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The Ends of an Idiom, or Sexual Difference in Translation[1]

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Abstract

In "The Ends of an Idiom: 'Sexual Difference' in Translation," Anne Emmanuelle Berger reflects on the different uses and meanings of the notion of "sexual difference" in the Francophone and Anglophone worlds. "Sexual difference" was elevated to the status of a quasi-concept by psychoanalysis and became subsequently one of the key terms in thinking about sex and gender. Looking at the pluralization of its uses and the inflection of its meaning in North-American gender and queer theory, the author stresses its "becoming-queer" and ponders over the contemporary queering of feminist thought. Through her examination of the unending differentiations of the meaning of "sexual difference", she seeks to bring out the conceptual heterogeneity – in her eyes as irreducible as it is productive – of the theoretical field of gender studies. This is also a way of interrogating the modes of constitution of the Franco-Anglo-American theoretical axis, which has dominated feminist thought in the 20th century.

Keywords: sexual difference, language, idiom, gender, French and North-American, Freud, Cixous, Derrida, Rubin, Butler.

What are they talking about?

In a 1994 interview titled "Sexual Traffic,"[2] Judith Butler questioned Gayle Rubin about the political and theoretical reasoning that had led her to drop the paradigm of gender in favor of a theory and politics of sex.

The American anthropologist Gayle Rubin, once a feminist and now decidedly post- feminist, is still not very well known in France, but she is read in Gender Studies, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, and Queer Studies programs throughout the United States. Two of her essays in particular have left their mark. The first, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," appeared in 1975; in it, Rubin formulated one of the earliest feminist theories of gender oppression, supplying theoretical bases for

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the distinction between sex and gender as it functions in the field of feminist theory in the United States. Without Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler might not have written *Gender Trouble* in the same way, as she herself has acknowledged on several occasions.[3] Rubin's second influential text, "Thinking Sex," was published for the first time in 1984, nearly ten years after "The Traffic in Women." This essay played a founding role in the epistemological demarcation and the political justification of gay and lesbian studies as this field was gradually constituted toward the end of the 1980s, before its queer reformulation in the 1990s. Frequently reproduced in anthologies, "Thinking Sex" is the first essay in the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, a capacious collection of theoretical texts published by Routledge in 1993, at a time when Gay and Lesbian Studies programs were beginning to proliferate on the American university landscape.[4]

When Butler asked Rubin why she had abandoned the paradigm of gender in favor of "thinking sex," Rubin responded as follows:

> I was trying to deal with issues of sexual difference and sexual variety. And when I use "sexual difference" I realize from reading your paper "Against Proper Objects" that you are using it in a very different way than I am. I am using the term to refer to different sexual practices. You seem to be using it to refer to gender. (Rubin with Butler 1997: 73)

Rubin is alluding here to an essay by Butler published in the same special issue of *Differences* as "Sexual Traffic" that calls into question the philosophical and methodological premises of gay and lesbian studies, in this instance their exclusion of "gender" as an object in sexuality studies.

The dialogue that follows might have come straight out of a play by Ionesco, Tardieu or even Beckett: two characters ask themselves and each other what they are talking about when they talk or believe they are talking (to each other) about sexual difference, or, in Lacanian parlance, what it – sexual difference – is talking about:

> JB: You mean, I am using "sexual difference" in the way that you were using gender in "Traffic in Women"?
> GR: Well, I'm not sure. Tell me how you are using "sexual difference," because I am not clear on it.

Butler then tries out a definition of sexual difference that she prudently refuses to represent as her own, as the quotation marks indicate. And she immediately associates the paradigm, or what she calls the conceptual framework, of sexual difference with a certain use of psychoanalysis:

> JB: . . . most of the people who work in a 'sexual difference' framework ac-

> tually believe . . . there is something persistent about sexual difference understood in terms of masculine and feminine. At the same time, they tend to engage psychoanalysis or some theory of the symbolic. . . .

A little later in the discussion, Rubin returns to the terminological issue:

> GR: I found [the gay male political] literature fascinating and thought it was not only helpful in thinking about gay male sexuality, but also that it had implications for the politics of lesbian sexual practice as well. *And then there was just the whole issue of sexual difference. I am using that terminology of sexual difference here to refer to what has otherwise been called perversion, sexual deviance, sexual variance, or sexual diversity. By the late 1970s, almost every sexual variation was described somewhere in feminist literature in negative terms with a feminist rationalization. Transsexuality, male homosexuality, promiscuity, public sex, transvestism, fetishism, and, sadomasochism were all vilified . . .* (Rubin with Butler 1997: 82-3, emphasis added)

Rubin thus uses the phrase "sexual difference" – which she puts in the plural in "Thinking Sex"[5] (Rubin 1993) – to designate, as she says, "what has been called perversion, sexual deviance, sexual variance, sexual diversity." For now, I shall set aside the question of the reasons for her apparent preference here for "sexual difference" as opposed to "sexual variation" or "sexual diversity." What is striking, if we can agree that the notion of sexual difference stems from the field of psychoanalysis or refers back to it (a point that Butler makes immediately in response to Rubin's question), is that Rubin is clearly giving it a "perverse" twist. The notion of perversion was developed in the field of psychopathology and more specifically within psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century. In psychoanalytic terms, everything that amounts to denial of sexual difference is akin to perversion, sexual difference being understood as recognition by sexualized subjects of the irreducible male/female duality, and – the inexorable corollary –acceptance of the symbolic effect of castration; the "perversions" Rubin enumerates (transsexualism, homosexuality, fetishism) are cases in point. (Let us note in passing that "fetishism" seems to be the "fetish" perversion of a certain "queer" discourse on sexuality, from Foucault who reserves a particular fate for it in his *History of Sexuality*[6] (Foucault 1997: 153-4), to Rubin, who proposes an anti-psychoanalytic "materialist" reading of fetishism in "Sexual Traffic." Is this because the fetishist perversion properly speaking, according to its Freudian interpretation, consists in denying sexual difference and its consequences? Is it not also because fetishism helps to reveal a certain complicity between contemporary sexual "arrangements" and market capitalism? To satisfy his or her desire, as Rubin recalls at length in "Sexual Traffic," a fetishist needs accessories that both imply and feed into a whole

system for producing and consuming objects. In this sense, fetishism can be viewed as the modern perversion par excellence, the one that aligns sexual "deviance" with the production of artifacts and the circulation of merchandise.[7])

Then how does one move from the psychoanalytic notion of "sexual difference," linked as it is to the "knot" of castration that serves to bind each subject to his or her gender destiny, "masculine" or "feminine," to its "queer" use to designate the variety of the sexual practices or inclinations called deviant, that is, the "perversions" in which psychoanalysis, at least in its most normative and most widespread version, recognizes precisely a "denial of sexual difference"? I shall leave that question in abeyance for now. What I would like to emphasize for the moment is the obvious instability of the use of the phrase "sexual difference," an instability that cannot be attributed simply to ignorance, to lack of precision, or to the fact that its "original" contexts of production have been forgotten. Rubin's first essay, "The Traffic in Women," suffices to attest to her knowledge of the psychoanalytic field, especially in its "Franco-German extension" (Freud and Lacan).

