

## **Foucault and Feminism: Reevaluating Traditional Criticisms**

Feminism has not been an exception to Foucault's kaleidoscopic thinking. Unable to ignore Foucault's problematization of traditional feminism's most basic assumptions, feminism has been transformed by its encounter with and response to Foucault. Thus, the question is not if, but how Foucault should be situated into contemporary feminist theory. To this end, this paper will examine several major criticisms that traditional feminists have launched against Foucault's understanding of theory-justification, power relations, collective politics, and gender neutrality. It is my belief that the first three criticisms are unfounded, and that in fact, Foucauldian methods offer feminism an important set of political tools. However, as a result of Foucault's neglect of gender difference in his work, his history of sexuality falls short of feminist goals, and even reifies a philosophical "blind spot" towards women.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, feminists must appropriate only the aspects of Foucauldian philosophy that are conducive to gender analysis, moving beyond Foucault's androcentrism to create alternative histories of sexuality and opportunities for resistance.

The first criticism of Foucault found in feminist literature is reminiscent of the debates between Foucault and Habermas. In response to Foucault's critique of Enlightenment rationality and humanism, many feminists argue that Foucault is unable to provide a viable alternative or a normative basis for resisting oppression; because Foucault denies the use of universal values, he cannot justify the necessity of his critique or articulate a reason why status quo conditions are intolerable. Nancy Fraser explains:

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<sup>1</sup> McCallum, E. L.. "Technologies of Truth and the Function of Gender." Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault. Ed. S. J. Hekman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996, pp. 90.

...[W]hat sort of nonfoundationalist justification can such values lay claim? This, however, is a question Foucault never squarely faced; rather, he tried to displace it by insinuating that values neither can have nor require any justification. And yet he never provided compelling reasons for embracing that extreme meta-ethical position. This puts Foucault in the paradoxical position of being unable to account for or justify the sorts of normative political judgements he makes all the time—for example, that “discipline” is a bad thing.<sup>2</sup>

Such arguments charge Foucault’s critique of Enlightenment rationality and humanism with nihilism. However, this appears to be a misunderstanding of Foucault’s argument; Foucault does not want to overthrow all social order, but rather rejects the use of universal criteria for moral and political judgement.<sup>3</sup> In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault clarifies his position, stating that one does not have “to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ the Enlightenment.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of advocating a blanket rejection of modernism, Foucault wants to appropriate its critical attitude, which includes applying this criticism to modernism itself. Foucault wants to examine what reason is, what its effects are, and why we use it. Thus, “if it is extremely dangerous to say that reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality.”<sup>5</sup>

This critical questioning cannot be equated with wholesale rejection. We then ought to heed Ladelle McWhorter’s advice that we should look at “what [Foucault’s] texts *do*, rather than primarily in the arguments they advance” to assess their political

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<sup>2</sup> Fraser, N. “Michel Foucault: A Young Conservative?” Feminist Interpretations of Foucault. S. J. Hekman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996, pp. 24. For similar arguments, also see: Hartssock’s. “Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory” in the same volume. Michel Waltzer also proposes this argument in “The Politics of Michel Foucault,” Dissent, Fall, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> McWhorter, L. Bodies and Pleasures. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, M. “What is Enlightenment?” The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I. P. Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1994, pp. 313.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, M. “Space, Knowledge, and Power.” The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume III. Ed. J. D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 1994, pp. 358.

value.<sup>6</sup> In other words, we should examine the types of questions Foucault and his supporters have raised. It is this critical attitude of problematization that possesses significant potential for feminist theory; Foucault's refusal of the blackmail of the Enlightenment provides feminists a model for questioning binaries of rationality/irrationality, sane/emotional, strong/weak, and mind/body that traditionally have been divided on gender lines. Foucault and feminists have a shared interest in transcending this binary logic, as otherwise, "humanism itself [becomes] inaccessible to critique, since the only critique it would accept would be one carried out under the terms it imposes and controls."<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, this criticism of Foucault is based on the assumption that political strategies must be defined and reasoned out before acting. However, Foucault does not require politics to develop at the level of normative judgement; for him, political practice is prior to the developing of agendas and programs. For example, an individual does not thematically decide to resist sexism or racism, but rather finds her or himself in the midst of it. As an intellectual, Foucault aims to encourage creativity and open other modes of action for this resistance. This reversal is significant for oppressed individuals, because the requirement of prior justification for one's actions can be a function of unequal power relations that co-opts opposition. McWhorter contextualizes this debate:

