

Anarchic Bodies: Foucault and the Feminist Question of Experience

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The article shows that Michel Foucault's account of the sexual body is not a naïve return to a prediscursive body, nor does it amount to discourse reductionism and to the exclusion of experience, as some feminists have argued. Instead, Foucault's idea of bodies and pleasures as a possibility of the counterattack against normalizing power presupposes an experiential understanding of the body. The experiential body can become a locus of resistance because it is the possibility of an unpredictable event.

1. THE RETRIEVAL OF EXPERIENCE

The aim of discussing the centrality of experience in feminist theory is very likely to produce a feeling that we are again going over a much-trodden terrain that has become barren in the process. The importance of experience for contemporary feminist theory has swung like a pendulum from one extreme to the other during its fairly short history. In the 1970s feminist theorists held experience to be one of the irreducible starting points for understanding the situation of women. The explicit aim was to retrieve women's experiences, which for too long had remained invisible and marginal. The pendulum reached the other extreme with Joan Scott's influential article "Experience" (1992), in which she accused feminist projects aiming to make experience visible of being exceedingly naïve: they preclude analysis of the working of the representational system itself and of its historicity, and reproduce instead its oppressive terms. The notion of experience has thus become polarized as either a positive or a negative term in feminist debates between postmodernism/modernism and humanism/antihumanism.¹

Sonia Kruks's book *Retrieving Experience* (2001) shows that the pendulum has not yet stopped. Kruks argues that feminist theory has become dominated

by postmodern modes of thinking, such as Foucault's philosophy, and that it has therefore unwisely cut itself off from the rich heritage of existential thought. One of the central premises of her book is that feminist theory would now do well to employ existentialism, and through it to also retrieve the central importance of lived experience (Kruks 2001, 6). On the one hand, Kruks's aim is to complement accounts of discursively constituted experience with subjective, lived accounts of it. She claims that experience can be accounted for on the basis of two dialectically related poles, one of which can take priority depending on the nature of our questions and goals: 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 (Kruks, 141).

This idea of two complementary accounts of experience generates more philosophical problems than it solves, however. Even though a distinction must exist between having an experience and describing it, as long as we move in the realm of philosophy, language is needed to describe even the lived or felt experience. Kruks's distinction between linguistically articulated experience and prediscursive, affective experience thus simply avoids the philosophical problem of the relationship between experience and language.

On the other hand, Kruks also argues for the primacy of the lived pole. This leads her to a problematic position of considering "female experience" as an irreducible given grounded in female embodiment:

In my example, the person in pain was, like myself, a woman. That she was a Nigerian woman whose physiognomy, speech, life experiences, and social status were very different from mine did not interfere with my ability immediately to feel-with her pain. To clarify the place of gender here it is useful to ask a further question: Do I also feel-with the pain of a man whose face has been smashed? A bruised eye and a split lip certainly communicate another's pain to me irrespective of the gender of the sufferer, yet generally I do find that my affective response to a man's pain is weaker. (Kruks, 167)

Even though there are a number of explanations for why Kruks's affective reaction to a man's pain is weaker than to a woman's pain, she draws her conclusion without hesitation: "This is surely because, although I share with him those key invariants that make us both sentient human beings, my lived body is also significantly different from his" (Kruks, 167).

While I agree with Kruks's concern that accounting for the constitution of experience in terms of discursivity alone poses serious theoretical difficulties for

feminist theory, I also claim that feminist criticism influenced by poststructuralism has made it difficult for us to return to a foundational “female experience” grounded in the communalities of women’s embodiment. I argue that feminist theory must “retrieve experience,” but this cannot mean a return to a mute and original female experience. On the contrary, the philosophical challenge facing us is today is by no means less demanding than the one that has occupied much of twentieth-century philosophical thinking: trying to understand the relationship between experience and language.

I will focus on a limited aspect of this question in this article by discussing sexual experience and its relationship to discourse in Michel Foucault’s philosophy. My aim is to show that Foucault’s thought offers feminist theory tools, which are often overlooked by both his feminist critics as well as his appropriators in trying to understand experience. I will thus argue that the dominance of postmodern questions in feminist theory does not amount to discourse reductionism as Kruks, for example, claims, 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.

I will begin by discussing the dominant feminist interpretations of Foucault’s understanding of embodiment and experience in parts two and three. My aim is to explicate the problems in these accounts in order to way the pave for my own reading discussed in parts four and five. I argue that Foucault’s account of the sexual body is not a naïve return to a prediscursive body, nor does it amount to discourse reductionism and to the exclusion of experience. Instead, Foucault’s idea of bodies and pleasures as a possibility of the counterattack against normalizing power presupposes an experiential understanding of the body.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF PLEASURE

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.²

Although experience is a central topic in Foucault’s thought, its importance has been bypassed by many of his commentators.³ To point out only some examples, in the *Preface* of his early book *The Order of Things* (1966/1994),

Foucault claims that in every culture the pure experience of order exists and that “the present study is an attempt to analyze that experience” (Foucault 1966/1994, xxi). Nearly twenty years later, in the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* (1984/1992) he again characterizes his work as a study of experience, the goal being to understand how the modern individual can experience himself as a subject of “sexuality.” To do this, he claims, we must undertake a genealogical study of the experience of sexuality. “What I planned . . . was 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” (Foucault 1984/1992, 4).