Geneviève Fraisse, a French philosopher known for her nuanced positions in the field of French feminist thought[8] and also for her reservations toward American Gender and Queer theory refuses for her part to use the expression "sexual difference." She prefers the formula "difference between the sexes," arguing that the first expression already has a determined content.[9] (Fraisse 1997) I do not know what Fraisse means by the word "content," a term of which she is fond, and I am not sure that the distinctions it presupposes can be rigorously maintained. From the standpoint of either a pragmatics or a philosophy of language, how can one differentiate between a form without content and a form with content, between a floating signifier and a signifier aligned with a meaning, between the presumed "semantic void" of the "difference between the sexes" and the loaded meaning of "sexual difference," between the neutrality of one expression and the tendentious charge of the other? Nevertheless, I imagine that Fraisse has in mind (or in her line of sight) reflections on "sexual difference" by thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, whom she mentions, Antoinette Fouque, whom she does not mention, Hélène Cixous, whom she mentions, or Derrida or Lacan, whom she scarcely mentions but who use the expression.[10] (Cixous 1996: 45) But one can hardly reduce the phrase "sexual difference," as used by Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Cixous or Fouque, to *one* and *only one* content. While it is true that the phrase has a particular intellectual history in France, this history is by no means homogeneous. It is by definition susceptible to the historicist treatment that Fraisse claims to be privileging in her approach to the questions surrounding the "difference between the sexes."

In any case, seen or read from the United States, the assertion that "sexual difference" has *one* content (precise and immutable) risks being illegible. All the more so in that it would be quite difficult to find an idiomatic translation

that could bring out the distinction between *la différence des sexes* (difference between the sexes) and *la différence sexuelle* (sexual difference) and that would not play on the disjunction between "sex" and "gender" that Fraisse also challenges. To designate the "difference between the sexes" in English today in Fraisse's sense(s), "gender difference" would arguably be the first expression to come to mind, as Fraisse herself hints.[11] (ibid. 46) And since American feminists and post-feminists are being translated in France in increasing numbers, the flow of discourse coming from the Anglophone world cannot help but provoke re-readings of the French corpus and consequent misalignments or realignments of the French theoretical scene in this realm.

These are not the hairsplitting arguments of a semiotician. At issue is rather what we call cultural history today and how we go about "doing" it. One usually studies cultures as if they were securely bounded and unified entities. Cultural history is generally the history of a single culture. The relation between cultures is thus seen as a variable relation between stable entities, whose territorial boundedness both figures and provides the ground for its internal coherence. Yet territorial unity and internal coherence are undermined by the way a number of contemporary cultural phenomena and discourses travel across space and especially virtual space, bypassing borders, material and immaterial. The display and circulation of "information" on the web has thus contributed to inflecting the meaning of the word "culture". Notions of "culture" and "cultural space" or "areas" are traditionally tied to a notion of "location" as a bounded and "oriented" space. Virtual space does something more and something else than simply putting different geographical, linguistic and political spaces in permanent communication with each other: it *dislocates* and *disorients* location(s). It unhinges culture and "the cultural" from their traditional anchors. It therefore modifies the task of translation.

Sexual difference is not one

I would now like to examine several different uses of the idiom "sexual difference." I am calling it an idiom and not a concept in order to stress the textual and contextual particularities of its use rather than the universal scope and abstract quality of the concept. The appeal to (and of) "sexual difference" is not only determined by history and by cultural particularities, as we have just seen, but also by the singular relationship between those who use the expression and the language they speak and with which they play.

In Greek, *idios* connotes both particularity and strangeness. An idiom is a highly particular and therefore untranslatable element of a language, or rather of the way a language is used. In any given language, idioms connect linguistic

features with cultural features in a singular way, thus linking a text to a specific context. Every idiomatic formula has a context and a history, or rather contexts and histories. In this sense, none of the terms we use can be said to be pure concepts, universally translatable and abstractly universalizable.

To support these contentions, I shall evoke very briefly five idiomatic contexts in which the phrase "sexual difference" is used, five corpuses to which I attach singular names: 1) Sigmund Freud, 2) Hélène Cixous, 3) Jacques Derrida, 4) Gayle Rubin, and 5) Judith Butler.

1) I begin with Freud because it is he – in other words, it is psychoanalysis – that gave a new theoretical meaning to the notion of sexual difference, establishing it as a quasi-concept[12] and ensuring for the lexicon of sexuality a renewal, extension, and diffusion without precedent in the history of Western thought. Let me specify that I am gathering under Freud's name an entire European continent of thought and preoccupations to which Freud gave the most sophisticated formulations; thus I am also implicitly referring to Breuer, Kraft-Ebbing, Havelock Ellis, and many others.

As Foucault reminds us in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, the discourse on and of sexuality, and consequently the lexicon of sexuality that simultaneously translates and produces this discourse are dated. This allows Foucault to advance the hypothesis of an "age of sexuality" that has clear historical and geocultural contours. "Sexuality" – as an idiom, an epistemological category, and an object – and thus the "sexual difference" that stems from this lexicon and from the range of questions it purports to address, are modern Western inventions.

The adjective "sexual" (*sexualis*) certainly existed in Latin, but it referred exclusively to the female sex. Similarly, the word *sexe* was used in French to designate women (English did the same in expressions such as "the sex," "people of sex," or "the fair sex") until the eighteenth century. It was precisely in the eighteenth century that the adjective "sexual" took on its modern meaning, henceforth designating features of either sex or sexuality in general. From this point on, something like "sexual difference" became thinkable as such. Similarly "sexuality" was a neologism that appeared in Romance languages in the first half of the nineteenth century, during the period when the epistemology and the politics of sexuality were being established.