If humanists require that *before* I resist I must justify my doing so—that I use *their* terms and concepts, speak *their* language—they subvert my political energy and annihilate my resistance all together. What appears politically questionable, then, are the assumptions and requirements embedded in humanist critiques themselves. Indeed, I cannot reason my way out of humanism, since humanism precludes my particular existence from the outset.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> McWhorter, op. cit., pp. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 74.

Consequently, feminists, rather than using traditional logic and forms of argumentation—some of the very practices that they have identified as patriarchal—are able to condemn such practices, without being limited to an internal critique.

The second main criticism that feminists utilize against Foucault concerns his “theory” of power relations. In response to Foucault’s claim that subjects cannot exist outside of power, these critics consider his philosophy detrimental to “emancipatory projects”; without individual agency it is impossible to resist domination. Linda Alcoff explains:

It is difficult to understand how agency can be formulated on this view. Given the enormous productive efficacy Foucault accords to power/knowledge or the dominant discourse, there could be agency only if human beings were given the causal ability to create, affect, and transform power/knowledge or discourses, but Foucault does not concede to us this capacity... if Foucault’s analysis of subjectivity is correct, a feminist emancipatory project is in trouble.<sup>9</sup>

The first part of this argument assumes that Foucault’s understanding of power excludes individual freedom. In my view, this is a misunderstanding; while Foucault argues that power functions in every human relationship to influence individuals to behave in certain ways, this does not mean that it is inherently bad or restrictive. Foucault describes power as “conduct.” In *The Subject and Power*, he states:

[Power] is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult... Perhaps the equivocal nature of the term ‘conduct’ is one of the best aids for coming to terms with the specificity of power relations. To ‘conduct is at the same time to ‘lead’ others... and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for Foucault, power has a dual nature; it both limits and creates possibilities for individuals. Strategies of power gravitate toward the solidification and strengthening of

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<sup>9</sup> Alcoff, L. “Feminist Politics and Foucault: The Limits to a Collaboration,” in McWhorter, op. cit., pp. 75. Also see Dean, C. “The Productive Hypothesis: Foucault, Gender, and the History of Sexuality.” *History and Theory* 33(3): 1994, pp. 275.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, M. “The Subject and Power.” *The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3*. James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press: 1994, pp. 341.

themselves. The danger is that these strategies could freeze and become a state of domination which, as opposed to power relations, closes off the possibility of resistance. Power, contrary to domination, must allow for the exercise of freedom, as its very existence is contingent on its being exercised over free subjects. As a result, power relations contain the possibility of their own disturbance. Foucault writes, “This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relation at all.”<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, Foucault would be critical of Alcoff’s emphasis on emancipation or liberation. For him, it is important not to view such resistances as liberation from an oppressor, as he rejects the liberation model of freedom, because it assumes a metaphysical subject constituted independently of power relations; there is no imprisoned human nature to be liberated by altering the economic or political situation.<sup>12</sup> In an interview, Foucault states:

I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social pressures, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression.<sup>13</sup>

To the contrary, freedom refers to the individual’s ability to transgress limits and to alter how one fits within a particular set of power relations or to alter the power relations themselves; it is an invention of alternatives to current practices. Thus, Foucault’s notion of power has a theory of agency implicit within it.

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, M. “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom.” The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 1,. Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press: 1994, pp. 292. (Hereafter cited as ECS.)

<sup>12</sup> For more on Foucault’s critique of freedom as liberation, see Olivia Custer’s “Exercising Freedom: Kant and Foucault,” Philosophy Today, SPEP Supplement, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault (ECS), op. cit, pp. 282.