This contradiction between Foucault’s criticisms of philosophies of experience on the one hand, and his setting of experience as the explicit subject of his own study on the other, has been pointed out by some of Foucault’s commentators. Thomas Flynn (2003), for example, argues that the contradiction is only apparent, because what we are dealing with are in fact two different conceptions of experience: experience as temporal and lived versus experience as spatial and objective.⁴ Flynn argues for an “axial” reading of the Foucaultian corpus, which advances along three axes: truth (knowledge), power (governmentality), and subjectivation (ethics as reflection of the self on itself). These three axes constitute a prism, and the space enclosed by these prismatic planes is “experience.” Foucault’s experience is thus desubjectivized: it leaves us with a plurality of correlations irreducible and nonsubsumable into a larger whole. Flynn warns that although the unwary might be amazed to find Foucault speaking of “experience,” any throwback to psychological or epistemological categories is excluded (Flynn 1985, 533). Foucault’s understanding of the subject denotes neither the consciousness of phenomenologists nor the atomic individual of empiricism. Foucault believed that a genealogy of the constitution of the subject would free us from the philosophy of a meaning-bestowing “subject” that has prevailed since Husserl. It is in pursuit of this Nietzschean project of historicizing the subject that Foucault undertakes his genealogies of experience (534–35). I will return to the question of what an experience without a subject means in Foucault’s thought at the end of my article.

If we read Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* not as a history of sexuality but as a history of the *experience of sexuality*, as Foucault himself characterizes the project in the Introduction to Volume Two, then the first volume (*La volonté de savoir*) also appears in a new light. I will focus my discussion of sexual experience mainly on this book, because of Foucault’s books, it is inarguably the one that has influenced feminist theory the most. In it Foucault studies the birth of modern sexuality in power/knowledge networks. According to Flynn’s prismatic model, the book would thus study the axes of truth and power that constitute experience. 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 as a practice.

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 mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grip 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 (Foucault 1976/1990, 157).

Foucault claims here that sex-desire cannot offer resistance to normalizing power, but on the contrary only strengthens it. By revealing the truth about our desire we cannot find our natural or authentic sexuality, but only solidify prevailing sexual identities. Foucault suggests that it is bodies and pleasures that can become the locus of resistance instead. What Foucault means by this claim is not very clear, however. Some commentators interpret it by emphasizing the notion of pleasure. David Halperin (1995, 95–96), for example, argues that modern techniques of power make use of sexuality in order to attach to us a personal identity defined in part by our sexual identity. According to Halperin, the transformative power of the queer sexual practices that gay men have invented lies in the invention of novel, intense, and scattered bodily pleasures. In this way, queer culture brings about a tactical reversal of the mechanisms of sexuality, which ultimately dispenses with sexuality and destabilizes the very constitution of identity itself.⁵

The idea of bodies and pleasure as a locus of resistance has also been strongly criticized, however. Perhaps the most influential form of this criticism was presented by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she interprets this idea as a contradictory claim about the body's return to a non-normalizable wildness.⁶ Butler's performative theory of gender builds upon Foucault's understanding of sex as a fictive unity that has been naturalized and that grounds the explanatory framework of both gender and sexuality. According to Butler, Foucault's genealogical inquiry exposes this ostensible "cause" as "an effect." It is produced by a regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within discursive accounts of sexuality (Butler 1990, 23).

Butler parts ways with Foucault by denying Foucault's idea of bodily resistance. She argues that Foucault's claim that the category of sex is a fictitious unity means that for Foucault, the body is not sexed in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse, through which it becomes invested with an idea of natural or essential sex. She also draws a second, problematic conclusion about the body, claiming that this also means that "the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations" (Butler, 92).

She denies any meaning to the body in Foucault's thought, which is not discursively constructed. The result is that his idea of bodily resistance becomes contradictory. According to Butler, Foucault seems to argue for the cultural construction of bodies, but his theory in fact contains hidden assumptions that reveal that he *also* understood them to be outside the reach of power (94–95). When we consider those “textual occasions on which Foucault criticizes the categories of sex and the power regime of sexuality, it is clear that his own theory maintains an unacknowledged emancipatory ideal that proves increasingly difficult to maintain, even within the strictures of his own critical apparatus” (94). While Foucault advocates the critical deconstruction of sexuality and sex in *The History of Sexuality*, he does not extend it to the sexed body, but naively presents bodies and pleasures as the site of resistance against power.

Are Foucault's references to the body as the locus of resistance merely naive slippages into the idea of a prediscursive body? Do we have to accept Butler's reading of the Foucaultian body according to which these passages are implicit contradictions within his thought? Are bodies and pleasures within the same discursive order as sex and sexuality? What can bodies and pleasures as an alternative to sex-desire mean? Do they presuppose an understanding of experience?

3. THE DISCURSIVE BODY

To answer these questions and evaluate the Foucaultian body from the perspective of feminist theory, we must first ask what exactly is meant by it. The feminist appropriations are based on varying readings of it.⁷ Foucault did not present a theory or even a unified account of the body anywhere, and thus his conception of it has to be discerned from his genealogical books and articles that aim to bring the body into the focus of history.⁸ It is often summarized by saying that Foucault understands the body to be discursively constructed. This, however, can be interpreted in very different ways. The first source of confusion is the fact that the notion of discourse is understood differently. Sometimes “discursive” is understood in a strictly linguistic sense, as something that is linguistic or linguistically structured. Sometimes discourse is understood in a more general sense as a cultural practice, and discursive means more or less the same as culturally constructed. Furthermore, there are at least three different interpretations of discursive—linguistic or cultural—construction. I will explicate these three interpretations in order to bring out the problems in them. In the next part I will argue for a fourth reading, which unlike most feminist appropriations gives a central role to Foucault's claims about bodies as a locus of resistance.

