expand Alcoff’s point, to claim that signifying within a discursive schema, more broadly construed to include cultural institutions such as marriage, is a necessary condition of meaning erases the real, material suffering of women who underwent such traumatic experiences as date rape or marital rape before they were named. As Alcoff puts it, to claim that

discourse is the condition of intelligibility for all experience, is to erase all of those kinds of experiential knowledges unsusceptible to linguistic articulation. If meaningful experience must pass the test of discursive formulation, we will preclude the inarticulate from the realm of knowledge and risk erasing forms of oppression that cannot be expressed under reigning regimes of discourse. A better view would be one that understood experience and discourse as imperfectly aligned with locations of disjuncture (2000, 256).

Her point is strengthened by broadening what falls under the umbrella of ‘discourse’ such that the symbolic unintelligibility, and thus erasure, of something like marital rape continues beyond



the linguistic aspect (“I do”) and into all the other institutional, practical, and cultural meanings that marriage connotes. Denying the validity of experience that does not fit into current discursive formulations either strictly linguistically conceived as Alcoff discusses or more broadly conceived, as a strictly poststructuralist, Foucaultian feminism would do, serves to deny rather than illuminate the very experiences of oppression with which feminism needs to deal. Alcoff’s claim is that relying on language without regard for the unnameable, non-signifying, yet real elements of experience is dangerous for feminism because it threatens to erase marginalized experiences that do not necessarily signify within the dominant conceptual schema. This dovetails with Deveaux’s point about women’s feelings about and experiences of power: claiming that discourse must ground meaning results in the erasure of the feelings and experiences of those who tend to be on the oppressed side of domination because they are not the ones writing the dominant discourse, they, who are unnamed or have unnameable experiences. Thus, Alcoff warns, if feminists take Foucault’s poststructuralist distrust of experience to an extreme, we run the risk of denying the very thing we ostensibly seek to bring to light: ways in which women experience oppression and victimization. If feminists deny these experiences, how can we rectify them?

Another reason phenomenological feminists argue for a strong theory of the experiencing subject is their claim that women’s subjectivities and identities need to be celebrated and affirmed, not dismissed as mere constructs, which, critics of Foucault warn, poststructuralist feminism threatens to do. If “man” (or the Enlightenment subject) is dead, as Foucault claims in *The Order of Things*, then by default woman is dead too; subjectivity is surpassed before women are allowed to partake of it. Concomitantly, if subjectivities and identities are simply constructs, then there is no *material* reason to differentiate women’s experiences and subjectivities from

men's; consequently, women's experiences, and thus women themselves, are erased and delegitimized. Thus Hartsock accuses Foucault of robbing feminists of the foundation of their political projects: their identity as women. If feminism is defined as a struggle for the liberation of women, Hartsock asks, how can there be feminism without women? How can feminist politics and women's liberation make forward progress if the category "woman" is contested, denaturalized, and divorced from its material basis? In other words, can feminism have a *subject* if subjectivity itself is deconstructed along Foucaultian lines? Hartsock finds it frustrating that Foucault wants to deconstruct the notion of subjectivity and identity just as women are coming to claim their own place as subjects; she demands, "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic" (1990, 163)? In other words, from Hartsock's perspective, to use Foucault's philosophy as a pillar in a feminist theory of embodied subjectivity is to admit defeat before one even starts, for the "subjectivity" pole falls out altogether in Hartsock's reading of Foucault and feminism needs to affirm women as subjects. For Hartsock, subjectivity as thought by Foucault is not the subjectivity feminism needs, because it denies the relevance of experience, based in materiality, to subjectivity and identity.

Furthermore, Hartsock argues that because Foucault's poststructuralist/postmodernist approach abolishes identity categories, including the category "woman," it renders any unified resistance by a group with that label nonsensical. For Hartsock, such resistance (which is a necessary component of feminism) is predicated upon common experiences among those who share at least some aspects of an identity. She writes, "I believe that the task facing all progressive theorists is that of trying to expose and clarify the theoretical bases for political

alliance and solidarity” and further claims that “the primary lived experience[s]” of marginalized groups are fundamental to any such theoretical clarification (1996, 46). In other words, Hartsock’s argument is that similar material conditions (e.g. modes of embodiment) contribute to similar experiences of oppression, and thereby ground similar knowledges of oppression which grants the impetus to form collective resistive units (1996, 48). The connection of experience to subjectivity and to the possibility of communal political resistance is crucial for feminists, Hartsock argues, and she finds this connection undermined in Foucault to the point that his work is dangerous for feminism.

## 2. The Agentic Body vs. the Docile Body

Another feature of phenomenological feminism is its commitment to an account of bodily materiality. Just as feminists like Deveaux and Hartsock question poststructuralism’s reduction of experience to discourse, they question its reduction of materiality to discourse and argue that this reduction erases not only women’s bodies, but their agency. Feminists such as Deveaux, Hartsock, and McNay find Foucault’s theory of bodies as constituted by discourse and power antithetical to their aims and warn that it would ultimately be wrong-headed for feminist theory to adopt a Foucaultian approach. They claim that Foucault’s account of the relationship between power and the body does away with the possibility of agency and thereby renders politics impossible or impotent. Progressive politics would be impossible on Foucaultian terms, critics claim, because by erasing any element of the natural, prediscursive or even concretely material in his theory of the body, Foucault offers no avenue of resistance to domination; by construing identity categories as purely discursive rather than rooted in bodily materiality he undermines the foundation on which emancipatory politics is based; and by privileging anonymous discursive

forces at the expense of material agency, he destroys the possibility of normative grounding for values or political goals. If all is discursive through and through with no basis in sheer, concrete materiality or reality or nature, there is no basis for progressive politics; if all is difference, there is no room for commonality and no possibility of intersubjective communication, hence no basis for collective political struggle. Thus, phenomenological feminists fear that Foucault leaves us fragmented and alone, powerless to change, with no agency and hence drifting in the wind of discourse, powerless to affect or influence its path.

Foucault's account of the body, according to critics such as McNay, Deveaux, and Hartsock, is deterministic and thus unacceptable. They find his theory of the body deterministic because of his claims about the constitutive effects of power on the body. McNay claims that "The emphasis that Foucault places on the effects of power on the body results in a reduction of social agents to passive bodies and cannot explain how individuals may act in an autonomous fashion" (1991, 125). She reads *Discipline and Punish* as painting a picture of bodies rendered utterly docile by discipline: bodies determined through and through by the power that shapes them and that are therefore unable to struggle against that which oppresses them. In other words, there quite simply *is* no body apart from or independent of that which shapes it. A building does not exist independently of the architect who designs it and the workers who build it; critics like McNay fear that Foucault's body is no more free to be other than its construction than a Gaudi is to be a Frank Lloyd Wright (my analogy, not McNay's). A Gaudi cannot choose to be a Wright; a docile body cannot choose to be subversive. McNay claims that "Foucault's notion of the body is that it is conceived essentially as a passive entity upon which power stamps its own images" (1992, 12), like the material of a building is a passive entity on which the architect stamps her image. In other words, there is no agentic human subject who directs or employs power; rather,

power simply happens, and one location of power happening is the body. It is not human agency that consciously decides to make bodily changes; it is just that power networks happen to flow in such a way that material changes come about. Furthermore, power's effects on bodies are thoroughgoing and pervasive. Bodies are objects completely determined and completely powerless to react. McNay's claim is, in other words, that if Foucault is right about power's constitutive position vis-à-vis bodies, then resistance is impossible, for human beings are nothing but the automatons of power with no will or agency of their own—not even in control of their own bodies.

McNay fears that if the body is completely determined as Foucault's notion of docile bodies seems to indicate, women in particular will be relegated to their traditional position of powerlessness and weakness, with no recourse. She contends that a notion of autonomous agency is necessary to empower women to struggle against being categorized and constructed as impotently passive, but fears that Foucault's account of docile bodies eliminates any possible source of agency or autonomy. She writes, "Thus, whereas feminists have recognized the need to show that women are more than passive victims of domination through the rediscovery and reevaluation of their experiences and history, Foucault's understanding of individuals as docile bodies has the effect of pushing women back into this position of passivity and silence" (1992, 47). McNay finds Foucault's account of docile bodies particularly egregious in light of women's struggles to be seen as empowered and autonomous rather than passive and dominated. If feminism is a movement to empower women, a theory that fixes them as docile constructs is unacceptable. Women are traditionally characterized as, and expected to be, docile. McNay's claim is that Foucault's theory of the body, applied to women, reifies this image.

Furthermore, McNay suggests that Foucault's reduction of the body to a product of discursive forces eviscerates any possibility of drawing on natural, material bodies as sites of resistance and change, of the body's mature rejecting the constraints under which power strives to place it. She writes,

Foucault's historical studies give the impression that the body presents no material resistance to the operations of power. The body is little more than a passive vector upon which power inexorably 'inscribes' itself. Without elaborating on how resistance to the insidious workings of modern 'biopower' can be developed from the libidinal forces of the body, the body is, in effect, deprived of any salience or oppositional force (1991, 134).

In other words, McNay is claiming that there is something about bodily materiality that is necessary for an understanding of agency—that a body must have some reserve of materiality untouched by power in order to be able to resist disciplinary power. And if bodies are docile and constructed through and through, this material reserve does not exist and thus agency is denied. McNay argues that the kind of resistance Foucault gives lip service to in claiming that power and resistance are inseparable is not really resistance, because it does not originate from a locus outside of the discursive regime that constructs and produces the bodies that are then ostensibly supposed to resist (McNay 1991, 143). Only if something about bodies escapes this discursive regime, according to McNay, can resistance be truly agentic and therefore truly resistance.

This is because if a body's very materiality is constructed by power, then any pushing back against that power in which it might engage is in reality an *effect of*, and therefore proliferation of, that power. For example, if a woman wants to change her body image in a way that she thinks of as resistant to patriarchal images of femininity, the very fact that she thinks she needs to change, and the ways in which she thinks she needs to change, are constructed by the demands of patriarchal images of femininity—by power networks. It is not really a deep, true, free woman who chooses to reject slenderness, for example; it is a woman constructed by

patriarchal power to think that slenderness is required, and additionally constructed by *feminism* to reject the patriarchal construct! In other words, her “choice” is only the play of power forces against one another. It comes neither from a true self nor from a material body trying to be what it naturally is, because, according to McNay, for Foucault there is no natural body. And if there is no natural body, there is simply no way to resist how power shapes bodies without feeding right back into the very power networks that construct bodies in the first place. McNay finds this aspect of Foucault’s work troubling, and the implication of her critique of Foucault is that some sort of natural bodily materiality must be retained in a feminist theory of embodiment in order to ground positive bodily change and resistance.

Deveaux concurs with McNay’s reading of Foucault on the body, writing, “Foucault’s extreme reluctance to attribute explicit agency to subjects in his early account of power results in a portrayal of individuals as passive bodies, constituted by power and immobilized in a society of discipline” (217). As Deveaux rightly points out, Foucault’s later work corrects some of the problems with his earlier work regarding agency and choice. But there are feminists who find the early Foucault’s work on the body useful—most notably Bartky and Bordo—and Deveaux rejects their use of his work on docile bodies for feminist purposes. Bartky does chastise Foucault for failing to acknowledge how discipline affects women differently than it affects men, so while she adopts a very Foucaultian position, she does not do so uncritically and she does take Foucault to task for his gender blindness. But Deveaux rejects even Bartky’s critical appropriation. Deveaux’s main problem with Bartky’s Foucaultian approach dovetails with McNay’s critique of Foucault’s docile bodies. Deveaux writes that “the way Bartky conceives of women’s interaction with their bodies seems necessarily reductionist. Women’s choices and differences are lost altogether in Bartky’s description of the feminine body and its attendant

practices” (215). Deveaux quotes a passage in which Bartky describes some of the effects of discipline on women’s bodies in terms of the internalized need to maintain a properly ‘feminine’ appearance in dress, comportment, makeup, etc. In describing women and their bodies in this manner, Deveaux claims, Bartky has robbed them of agency, of choice, of feelings—in short, of subjectivity. By describing women as bodies that are constructed to behave, dress, and decorate themselves in certain ways due to patriarchal forces, Bartky has turned women into automatons with no interiority, no perspective on their own position. According to Deveaux, Bartky’s description of ‘feminine’ discipline “may draw attention to the pernicious effects of cultural standards of attractiveness, but it blocks meaningful discussion of how women feel about their bodies, their appearance, and social norms” so that it ends up “treating women as cultural sponges rather than as active agents” (216).

In other words, what is missing from Bartky’s Foucaultian understanding of women’s oppression is women’s own experiences thereof, in all their many variations, and women’s agentic responses thereto. “Bartky...uses the docile body and the Panopticon as if these describe a wide range of subjectivities and practices, and this leads her to conflate women’s myriad experiences of femininity” (Deveaux 217). If we ignore women’s myriad experiences, the implication is that we turn women’s bodies into uniformly pliable, subjectless objects. And if bodies are docile objects shaped by power networks external to women’s individual identities, *we have no choice* but to succumb to our cultures’ disciplinary demands. Our bodies have no say in the matter. Bodies *will* be disciplined; like clay, they will have no choice but to take on that with which their environment imbues them. On this view, bodies are dead weights, a position Deveaux finds antithetical to feminist aims.



Feminists like McNay and Deveaux who are hesitant to reject goals such as resistance, liberation, freedom and autonomy are wary of Foucault because, they claim, he makes bodies docile—and, perhaps even more problematically, he argues that attempts to overcome bodily docility or other forms of bodily construction/oppression merely feed into the system that constructs and oppresses in the first place. Foucault makes this argument when he claims that the attempt to achieve sexual liberation is but another effect of subjectifying power. He claims that the notion that our repressed sexuality is in need of liberation from Victorian prudishness is a stark example of the insidiousness of power, which has so construed society as to make us think there is something essential, deep and “true” about our sexuality that is intimately tied up with the truth of our identity. Strategies of sexual liberation, rather than resisting oppressive power, are actually an exercise of power that ties and constrains us to strictly delimited identities as sexual subjects. Thus critics like Hartsock, McNay, and Deveaux, who see feminism as a liberatory, emancipatory project, worry that on Foucault’s terms one can never know whether one’s resistive strategies are just another expression of power, in which case they would not be resistive after all. Thus they find Foucault’s account of power troublingly pessimistic, even nihilistic: if there is never a way to distinguish resistance from subjectifying power or to disentangle a thread of self-determination from the bundle of power relations that is the self, why bother trying? Why even attempt to rectify injustices and inequalities if one is but a docile, passive pawn caught in a deterministic net of power beyond one’s control?

Nancy Fraser’s trenchant critique of Foucault is that his concept of disciplinary power makes it impossible to distinguish between autonomously chosen actions and those that are the result of internalized discipline/domination (1989, 49). On Fraser’s terms, there can be no resistance to domination without an autonomous subject, and if subjects cannot differentiate their

own autonomy from internalized oppression, resistance is hopeless. The argument is that if a subject is completely determined and constituted by power (as Foucault seems to claim), then everything about that subjectivity exists by virtue of something heteronymous to it—there is nothing self-determined about it, and no way to achieve self-determination. A subject may think she is autonomously choosing, for example, to join the local gym, but the choice in fact arises from her internalization of social norms concerning health and body image. If all one's subjectivity *is*, Fraser worries, is an internalization of power structures, there is no free or autonomous self left over to critique or resist the norms that structure the subject.

The “docile bodies” critique of Foucault dovetails with another significant feminist criticism of his work, a criticism made by Hartsock and Fraser (among others): that he offers no normative framework to determine good from bad, better from worse. As McLaren points out, feminism, along with the struggles of other oppressed groups, “all invoke notions of freedom, rights, autonomy, justice, and truth. These struggles for social justice appeal to normative ideals based on the idea that all human beings deserve respect, freedom, and fair and equal treatment” (19-20). But feminists critical of Foucault read his analyses of power, knowledge, truth, and subjectivity as thoroughly discursive as destroying any possibility of normative grounding upon which these appeals to justice and equality rely. By erasing this ground, critics such as Hartsock, Fraser, and McNay claim that Foucault actually presents a danger to any liberatory, progressive political and philosophical projects. If ‘reality’ is nothing but the reified products of ever-shifting power relations, these critics point out, there is no possibility of objective experience or knowledge of reality. Without objectivity, how can there be critique, and without critique, how can we distinguish between situations of domination and situations of liberation? How can we end discrimination if we have no notions of freedom and rights to which to appeal? How can we

claim that women, blacks, gays, the poor, etc. are being denied basic human rights if we reject notions such as basic humanity and rights as foundationless, contingent, arbitrary discursive constructions?

Without such a framework, it becomes impossible for a feminist to claim that physical, bodily suffering is 'bad'. We cannot say certain types of embodied being are better or worse than others; we cannot say that, e.g., stereotypical images of feminine beauty, and the disciplinary regimes that produce/enforce them, are harmful to women. This renders the Foucault-inspired work of feminists like Bartky and Bordo useless. If there is no normative grounding for claiming that patriarchal images of femininity are harmful to women, Bartky's essay on women as disciplined bodies (1990, 63-82) simply describes a state of affairs, with no social, ethical or political implications. Bordo's claim that anorexia is a crystallization of the harmfulness of patriarchal images of femininity (1993, 139-164) is rendered nonsensical. In other words, Foucaultian feminists are undermined by their very own theoretical basis, Foucault critics like Hartsock and Fraser argue, because they cannot ground the claim that what they see as harmful operations of power really are harmful or bad for women. If anorexia cannot theoretically be shown to be harmful, why struggle against it? The basis of this critique of Foucault is that in order to effectively call for resistance, there must be some normative basis for resistance, some way of determining that what is being resisted is wrong and needs to be replaced with right. We need to be able to say that some bodily disciplines and discourses hurt women, bodily, and need to be replaced with disciplines and discourses that do not. But according to Hartsock and Fraser, Foucault calls for resistance without a normative basis, and on

his own terms he cannot explain why domination, oppression, and disciplinary power<sup>29</sup> are perverse and need to be resisted. According to Fraser, Foucault's rejection of normativity strands him in the cold depths of relativistic nihilism. This cannot work for feminists who want to see positive, healthy changes in women's embodied subjectivities.<sup>30</sup>

### **Poststructuralist Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty**

In this section, I present the flip side of the picture: I look at feminist theorists who draw on Foucault and the poststructuralist perspective and examine their critiques of phenomenological feminism. Foucault rejects phenomenology because of its emphasis on experience as a foundational category. For Foucault, discourse has a much more extensive role in theorizing bodies and identities. Following Foucault, poststructuralist feminists such as Joan Scott and Judith Butler argue that a phenomenological approach is too naïve in its use of experience as a category of explanation. They argue that it is misguided for feminism to rely too heavily on experience because there is no unified Woman's Experience, and talking about experiences as generalities tends to reify hierarchal, patriarchal categories of proper femininity (among other things). Thus, these feminists argue, feminism should instead focus on the discursive and cultural forces that structure multiple and varied social locations and ways of being. Another reason Foucaultian feminists critique phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, is his concept of a universal element of human embodiment, the anonymous body. Feminists like Sullivan argue that appealing to an anonymous body encodes male embodiment as the norm, thus keeping women's bodies firmly entrenched in the subservient position from which

---

<sup>29</sup> I argue that Foucault himself does not see disciplinary power as "bad" or perverse—merely as sometimes dangerous. Fraser reads Foucault as implying, without being able to support, the notion that power is bad. I disagree, because as I showed in chapter two, power can be *em*-powering. Power itself is neither good nor bad.

<sup>30</sup> For an in-depth critique of Foucault's position vis-à-vis normative standards for political critique, see Fraser (1989).

feminism seeks to extract them. In this section, then, I examine arguments from feminists who find phenomenology, and thus Merleau-Ponty, problematic due to its naïve reliance on experience, and I will then turn to arguments rejecting Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a basis for feminism due to his concept of the anonymous body.

### 1. Poststructuralist Feminist Critique of Experience

For poststructuralist feminists, the starting point for any theory is discourse rather than experience. A poststructuralist reading of Foucault points out that existentialism and phenomenology's "attempt to seize discursive regularities after the fact and reinsert them into the 'lived experience' of actors—actors who were nothing but points *within* that network of discursive regularity—was destined to fail. There was no freer reality outside discourse, no primal prediscursive state from which the latter might be taken in hand and mastered by consciousness" (Paras 37). In other words, a tenet of poststructuralism is that to rely on experience as a starting point for theorization is naïve because it assumes, wrongly, that it is possible to think *outside* of already existent discursive structures. Thus for the poststructuralist feminist, we must find ways of theorizing bodies and subjects completely within discursive frameworks, because there is no area outside of them. In other words, it is not possible to find in experience things in themselves, pre-theoretical reality, untouched by discourse.

Merleau-Ponty, however, claims that phenomenology is about returning to the things themselves. He writes, "To return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is"

(1962, ix). In other words, Merleau-Ponty's claim is that the subject has direct, experiential access to the world such that thetic knowledge is always knowledge *about* something, and non- or pre-thetic experience grasps that which thetic knowledge is about: the things themselves, directly. But poststructuralists counter that the human being exists as a node within a linguistic construct and as such is not the kind of thing that can have unmediated experiences of unmediated things. Therefore both experience and things/objects are problematic: experience because there is no unified, foundational subject of experience, things because there is no pure subject to grasp them in their purity.

From a poststructuralist feminist point of view, because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology aims to get at the real, directly, it is too naïve to deal with the actuality of our complexly constructed being. Problems of exclusion and reification arise if we assume that subjects and objects exist and can be known in any sense outside of discourse. Judith Butler writes about the problematic consequences of a feminism that takes "woman" to be a unified, pre-theoretical subject (the type of subject that has experiences which, for reasons examined in the previous section, phenomenological feminists argue must be taken seriously): "For the most part, feminist theory has taken the category of women to me foundational to any further political claims without realizing that the category effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of a feminist discourse" (1990, 325). As I showed in the previous section, phenomenological feminists argue that feminism's goal should be to take up and validate women's experiences rather than erasing them as discursive epiphenomena. But Butler argues that the minute one appeals to "women's experiences," one has already carved out a finite space for what "women" are and what kinds of things they can experience. So instead of bringing women's experiences of oppression to light, the phenomenological approach serves to reify,

normalize, and exclude. Only by appreciating the multiplicity of discourses, according to Butler, can feminism be inclusive of varied ways of being women in differently constructed social locations. Thus for Butler, a feminism that appeals to pre-theoretical experience is inherently flawed and politically suspect.

Joan Scott elaborates on the poststructuralist argument that a politically viable theorization of difference cannot rely on an “appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation—a foundation upon which analysis is based” (1992, 24). The reason experience cannot be relied upon for theorizing difference, according to Scott, is that historians who take this approach “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference” (1992, 25). This is problematic because, for example, if we take the reported experience of a woman and the reported experience of a man at face value as direct access to the real, we are left reifying as ‘natural’ and ‘real’ the differences in the two accounts and attributing them to real, natural differences between men and women, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical, oppressive structure of difference we meant to undermine. “To put it another way, the evidence of experience...reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (J. Scott 1992, 25). Scott further argues,

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who act in the world (1992, 25).

In other words, while appeals to experience ostensibly seek to empower the experiencing subject by respecting the authenticity of her report, such an approach actually constructs the very

authenticity it seeks to uphold because it fails to examine the discursive conditions that made the experience possible.

While Scott does not explicitly mention Merleau-Ponty in her critique of experience, his phenomenological reliance on experience is precisely the kind of position she is rejecting: the task of philosophy, according to Merleau-Ponty, is “making explicit our primordial knowledge of the ‘real’, of describing our perception of the world as that upon which our idea of truth is forever based. We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi). In other words, Merleau-Ponty is attempting to make the real visible via examination of pre-theoretical experience and non-thetic knowledge. But according to Scott, “the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (1991, 778). In other words, from a postmodern feminist’s perspective, Merleau-Ponty is attempting the impossible: a *pre-theoretical description* of things themselves as one directly experiences them, and yet one cannot describe without language, and language is always already theory-based. Ignoring the theories that already infuse experience blunts the critical force required for a good theory; and according to Scott, “the project of making experience visible [Merleau-Ponty’s project] precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself” (1991, 778). Merleau-Ponty wants to get to the things themselves yet his very awareness of situatedness suggests the impossibility of this enterprise.<sup>31</sup> If one follows through on an awareness of

---

<sup>31</sup> However, he does manage by looking at ‘brute’ experience, starting with sense perception, to debunk dualist epistemological theories. Even if his positive project (to get to the things themselves) fails, his negative one, debunking dualism, does not. And we do get good things out of his phenomenology, even if we never actually get to the things themselves, and that is not so much our concern. Our concern is what his phenomenology tells us about the body and human subjectivity.



situatedness, one must realize that situations construct subjects and identities such that no experiencing individual pre-exists situational experiences to interpret them.

Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather than which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced (J. Scott 1991, 779-780).

What Scott is saying is the polar opposite of the argument made by phenomenological feminists such as Weiss or McNay: rather than relying on the reported experiences of those differently situated to bring differences to light, this approach *reifies those very differences in a naturalistic, ahistorical fashion* and thereby *hides* rather than illuminates the structures which produce and reproduce differences in a hierarchical fashion. The phenomenological approach, Scott's argument reveals, entails assuming that there is a natural, pre-existing subject, e.g. woman, who has and can unproblematically report and understand experiences that differ from those of another pre-existing subject, e.g. man. Scott's argument is that, to the contrary, the identity "woman" is constructed as a result of experiences, which themselves need to be theoretically explained in order to understand the creation of women's identities. Scott's analysis of experience captures the Foucaultian feminist's problem with Merleau-Ponty: experience as a starting point for explanation versus experience as precisely that which requires explanation. In short, postmodernist feminists are suspicious of claims founded upon a direct grasp of experience; hence, Merleau-Ponty's project is suspect for them.

Another reason feminist critics of Merleau-Ponty find his subject-centered approach problematic is his androcentrism. They believe that any philosophy of the subject is fatally

flawed by the masculinist history of the concept of subjectivity. Traditionally, the subject has been put forth as a universal, but actually represented a white, middle-class, usually Christian, European, straight, able-bodied man: a far cry from a universal descriptor of human being. Thus the feminist who is skeptical of experience argues that in attempting to describe her own experience, the phenomenological feminist is serving only to further entrench and reify the patriarchal constructions of femininity that inform and structure women's experiences. Judith Grant presents this critique of experience-based feminism.