Moreover, Foucault's account of power appears particularly useful for feminist theory, in several ways. First, Foucault's description of power's effects on the body in *Discipline and Punish* has explanatory value for the "techniques of self" that women adopt to become feminine.<sup>14</sup> Women have been subjugated by internalized power relations, "[through the development of] norms and competencies, not simply by taking power away."<sup>15</sup> As Foucault explains, there is no centralized oppressor, but rather the habits and comportment of masculinity and femininity that women perpetuate themselves through dieting, exercise, fashion, beauty techniques, etcetera, and which implicate the lived experiences of women's bodies. Women are socialized *to be* for others—for men. At the same time, it is difficult for women to rid themselves of these practices, as they come to view themselves in terms of how they are perceived by others. A woman's worth, then, is often dependent on the male gaze.<sup>16</sup>

Traditional feminist theory cannot explain the pleasure that women may derive from performing these practices, because it posits a singular view of femininity as oppressive. Foucault's understanding of power recognizes its diverse effects and women's role in their own oppression, resulting in an understanding that moves beyond victimization. If feminism clings to an emancipatory project for female victims of power, it will "preserve the old dichotomies of power in spite of itself."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bordo, S. "Feminism, Foucault, and the Politics of the Body." *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*. C. Ramazanoglu. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 191.

<sup>15</sup> Sawicki, J. "Foucault, Feminism, and Questions of Identity." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. G. Gutting. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 291.

<sup>16</sup> Haber, H. F. "Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman." *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*. S. J. Hekman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996, pp. 147. Also see Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*.

<sup>17</sup> Aladjem, T.. "The Philosopher's Prism: Foucault, Feminism, and Critique." *Political Theory* 19(2): 1991, pp. 280.

The next feminist criticism of Foucault that I would like to examine is the claim that Foucault's refusal of identity politics destroys the basis for collective political action. Supporters of this argument state that political alliances are based on a shared feminine identity and are concerned that any threat to the stability of this identity is detrimental to the ability of women to mobilize support. As Joan Cocks argues, one of Foucault's greatest weaknesses is "the inability to support any movement that through its massiveness and disciplined unity would be popular and yet powerful enough to undermine an entrenched legal-political arena."<sup>18</sup>

For Foucault, however, it would be important to problematize this use of women's sexual identities, given the traditional feminist assumption that there is a universal and ahistorical notion of "woman."<sup>19</sup> In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault conducts a genealogy of sexuality, and proposes that sex is an arbitrary and contingent component of identity. A brief review is necessary.

According to Foucault, in the eighteenth century, as the threat of epidemic disease decreased in Europe, governments began to focus their control on life, rather than death.<sup>20</sup> "Populations" emerged as political and economic problems that needed to be policed:

At the heart of this economic and political problem of population was sex: it was necessary to analyze birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive devices—of those "deadly secrets" which demographers on the eve of the Revolution knew were already familiar to the inhabitants of countryside.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cocks, J. cited in Sawicki, "Foucault, Feminism, and Questions of Identity," pp 297. Also see Hartssock, op. cit., pp. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Sawicki, J. "Foucault and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Difference." *Hypatia* 1(2): 1986, pp. 35. Also see Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 3-5.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978, pp 25 & 142.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-6.

Consequently, for the first time, it became necessary to be aware of each individual's sex and sexual activities. A "will to knowledge" developed in the realm of sex, resulting in the creation, classification, and recording of natural and unnatural, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, and other sexualities. Moreover, sex became something "hidden" that individuals were compelled to confess; not only did "sex" unify biological and physical characteristics, but it also implicated the essential and psychological core of the individual; an individual *became* his or her sex.<sup>22</sup> Sex had to be spoken of; "[s]ex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence."<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the third criticism, it is now possible to situate Foucault's response to supporters of a feminist identity politics. Foucault's move to historicize identity does not deny the reality of sexual identity, but rather demonstrates its limitations and dangers. Because sex was constructed with a set of discriminatory power relations, there is an implicit racism embedded in the concept that "would become anchorage points for the different varieties of racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."<sup>24</sup> Contemporary feminism has already experienced the exclusionary nature of its use of the category "woman," through its encounters with counter-movements including women of color, Third World feminists, and queer theory. For example, in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the subject of woman can no longer be viewed as a stable and distinct entity:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 154-156.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 32-3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 26.

intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.<sup>25</sup>

Traditional feminism typically has been blind to the intersections of multiple power relations that shape a woman's experiences. By treating white, middle-class female experiences as universal, feminism alienates women that do not situate themselves within this description.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, a feminist identity politics reproduces the harms it seeks to alleviate.