Freud uses the Latinate neologism *Sexualität* to name and describe his new field of inquiry. But when he uses the modern expression *Sexuelle Differenz* (or its plural form *Sexuelle Differenzen*), the term does not necessarily have the meaning attributed to the comparable expressions in contemporary French and English. As gay activist and theorist Simon Watney points out in "The Banality of Gender," an article published two years after "Thinking Sex" in a special issue of *The Oxford Literary Review* titled *Sexual Difference*, there are indeed two "lines of thought" in Freud's work on this question. Under the

label *Sexuelle Differenzen*, Freud attempts to conceptualize not so much the male/female or masculine/feminine distinction as the variety of sexual behaviors, or even sexual orientations, anticipating the way certain queer theorists use this term.[13] (Watney 1986: 14) To designate what is called sexual difference in English (French *différence sexuelle*), he uses the conventional German term *Geschlechtigkeit* – from a pre-theoretical lexicon, one might say; he speaks about *Unterschied der Geschlechter*, or, more often and even more simply, of *Geschlecht*. In the German notion of *Geschlecht* – Geneviève Fraisse and Jean Laplanche rightly stress this point – "sex" and "gender," as distinguished today in English and the Romance languages, are precisely indistinguishable, or at least very hard to dissociate. (Fraisse 2000: 188) Like the Latin *genus,* from which the word "gender" derives, *Geschlecht* can designate race, family, or gender; however, unlike the Latin word, which belongs to the lexical family of genetics and generation, nothing in the etymological origin of *Geschlecht* suggests the "genetic" or natural character of the social categories it "expresses." Finally, contrary to what the French and Anglo-American gloss on Freudian thought might imply, *Unterschied der Geschlechter* appears in Freud's discourse as an infra-theoretical locution that can refer to ordinary – pre-psychoanalytic, as it were – conceptions of the difference between the sexes. In contrast, Freud's frequent recourse to the (Latinate) lexicon of "sexuality" (in certain texts, the substantive *Sexualität* and the adjectives *sexual* and *sexuel* can be found as many as ten times on a single page) underscores the innovative character of his reflection on the various sexual organizations and orientations. Indeed, in the indexes to German editions of Freud's texts, *sexuel*, *sexual* and numerous lexical kin appear with high frequency, signaling the particular theoretical status of the lexicon of sexuality. The word *Geschlecht,* no doubt deemed infra-conceptual, is not included.

In any case, when we read Freud we must take into account the pragmatic and semantic distinction that he establishes between the lexicon of "sexuality" properly speaking and the Germanic vocabulary of *Geschlechtigkeit*. I shall offer just one example of this play, or gap, between the German language and the Romance (or Greco-Latin) languages as purveyors of the idiom of sexuality. In his 1931 lecture on "femininity," when he invites his public to consider the coexistence of "masculine" and "feminine" traits as a manifestation of bisexuality, Freud writes this: "Sie [die Wissenschaft] sieht in diesem Vorkommen das Anzeichen *einer Zwiegeschlechtigkeit, Bisexualität*, als ob das Individuum nicht Mann oder Weib ware" (p.121; emphasis added). "Bi-gendericity" (*Zwiegeschlechtigkeit*) is interpreted in psychoanalytic terms as "bisexuality" and can only be characterized in this way.[14]

As his readers know well, Freud conceives of *Geschlecht* or *Unterschied der Geschlechter* (rendered in English as sexual difference, in French as *différence sexuelle*) not as the set of anatomical differences between male and female, but

as the manifestation of different unconscious positions that drive human subjects to privilege one path or another in their social and erotic lives. As Lacan himself repeatedly stressed, the psychoanalytic concept of "sexual difference" does not make reference to any sort of "biological essentialism."

It might be helpful, however, to look into what we project, and reject, when we refer to "biology." The term tends to be condemned out of hand too often and too quickly in gender studies today, at least in their most widespread summary version. Are we sure that we know what set of phenomena this word designates in the scientific field that bears its name? Is biology as a discipline truly "essentialist" in its approach and its goals? Above all, can the terms "essence," "nature," "body," "life," and "sex" that are associated with "biology" or called upon to answer in its name really substitute for one another in an unproblematic synonymy? Not according to Foucault, at least. "Sex," for Foucault, is a speculative, indeed the most speculative, effect of sexuality. In contrast, the "body," that is, the living body, retains its physicality while it is being "disciplined." And Foucault certainly does not conceive of the relation between *bios* and *polis*, or between politics and "the body," as one of opposition and mutual exclusion. As for the distinction between *bios* and *zoé* on which Giorgio Agamben bases his version of "biopolitics," it is hardly problematized by Foucault, and one could show that it is as instable in his case as it is in Aristotle. Whether or not we take a "Foucaldian" approach to "sex" and "sexuality," "biology" – the discourse or study of *bios* – need not be anathematized. It deserves a less simplistic approach than mere exclusion from the speculative horizon of gender and sexuality theory.[15]

To return to the question of *Geschlecht* in Freudian theory, the difference between woman and man, or rather between the 'feminine' and the 'masculine', is not given; one is not born a woman – or rather *Weibliche*, feminine – it is a matter of becoming. Freud says this and seeks to demonstrate it well ahead of Simone de Beauvoir. Here again it would be necessary to account for Freud's differentiated use of *Weib* and *Weibliche* on the one hand and *Frau* on the other. The adoption of a sexual identity and orientation is the result of a complex process that implies identifications, transferences, cultural and social categorizations, and so on.

2) Hélène Cixous has inherited the Freudian notion of "sexual difference" through its French translation, and she plays purposefully with this legacy. Let us consider just one example of such play. "Sexual difference" – not the thing itself but the formulaic phrase – features in the title of a "reading" presented in 1990 at the first major international multidisciplinary conference organized by the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Paris VIII. The conference was titled "*Lectures* de la différence sexuelle" (*Readings* of Sexual Difference): the aim was precisely to present "readings" rather than demonstrations or proofs (for example, of the existence or non-existence of sexual difference).