Like Butler and Scott, Grant is suspicious of calls to rely on experience because it is too universalizing and cannot account for vast differences; she argues that there are too many different experiences that different women have for us to rely upon a general category of 'experience' in feminist epistemology. Furthermore, a corollary of this problem is that returning to experience is dangerously essentializing, reinforcing the stereotypical male-as-rational vs. female-as-irrational value hierarchy. According to this traditional conception, women have to rely on experience to gain or share knowledge because we cannot rely on reason; thus, a feminism that starts with women's experiences plays into the patriarchal construction of women as non- or irrational. Rather than using "experience" as a category in feminist epistemology, Grant argues that we should deconstruct the male-as-rational vs. female-as-irrational binary. Grant is arguing against an approach such as Mary Daly's in *Gyn/Ecology*, in which Daly argues that the meme of rationality as the key to objective knowledge is inherently masculinist and exclusionary towards women, and that women therefore in order to gain true knowledge must rely on experience and insight. "Female knowledge, in contrast to male, is based on what Daly sees as our natural connections to each other as women and to nature itself" (Grant 101). Daly argues that women know things about being women in a more real, true fashion than any male,

rational knowledge could claim because, simply put, women have women's experiences and men do not. Grant critiques feminisms like Daly's, pointing out that

by conceptually dividing all things including knowledge into these kinds of dichotomies—masculine and feminine; objective/subjective, reason/intuition, patriarchy/matriarchy, public/private, these theories obviate the need to ask and answer a prior question: namely, to what extent do these gendered dualisms themselves reflect and *reproduce* patriarchal social relations (103, emphasis in original)?

In other words, feminisms like Daly's that take dichotomous experiences as given and natural fail to account for what structures experiences as dichotomous (or, more accurately, multivalent—but Daly is only focusing on the male/female dichotomy) in the first place. In so doing, it naturalizes and reifies the effects of social and cultural forces that construct women as sharply bifurcated from, and hierarchically less than, men.

Another experience-based feminist approach that Grant rejects is standpoint theory, argued for by Harding and Hartsock (among others). Standpoint theory claims that knowledge which excludes or discounts women's experiences is incomplete and hence incorrect; because women have different experiences from men, a complete epistemology must make room for the knowledge found exclusively in women's experiences. In other words, women's experiences grant women knowledge that is different than knowledge available to men; there is an epistemological difference between men and women that arises from different phenomenological encounters, which in turn arise from our different embodiments. But Grant disagrees that women know differently because we have different bodily experiences. Such a position, she argues, requires that *all* women are epistemologically different from *all* men—have different knowledges and gain knowledge in different ways—based on experiences that only *some* women have (e.g. not all women experience reproduction, even if most of us are equipped with reproductive capacities that differ from men's). Furthermore, not only is it false that all similarly

embodied beings experience in the same way, Grant argues that standpoint theory cannot account for the radically subjective and individual nature of experience (110). Grant points out that different women have very different personal experiences of similar situations, e.g. lesbian sado-masochistic relationships. Some women experience such relationships as empowering; others experience them as an oppressive reproduction of patriarchy. Grant writes, “Proponents of both can make their cases based on irrefutable personal experiences justified by experiential epistemology. . . . From the point of view of ‘female experience,’ both sets of experiences must be taken seriously as female experiences. Thus, contradictory arguments must be simultaneously true” (110-111). Because contradictory arguments cannot simultaneously be true, there is a flaw in a theory that accepts contradictory experiences of similar situations as equally valid.

Because of such individual differences in experience, Grant concludes that the category “women’s experience” is insufficient to ground feminist theory—in other words, that a specifically “female” phenomenology is impossible. She writes,

In the end, we cannot escape the fact that it is so difficult to operationalize the idea of women’s experience. This difficulty is due to the nature of experience and its relationship to the category ‘woman’. Traditionally, philosophers who have used the concept experience (e.g., Mill and Nietzsche) have understood it as an individual phenomenon. But feminist theorists argue that women as a group or class share an experience as women. To make this work as an epistemological point of departure, feminist theory has vacillated between inventing an experience of Woman writ large, and attempting to summarize those of all particular women (112).

According to Grant, standpoint theory—or a phenomenology of women’s experience—is problematic because if we are to base women’s knowledge on women’s experience, then we have to know what women’s experience, as a unified entity, is, which means we have to know what ‘woman’ is, which leads us right back to essentialism. If we are to draw upon women’s experience as a category, Grant argues, “all women would have to have an experience or set of experiences distinct enough to set women definitively apart from men, otherwise the very reason

for stressing female experience disappears. But obviously women exist in all classes, races, ethnicities, etc., and finding a universal female experience is no easy task” (108). Thus standpoint theory, or any feminist theory that relies on “women’s experience” as a unified category, merely papers over the very differences and structures of oppression that a good feminist theory should bring to light. This is why, according to Grant, experience cannot be a good basis for feminism. Extrapolating, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology cannot be a good basis for feminism. While Grant’s critique of experience as a feminist category does not explicitly dismiss Merleau-Ponty, it does argue compellingly against a type of feminist theory that would take a phenomenological starting point much like Merleau-Ponty’s and apply it strictly to women (in contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s supposedly universal but tacitly masculine phenomenology). Grant concludes,

If experience is to be used as the basis for feminist epistemology it must be refined. To speak of unmediated experiences as the basis for theory [which Merleau-Ponty does] is nearly a contradiction in terms. Theories are based on reflection. Experience simply exists. It is therefore important to point out that feminist theory is missing a crucial step—an evaluation of the interpretation of experience (113).

In other words, Grant’s critique of feminist uses of the category of experience leads to the conclusion that a feminism based solely on phenomenology is inherently problematic. If her critique of experience is valid, then Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology will not suffice to ground a viable feminist theory of embodiment.

## 2. The Anonymous Body

Poststructuralist feminists seek an understanding of bodies that moves away from their ‘naturalness’, presumed biologically-based concrete materiality, towards a more nuanced understanding of the social, cultural and historical forces which come into play in constructing

bodies. In so doing, they critique phenomenology for relying too much on an uncritical, naturalistic, material body. Like with the poststructuralist critique of experience, the critique of the “natural” body is that it is far too generalized, thus erasing specificity and ignoring difference. Just as claims of a universal experiencing subject have been shown to be code for white-straight-etc.-male, claims of a universal mode of embodiment or of a natural body, these feminists argue, tend to be androcentric. In this section, I look at Judith Butler’s and Shannon Sullivan’s critiques of Merleau-Ponty for relying on an ostensibly anonymous body that erases difference and impedes (rather than grounds) intersubjective communication. Then, I consider Iris Marion Young’s argument that Merleau-Ponty’s problem lies in his assumption that all bodies experience in the same way: by so assuming, he is universalizing a privileged masculine way of being while ignoring the possibility that women have vastly different experiences of our bodily potentials and abilities. Finally, returning to Butler, I examine her feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty on sexuality; she argues that Merleau-Ponty’s account of sexuality, as a corollary of his theory of the anonymous body, is androcentric and consequently inadequate for feminist needs.

Poststructuralist feminists such as Butler argue that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the anonymous body manifests itself in troubling androcentrism, and that Merleau-Ponty frequently ignores the specificity of bodies in such a way that equates “normal” with “male”: “In the case of the *normal* subject, a body is not perceived merely as any 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” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 156, emphasis added). Butler points out that because Merleau-Ponty

ignores gender, he fails to recognize that he is writing a masculinist phenomenology about a male subject-body:

Devoid of gender, this [universal] 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 (Butler 1989a, 98).

Butler's and other feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment center primarily on his notion of an anonymous body, and while there are a multiplicity of bodily differences that Merleau-Ponty problematically ignores in appealing to an anonymous body, his feminist critics focus on his gender blindness and consequent androcentrism.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Butler argues forcefully against retaining any trace of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the anonymous body. For Butler, only genealogically rejecting, destabilizing, and transgressing the limitations of socio-historically imposed identities can offer a path to liberation from the norms which, for her, construct and maintain bodily materiality in an oppressive heteronormative binary.

Shannon Sullivan also takes issue with Merleau-Ponty's theory of anonymous embodiment. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty, "there is a fundamental aspect of all human bodies that is the same. . . . beneath their differences lies a similarity or common ground that is not yet marked by particularity. And it is this similarity that provides the basic possibility for communication because, thanks to it, a body can grasp the corporeal intentions of another" (Sullivan 70). Although Merleau-Ponty intends to put this bodily anonymity to good use as the basis for intersubjective communication, it is precisely this claim of fundamental similarity that raises a red flag for Sullivan. The problem arises in assuming, as Merleau-Ponty does, that I know the other's body like I know my own—assuming the other's body *is* like mine. But bodies

---

<sup>32</sup> Other differences Merleau-Ponty ignores that are not specifically addressed by his feminist critics include race, class, age, ability, etc. Perhaps his critics feel that his gender blindness is the most egregious or most pronounced, but whatever the reason, they focus on gender rather than other differences.

are *not* all alike; rather, they come in a plethora of experientially relevant variations and categories (categories whose relevance is due to socio-historical construction, yet with physical, embodied manifestations) such as gender. Sullivan argues that Merleau-Ponty does not actually escape solipsism as he claims precisely because he thinks the body is neutral and experienced in the same way by all (2001, 65). In claiming that my experience is universal, I am really claiming that everyone else is exactly like me, but if everyone is exactly like me, then mine is the only example of subjectivity there is, so I have erased all other subjectivities and posited my own little solipsistic universe. This, according to Sullivan, is the logical outcome of Merleau-Ponty's anonymous body. Furthermore, "Merleau-Ponty's account of human existence...tends to construe a person's being-in-the-world as a solipsistic activity of imposing her intentions, value, and meanings onto objects and others in the world" (Sullivan 2001, 65). In other words, not only does Merleau-Ponty's concept of the anonymous body erase differences, it entails a colonizing model of subjectivity: I do not simply *assume* that you are exactly like me, I actively *impose* my values and intentions onto you and turn you—for my world, anyway—into someone exactly like me. Merleau-Ponty actually goes so far as to claim that I read *my own intentions* in *your* bodily behavior: "it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body *a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions*, a familiar way of dealing with the world" (1962, 354, emphasis added). Assuming that I know your intentions—which is in fact the imposition of my intentions onto your behavior—results in the complete erasure of your potential contribution to my world of knowledge and understanding.

For example, take the culturally varied bodily expressions of emotion: Merleau-Ponty would have us believe that witnessing the bodily behavior in another allows me to grasp the other's intentions, writing,



I perceive the other as a piece of behavior, for example, I perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or his hands, without recourse to any ‘inner’ experience of suffering or anger, and because grief and anger are variations of belonging to the world, undivided between the body and consciousness, *and equally applicable to the other’s conduct, visible in his [sic] phenomenal body*, as in my own conduct as it is presented to me (1962, 356, emphasis added).

But a facial expression can cover a multitude of intentions. In Japan, for example, it is culturally common to smile when one is *unhappy*. If I read the intention of communicating happiness in the smile of a Japanese woman, I erase her actual intentions and, misunderstanding her, may engage in behavior that prolongs rather than cuts short her unhappiness, out of a mistaken belief that her body expresses intentions in behavior identical to mine. This is an apt example, for Merleau-Ponty himself refers to the smile as having a “global meaning” (1964a, 115), and this is but one minor example of the socially and politically unsavory implications that Sullivan finds in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the anonymous body, the notion that we are ‘all the same underneath’ because we all fundamentally share a universal mode of embodiment.

Thus while Merleau-Ponty argues that the ability to know the other’s body as like mine is a path out of Cartesian solipsism, Sullivan counters that this claim to knowledge of the other actually condemns Merleau-Ponty to the very solipsism he seeks to avoid (65). Because he thinks the body is neutral and experienced in the same way by all human subjects (i.e., all men?), Merleau-Ponty misses out on the experiential differences among differently embodied subjects, and by ignoring those differences, invites only *miscommunication* and *misunderstanding* rather than genuine knowledge of the other. Therefore, “Instead of being an account of the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship between self and other, the model of intersubjectivity offered by Merleau-Ponty tends toward that of a subject’s monologue with itself that includes a domineering erasure of others in its projective ‘communication’ with them” (Sullivan 66). Sullivan is pointing out that by assuming that the other’s body is fundamentally like mine, I also

assume that I can understand the bodily meanings of another's experience, but in this assumption I simply read my own experience in the other's body and fail to recognize that his experience might actually be crucially different from my own. Since Merleau-Ponty ignores gender differences (among others), Sullivan argues that he problematically paves the way for my body to overwrite the intentionality and meaning of another's differently gendered body. Sullivan explains,

Bodies cannot be appealed to as some sort of foundational 'given' that easily solves the problem of communicating across their differences. Neglecting this fact, as Merleau-Ponty's notion of the anonymous or impersonal body tends to do, leads one to overlook the different habits incorporated into bodily structures and thus the different meanings that bodily gestures have as a result (71).

Thus, Sullivan argues that a good feminist theory of embodiment must reject the anonymous body on which Merleau-Ponty wants to base the possibility of intersubjective communication. Bodies are too various and (e.g.) gender differences too experientially relevant to assume that my embodiment guarantees that I understand your bodily intentionality. Therefore, "Only by rejecting Merleau-Ponty's concept of the anonymous body can feminists create a genuine option of breaking out of the ethically solipsistic subjectivity against which Merleau-Ponty tries to argue" (Sullivan 75). While Merleau-Ponty tries to ground communication in bodily commonality, Sullivan argues that we will only truly be able to communicate when we recognize our bodily differences. For Sullivan, a good feminist theory of embodiment must recognize that I will not understand you if I assume my embodied experiences to be fundamentally the same as yours: by assuming I already understand you, I erase altogether the possibility of learning from our differences and coming to understand you across our differences.

Iris Marion Young's work on women's embodiment also highlights a flaw in Merleau-Ponty's universalist assumptions. Young writes that women "often experience our bodies as a

fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our body to make sure it is doing what we wish it to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies” (Young 1989, 57). This illuminates, for Young, the problem for feminists in Merleau-Ponty’s work: his assumption that bodily being in the world is primarily manifested in intentional projective action of the body viewing the world as potentiality and doing things that the world makes possible for its projects is a more accurate description for men than for women because men have the confidence in their bodies that they *can* carry out their projects, a confidence women generally lack, according to Young. Men focus on the intention, the project; women on the bodily movements and try to direct the body to make it do what we want.

Young illustrates her argument with the example of “throwing like a girl”; drawing on my own experience, I find Young’s observations pertinent when I go rock climbing with my brother. He sees a viable hold on the rock and his body just goes there without conscious intervention; his body perceives what is available to it to carry out its project and actually carries out said project directly via bodily perception of the situation in terms of an “I can”. I, on the other hand, stare at the miniscule projection on the rock and wonder if it will hold me, if I can reach it, if I can hang on without slipping off—I wonder if my body will do what I need it to do to get me to the top of the rock. My brother just goes. He, his body, climbs the rock. My minded body prevents me from doing the same, because my body has been problematized for me, as Young explains, in a way his has not: even though historically women have been associated with the body and men with the mind, the practical upshot of this traditional bifurcation is that the body is not a problem for men (particularly white, straight, able-bodied men—men who fit the bodily picture of what is actually silently implied in the Western picture

of disembodied, rational subjectivity). Because my body is different from what is supposed to give rise to a competent, full human subject, my body is a problem for me and I must question its abilities.<sup>33</sup> As Merleau-Ponty claims, bodily possibilities are manifested as the “I can.” “Feminine existence, however, often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident ‘I can’” (Young 1989, 59). My brother’s body grasps the rock and manifests its “I can” in easy, fluid motion to the top. Although climbing the rock does not require any strength or mobility beyond what I possess (as I realize once I have made my slow, hesitant, tortuous ascent), *my* body encounters the rock with an “I’m not so sure I can” rather than with a confident “I can.” As Young puts it, “In performing a physical task the woman’s body does carry her toward the intended aim, but often not easily and directly, but rather circuitously, with the wasted motion resulting from the effort of testing and reorientation, which is a frequent consequence of feminine hesitancy” (1989, 60).

Thus while Merleau-Ponty may provide an accurate account of the white, straight male’s “I can,” he fails to account for what it is like to be a woman (and really, who could expect him to do that? But, as Young points out, he fails to even acknowledge that there might be a difference). Due to his inability to recognize differences that separate his own “I can” from those of the differently embodied, Young concludes that Merleau-Ponty is problematically androcentric and his phenomenology cannot be accepted uncritically as the basis for a feminist theory of embodiment.

Butler, as we have seen, also cautions feminists against wholesale adoption of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Another reason she (and other feminists critical of phenomenology) critiques Merleau-Ponty is his discussion of sexuality. Butler argues that Merleau-Ponty’s

---

<sup>33</sup> I do not intend to claim or imply that *all* women find their bodies problematic in ways that *all* men do not. But, following Young’s argument, I would be willing to bet that more women than men experience such bodily uncertainty.

failure to consider bodily specificities such as gender results in a masculinist, misogynist account of sexuality. While she praises him for rejecting a naturalistic account of sexuality in favor of an account based on the historical construction and fluid possibilities of the body, she finds significant problems with Merleau-Ponty that again center on his androcentrism. According to Butler, “Merleau-Ponty offers descriptions of sexuality which turn out to contain tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality,” assumptions, moreover, that are based on the objectifying male gaze (Butler 1989a, 86). In fact, Butler argues that Merleau-Ponty does not actually succeed in his attempt to displace naturalistic, normative sexuality; on the contrary, “his descriptions of the universal features of sexuality reproduce certain cultural constructions of sexual normalcy” (Butler 1989a, 92)—constructions that privilege male sexuality and all but ignore women’s sexual experiences and pleasures.

For example, Merleau-Ponty discusses the patient Schneider’s lack of sexual interest as an abnormality which can only lead to “failed” sexual encounters—i.e., sex that does not result in an orgasm for Schneider—an analysis based on the masculinist assumption that the purpose of sex is male orgasm. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Schneider’s failure to become aroused by exposure to “[o]bscene pictures...[or] the sight of a body” is abnormal (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 155); as Butler points out, this reinforces the constructed normalcy of the female body as object for a devouring male gaze. Since Merleau-Ponty utterly fails to consider the woman’s sexual interests, desires, and experiences, he constructs sexuality as solely the domain of the man, with the woman’s body—any woman’s body—presumed there for male consumption.

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 a 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 (Butler 1989a, 92-93).

Butler points out that this misogynist account of sexuality is an unfortunate, but not unexpected, result of Merleau-Ponty's failure to consider that bodies are gendered and his concomitant assumption that the normal, human body is masculine. By failing to consider that phenomenology might look different from a body coded female, Butler argues, Merleau-Ponty fails to follow through on the potential inherent in his own concept of the body-subject.

According to Butler, Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality seems to ignore his own non-dualistic insights in that he emphasizes the male (disembodied) gaze, attributed to the "normal subject," which appropriates the female body, once again reverting to the traditional philosophical bifurcation that privileges male/reason over female/body (Butler 1989a, 93).

Butler muses, "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...the 'normal subject' turned out to be male" (1989a, 94). In other words, despite Merleau-Ponty's insistence that the body is not a mere physical object in the world, he seems to abandon this principle when it comes to women's bodies, for he claims that Schneider's abnormality does not allow him to respond sexually to the "essence" of the woman's body (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 156), as though women's bodies are essentially objects for male sexual consumption. As Butler remarks,

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 (1989a, 94).

Despite the insightful things he has to say about bodies, then, Butler cautions that Merleau-Ponty fails to include women within the realm of human subjectivity and fails entirely to consider the phenomenological, experiential import of women's bodies. "For a concrete description of lived experience [the ostensible aim of phenomenology], 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" (Butler 1989a, 98), and Merleau-Ponty fails to consider such situations. Consequently, Butler concludes that "the promise of his phenomenological method to provide a non-normative framework for the understanding of sexuality proves illusory" (1989a, 95). However, it is not necessarily the phenomenological method itself that fails, but rather Merleau-Ponty's selective, male-biased application of it, and Butler concurs that a feminist reappropriation and revision of Merleau-Ponty is needed (1989a, 98).

## **Conclusion**

Two different strands of feminism have emerged in this chapter and they disagree fundamentally with each other on several key issues. Foucaultian feminists claim that relying on an experiencing subject to ground knowledge is problematic because such a position reifies an effect, putting the cart before the horse. However, phenomenological feminists argue that it is poststructuralism's distrust of experience that is problematic and misplaced, and that experiences have real, viable epistemological implications. In other words, while for the poststructuralist, experience is always already theoretical, the phenomenologist argues instead that theory is always already experiential. We cannot have theories until we have had experiences, and it is the poststructuralists who place cart before horse in denying this.

Looking back over the feminist perspectives covered in this chapter and the previous two, two major strands of thought emerge: one which focuses on Merleau-Ponty and the potential of shared modes of embodiment for intersubjective communication, understanding, and an understanding of the body as natural on the one hand; and on the other, feminists who draw on (and/or go beyond) Foucault to argue that the notion of a prediscursive body is dangerously essentializing and instead focus on the feminist potential of destabilizing bodily identities. The fundamental differences stem from whether one begins with experience or with discourse and include the problems of whether or not there is a prediscursive body—thus whether or not one can legitimately appeal to an anonymous body to ground intersubjectivity—and whether or not one can legitimately speak of the subject in a theory of embodiment. Feminists who argue in favor of a prediscursive and/or anonymous body find Foucault dangerous and problematic because of his over-reliance on discourse that, they claim, severs women's bodies and identities from any sort of grounding reality. On the other hand, feminists who reject both prediscursivity and anonymity argue that a Merleau-Pontian approach is dangerously essentializing and too naively realist. Two camps disagree fundamentally over the best and most productive way to theorize the body from a feminist standpoint. They disagree because of the political implications of each position: those who claim that there is an anonymous or prediscursive body argue that rejecting this body amounts to an erasure of bodily materiality that rids us of the possibility of subjectivity, agency and resistance; those who reject the prediscursive body argue that an appeal thereto traps us in essentialistic, oppressive normativity regarding correlations between body and identity, and that it threatens to erase differences by overemphasizing bodily anonymity.

In chapters one and two, I showed that there is much feminist potential to be found in both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. However, there are also strong feminist criticisms of each



that must be taken into account and that lead to significant differences in feminist approaches to theorizing embodiment. The differences, as I have shown, center around divergent uses of the concepts of experience, subjectivity, discourse, and materiality. Thus my task: after having considered the feminist disagreements over the potentials and failings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Foucault's poststructuralism, I will turn in the next chapter to the possibility of retaining the strengths and expunging the weaknesses of each approach to theorizing embodiment. There are significant difficulties to overcome in constructing a feminist theory of embodied subjectivity and resistance to oppression that draws on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. But, as I will show in the next chapter, it can be done.

## CHAPTER FOUR: HARMONIZING MERLEAU-PONTY AND FOUCAULT

### Introduction

It is notable that despite a level of similarity in their mutual rejection of Cartesian dualism and objectivist epistemologies, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault still differ significantly in their understandings of bodies and subjects. As I showed in chapter three, these differences spark debates among feminists about the most productive way to theorize embodied subjectivity. Given the differences between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty and the differing feminist schools of thought that take their points of departure from one or the other, is it possible to bring the two together without merely reducing one to the other, or glossing over significant and fundamental differences? In this chapter, I argue that it is.

The basic difference to be resolved is that Foucault treats bodies and subjects as primarily discursive while Merleau-Ponty treats them as primarily material. I argue that these two approaches are not contradictory but are instead complimentary and can be brought together in a way that entails viewing the embodied subject on different levels and with different foci rather than from different fundamental philosophical frameworks. I show that treating the body as discursive (Foucault) does not necessarily entail ignoring its materiality (Merleau-Ponty); that recognizing bodily materiality does not necessarily lead to the pitfalls of anonymity or essentialism; and that describing the body as discursively constituted within networks of power does not entail its docility or lack of agency. I attempt to mediate the disparities highlighted in chapter three by arguing that a fruitful appropriation of Merleau-Ponty on the body can survive without the anonymous body—indeed, can be even more fruitful thus—and that Foucault's emphasis on discourse need not eviscerate the materiality and lived-ness of the body and bodily experience. Thus, my argument is that feminists inspired by Merleau-Ponty and who explicitly

appeal to an anonymous body are headed in the wrong direction, but that rejecting the anonymous body need not entail throwing the baby out with the bath water and writing off Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology altogether. Furthermore, I argue that the Merleau-Pontian feminists are right to emphasize bodily materiality, which does indeed tend to get overlooked by some Foucaultians. A philosophy of embodied subjectivity that is consistent with a generally phenomenological approach can be constructed, one that overcomes the flaws in Merleau-Ponty's particular omissions and shortcomings without rejecting his beneficial insights. Such a philosophy can be consistent with Foucault's genealogical insights, but without succumbing to the political nihilism often attributed (mistakenly, in my view) to Foucault. In this chapter I show how a theoretical framework fits together such that it is possible for feminists to draw on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and in chapter five I elaborate on how this combined framework works to benefit feminism.

### **Resolving Problem #1: The Experiencing Subject vs. Discourse**

Is there experience prior to discourse upon which a subject can rely in understanding her world? As I have shown in previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty seems to assume that there is, while Foucault seems to argue that there is not; I also demonstrated how some feminists argue that experience ought to be the starting point for feminist theory and thus prefer Merleau-Ponty, while others hold that experience *cannot* be the starting point because it is always already discursively infused such that discourse must be the starting point and thus prefer Foucault. Here, I will show that this chicken/egg thinking (which comes first—experience or discourse?) is itself problematic and that the apparent tension between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on the

question of the ontological primacy of experience or discourse in theorizing subjectivity can be resolved by doing away with this mistaken thinking.

I first take up the problem of Foucault's rejection of the phenomenological emphasis on experience as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reliance upon experience. While I agree in part with Foucault's concerns, I do not think that the way phenomenology has historically been done demands that the phenomenological project as a whole be discarded. With Foucault, I reject a phenomenology that seeks essences, universalities, generalities, anonymities; however, a situated phenomenology of the experiences of differently embodied subjectivities is both possible and necessary. I argue that Foucault's own most feminist-valuable insights are not as incompatible with the positive aspects of phenomenology as he may have thought. Also, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's reliance on experience does not entail the naïve realism with which Foucault and other poststructuralists take issue. Instead, I contend that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault can be read as appealing to, or at least not excluding, experience in a way that fully recognizes and takes account of the discursive elements that contribute to it. Thus considered, experience can be enlightening as a source of information about women and other marginalized or oppressed groups, but their experiences can also be analyzed in terms of the discourse that informs it. In short, I argue, to borrow a phrase from Kruks, that "experience can serve as both a point of origin for an explanation and as the object of an explanation" (2001, 138) and that both Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Foucault's poststructuralism are consistent with this view. My position is that neither experience nor discourse fundamentally, ontologically or epistemologically precedes the other, and that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault can be read in this light.

From an analysis of experience and discourse arises the question of the nature and status of the subject. Does subjectivity precede experience, and are subjects the unified loci of experience? Or is subjectivity constructed from experience? Or are subjects produced by discourse? This is an area in which Foucault and Merleau-Ponty are frequently read as being directly opposed to one another, for Merleau-Ponty presupposes the existence of human subjectivity and Foucault (in his early work, at least) explicitly rejects just that. When Foucault rejects phenomenology, he rejects not only its assumed naïve realism but also its centralizing of the subject as a God-like knower of the real. In other words, Merleau-Ponty holds that subjects exist, have experiences, and subsequently discourse and theorize about them; Foucault argues that discourses and power networks exist and humans are nodes produced by and within those networks, produced by discourse, and therefore all human experience is necessarily the product of external forces, not springing from any internal fount of pure self that exists separately from the forces which form it. Thus, to show that feminism can draw on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, I must resolve the conflict between Foucault's early rejection of the subject, including the subject of phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty's explicit reliance on a strong concept of subjectivity.