Foucault, then, wants to displace sex as the foundation of identity and rejects the essentialist assumption that identity is the basis for community. Moreover, both Butler and Foucault criticize the “tendency to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken.”<sup>27</sup> Intellectuals should not attempt to determine in advance which characteristics would unify women, because such characteristics are constructed through the act itself. Unity is then based on “creating a new cultural life”<sup>28</sup> and common interest, rather than a perceived essence or nature. Foucault explains:

...Rorty points out that... I do not appeal to any “we”—to any of those “wes” whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a “we” in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a “we” possible by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result- and the necessarily temporary result- of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, op. cit., pp. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Deveaux, M. “Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault.” Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault. S. J. Hekman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996, pp. 232.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, op. cit, pp. 298.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, M. “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity.” Foucault Live. S. Lotringer. New York: Semiotexte, 1996, pp. 382-3. (Hereafter cited as SPP.)

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, M. “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations.” The Essential Works of Foucault: Volume I. P. Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1994, pp. 114.

This can be compared to Foucault's discussion of gay communities, which he believes can be unified by a chosen lifestyle—by “a certain relationship to gayness,”<sup>30</sup> and not by *being gay*.

But what shape will politics take in the absence of identity as its focal point? Foucault himself could be said to support a programless politics. Foucault is weary of providing others with his own solutions, for, “[t]he role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they must do... it is... to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking.”<sup>31</sup> Through problematization, Foucault aims to expose previously unnoticed practices and views, and to ask new types of questions, in order to expose intolerable limitations on freedom. “[O]ppression must be experienced before it can be effectively resisted,”<sup>32</sup> and thus Foucault's critical thought is particularly useful to feminism in pointing out the patriarchal nature of customary practices.

As a result, Foucault is able to preserve and open up the multiplicity of resistances that exist in response to power relations. Moving beyond identity politics recognizes that identities are constructions. This, in turn, increases opportunities for resistance because it allows individuals “to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practice of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.”<sup>33</sup> Influenced by Foucault's method of critique, post-humanist feminists have utilized various forms of resistance in their theories. For example, Butler examines parody as a means of bending traditional understandings of

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<sup>30</sup> Foucault (SPP), op. cit., pp. 383.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, M., Ed. (1996). “Concern For Truth.” *Foucault Live*. New York, Semiotexte: 462.

<sup>32</sup> Sawicki (1994), op. cit., pp. 294.

<sup>33</sup> Butler, op. cit., pp. 187-8.

gender roles, while Honi Fern Haber considers images of muscular women in order to challenge feminine ideals.<sup>34</sup>

In discussing possible resistances to the confining nature of sexual identity, Foucault offers the following suggestion:

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanism of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.<sup>35</sup>

If Foucault could be said to have an “alternative” to current sexual practices, it would be his reversal of our traditional understanding of sexuality towards a notion of bodies and pleasures. It is in this context that I will examine the last main criticism of Foucault, the androcentrism and misleading neutrality of his history of sexuality. First, however, it is necessary to understand what Foucault means by replacing sex-desire with bodies and pleasures.

As discussed earlier, with the advent of bio-power and the surveillancing of populations, the notion of “sex” was established as a means of “[grouping] together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle.”<sup>36</sup> Having an intelligible sex that was distinguishably male or female became a prerequisite to humanity; sex became the “universal signified.”<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that in this move, Foucault inverts the traditional understanding of sex; rather than being a natural

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<sup>34</sup> Haber, *op. cit.*, pp. 139.

<sup>35</sup> Foucault (1978), *op. cit.*, pp. 157.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154.

characteristic of anatomy, the function of sex is to impose an artificial unity on the body, which otherwise is comprised of multiple, undifferentiated pleasures and experiences.