1. First, we can understand discursive in the strict sense of linguistic, and argue that by denying the prediscursive body Foucault is claiming that the

way we identify and theorize about the body is linguistically constituted. The prediscursive body is, by necessity, impossible to identify and theorize because as soon as we name it and start to talk about it we have already brought it into the realm of discourse. William Turner, for example, explicates Foucault's and Butler's thinking like this: "Our conceptions of our bodies, whether as material, or important, or neither, come to us through language; the belief in a preculturally material body as the ultimate ground of identity itself depends on the circulation of meanings in a culture" (2000, 112).

I call this first reading the *weak* version of the idea of a discursive body, because by denying the prediscursive body it in fact says nothing about the body itself. Even if the linguistic representations were inevitably constructed in discourse, bodies themselves, in their materiality, could escape the cultural construction. However, this reading is refuted by Foucault himself: "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" (Foucault 1976/1990, 152).

2. The second interpretation, what I call the *intermediate* reading, claims that the cultural construction covers bodies themselves in their materiality and not just in their cultural and linguistic representations. There remains, however, a stable core of the body, imposing a limit that cultural manipulation cannot cross. This intermediate reading thus accepts that the Foucaultian body is culturally constructed, even in its materiality to a certain extent, but we must posit some kind of universal invariance. The border between nature and culture in this kind of reading is variably drawn. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982, 111) suggest that the stable core in Foucault's account is drawn from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body and consists of ahistorical structures of the perceptual field such as size constancy, brightness constancy, and up-down asymmetry.

This second reading is incompatible with Foucault's explicit effort to dismantle the nature/culture dichotomy on which it heavily relies. In Foucault's thought, we cannot assume to have knowledge of what is natural and what is culturally variable in our bodies. This distinction between nature and culture should itself be understood as an effect of a certain discourse that produces the idea of a natural body. Such an interpretation, while relying on certain passages of Nietzsche, *Genealogy, History* (1971/1984), must also either ignore or attribute to Nietzsche the strong formulations concerning a culturally constructed body that also occur in it. Foucault writes in this essay that "nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1971/1984, 87).

3. The third or *strong* reading denies any dimensions or variations of embodiment not historically and culturally constructed. We can only understand as

well as experience our bodies through culturally mediated representations, but bodies themselves are also shaped in their very materiality by the rhythms of culture, diets, habits, and norms. Judith Butler appropriates this reading of Foucault's thought when she argues in *Gender Trouble* that the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. According to her, the body "is not a being, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 139). Butler criticizes all feminist efforts to liberate the female body from the determinations of patriarchal power. The culturally constructed body cannot be liberated to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but only to an open future of cultural possibilities (93).

While the strong interpretation of the Foucaultian body has resulted in influential feminist appropriations⁹ such as Butler's, it also contains serious problems from a feminist point of view. The wide feminist criticism that Butler's understanding of the body in *Gender Trouble* received testifies that at least some difficulties are involved in trying to encapsulate female embodiment through strong cultural constructivist accounts of the body. I will summarize three sets of questions that I see as problematic for feminist theory in Butler's account of the body as presented in *Gender Trouble*, and therefore also in Foucault's account when it is interpreted according to the strong reading.¹⁰

The first problem can be called the question of *identification*. Butler, appropriating Foucault, argues in *Gender Trouble* that the unity of gender is an effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through compulsory heterosexuality. Cultural representations of the body and its sex as a natural and necessary ground for gender identity have a normative function in the power/knowledge strategy that forces individuals into two opposing gender categories. Gender identity is discursively constructed as a normative ideal and then performatively produced by those acts understood to be its effects. This normative unity is never fully installed, however. The dichotomies of male/female, masculine/feminine are constantly undermined by gender discontinuities in the sexual communities in which gender does not necessarily correspond with sex. Butler's theory, while appropriating Foucault's thought, also reveals the limitations of the Foucaultian framework when applied to the question of gender: it leads to an oversimplified notion of gender identity as an imposed effect. We cannot understand the constitution of gender-identity only through the normative ideals and practices that prevail in our culture. There are experiences, sensations, and lives that do not properly fit within the limits of the normal. People identify with stigmatized subject positions, or even socially abject positions, and often this identification is strongly tied to their bodies. As Stuart Hall formulates the problem, Foucault's thought "reveals little about why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others"

or “what might in any way interrupt, prevent or disturb the smooth insertion of individuals into the subject positions” (1996, 10–11). Feminist theory must develop some understanding of why or how subjects identify with the sexual subject positions, for example, to which, according to Foucault’s analysis, they are summoned.¹¹

The second and related problem could be called the problem of *singularity*. The feminist question concerns not only how different subject positions are constituted, but also how subjects fashion, stylize, and produce these positions, and why they never do so completely. If female embodiment as well as subjectivity is an effect of a constitutive power, how is it possible that there are several different variations of it? Even if I identify with the gendered subject position to which I am summoned, I still have the singular style of living my female embodiment. Despite providing an explanation for the normative construction of the female body, feminist theory has not yet accounted for or explained in any way the variations of female embodiment.