My solution to this problem parallels my position on experience and discourse: in constructing subjectivity, neither experience nor discourse comes first, and both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault can be read consistently in this light. Subjects simultaneously come to be and effect change by having discourse-informed experiences with the potential to affect both the subjects themselves and future discourses and experiences. This position does grant that subjective experience is pervaded by discourse and does not in any way precede it (which might be unsatisfactory to feminists who argue that untouched, pure experience is required for

experience to be valuable in theorizing women's subjectivities), but I argue that theorizing experience as thoroughly discursive does not necessarily take away from its relevance or value, and that even Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological emphasis on the subject as experiencing is consistent with a thoroughly discursive reading. Furthermore, the iteration of the subject that Foucault rejects when he explicitly rejects subjectivity happens to be the very same iteration that is rejected by Merleau-Ponty—the Cartesian subject—for while Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does rely on a concept of subjectivity, it is (as I showed in chapter 1) a very different concept of subjectivity than the traditional western philosophical subject. Thus the two end up being closer in their comprehension of the subject than might initially appear to be the case. Also, it is important to remember that the early Foucault's rejection of subjectivity is not his last word on the subject (so to speak). My claim is that, on the basis of and inseparable from their compatible positions on the relationship between experience and discourse, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault both ultimately locate subjectivity in a realm that is simultaneously experienced (in a way that experience is relevant and important) and discursively constituted. By so doing, the two offer theories of the experiencing subject that are not opposed, as might appear based on the arguments discussed in chapter three, but are in fact compatible and mutually enhancing.

To support my position, I look at the apparent conflict between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on the primacy of experience versus discourse. Does Merleau-Ponty's claim that experience precedes theory contradict Foucault's position that nothing escapes discursive constitution? In other words, if 'discourse' is taken to include linguistic, cultural, historical, social, and theoretical knowledges and practices, and Merleau-Ponty places experience behind or before such while Foucault claims that nothing escapes such, do we have an unsolvable conflict? Phenomenology, for Merleau-Ponty, is about returning to the things themselves, and "To return

to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, ix). This reads as an explicit claim that phenomenology seeks pre-discursive knowledge and that such knowledge is gained via pre-discursive experience, namely, perception. As I showed in chapter one, Merleau-Ponty begins his philosophy with an analysis of perception; attending to the unmediated experience of perception is what enables him to develop his phenomenology. In sharp contrast, Foucault directly challenges the primacy of perception when he writes, “I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, *their perceptive capacity*, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them” (1970, xiv, emphasis added). In other words, Foucault indicates that even what Merleau-Ponty ostensibly takes to be the most basic, pre-theoretical, extra-discursive source of knowledge—perception—is in fact discursively constituted. Are these two positions, as it seems at face value, mutually exclusive?

I contend that they are not. The way Merleau-Ponty and Foucault talk about the real is relevant to solving this seeming conundrum: the question of experience has to do with whether or not we have access, via experience, to a realm of reality that exists pure and untouched by discourse. Foucault clearly rejects this position, and it is my claim that Merleau-Ponty does as well. For even in attending to experience, Merleau-Ponty is careful to emphasize the situatedness, localization, and social and historical influences that shape experiences (1962, 189). Unlike, indeed in explicit rejection of, Husserl’s phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty’s way of attending to experience does not entail getting at essences or universal truths about the natures of

things (as I showed in chapter 1). Attending to experience without first theorizing what experience *must* be like (as empiricists and intellectualists do, Merleau-Ponty claims) does not mean that the experience to which I attend is not already constructed and shaped by social and historical factors. Yes, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology seeks to describe, rather than analyze, sheer experience, but are these descriptions of experience pure, unmediated Truth? Do they show us true, pre-existing, universal essences as Husserl claimed? No. As Merleau-Ponty explains, "The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing, truth into being" (1962, xx). He also says, "the phenomenal field...places a fundamental difficulty in the way of any attempt to make experience directly and totally explicit" (1962, 60). In other words, phenomenology is not a discovery of a pre-existent, extradiscursive reality, but a *bringing truth into being* precisely *via* discourse, via descriptions of experiences. Thus Merleau-Ponty is no more a naïve realist than is Foucault. He does not hold the problematic position that our senses grant us unhindered and undisputed access to The Real and The True. Rather, he holds that experience, and thus descriptions of reality, is *always situated and mediated*. Yes, Merleau-Ponty claims that what we perceive is 'the real,' but 'the real' is never complete or unchanging because our locations and perceptions change: "But in perception it [the perceived object] is 'real'; it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 15). In other words, Merleau-Ponty holds that we can experientially attain local, situated, perspectival knowledge of an always modifiable and never complete 'real'. Yes, the perceived is 'real,' but *the real* is always partial and un-exhausted, and is *produced*, perspectivally, rather than discovered. This perspective is not at all incompatible



with Foucault's claim that knowledge is always produced from within power networks (locations) and is hence malleable.

As I have shown, Merleau-Ponty avoids anti-realism—he does maintain a concept of the real—without succumbing to naïve realism. Foucault, though, is generally read as being an anti-realist. However, there are occasions when he refers to ‘the real’ in a way that I take to be similar to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the real (local, changeable, etc.) when, for example, he talks about how actions and discourses effect changes in the real. In a 1980 interview in which he is responding to questions on *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *A History of Sexuality*, Foucault has this to say: “The problem, you see, is one for the subject who acts—the subject of action through which *the real* is transformed” (1991b, 84, emphasis added). In other words, it was at one time ‘*really*’ the case that homosexuals and delinquents did not exist; now, both are ‘real’ and have been produced as real via discourse and power. In ancient Greece, men who engaged in sexual relationships with boys were not considered a different “type” of person than those who only engaged in sex with women; there was simply no concept of one's sexual relationships being determined by one's core identity (Foucault 1990, 187). Now, however, since sex has come to be taken as the truth of our identity, the workings of power are such that homosexuality as an identity *does* exist—in our discourse, in our everyday reality, in the experiences both of those it names and those who would seek to define them. A concept that simply was not in play in ancient Greece is commonplace today, and on Foucault's terms, *no less real* for having emerged out of a history of shifting power relations than had it been “natural,” a.k.a. pre- or extra-discursive. Foucault further claims, “My general theme isn't society but the discourse of true and false, by which I mean the correlative formation of domains and objects and of the verifiable, falsifiable discourses that bear on them; and it's not just their formation that

interests me, but *the effects in the real* to which they are linked” (1991b, 85, emphasis added). In other words, discursively constructed domains and objects *are real* and *have real effects*. Thus Foucault does, in fact, have a conception of the real, and the type of reality Foucault holds to is precisely the same type of reality to which Merleau-Ponty subscribes: the type that emerges as a result of discursive formulations, whether it be the power/knowledge discourses Foucault describes or the descriptions of experience upon which Merleau-Ponty relies.

Merleau-Ponty’s and Foucault’s positions on the real may be compatible, but what about Foucault’s explicit rejection of phenomenology its reliance on the experience of a subject? Foucault may admit to a reality of a sort, but if it is wholly discursively constructed *along with those who inhabit it*, can a subject have experiential access to the real in any informative way? In other words, what is the status of experience in Foucault’s work, and does it constitute an impasse vis-à-vis Merleau-Ponty’s clear and explicit favoring of experience as philosophy’s starting point? Is it a problem that, as I have been describing them thus far, Foucault’s ‘real’ emerges from power/knowledge networks, thus locating discourse as primary, and Merleau-Ponty’s from descriptions of experience, thus locating experience as primary?

The key point of contention is whether or not philosophy is able to call upon experience as the starting point of theory, namely the experience of a subject who precedes entry into social and cultural structures and subsequently experiences and forms knowledge of those structures. As Johanna Oksala points out, Foucault is generally read as positioned in stark opposition to this phenomenological view:

Foucault is not generally regarded as a philosopher of experience. On the contrary, Foucault’s philosophy and poststructuralist thought as a whole is generally read as a critical reaction to those philosophical traditions, such as existentialism and phenomenology, that take lived experience as their starting point. The poststructuralist critics argue that experience is always structured and constituted by a culturally and historically specific network of practices. The experience of the subject cannot be the

starting point for our knowledge of the world, because it is the knowledge of the world that constitutes the experience of the subject (101).

Foucault's work does, at first, seem to mesh very well with this description. For example, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault claims that his aim is to look at the discursive conditions that make possible the very existence of a subject who then constructs knowledge:

I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them. In short, I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse (1970, xiv).

But despite this clear rejection of a subject who precedes discourse, Foucault's rejection of phenomenology does not entail an outright rejection of the importance of experience. As Oksala rightly points out, even in *The Order of Things*, where Foucault explicitly rejects phenomenology, he still maintains that his work is intended as an analysis of experience (102). Foucault writes that "in every culture...there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being. The present study is an attempt to analyse that experience" (1970, xxi). Thus Foucault's most explicitly anti-phenomenological work itself contains, though Foucault may not have realized it, phenomenological presuppositions, for Foucault is interested in looking at experience to understand the construction of order in a given episteme. Nick Crossley also makes this point, arguing that while "For Foucault, Merleau-Ponty is a key proponent of the notion of the (constituent) phenomenological subject that he (Foucault) is firmly opposed to", Foucault "doesn't posit an adequate critique of phenomenology to justify his rejection of it and that, in fact, he presupposes many phenomenological notions in his own work" (1994, 5). Furthermore, with regard to the first volume of *A History of Sexuality*, Oksala remarks, "Foucault does not explicitly mention experience in this work, but he makes a claim about bodies and pleasures,

which in my view presupposes an understanding of the experiential body in so far as pleasure can only be understood as an experience of pleasure, not solely as a concept or practice” (102-103). Oksala is correct. Even if one rejects the terminology of experience, one would be hard pressed to come up with an account of bodies and pleasures that is divorced from embodied experience. And Foucault himself, retrospectively, recognizes the experiential import of his *History of Sexuality*: in the introduction to the second volume, *The Use of Pleasure*, he writes that the first volume had been “a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture” (1990, 4). Thus, it is my claim that the language of experience can be brought to Foucault’s project without contradiction.

As I have shown, Foucault’s lack of explicit focus on experience does not preclude the presence and relevance of experience in his theories. Also, I have shown that, due to his recognition that experience is culturally and historically situated, Merleau-Ponty’s use of experience is not the naïve sort of thing that should trigger poststructuralist skepticism. Now, the basic claim that I am making is that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault have compatible positions (even if they did not realize it or state it in these terms). My claim is that Merleau-Ponty and Foucault can both be read consistently with the position that experience and discourse are mutually co-constituting. We do not need to determine which comes first and be able to declare once and for all that either experience or discourse is primordial and foundational. Rather, we need to recognize their coexistence, coextensiveness, mutual co-constitution, in determining a reality which is neither objective nor absolute but still experienceable. As with chickens and eggs, we cannot have one without the other, but we need not try to determine which is temporally or even ontologically prior, because *both are*. All experience is discursive, and at the

same time all discourse is rooted in experience. It is possible to look at experience and discursivity as each talking about the same thing but from a different level of explanation. As Oksala puts it, summarizing Kruks's point in *Retrieving Experience*,

One pole explores experience from an impersonal or 'third person' stance, its project being explanatory. The other explores it from a 'first person' stance, in terms of its lived meaning, as an experience to be grasped or felt rather than explained. Depending on which pole we choose to start from, we can render an account of the same experience as a discursive effect or as subjectively lived (100).<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault emphasize different poles, Merleau-Ponty focusing on experience and Foucault on discourse, but this difference in emphasis, rather than rendering their positions incompatible, allows their philosophies to enhance each other, providing a fuller and more comprehensive view together than either could alone.

I have shown that Merleau-Ponty and Foucault have compatible accounts of the nature of the real and of experiences thereof. The next question: what is it that experiences? Concomitant with an understanding of experience and discourse as mutually co-constituting comes a picture of subjectivity as both discursively constructed and experientially relevant. But as I showed in chapter three, the existence, status, and nature of the subject is an area where Foucault is commonly read as directly opposing Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty takes the existence of subjectivity as a grounding assumption in his work; his emphasis on embodiment reformulates the notion of subjectivity away from Cartesian dualism, but relies nonetheless on the assumed reality of human subjectivity, while Foucault explicitly rejects the phenomenological subject. However, as I showed in chapter two, subjectivity is not absent from Foucault's work and is in fact implicit throughout, as the later Foucault himself states (1982, 216). For while Foucault

---

<sup>34</sup> Incidentally, Oksala herself rejects Kruks's approach: "Kruks's distinction between linguistically articulated experience and prediscursive, affective experience thus simply avoids the philosophical problem of the relationship between experience and language" (Oksala 100). To which I would reply, affective does not necessarily mean prediscursive. I find no contradiction or problem in the possibility of discursive elements of affects.

does reject the Cartesian subject, this rejection does not amount to ridding persons of subjectivity altogether. By looking at the development of Foucault's stance on subjectivity, a degree of harmony can be found with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject—for if we take seriously Foucault's later claim that he has been talking about subjectivity all along (1982, 208), then there is no contradiction in accepting both Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject and Foucault's early work on the body as well as his later work on the care of the self.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are in agreement in their rejection of a certain conception of subjectivity. Both argue against precisely the same sort of subject, the one that comes hand-in-hand with Cartesian dualism: the autonomous, purely rational, transcendent, disembodied subject. Demonstrating the historicity and demise of this subject is Foucault's objective in *The Order of Things*. Critiquing phenomenology for its over-reliance on Cartesian subject, Foucault writes,

If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity—which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness. It seems to me that the historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice (1970, xiv).

However, a position which grants priority to an observing subject is precisely what Merleau-Ponty rejects as well, as he strives to reformulate subjectivity as firmly and irreducibly embodied and relational. Merleau-Ponty might not explicitly focus on Foucault's preferred "theory of discursive practice", but, as I showed in chapter one, he absolutely rejects the transcendental, external, atomic knower to whom Foucault objects and with whom Foucault equates the phenomenological subject. Furthermore, according to Eric Paras, "The argument of *The Order of Things*, with its emphatic rejection of the figure of man, was at its heart an attack on the

philosophy of the autonomous subject. The denial of man was intended as a challenge to those currents of thought, still flowing in France in the mid-1960's, that invoked a 'strong' individual: a coherent, singular Cartesian subject" (26). Since this is precisely the same concept of the subject against which Merleau-Ponty argues, Foucault's rejection of phenomenology is (whether he realized it or not) actually not a rejection of Merleau-Ponty at all. Thus despite Foucault's nominal rejection of phenomenology and the phenomenological subject in particular, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault actually agree on what subjectivity is *not*. Furthermore, as I will show, both theorize subjectivity, experience, and agency as inseparable from bodies and embodiment; thus their views of what subjectivity *is* cohere.

I have shown that Foucault's rejection of the subject is not incompatible with Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of it. Similarly, Foucault's emphasis on the discursive aspects of subjectivity works well with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on historical and social location. Merleau-Ponty and Foucault both have a similar concept of the status of the human subject as, rather than independent and transcendent, very much a social/historical product. Alcoff notes that "Like structuralism and poststructuralism...Merleau-Ponty's account of subjectivity allows us to understand how it is constituted by and through historically specific cultural practices and institutions" (2000, 263). She is correct; Merleau-Ponty argues that temporal bodily histories and generalities build into figures, or types, such that a subject is not radically free to invent herself because of the sediment of situation that shapes her bodily possibilities: "the figure in history does not create his part completely: faced with typical situations he takes typical decisions" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 87). Another example of the ways in which social/historical forces constitute human subjectivity arises in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of anti-Semitism and World War II in *Sense and Non-Sense* (1964b, 139-152). Merleau-Ponty cites the experiences of

war and occupation as evidence of the falsehood of the notion of the independent, autonomous subject, for in an occupied France, one could not be a transcendent, pure individual in one's interactions with others, but must identify as a French person or as a German or as a Jew; identities were brought to the fore in a graphic and dramatic illustration of the historical and cultural forces at play in producing subjectivities. According to Crossley, the war

illustrates to Merleau-Ponty that human identity, thoughts and action are not...derived from an 'inner' mental reserve but rather from an active belongingness to a socio-historical world. People are never determined by history, Merleau-Ponty reminds us. They make history through their actions. They determine the meaning and the course of history by what they do. But they do not create that meaning *ex nihilo*. . . . Their beliefs, commitments, hopes and aspirations etc., not to mention their opportunities, all derive from their participation in a common historical world (1994, 36).

If Crossley is right, and I think he is, then Merleau-Ponty's concept of subjectivity is actually quite similar to Foucault's, in that both locate subjects squarely within history and discourse, incapable of acting or existing external to their discursive situations. Merleau-Ponty

provides an analysis of the agent qua subject without recourse and indeed, in opposition to the notion of either a constituting consciousness or a transcendental ego. Merleau-Ponty's subject-agent is involved in worlds of meaning but she is not a free floating consciousness. The key to this understanding is the notion of 'behaviour' as a culturally acquired, prereflective, prereflexive and preobjective mode of being-in-the-world. Behavior or praxis as we may call it is meaning-creation-in-the-act but the meaning it creates is not known to the subject-agent except by means of time (retrospection) and language (linguistic behavior). Moreover, it is based in a stock of culturally acquired habits or techniques. In this sense the subject is both decentred and situated in relation to the cultural world of which they are a part (Crossley 1994, 37).

Thus Merleau-Ponty's subject is capable of reflection, self-awareness, and choice, but *only* as a socio-culturally situated subject. This is compatible with Foucault's notion of persons.

As I demonstrated in chapter two, Foucault's philosophy does not do away with the category of the subject. Foucault's destabilization of identity categories does not mean that he denies the existence or experiences of the individuals named by those categories: on the contrary, Foucault holds that the very reality of these categories depends upon their being constructed by



power. Hence on Foucault's terms subjects with identities do exist; women exist, homosexuals exist. Their identities may be contestable and ever-changing, but they are nonetheless real—and they are subject positions. When Foucault talks of subjectivity, he is not talking of an independently existing entity, but of different positions within discourse. For example, Foucault says:

What is important to me is to show that there are not on the one hand inert discourses, which are already more than half dead, and on the other hand, an all-powerful subject which manipulates them, overturns them, renews them; but that discoursing subjects form a part of the discursive field—they have their place within it (and their possibilities of displacements) and their function (and their possibilities of functional mutation). Discourse is not a place into which the subjectivity irrupts; it is a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions (1991a, 58).

This view clearly maintains a concept of subjectivity situated within discourse, just as Merleau-Ponty argues for a subject situated within social/historical sedimentations. Rather than discourse replacing subjectivity for Foucault, *discourse is inherently a matter of subjectivity* that gives rise to various subject-positions. Discourse both *arises from* and *contributes to the formation of* subject-positions, much like for Merleau-Ponty, subjects are historical yet still experiencing. In a 1968 essay Foucault writes that his aim is

to challenge the idea of a sovereign subject which arrives from elsewhere to enliven the inertia of linguistic codes, and sets down in discourse the indelible trace of its freedom; to challenge the idea of a subjectivity which constitutes meanings and then transcribes them into discourse. Against these ideas I would advocate a procedure which maps the roles and operations exhausted by different 'discoursing' subjects (1991a, 61-62).

Thus for Foucault, despite the feminist critiques of his work I discussed in chapter three, subjects still exist and are central to his work. And to return to a quote I used earlier, but with a different emphasis: "The problem, you see, is one for *the subject* who acts—the *subject* of action through which the real is transformed" (Foucault 1991b, 84, emphasis added). Foucault is very much

concerned with the subject, despite claims to the contrary, and his concept of the subject is similar to Merleau-Ponty's historically and culturally situated subject.

To summarize, while Merleau-Ponty has traditionally been read as taking experience as primary and Foucault has traditionally been read as taking discourse as primary, I have shown that a better reading of both is to take experience and discourse as co-constituting, neither preceding the other and both contributing mutually to both the constructedness and the livedness of the embodied subject. I have also shown how that subject is maintained in the work of both figures as a historically and discursively situated, yet still subjective and 'real', being. Next, I consider the relationship between materiality and discursivity in the embodied subject.

### **Resolving Problem #2: Is There a Pre-Discursive, Anonymous Body?**

As I showed in chapter three, the issue of the depth of discursive inherence in, or constitutive impact on, bodily materiality is an area in which feminists differ. Some hold that feminism is well served by a theory that posits an element of bodily materiality that exceeds or escapes discourse and call on such extra- or non-discursive materiality to ground agency, resistance, and intersubjectivity. These feminists (Carol Bigwood, for example) find Merleau-Ponty's work quite helpful, as he uses the notion of an anonymous or generic mode of embodiment to ground the possibility of intersubjectivity and communication; for example, he writes that "The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 185). However, other feminists (most notably Judith Butler) argue that the body is discursive through-and-through, and that it is not only theoretically naïve

to call upon a non-existent extra-discursive materiality, it is also politically counterproductive to do so, because such a stance serves only to reify traditional, oppressive notions about women's bodies. These feminists tend to like Foucault, who writes that nothing, not even the body, escapes discourse:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose *a body totally imprinted by history* and the process of history's destruction of the body (1984, 87-88, emphasis added).

Foucault also claims that "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (1984, 87-88). This notion of a body that is discursive through-and-through, with *no* level of material commonality, directly opposes Merleau-Ponty's notion that extra-discursive, anonymous embodiment grounds intersubjectivity.

This issue constitutes the second major area of disagreement between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault (and their feminist followers). The key question is whether or not there is an anonymous or prediscursive body. Can and should feminists appeal to such a thing to ground intersubjectivity, communication, and (as will be addressed in the next section), agency? My answer to this question differs from how I addressed the first problem. Here, I will side more with Foucault than with Merleau-Ponty. My position is that there is not an anonymous or prediscursive body, and that such a concept is harmful rather than helpful for feminism. However, I still believe that Merleau-Ponty has value for feminist use. To retain the possibility of using Merleau-Ponty for a feminist theory of embodiment, I look at places where he talks as though there is not an anonymous body; show that he is inconsistent on this issue; and argue that

feminists can consistently draw on Merleau-Ponty's more 'Foucaultian' side without accepting his theory of the anonymous body.

As I showed in chapter three, Merleau-Ponty suggests the anonymous body to overcome Cartesian solipsism, but his generic body ends up being every bit as solipsistic precisely because of its anonymity. Why, then, should feminists accept an anonymous body over a Cartesian *cogito* or a Kantian transcendental ego? I argue that we should not. But is it not correct to point out that at some basic level, all human bodies are structurally, materially similar? Perhaps, but taking this observation to the next level and claiming that our bodily similarity is sufficient that I can understand your intentions based on your conduct—which is how some feminists read Merleau-Ponty—is problematic. The solution I propose—and that I argue is compatible with a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian theoretical basis—is that there is a degree of bodily commonality among human beings, but not enough to assume understanding of the other in a colonizing way that erases their actual differences. That is, to the extent that you and I are both members of the species *homo sapiens* and both have similar physical/material limitations on our bodily being (e.g. we require oxygen and nutrients to survive, we have internal rather than external skeletons, our hearts pump blood and our kidneys filter out toxins, we cannot fly without the help of a machine, etc.), bodily commonality exists between us. However, that level of similarity is very basic, and our particularities and differences far outweigh it. The fact that we both breathe oxygen does not entail that I can, for example, accurately read your emotions in your facial expression or your intentions in your behavior. In other words, while Merleau-Ponty is correct in noting that human bodies are similarly constructed and function in ways that can be generalized, he is incorrect to infer from this that intersubjective communication automatically follows. Foucault's work is important in reminding us of the limits of bodily commonality

because of his emphasis on discursivity: bodies are not anonymous, and commonalities are strictly limited, because not all are subject to the same power nexuses and discursive influences. Male and female bodies, to name but one example to which Merleau-Ponty is notoriously blind, experience vastly different socio-historical demands and hence undergo dramatically different discursive formations (e.g. male bodies are expected to be physically powerful and female bodies are expected to be attractive objects; these different expectations tend to lead to different bodily practices for men and women which in turn lead to concrete, material, bodily differences). I argue that feminists can and should theorize embodiment by recognizing the validity of Foucault's emphasis on discursivity and difference and that this position can be compatible with what is of most feminist use in Merleau-Ponty's work.

Although Merleau-Ponty does problematically theorize that there is an anonymous body, as I showed in chapter three, he is not entirely consistent on the point and his valuable philosophical contributions, such as the concept of the body-subject, the "I can," body habits and images, etc., can be retained without the anonymous body. In fact, I argue that to be consistent, Merleau-Ponty himself should *not* maintain anonymous embodiment as part of his theory, and there are areas in his writing that suggest that he may not have been fully committed to the idea. For example, he writes:

As long as we allow the existence of dreams, insanity *or perception*, at least as so many forms of absence of reflection—and how can we not do so if we want to leave some value to the testimony of consciousness, without which no truth is possible?—*we have no right to level all experiences down to a single world, all modalities of existence down to a single consciousness* (1962, 290, emphasis added).

If this means that experience is *not* univocal, generic, and completely transparent to be shared among generically embodied selves, this mitigates against the ethical problems that arise with the anonymous body (which I discussed in chapter three). I find it significant that Merleau-Ponty

includes perception in his list of experiences that indicate that consciousness is not univocal, since that is precisely where he usually talks in terms of generalities and anonymities, arguing that you and I perceive in the same way because we share the same general mode of embodiment. True, Merleau-Ponty here is talking about consciousness rather than embodiment, but it is also fundamental to his philosophy that consciousness *is* embodied. Thus, to be consistent, I posit that if Merleau-Ponty rejects a shared, univocal consciousness, he must also reject a shared, generic mode of embodiment that allows across-the-board access to a universal world of meaning.

Further evidence that Merleau-Ponty might not be fully committed to anonymous embodiment arises in his essay *The Child's Relations with Others*. Here, Merleau-Ponty discusses perception of stimuli and explains that, shown a picture that gradually changes from a dog to a cat, the psychologically rigid refuse to recognize that a change has taken place. The visual stimuli change, but the perception does not. If perception were intersubjectively communicable due to the bodily structures that engender perception being the same from person to person, one would expect different subjects to express the same perceptions when shown the same visual stimuli. That this does not happen indicates that more is going on than (so to speak) meets the eye. Merleau-Ponty argues that "Psychologically rigid subjects could be expected to show, in the same way, a sort of perceptual rigidity. It would be hard for them to modify their attitude and to adopt a new account of new aspects of a problem" (1964a, 105). This is an admission that we do *not* all perceive the same way, which seems to contradict, or at least mitigate against, his commitment to anonymous, generic perception in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In other words, despite his ostensible commitment to the idea of anonymous embodiment, Merleau-Ponty not only recognizes, but *emphasizes*, psychological differences.

And since psychology and consciousness are inseparable from embodiment for Merleau-Ponty, it is contradictory to claim that embodiment contains an element of anonymity that does not extend to consciousness.