The invention of “sex” unified the multiple eighteenth century discourses on sexuality into a singular concept that served as an object of study to explain individuals’ behavior. As Foucault explains:

By creating the imaginary element that is “sex,” the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted “sex” itself as something desirable.<sup>38</sup>

It is this understanding of sexuality as sex-desire that Foucault wants to displace. Because sex-desire is inscribed in bodies that are pigeonholed into either side of the heterosexual male/female sex dichotomy, desire takes on the appearance of existing naturally as heterosexual desire. Because homosexual behavior is unintelligible within this framework, homosexuals are believed to have unnatural, inhuman desires. As Foucault explains, homosexuality is “disturbing” because it refuses to conform to the laws of desire; when two men are in love, the traditional understanding of sexuality is contradicted.<sup>39</sup>

Given Foucault’s criticism of identity, one might expect him to refuse the label of homosexual. However, while he avoids discussing personal experience in his writings, Foucault speaks more openly of his sexuality in interviews, which may provide insight as to what he means by “bodies and pleasures.” In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault explains that “[t]o be ‘gay’... is not to identify with the psychological traits and the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp. 156.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, M. “Friendship as a Way of Life.” *Foucault Live*. S. Lotringer. New York: Semiotexte, 1996, pp. 309.

visible masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life.”<sup>40</sup>

Foucault, rather than defining homosexuality as a form of desire, wants to return to an understanding of sexuality as an activity or lifestyle in which one chooses to engage.

While bodies and pleasures are not outside power relations, for Foucault they are in a unique position of resisting the deployment of sexuality. Bodies and pleasures do not carry the same connotation as desire, in that they do not imply a secret, psychological longing or preoccupation for sex. Additionally, Foucault desexualizes bodies and pleasures, allowing individuals to experiment with, cultivate, and create new pleasures. Understanding these new pleasures and experiences of the body as activities avoids collapsing them to means of uncovering identity.<sup>41</sup>

Foucault’s account of sexuality, however, has been criticized for neglecting to account for gender differences and its “chimera of neutrality.”<sup>42</sup> By not accounting for gender within his genealogical project, Foucault both limits the efficacy of his “bodies and pleasures” alternative and perpetuates the subjugation of women in Western philosophy. While Foucault examines the effects of power on the body, he cannot reconcile the fact that bodies are perceived in the world as occupying a space within the binary of masculinity and femininity.<sup>43</sup> In short, Foucault’s history of sexuality is incomplete, because he only provides a masculine account of sexuality. Naomi Schor explains:

The question of gender cannot be said to inform Foucault’s project. In the *Will to Power* [sic] we are introduced to a History of Sexuality wherein the notion that through history of sexuality might

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 310.

<sup>41</sup> Foucault (SPP), op. cit., pp. 384-5.

<sup>42</sup> McCallum, op. cit, pp. 90.

<sup>43</sup> Holland, C. R. J. “Women’s Sexuality and Men’s Appropriation of Desire,” Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism C. Ramazanoglu. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 251.

be different if written by women is never entertained; a single universal history is presumed to cover both sexes, as though the History, and more important, the Historian of sexuality himself had no sex.<sup>44</sup>

There are two important differences that must be taken in to account. I will first look at the woman as an object of masculine desire. Foucault's account of sex-desire is that it posits "'sex' itself as something desirable."<sup>45</sup> According to Beauvoir, women are other to themselves because they are defined by and measured according to a masculine perspective that strives to keep them embodied.<sup>46</sup> Despite Foucault's attempt to desexualize bodies, he misses the important point that women's bodies are read as sexual; they are their sex, they are their bodies.<sup>47</sup> In Western culture, women's bodies are produced by a "phallogentric desire," making women "other to that desire,"<sup>48</sup> and creating a fundamental inequality in sex relations. While men are expected to desire and actively seek sex, women must provide pleasure, but not desire it. As McWhorter argues:

If Jonathan Katz has it right—that is, if in the nineteenth century people really did experience sexual and gender identity and well-being differently from the ways most of us experience them now—it stands to reason that in places where electricity, plumbing, and paved roads were all but nonexistent before 1945, female heterosexual and lesbian identities may well have been all but nonexistent too.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Foucault's history of sexuality would be a different story if it were written by a woman. The identity of heterosexual women traditionally has not been composed of sex as desire; though they may have had sex in order to reproduce, women have maintained the position of the pleasure-giver or object of desire. Without this

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<sup>44</sup> McCallum, op. cit., pp. 80.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault (1978), op. cit., pp. 156.

