Lived Bodies: Women's Experience of Sex and Gender

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Abstract

This thesis will discuss the category of women, as a social group, through a phenomenological understanding of women's subjective experiences. In arguing for the phenomenological perspective of the *lived body*, I show the ways in which other conceptions of women's embodied subjectivity ultimately fail to provide comprehensive accounts of the lived experience of being a woman. I begin with an investigation into how biological determinists hypothesise women's bodies as sexed. I then move to respond to Judith Butler's poststructuralist feminist account of the gendered body. Finally, I argue that the embodied experience of being a woman is best explained as an ambiguous relationship between socially constructed expectations of femininity and biological materiality.

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Introduction

> The truncated self I am to be is not something manufactured out there by an anonymous Other which I encounter only in the pages of *Playboy* or the *Ladies' Home Journal*; it is inside of me, a part of myself. I am infatuated with my feminine persona and waste my powers in the more or less hopeless pursuit of a *Vogue* figure, the look of an *Essence* model, or a home that "expresses my personality."[1]

> Contrary to the claim that to seek for commonalities in women's experience is to essentialise women or to deny difference, I argue that giving attention to commonalities of experience, even to the minimal ones of feminine embodiment, is one of the most important ways that we can become open to others different from ourselves. An exclusive focus on the discursive construction of identities risks occluding, in the name of pre-given categories of difference, concrete embodied experiences that we well might find we share. For feminism to endure as a movement that can encompass differences among women without reifying them, it is urgent that we explore areas of possible common experience: notably those of the lived feminine body.[2]

Based on my first reading of Sandra Lee Bartky's "On Psychological Oppression," from which the first epigraph to this introduction is taken, I felt that, as a woman, I was not capable of making my own decisions in the world. At the time, I felt that if Bartky was indeed right about femininity, then it was inevitable that I would act in accordance with the stereotypes that reductively define women, and that I would always be "infatuated with my feminine persona." This would mean that many of my decisions would not have been my own, but rather those of a person programmed by a patriarchal society. I was then struck with a deep sense of guilt and regret for all of my actions that might have contributed to stereotypes of femininity, such as being 'distracted' by feminine practices of housework, decorating, or applying make-up.

This led to a series of reflections on the times that I might have acted in a way that "waste[d] my powers" by subconsciously pursuing a feminine ideal. But these reflections also guided me towards a myriad of questions related to my actions, and which had been asked by feminist philosophers for some time: am I utterly conditioned by the patriarchal society in which I live to perform these 'feminine acts?' Have patriarchal systems merely exaggerated motivations that do actually come naturally to me? Do I comply with feminine ideals because I have developed

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[1] S. L. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression,* New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 25.
[2] S. Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 152.

certain preferences independently from social norms? Have I developed these preferences because I have been unwittingly convinced that they are worthy of my time?

As I thought about these questions, it became clear that understanding the terms sex and gender, and how they differ, was going to be important. I wanted to understand how much of my experiences of being a woman was defined by free choice, conditioned compliance or natural preference. In order to answer these questions, I would have to figure out how much of my experience of being a woman was naturally sexed and how much was conditioned by a gendered feminine ideal. After engaging with phenomenological understandings of embodiment, however, I realised that I needed to be asking different questions. For the phenomenologist, who accepts the *lived body* as the best explanation of subjectivity, Toril Moi argues the following:

> [I]t is impossible to derive the definition of 'woman' from an account of social norms alone, just as it is impossible to derive the definition of 'woman' from an account of biological facts alone.[3]

In this thesis I will argue that the phenomenological feminist account of the *lived body* offers contemporary feminists a powerful argument for abandoning the sex/gender binary when discussing the subjective experience of being a woman. As such, this thesis aims to show that discourses of sexed and gendered understandings of women are incomplete; women's bodies are never just sexed or gendered.

Before I defend the phenomenological account of the *lived body*, I shall discuss, in the first chapter of this thesis, the different ways that biological determinists have described women as sexed subjects. Significantly, much of our understanding of sex is related to a biological determinist understanding of what constitutes a male or female body. I will also discuss the ways in which contemporary conceptualisations of women are largely informed by biologically deterministic accounts of the body, which conceive of the female subject as sexed.

[3] T. Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 76.