Psychological rigidity is but one example of difference overcoming anonymity. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that social and situational factors also contribute to differences in perception and experience; people who are equally mentally capable but living different situations also have experiences that cannot be directly and clearly intercommunicated. For example, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that “the grief and anger of another have never quite the same significance for him as they have for me. For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed” (1962, 356). If his friend Paul is grieving a loss, while Merleau-Ponty’s grief may be sympathetic, it arises in a different lived situation—he is grieved for his friend, while his friend is grieved for his own loss—in such a way that “our situations cannot be superimposed on each other” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 356).<sup>35</sup> In other words, despite his claims that anonymous embodiment grounds intersubjectivity, there are times when Merleau-Ponty recognizes that anonymity cannot be complete and I can never live or inhabit your embodied subjectivity with any degree of thoroughness or absoluteness.

Thus what is problematic in Merleau-Ponty is not an unsupportable theory about embodiment, but his inconsistency. At the same time as he recognizes that differences preclude the possibility of superimposing one body-subject’s situations and meanings on another, he claims that all human bodies share anonymous features that *do* allow for direct communication and intersubjective understanding. He claims that our experiences and perceptions both *are* and

---

<sup>35</sup> As a feminist, I contend that embodied differences such as sex, race, (dis)ability, etc. also contribute to vast differences in experiences and perception. Feminists properly critique Merleau-Ponty for ignoring these vast sources of difference in bodily experiences (at least race and gender—he does discuss one type of disability in his analysis of phantom limb syndrome), but my aim here is to show that his philosophy can consistently ground a feminist position that does emphasize such differences.

*are not* intersubjectively communicable; both that our bodies' generic functions *do* and *do not* give rise to shared states of consciousness. Within the same pages, he makes the claims that "There is no reason to treat...primordial communication as an illusion" (1964a, 17) and that "It is true that we discover the unreflected [via perception]. But the unreflected we go back to is not that which is prior to philosophy or prior to reflection. It is the unreflected which is understood and conquered by reflection" (1964a, 19). In other words, he first claims that we communicate with each other on a primordial (read: untouched-by-culture, e.g. extra-discursive) way, and then claims that any perception, discovery, or experience of the primordial/unreflected that is absolutely prior to or outside of culture is impossible. He cannot have it both ways. I propose that we reject the first and take seriously the second of these propositions: there is no way to get back to the truly prediscursive (unreflected) because such a thing does not exist. The farthest back we can go is to attend to perception and experience *within* the constructed, reflected, discursive paradigm within which we necessarily exist.

My position, then, is that Merleau-Ponty is wrong when he leans towards the view that there is anonymous embodiment and primordially shared consciousness, and that feminists should embrace the areas of his work that lean towards the view that there is no such thing as a non-discursive, unreflected perception or experience that can be easily shared. Such a view helps to maintain difference and avoid problems of misunderstanding and imposition. In this way, feminists can bring out of Merleau-Ponty a theory of embodied subjectivity that is thoroughly discursive and that does not erase differences. While this reading does entail rejecting some of Merleau-Ponty's claims, it does not fall prey to the criticism that it is a 'smorgasbord' approach: the claims that are accepted and rejected are not selected according to personal convenience, but in a methodical way that seeks to eliminate inconsistencies within



Merleau-Ponty's work. To consistently follow his own principles about the very basis of philosophy, perception that cannot reach outside of discourse (broadly construed), some of his conclusions must be rejected, and I suggest we reject the notion of anonymous embodiment to maintain theoretical consistency.

But does rejecting Merleau-Ponty's anonymous body also entail rejecting his theory of intersubjectivity, a theory that has been fruitfully appropriated and applied by feminists? I argue that it does not. Denying anonymity in bodily structures and embodied experiences does not entail denying *all* generalizable similarities. There has to be some level of similarity or else Merleau-Ponty's entire analysis of perception, which I accept, is suspect: if there were absolutely no bodily generalizability possible, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception would be analysis only of *his* perception, not of *human* perception. Human bodies open upon the world in more or less similar ways via perception. For example, functioning (non-blind) human eyes all work in more or less the same way in that light entering the eye interacts with the structures of the eye to produce a visual image, but this level of similarity need not go all the way to the anonymity that Merleau-Ponty's feminist critics claim are deadly to his philosophy: despite the fact that your eye and my eye are similarly structured, both have rods and cones and retinas etc., the particular shape of my eyes is such that I am very nearsighted and thus do not perceive in exactly the same way as you. Thus Merleau-Ponty's claim that you and I have access to an unproblematic, shared world of meaning via generic bodily perception is rendered void by differences in perceptive organs; however, just because my vision is blurred more than yours does not mean that we cannot compare and communicate about our perceptive experiences and come to an understanding. Recognizing this means that I cannot *assume* that you perceive exactly what I do and thereby ignore or overwrite your account of your perceptive experience.

More than just brute physical structures contribute to perceptive and experiential differences: histories and situations play a vital role as well. Just because you and I both perceive the color red via a similar structure of light interacting with retinas does not mean that you and I have the same experience or interpretation of the red; we do not necessarily both construct the same meaning. You might see the red on a Chinese flag, for example, as a sign of communism and oppression; I might interpret its meaning as representing an exotic and foreign culture. And this is why we need Foucault to inform our theory as well as Merleau-Ponty: the notion that you and I see the red of the Chinese flag differently is precisely an example of what Foucault means when he claims that the body is totally imprinted by history; there is not pure redness that escapes historical meaning and to which you and I both have access; history imprints even eyeballs. If one was present at Tiananmen square, for example, one's body will have been imprinted by the history of that moment in such a way that one's subjective experience of the red of the Chinese flag is likely to be very different than someone without such an encounter. So while there is a level of similarity and generality in that we both see red, the problematic anonymity Merleau-Ponty's critics argue against does not follow, because we have different subjective experiences of the red. Merleau-Ponty is aware of this. Even if my retinas and yours follow the same mechanics and the physics of the way the light enters our eyes is the same, he recognizes that we might not experience the perception of red in the same way: "I will never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 17). In other words, similarities in the structure of how the human eye perceives color, or how any human sense perceives anything for that matter, does not preclude individuality in experience, perception, and construction of meaning.

What Merleau-Ponty says next offers a different way of interpreting his theory of intersubjective communication that I find more beneficial. He continues: “but this separation of consciousnesses is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us” (1964a, 17). In other words, when a differently embodied/situated person and I misunderstand each other, we are forced to realize that our initial assumptions that we shared a common understanding are untrue. I start out assuming everyone understands the same way I do, so when I offend someone there is a breakdown in communication and I am forced to realize that not everyone understands the way I do: *I will never know exactly how you see and you will never know exactly how I see*. Once we realize this, communication can proceed. So intersubjectivity and communication come not from a basic, underlying generality, but precisely from *our realization that such an underlying generality does not exist*. We may be similar enough to negotiate a way to communicate while respecting our differences once we are able to concede that I do not see from your perspective nor you from mine, but that level of similarity is simply not the same thing as positing a mode of embodiment that is the same for everyone everywhere and that serves as the only possible basis for understanding one another. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied subjectivity can still ground the successful kinds of difference-recognizing understanding and communication that feminists seek without falling prey to the problem of bodily anonymity.

Recognition of both differences and similarities as culturally (discursively) constituted is key. Merleau-Ponty writes that “We live in a world where speech is an *institution*” (1982, 184) and argues that body language is like speech. Speech is gestural and institutional; so are body gestures in their conveyance of meaning. However, he also claims, problematically, that “The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my

intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his" (1962, 185). I argue that we can accept the former claim and reject the latter, because "It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'. The meaning of a gesture thus 'understood' is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 186), and when we take into account that "the structure of the world" which grants meaning to bodily gestures is discursively constituted, and that you and I inhabit more or less the same discursive universe, we can understand each others' gestures without there being a pure, natural body. Similarly, when two people inhabit different discursive universes, gestures will not be so easily understood, and awareness-fostering breakdowns in communication may occur. As evidence that this is what Merleau-Ponty means, consider his awareness of cultural differences: "The fact is that the behaviour associated with anger or love is not the same in a Japanese and an Occidental" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 189). He even talks about the example of Japanese smiles (despite earlier having declared the smile to have global meaning): "The angry Japanese smiles, the westerner goes red and stamps his foot or else goes pale and hisses his words" (1962, 189). Furthermore:

It is not enough for two conscious subjects to have the same organs and nervous system for the same emotions to produce in both the same signs. What is important is how they use their bodies, the simultaneous patterning of body and word in emotion. The psycho-physiological equipment leaves a great variety of possibilities open, and there is no more here than in the realm of instinct a human nature finally and immutably given. The use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity. It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table 'a table'. Feelings and passionate conduct are invented like words. Even those which, like paternity, seem to be part and parcel of the human make-up are in reality institutions. It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behavior which one chooses to call 'natural', followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 189).

The only sentence I take issue with is “the use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity” (which is problematic because it implies a mental world superimposed on and thus distinct from a pure, natural body), but I think we can accept the rest without this; in fact, I think the passage makes more sense without this sentence, especially because it ends my claiming that we *cannot* superimpose culture over ‘natural’, or biological, aspects of embodied, gestural meanings. Discussing Merleau-Ponty, Veronica Vasterling writes, “The linguistic world consists of standard ways of expression, standard meanings, which we acquire in the course of our lives. The intelligibility of expressive gestures is assured because language, for Merleau-Ponty, is never purely creative expression; it is also, at the same time, inscribed in established systems of expression, of vocabulary and syntax” (2003, 212). This position (and as I show above, there is textual support for it) seems to imply that intersubjectivity and communication come from shared *culture*, not shared, anonymous embodiment. Thus it is possible and consistent to read Merleau-Ponty as maintaining intersubjectivity and the ability to communicate and connect with others *without* relying on a universal, anonymous, generic, pre- or non-discursive body. Furthermore, this reading is consistent with Foucault’s claim that the body is imprinted by history; if it is shared culture rather than pure nature that grounds intersubjective communication, and subjectivity is still embedded in the body, then the Foucaultian idea that bodies are culturally shaped is consonant with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodied intersubjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception and communication about ‘reality’, and his understanding of what ‘reality’ is, support my claim that his philosophy need not succumb to the anonymous body problem and can work well with a Foucaultian emphasis on discursivity. Reality for Merleau-Ponty is not the same as intellectual truth. In trying to understand the

possibility of communication with others about truth and reality, neither rationalism nor empiricism can make sense of the way that you and I both perceive a/the world. If perception is equivalent to sensation then it is private and there are as many worlds as there are people, and solipsism rears its ugly head. If intellectualism is the case, then we should all perfectly coincide in our knowledge of the real/true. But that is not the case. Merleau-Ponty argues for a third perspective: there is only one world that we all perceive, but we all perceive from where we are standing. It is not the case that we each perceive our own numerically distinct world and then mediate them linguistically. If I am trying to point out something to a friend that he does not see,

There is—and I know it very well if I become impatient with him—a kind of demand that what I see be seen by him also. And at the same time this communication is required by the very thing which I am looking at, by the reflections of sunlight upon it, by its color, by its sensible evidence. The thing imposes itself not as true for every intellect, but as *real for every subject who is standing where I am* (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 17, emphasis added).

The notion that my reality is shared only by those who stand where I am can be read through a Foucaultian lens if we take “standing where I am” to be equivalent to *sharing my discursive history*. It is too simplistic to assume that Merleau-Ponty is talking only about physical location; if my friend and I stand in the same spot and he sees a bald eagle that I cannot see, it is real for him but not real for me in Merleau-Ponty’s sense because although we might share a physical location, I am *not* standing where he is precisely because I am standing in a different body. I *cannot* stand in the same place as my differently embodied, differently situated friend. A mundane bodily difference suffices to explain why my friend sees a bird I cannot see—his eyesight is simply better than mine—but if we take “standing where I am” to include social location and discursively constructed embodiment rather than sheer spatial location—and further, recognize that not everyone *can* stand where I stand—the problem of the anonymous body is greatly softened, even eliminated, in areas of much greater significance and cultural

variation than bird-spotting. And due to Merleau-Ponty's recognition of cultural differences, it is my claim that this broader sense of "standing where I am" is more accurate. On this reading, bodies with different discursive histories, bodies that history has differently imprinted (to invoke Foucault), will *not* be "standing where I am" and thus will not share my reality.

However, I also posit that we can reject notions of generic, anonymous embodiment without reverting to the solipsism that Merleau-Ponty was attempting to overcome with his concept of the anonymous body. Some take recognition of basic humanity as the problematic humanistic assumption that we are basically the same to the extent of the complete erasure of differences. But I can recognize you as human without ignoring our differences: I recognize that the small, furry, playful terrier and the toothy, snarling Rotweiler are both dogs, yet I must also recognize their differences if I want to avoid being bitten. Despite perceptive generality, individuality and difference remain, within a consistent, Merleau-Pontian account of embodied subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty writes,

the thinking Ego can never abolish its inherence in an individual subject, *which knows all things in a particular perspective*. Reflection can never make me stop seeing the sun two hundred yards away on a misty day, or seeing it 'rise' or 'set', or *thinking with the cultural apparatus with which my education, my previous efforts, my personal history, have provided me*. I never actually collect together, or call up simultaneously, all the primary thoughts which contribute to my perception or to my present conviction (1962, 61, emphases added).

The recognition of different personal histories and cultural apparatuses along with different bodies entails the recognition of difference, and *only with this recognition* can communication and understanding proceed. As critics such as Sullivan rightly point out, assumed sameness hampers understanding, but I have shown that Merleau-Ponty's work as a whole does not necessarily succumb to this flaw. I do concede that Merleau-Ponty himself did not adequately follow through on the implications of this, viz. that "the cultural apparatus with which

my...personal history have provided me” will be *vastly* different for people with different personal histories due to different embodiments, which is why I argue that Foucault’s work can help to mitigate what is under-emphasized or ignored in, yet still theoretically supportable by, Merleau-Ponty’s work.

I have shown that one can embrace Merleau-Ponty’s theories of embodied subjectivity and intersubjectivity without retaining the problematic aspects of the anonymous body. The next question: is this position consistent with Foucault’s views of the body and subjectivity? I argue that it is. To argue that the body is discursively constructed is not particularly controversial within Foucault scholarship; however, Judith Butler argues that despite Foucault’s explicit rejection of an extra-discursive body, he implicitly relies on that very concept (which is the inverse of my point about Merleau-Ponty: despite his explicit reliance on the anonymous body, he implicitly rejects it). If Butler is right (and if I am right about Merleau-Ponty), then paradoxically their philosophies are incompatible because Foucault relies upon the very extra-discursive body that Merleau-Ponty’s position renders null! However, I will show that Butler’s critique of Foucault is misguided and that Foucault does not presuppose any sort of anonymous or non-discursive body. Thus, Foucault and Merleau-Ponty can be read consistently on this issue.

Butler argues that despite his ostensible commitment to discursivity and the all-pervasiveness of power, Foucault inadvertently assumes a prediscursive body upon which power subsequently acts. She writes that to theorize the body as inscribed by power, as Foucault of course does, “invariably suggests that there is a body that is in some sense there, pregiven, existentially available to become the site of its own ostensible construction”, thereby positing an “existent body in its anonymous universality” (1989b, 601). In other words, Butler charges that



“Foucault implicitly relies on a prediscursive body, unmediated by culture, a natural body” (McLaren 103)—precisely the type of body I seek to eradicate from Merleau-Ponty. Similarly, Grosz argues that for Foucault bodies and pleasures seem to be the natural, extra-discursive ground on which everything else is inscribed: “‘Bodies and pleasures’ are the objects and targets of power; in a sense, Foucault seems to imply that they preexist power, that they are or may be the raw materials on which power works and the sites for possible resistance to the particular forms power takes” (155). The implication is that only if there is a body that exists prior to or untouched by culture can there be bodily resistance to oppressive aspects of culture. Butler argues that this uncultured body exists as an underlying assumption even in Foucault’s most explicitly constructivist work, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where he claims that sexuality can never escape or precede power relations. Even here, Butler posits, “If the body in its indefinite generality, however, proves to be a point of dynamic resistance to culture per se, then this body is not culturally constructed, but is, in fact, the inevitable limit and failure of cultural construction” (1989b, 602). In other words, according to Butler, Foucault’s famous statement that bodies and pleasures are the only possible sites of resistance to sexual subjectivation amounts to a three-part claim: 1) the forms of sexuality that have been constructed by power are in need of being resisted; 2) only something *outside* of the power networks that have constructed the sexuality we need to resist are capable of providing avenues of resistance; and 3) bodies and pleasures are the only areas which exist outside of power networks. In other words, despite his protestations to the contrary, Butler claims that Foucault is assuming that bodies and pleasures are natural, biological, ‘pure’.

I disagree with Butler. As she points out, this reading depends upon reading the claim, *the body is constructed by power*, as implying that the body itself is “ontologically distinct from

the process of construction it undergoes” (1989b, 601). But this is not what Foucault meant. Butler’s reading fails on point 2 above: resistance for Foucault does not require ‘escape’ or something that remains untouched by social inscription and power; as I showed in chapter two, resistance is only possible *within* discourse. Only a discursively constituted body *can* resist the oppressive aspects of its construction, because its discursive construction is that which grants it the power to act at all. Thus it is perfectly consistent to say that for Foucault, there is no bodily materiality prior to cultural signification. Foucault writes, “Hence I do not envisage a ‘history of mentalities’ that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value, but a ‘history of bodies’ and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested” (1978, 152). It is a matter of the limitations of language that he must write about power inscribing bodies, which (as Butler notes) grammatically does seem to imply an ontological separation between power and bodies; however, if we take him at his word when he says he is not just concerned with how the body is perceived or talked about, but with its *material formation*, it is evident that the grammatical construction of power inscribing bodies does not imply an ontological disjunct between matter and form. McLaren responds to Butler’s critique in a similar fashion, by pointing out the difference between linguistic/grammatical construction and the type of construction Foucault is concerned with. She points out that Butler is too focused on language and treats Foucault as talking about linguistic construction when in fact discourse means so much more, covering “a variety of material practices and social institutions” (McLaren 105). Discursive construction for Foucault does not mean literally molded out of words and significations but encompasses the concrete, material ways in which produces the bodies we are.

Another element of Butler's critique is the notion that bodies and pleasures can serve as sites of resistance only if they are extradiscursive; thus, if they turn out to be discursively constructed, they are no longer viable sources of resistance against normalization. I disagree. Bodies and pleasures are discursively constituted for Foucault but constituted does not mean incapable of resistance, as McWhorter points out. She argues that while pleasure is a discursive construct just like desire, it lacks much of the normative history and baggage that desire carries with it. Thus pleasure as a site of resistance is much less dangerous than desire, because less disciplined and less normalized (McWhorter 1997, 164). In other words, Foucault argues that the way desire has been constructed and normalized is fraught with danger, unfreedom, and oppression; however, experiences of pleasure, while no less discursively constituted, have historically *not* been utilized as domains of subjectivation in the ways that desire has. Therefore, pleasure offers an alternative to the subjectivation brought about by the deployment of sexuality via normalization of sex desire. As for the bodies in which pleasures inhere, McLaren claims that Butler is wrong that Foucault places the body outside of discourse because while he does acknowledge a 'natural' body, it "is not an ahistorical body; [Butler] fails to understand that Foucault's natural body is an historically emerging functional component of discourses of normalization" (McWhorter 1991, 251-252 n. 14). In other words, for Foucault the 'natural' body is but one of the historical, genealogical, fully discursive phases through which the body has developed. The body is constructed as natural. To say this is far from saying that the body is inherently, essentially, purely, extra-discursively, natural; just the opposite: our very assumption that the body is natural is itself a product of discursive construction.

To summarize: I have shown that Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment need not bring with it the baggage of anonymity that his feminist critics rightly disdain. To be embodied

as a human being does entail similarities with other embodied human beings, but such similarities are not 'pure' or 'natural' enough to allow for the kind of intersubjective access Merleau-Ponty falsely assumes in a way that is colonizing. Rather, intersubjective communication results from recognizing the discursive, historical, cultural, and embodied differences that entail different perceptions and experiences in people with different embodied histories and different social locations. Thus, I have shown that it is possible to extract from Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied subjectivity a fully discursive embodied subject that is capable of communication and intersubjectivity without falling prey to the ethical problems of assumed anonymity. Furthermore, since Foucault also has a theory of embodiment as fully discursive (despite Butler's critique), his theory of embodiment is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's on this point. The next issue to consider is whether or not this fully discursive body is capable of agency.

### **Resolving Problem #3: The Body and Agency**

A corollary of the anonymous body problem is the question of agency. Does agency require an element of naturalness, untouched by discourse, in the body upon which to draw as a source of resistance? If so, then if there is no anonymous body, how can there be agency? As I showed in chapter three, this is an issue feminists raise in critiquing Foucault and arguing in favor of Merleau-Ponty; feminists like Carol Bigwood hold that Merleau-Ponty's anonymous body is theoretically useful because it grounds agency and thus would disagree with my reading of Merleau-Ponty. Furthermore, can my reading of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the agentic body be reconciled with Foucault's theory of the body as a docile product of power? I will show that it can. While I argue that agency is not necessarily absent in nor antithetical to Foucault's

position, I still need to call on Merleau-Ponty to flesh out the concept of agency, in particular through his notion of the “I can.” In other words, Foucault’s position does not preclude agency, but it does not elaborate on it, either. I show that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of agency does not conflict with Foucault’s position, and helps to flesh out and elucidate what is only vaguely implicit in Foucault.

The issue at stake here are whether a body that is discursively constituted (as I have shown in the previous section can be found in both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault) is also agentic; or, put differently, whether Foucault’s body that is discursive through-and-through is compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s body that is explicitly experiential and agentic. I have addressed the issues of experience and whether or not there is anything extra-discursive to an experiencing/discursive body in the previous sections. Here, I focus on the question of agency. First, I show that Foucault’s philosophy does not preclude agency; second, I show that even though I reject Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the anonymous body as discussed above, this does not entail a rejection of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body as an experiencing, agentic subject; and third, I show how Foucault’s concept of discipline actually works well with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the habit-body and the “I can” for a theory of bodies as both discursive and agentic.

I argued in chapter two that Foucault does not reject or preclude agency, but more needs to be shown: I need to demonstrate that Foucault’s (at least implicit) position on agency is in fact consistent with his position on the body as a discursive construct with no extra-discursive, purely material excess, and further, that this position is compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of bodies as agents. I begin by recapping my claim from chapter two that Foucault’s concepts of discipline and power do not contradict, and (at least implicitly) rely on, a concept of agency. The question is: how can a body that is a product of external discursive forces agentially resist those

forces? This is only a problem if one succumbs to either/or thinking, as does, for example, Deveaux: she argues that either we treat bodies as subject to external power relations as in early Foucault, or we treat them as subjects with agency that have experiences of situations to which they can freely respond as in later Foucault (Deveaux 223-224). I posit that these two positions are not mutually exclusive. Early Foucault does not contradict or preclude late Foucault nor vice-versa; both areas of his work contribute to a fuller picture of what it is to be a subject with genealogies and histories that include both disciplinary power and techniques of the self. Each area simply focuses on a different aspect of those genealogies. Just because *Discipline and Punish* does not explicitly talk about the experiences of the disciplined does not mean they are not having experiences; nothing in the work denies that the disciplinary, normalizing control exerted on bodies was also experienced by an agentic subject. Being disciplined and being an experiencing, agentic subject are not mutually exclusive.

While one is hard pressed to find the word ‘agency’ in Foucault, he is clear that his work, from the early studies of power to the later work on care of the self, is deeply concerned with freedom. He writes, “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that *certain persons exercise power over others*. The term ‘power’ designates relationships between partners (and by that I am not thinking of a zero-sum game, but simply...of an ensemble of actions which induce others and follow from one another” (1982, 217, emphasis added). In reference to this quote, Crossley aptly notes that “Power, in this sense, is based in instituted human agency” (1994, 113). That is, contrary to Foucault’s critics discussed in chapter three, Foucault’s concept of power, far from erasing agency, fundamentally *depends upon* and *presupposes* agency, even if he does not use the word itself. What else can *persons exercising power* be? Yes, power is ubiquitous, but it is simultaneously the source of the

possibility of agency. As Alcoff puts it, Foucault “figures the process of subjectivation—of becoming a subject—as having an irremediably ambivalent political valence: it makes possible both agency and resistance to power as surely as it enfolds the individual into power’s embrace” (2006, 72). Thus power only operates insofar as it exists within a sphere of freedom.

Furthermore, in an interview shortly before his death, Foucault said,

My role—and that is too emphatic a word—is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people—that’s the role of an intellectual.... All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made (Martin 10-11).

Foucault says these things looking back on his work as a whole, indicating that even his work about how power works on bodies is work about freedom, about how power-constructed institutions and situations can change and *be changed by people*. In other words, Foucault’s own estimation of his life’s work is that it enables us to realize our freedom, to recognize that social institutions and power relations are never final, never indelible, always open to being acted upon. And further, he claims that change starts in the human mind: “to change something in the minds of people” is the way to alter and find freedom in the discursive situations in which we find ourselves. Such change would not be possible did Foucault not implicitly rely on a concept of agency in his work.

While he is clear that freedom is a necessary component of his work, Foucault does not spend much time dealing with exactly how agency works and where it is found, or explaining how persons who are constructed as docile bodies can also be sources of agency who exercise power. The problem, as McNay puts it, is that “Without elaborating on how resistance to the insidious workings of modern ‘biopower’ can be developed from the libidinal [read: extra-

discursive] forces of the body, the body is, in effect, deprived of any salience or oppositional force. The result of this annulment of the materiality of the body is that power [becomes conceptually meaningless] because it has nothing determinate against which it operates” (1991, 134). McNay’s point is that even if Foucault claims that his theory of power entails resistance, if he does not explain how resistance comes from a materiality that escapes discourse, he has not explained anything because he has not given us anything concrete or demonstrable that can resist power. “To have some critical force, the concept of power must have a counterfactual to show how a situation would change if an operation of power were canceled or resisted” (McNay 1991, 134). I agree that Foucault does not posit anything external to power that can resist it; however, unlike McNay, I do not think his philosophy necessarily fails because he does not explicitly call on non-discursive materiality as a source of agency. My contention is that Foucault presupposes/assumes the counterfactual McNay desires, the concrete locus of resistance, without elaborating on it, and that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “I can” is precisely the elaboration that is needed. Merleau-Ponty provides what is missing in Foucault for a fuller picture of how material bodies that are subject to discursive formation are also, at the same time, experiencing, agentic subjects. Before turning to Merleau-Ponty’s “I can,” though, I must address concerns that Foucault deterministically reduces bodies to discourse, for this is the root of McNay’s critique.

Rather than reducing bodies to discourse as some critics claim, Foucault conceptualizes materiality as always already discursively constituted, yet nonetheless potent and real. One example of how this is possible arises when Foucault inverts the relationship between sex (what we “are”) and sexuality (what we “have”) with his claim that the deployment of sexuality produced the category of sex (Butler 1996, 66). Butler explains that for Foucault,



As a regulatory regime, sexuality operates primarily by investing bodies with the category of sex, that is, making bodies into the bearers of a principle of identity. To claim that bodies are one sex or the other appears at first to be a purely descriptive claim. For Foucault, however, this claim is itself a legislation and a production of bodies, a discursive demand, as it were, that bodies become produced according to principles of heterosexualizing coherence and integrity, unproblematically as either female or male (1996, 66).