The title was thus an invitation to read "sexual difference" both as a fact of language and as an effect of discourse. Cixous's contribution was part of a duet, with the other part voiced by Jacques Derrida. Each one played at playing his or her part or score (the "woman" part and the "man" part) while complicating and questioning the distribution of parts to the point of rendering the score untenable or unsingable without multiple voices. Cixous titled her part "Tales of Sexual Difference," emphasizing in literary terms what would be called discourse in para-Foucaldian terms. "Tales" here does not mean "lies" (as in "Are you telling me a tall tale?" or "What are these tales you've been telling?"), for literature does not moralize (even when it seems or seeks to do so), and in this sense it is not concerned with the opposition between lies and truth. Cixous's title nonetheless points toward fiction and its powers. And indeed, in these "tales," sexual difference is transformed by a stroke of the poetic wand into "DS," an acronym for *différence sexuelle* and a homonym of *déesse,* the French word for goddess, thus bringing into play the pagan goddesses that have been marginalized by monotheistic religions. Some will pounce on this point and say: we told you that she worshipped sexual difference as if it were a divinity! But that's because they haven't read the text. What is "divinised" and thus embodied, what is changed into an unexpected trope, is not the thing called "sexual difference" but the formula itself. And the DS is precisely not sexual difference. It is a fact, a phenomenon – *un fait* (or as H. C. would say, with another homonym, *une fée*, a fairy) of language. Here is what Cixous says:

> [DS] is not a region, nor a thing, nor a precise space between two; it is movement itself, reflection, the reflexive *Se*,[16] the negative goddess without negativity, the ungraspable that touches me, that, coming from what is closest to me, gives me in a flash the impossible me-other, makes the you-that-I-am appear, in the contact with the other. (Cixous 2010: 57)

This DS who in passing destabilizes all signs and assignments, this not-so-well-behaved (*pas sage*) goddess of the passage of one toward the other and of one in the other has no more to do with anatomical destiny than with a regulated distribution of roles. Rather, it has a great deal to do with certain psychic mechanisms studied by psychoanalysis, such as the formation of the ego, the self's various ways of relating to the other, love, or, conversely, when there is no (tres)passing, hostility.

3) Derrida, a powerful deconstructor of what he calls "sex**d**uality," the dual logic underlying the traditional idea – but also to a great extent the psychoanalytic notion – of sexual difference and of sexuality in general (starting with the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality), nonetheless remains attached to the idiom of sexual difference. Why and how does he preserve this

idiom while continuing to denounce and break down the phallogocentric hierarchy that slips into every difference treated as an irreducible opposition? The fact is that idioms, and this idiom in particular, interest Derrida on several counts; moreover, deconstruction does not work by censuring, reducing, or erasing the structures it purports to dissect.

To retain the idiom "sexual difference" is to accept a certain historical legacy and to reflect on this legacy, even if in a critical manner. Derrida inherits the notion of sexual difference from modern epistemology, and by playing with the idiom he engages in a dialogue with modernity (an "age of sexuality") and especially with "Freud's legacy." He approaches the phrase as a poet or poetician, too, playing as Cixous does with the feminine gender of the French term, and with the word "difference," which, as he reminds us in "Choreographies," connotes both mobility and instability. Difference (a noun derived from a verb), the differentiating act of difference, is not a state and certainly not a state of opposition; it is a dance. The Latin verb *di-fero* literally means to carry away, to move, deport or displace (oneself) in multiple directions. It comes close to what Derrida calls dissemination: difference, in this sense, in no way resembles the categorical immobility of a distribution of traits. The philosopher calls on philology to bring out the cutting edge of the epithet "sexual." The word "sex" and its derivatives come from the Latin *secare, sectum*, meaning to cut, to divide into sections. Language thus invites us to think sex, sexuation, and the sexual, as phenomena and experiences of cutting, partitioning, even wounding. Sexual identity would then refer to a specific incision, an imaginary and symbolic cut in and of the very fabric of each human being.

We know the role that reflection on cutting – always both an interrogation and a deconstruction – plays throughout Derrida's work, for both philosophical and autobiographical reasons, via the circumcision motif, for example (and thus for historical reasons as well, since autobiography is a writing of history at the individual level). In Derrida's writings, with "sex" and its lexical derivatives we find ourselves in the vicinity of thought about cutting and infinite divisibility, but also at the heart of an inseparably psychical and cultural experience of the cut as a wound, of division as resistance to totalization, of the "not all/whole her" and the "not all/whole him," "not all-mighty" that we all are as sexed beings, subjected to sectioning and therefore bound to intersect.

Derrida prefers to talk about sexual difference*s* in the plural. He holds onto the idiom of sexual difference while dividing it infinitely and hence pluralizing it in the hope of escaping from binary constructs as well as from conceptual frames. A concept is always spelled out in the generic singular. Indeed, when sexual difference in the singular is taken seriously, that is, as a concept, it cannot help but produce effects of sex**d**uality.

For Derrida, finally, holding onto this idiom is also a way of preserving the

possibility of thinking about the relation between the cut, or the experience of the cut, and the experience of love. Without sex, without the thought of sex, there would be no love dance. Without cutting, that is, without the cut of sex, there would be no self-interruption, no self-limitation. We would risk losing the differences (understood as plural, because the line of demarcation between them is neither "one" nor clear) between auto-eroticism and allo-eroticism. Without interruption or alteration of the love for oneself, there would be no possible love for another.

4) Let us now leap back to the other continent where these questions are in play and return to Gayle Rubin. In "The Traffic in Women," Rubin seeks to show the importance of psychoanalysis and structural anthropology in the development of a feminist epistemology and politics. Indeed, these are the only two "human sciences" or discourses where what she calls the "sex-gender system" (that is, "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (Rubin 1994: 159), plays a central role.

Rubin offers one of the earliest feminist definitions of "gender," for example when she declares that "[g]ender is a socially imposed division of the sexes" (Rubin 1994: 179), but she also provides the most convincing defense and illustration of the usefulness of psychoanalysis for feminist theory:

> In Marx's map of the social world, human beings are workers, peasants, or capitalists; that they are also men and women is not seen as very significant. By contrast, in the maps of social reality drawn by Freud and Lévi-Strauss, there is a deep recognition of the place of sexuality in society, and of the profound differences between the social experience of men and women. (ibid. 160)

In France, gender theory proper has often ignored psychoanalysis. And yet it is impossible to understand Judith Butler's work and that of her contemporaries in Gender Studies and/or Queer Studies if we fail to take into account their debt to psychoanalysis and to some sectors of anthropology. At the same time, it is true that psychoanalysis remains a major bone of contention within these fields. While Rubin followed through with her commitment to anthropological reflection and ethnographic work, she gave up on psychoanalysis in the name of a new, radical distrust of any interpretive gesture with respect to sexuality: "Sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance," she claimed in "Thinking Sex" (Rubin 1993: 11). At virtually the same time, Simon Watney was arguing for a Foucaldian reading of Freud, or (perhaps more accurately) a Freudian reading of Foucault, and he also proposed abandoning the theory of gender in favor of a theory of sexuality or sexualities. But, unlike Ru-

bin, he appealed to a Freudian notion of desire and the instability of identity in order to do so.[17]

"Thinking Sex" is for Queer Theory what "The Traffic in Women" was for the establishment of Women's Studies, a founding text.[18] That these two texts were written by the same author is particularly interesting.