I will then discuss, in the second chapter of this thesis, the poststructuralist account of gender. Specifically, I will focus on Judith Butler's conception of women as a social group. Butler maintains that women do not share an embodied experience because such a shared experience would rely on a stable concept of sex. As I will explain further, Butler argues that sex is as conditioned as gender, which means that women cannot be defined as a social group based on either their sex or their gender. In response to Butler, I will defend women's shared experience as related to their embodied subjectivity. I will argue that, in contrast to Butler, the *lived body* refutes the biological determinist conception of sex, while maintaining the idea of women as a social group.

In my final chapter I will defend the phenomenological perspective of the *lived body*. With regard to the distinction between sex and gender, Toril Moi argues that there is "at least one case in which the distinction does no useful work at all, and that is when it comes to producing a good theory of subjectivity."[4] As a Beauvoirian scholar, Moi's theory is informed by a phenomenological perspective of the *lived body*, which she employs in order to explain embodiment and what this means for women's shared lived experiences. Importantly, Moi articulates the need to fully comprehend the Beauvoirian notions of the 'body as situation,' 'lived experience,' 'myths of femininity,' and 'sex.'[5] This thesis aims to show how these concepts inform a deeper understanding of women's embodied subjectivity.

In the second epigraph of this introduction, Sonia Kruks emphasises the need for feminists to take seriously the idea of the *lived body*. She argues that by discussing the *living body* we are able to enter into a dialogue about the common experiences that women might share without simultaneously denying that each woman also lives her body differently. I hope to contribute to this dialogue by showing that the inadequacies of a purely sexed or purely gendered discourse emphasise the ambiguity between women's material reality and socialised subjectivity. In contrast to reductive studies of sex and gender, the notion of the *lived body*, I shall

[4] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 6.
[5] *Ibid*, p. 80.

argue, presupposes a focus on both natural and social understandings of what it means to be a woman as an embodied subject.

Chapter 1: The Sexed Body

As I have already intimated in my introduction, one of the predominant aims in this thesis is to defend the conception of 'women' as a social group. In order to do this, it is important first to discuss how the term sex has informed the ways in which women are defined and understood as a group. The ways that women are defined by the sexed term *female* is always in opposition to the ways that men are defined as *male*, and this plays an influential role in the ways that women see themselves in the world, and the ways that they are understood by others in the world. Sex terms are, however, unreliable and incomplete when used to describe embodied subjectivities.

In order to make evident the unreliability of sexed terms I will first discuss how they are used to define women as female. I will investigate the problematic nature of defining women with sexed terms by referring to Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl"[6] to show that sex is often used to justify naturalising social norms, which prescribe ways of being on to women. I will then unpack the reductive conceptions of sex as understood by both early and new biological determinists. One of the concerns I have with how biological determinists employ the term sex, is that they use it to bind women to characteristics that have precluded women from contributing to social spaces. This discussion will show how reductive conceptions of sex have been used, and are still used, to describe and define women. It is important, however, to distinguish between reductive biological accounts of the sexed body, and accounts which include the materiality of the body when conceptualising women's subjectivity. This chapter focuses on the former, while chapter 3 will reflect on the relationship between the lived body and the material body.

Following my discussion of the biological determinists' conceptions of sex, I will turn to psychoanalytical understandings of gender. In this regard, I rely on Robert Stoller's conceptions of gender roles and gender identities. In the final section of

[6] I. M. Young, 'Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality', *Human Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1980.

this chapter I argue that feminist theorists adopted the term gender and constructionist theories because the pejorative effects of the biological determinists' conceptions of sex seemed too pervasive to overcome. By the end of this chapter I hope to have highlighted the importance of reassessing our need for binary gendered terms which are rooted in a biological determinist perspective.

How Sex Influences Conceptions of Materiality and Motility

The term sex generally refers to aspects of the anatomical state of the human subject's body. One text in gender studies defines sex as "a theory about human beings which divides them into two biologically based categories – male and female."[7],[8] Sally Haslanger posits that when discussing sex most people feel confident that they know what these terms mean. Haslanger explains the common conception of sex as follows:

> Males are those human beings with a range of familiar primary and secondary sex characteristics, most important being the penis; females are those with a different set, most important being the vagina, or, perhaps, the uterus. Enough said. [9]

It is uncontroversial to state, then, that the common conception of sex prioritises the anatomical state of the body, specifically referring to the bodies' reproductive organs.