In other words, body parts would be meaningless without discursive constructs, without a system in place to tell us that genitalia are more significant indicators of identity than, say, earlobes. But this does not mean that the body parts are reduced to their discursive meaning; nor does it mean they exist in any way outside of them. Discursive construction does not entail the elision of the material, for those body parts that are taken up and defined as “sex” via the deployment of sexuality *are still material body parts*. “For Foucault, sex, whether male or female, operates as a principle of identity that imposes a fiction of coherence and unity on an otherwise random or unrelated set of biological functions, sensations, pleasures” *which inhere in material bodies* (Butler 1996, 67). The point is that for Foucault it is impossible and fruitless to separate out what is material from what is discursive; we simply have no access to the material outside of its discursive construction, but the material is still material. In Foucault’s own words,

far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another, as in the evolutionism of the first sociologists, but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective. Hence I do not envision a ‘history of mentalities’ that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a ‘history of bodies’ and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested” (1978, 152).

In other words, instead of denying or ignoring the importance of bodily materiality, it is precisely materiality in which Foucault’s work is invested. The emphasis on discourse and the claim that bodies are constructed discursively is simply an explanation of how our materiality comes to be what it is and mean what it means, *not* an erasure of that materiality.

But some argue that if materiality is fully discursive, then it lacks agentic capabilities because it is constructed by that which it ostensibly seeks to resist; thus, even resistance is constructed by the very structures to which it is supposedly providing an alternative. As McNay puts it, “However, what Foucault’s model suggests is that it is impossible to know the materiality of the body outside of its cultural significations. The psychic impulses and drives of the body may form the threshold of sexual identity, but these drives are not presocial. Rather, they are always already produced within the signifying network of gender” (1991, 131). But contrary to McNay’s claim, this view does not preclude agency; it simply redefines it as coming not from a pure, untouched realm of nature, but from the very ability to recognize discursive practices for the constructs they are. For example, freedom for Foucault in the area of sex is not from power-imbued sex to pure, natural sex, but freeing the body “from the regulatory fiction of heterosexuality” (McNay 1991, 131), e.g. from one contingent, changeable discursive construct, so that new options can be opened up, new discourses created and new material ways of being made possible. Those new possibilities open by and to the constructed, material bodies we are; it is the fact that our bodies are produced within “the regulatory fiction of heterosexuality”, e.g. are discursively constructed, that grants us the possibility of using those bodies to seek alternatives. In other words, discursively constructed materiality does not obliterate the possibility of agency; it simply recognizes that agency and change are not located in an unreachable, ideal realm of pure, untouched nature, for such a realm is inaccessible and hence useless. Rather, it is the constructed body that is capable of change, because it is capable of recognizing its discursive history and thereby altering its present and future.

Oksala also argues that Foucault does not reduce the body to discourse:

I will thus argue that the dominance of postmodern questions in feminist theory does not amount to discourse reductionism...but to genuine efforts to try to understand the

relationships between experience, body, discourse, and power. By seeking to understand the historical constitution of experience as well as its discursive limits, Foucault problematizes the philosophical relationship between discourse and experience (101).

Oksala argues (and I agree) that Foucault's concept of resistance requires/implies a concept of experience, namely, the body as a locus of experience. She writes, "If we conceive of the body as a passive object, it is possible to discipline it, but equally impossible to theorize about its resistance to normalizing power. The question of resistance arises if we take the experiential body—the body as experiencing in everyday practices of living—as the starting point" (109). The key here is that a discursively constructed body is still an *experiencing* body; were Foucault's body truly reduced to discourse, it would be a machine, incapable of pushing back against that which constructs it. But because Foucault's body exists simultaneously as an effect *and* locus of power, it is not a machine but a locus of experience capable of responding to its situation. As I showed in the first section of this chapter, a body can be both experiential and discursively constructed, and Oksala reminds us that experience is crucial to arguing for the possibility of agency. As an example of bodily experiences that can serve as a locus of agency, Oksala writes:

The sexual body is always discursive in the sense that it is an object of scientific discourses and disciplinary technologies. Nevertheless, the sexual body as experiential is capable of multiplying, distorting, and overflowing its discursive definitions, classifications, and coordinates. In Foucault's thought a constitutive outside to the discursive order thus exists, even though there can be no outside to the apparatus or cultural network of practices as a whole (112).

While I disagree with Oksala's terminology, I agree with her basic position. She uses the term "discursive" in a more strictly linguistic sense than do I; I consider discourse to encompass "the apparatus or cultural network of practices as a whole," to which she and I agree there is no outside in Foucault, *without robbing the body of its ability to experience and resist* (and the

sexual body, I would argue, is but one example of this).<sup>36</sup> In other words, an experiencing body is a body that has resources of resistance upon which to call in an agentic manner even if those resources themselves are part of discourse broadly construed. And since, as I have shown above, Foucault's discursive body does not conflict with Merleau-Ponty's experiencing body, the discursive body does have agentic capabilities.

As evidence that this is compatible with Foucault's view of the possibility of action, change, and resistance, consider his position on being/becoming gay in a post-homosexual culture (meaning a culture existing after the creation of the identities "homosexual" and "heterosexual"). Obviously, Foucault argues that sexuality and sexual identities have been constructed in ways that are harmful, oppressive, and limiting; how, then, does one resist these identities if one lives, inescapably, in a discursive world entirely inscribed with limiting categories of sexual identity? Foucault suggests that "we have to create a gay life. To *become*" (1989, 382). In other words, the body constructed and identified as homosexual cannot remove itself to a world where bodies are not categorized and normalized according to sexual orientation; its resistance must take place within the nexuses of power and discipline that have formed it. Thus, resistance is not rejecting homosexuality, but *creating it* via one's own way of living in the disciplined, constructed setting within which one finds oneself. Foucault writes that homosexuals must "affirm ourselves...as a creative force" (1989, 383). The implication is that it is possible, within Foucault's theoretical framework, to act in ways that are (necessarily) influenced by power, even its oppressive aspects, but are also creative, self-affirming, and moving in a direction different from that which confines and oppresses. In other words, it is possible, in Foucault's world, for constructed, disciplined bodies to act in ways that arise out of

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Flynn also reads Foucault as a philosopher of experience, who locates experience in the intersections among, or space formed by, power, knowledge, and subjectivity. See Flynn 1985.

the way in which they are constructed (e.g. homosexual bodies) yet in ways that are not necessarily co-opted by, or feeding back into, oppressive power structures (e.g. homosexual bodies acting as creating forces, creating gay lives). One way in which Foucault argues that the gay male community has done this is in the area of sadomasochism. He writes that gay men who engage in S/M “are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body” as “a creative enterprise” (Foucault 1989, 384). This bodily, material enterprise arose out of the at times oppressive power forces that created the identity ‘homosexual’, but arose as an enterprise that *increased* pleasures and possibilities rather than feeding into the limiting, constraining aspects of normalizing disciplinary power. And it increased pleasures and possibilities by exploring new bodily *experiences*. Thus Foucault’s disciplined body is still an experiencing body, a body capable of acting and creating even within a discursive universe.

To summarize: Foucault does not do away with materiality, does not reduce bodies to discourse, does not have a concept of bodies as purely and completely docile and subjected to the dictates of external power forces. He does have a concept of bodies as subject to power yet also as loci of power and as material entities. Material bodies can agentially resist oppressive and dominating power structures. Foucault just does not elaborate on how. This is where Merleau-Ponty comes in.

But have we gotten rid of the possibility of agency in Merleau-Ponty by rejecting the concept of the anonymous body? Have we landed ourselves precisely in the problem McNay finds in Foucault, that without something concrete against which power works (for McNay, a material, non-discursive body) there is no hope for agency or resistance? Feminists who draw on Merleau-Ponty often find his work beneficial precisely because of the anonymous body and its agentic, resistive potential (for example, Carol Bigwood). Thus if I reject the anonymous body

and still want to claim that Merleau-Ponty is good for feminism, I need to show that there is still agency to be found in his theory of embodiment. I contend that even if we reject the concept of the anonymous body, we can retain agency because of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the "I can", body image, and the possibility of changing bodily habits, which I discussed in chapter one.

When Merleau-Ponty talks about body image and perception as forms or *gestalts* (Weiss 1999, 11), he says that the body image "is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a norm; it is the identity of the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external" (1962, 61). I read in this something very similar to the notion that early and late Foucault are not in conflict but are talking about two different, mutually compatible aspects of subjectivity and embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's "external" could be equated to something like disciplinary forces applied to bodies, and his "internal" could be read as something like techniques of the self. The claim that the two are inseparable is the same as claiming that bodies/subjects are formed neither solely by discipline nor solely by techniques of the self, but by a combination of the two.<sup>37</sup> Also, noting that external and internal (or discipline/working on the self) are inseparable gets back to a fundamental rejection of dualism. If there is no dualism, one cannot oppose external forces to internal experiences, or perceptions of the outside world to internal representations, or even, and this is Merleau-Ponty's point, the perceiving self from the perceived world. Given the unity rather than duality of all these things, it makes sense to talk about power/discipline applied to bodies and experiences thereof/agentive responses thereto as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same genealogy of contemporary human subjects.

---

<sup>37</sup> I recognize that the very language of "external" and "internal" can be problematic in that it seems to indicate a dualistic ontological distinction. However, my point is that when Merleau-Ponty uses these terms, he is doing precisely the opposite: noting that the two are mutually co-constituting and thus ontologically inseparable.

With regard to locating agency in a discursively constructed body, my basic claim is that we are agentic because we experience ourselves ('internally') as agentic, in the Merleau-Pontian sense of experience, yet this does not take away from nor negate the Foucaultian notion that our bodies are molded by power ('external' forces).<sup>38</sup> When I say that we experience ourselves as agentic, I do not mean that we have agency simply because we think we do or feel like we do; rather, I am referring to the Merleau-Pontian concept of giving credence to lived experience as epistemically relevant. Agency is found in the lived experiences of being able to act on, impact, and the world and of the body's active potentialities and capabilities: experiencing what my body *can do* and the changes and effects its actions can have in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, our personally lived and experienced body image is a source of agency; our body image provides us with our sense of "I can", with the ability to know what we can do. Our body images "ground our own sense of agency and...establish our 'real' presence in the world as a material force to be reckoned with" (Weiss 1999, 36).

Furthermore, agency is bound up in change. To have agency is to be able to direct change in one's body image and body habits (which also impacts the world around one). The phantom limb example is evidence that one's body image is capable of change (Weiss 1999, 37): eventually the phantom limb disappears as the amputee gains a new body image and hence a new sense of "I can". The fact that such change is possible through therapy (for the amputee often requires therapy to adjust to her new body) is indicative of the notion that agency and discipline can work together. Therapy is a form of discipline which helps to direct the shifting body image of the amputee; at the same time, the amputee's own bodily experiences of coming to terms with her new shape and different physical possibilities grant her concrete, immediate evidence of her body's agentic abilities. The body image/sense of "I can" grants us agency; external forces (be

---

<sup>38</sup> I use scare quotes on 'internal' and 'external' to note my objection to their dualistic connotations.

they normalizing disciplinary power or something as concrete and specific as an amputation) can alter our body image/“I can” in a way that we do not have direct, agentic control over, but that alteration is not fatal, not final, not permanent because the fact that we still have a body image means that we still have agency and therefore can respond to and deal with the changes imposed on us from without. The key point is that none of this requires an anonymous body untouched by discourse. Even a body so dramatically altered from its ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ state as that of an amputee can adapt and respond to that change; certainly, so can a body that is more subtly affected by discursive regimes (e.g. a woman’s body disciplined to conform with normative standards of feminine appearance). It is the body’s culturally acquired habits, not some inaccessible fount of naturalness, that provide it with agency and the ability to change. Thus, it is perfectly consistent to maintain a concept of agency in Merleau-Ponty’s work while rejecting his concept of the anonymous body.

Butler argues for a concept of agency in Foucault’s theory of the body in a way that highlights its compatibility with Merleau-Ponty (although she does not frame it that way).

Concerning Foucault’s discussion of power occurring in nexuses, she writes,

The introduction of the ‘nexus,’ however, is not simply, or exclusively, a way of thinking about power. It is also a way of redefining the body. For the body is not a substance, a surface, an inert or inherently docile object; nor is it a set of internal drives that qualify it as the locus of rebellion and resistance. Understood as the nodal point, the nexus, this site of the application of power undergoes a redirection and, in this sense, is a certain kind of undergoing. So if the ‘nexus’ redefines power as that which is strategy, meaning activity and dispersion and transvaluation, so the ‘nexus’ redefines the body as that which is also a kind of undergoing, the condition for a redirection, active, tense, embattled (2004b, 186-187).

Referring to the body as something that is not an inert substance or object is a very Merleau-Pontian concept of the nature of the material body, even if Butler does not frame her argument in that way. Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on bodily knowing, e.g. of body as minded and undergoing



rather than an inert object at the behest of a disembodied mind, is the heart of his theory of embodiment. Inert substances do not perceive, know, or habituate; bodies do. Nor, in Foucaultian terms, do inert objects undergo redirection or act as sites of transformation; bodies do. Furthermore, Butler writes that for Foucault,

The body in subjection becomes the occasion and condition of its productivity, where the latter is not finally separable from the former. These are not two bodies—one subjected, another productive—for the body is also the movement, the passage, between subjection and productivity. And in this sense, it is the name given to the nexus of a transvaluation understood as an undergoing and also, perhaps ultimately for Foucault, a passion (2004b, 187).

In other words, for Foucault, the subjugation of the body *is* its production/productivity; it is in the process of subjectivation that the body gains powers to produce, create, and change. Subjection and production are inseparable. Or, put differently, the discipline applied to a body is its source of agency. My argument is that this claim reads well with Merleau-Ponty's concept of agency as located in the body image, something which is amenable to both agentic control and manipulation by external forces. One's body image can change via agentially chosen means (e.g. therapy, a self-directed exercise regimen, practicing to gain a skill, etc.) just as it changes inevitably in response to external factors (e.g. amputation, military training, or simply growing older). The key point is that Foucault's concept of the body as a nexus of power is compatible with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body image; the two simply focus on different yet inseparable and equally important levels of bodily formation and transformation.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the habit-body enhances and works well with Foucault's concept of the disciplined body. Thinking the two together paves the way for agentic resistance to oppression by allowing for the possibility of self-discipline and rehabitualization. Discipline as Foucault describes it in *Discipline and Punish*, as a constructor of docile bodies, is only half of the picture: disciplined bodies are bodies that have been shaped by normative forces

such that they become habituated in certain normative ways, but habits are not intractable—habits can change, and discipline can (to an extent) be self-directed. Like Foucault’s concept of discipline, Merleau-Pontian habituation is not mechanistic, and is temporally and culturally situated—those from different cultures will acquire different habits (Crossley 1994, 18).

Furthermore, just as discipline is inseparable from the material forms it produces, referring to habits as cultural does not mean that ‘culture’ is opposed to ‘nature’; there is no one ‘natural’ way body-habits would form in the absence of culture. Rather, bodily habits that I take to be ‘natural’ *are* natural to me because of my cultural setting. “Culture is the nature of human beings for Merleau-Ponty. There is no human nature if by this we mean cycles of behaviour that are given with our biological constitution but what is given, our nature, is the propensity to acquire, use and transform habitual or cultural ways of being-in-the-world” (Crossley 1994, 18).

In other words, habits shape, and are ontologically inseparable from, bodies in Merleau-Ponty just as discipline shapes, and is inseparable from, bodies in Foucault. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “The acquisition of habits [is] a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema” (1962, 142). This meshes well with Foucault’s notion of discipline and internalized surveillance: our corporeal schema/body image is produced by disciplines and networks of power that incorporate themselves into our very material, bodily being via the internalization of norms and discipline. What is produced is a habit-body, which may, in certain circumstances (if the internalized forms of discipline are oppressive and all-pervading), be a docile body. Merleau-Ponty’s habit body and Foucault’s disciplined/docile body are two ways of talking about the same thing. The habit-body is that seemingly natural stance that we just “fall into” as Weiss puts it (1999, 19) and discipline is the way the habit body forms. McLaren reads Foucault in a way that is consonant with Merleau-Ponty; she writes, “Discipline and disciplinary practices, as discussed by Foucault,

are exercises of power on the body in particular ways. In general, his descriptions of discipline and training rely on the body's internalization. Internalization occurs through repeated actions that result in habituation" (106). She is right: discipline results in habituation.

However, the habit-bodies and/or docile bodies we find ourselves as are not destiny, for "Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 143). Habits can change. With habituation, the body "acquires a form of understanding, a flexible and transferable skill or a competence which can be mobilised under different conditions to produce different effects" (Crossley 1994, 18). Yes, habits become sedimented and change is difficult (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 441-442), but if habits were entirely static, Merleau-Ponty's entire project would collapse. Habits are changeable, and Foucault is in agreement that disciplined bodies can and do change. I contend that the way habits can change is via self-directed discipline. Habits do not and will not ever change over night or by fiat or sheer force of will. No—discipline is required. And a key element of discipline that saves it from being deterministic is that it can be self-directed and self-applied. It need not always be the discipline of the external surveillant (as in *Discipline and Punish*). Thus if one takes on a self-chosen and self-directed discipline, engaging in techniques of the self, one changes one's habituation and thus one's very bodily being (ideally from a more oppressed state to a less oppressed state). Self-discipline leads to rehabituation, producing a new body image with new possibilities and capabilities.

One question remains to be answered. As I showed in chapter three, feminists such as Fraser and Hartsock fault Foucault for his apparent inability to ground normative critique and change; if everything is equally a product of discourse, there seems to be no way of differentiating good change from bad or determining if one's practices are resisting or

reinforcing oppressive power structures. I may have shown that embodied subjects are agentic and can undergo self-directed discipline and transformation, but what criteria can they use to judge how to use their agency? My position is that reading Foucault together with Merleau-Ponty provides an adequate justificatory groundwork for positive change. This is because Foucault does not (as I showed earlier in the chapter) jettison any concept the real, he simply alters how it is understood. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on experience grants us a framework to argue that women's experiences are relevant and important. Thus, women *really do* (in the modified sense of "real") have experiences of oppression, suffering, limitation, and restriction; and women *really can* experience positive, self-directed change. For example, it would be overreaching to argue that the claim "women have negative self-images due to media representations of women's bodies" is a universal truth or reality, but it is certainly descriptive of a contingent, situated reality that many women experience. This is a sufficient amount of "reality" to ground the claim that media representations of women's bodies have negative impacts on women's experiences, and to thus advocate for change and engage in disciplines that have positive effects on women's self-images. As Alcoff says, "I believe...that we can make many accurate claims about women, as women exist here and now in particular locations, and thus we can make demands that reflect women's needs" (2006, 152). These are precisely the types of claims that a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian framework allows us to make: localized, situated, historically contextualized, yet still strong and explanatorily powerful enough to ground claims that some disciplines/practices are better for women and others are worse. Moreover, if we can make accurate claims about women here and now, we can also make accurate claims about what needs to change about those experiences, given that we trust that women's experiences are valuable and informative. Thus the response to critiques that Foucault

cannot ground critique or positive transformation is to point out that a Foucaultian framework can examine how women have been discursively constructed and accept the *reality* of that construction to mean that there are real women with real problems; adding Merleau-Ponty allows us to emphasize that these women have real, important experiences of good and bad, helpful and harmful practices and institutions.

In summary, I have shown that agency is still to be found in both Foucault (despite critiques that he reduces bodies to discourse or theorizes only docile bodies) and Merleau-Ponty (despite ridding his work of the concept of the anonymous body). Furthermore, combining Merleau-Ponty's concepts of habituation and body image (or corporeal schema) with Foucault's concepts of discipline and techniques of the self gives us a theory of a disciplined/habit body that is *not* docile in the sense that Foucault's critics use the term, e.g. helpless, utterly subjected, without recourse—but is instead capable of change and transformation through self-directed re-habituation, or self-applied discipline. Merleau-Ponty and Foucault both recognize the danger inherent in overly sedimented habits or oppressive disciplines, but neither hold that these dangers are incontrovertible or inescapable because both allow for the possibility of, and Merleau-Ponty elaborates on, agency. Both Foucault's disciplined body and Merleau-Ponty's habit-body are agentic, experiencing bodies; together, they are able to justify working for positive change; and both are compatible in a feminist theory of embodied subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have resolved problems that arose in chapter three when feminists differ over fundamental areas of disagreement between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. As I have shown, it is possible to reconcile Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on key issues, and it is possible to cull key

bits of their philosophies while rejecting the problematic parts. All one needs to do is to recognize that philosophy is not an all-or-nothing game; that it is possible to entertain multiple origins and loci of subjectivities and identities and bodily beings. If one tempers one's reliance on the self-evidence of experience with an awareness of discursive histories, one avoids the problems of a naïve and simplistic belief in the 'real'. On the other hand, if one recognizes that there is an element of legitimacy in experience rather than taking the other extreme position that experience is a groundless epiphenomenon of discursive constructs, one avoids the problem of a complete and utter lack of connection to a fallibilistic 'real' that can ground normative justifications. The same goes for the relative discursivity and materiality of body-subjects. One cannot take Merleau-Ponty as the last word on embodied subjectivity for one then runs into the problems of the anonymous body and its erasures of differences; but nor can one take Foucault as the final word (not early-to-mid Foucault anyway) for then one runs the risk of treating bodies as sheer objects devoid of agency and subject to the whims of anonymous, directionless power networks, as docile. As I have shown, however, it is possible to read Merleau-Ponty without the anonymous body, and a consistent reading of Foucault shows that docile bodies are still experiencing, agentic, resisting bodies. Furthermore, I have shown that Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's positions on embodied subjectivity are compatible. Combining the two positions leads to a theory of body-subjects with similarities that do not gloss over differences and that are agentic and capable of change. As I will show in chapter five, such a basis (one that combines Merleau-Ponty and Foucault) is better for a feminist theory of embodiment than one which takes only one and rejects the other.

**CHAPTER FIVE: THE FEMINIST BENEFITS OF A COMBINED MERLEAU-  
PONTIAN/FOUCAULTIAN THEORY OF EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY: A CASE  
STUDY OF KARATE**

**Introduction**

In the final chapter of my dissertation I discuss why bringing Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together works specifically for a feminist theory of embodiment. I argue that how I understand and experience my self/body is best informed by both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and that such understanding grounds feminist ethics and politics in a more thorough and robust fashion than could be done using either Merleau-Ponty or Foucault alone. This chapter illustrates the benefits of a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian stance on embodiment by looking at examples that illustrate how bodies can be both disciplined and habitualized, fully discursive and lived, *and* involved in resistance to oppressive power structures on both individual and collective levels. Looking both at examples drawn from other feminists and at my own favorite body discipline, karate, I show that bodily disciplines and habit transformations are better theorized and better understood if we look at them as both phenomenological and discursive body-experiences, rather than overemphasizing either the constructedness or the livedness of an experience to the neglect of the other pole. I do this by following and expanding on the threads with which I ended chapter four: habit, transformation and agency, and discipline.

In this chapter I also address possibilities for intersubjectivity and collective political action, key feminist issues that have sparked debates over the adequacies and inadequacies of both phenomenology and poststructuralism as theoretical grounds for political struggle. Again, I argue that combining Merleau-Ponty and Foucault leads to a more viable position than either one alone, a position that allows for community, communication, and collective political action

without succumbing to the potential flaws of colonizing others and erasing differences rather than understanding others and accepting differences. I use karate (an individual discipline) as a bridge to understanding both myself and others as beings capable of agentic, intentional change, capable of working together to struggle and resist, and (perhaps most importantly) as *worthy* of engaging in such struggles.

I start this chapter with an overview of what a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian theory of embodied subjectivity looks like; I then examine other feminists' work on bodies, habits, and disciplines to show why my combined approach works better and addresses problems or weaknesses inherent in other approaches. Next, I turn to an analysis of karate as a body discipline that is useful for transforming habits and body images in liberatory ways. Finally, I look at the political implications of my theory of embodied subjectivity and discuss how the discipline of karate can be transformative not only on an individual level, but on a collective, political level as well.

### **Overview of a Combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian Feminist Theory of Embodiment**

In chapter four, I showed how, despite their ostensible differences, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault can be read together to form a feminist-friendly theory of embodied subjectivity. Here, I briefly recap what that theory looks like before specifying in detail exactly how and why it is preferable for feminism to a theory that excludes either Merleau-Ponty or Foucault.

A theory of embodied subjectivity that combines Merleau-Ponty and Foucault begins with the Foucaultian concept of genealogy, which entails investigating body-subjects historically and discursively. By genealogical/historical means, feminists can come to understand the ways in which our bodies and subjectivities have been constructed and formed by power networks,



knowledges, and other discursive practices to create women's bodies and women's subjectivities as generally more oppressed and less free than men's. Such an understanding allows us to realize that who and what we are is both *real* (in the sense that effects of power, knowledges, and discourses are real) and *changeable* (in that power, knowledges, and discourses are constantly shifting and transforming). Thus Foucault forces us to acknowledge that our bodily and subjective ways of being (for example, norms of feminine comportment and attitude that become internalized and ingrained to the extent that they appear natural) are constructed for us by forces initially external to us, that we are created by forces not concerned with our best interests or flourishing or freedom in mind. The quintessential Foucaultian docile body, from a feminist point of view, would be the woman who has fully internalized patriarchal norms of femininity such that her behavior and experiences are completely determined by social norms and expectations rather than by her own agentic choices or with her own pleasures and possibilities in mind. However, the docile body is not the end of the story for Foucault; rather, the very forces that produce docile bodies also provide means of resistance to domination, and the genealogical studies that uncover these forces demonstrate the contingency of the body-subjects that we are, granting us the knowledge that we can and will change. Furthermore, Foucault discusses change as occurring via techniques of the self or care of the self, which occurs when a body-subject takes up a discipline of her own accord and self-consciously, intentionally works on disciplining herself rather than simply allowing herself to succumb to external disciplinary forces. In this way, the formerly docile body can re-construct herself by re-disciplining her body in a way that will expand her own pleasures and possibilities rather than simply restricting them to conform to patriarchal norms and external expectations. Thus, in sum, the Foucaultian pole of a combined theory gives us the conceptual tools to understand the historical, social, discursive

reality of our present situation and the possibility of changing it to a more open, less restricted state.

However, more needs to be added to this theory for it to be a complete and robust feminist theory of embodiment. This is where Merleau-Ponty comes in. By adding Merleau-Ponty to our theory, we gain a more explicit focus on the lived experiences of the body-subject that undergoes discursive formation and (eventually) self-discipline. Merleau-Ponty teaches us that body-subjects are important and epistemically relevant loci of experience, and his work is more informative than Foucault's on the mechanisms by which change is possible. His understanding of body images and bodily habits provide a concrete ground for theorizing the possibility of change, for while habits are sedimented and very deeply ingrained, they are not writ in stone and thus are susceptible to positive transformation. Furthermore, and crucially, Merleau-Ponty expands on the concept of agency, which is implied but not elaborated on in Foucault. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject forms a promising basis for rethinking embodiment in a liberatory way, for the body-subject gets rid of the dualistic object-body without eviscerating subjectivity and agency, which are crucial concepts for liberatory transformation. For Merleau-Ponty, I am agentic and I have subjectivity not because I am essentially a mind, but because I *am*, fundamentally, an embodied being engaged within a world; it is precisely my embodiment and the conscious intentions of my material, physical body reaching into the world of meaning in which I find myself that permits me to engage in and carry out agentic projects. In other words, while Foucault's discussion of techniques of the self implies that self-directed, intentional change is possible, he does not elaborate on the specific mechanisms of intention or self-direction; Merleau-Ponty does. My body is my "I can", my intentionality, my agency.