In "The Traffic in Women," we begin to see the seeds of the thesis that Rubin developed subsequently in "Thinking Sex," namely, that the deconstruction of gender as a social and political category involving the binary regulation of sexual life *and* social life has to result in the eventual abandonment of that category, both in theory and in practice.

> Cultural evolution provides us with the opportunity to seize control of the means of sexuality, reproduction, and socialization, and to make conscious decisions to liberate human sexual life from the archaic relationships that deform it. Ultimately, a thorough-going feminist revolution would liberate more than women. It would liberate forms of sexual expression, and it would liberate human personality from the straitjacket of gender. (Rubin 1994: 200)

Rubin thus calls for liberation from gender in a radical contestation of the way social identities are produced. Whether it is possible to drop gender altogether in favor of thinking sex and sexuality more thoroughly and more freely is an object of debate and even dispute within Queer Theory. The field is split between those who hold Rubin's position and those who endorse Butler's, with each side finding support in Foucault on different grounds. As Rubin herself reminds us, the word "sex" in English refers ambiguously to the sexual identity or characteristics of human beings *and* to sexual practice (as in the act of "having sex"). In contrast, in French it is possible to "have a sex" but not to "have sex"; one can only make love. Yet for political reasons that are at the heart of her essay, Rubin seeks to make a sharp distinction between these two uses of the term.

In "Thinking Sex" (a richly idiomatic and amphibological formula that we must not be too quick to translate into French as "*penser* le *sexe*": it could just as legitimately be translated as "*penser sexe*" or even "*sexe pensant*"), the idiom of sexual difference still occupies center stage. But it is pluralized, as in Derrida's work; and it is not used to signify generic differences between masculine and feminine, since Rubin refutes this dichotomous polarization, nor is it used to designate the differences in sexual orientation that are thought to be a by-product of a heterosexist conceptual matrix that sees difference or binary opposition everywhere (between men and women, but also between heterosexuality and homosexuality). Instead, "sexual difference" is used to refer to all

sorts of sexual practices and identifications, which are understood to be historically contingent. For Rubin, dropping gender does not mean returning to a naturalist notion of sexuality. She seeks rather to delve further into Foucault's analysis of sexuality and follow his pronounced indifference to the question of gender(s) to its full consequences.

Rubin denounces the social pressures and the political repression that are applied against anyone who breaks away from the dominant model of sexual behavior in any given society:

> The notion of a single ideal sexuality characterizes most systems of thought about sex. . . . *Progressives who would be ashamed to display cultural chauvinism in other areas routinely exhibit it toward sexual differences*. We have learned to cherish different cultures as unique expressions of human inventiveness rather than as the inferior or disgusting habits of savages. We need a similarly anthropological understanding of different sexual cultures. (Rubin 1993: 12; emphasis added)

I have already stressed Rubin's apparent lexical preference for the phrase "sexual difference(s)," for which she also proposes a series of imperfect equivalents that only express the full meaning of the preferred phrase when she lists them all together, as she does in "Sexual Traffic": sexual deviance, sexual variety, sexual diversity. It is as though the word "difference(s)" allowed her to maintain a balance between a clearly pejorative term such as "deviance," which has meaning only in relation to a norm that Rubin is intent on contesting here – for her there are no normal or abnormal sexualities – and another term, "diversity," whose euphemizing and neutralizing value is by now well known in both the French and American contexts. Difference separates and upsets people; diversity reassures people and brings them together. The former threatens the principle of identity; the latter does not.[19] Rubin's goal is thus to decriminalize so-called "deviant" behaviors instead of "normalizing" them on the basis of the liberal ideology of "individual choice."

What, then, is the status of these sexual differences and these different sexual cultures? What social and psychic forms can their practice or experience take? Is it possible to leave all "generic" categorization and qualification behind? I shall leave these questions unanswered for now, and simply add that, for Rubin, the sexual question is not a pre-political question but is at the very root of politics. Even so, her position can only be fully understood in the context of the cultural history of politics and the political in the United States. In particular, one has to take into account the centrality of the focus in "American" politics on everything that has to do with what has been called biopolitics, in the wake of Foucault. Rubin is advocating not a new politics of the

genders or sexes (whether we count two of these or, following Plato, three), but a politics of sex and sexualities that cannot be reduced, according to her, either to Marxism as a theory of workers' liberation or to feminism as a theory of women's emancipation.

5) Have we then reached "the end of sexual difference"? My question is actually a quotation. I borrow it from the title of an article by Judith Butler first published in *Feminist Consequences* in 2001 and reprinted in *Undoing Gender*. Butler's title is indeed formulated as a question, and she herself intends it "as a citation of a skeptical question." She answers in the negative.[20] The question of sexual difference (both as an idiomatic expression and as a notion) will have to remain troubled and troubling (which is why the title is indeed an open question), if we are to avoid impoverishing the field of feminist reflection. Here are Butler's final words in the first version of her essay:

> That the sexual freedom of the female subject challenged the humanism that underwrites universality suggests that we might consider the social forms, such as the patriarchal heterosexual family, that still underwrite our "formal" conceptions of universality. The human, it seems, must become strange to itself, even monstrous, to reachieve the human on another plane. This human will not be "one,"[21] indeed will have no ultimate form, but it will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organization of sexuality. By insisting that this will be a persistent and an open question, I mean to suggest that we make no decision on what sexual difference is but leave that question open, troubling, unresolved, propitious. (Butler 2001: 432)

"The End of Sexual Difference?" is above all a meditation on the idiom of "gender," thus on gender *as* an idiom, not in the philosophico-philological mode of Derrida or in the poetic fashion of Hélène Cixous, but rather in a pragmatic and political mode that makes room for a questioning of language and discourse as the author reflects on the semantic variations of the term and on the various political aims or effects of its use within different contexts. Butler writes: "More important than coming up with a strict and applicable definition of the term [gender], is the ability to track the travels of the term through public culture" (Butler 2004: 425). Her essay does not advocate a soft intellectual pluralism; rather, Butler argues for the necessary complexity of a theoretical field that only becomes richer as it indexes multiple idioms and sometimes contradictory formulations.