The term sex, as well as its sub-categories male and female, is used, as shown above, to describe the materiality of the body. Materiality, in this instance, refers to the tangible physicality of the body, and generally refers to human reproductive organs. One's body is, of course, material in nature. However, feminist theorists have long critiqued the assumed relationship between the common conception of sex and the materiality of the body. Indeed, some feminist theorists argue that how we conceive of the body's materiality affects the body itself. Judith Butler argues

[7] A. Cranny-Francis, J. Kirkby, P. Stavropoulos, and W. Waring, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*, New York, Palgrave, 2003, p. 9.
[8] I will discuss the problems with, and critiques of, sex being used to categorise persons into such a dichotomy in the second chapter of this thesis.
[9] S. Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?', *Noûs*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2000, p. 31.

in *Bodies that Matter*[10] that this "matter" (the materiality of the body) does not necessarily sex our bodies, even if we feel as though there is a direct connection between a bodily function and a sexed description. She writes:

> [S]urely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these "facts," one might sceptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as merely construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is.[11]

"But", Butler continues, the "irrefutability" of the materiality of bodies "in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means."[12] Butler argues that, although bodies are material by nature, how we understand and relate to our bodies is influenced by the very construction of sex. In other words, when bodies are considered female or male, this distinction is influenced by the concepts we use to make these distinctions, not necessarily because bodies ought to be naturally categorised as such.[13]

Understanding *sex* as equivalent to the body's reproductive organs has justified generalised claims about how men and women behave, move and think. Take, for example, the expression "throwing like a girl." This might imply that a "girl," as a sexed subject, is physiologically different to a boy, and that the bodily motility of boys and girls is naturally different. In order to say something about how boys and girls move, the acceptability of the expression "throwing like a girl" relies on the weight of an assumed biological objectivity of sexed categories. This biological objectivity ensures a naturalisation of the movement of throwing and implies that girls *just do* throw a certain way.

"Throwing like a Girl,"[14] is also the title of one of Iris Marion Young's most renowned analysis of feminine motility, in which she raises questions of how

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[10] J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, New York, Routledge, 1993.
[11] *Ibid*, p. xi.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] I will discuss Butler's concern with sexed conceptions of the body in more detail in the second chapter of this thesis. For the moment it is important to note that sex, as a term to describe bodies, is contested by feminist theorists like Butler.
[14] I. M. Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl'.

women's bodily comportment is often, and mistakenly, understood to be the natural actualisation of a biological state of being in the world. She argues that:

> The approach persons of each sex take to the performance of physical tasks that require force, strength, and muscular coordination is frequently different. There are indeed real physical differences between men and woman in the kind and limit of their physical strength. Many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength, however, are due not so much to brute muscular strength, but to the way each sex uses the body in approaching tasks.[15]

In this passage, Young does not dispute that there are physical differences between women and men. She does, however, examine whether bodily motility is an obvious manifestation of these physical differences. Rather than a concern with brute physical capabilities, such as strength, Young focuses on how women and men are taught to use their bodies. As a feminist critique of natural and conditioned motility, Young's essay has made a significant contribution to debates about whether bodies are naturally capable of tasks as a result of their sex, or whether they exhibit certain conditioned qualities in relation to their gender. She continues by suggesting the following:

> [I]n attempting to lift something, women more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task – the arms and shoulders – rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. [16]

Here, Young draws attention to the ways in which women may approach tasks that are generally reserved for persons who are thought to be more physically capable. For Young, the difficulty that women may find in carrying out these tasks is not necessarily a consequence of the task itself, but rather their approach to it. Young's investigation of sex-specific motility focuses on how bodily acts are thought to be performed differently by each sex. Women, she argues, are taught to use their bodies ineffectively for certain tasks from an early age. Women are taught that their bodies are fragile and should avoid getting dirty or risking injury.[17] In light of Young's analysis of motility, it is not surprising that women might be unfamiliar with, for example, lifting heavy objects effectively. Young's observation of

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[15] I. M. Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl', p. 142.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 143.
[17] *Ibid*, p. 144.

socialised bodily comportment can extend further than lifting heavy objects, though. Women are constantly taught to use their bodies in ways that are considered appropriate for their given societal norms,[18] even when the action is not physically strenuous. Sitting, for example, is an action that women are socialised to act out from a young age. Girls are told to make sure their knees are close together or that their legs are crossed, and women who perform this action do so in ways which feel almost reflexive. So, bodily motility is not only affected by physicality but also by social conditioning. That bodily motility has been conceived of as sex-specific is only one example of sexual stereotyping in women's history.