Furthermore, by working to form and transform my body habits and body image, I transform my subjectivity. Because for Merleau-Pontian agency and intentionality are bodily and temporally sedimented, there is no need for some sort of spontaneity, some wellspring of nature untouched by culture, for agency to work. We do not need an unstructured, un sedimented bodily excess to ground agency, because it is precisely the sedimentation of habits that allow the body to work in an intentional, agentic way, and thus change happens from *within* who and what we have already been constructed/habitualized to be, not from some source of selfhood separate from and operating control over the constructed body. In other words, agency for Merleau-Ponty is possible only because bodies learn habits; a pure, discursively untouched body would be empty of agency or intention because it would have no sedimented habits. Thus agency for Merleau-Ponty involves the slow but effective work of reshaping body images and body habits from within an already discursively formed body. This meshes quite well with Foucault's notion of resistance working from within already established power networks because there is no such thing as an arena of life or experience external to power networks.

Thus Merleau-Ponty and Foucault each bring key insights to a theory of embodied subjectivity, and their insights work well together to flesh out a fully formed theory that accounts both for the discursive construction of embodied subjects and their potential for positive change. Turning to how women can work to change oppressed, docile bodies to less limited, more flourishing body-subjects, I argue that a key to combining Merleau-Ponty and Foucault theoretically is bringing together their respective notions of habit and discipline, both to understand our body-selves as we find ourselves, and as potent agents for change and transformation. First, the habit-body that Merleau-Ponty elucidates can be combined with Foucault's notion of the docile body. In his discussion of docile bodies, Foucault shows us how

bodies are constructed by power in ways that are often oppressive; yet docile bodies are not inert bodies. Docile bodies are effective, powerful, agential, active; but the direction of their power, insofar as they are docile, is almost totally in line with normalizing forces. They are subject to power, power operates through them, and they exert power (both on themselves and on situations or other people)—but the way they exert power has been funneled by the disciplinary forces. Thus the docile body can be thought of as the body we are before we start our project of resistance, the habit-body that we naturally fall into and that has been constructed discursively; the body whose fund of knowledges, meanings, “I cans”, and possibilities is delimited by the sedimented habits we have developed thus far.

Next, taking up Merleau-Ponty’s concept of shifting and transforming body images and habits and combining it with Foucault’s notion of techniques of the self, we can change our docile/sedimented habit-bodies from a bodies whose skills and abilities are in line with a dominant (and often oppressive) power network to bodies that are freer and more open, more self-directed. The concept of self-discipline comes out in Foucault’s later work on care of the self, and I showed in chapter four that looking at care of the self in phenomenological terms strengthens the argument that the body-subject can, to an extent, work on its own habituation in resistive ways. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of habit helps to flesh out something that is underdeveloped by Foucault, for he talks about care of the self but does not specify how this happens. It is my contention that one way in which this happens is via self-habitation, or re-habitation, or the ability of bodily habits—and thus consciousness and subjectivity—to respond to self-directed change. Thus not only is Foucault’s work on disciplinary power not contradictory to Merleau-Ponty’s work on the habit-body/subject-body, Foucault on discipline and care of the self combined with Merleau-Ponty on the body as subject and as habituated can

ground resistance in a way that is stronger and more complete than what can be found in either Merleau-Ponty or Foucault alone. To show how this combined theory is specifically beneficial for feminists, I will argue via examples throughout the rest of the chapter that Foucault's cryptic reference to bodies and pleasures as a source of resistance can be developed with a (situated) phenomenological, lived-experience slant, with the help of Merleau-Ponty's insights about the habit-body and the subject-body, in such a way that allows for positive transformation of oppressed (docile) body-subjects into freer body-subjects.

### **Why a Combined Theory is Better: Examples from Other Feminists**

As I showed in previous chapters, a purely Merleau-Pontian account of embodied subjectivity, such as that of Carol Bigwood, is insufficient because of its lack of nuance with regard to historical, social, and discursive constructions that shape bodily being. On the other hand, a purely Foucaultian approach, such as Judith Butler's, is insufficiently material and fails to account adequately for agency, intentionality, and lived experience. Thus, a theory that combines the two is better for fully and robustly elucidating and theorizing body-subjects and their transformative abilities. In this section I show why this combined theory is superior using examples of body disciplines and habits that other feminists have used to put forth either a Merleau-Pontian or a Foucaultian theory of embodiment. Specifically, I will show that Iris Marion Young's work on throwing like a girl would be improved with the addition of a Foucaultian perspective, and that Honi Fern Haber's and Ladelle McWhorter's Foucaultian analyses of various body disciplines (bodybuilding and line dancing) could benefit from an injection of Merleau-Ponty.

Iris Marion Young's thesis in her essay *Throwing Like a Girl* is that physical, bodily differences between men and women are not sheer natural phenomena but are the product of Merleau-Pontian habits, and that these embodied differences result in different relationships to subjectivity for men and women. Women experience themselves as subjects, just like men, yet their situation as women prohibits them from fully occupying the subject position; thus, they experience a constant tension and contradiction between their experienced subjectivity and the object status their situation imposes on them (Young 144). Young applies Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodied subjectivity specifically to women in order to better understand constructed, situated 'feminine' embodiment, writing that

at the most basic descriptive level, Merleau-Ponty's account of the relation of the lived body to its world, as developed in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, applies to any human existence in a general way. At a more specific level, however, there is a particular style of bodily comportment which is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular *modalities* of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world (144).

In other words, a different fund of ways of moving bodies in spaces has developed for and around women's bodies than men's, and these different ways of moving appear so natural and unremarkable that the phrase "throwing like a girl" is immediately comprehensible. Young focuses on movements like throwing because they are purposive: she agrees with Merleau-Ponty that "it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world" and applies this towards feminist philosophy by arguing that a "focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence" (143). Thus basing feminist analysis on Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied subjectivity—or, put differently, using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to understand women specifically rather than humanity generally—provides a

way to highlight and render comprehensible women's experiences not as a product of nature or biology but of habits inscribing cultural memes directly on and into bodies.

For example, women are traditionally considered the "weaker sex". Because this meme is inscribed on bodies, Young explains, "Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force" (Young 145). Even if women are, in fact, capable of such actions, they do not experience themselves as capable and thus do not make full use of their bodily resources. The standard cultural meme that women are the weaker sex results, according to Young, in different ways of throwing, swinging, running, climbing, and a whole host of other purposive bodily movements for girls and women, all of which "have in common first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather...the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second that the woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention" (Young 146). In other words, female body-subjects tend to inhabit their bodies much less fully than male body-subjects, to constrict and restrain themselves, and not to allow themselves full range of motion or use of space around their bodies. Of course, following Merleau-Ponty, Young emphasizes that these ways of being are habits, not products of pure natural femininity; but they are deeply sedimented habits that are experienced as very much real and embodied—ingrained in women's very flesh. Significantly, this reality is different for women than for men. Merleau-Ponty, as I showed in chapter one, discusses bodies and consciousness in terms of "I can"; it is the body that presents the subject inherent in it with its possibilities and abilities to pursue goals and intentions. Young points out, though, that women "often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the media for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our

bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies” (146-147). Thus Merleau-Ponty’s account of bodies as intentional may well apply to those situated as he is (male, among other things), but for women, “bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches towards a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot’” (Young 148). This is an important point, and a good way of understanding general structures of feminine embodiment<sup>39</sup> that is grounded in Merleau-Ponty but overcomes his androcentrism: women experience “I cans” differently than do men, and frequently, as Young points out, as a generic possibility such that *someone* can, but “‘I cannot’” (Young 149).

While Young’s analysis is enlightening and cogent, it is missing key components that Foucault could bring to the table. To show this, I will briefly use Young’s framework to look at an example from my own life that is similar to the “throwing like a girl” example and show how I need to draw on Foucault to fully analyze the meaning of such phenomena. An intentional, purposive action in which I frequently engage is getting a bottle of wine open. However, I achieve this purpose not by removing the cork myself, but by getting my (male) partner to open the bottle, for, in Young’s terminology, I experience the project as possible in general, but as an “I cannot”. I find myself habitually, without thinking, handing the wine bottle to my partner to open, because before I even try, I assume I do not have the strength to remove the cork; as Young says, women “decide beforehand—usually mistakenly—that the task is beyond us” (147). When I actually do attempt to uncork the bottle of wine, I find I am perfectly capable of doing so; but my embodied subjectivity is habituated *not* to project and follow through on the intention to uncork the bottle, and thus my body has developed a sedimented habit of not even trying.

---

<sup>39</sup> Young emphasizes, and I concur, that she is not making a general claim about *all* feminine embodiment, but a very specific, localized claim about general structures that arise for women situated in modern, Western industrialized nations (Young 143).



This experience exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's concept of sedimented habituation as a body-subject's reality: my subjective experience of myself as physically too weak to do everyday tasks such as opening a bottle of wine is an *embodied* experience, a bodily contribution to my subjectivity.

The key aspect that is missing, though, and that Foucault provides, is the discursive context in which this bodily subjectivity developed its sedimented habits. My body has lived in a cultural, historical situation such that it embodies a habit of not even trying to do a task that requires strength as a direct result of the cultural and social situation in which I find myself—the discursive universe in which my embodied subjectivity must signify in order to have meaningful experiences and develop habits in the first place. My experience would not make sense without both aspects: a body that habitually hands the bottle to someone else without even trying, and a discursive history that tells me I as a woman do not have access to the full range of bodily movements and possibilities open to men. Thus while Young's analysis of women's embodiment is excellent, she provides only part of the picture. Young writes from the here and now: she analyzes women's embodied habits as they have already come to be formed, and spends little to no time examining how they got that way or how they can change. She explicitly situates her work in the present, repeating several times throughout the essay that she is writing about *contemporary* women, reaching in history only back as far as contemporary women's childhoods to explain how feminine habits develop differently from masculine ones; thus, while I am sure this was not her intention, she gives the impression of ahistoricity. To be transformative and liberatory, a theory of embodied subjectivity must explicitly bring to light the historical/discursive constructs that shape present ways of being; for only then can we understand viscerally that oppressed ways of bodily being are contingent and changeable. Thus

a Foucaultian genealogy exploring how and why women come to experience bodies as encumbrances rather than possibilities would add a valuable and necessary component to Young's work.

Furthermore, while Young is attempting, like Beauvoir, to separate biology from destiny in locating feminine comportment in sedimented, learned bodily habits rather than in innate biology or anatomy, her discussion does not lend itself to change. If women's bodies experience themselves as "I cannots", or at the very least, conflicted and hesitant "I cans", and if this is a result of habits so deeply ingrained that they are experienced as normal and natural, are women doomed to forever live as half-subjects, as subjects struggling with body-encumbrances rather than living through body-abilities?<sup>40</sup> Young hints briefly at a possible mechanism for change, writing, "There is no inherent, mysterious connection between these sorts of typical comportments and being a female person. Many of them result...from *lack of practice* in using the body and performing tasks" (147, emphasis added). It is that precisely that notion of *practice* that Foucault provides. Bodies get to be the way they are because they have practiced doing so, and they can change by changing their practices. So to overcome the contested and often frustrating relationship to bodies that women have, we just have to practice using our bodies fully, specifically via techniques of the self. Foucault's claim that bodies and pleasures can ground resistance is a good next step; after looking at discursive history to explain how we arrived where we are and then looking at the present phenomenologically as Young does to elucidate exactly with what problems we are dealing, we then follow Foucault to resistance and change by focusing on bodies, pleasures, and techniques of the self.

---

<sup>40</sup> I recognize that this critique is, to an extent, unfair; Young's essay does not claim to be about change or overcoming and sets out only to elucidate contemporary women's present experiences of embodiment. My intent, then, is not so much to fault Young for not being all-inclusive, but to point out that her work, while beneficial, is insufficient for a complete and comprehensive theory of the sort I seek to construct.

Honi Fern Haber examines one such technique in her Foucaultian approach to a feminist theory of embodiment. She starts her analysis with an observation straight out of Young (she, in fact, cites Young): “Men are trained to open their bodies up to the world; encouraged to rush out to meet it, they learn to view their bodies as extensions of *their* world. Women, on the other hand, are taught to shrink away from the world; their bodies, both in mass and motion, are trained to take up as little space as possible” (Haber 138-139). This seems promising, then, as an essay to start to fill in the pieces I identify as missing in Young, and Haber continues:

“Something as mundane as the fact that men sit with their legs spread wide apart, while a woman is trained to cross her legs and sit tucked into herself, can, with the aid of Foucauldian analysis, be read as shaping the meaning of male and female subjectivities” (Haber 139). Haber picks up where Young left off, looking to ways to challenge and redefine women’s troubled embodied subjectivities, reshaping them in liberatory ways by applying Foucaultian discipline to the body. She also analyses the discursive history Young omits, elaborating on how discourses and power shape and constitute women as objects for the male gaze inevitably and ubiquitously throughout almost every element of culture from pop culture to medicine to language, even to women’s own complicity in and exercise of the power that shapes them (Haber 140-141). Haber reaches back in history to show how these discourses have developed and solidified, tracing a direct connection from, e.g., a passage from Burke describing women’s necks and breasts to modern-day cosmetic surgery (Haber 141).

Women’s bodies have been constructed, historically and discursively, to be aesthetically pleasing to men, Haber claims. Thus to resist oppression and to take hold of their own subjectivities, women must challenge patriarchal aesthetics; women must create a new bodily

aesthetic. Haber suggests doing this by body-building. Creating muscle on a woman's frame challenges the traditional notion of femininity as weak, soft, and passive; and

in confusing accepted gender dichotomies, the body of the muscled woman problematizes seeing in a way that calls attention to the cultural presuppositions oppressing both men and women on an unconscious or ideological level. The muscled woman makes visible the artificiality of the norms of masculinity and femininity, and the artificiality of the distinction that one is *either* male *or* female (Haber 142).

In other words, Haber's suggestion for resistance is to challenge seeing by developing visually shocking bodies. If women have been constructed as objects for male viewing pleasure, and that construction affects us at a bodily level, then one possible path out of that subordinate position is to forcibly change the way we are seen by changing our visible bodies in a way that challenges norms and expectations. Thus, Haber is "looking for alternatives that are inscribed on the surface of the body, because it is the everyday male readings of the visible body...that have played a large part in restricting [women's] possibilities to those that serve...patriarchal power" (Haber 142).

Haber's admittedly strong Foucaultian analysis of body issues could be rendered even stronger with the addition of some insights from Merleau-Ponty. Her Foucaultian discussion of bodybuilding might initially read as positive and feminist-friendly, but it has potential problems that need to be addressed. One problem that Bordo identifies is that bodybuilding positions mind and body in opposition, much like another form of embodiment that Bordo studies, anorexia: "The bodybuilder, like the anorectic, [Bordo] argues, finds the one available arena of control open to her, namely her own bodily conformation, this time expanding instead of wasting flesh, sculpting and developing her body in accordance with her own will and self-determined image" (Howe 98). In other words, Bordo frames body building as but another part of the same cultural problem that produces anorexia: pitting mind/self against body and viewing body as the fleshy,

inferior Other to be tamed, controlled, bent to one's will. Bodybuilding, then, reifies rather than challenges the hierarchization of mind over body which has traditionally contributed to the exclusion of women (Bordo 1996, 399). On Bordo's reading, bodybuilding challenges women not to experience themselves as unified, embodied wholes, but to try to exercise mentalistic control over their bodies to shape and mold those bodies into new forms of visibility. The way to overcome this problem is to employ a Merleau-Pontian perspective to emphasize the woman's *experience* of her bodily strength and abilities while weight-lifting or engaging in other forms of bodily discipline.<sup>41</sup> If Haber's analysis included how women experience themselves and their bodies as bodybuilders, then rather than simply focusing on women's visibility to others or on the need to mentally control one's bodily appearance, it would be much stronger. Experiencing oneself as strong and capable is certainly transformative and liberatory on an individual level, even if one is still subject to the male gaze.

Another problem with Haber's analysis of bodybuilding is its potential for co-optation. Where the ideal of feminine appearance may once have been willowy, slender, and more akin to a pre-pubescent boy than a fully developed woman, if enough women start bodybuilding, the cultural aesthetic may well start to shift to require women to be muscular to be sexy. Bodybuilding would then turn into another instrument of patriarchal culture, another discipline shaping women's bodies to conform to norms for male gazing pleasure rather than an element of experienced, lived, embodied pleasure for women. Haber is aware of this problem; in fact, she discusses how body-building has already been co-opted such that women body builders are praised not for their muscles, but for the fact that despite being muscled, they retain their 'femininity'; she describes and analyzes the ever-prevalent eroticized images and descriptions of

---

<sup>41</sup> Karate is better, as I will argue later; karate is not about controlling and dominating the body or pitting body against mind, but about experiencing oneself as/in harmony with one's body.

women bodybuilders she encounters as exemplifications of this problem (Haber 149-150). Thus, the muscled woman is already no longer shocking and disruptive but is yet another manifestation and reification of women's subordination to the male gaze. Haber's inadequate response to this problem is that perhaps it only applies to *professional* bodybuilders and somehow everyday women can still engage in bodybuilding without succumbing to this co-optation (151). But this is an ineffective dodge. Professional bodybuilding women are the ones whose pictures, posed for maximum sexual appeal, adorn magazine covers; they are the ones described in public images and discourses as sexy and feminine despite, or increasingly because of, their musculature. This discourse is creating the co-optation of bodybuilding, and given that there is no location external to discourse, I fail to see how any given individual woman can somehow step outside of the discursive realm in which women bodybuilders now signify as erotically feminine rather than as shocking visual challenges to restrictive gender norms.

Again, looking at bodily experience from a Merleau-Pontian perspective removes this problem. Merleau-Ponty is not concerned about achieving a certain body aesthetic (and Haber explicitly focuses on aesthetics) but on elucidating the lived experience of the inherent oneness of body and mind.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Haber explicitly rejects an approach that focuses on one's experience of one's body in favor of aesthetics. She chooses bodybuilding specifically because of its power to shock aesthetically, writing, "The body of a woman runner or tennis player, for example, may in fact be strong, and may make her feel empowered, but such internal feelings do not problematize seeing" (Haber 143). I disagree with Haber's approach. Focusing on women's embodied experiences is more important than problematizing seeing, for a challenged way of seeing may soon be co-opted and transformed into a new restrictive norm, while a woman's experience of her body as strong, capable, and pleasurable is not so easily co-opted into

---

<sup>42</sup> As I will show later, karate is well suited to such an experience because it is not done for aesthetic purposes.

something that can be used against her. Thus while a Foucaultian understanding of genealogy and of the construction of women's bodies is crucial, and while a Foucaultian emphasis on discipline for positive change is also crucial, and Haber provides both, her theory is incomplete in its rejection of experience, of pleasure, of what it feels like from the *inside* to engage in bodily disciplines. Of course, aesthetics versus lived experience is not an either/or proposition.

Foucault is concerned with aesthetics, with self-creation as an artistic endeavor; there is nothing inherently problematic with such a stance. But aesthetics alone it is not sufficient. Feminists need to focus on the notion of experiencing bodies as strong and capable as well, and such a focus is precisely what Merleau-Ponty's theory provides.

Another problem Haber raises is that of the origin of resistance: "if we agree with Foucault that power is not just repressive but also constitutive, and responsible for the very formation of bodies and individuals along with their desires, discourses, and *pleasures*, then it becomes very difficult to imagine where a chosen, and phenomenologically empowering, self-conscious resistance would come from, or why it would occur" (Haber 148, emphasis added). I agree with Haber that Foucault's theory of power indicates that bodies, desires, and pleasures are all discursively constructed; I disagree, however, that such a claim renders resistance unattainable. Taking my cue from Ladelle McWhorter, I argue that while pleasures are certainly within the discursive universe, they are still a viable source of resistance because they are experienced by subjects who, while constructed, are (as I argued in chapter four) nonetheless real and viable. Just because I am a discursively constructed body-subject does not mean that my experience of pleasure is invalid or unimportant or somehow less real than a purely "natural" pleasure (whatever that might mean) would be. McWhorter's book *Bodies and Pleasures* provides support for my claim that bodies and pleasures need not be non-discursive to serve as

sites of political resistance. To elaborate on one example of pleasure as a source of resistance, McWhorter discusses learning to line dance in terms of becoming self-disciplined, and argues that such discipline enables her to resist, in a Foucault-inspired way, the cultural standards that label some bodies normal and others (her own lesbian body) deviant. The disciplined movements she must learn in order to dance properly allow her to joyfully experience bodily pleasure on her own terms, as it is a self-imposed discipline, and for McWhorter the joy of disciplining *herself* rather than succumbing to the discipline of normative power is resistive (McWhorter 172). As I showed in chapter two, a discipline that increases one's bodily capabilities while decreasing docility, as line dancing does for McWhorter, is resistive in that it opens up new possibilities of bodily being. McWhorter's line dancing example encompasses both self-discipline and the notion of joyful bodily experience, but her analysis is still missing something that Merleau-Ponty can provide: an emphasis on the deeply-felt *I can* that comes with such self-discipline or self-habitation, and the corresponding alteration of one's own bodily-subjectivity. Thus McWhorter's analysis of line dancing is excellent as an explanation of what Foucault means by bodies and pleasures as a source of resistance, but a fuller picture of resistance still needs to include Merleau-Ponty's understanding of habits and the "I can".

Using bodies and pleasures as sites of resistance is congruent with Merleau-Pontian phenomenological insights about lived, experiential embodiment; thus pleasure—or more specifically, bodies and pleasures—is a useful point of intersection between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty. Foucault famously claims that bodies and pleasures are loci of resistance, and has equally famously been criticized for not showing how they can be so due to the claim that they are constructed by power in such a way that one could not differentiate a resistive pleasure from a pernicious one. But the lived experience of pleasure, I argue, is where resistance can start



in a fully discursively constructed universe. McWhorter notes that “Most philosophers have ignored Foucault’s comments on pleasure, perhaps because most of us just aren’t used to thinking of pleasure as anything but an outcome, as an effect that has very little effect of its own” (1999, 177). To overcome this oversight, one need merely note that the effects of pleasure are bodily and experiential. If the effect, for example, of a pleasurable night of line dancing is increased confidence in one’s bodily capabilities, then a further effect of such pleasure over time will be a shift in body image from a less confident to a more confident embodied subject. Pleasure as the aim of a self-chosen discipline, then, can have the resistive effect of healthy, fruitful transformations in one’s body image and thus in one’s subjectivity. McWhorter’s insight about pleasure as a viable form of resistance serves as a jumping off point for my own example of a bodily discipline that I understand by combining Foucault and Merleau-Ponty: karate.

### **Why a Combined Theory is Better: A Case Study of Karate**

#### 1. Bodies, Pleasures, Habits, and Karate

I have been practicing Shorin-Ryu karate, an Okinawan style, for several years. I initially took it up because I was looking for a form of physical activity that I would not loathe (I generally hate exercise), and on the recommendation of friends, I decided to give karate a try. As it turned out, I loved it; it is a body discipline and form of exercise that I find pleasurable (at times, certainly, it is very painful, but I experience it as a ‘good’ pain!). I continue to practice now not only because karate is a form of exercise that I can stick with, but because it works for me as a self-chosen discipline that I use to gradually but effectively shift my body-image and body habits in a healthier, freer direction. I pursue karate not to learn ways in which I could potentially kill or maim an attacker or to excel at tournaments, but because of its positive effect

on my embodied subjectivity. As martial artist Carol Wiley explains, “The value of the martial arts is not in the perfectly executed front kick or hip throw; the value is in how people use the training to develop themselves” (Wiley 1). That is why I do karate: to develop myself. Not (just) my body—*myself*. And it brings me great pleasure. Karate is a discipline that develops my use of bodies (or at least, my body) and pleasures resistively to positively transform my embodied being, my body image and “I cans”, in the direction of freedom-to (expanded “I cans”) and away from domination and oppression. Thus I agree with Wiley that “the value of martial arts training is the empowerment of the self” (1). Karate grants me the ability to experience the reality of bodies and pleasures as loci of resistance; it grants me experiential access to the value of both Foucault’s and Merleau-Ponty’s understandings of embodiment and change.

Since I am invested in the historical, social, and other discursive impacts of various disciplines, I need to address the history and social implications of karate as a discipline. Just as McWhorter must face and deal with the racism inherent in line dancing by discussing the racist implications of engaging in a traditionally “redneck” enterprise (1999, 172-174), I must address the less savory elements of karate as manifested throughout its history and current practice. Karate has an undeniably masculinist history, which carries over into how it is represented today. A brief perusal of webpages devoted to Shorin-Ryu karate, the style I study, reveals heavy masculine bias; for example, the sites reference karate students as “karatemen” (<http://www.shorinryu.com/hanariv.htm>), as though the possibility of a female *karateka* (karate student) were unthinkable, and the pictures on a Shorin-Ryu homepage (<http://www.shorinryu.com/>) depict only men. Histories of karate are replete with tales of feats of strength, courage, and overcoming by *karatemen* (see, e.g., Urban, Nagamine), and the only story involving a woman that I have come across is a story my sensei tells about how a (male)

*karateka* defeated his wife (also a *karateka*) in a sparring match only when he stopped thinking of her as a woman and started thinking of her just as an opponent. Karate's very terminology is male-centered: "In Karate the system is divided into two basic categories: the lower level is called 'kyu,' implying the idea of 'boy,' and the upper level is called 'dan,' implying the idea of 'man'" (Urban 37). Furthermore, karate is highly hierarchical and authoritarian; in fact, "A traditional dojo [karate school] is, in a sense, a patriarchy" where the sensei (almost always male) rules supreme (Urban14). Karate is tradition-bound, interested not so much in change as preservation. Part of the mission statement of a Shorin-Ryu school is: "To preserve and protect the history, traditions, methods and integrity of SRKUSA" (<http://www.shorinryu.com/mission.htm>). Is there room in such a system for a feminist looking to challenge masculinist and hierarchical systems?

I argue that there is: as Foucault says, resistance always comes from within power structures. And, as McWhorter points out, avoiding or ignoring a discipline because of its problematic past will in no way overcome that past; it will only serve to perpetuate it by not challenging it (1999, 174). So I challenge the masculinist, authoritarian, hierarchical system of karate by practicing as a woman and a feminist interested in transformation rather than stagnation. Furthermore, despite the historical fact that karate masters are and have been predominantly male, karate is certainly not restricted to male participants, as even traditional male practitioners recognize: "The way of karate can be followed by anyone—man, woman, or child" (Nagamine 271). Not insignificantly, the head of my system, an elderly Japanese gentleman well steeped in karate tradition, has made a series of demonstration DVDs in which he demonstrates *kata* with a female student of his demonstrating the attackers' roles. This indicates that while karate may be historically male-dominated, it fundamentally does not distinguish

between or hierarchize men and women. Female *karateka* are given no special dispensation and are treated and trained no differently from their male counterparts. Unlike Western sports that have different teams for men and women, in karate class, male and female students study and spar together.