Butler's most recent work on gender, collected in *Undoing Gender* (2004), also attempts to address a new set of concerns that have come to the forefront

of American discourse on such questions. This new set of concerns is again making trouble in the already troubled area of gender as a social category and as a conceptual tool: I am of course referring to the development of the double social phenomenon of transsexuality and transgenderism, a development spurred by the theoretical attention it has received. The discourse and the practice of "crossing" assume a symbolic, social, and fantasmatic alignment of gender with sex in its transsexual version, while in its transgender version it plays instead on the discrepancy between sexed bodies and declared gender identities. In both cases, these cultural phenomena invite us to continue to situate our analyses at the crossroads of cultural history, social theory, and psychoanalysis, and above all to keep open the irksome question of sexual difference(s).

When language takes us for a ride

A few remarks, to end but not to conclude.

First remark

In "Sexual Traffic," Gayle Rubin reminds us that in the early 1970s, a time when "women's movements" started to form throughout the Western world, Marxism in its various forms was the dominant paradigm among "progressive intellectuals."[24] These women's movements were both real political movements, capable of mobilizing public opinion in favor of contraception and abortion, for example, and reflexive moves that resulted in the gradual development of *feminist* theory in the 1980s and the early 1990s. What is called second-wave feminism thus grew out of a complicated relation to Marxism.[22] In her first essay, "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin pointed out the shortcomings of Marxism and spelled out the epistemological and methodological conditions for an autonomous feminist thought. However, her essay was also conceived both as a commentary on and a homage to Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In "Thinking Sex," Rubin affirms her debt to Marxism when she analyzes the ambiguous but substantive relations between certain forms of modern sexuality and the market economy.[23] Marxism supplied and continues to supply feminism with productive ways of thinking about the connection between theory and politics, and more specifically between a theory of domination and a politics of emancipation. But if Marx has his share of interpreters and has elicited a wide range of readings, Marxism in all its forms nevertheless has only one source and is grounded in a fairly stable conceptual apparatus. There is general agreement on the meaning of terms such as "capital," "work," "surplus value," "exchange value," and so on, or at least on their definition and meanings in Marx's work. The same cannot be said of "feminist theory." The key terms in its vocabulary are regularly dis-

puted and consequently undergo a continuing process of "resignification," to use a term coined by Butler to describe the semantic shifts and redeployments that are so characteristic of contemporary thinking about gender and sexual differences. No single author or authority stands out in feminist or postfeminist thought today: neither Marx nor Freud, neither Irigaray nor Beauvoir. For feminist theory, this is at once a misfortune and an opportunity, but perhaps especially the latter, since the heterogeneity of its sources and the constitutive instability of its "foundations" bring to light, by contrast, what any attempts at conceptual stability owe to the double ("patriarchal"?) principle of textual unity and authority.

Second remark

Toward the end of the augmented version of "The End of Sexual Difference?" that appeared in *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler reflects on "the Anglo-European division" and initiates a dialogue with "European" feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. At one point, Butler asserts that "theory emerges from location." This remark on the "location" of theory may well have been inspired by Homi Bhabba's work on the "location" of culture. In any case, it is a way of reminding the reader that no theorization is possible without a *point of view*, and that there is no point of view that does not imply a place from which the "viewing" activity, or the *theorein*, can take place. In the wake of this remark, Butler points out that "location" itself, as a unified or at least identifiable site of collective enunciation is actually in a state of crisis in Europe:

> Theory emerges from location, and location itself is under crisis in Europe, since the boundaries of Europe are precisely what is being contested in quarrels over who belongs to the European Union and who does not, on rules regarding immigration (especially in Belgium, France, the Netherlands), the cultural effects of Islamic communities, of Arab and North-African populations. (Butler 2004: 201)

But this crisis of location, which is a crisis of the belief in the unity of location (a unity which in Europe is declared and asserted through the figure of the Union and without which no location can "take" or stay in place), does not affect Europe alone. The literal dislocation of viewpoints affects the whole of contemporary theory and especially feminist theory, as Butler herself suggests. Immediately after her remarks on Europe, she hastens to add: "I am an American, but I am trained in European philosophy." She then goes on to offer a quasi-"confessional" statement about her relation to European languages in general and German in particular. What is the connection between her meditation on the crossing of languages and her questioning of the meanings and

uses of the terms "gender" and "sexual difference"? In both cases, the issue is one of dislocation, of the severing of the link between language and its – or *any* – place of utterance. What language am I speaking, and from what location(s), when I use the word *sex(e)* today in French? Sociolinguists have shown that this term has taken on meanings in French that it lacked fifteen or twenty years ago, to such an extent that when we speak (about) *sexe* in French we are actually speaking English. One historical dictionary of the French language confirms this relation between "speaking sex" and speaking (in) English when it notes that many derivatives of the words *sexe* and *sexualité* in contemporary French come from English: this is the case of the series of words with the prefix *trans-,* such as *transsexualisme*, first attested in French in 1956, and *transsexualité* (1960) or *transsexuel* (1965), and, today, *transgenre,* a term that had not yet made it into the 2000 edition of the dictionary.[24] (Rey 2000)

The English language, which no longer refers back to a unified place or culture, is today both the paradoxical location and the vehicle of this generalized dislocation. It has thus become advisable, perhaps even necessary, to ask ourselves what happens to the "content" of "différence sexuelle"/"sexual difference" when the French term crosses the Atlantic or the English term heads back from San Francisco or New York.

The semantic instability of such a locution is of course an effect of the particular character of our "knowledge" in the area of sexual difference(s). All "knowledge" of the subject matter, all rationalizations, all epistemological or political propositions concerning sexual differences are necessarily "affected" – Geneviève Fraisse uses this term in her introduction to *L'exercice du savoir et la différence des sexes* – or at least overdetermined and therefore undercut by both the intimate experiences and the unconscious positions of those who speak on the subject. Above all, such "exercise of knowledge" is affected by the at once *undecidable and insurmountable* limit that separates knowledge of oneself from knowledge of the other, however uncertain the former may be. Where "sexual difference" is concerned, the knowing subject is condemned to the misrecognition or lack of knowledge that characterizes his or her apprehension of the other as well as of him- or herself. Knowledge of the other can therefore only be a system of presumptions; Lacan would call them, jokingly, convictions.[25] (Lacan 1998: 72) This is why, in Western feminist politics and theory alike, it is so difficult – indeed, impossible – to reach agreement on questions of "sexual identities," triggered again and again by the mystery and complications of sexual divisions, while it is so easy to agree on the necessary struggle for equality.