<sup>46</sup> Butler, J. "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault." *Praxis International* 5(4): 1986, pp. 509.

<sup>47</sup> Haber, op. cit, pp. 139.

<sup>49</sup> McWhorter, op. cit, pp. 104.

understanding of the objectification of women, Foucault's analysis loses explanatory power in the realm of sexual inequality.

Second, it is important to examine the different ways in which women experience their bodies, given its role as a site of political struggle. Bodies are shaped and trained by the networks of social and political power in which they exist, affecting their very comportment and habits. For example, men tend to be taught to take up space in the world and to actively and aggressively participate in it. On the other hand, women are socialized to take up as little space as possible, both physically and intellectually.<sup>50</sup> The feminine subject is constituted as "a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed."<sup>51</sup> Thus, an analysis of bodies and pleasures must take the differences between masculine and feminine bodies seriously.

There appear to be three main ways in which women experience the effects of power on their bodies differently than men.<sup>52</sup> First, disciplinary practices produce a certain image of the ideal size and shape of a woman's body. The internalization of the feminine ideal is evident by the prevalence of excessive dieting, exercising, and eating disorders. Even healthy women often have a distorted image of their own bodies. Second, women tend to exhibit a specific repertoire of gestures, including reserved movement and limited use of space. Finally, the female body is treated as an ornamental surface to be displayed. To this end, women utilize various techniques of self in order to gain control of their bodies and seek the perfect body through shaving, cosmetics, hair care, plastic surgery, etcetera. An interesting aspect of these techniques is that many women find

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<sup>50</sup> Haber, *op. cit.*, pp. 139.

<sup>51</sup> McLaren, M. "Possibilities for a Nondominated Female Subjectivity." *Hypatia* 8(1): 1993, pp. 155.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157.

pleasure in these constrictions of femininity, as it provides a sense of self-mastery and identity.<sup>53</sup>

One may argue, as some feminists have recently done, that Foucault, in fact, does not exclude women from his history of sexuality. According to this argument, his silence on feminine sexuality problematizes the absence of women in traditional history.

Aladjem explains:

There appears no “woman...” Yet she really is there in Foucault’s own work, posing a sort of question. In refusing to assert his own perspective he is unwilling to posit hers, and yet she stands in the same relation to the tests of his *History of Sexuality* as the mad individual, the deviant, the prisoner, or “mankind.”<sup>54</sup>

This position, in my view, is too lenient on Foucault, given that he intended to conduct a history of sexuality, it was irresponsible to ignore an important aspect of that history.

Moreover, this argument seems anti-Foucauldian. If Foucault intended to problematize the absence of women from history, rather than perpetuate that absence, he would have drawn attention to it and asked what societal conditions brought about the treatment of women as the “second sex.” I can see no reason why Foucault would have chosen to abandon his method of critique in the case of gendered oppression.

It is Foucault’s silent position on feminine sexuality that limits his effectiveness for a feminist politics. Sandra Bartkey explains the significance of Foucault’s omission of gender:

Women, like men, are subject to many disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines which produce a modality of embodiment which is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed... his analysis as a whole *reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory.*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp. 156.

<sup>54</sup> Aladjem, T., op. cit., pp. 281.

<sup>55</sup> Bartkey, cited in: Holland, op. cit, pp 250 (my emphasis).

Although Foucault's work excludes an analysis of gender, it does not preclude the incorporation of gender into Foucauldian methods. Foucault's problematization method is useful in demonstrating that traditional gender roles are historical and contingent, and thus, suggests the possibility of alternatives to the status quo. Moreover, Foucault's "theory" of power relations offers a more accurate description of gender inequality than a theory of victimization. Finally, and perhaps most important to the efficiency of feminist politics, Foucault's critique of identity politics offers a means for transcending the exclusionary practices of mainstream feminism. In my own view, feminist theorists ought to examine Foucault's method of critique, and appropriate the aspects that can be incorporated into gender analysis. As Jana Sawicki suggests, "[a]ttending to the exigencies of feminist practice will sometimes require that we either ignore Foucault or move beyond him. A Foucauldian feminism would require no less."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sawicki, J. Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body. New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 109.