The third set of questions concerns the possibility of resistance to normative power. The only possibilities for resistance against subjection that a strong interpretation of the discursive body seems to allow open up through the gaps in the struggle with competing regimes. The subjection of bodies is never complete because the deployments of power are always partial and contradictory. Foucault insists that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 1976/1990, 95). The points of resistance are distributed in an irregular fashion throughout the power network. They are the “odd term in relations of power” (96), its blind spot or evading limit. Power is thus not deterministic machinery, but a dynamic and complex strategical situation allowing for resistance. In her book *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler analyzes and concisely explicates this idea of resistance in Foucault’s thought. In Foucault, resistance appears (a) in the course of a subjectivation that exceeds the normalizing aims by which it is mobilized; or (b) through convergence with other discursive regimes, whereby inadvertently produced discursive complexity undermines the teleological aims of normalization. Butler concludes: “Thus resistance appears as the effect of power, as part of power, its self-subversion” (Butler 1997, 93). Consequently, she puts forward the view that resistance constitutes an error in the workings of the normalizing power as the only viable account of resistance in Foucault.

From a feminist point of view, this means that, while a focus on bodies seems to open up important connections with Foucault’s thought, the apparent denial of the body’s capacity for resistance seems to refute all feminist political goals. Lois McNay, for example, argues in her book *Foucault and Feminism* (1992) that Foucault’s historical studies give the impression that the body presents no resistance to the operations of power. Although Foucault insists that power is always accompanied by resistance, he does not elaborate on how this resistance manifests itself through the body. McNay argues that this is particularly

problematic for feminist theory given that a significant aim of the feminist project is the rediscovery and revaluation of the experiences of women (12). Foucault cannot account for women's strategies of resistance, for the fact is that women did not simply slip passively into socially prescribed feminine roles (41).

Butler's books that followed *Gender Trouble*, particularly *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), seek to answer the questions left open in *Gender Trouble*. While accepting the strong reading of the Foucaultian body, she sees its limitations for feminist theory and seeks to complement it with a more dynamic and productive understanding of embodiment.¹² In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler engages most comprehensively in combining Foucault and psychoanalysis. She does this in connection with the question of resistance to constitutive power. Her question to Foucault is, how can one take an oppositional relation to power if one is constituted by the very power one opposes? Butler suggests that to understand how the subject is formed in subordination while becoming the guarantor of resistance and opposition at the same time requires combining the Foucaultian theory of power with the psychoanalytic theory of the psyche (Butler 1997, 2–3).

In Butler's analysis the psyche—not the subject—resists the regularization that Foucault ascribes to normalizing discourses. According to Butler, psychoanalysis can provide a principle of resistance to given forms of reality because the psyche exceeds the normalizing effects of power (86).¹³ The psychoanalytically inspired account of resistance thus does not locate resistance in the body either, but rather in the psyche. If the problem with the strong constructivist account of the Foucaultian body operative in *Gender Trouble* was that cultural intelligibility seemed to swallow up the material resistance of the body, this problem still seems to be pertinent, at least to some extent, in *The Psychic Life of Power*.¹⁴

In regard to Foucault's poststructuralist understanding of the body, Butler writes that "perhaps the body has come to substitute for the psyche in Foucault—that is, as that which exceeds and confounds the injunctions of normalization" (Butler 1997, 94). It is here I think that Butler hits the mark. I will argue in the next part of my paper that the enabling shift in subjection that Butler locates on the level of the psyche can also be thought to take place on the level of the body. Thus, rather than complementing Foucault's account of the constitution of the subject with a theory of the psyche, I suggest that we return to his own formulations about the resistance of the body.

4. THE EXPERIENTIAL BODY

In addition to the three different readings of the Foucaultian body that I presented earlier—the weak, intermediate, and strong—I will next argue for a fourth reading of Foucault's understanding of the body. It is my contention

that if we wish to consider Foucault's idea of bodily resistance, we must leave behind the conception of the body as a mere material object, the body as an object of natural sciences and disciplinary technologies. 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. Thus, when we discuss the different interpretations of a discursive body, we must make one more distinction. Rather than referring only to the different senses or degrees of the cultural construction of the body as a material and bioscientific object, we must also distinguish when we talk about the discursive construction of experiences.

While Foucault conceived of the body strictly in terms of an object of disciplinary manipulation in *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1991), I argue that such a conception does not underlie his account of it in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, in which he presupposes a more elaborate understanding of the body through sexuality. While feminist theory has widely appropriated *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, in connection with issues of sexuality and sex, it is normally interpreted as identical to *Discipline and Punish* in its account of the body as an object of disciplinary manipulation. Disciplinary power in connection with sexuality is simply complemented with biopower and deployments of sexuality. This kind of reading, however, overlooks what I think are some of the most interesting aspects of the account of the body in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, and that point to the potential of bodily resistance.¹⁵

A much earlier essay than *Discipline and Punish* illuminates Foucault's idea of bodies and pleasure as put forward in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. "A Preface to Transgression" (1963/1998), written over ten years earlier than *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 and dedicated to Bataille, takes up the question of sexual experience. Foucault questions the limits of experience and the acts of transgression that overcome them. Through his reading of Bataille, Foucault suggests that the importance of the experience of sexuality in our culture derives from its connection to the death of God. Instead of condemning us to a limited, positivist world, the death of God in fact gives us a world "totally exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it" (Foucault 1963/1998, 72). Sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience, the experience of excess, of overcoming limits.

Foucault notes that "transgression is an action that involves the limit," it demands it for its existence (Foucault, 73). The limit and the transgression depend on each other: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and reciprocally, transgression would be "pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (73). The excess of experience, the transgression, not only presupposes the limit, but also constitutes it in overcoming it and momentarily opens it up to the limitless. It forces "the limit to face the

fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes." Foucault argues that transgression is thus not victory over limits, it is not a negative or a revolutionary act. It reaffirms limited being, while also momentarily opening up a zone of limitlessness to existence.