Furthermore, as an Okinawan school, there is an aspect of the history of Shorin-Ryu that I find appealing: namely, that it has its roots in Okinawan resistance to Japanese occupation. The Japanese outlawed weapons on the island of Okinawa, so Okinawan peasants started to develop karate (the word means “open hand”) as a system of weaponless fighting to resist their occupiers. This is precisely the kind of resistance I think Foucault would find appealing: grasping what means of power one is able to exercise and focusing and redirecting them within the system in which one finds oneself to transformative, liberatory effect.

In terms of problematic histories, there is one aspect in which karate as a physical discipline stacks up well in a Western context comparative to other sports. In the early days of physical education for girls in the US, physical education teachers struggled with the implications of looking at sex differences as biologically grounded or as constructed—neither viewpoint suited them fully (Verbrugge 298). On the one hand, they needed concrete bodies—molding bodies is, after all, what physical education is all about—but they also needed scientific validity, which was reserved for academic matters, instruction of the mind. And they needed to be able to educate specifically *girls’* bodies without overemphasizing the differences between boys and girls or girls would not be viewed as capable of physical education (Verbrugge 295-296). Of course, karate was not involved here, but my point is that as far as historical baggage goes, Western forms of body disciplines in the form of sports and physical education carry the burden of historical emphases on biological determinism and mind/body dualism woven in from

the beginning, while karate has always been based on an inherent, lived, experienced grasp of the inseparability of body and mind and the capability of minded-bodily change. It is this focus on mind/body blendedness that makes karate such a trenchant and applicable discipline. I find that practicing karate is a lived, pragmatic way of truly understanding—and of course understanding is the wrong word here, as it implies purely cognitive grasping—that mind and body are one, that subjectivity *is* embodied.

Also, while the history of karate is certainly masculinist, it is inherently open to a wide variety of body types in a way that readily accommodates acceptance of women's bodies. For example, one karate master, Funakoshi (who brought karate from Okinawa to Japan), was physically tiny yet able to overcome much larger opponents,<sup>43</sup> so arguments that women generally are too small and physically weak to participate do not arise in the context of karate. Karate can be practiced by anyone of any body type or level of physical (dis)ability. there are even classes for wheelchair-bound *karateka* (Wiley 61-65). Also, the goal of karate is not to achieve a certain type of body; thus, it is not particularly effective at sculpting bodies in line with normative aesthetic ideals. When the *karateka* removes her *gi* (the karate uniform), her body is not necessarily “athletic, hard, and slick” (Cole 87); in fact, older karate masters, while incredibly strong, lithe and capable, frequently have pronounced potbellies. Thus karate does not give the practitioner a patriarchy-approved, athletic, sexy body, but it does increase strength, balance, minded-bodily harmony, and physical capabilities. Thus, as I will show shortly, it is a good discipline for engaging bodies and pleasures as loci of resistance and for transforming habits and body images in healthy, positive ways.

---

<sup>43</sup> My sensei loves to tell the story of how Funakoshi, in a demonstration for the Emperor of Japan, knocked out a much, much larger man—a sumo wrestler—with a single well-placed, well-executed punch.

Another positive element of karate is that it is not a sport for the gaze.<sup>44</sup> The way the body looks in karate is simply not an issue. Part of Cheryl Cole's Foucaultian critique of women in sports<sup>45</sup> is that sports are being used as yet another technology in the patriarchal construction of normative femininity, producing the athletic female body as a commodity for male consumption (Cole 87). She writes, "Rather than working as technologies of transgression, exercise and aerobics [for women] tend to be normalizing technologies that produce fashionable 'dress for success' bodies embedded in promises of material gains; in other words, they are practices invested in the status quo" (Cole 87). Cole is absolutely right in identifying the "new feminine aesthetic, versatile, athletic, hard, and slick" (87), which, again, causes problems with Haber's body-building analysis. But in karate, this danger is obviated by the *gi*, the karate uniform which covers the entire body and is the same for men and women, the only differentiations being in colors of both the *gi* and the *obi* (the belt), which are a matter of rank and style, not of gender or any other feature of the practitioner's body. What one looks like while practicing karate is irrelevant to the discipline. Frequently my sensei will censure a student for too busily studying his image in the mirror or adjusting her *gi* instead of concentrating on the technique at hand. Physical appearance is unimportant; bodily awareness and concentration are all-important.

---

<sup>44</sup> There are tournaments in which *karateka* are watched and judged on how well they perform, but the style I study does not emphasize competition or visual/aesthetic elements. And in tournaments, judging is based not on how the competitors' bodies look but on how well they perform the techniques they are practicing.

<sup>45</sup> Cole reads the Foucaultian interpretation of sport negatively: "Sport...is most usefully understood as a technology in the Foucauldian sense, an ensemble of knowledges and practices that disciplines, conditions, reshapes, and inscribes the body through the terms and needs of a patriarchal, racist capitalism" (86). I agree that sport (and karate) can be read through a Foucaultian lens and (as my brief glance at the history of Okinawan karate evidences) its discursive implications cannot be overlooked. However, as I discussed in earlier chapters, I reject a thoroughly negative reading of Foucault and argue that reading sport/karate through a Foucaultian lens serves to highlight its potential as an element of self-directed technologies that serve to embrace empowerment and the expansion of possibilities. (Of course, Cole is talking about Western sports, not karate.)

Perhaps more importantly for my project, karate is inherently anti-dualistic, and it is the rejection of dualism that serves as the starting point for bringing Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together: living and experiencing oneself *as* a minded-body or a body-subject is the foundation for liberatory change through self-discipline and rehabilitation. Karate as a discipline is an excellent way to foster such an experience; the study and practice of karate bring home to the *karateka* concretely the reality of embodied subjectivity and bodily consciousness. Texts about karate emphasize this; for example, Peter Urban writes that “the study of Karate involves far more than the learning of certain physical techniques; it absorbs the student wholly; his [sic] character is as much affected by Karate as is his body” (10) and “Karate...deals primarily in developing the body so as to bring about a practiced control of the limbs and in developing certain mental energies...so as to make the body into a highly effective tool of the mind. . . . The mental demands in rigorous Karate training are more taxing than they physical demands” (11). While Urban writes in dualistic language, describing the body as the tool/weapon of the mind, the phenomenon to which he is referring is experienced non-dualistically, for what the study of karate teaches is that training is simultaneously mental and physical, for the two are inseparable. And by referring to the mental demands as “more rigorous” than the physical, the point this non-philosophical writer is crudely trying to express is quite simply the fact that physical training simply *cannot* be separated from the mental. Mindless rote physical training simply does not happen, for even routinely practicing the same motions over and over (as the karate student must frequently do) involves and demands conscious bodily awareness and focus. And indeed, dualistic language aside, Urban recognizes that karate ultimately brings about an awareness in its practitioners of the fallacy of severing body from mind: “Karate can be considered a philosophy based on the belief that a sound mind is achieved through the development of a virtuous

character. A sound body is achieved through rigorous training. The natural result of sound mind and sound body is ‘oneness’: the oneness of Zen (mind) and Ken (fist or body); Zen, Ken, Isha: mind, fist, oneness” (Urban 14). Shoshin Nagamine also discusses how karate works to help its practitioners live and experience the oneness not only of mind and body but also of self and world:

Karate training helps to end a dualistic way of life in which a person is separated by lack of commitment from the world around him [sic]. From this comes peace of mind. The fusing of mind and body in karate is indescribably beautiful and spiritual. The flow of the mind, when totally absorbed during kata practice, brings a person into total contact with the essence and core of his being. One is both humbled and uplifted by this knowledge of self (271).

Because to practice karate is to experience the inadequacies of dualisms, karate is well suited to be a resistive practice. Living/experiencing nondualism is the first step to liberatory transformation because it undoes the history of Western philosophy’s problematic dualisms and hierarchies that have denigrated and excluded women for so long.

Following this line of thought, Leslie Howe writes about how sports/athletics in general are anti-dualistic (although she does not herself frame it that way): “The goal of athletic activity is not victory over one’s body at all; it is not autocratic control. It is unity: the regaining, for those brief moments for which it lasts, of perfect immediacy between body and mind” (Howe 99). While she does not mention Merleau-Ponty, this is a Merleau-Pontian insight: body discipline is not about “autocratic control” *over* the body but about transformation *through* the body. Unfortunately, Howe writes as if mind and body are fundamentally distinct and athletic activity brings them briefly closer to bridging the gap. However, the experience to which she is referring is not bridging a non-existent gap, but bringing to conscious/bodily awareness the fundamental unity of the two. When an athlete is successful/highly trained, according to Howe, “it is the *intentionalized body* that exerts the greater part of control over the outcome” (99,



emphasis added). It is not that the body is separate from but somehow temporarily united with the mind, but that the body itself *is the source of intentionality* and hence of consciousness/mind/self. Howe's point is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's typing example: my 'mental' intentionality to type this sentence cannot be separated from my fingers' intentional/physical execution thereof. To be sure, I can think about typing without actually typing, but if I actually *intend* to make words appear on the screen, my intention *must* live through and be embodied in the motion of my fingers. Practicing karate provides a similar experience. If I intend to punch, the intention is not mental but bodily, and cannot exist as a conscious intention without its physical manifestation. As Howe puts it, "The key experience that is common to athletes in any athletic discipline is that absolutely freeing sense of ontological unity that can only occur when mind and body are wholly in sync with each other, when intention is translated into effect seemingly without effort or intervening formulation of means or method" (99). Howe talks as though these moments of ontological unity are fleeting and the desire to experience them again is what keeps athletes going; I disagree only in that I argue that it is not a fleeting unity that is temporarily achieved between two separate entities, but an experience of their actual unity that is so freeing: freeing from the hierarchical weight of mind-vs.-body constructs that are so historically fraught and anti-woman. Practicing karate allows me to rehabilitate my body image so that such an experience of unity flows out into the rest of my life. In short, karate disciplines me to understand my body *as* my self, as the conscious medium through which my physical intentions are carried out. In so doing, it allows me to expand my "I cans" and thus opens up new possibilities.

Learning to experience myself as a minded body, as an embodied subject, is important for feminist transformation; a key part of that transformation is living the reality that gender

differences are constructed rather than “natural”. But if this is true, then why, despite the fact that men and women are treated the same in the *dojo*, do female students always seem to be weaker than their male counterparts? When it comes to breaking boards in my class, the least-experienced male student blows right through while a more experienced female student (me) repeatedly fails. To understand why this is, one must turn to the ways in which the minded/bodily experiences of men and women have been discursively constructed. Women are just as capable of breaking the board as men, but we have developed habits and body images that prohibit it. Using Foucaultian techniques of the self, such body images can change, as is evidenced by the women who do successfully break the board. Such change must encompass not mere physiological alterations in musculature, but conscious, intentional changes as well; according to karate instructor Karla Grant, “The body cannot follow where the mind doesn’t go. Therefore self-defense [e.g. karate] is more a matter of transforming one’s thought rather than just learning a physical technique. This transformation will facilitate the unification of mind and body at all levels and expressions of defense, be it prevention or physical confrontation” (Wiley 76). Although expressed in dualistic language, Grant is expressing a Merleau-Pontian concept that mind and body transform together because it is only by shifting my body image from one that cannot break a board to one that can that I am able to become a body-subject that is able to break the board, and vice versa. The way to get to that point is by engaging in techniques of the self—disciplining my body to expand its capabilities to engage in the task at hand. Such an experience of minded/bodily transformation shows not only their necessary unity, but also that the embodied differences between a woman and a man are not given biological physicalities, but discursively constructed body images that are capable of being transformed.

Karate, then, works well as an example of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of body image/I can combined with Foucault's philosophy of techniques of the self; it perfectly exemplifies the blending of Foucaultian and Merleau-Pontian philosophies of embodied subjectivity. Doing karate is a practice, a discipline, a technique of the self that is focused on minded-bodily habits and images, on experiencing oneself as a minded body or body-subject, and that has liberatory potential on both an individual and collective level. On the Merleau-Pontian axis, karate helps to expand one's "I cans", no matter what the state of one's initial embodied capabilities. For example, Lydia Zijdel, a martial artist uses a wheelchair, says that after starting to practice karate, "Not only did I learn some techniques to defend myself, but I also started to love my disabled body again. I saw what she was still capable of doing, instead of seeing what she could not do anymore" (Wiley 61). Expanded capabilities provide a lived, experiential confirmation that consciousness is bodily and intentional. In Nagamine's words, "Karate is self-training in perfection, a means whereby a man [sic] may obtain that expertise in which there is not the thickness of a hair between a man and his deed" (14). In other words, one's conscious, agentic being—one's self—is expressed in and through—is only possible through—*embodied* action. Furthermore, karate enables its practitioners to achieve expanded "I cans" and lived experiences of conscious-bodily intentionality by being a technique of the self, a discipline, which brings us to the Foucaultian axis. Disciplining one's body, not so that it can be docile but so that it can become an agent of power and transformation, is what allows the *karateka* to get to the point at which "there is not the thickness of a hair" between self and embodied action. Martha McCaughey writes about self-defense (and while I take karate not primarily for self-defense, what she says is still relevant) that it shows that "power is disseminated and resisted through the lived body" (xii) which precisely articulates the combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian

approach I find so compelling. Disciplining one's body through karate allows one to start with the embodied, discursively constructed being that one is and, working *within* the power networks in which one exists, alter the direction of power in a more freeing and less oppressive direction by expanding one's embodied possibilities.

To speak in terms of my own experience with bodily self-discipline through karate, and to focus the example on body image: practicing karate helps me to overcome the shame I feel towards my body (e.g., my tummy flab, which is definitely not in line with the svelte, size-0 ideal put forward in TV, movies, advertisements, fashion shows, etc.) not only because it enables me to discipline myself or care for myself as Foucault might suggest, but also because it involves a re-alignment of the way in which I experience my own body, and hence my self, my subjectivity. Karate, as I have been emphasizing, is not about trying to achieve a bodily ideal, but about experiencing my bodily power and the oneness of body and mind. At the end of a karate workout I feel strong and healthy and I love my body—even if I am exhausted, in pain, shaking from exertion, I am enveloped in the directly-experienced awareness that *my body is powerful and capable*. My stomach is not one bit flatter, but I have changed my self-experience so that the flab is no longer quite so repugnant to me—I have (temporarily, at least) succeeded in refusing the cultural norm of feminine appearance by experiencing myself as a powerful body. Thus when I discipline myself (Foucault) by doing karate, I re-habituate the way I relate to my own body, and I develop new lived experiences of my own bodily being (Merleau-Ponty). When I can re-habituate myself to be happy with my body by practicing karate, I will have changed my subjectivity such that I no longer need to fit the oppressive, male-oriented norm of appearance and comportment, and I will have done so by taking charge of my own discipline. Other women have had similar experiences practicing martial arts; Carol Wiley, for example, says of her

experience with Tae Kwon Do and Aikido: “I didn’t lose weight, which surprised and bothered me at first, but as I saw my body respond to the physical activity, I thought less about weight (59). She also says, “The martial arts have been important in helping me accept my body. If I can do all this, what’s so great about being thin” (Wiley 60)? This is precisely the liberatory change in one’s embodied being/body image that I find so powerful: altering one’s subjectivity so that it is *not* restricted by norms that demand a certain physical appearance and style and instead is open to its own active, expanding potentialities. Karate makes me strong and one with my body; it helps me *live* my embodied subjectivity; it provides freedom in the Foucaultian sense: freedom *to* new possibilities of health, thriving, flourishing.

How does this transformation come about? Slowly and gradually. Rehabilitation takes time and effort. I must start with the body I am/have and slowly transform it into a body-subject less constrained by sexist, patriarchal norms. According to Merleau-Ponty, the habit body is the bodily style we ‘naturally’ (so to speak) fall into, our body as it is when we are not paying attention. Part of that ‘natural’ habit-body for me (and many women) includes a lived sense of inadequacy, because in our culture a woman can never be thin enough, leggy enough, svelte enough; this lived sense inhabits and informs my stances, postures, movements, comportments, etc. My habit body is one informed by the sense that I am less than, never good enough; as a result, its comportments are timid, confined, inhibited. Karate requires changing the stances, postures, movements, comportments, ways of being and moving that my body ‘naturally’ falls into. For example, my habit body includes a ‘natural’ way of standing: my body falls into a somewhat slouched, shoulder-hunched, weight on one leg, other leg bent, hip-jutting stance; one cannot do karate from this position. So, the *karateka* must re-learn how to stand. Even the ‘natural stance’ of the style of karate I study is not the same stance that *my* habit-body naturally

falls into. Karate's 'natural stance' involves standing with feet about shoulder-width apart, arms at the sides, but shoulders and hips squared straight forward, back straight, head up, knees very slightly bent—not at all the stance in which my body is habituated to stand. So, I have to practice. I have to discipline my body *just to stand*, and standing is one of the most normal, seemingly natural postures the human body has. Once a *karateka* learns to stand, she must relearn how to walk, for walking in karate is not what a toddler learns to do. The goal is that learning to stand and walk as a *karateka* will become as natural and normal as learning to stand and walk does for a toddler; by the time the toddler is a few years older, usually walking and standing are completely habitual in Merleau-Ponty's sense. A good *karateka* should no more have to think about placement of limbs, joints, and muscles to stand in a karate stance than she has to think about how to get out of bed in the morning. The first time I learned to stand and walk (as a toddler), it just happened, in a sense, without conscious or intentional direction on my own part. Practicing karate demonstrates that it is perfectly possible to take this habit-body that I am and re-train it *with* conscious, intentional direction, so that my stance is constructed not just by, for example, norms of femininity (e.g. the way women and men sit, legs open vs. crossed), but by a self-chosen discipline that I can use to weaken the stranglehold social norms have on the construction of my body and habits.

Weakening my subjection to social norms is not easy, though. I still struggle with shame and loathing towards my body, especially when I am not working out, but sitting outside in the sun reading Linda Alcoff and noticing with dismay how my belly fat rolls over the top of my shorts as I sit. I suck it in, I try to make it go away, but I cannot sit comfortably without noticing this *Thing* there on my belly, this thing that I think of as other, not quite me, but alien and hostile and disgusting. I notice its ugly, unflattering shape as it squats on my belly. I have a hard time

concentrating on my reading because I keep glancing down to where the Ugly Flab is. I start to get a stomach ache, and worry that I ate too much for lunch, and then start to imagine that my tummy flab is more prominent than it was before lunch; there, now I've done it, I ate too much and made my flab even *bigger*, and everyone knows it's so much harder to lose than to gain that unsightly bulge. So even as I am reading positive, brilliant, Foucault-inspired, Merleau-Ponty compatible feminist philosophy, I am too distracted by my own poor body image to pay attention.

Such distraction is not infrequent; I struggle daily with my body image. I have been well disciplined in the ways of womanly desirability; I know my body is not up to par with societal standards. I have internalized the gaze of the judging male quite well. My body *is*, and thus *I am*, a person who does not measure up to the impossible ideal of beauty and thus experiences itself as less-than, not good enough.

But I know I can change this body that I am; not necessarily its size or shape or fat distribution, but *its subjectivity*. Time for more karate.

Doing karate is a way of using bodies and pleasures (because for all the pain and suffering a good workout entails, I do find karate intensely pleasurable) as a locus of resistance to oppressive power schemes in such a way that gradually it changes my sedimented body habits and body image from one constrained by harmful norms to one that, while it still lives in the discursive universe shaped by those norms, no longer experiences itself as necessarily measured by how it fits into or deviates from those norms. Even in moments of relapse, I do not feel nearly the amount of shame towards my body that I did before I started karate, and I no longer position myself, my subjectivity, in opposition to and in an agonistic relationship to my body. More and more, I am starting to live my body as the medium through which my consciousness

and intentionality reaches into and acts in my world. This is an inherently liberatory experience, allowing me to realize my ability to exert power within a Foucaultian power network by expanding my Merleau-Pontian sense of “I can”.

As an example of an aspect of women’s bodily comportment that can be changed in a less oppressive, healthier direction via a discipline like karate, consider women’s bodily habits of deference to men. Ways in which women interact with men are frequently disciplined such that we shrink back, take up less space, and present a non-confrontational, submissive posture, as feminists have often noted (see, e.g., Bartky 1990, McCaughey 1997, Wex 1979, Young 1990). According to McCaughey (making a point similar to Young’s), “Women tend not to reach, extend, and follow through because they are not as likely as men to have developed a relationship with their bodies as agents, as instruments of action” (40); women are disciplined and normalized to experience their bodies as troublesome encumbrances rather than active potentialities, leading them to develop a restrictive, limiting fund of bodily habits. In McCaughey’s words, “By the time we are adults, particularly when it comes to physical tasks, men’s bodily comportment bellows, ‘I can,’ while women’s bodily comportment chirps, ‘I can’t’” (42). Women need, then, to unlearn the bodily habits that have us stuck at “I can’t” and learn new body habits that will allow us to experience our “I cans”. This entails a change in subjectivity from traditional femininity to something less restrictive. McCaughey argues that practicing self-defense (e.g. karate) is instrumental in fostering this change: “By requiring women to act in unfeminine ways, self-defense instruction makes possible the identification of not only some of the mechanisms that create and sustain gender inequality but also a means to subvert them. Self-defense is a counterdiscourse” (McCaughy 89). This, then, is another confirmation that looking at embodied subjectivity from a combined Merleau-



Pontian/Foucaultian perspective is necessary. As we know from applying Foucaultian genealogy, women's bodies/subjectivities have been constructed as inferior and subordinate to men's, with the accompanying habits of deference; applying Merleau-Ponty's notion of body habits and images as transformable allows us a path to overcoming these habits and constructions.

My claim, then, is that habits such as those of traditional femininity can change based on a combined theoretical approach using both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. Foucault helps us understand how restrictive habits formed via normalizing discipline; thus, we realize that they are contingent and therefore changeable. Merleau-Ponty teaches us to actively engage with our body image and habits to re-habituate ourselves away from oppressive, negative, unhealthy habits into more positive forms of bodily being. McCaughey again:

The theoretical model of lived, embodied power inequalities is not totally determinative, however. Women's self-defense is a reprogramming regimen for the body. Here, women—regardless of their conscious political beliefs about gender—rehearse a new script for bodily comportment. The body, then, is not simply the locus of patriarchal power, ideology, or brutality; it is a potential locus of resistance. In self-defense classes, women...develop a new self-image, a new understanding of what a female body can do, and thus break out of the expectations under which they have acted and cemented themselves at the level of the body (95).

This quote perfectly encapsulates the combination of Merleau-Pontian and Foucaultian insights that I find compelling. McCaughey discusses ways in which femininity has traditionally been constructed and how self-defense practices (e.g. karate) can help change that tradition:

femininity involves deferring to men. . . . Self-defense helps women undo the enslaving feminine identity of deference, kindness, and weakness that men so often take advantage of, by getting them to imagine and practice aggressively refusing men's advances. It also enables women to take themselves more seriously and to approach men's demands and whims with a different kind of thoughtfulness and consideration (9).

Transforming "enslaving feminine identity" into something less oppressive is done by changing bodily habits; for example, McCaughey cites an example of a woman who had to practice yelling

“No!” because she was so habituated *never* to say no, especially to a man (9). Similarly, *karateka* must practice *kiai*, a powerful expulsion of breath in the form of a yell that comes from deep in the gut. I feel extremely uncomfortable doing *kiai* because it is a bodily activity that expresses force and power loudly and unmistakably, in a way in which my body-self has not been habituated to do; it is decidedly unfeminine. For me to be able to do a proper *kiai* requires a change of habit, which entails a change of self away from the strictures of normative femininity. Furthermore, McCaughey writes that women frequently find it difficult to use force against someone they know, and since the vast majority of rape and violence against women is perpetrated by people they know, this is another deferential, “feminine” habit that must be changed: “rewriting the script of feminine deference is crucial. This is precisely why women in self-defense courses unlearn the habits of polite, compliant feminine conversation” (McCaughey 9), and of course these are *bodily* habits. Self-defense “begins to dismantle the assumption that women have victim-bodies, that is, weak, small, boundariless, and ineffective bodies” (McCaughey 10).

Engaging in a practice like karate, then, changes not only one’s bodily abilities, but one’s very subjectivity and self-image; the very same body-self changes from one who assumes she is too weak to defend herself (and perhaps does not even have the right to do so!) to one which is aware of her capabilities and confident in her right to use them. McCaughey’s “aim is to examine and understand gender, aggression, and sexual assault in ways that create an opportunity for transforming our body-selves from objects of patriarchal reflection into against patriarchal oppression” (12). Understanding Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together provides a theoretical framework for understanding how this goal possible; then, engaging in a body discipline like karate helps the transformation to actually take place. This requires a shift from

thinking of our bodies as other than ourselves to understanding our bodies *as* ourselves, which, as I have argued, can be achieved by engaging in a discipline such as karate. Karate, then, is liberatory and transformative for its practitioners, for it physically challenges patriarchy and oppression at the bodily level.

## 2. Intersubjectivity, Communication, and Political Action

The karate example is one way of understanding how to use the body for positive transformation on an individual level. Next, I turn to the feminist benefits of drawing on both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault for collective political struggle. To do this, I must address the problem of how we can ethically relate to others to join into communities. This is the problem feminists such as Kruks, Weiss, and Bigwood argue that Merleau-Ponty has solved with the concept of the anonymous body. However, as I explained in chapter three, there are significant problems with Merleau-Ponty's anonymous body, and as I showed in chapter four, it is possible to have a consistent and beneficial Merleau-Pontian theory without the anonymous body. Here, I show that the anonymous body is not necessary for relating to others. We can find a measure of understanding, solidarity, and empathy with others' suffering and be inspired to work for collective political change *without* assuming a universal, generic, anonymous embodiment that serves only to erase differences and thereby hinder understanding. One way to do this is to bring in some Foucaultian insights. Foucault's work on power and normative limits provides a way to understand that when I relate to others' suffering, it is not because I share a generic embodiment, but because we have both experienced similar normative limitations and have both been shaped by similar power networks. Yet Foucault himself has little to say about intersubjectivity, empathy, or communicating with others, and feminist work that draws on Merleau-Ponty to

argue for the necessity of such feeling-with (but without the anonymous body) strengthens the possibility of community and group action. Thus my position is that ethical communication and political action are both possible on the genealogical/phenomenological, situated, discursive model of embodiment that we get when we read Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together.

While one of the critiques frequently leveled at Foucault is that he provides no grounds for change or activism (as I discussed in chapter three), Foucault's work does not preclude political action, and he himself engaged in political protests and activism. According to Thomas Flynn, political action is not at all inconsistent with Foucault's genealogical, critical approach to histories of the present. Flynn writes,

How do we reconcile *parrhesia* [truth-telling] and the *historico-practical critique* that [Foucault] traces back to *Was ist Aufklärung?* It is in the *practical*, 'revolutionary' dimension of each approach that we discover their conceptual overlap. Historico-practical critique, recall, is the study of structures and 'history' of current *practices*, 'practical systems'—the modern self, for example, as political-social subject or as moral agent; the point is to reveal the 'contingency' of what we have taken to be social or metaphysical *necessities*, necessities that have delimited our lives, both private and public (1989, 196).