"As for sexual difference, we will always wonder . . ." (Derrida 2002: 39) (*La différence sexuelle, nous nous demanderons toujours . . .*), Derrida writes at the end of his "reading of sexual difference" titled "Ants." And to stress the grammatical undecidability of the *nous nous demanderons*" (literally either "we shall ask ourselves" or "we shall always ask one another"), a pronominal quandary

that inserts the *inter*locution into the *allo*cution and the question *to* and *of* the other into solitary reflection, Derrida adds: "But that's it, sexual difference, if sexual difference has something to do (*quelque chose à voir*) in this situation: se demander. And to ask oneself, (from) the other (*se demander, à l'autre*), if there is such a thing, if it is an accessory determination, . . . a secondary supplement or an essential antenna across all separations . . ."[26] (Derrida)

If the question of sexual difference, or rather the multiple questions gathered together under its name, remain, as both "troubling" and "troubled" questions, the idiom (or the fragment of an idiom) "sexual difference," which speakers of the Western languages in which it is rooted continue to use, no longer functions today as the key element of an "oriented" discursive arrangement. Disoriented and disorienting, it opens up in discourse – whether it is a matter of ordinary speech, learned speech, or militant speech – what Laurent Dubreuil calls, with respect to a certain colonial phraseology, "a contradictory *and* yet meaningful space."[27] At once available and ungraspable, it does not bequeath to us a doctrine or an ideology, but an injunction to keep open, and continue to interpret actively, the meaning or rather the meaning(s) of its legacy.[28] (Derrida 2002: 26)

Endnotes

1 This article is an abridged version of Chapter 4 of *The Queer Turn in Feminism. Identities, Sexualities and the Theater of Gender,* forthcoming at Fordham University Press in 2014.

2 Note: The first version of this essay, "Les fins de la 'différence sexuelle,'" appeared in *Traduction, Traductions*, a special issue of the journal *Théorie Littérature Enseignement* published by the Presses Universitaires de Vincennes (Berger 2008: 153-64). The article was reproduced in October 2008 in the online journal *Les Rencontres de Bellepierre*, no. 3: http://www.lrdb.fr/articles.php?lng=fr&pg=1062, accessed 4/14/12. The interview first appeared in the journal *Differences (A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies),* in a special issue devoted to the complex "encounter" between feminism and queer theory; it was later republished in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory,* ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Rubin with Butler 1997: 68-108.).

3 Butler devotes several pages of *Gender Trouble* to the analyses of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Freud that Rubin offers in "The Traffic in Women". She salutes Rubin's "extraordinary work" again in the preface to the second edition of her book (Butler 1999: 98-102). Finally, she reiterates her debt to Rubin at some length in "Sexual Traffic": "what interested me in 'The Traffic in Women' was that you, by using a term that comes from American sociological discourse –"gender" – by using that term, you actually made gender less fixed . . . So I think that what you produced was an amalgamation of positions which I very much appreciated, and it became one of the reasons I went with gender myself in *Gender Trouble*" (Rubin with But-

ler 1997: 73-4).

4 The graphic emphasis on the article "The" on the cover of the reader *(The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*) clearly indicates that the anthology claims a position of authority on the question from the outset.

5 "Progressives who would be ashamed to display cultural chauvinism in other areas routinely exhibit it towards *sexual differences*" ("Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in ***The*** *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin [New York: Routledge, 1993]), p. 15; emphasis added).

6 "Thus 'sex' was defined by the interlacing of function and instinct, finality and signification; moreover, this was the form in which it was manifested, more clearly than anywhere else, in the model perversion, in that 'fetishism' which, from at least as early as 1877, served as the guiding thread for analyzing all the other deviations. In it one could clearly perceive the way in which the instinct became fastened to an object in accordance with an individual's historical adherence and biological inadequacy."

7 See Rubin's remarks in "Sexual Traffic," p. 85: "I do not see how one can talk about fetishism, or sadomasochism, without thinking about the production of rubber, the techniques and gear used for controlling and riding horses, the high polished gleam of military footwear, the history of silk stockings . . . To me, fetishism raises all sorts of issues concerning shifts in the manufacture of objects, the historical and social specificities of control and skin and social etiquette . . ."

8 Fraisse refuses to subscribe to the nature/culture or body/psyche opposition that underlies, in France, the ongoing grievance of "constructionists" against those they accuse of "essentialism."

9 See, for example, Fraisse's remarks in a conversation with Frédérique Ildefonse and Sabine Prokhoris, published in an issue of the electronic journal *Vacarme* devoted to "minorities in the feminine plural" (04/05, fall 1997): "I insist on using the expression 'difference between the sexes,' which, unlike 'sexual difference,' offers no set content. It is an empty concept, and that is good. I am not proposing a theory of difference, but I am concerned with the conditions of epistemological thinking about difference." And again, in "La contradiction comme lieu du féminisme," a compilation of earlier articles posted on line in November 2008 by Arnaud Sabatier, editor of the electronic journal *Les Rencontres de Bellepierre* published in La Réunion (http://www.lrdb.fr/articles.php?lng=fr&pg=1074; accessed 4/14/12): "I have decided to stick with one category, that of the difference between the sexes (*Geschlechtsdifferenz*, as the German language aptly puts it, since *Geschlecht* is both sex and gender), which in this case is a category devoid of content."

10 "'Sexual difference' is a philosophical position proper to French thought, especially to that of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray; sexual difference is already a definition of the difference between the sexes, the ontological or psychological assertion of a difference, the point of departure of a philosophy of the feminine."

11 'The language problems remain to be highlighted, and they are worthy of interest: *sexual difference* has biological connotations in English, hence the need to create "gender" in the hope of escaping a determinist representation'.

12 I want to emphasize the "quasi" and the kind of thinking about "quasi" we have inherited from Derrida.

13 "It should at once be noted that the sense of sexual difference which informs these overlapping institutions [and Watney is hereby referring to law and the state, but also to sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis as institutional disciplines] involves a taken-for-granted distinction between male and female, a sense of opposition which constitutes the bed-rock of their understanding of 'difference.' At the same time, however, each reveals its own sexual unconscious in the degree to which it acknowledges, handles, disavows, or entirely represses the other major axis of sexual difference – that which Freud explores in the name of the object-choice, and to which Foucault gives the word 'sexuality.'"