However, this affirmation contains nothing positive either, in the sense that no content can bind this experience, which by definition, has no limits. Foucault suggests that perhaps it is simply an affirmation of a division, a testing of the limit, a contestation. Transgression is not related to the limit "as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open space of a building to its enclosed spaces" (Foucault, 73–74). The relationship between limit and transgression is rather like "a spiral that no simple infraction can exhaust" (74). Limit and transgression are irrevocably tied to each other; they constitute each other and constantly reaffirm and contest each other. Transgression creates a limit that exists only in the movement that crosses it. It literally crosses over the limits and thus brings an explicit experience of limits into being.

If we read the idea of sexual experience as an overcoming of limits into Foucault's understanding of the body, we can interpret this in different ways. Firstly, the experiential body can transgress the limit between the normal and the abnormal. The transgressive experiences that fall outside the limits of the normal are necessary for constituting its limits. The experiential body is a locus of resistance in the sense that it forms the spiral of limits and transgressions. Power inscribes the limits of normal bodily experiences, but it is exactly the existence of these limits that makes their transgression possible. In an interview Foucault opposes the term desire because it functions as a calibration in terms of normality: "I am advancing this term (pleasure), because it seems to me that it escapes the medical and naturalistic connotations inherent in the notion of desire. . . . There is no 'pathology' of pleasure, no 'abnormal' pleasure" (quoted in Halperin 1995, 93–94). Foucault's view would thus be that bodies and pleasures can gain meaning in discourse only, but that this discourse would be different than the psychological-medical discourse that produces our conception of normal sexuality.

I argue that Foucault also makes a more radical claim by taking up limit-experiences. He argues that the limit between discursive intelligibility and unintelligibility can also be crossed in experience. Like Bataille, he is interested in experiences on the limits of language. The experiential body thus also contests the limit between the intelligibility and unintelligibility of experiences. This is a more radical interpretation because even abnormal experiences may still be within discursive intelligibility; we can list and classify perversions, for example. Foucault also advanced pleasure and opposed desire as a grid of intelligibility:

That notion (desire) has been used as a tool, as a grid of intelligibility. . . . Desire is not an event but a permanent feature of the subject: it provides a basis onto which that psychologico-medical armature can attach itself. The term pleasure, on the other hand, is virgin territory, unused, almost devoid of meaning. . . . It is an event “outside the subject,” or at the limit of the subject, taking place in that something which is neither of the body or the soul, which is neither inside nor outside—in short, a notion neither assigned nor assignable. (quoted in Halperin, 93–94)

According to Foucault, the power/knowledge apparatus constitutes subjectivity as well as all forms of experience, but this does not mean that they are discursively constituted. In Foucault’s genealogy the regime of discourse, the episteme, only constitutes the specifically discursive element of a more general regime, the *dispositif* or apparatus, which is both discursive and nondiscursive.¹⁶ Through the notion of *dispositif* Foucault aims to overcome the distinction between transcendental constitution and empirical, causal formation. Power relations are immanent to the social reality and have empirical, causal effects. They do not exist prior to the individuals who are to be inserted in them as inert or consenting targets; power exists only when it is exercised. Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault 1980, 98). But power relations are also paradoxically “transcendental,” in the sense that they are a condition of possibility for the constitution of the subject and its experiences.¹⁷ By claiming that power relations are productive of forms of subjectivity, Foucault does not simply suggest that the subject and its experiences are produced as cars are produced from various materials in a factory. Nor does he claim that only the intelligibility or the linguistic interpretations of experiences are formed by power. We must rather try to understand how materiality and intelligibility are dynamically entangled in the idea of a *dispositif*, which explores the historical materialization of ideational norms.

Beatrice Han (1998/2002, 125) provides an example of this materialization in her discussion of a course given by Foucault at the College de France in 1974, in which the effects of truth specific to medical discourse were analyzed. Medical discourse elaborates a theoretical object, following a process made possible by the hospital structure and therefore by the techniques of subjection practiced on the patient. But by the same token, this discourse generates a real object corresponding to its knowledge. The conceptual objectification of the illness is therefore doubled by a second material form of objectification, in which the patient reproduces the phenomena in his or her very person. The objectification process is thus transposed from the theoretical level to that of reality, where in turn it produces concrete effects, since real forms of illness end up corresponding to the newly constituted concept of the patient’s sickness.

The distinction between a regime of discourse and a more general regime, the *dispositif* or apparatus, which is both discursive and nondiscursive, leaves open the possibility that not all experiences are discursively constituted, even though their intelligibility is. It is possible to imagine limit-experiences that fall outside of what is constituted by discourse in the sense that these abject or transgressive experiences are rendered mute and unintelligible in our culture. They might, for example, be experiences induced by drugs, or experiences that we try to make intelligible by classifying them as forms of insanity. However, what Foucault also seems to suggest is that sexual experiences of pleasure can never be wholly reduced to discursive meanings either. Bodies and pleasures, an expression “almost devoid of meaning,” would point to an experience on the limits of intelligibility that cannot be properly named or described at all.