In other words, genealogy tells us that we are discursively constructed, but such information, rather than rendering us helpless pawns of externally controlling systems, allows us to recognize and understand the structures that have led to limiting, restrictive current practices and realities. This understanding allows us to conceptualize ways to change those restrictive practices to more open ones. Thus *parrhesia*, truth-telling as a political act, is simply speaking up about the contingent, historically constructed present in which we find ourselves, whether it concern inequalities for women, racism, discrimination against gays and lesbians, or prison reform (for which Foucault himself agitated). Taking a political stance, then, is perfectly congruent with Foucault's historicism and genealogism; it simply requires recognizing that political struggle does not take the form of striving for some sort of utopian, acultural "natural" state of freedom

from power structures, but instead requires working for shifts and alterations *within* the discursive context in which we find ourselves. Foucaultian political action, then, is possible; but his account is incomplete. A theory that grounds the basis for and possibilities of political activism is enriched by adding Merleau-Ponty because while Foucault opens the possibility of politics and coalition, he does not elaborate on how we come together to engage in collective struggle, or why we should. A Merleau-Pontian account of intersubjectivity (though revised to omit the problematic anonymous body, as I discussed in chapter four) fills these gaps. To show how this combined theory works, I again turn to the practice of karate.

Practicing karate can help one prepare to enter the political arena, and serves especially well for women who are disadvantaged to start with due to our historical exclusion. Women have been so thoroughly excluded from the public sphere for so much of history that such exclusion, as part of our genealogy, remains ingrained and constitutive of our present state of being. Thus oftentimes women have a harder time than men feeling worthy of entering into the public sphere in political activism of any sort. Karate can help women overcome this discursively constructed internalized limitation. Carol Wiley quotes Aikidoist Lidia Wolanskyj as saying, discussing self-defense,

It's not enough to learn that you can hurt someone twenty-three different ways in five seconds flat if they jump you. If you don't feel good about yourself, if you're not confident within yourself, *if you haven't got a sense of having a right to the territory that you occupy*, then no amount of technique, no bag of little tricks is going to help, because you aren't going to react properly when push comes to shove (Wiley 93, emphasis added).

Wolanskyj is referring to a woman defending herself against assault: if she does not feel she has the right to inhabit *her own body*, she is much less likely to fight back. Thus women need to engage in rehabilitation to overcome an internalized sense of lacking the right to occupy a certain territory. This internalized sense expands beyond one's own body into the public/political

sphere. Although intellectually they may know better, many women experience themselves living lives in which they do *not* feel that they have the right to occupy the territory they inhabit, whether it be the identity they carve out for themselves, their particular embodiment, or their role in shaping public discourse. Because historically both subjecthood and the public sphere were reserved for men, altering women's embodied subjectivities such that they live a sense of full human subjectivity can carry over into other historically denied arenas as well. Practicing karate can help women overcome that sense of being excluded, bodily, thus altering their subjectivities and lived experiences such that they learn to experience themselves as having every bit as much right to occupy human subjecthood and public/political roles as any man. Thus, gaining a lived sense of full human subjectivity is the first step to opening the door to political, collective activity. According to McCaughey, "The body-self is transformed through rehearsals of aggression [e.g. karate or other self-defense practices], which solidify a new embodied ideal, not because a woman becomes conscious of her political situation and then changes her behavior. This is the political, and feminist, importance of learning self-defense...." (132). In other words, bodily practices *are* political practices; liberatory transformations in individual embodied subjectivities *are* political transformations.

To elaborate briefly on one example, rape: rape is certainly a political problem; women in 21<sup>st</sup> century America find ourselves living in a rape culture in which male sexuality is coded as aggressive and unstoppable, and female sexuality is coded as passive and easily susceptible to seduction. In such a setting, a woman who does not succumb to a man's sexual advances is not truly feminine; she is transgressing the identity constructed for her. Learning to live one's embodied subjectivity in a way that *does* physically, aggressively, and confidently resist unwanted sexual pursuit, then, serves to undermine rape culture and is thus a political act. As

McCaughey puts it, “[traditional] femininity includes the internalized bodily ethos of rape culture, while self-defense trains women to internalize a different bodily ethos in reaction to rape culture” (McCaughey 163). Simply learning to inhabit one’s body as a woman in a way that denies the cultural narrative that men have unlimited access to women’s bodies, then, is a political act. Furthermore, training in something like karate in a way that I do it—more for exercise than for self-defense—is just as much a repudiation of rape culture. While fighting off potential rapists is not primarily what I have in mind when I practice *kata*, my practice does give me a lived sense of belonging in my body, of *being* my body. This lived sense is a visceral education in my right to occupy my own territory. If I *am* my body, and my body *is* me, then certainly I have the right—the *necessity*—to defend my body-self from unwanted incursions. This lived sense of complete inherence in one’s body-self instills in self-defense students and practitioners of other bodily disciplines the confidence that they have a *right* to resist assault, and thereby effects political change in a rape culture.

Once one overcomes an embodied, habituated sense of alienation from one’s own body and its accompanying alienation from the public sphere, one must learn how to form communities of political action. For such communities to be possible, a measure of intersubjectivity is required. While I can never inhabit another’s subject position fully (because I reject Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the anonymous body), it is still possible to attain a high degree of shared meaning and mutual understanding. My subjectivity will never cross over into yours such that the two commingle completely; I can recognize that you are a distinct agentic subject, but I cannot ever know the content of your subjectivity. This is not to say that you and I are atomically distinct; as agents sharing a discursive universe, you and I co-constitute one another. But I never experience this co-constitution from your subjective position, only ever from mine.

How, then, is any measure of intersubjectivity possible? Intersubjectivity is easier to understand from a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian position. Such a combination does not allow for the anonymity that threatens Merleau-Ponty, but it also does not atomistically cut us off from each other, which Foucault's notion of networks and discursivity helps to underscore. To show how this works, I turn to Sonia Kruks and Ladelle McWhorter. Kruks discusses the possibility of politics from a Merleau-Pontian point of view, McWhorter from a Foucaultian perspective; I argue that each position is strengthened when read in light of a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian approach.

In chapter one, I discussed Sonia Kruks's theory that "feeling-with", based on anonymous embodiment, allows for intersubjective communication and commonality to ground political action. In chapter three, I showed how Merleau-Ponty's theory of the anonymous body is problematic. In turn, this renders Kruks's theory problematic as well. Kruks is responding to the problem of establishing solidarity in the face of difference. If women exist across a vast array of differences (e.g. race, sexuality, (dis)ability, and multiple other interconnected axes of identity), then how can there be such a thing as "women's experience" around which feminist politics can coalesce? Kruks asks, "if women's experiences are as radically different, as incommensurate, as such authors [Lorde, Anzaldúa, Collins] have claimed, how helpful can it be to talk to them as a basis for either feminist theory of political activity" (2001, 132)? Her response to this problem is to call on Merleau-Ponty's anonymous body to claim that women, due to their similar embodiments, have the capability to feel-with each other and empathize with each other's situations and problems. Kruks's argument for feeling-with is that women share certain bodily generalities, e.g. we menstruate, we have vaginas and uteruses, etc.; these commonalities shape our experiences in common ways that allow for mutual understanding



(2001, 149-150). Kruks argues that these generalities provide “an *affective predisposition* to act on behalf of women other than and different from oneself” (2001, 151, emphasis in original). Thus, because Kruks shares certain bodily generalities with (e.g.) the battered Nigerian woman, then even though she and the Nigerian woman are different in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, class, and other elements of identity, she is able to affectively commune with the Nigerian woman’s suffering and is thereby moved to political action on behalf of battered women in situations, and with identities, vastly different from her own.

But if, as I have argued, embodiment is *not* anonymous—if simply having a human body similar to other human bodies, or a female body similar to other female bodies, does not provide a basis for understanding other humans/females—what basis remains for feeling-with? If I have been constructed entirely differently from the battered Nigerian woman, and I recognize that the mere fact that we both have female bodies does not necessarily entail that I have any measure of understanding of what she has been through, how can I hope to connect with her, to empathize with her, to struggle politically with her in a way that does not erase, occlude, or colonize her specifically situated experiences and needs?

The problems inherent in Kruks’s theory can be mitigated when her concept of feeling-with is read through a Foucaultian lens. My argument is that the basis of feeling-with or intersubjective understanding needed to ground community is not sheer bodily similarity, but the sharing of similar social locations that have been constructed by similar discursive constructs. For example, another woman in my karate class and I share similar struggles with ambivalence and shame towards our fleshy bodies. She once told me after class told me that she was going to do some sit-ups to try to eliminate the (small) layer of fat on her tummy after having been told by a male friend that he was surprised by how “soft around the middle” she was, given that she did

karate. She could easily have physically overcome him; years of martial arts study left her strong, healthy, and physically capable, yet still “soft around the middle”, so she felt the need to harden up her body to meet the approval of a male gaze. I identify with her struggle not because we share the same “natural,” biological, fleshy structures on our abdomens, but because we both exist in a discursive/power scheme that tells us the flesh on our stomachs is unacceptable. Our potential to understand each other or work together to alter norms of femininity and acceptability is not lessened by the fact that this connection is discursively constructed rather than “purely” natural. Kruks’s valuable point about feeling-with, then, need not evaporate with the anonymous body; it is quite possible to have an “affective predisposition” towards others even if embodied subjectivities—affects and all—are products of discourse.

On this model, though, how can I communicate with and understand people who are differently situated and have been subject to vastly different power networks? How can I connect to the battered Nigerian woman? We do not inhabit the same discursive constructs or power networks. Certainly there are vast differences in the powers, knowledges, and discourses to which we have been subjected; but also, certainly, there are at least some elements of similarity to the extent that we both live in cultures in which violence against women is a problem (certainly to differing extents and degrees, but it is a similarity nonetheless). Thus I can recognize that I am to an extent similarly constructed in that like the battered Nigerian woman, I exist within a cultural milieu in which to be embodied as a woman is to be under greater threat of violence and battery than those embodied as men. Given this broad discursive similarity, I can still, to an extent, feel-with the battered woman. It is not because we both have natural, pure, womanly bodies that I cringe at her pain; it is because I recognize that we both live in a world in which men are constructed as violent sexual aggressors against women, and thus because we

share (to an extent) a similar *constructed* embodiment, we share a similar relationship to gendered power constructs. In fact, this recognition renders feeling-with even stronger as a basis of political action, for if I did not recognize a battered woman's injuries *as* products of a Foucaultian discursive/power network of gender inequality, I might think she had suffered a fall or had an accident—not politically motivating. Because Foucaultian genealogy makes me aware of the political, cultural, historical, social, and other discursive forces that contribute to violence against women, feeling-with a battered woman inspires me to struggle against those forces in a way that feeling-with a woman who has just tripped over a rock (or somehow come about her injuries in a purely “natural” way) might not.

There is more to political activism, though, than simply feeling empathy with those in need of advocacy. Politics requires a theoretical groundwork. In chapter two, I discussed McWhorter's Foucaultian politics, which stemmed from her coming to terms with her homosexual identity as a basis for political action for gay rights. Like McWhorter, I find potential for a theoretical basis for politics in Foucault; thus, like McWhorter, “I see reasons to believe that caring for one's self would lead, often, to caring for others and for one's community and world” because “Communities and cultures depend upon the ethical work of individual people” (McWhorter 1999, 197). Moreover, McWhorter draws a direct and necessary connection between Foucaultian ethics as care of the self and politics—for, she points out, how is a lesbian to care for herself *without* engaging in political struggle against those who would deny her the space to freely and openly work on herself (1999, 209)? In other words, far from precluding politics, the Foucaultian position demands it. Foucault addresses politics via the concept of governmentality, which McWhorter defines as “the use of strategies for influencing others while (and as a part of the practice of) caring for one's self” (1999, 211).

Governmentality is political action *within* power networks, the strategic exercising of what means of power are available from within the situated, localized, historical situations in which we find ourselves. McWhorter aptly and eloquently summarizes the possibility and necessity of Foucaultian politics thus:

It is possible, then, for me as a particular historically constituted subject to formulate strategies and engage in projects whose aim is to attack certain social institutions and practices and to alter the conduct of people who currently take their identities from those institutions and practices. Not only is it possible, but if I want to attack sexual regimes of power, it is absolutely necessary that I cultivate my ability to exercise power over the conduct of other people, my capacity for the deployment of technologies of power (1999, 213).

As I argued previously, such a framework provides a better groundwork for collective political action than does the notion of anonymous, generic embodiment. Conversely, though, McWhorter's Foucaultian position on political action can be strengthened with the addition of Merleau-Pontian insights about the importance of affective, lived experience. If we recognize that our constructed bodies still *do* possess the ability to be conscious and have intentions, we grant them the ability to feel-with others (still on the basis of discursive construction), thus strengthening our connections with others who are similarly situated, and even with those who are very differently situated but still share broad-based elements of socio-historical construction (such as living in a world in which violence against women is common). In other words, McWhorter focuses on the Foucaultian genealogical construction that I argue needs to be added to Kruks's account to make it stronger; and in turn, adding Kruks's Merleau-Pontian concept of feeling-with (but based on constructed, situated similarities rather than pure, natural, bodily anonymity) provides an even stronger aspect of political motivation to McWhorter's account. McWhorter discusses the problem that frequently gay people feel they should not have to engage in political struggle, beyond coming out, to try to get other people to accept them; rather, the

hard work should be done by those in the dominating position who need to work on *themselves* to overcome their own homophobia (1999, 214). While it might be true that the burden of change should be on the dominators rather than the dominated, it is unlikely that much change will happen that way. Thus, if we focus on our ability to feel-with others, then events like the murder of Matthew Shepherd, for example, who was killed for being perceived as gay, might well inspire us to engage in political action to resist homophobia. Knowing that one lives in a discursive context in which perceived gender deviances can cause physical pain and even death brings home viscerally to those who are gender-variant, and those who care about them, the need to resist the power structures that enable such violence.

To sum up, then, a theory of embodied subjectivity that brings Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together is politically beneficial from a feminist point of view. Such a theory allows feminists to recognize that while there is no natural, pure body to which to appeal as a basis for intersubjectivity and community, we are still able have affective, lived experiences of feeling-with that can inspire political struggle against restrictive, oppressive, harmful constructs and practices. Recognizing the historical and social practices that construct embodied subjects in oppressive, restrictive ways grants us the insight into their contingency that is necessary to theoretically ground the possibility of change; and intersubjective feeling-with those who have been similarly constructed, if only in few and disparate ways, grounds a visceral, experiential, *bodily* impetus for coming together to struggle for positive, liberatory political change.

## **Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have shown that it is both possible and beneficial for feminists to combine key insights from Merleau-Ponty and Foucault in a theory of embodied subjectivity.

Such a combined theory allows us to understand ourselves as body-subjects who have been discursively constructed in ways that may be oppressive; who have deeply sedimented, frequently unhealthy habits of bodily being; but who can change for the better via self-directed discipline, the transformation of body habits and images, and collective political work. Such a combined theory is stronger and more complete than a theory which takes as its theoretical basis only Merleau-Pontian phenomenology or Foucaultian poststructuralism. In this chapter, I have shown how such a combined theory works well to address feminist concerns on both the individual and the collective level. On an individual level, a combined Merleau-Pontian/Foucaultian theory grounds an understanding of body-subjects as real, experiencing, and capable of positive transformation through self-discipline and rehabilitation. Engaging in a technique of the self (a Foucaultian concept) such as karate allows the *karateka* to *live* the reality of minded-bodily unity, allowing her to grasp bodily and experientially that she *is* an embodied subject with strengths and capabilities—"I cans"—that render her capable of transforming her habit-body (a Merleau-Pontian concept) from one that is restricted and subjugated to oppressive norms to one that is more open to possibilities and pleasures, and thus less oppressed and more free. Furthermore, such experiences and disciplines open a path towards political action. Rehabilitating one's embodied subjectivity in a liberatory direction allows the *karateka* to take hold of and celebrate her right to inhabit her body and to be a full human subject who can participate in the public sphere. Gaining embodied confidence paves the way for collective political action. Furthermore, combining Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's political insights provides a compelling feminist political theory that recognizes our ability to feel-with others in order to inspire political action and highlights the discursive power constructs that present political challenges and require political change.

In conclusion, then, I have shown that a strong, robust, feminist theory of embodied subjectivity is well served by reading Merleau-Ponty and Foucault together as mutually enhancing and complimentary theorists. Combining the two is not precluded by their differences, for as I have shown, elements of each can fruitfully and consistently be brought together without undermining the strengths their respective philosophies. Feminism would be well served to reconsider historical disagreements over whether phenomenology or poststructuralism is better suited to ground feminist theory; rather, feminists should recognize that each school of thought offers valuable insights that serve to enhance each other and mitigate against problems and insufficiencies that arise in either position alone. Merleau-Ponty and Foucault work better together than apart to allow us to understand ourselves as embodied subjects with discursively constructed pasts, real and experientially relevant presents, and viable possibilities for working towards a better future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2000. "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience." In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, edited by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. New York: SUNY Press.
- . 2006. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Allen, Jeffner, and Iris Marion Young, eds. 1989. *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1990. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2002. *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and other Essays*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bernauer, James W. 1990. *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Bien, Joseph. 2004. "Merleau-Ponty on Embodied Freedom and History." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 20 (1): 49-54
- Bigwood, Carol. 1991. "Renaturalizing the Body (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty)." *Hypatia* 6 (3): 54-73.
- Bingham, Charles. 1999. "Language and Intersubjectivity: Recognizing the Other Without Taking Over or Giving In." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 6:3-4.
- Bordo, Susan. 1991. "Docile Bodies, Rebellious Bodies: Foucauldian Perspectives on Female Psychopathology." In *Writing the Politics of Difference*, edited by Hugh J. Silverman. New York: SUNY Press.
- . 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1996. "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture." In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1989a. "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*." In *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, edited by Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- . 1989b. "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions." *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVI (11): 601-607.



- . 1990. "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse." In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1996. "Sexual Inversions." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2004a. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2004b. "Bodies and Power Revisited." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- . 2005. "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carman, Taylor, and Mark B. N. Hansen, eds. 2005. *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carvahlo, John. 2000. "Folds in the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty/Foucault." In *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, edited by Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- . 1993. "The Visible and the Invisible: In Merleau-Ponty and Foucault." *International Studies in Philosophy* 25 (3): 35-46.
- Clarke, Melissa. 2002. "Ontology, Ethics, and *Sentir*: Properly Situating Merleau-Ponty." *Environmental Values* 11: 211-25.
- Cohen, Richard A. 2000. "Merleau-Ponty, The Flesh, and Foucault." In *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, edited by Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Cole, Cheryl L. 1993. "Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 17: 77-97.
- Coles, Romand. 1992. *Self/Power/Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Crossley, Nick. 1993. "The Politics of the Gaze: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty." *Human Studies* 16: 399-419.

- . 1994. *The Politics of Subjectivity: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty*. Newcastle: Atheneum Press.
- . 1996. *Intersubjectivity: The Fabric of Social Becoming*. London: SAGE Publications.
- . 2001. *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Daly, Mary. 1978. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Davidson, Arnold I. 1994. "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought." In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deveaux, Monique. 1996. "Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Diamond, Irene, and Lee Quinby, eds. 1988. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Dillon, M.C., ed. 1991. *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Evans, Fred, and Leonard Lawlor, eds. 2000. *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Fielding, Helen. 1999. "Depth of Embodiment: Spatial and Temporal Bodies in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophy Today* 43 (1): 73-85.
- Flynn, Thomas. 1989. "Truth and Subjectivism in the Later Foucault." *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (10): 531-540.
- . 1994. "Foucault's Mapping of History". In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . "Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity." *Noûs* 23 (2): 187-198.
- Foucault, Michel. 1965. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

- . 1973. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1977. *Discipline and Punish*, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 1982. Afterward: "The Subject and Power." In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1984. *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 1988. *The History of Sexuality, Volume Three: The Care of the Self*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1989. *Foucault Live*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, translated by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston. New York: Semiotext(e).
- . 1990. *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1991a. "Politics and the Study of Discourse." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1991b. "Questions of Method." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1991c. "Governmentality." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1997. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, translated by Robert Hurley *et. al.*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: The New York Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- . 1996. "Michel Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'?" In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gendlin, E. T. 1992. "The Primacy of the Body, Not the Primacy of Perception." In *Man and World* 25 (3-4): 341-353.
- Gordon, Colin. 1991. "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grant, Judith. 1987. "I Feel Therefore I Am: A Critique of Female Experience as the Basis for a Feminist Epistemology." *Women and Politics* 7 (3): 99-114.
- Grosz, Elisabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gutting, Gary, ed. 1994. *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haber, Honi Fern. 1996. "Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Halperin, David. 1995. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hartsock, Nancy C.M. 1990. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge.
- . 1996. "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Hass, Lawrence, and Dorothea Olkowski, eds. 2000. *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Heckman, Susan J. 1991. "Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism, and Postmodernism." *Hypatia* 6 (2): 44-63.
- . Ed. 1996. *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Heinämaa, Sara. 2003. *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Holland, Nancy J. "In a Different Ch[i]asm: A Feminist Rereading of Merleau-Ponty on Sexuality." In *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, edited by Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Howe, Leslie A. 2003. "Athletics, Embodiment, and the Appropriation of the Self." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 17 (2): 92-107.
- Hoy, David Couzens. 1986. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1999. "Critical Resistance: Foucault and Bourdieu." In *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, edited by Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, Galen A., and Michael B. Smith, eds. 1990. *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Kelly, Sean Dorrance. 2002 "Merleau-Ponty on the Body." *Ratio* XV (4): 376-391.
- Kruks, Sonia. 1981. *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Sussex: The Harvester Press.
- . 1990. *Situation and Human Existence*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- . 2001. *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Levin, David Michael. 1991. "Visions of Narcissism: Intersubjectivity and the Reversals of Reflection." In *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, edited by M. C. Dillon. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Low, Douglas. 2001. "Merleau-Ponty on Truth, Language, and Value." *Philosophy Today* 45 (1): 69-76.
- . 2002. "Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Modernism and Postmodernism." *Philosophy Today* 46 (1): 60-69.
- Lucas, Peter. 2002. "Mind-Forged Manacles and Habits of the Soul: Foucault's Debt to Heidegger." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32 (3): 310-328.
- Lugones and Spelman. 1983. "Have We Got a Theory for You: Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'." *Hypatia* 1: 573-581.
- Macleod, Catriona, and Kevin Durrheim. 2002. "Foucauldian Feminism: the Implications of Governmentality." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 32 (1): 41-60.

- Madison, Gary Brent. 1981. *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Martin, L.H., et al. 1988. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock.
- Matthews, Eric. 2002. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Chesham, UK: Acumen.
- May, Todd. 1993. *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 1995. *The Moral Theory of Poststructuralism*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- McCaughey, Martha. 1997. *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense*. New York: New York University Press.
- McLaren, Margaret. 2002. *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*. New York: SUNY Press.
- McNay, Lois. 1991. "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience." *Hypatia* 6 (3): 125-139.
- . 1992. *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- . 1994. *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Continuum.
- McWhorter, Ladelle. 1997. "Foucault's Attack on Sex-Desire." *Philosophy Today* 41 (1): 160-165.
- . 1999. *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- . 2004. "Practicing Practicing." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.
- . 1963. *The Structure of Behavior*, translated by Alden L. Fisher. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

- . 1964a. *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1964b. *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1964c. *Signs*, translated by Richard C. McCleary. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, edited by Claude Lefort. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Nagamine, Shoshin. 1976. *The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company.
- Nagel, Chris. 1995. "Sexualities: Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on the Meaning of Sex." *International Studies in Philosophy* 27 (1): 63-71.
- O'Grady, Helen. 2004. "An Ethics of the Self." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Oksala, Johanna. 2004. "Anarchic Bodies: Foucault and the Feminist Question of Experience." *Hypatia* 19 (4): 97-119.
- Olkowski, Dorothea, and James Morley, eds. 1999. *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Paras, Eric. 2006. *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge*. New York: Other Press.
- Priest, Stephen. 1998. *Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge.
- Racevskis, Karlis, ed. 1999. *Critical Essays on Michel Foucault*. New York: G. K. Hall.
- Roth, Michael S. 1981. "Foucault's 'History of the Present'." *History and Theory* 20 (1): 32-46.
- Rouse, Joseph. 1994. "Power/Knowledge." In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawicki, Jana. 1988. "Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom: Foucault and Feminism." In *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, edited by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- . 1991. *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*. New York: Routledge.

- . 1996. "Feminism, Foucault, and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom." In *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. Susan J. Heckman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2004. "Foucault's Pleasures: Desexualizing Queer Politics." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Scott, Charles. 1990. *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Scott, Joan. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (4): 773-797.
- . 1992. "'Experience.'" In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott. New York: Routledge.
- Shapiro, Gary. 2003. *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simons, Jon. 1995. *Foucault and the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1988. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stoller, Sylvia. 2000. "Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism." *Hypatia* 15 (1): 175-182.
- Sullivan, Shannon. 2001. *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2005. "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Dianna, and Karen Vintges, eds. 2004. *Feminism and the Final Foucault*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Urban, Peter. 1967. *The Karate Dojo: Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company.
- Vasterling, Veronica. 2003. "Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11 (2), 205-223.



- Verbrugge, Martha H. 1997. "Recreating the Body: Women's Physical Education and the Science of Sex Differences in America, 1900-1940." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 71 (2): 273-304.
- Weiss, Gail. 1999a. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1999b. "Body Image Intercourse: A Corporeal Dialogue Between Merleau-Ponty and Schilder." In *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, edited by Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley. Albany: SUNY Press.
- . 2002. "The Anonymous Intentions of Transactional Bodies." *Hypatia* 17 (4): 187-199.
- Weiss, Gail, and Honi Fern Haber, eds. 1999. *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Welton, Donn, ed. 1998. *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Wex, Marianne. 1979. *Let's Take Back Our Space: "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*. West Germany: Frauenliteraturverlag Hermine Fees.
- Whiteside, Kerry H. 1988. *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wiley, Carol A., editor. 1992. *Women in the Martial Arts*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

**Vita**  
**Julia Levin**

**AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION**

---

Feminist Philosophy  
Continental Philosophy

**AREAS OF COMPETENCE**

---

History of Philosophy  
Phenomenology  
Ethics

**EDUCATION**

---

Ph.D. Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University (conferral expected 5/08)  
BA Philosophy, Hiram College (2001), *summa cum laude*

**ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

---

Adjunct Faculty, Westminster College, 2005-present  
Teaching Assistant and Graduate Assistant, The Pennsylvania State University, 2001-2007  
Research Assistant, The Rock Ethics Institute at The Pennsylvania State University, 2002

**HONORS AND AWARDS**

---

Thomas Wayne Grant Prize in Philosophy, Hiram College (2000 & 2001)  
Peters Prize in Philosophy, Hiram College (2001)  
Vice President of Philosophy Forum, Hiram College (2000-2001)

**PAPER PRESENTATIONS**

---

*Foucault, Disciplinary Power, and the Subject: A Response to Foucault 2.0* presented at the West Virginia Philosophical Society Fall Conference, held at Penn State Altoona, October 13, 2006