14 The difference between *Zwiegeschlechtigkeit* and *Bisexualität* is lost in the English translation of this passage: "[Science] regards their occurrence as indications of *bisexuality*, as though an individual is not merely a man or a woman but always both" (Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis,* in Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 22, p. 114).

15 On the subject of the exclusion of "biology," as a matter of principle, from Women's Studies and the Gender Studies that came after, an exclusion that restricts the field of investigation and the scope of relevance of these studies in advance, see the excellent contribution to the volume *Feminist Consequences* by Biddy Martin, an important figure in the American dialogue between feminist theory and queer theory (Martin 2001: 353-80). Catherine Malabou also works in a relevant way to remove biological thinking (that is, at once thinking about biology and the thinking that biology is helping to forge and to inform) away from its "essentializing" reading. In "Possibilité de la femme, impossibilité de la philosophie," she relies on the latest work in this domain to show that the notion of "cerebral plasticity" goes against fixed conceptions of identity construction. "Biology is not essentialist, as attested by the incredible flourishing of epigenetics," she writes toward the end of this essay. And she adds: "The space from the 'bio' to the 'trans' is perhaps already, in itself, a biological phenomenon . . ." (Malabou 2011 :156).

16 *Se* is a personal pronoun used in particular with reflexive verbs: *se toucher* = to touch oneself/one another.

17 "It is of course impossible to reconcile any sense of this unitary stabilising factor which gender theory finds behind individual identity, with the uneven, unstable nature of subjectivity disclosed by Freud"; and "To be gay for Foucault was a state always waiting to be achieved. He believed passionately in the innovative potential of gay culture to contest disciplinary regimes of power organised in the body, and to construct totally new social, cultural and psychological forms. It was the image of diversity which he shared with Freud." (Watney 1986: 17-20.)

18 By putting the emphasis on the "sex/gender system," "The Traffic in Women" lay the groundwork for the strategic and epistemological shift from "woman" to "gender" and therefore from Women's Studies to Gender Studies programs in the late 1980s.

19 On this point, see Elizabeth Grosz's reflection on the different uses of the term "difference" in contemporary thought, and in particular on Derrida's handling of the term. In the Fall 2005 issue of *Differences,* dedicated to Derrida, Grosz stresses the philosopher's contribution to feminist theory: "It is Derrida who demonstrat-

ed that difference exceeds opposition, dichotomy, or dualism and can never be adequately captured in any notion of identity or diversity (which is the proliferation of sameness or identity and by no means its overcoming or difference)." (Grotz 2005: 90)

20 "My title is intended as a citation of a skeptical question, one that is often posed to theorists who work on gender or sexuality, a challenge I wish both to understand and to which I propose a response" ("The End of Sexual Difference?", p. 176).

21 A reference to Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

22 "'Traffic in Women' had its origins in early second-wave feminism when many of us who were involved in the late 1960's were trying to figure out how to think about and articulate the oppression of women. The dominant political context at that time was the New Left, particularly the anti-war movement and the opposition to militarized U.S. imperialism. The dominant paradigm among progressive intellectuals was Marxism, in various forms" (Rubin 1994: 69).

23 The notion of "second-wave feminism" arose in the United States in tandem with the development of feminist studies and gender theory. The term points to feminist thinking as it evolved in the wake of the various movements of the 1960s. Second-wave feminism is characterized by a strongly theoretical tenor, a focus on sexuality, reflection on the way the hierarchical opposition of the sexes has been constituted, and an attempt to provide the instruments and tools necessary for reading the historical oppression of women.

24 In an effort to justify, theoretically and politically, the decriminalization of "sex workers" and the "sex business" (pornographic publications, films, accessories, and so on), Gayle Rubin protests in the name of Marx against the relegation of the "sex business" to the outskirts of the ordinary marketplace for manufactured objects and service providers, to an ambiguous zone where authorized and clandestine exchanges mingle dangerously: "Marx himself considered the capitalist market a revolutionary, if limited, force. He argued that capitalism was progressive in its dissolution of pre-capitalist superstition, prejudice, and the bonds of traditional modes of life. 'Hence the great civilizing influence of capital, its production of a state of society compared with which all earlier stages appear to be merely local progress and idolatry of nature.' Keeping sex from realizing the positive effects of the market economy hardly makes it socialist" (Rubin 1993: 20). Is it an "American" paradox? Marx, whose *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (known by its German name *Grundrisse*] Rubin cites here, is *the* major and positive reference of a discourse based on a "liberal" logic with both the political (progressive) *and* economic (capitalist) meanings that the term has long held in American public discourse.

25 See the article "sexe" in (Rey 2000) *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française,* ed. Alain Rey [Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2000]. As we know, we owe to American medicine the first formulations regarding transsexualism and thus the disjunction between "natural" anatomical sex and psychical gender.

26 As we know, Lacan likes to play with sexually charged signifiers and phonemes. That is because, as he says, "language thinks about nothing else" (*la langue ne pense qu'à ça*). Thus, in *On Feminine Sexuality,* he states: "As opposed to what Freud maintains it is man – I mean he who happens to be male without knowing what to

do with it, all the while being a speaking being – who approaches woman, or who can believe that he approaches her, because on that score there is no dearth of convictions, the *con-victions* I spoke about last time". Here, he wants to be sure that we hear the "con" (English "cunt") that contributes to "con-vincing" us, hence his emphasis on the word. Elsewhere, he doesn't even insist, counting on his audience to catch the undertone.

27 Ibid..

28 In his study not of colonial languages but of the "language" of colonization in the Francophone world, Dubreuil distinguishes the notion of "discourse" from that of *parlure*, or sociolect. Unlike "discourse," which, in Foucaldian conceptual language, is a usually negatively "oriented" notion, "parlure" designates an "aggregate of language elements" or a combination of "phrases" going from isolated syntagma to complete utterances, which, to be sure, "impose themselves socially and politically as available speech," or even hegemonic speech, but nonetheless create a space for contradictory thinking through the ambiguity of their deployment. Dubreuil gives as an example of this (negatively) "oriented" use of the word "discourse," the notion of "Orientalist discourse" developed by Edward Said. (Dubreuil 2008) See Laurent Dubreuil, *L'empire du langage: colonie et francophonie* (Paris: Hermann, 2008).

29 See *Echographies of Television,* p. 26.

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