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.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler herself posits an outside to the culturally constructed body. She writes that there is an “outside” to what is constructed by discourse, even though this is “not an absolute ‘outside,’ an ontological there-ness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of the discourse” (Butler 1993, 8). Rather, it is a constitutive “outside” “that can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders.” She argues that the bodies that fail to materialize the norm provide the necessary “outside” for the bodies that qualify as bodies that matter (16). Thus, Butler seems to hold that when Foucault assumes an outside to the discursively constructed body, he effects a naive slippage to an outside as “ontological there-ness,” whereas her own notion of an “outside” is always in quotation marks because it is not an ontological outside, but only becomes possible in relation to discourse. I have argued that Foucault’s understanding of the sexual body, like Butler’s account, is an effort to dismantle the dichotomy of the culturally constructed vs. the natural, and to inquire into the discursive limits of embodiment and experience. It is, however, also possible to read into Foucault’s account an ontological claim about the experiential body.

5. ANARCHIC BODIES: FOUCAULT’S ONTOLOGY OF THE EVENT

If we return to Flynn’s prismatic model of experience, the limit-experience would thus be an experience that crosses over one of the sides of the prism that encloses it: the axis of power constituting the limit between normal and

abnormal or the axis of knowledge constituting the limit between discursive intelligibility and unintelligibility. To understand the limit-experience in relation to the third axis (forms of subjectivity), poses more problems, however. This axis deals with the ways that subjects understand and form themselves as subjects of certain experiences.

Beatrice Han argues that two contradictory notions of experience are in fact at work in Foucault's later thought dealing with the axis of subjectivization (1998/2002, 152–58). Foucault studies the forms within which individuals are able to recognize themselves as subjects of sexuality, and how sexuality is constituted as a singular experience through this recognition. Han argues that on the one hand, Foucault claims that experience is an objective, anonymous, and general structure connecting fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity. On the other hand, his later understanding of the subject also presupposes a more traditional understanding of experience as a subjective self-relation of recognition. In Foucault's late work, experience refers to a reflective relation to oneself, which is furthermore capable of problematizing experience understood as an objective structure. Han thus points out that the third axis is distinctly different from the other two, because it does not refer to objective conditions, but introduces the reflective dimension of subjectivity. Experience is understood as a correlation supposed to unite both objective (knowledge and power) and subjective elements (forms of self-consciousness) (155).

This more traditional, subjective understanding of experience at work in Foucault's later thought is also desubjectivized in connection with the idea of the limit-experience, however. Foucault's interest in subjective experience is not primarily interest in "normal" experience: it is not an effort to account for everyday experiences or to reveal what is invariable in them. For Foucault, experience is never an epistemological or ontological starting point. It is not analyzed through a phenomenological effort to isolate essential structures of consciousness or lived embodiment. By calling pleasure an event outside the subject, and not an experience of the subject, Foucault is clearly looking for a new perspective on the analysis of experience. He is interested in experience as the possibility of a surprise, a transgression of limits into something unanticipated or even unintelligible. Experience is an event outside the subject when it is experienced as transgressing the limits of the normal lifeworld into something that exceeds the constitutive power of our familiar normativity; in this sense it throws us outside of ourselves. In an interview Foucault clarifies this difference between the phenomenological understanding of experience and the idea of the limit-experience that was so important for him.

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a certain way of bringing a reflective gaze to bear on some object of "lived experience," on the everyday in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meaning. For Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, on the other hand, experience is trying to reach a certain point in

life that is as close as possible to the “unlivable,” to that which can’t be lived through. What is required is the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time. By contrast, phenomenological work consists in unfolding the field of possibilities related to everyday experience. Moreover, phenomenology attempts to recapture the meaning of everyday experience in order to rediscover the sense in which the subject that I am is indeed responsible, in its transcendental functions, for founding that experience together with its meanings. On the other hand, in Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivization (Foucault 1978/2000, 241).

Foucault’s understanding of experience can thus be understood as an experience without the subject in two senses. Firstly, Foucault is aiming to study the historical constitution of experience through an objective conception of it: experience is a spatial structure constituted by the interrelated elements of power, knowledge, and forms of relation to the self. Secondly, he is interested in experience as a possible path to the dissolution of the subject. This sense of experience contains a potential of resistance to normalizing power because it offers the possibility of transgression into the unpredictable.

Foucault’s understanding of subjective experience is thus more akin to the phenomenological understanding of an event than of an experience. Françoise Dastur characterizes an event phenomenologically by describing it as the impossible that happens, in spite of everything, in a terrifying or marvelous manner (2002, 183). It comes to us by surprise, when and where we least expect it. She asks what happens when the excess implied in the event fractures the horizon of possibilities in such a manner that the mere encounter with the event becomes impossible. An example would be a traumatic experience of which we can only speak about in the third voice and in past time, in the mode of it having happened to me. It is not comprehended as an experience of the subject, but as an event outside of the subject that happened to him or her.

I argue, therefore, that Foucault’s idea of bodies and pleasures as a locus of resistance implies not a Foucaultian ontology of the body, but an ontology of the event.¹⁸ The experiential body is the locus of resistance in the sense that it is the possibility of an unpredictable event. The experiential body materializes in power/knowledge networks, but the limits of its experiences can never be firmly set because they can never be fully defined and articulated. It can multiply, distort, and overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences, and in this sense it is capable of discursively undefined and unintelligible pleasures. The experiential body is the permanent contestation of discursive definitions, values, and normative practices. At the same time, these experiences are necessary “outsiders” because they constitute the limits of the normal and the intelligible. Experience as an event can never be

wholly defined. It always remains contestable and resistant to articulation. The experiential body can take normal language to the point where it fails, where it loses its power of definition, even of expression. This does not mean a return to a prediscursive body, however. It is rather that the body as a contestation exists at the limits of language, in those moments “when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes and radically challenges itself in laughter, tears, the eyes rolled back in ecstasy . . .” (Foucault 1963/1998, 83). The experience of the limit is realized in language but only at the moment “where it says what cannot be said” (86).¹⁹

To conclude, my point has been to argue that Foucault’s understanding of embodiment and experience can provide important tools for feminist theory. Rather than accusing him of neglecting experience and the dynamism of the body in favor of regulated discourse and social constraints, my aim has been to show that his insights can be valuable exactly for those feminist analyses that try to understand the important role of the body in resistance to gender discourses. It is also important for feminists to keep in mind the limits of his analyses for feminist politics, however. The Foucaultian resistance of bodies and pleasures cannot be accomplished by the intentional subject. It is not the result of conscious choices and practical solutions. The feminist questions as to what extent it is possible to intend resistance and how we should consciously choose to act against systems of power are still left open.²⁰ Bodies and pleasures is thus not political resistance in the traditional sense, but rather resistance understood as experimentation on what in our present and in our experience is necessary and what is historically contingent.²¹ As feminists we must therefore be aware that the resistance presented by the unpredictability of embodiment is never enough, because it alone will not be able to rearticulate the cultural meanings of women’s experiences. Nevertheless, the ontological contingency and unpredictability of the body opens up the philosophical space where political resistance in the form of conscious rearticulations and alternative representations of women’s embodiment and experiences becomes possible.

Foucault’s project of studying the experience of sexuality and its constitutive conditions was cut short because of his untimely death. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why his understanding of experience seems deficient and deflective from the point of view of feminist theory. Despite its problems, it is not as one-sided and crude as feminist theorists often claim. Foucault’s work is an original effort to rethink the constitutive conditions of our experiences as historical conditions while also acknowledging the resistance and openness of our experiential bodies. I believe that feminist theory would do better by giving Foucault’s thought the serious attention it deserves rather than dismissing it as excessive discourse reductionism and clinging to an ahistorical and unproblematized notion of experience.

Kruks writes that “we need to move beyond the postmodern fascination with the discursive and to consider more immediate experiences of feminine embodiment” (Kruks 2001, 22). My aim has been to show that we need to study more carefully what this move philosophically entails. In a rigorous philosophical inquiry “the postmodern fascination with the discursive” turns out to be a complex account of the discursive limits and constitutive conditions of experience. Posing a philosophical question about the relationship between experience and discourse will take us beyond a mere description of “the immediate experiences of feminine embodiment.”

NOTES

1. Among others, see Hekman 1990; Bigwood 1991; McNay 1991; Ransom 1993.

2. Foucault explicitly characterized his thought as a critical reaction to phenomenology in various texts and interviews. See Foucault 1966/1994, xiv; 1986, 174.

3. Notable exceptions are Thomas Flynn and Béatrice Han. See Flynn 1985; Han 2002; and Flynn 2003. In the latter, Flynn argues that the structuralist bias of Foucault’s archaeologies and the antihumanist intent of nearly all of his histories has distracted attention from the concept of experience that traditionally has been associated with philosophies of consciousness, especially phenomenology, from which Foucault’s generation wished to extract and distance itself.

4. Flynn (2003) argues that one reason why the term experience (*l’expérience*) is so obscure in English and French philosophical writing is that the term corresponds to two German words, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The former is favored by Dilthey and the hermeneuticians, including most existentialists, whereas the latter is preferred by Kant, Hegel, and the idealist tradition as well as the empiricists. When Foucault, for example, divides the French heirs of Husserl into the party of experience and the party of concepts, it is *Erlebnis* that he has in mind, because *Erfahrung* could easily have served as an inspiration for the party of concepts.

5. Ladelle McWhorter (1999) argues similarly that bodies and pleasures are not outside the deployments of sexuality, but that they have a different, strategically advantageous position in it. They refer to a personal way of life consisting of practices such as gardening and line dancing that are capable of challenging norms and imposed identities.

6. See also Butler 1997, 92. Elisabeth Grosz reiterates this criticism in her book *Volatile Bodies* (1994, 155). In her next book, *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995), however, she presents what she calls “the most generous reading” of what Foucault means by bodies and pleasures. She argues that Foucault is suggesting that the body may lend itself to other economies and modes of production than the ones that produce “sexuality.” A different economy of bodies and pleasures may find the organization of sexuality, the implantation of our sex as the secret of our being, curious and intriguing instead of self-evident (218).

7. Foucault's understanding of the historical constitution of the body through the apparatus of power/knowledge has influenced feminist theory profoundly: It has provided a way to approach the body in its materiality while subverting all essentialist formulations, and has given fruitful points of entry for understanding the disciplinary production of the feminine body. For feminist appropriations of Foucault, see, for example, Bordo 1989; Butler 1990; Hekman 1990; Braidotti 1991; Sawicki 1991; McNay 1992; and Bordo 1993. While a shared focus on bodies has opened up important connections between feminist theory and Foucault's thought, Foucault's account of the body has also been severely criticized by feminist writers. Kruks reiterates the common feminist criticism that Foucault understands the body as too passive and culturally malleable, and that his conception of it is thus too one-sided and limited for feminist purposes. For example, see also Bigwood 1991; McNay 1991; Soper 1993.

8. For instance, see Foucault 1980, 1984, 1975/1991, 1976/1990.

9. Elisabeth Grosz (1994) uses the figure of a Möbius strip—an inverted three-dimensional figure eight—to describe and problematize the relations of the inside and outside of the body-subject, its psychical interior, and its corporeal exterior, and the uncontrollable movement from the one to the other. While Grosz acknowledges that Foucault's account of the body as an inscriptive surface can be useful for feminism as a description of the "outside," she seeks to complement it with accounts of the "inside": psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and theories of the body image.

10. Despite Butler's criticism of Foucault's understanding of the body in *Gender Trouble*, her conception is often conflated with Foucault's in feminist literature and referred to as the poststructuralist body. For example, see Bigwood 1991.

11. In interviews about homosexuality, Foucault stressed the dangers of legal control imposed on sexual practices. He strongly refused to offer any comment as regards the distinction between innate predisposition to homosexual behavior and social conditioning (Foucault 1988, 288). All he would grant is that there is "a certain style of existence, . . . or art of living, which might be called 'gay'" (292).

12. Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that to defend a culturally constructed body does not mean that one understands cultural construction as a single, deterministic act or as a causal process initiated by the subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. In place of these conceptions of construction, she suggests a return to the notion of matter as "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Butler 1993, 9). Butler emphasizes the gaps and fissures opened up in this process of materialization: the constitutive instabilities become the deconstitutive possibilities. She also turns to psychoanalysis to understand these disruptions as imaginary contestations that effect a failure in the workings of the law, but also importantly as occasions for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic domain. The political dimension of her work is thus again safeguarded: even if the female body cannot be liberated, the meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body can be altered.

13. Butler (1997, 99) argues that norms are not internalized in mechanical or fully predictable ways, but assume another character as psychic phenomena. Power as a condition of possibility of the subject is not the same as power considered as the subject's agency—the power the subject wields by virtue of being a subject in the social matrix. Butler's recourse to a psychoanalytic account does not, however, mean that she posits

a wild, unharnessed remainder, an unconscious outside of power. Instead she suggests a Foucaultian reading of psychoanalysis in which the resistance upon which psychoanalysis insists is studied as socially and discursively produced. The symbolic produces the possibility of its own subversions as its unanticipated effects.

14. Pheang Cheah (1996) criticizes Butler's account for the fact that although the aim is to understand the body as a historical, social, and political entity, not as presignificative or nonintelligible matter, the resistant form or formative agency over matter is the psyche. Butler's effort to appropriate the psychical body image in her account of the body means that she theorizes the fluidity and malleability of bodies in terms of the unique role played by the psychical body image in the formation of bodily subjects. The psychical body image becomes a transcendental condition through which bodily materiality appears and can be experienced as such. The form/matter distinction in which matter is immutable and form is a principle of dynamism creeps in in a Kantian guise. Matter possesses a dynamism as human bodies because bodies become meaningful and intelligible through cultural and historical practices, not because their existence is causally produced by culture (Cheah, 113–14).

15. Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 146) argues that for Foucault, the body is the target of power and a stake in the struggle for power's control over a materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways, according to infinitely variable cultural dictates. Grosz claims that Foucault derives his understanding of the body mainly from Nietzsche, who understands the body's capacity for becoming as something that can never be known or charted in advance. The body's limits cannot be definitively listed because it is always in a position of self-overcoming, of expanding its capacities (Grosz 1994, 124).

16. For example, see Foucault 1980, 197.

17. Pheng Cheah, for example, argues that power is quasi-transcendental for Foucault because it is both the immanent causal origin of empiricity and physicality *and* a condition of possibility for grasping social reality, a grid of its intelligibility, which cannot itself be accessible to cognitive or practical-intentional mastery and control (1996, 126). See also Mohanty 1997; Han 1998/2002.

18. My reading brings Foucault's philosophy close to Deleuze's in this respect. Deleuze himself has suggested that Foucault's "pleasures-body" is the correlative of his own idea of "body without organs," the body as a site of the production of positive forces and creative differences. See Deleuze 1994/1997. Foucault's emphasis on pleasure is also a gesture of rejecting Deleuze's position, however. David Halperin (1995, 93–94), for example, emphasizes Foucault's distinction between desire and pleasure as his way of distancing himself from the idea of desire associated with Deleuze's philosophy. According to him, Foucault's remarks about the political importance of attacking sexuality and promoting pleasures at the expense of sex make more sense when they are set in the context of his insistent distinction between pleasure and desire. A study of the similarities and differences between Deleuze's and Foucault's philosophy is beyond the scope of this article. On feminist interpretations of Deleuze's conception of the body, see among others Braidotti 1994; Grosz 1994.

19. Compare to Shepherdson 2000, 5. According to Shepherdson, Lacan understands transgression and law very similarly. The rule of law does not repress or prohibit,

but produces its own exception. The symbolic order functions only on the basis of this exception or excess. The excess is not a natural phenomenon that disrupts the machinery of culture; it is rather a peculiar feature of culture itself, an effect of language, which includes its own malfunction, a remainder that marks its limits (Shepherdson 2000, 175–80). Although Foucault's relationship with psychoanalysis is explicitly critical in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, behind this explicit relationship lies an unacknowledged debt. Shepherdson argues that the canonical reception that opposes Foucault and Lacan does not do justice to the complexity of their relation (2000, 182). On Foucault's relationship to psychoanalysis, see also Miller 1992.

20. Foucault's late writings on practices of the self and the Enlightenment offer some answers to these questions. In his late thought Foucault focuses on the subject's active role in implementing forms of resistance to normalization. See Foucault 1984 and 1984/1992.

21. See Foucault 1984.

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