The focus of placing sexed qualities onto bodies is far from being out-dated. In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss how sexual stereotypes are largely related to the ways in which early biological determinists investigated the human body. For the most part, early biological studies of women's bodies attributed sexed terms to bodies when describing their actions and abilities. Ultimately, as I shall argue, the ways in which these investigative fields have described bodies as sexed has influenced contemporary patriarchal understandings of women. Significantly, biologically deterministic investigations have directly affected the ways in which feminists first began to conceptualise of gender.

Early Biological Determinism

For the early biological determinist,[19] a woman's capabilities were inseparable from her body. The bodies of women, they thought, were governed solely by reproductive processes. The biologically determined woman was further described as emotional, irrational, and ruled by impulses, which, in turn, classified her as ill-equipped to contribute to the very biological and scientific research that was beginning to define her. As Ruth Bleier explains, women were prevented from contributing to the rational and objective space of science because it was believed

[18] This is not to say that men are not taught to use their bodies in certain ways due to their sex, but, as I will show later, women's social conditioning defines their role in a society in unique and oppressive ways.
[19] Someone who believes that all human actions can be reduced to biological bodily functions.

to be a quintessentially male domain.[20] Women, in contrast to men, were routinely emphasised as being associated with the environment. In this regard, women came to closely personify 'mother nature.' The characteristics that were assigned to women were used to justify their exclusion from the sciences and most public spaces. In this regard, Bleier describes how women were understood, as follows:

> In the period of the early seventeenth century and developing capitalism, Francis Bacon helped to shape modern sciences by values our culture calls masculine. At a time when the control of nature was seen as inseparable from economic and industrial progress, he effectively cast the description of science, its methods and goals, in gendered and sexual metaphors that are with us to this day: he saw mind as male and nature as female, a mystery to be unveiled, penetrated and controlled. Woman as reproductive being embodied the natural, the disordered, the emotional, the subjective, the irrational; man as thinker epitomized objectivity, rationality, culture, and control. Bacon saw science as a "chaste and lawful marriage between Mind and Nature"; nature was to be subdued, dominated and controlled. These dualisms have had great importance in the molding of gender stereotypes in Western cultures as well as in the structuring of science as male, both conceptually and organizationally.[21]

By closely associating women to the natural sphere, Francis Bacon, a contemporary of René Descartes, placed women in the "body" category of a binary that juxtaposed the mind and the body. This meant that, as Bleier notes, women were placed in opposition to the mind, and thus in opposition to the rational and the objective. For scientists like Bacon, women, like nature, needed to be controlled, subdued and understood by rational and objective men. As a primarily "reproductive being," women's social roles and movements were emphasised as being related to their bodily functions.

Women continued to be described as irrational and ruled by their reproductive organs throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much of the early vocabulary of the sexed body was developed by W. K. Brooks' *The Law of Heredity*, which was published in the late nineteenth century.[22] In it Brooks presents features of sexual difference and reproduction in a way that personifies female anatomical organs and hormones as "conservative" and male biological processes

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[20] R. Bleier, 'The Cultural Price of Social Exclusion: Gender and Science', *NWSA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988, p. 8.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 15

as “progressive.” In an analysis of the nature of the male sperm and female ovum, for example, Brooks notes the following:

> [T]he male element is the originating and the female is the perpetuating factor; the ovum is conservative, the male cell is progressive.[23]

By characterising the male sperm and the female ovum with progressiveness and conservatism, the ovum and the sperm came to be metonyms for the roles of women and men in society. This gave Brooks further means to claim that women are biologically best suited to a domestic way of life in the private sphere, as it was men who were ‘naturally’ progressive and thus best suited for public affairs. This metonymic representation of sex entrenched the vocabulary necessary for the “pervasive picture of sex”[24] within organisational spheres of Western society,[25] such as government, business and academia. “Pervasive sex,” Toril Moi explains, makes “whole classes of activities… endowed with a sex,” so that “every habit, gesture, and activity” then also becomes “sexualized and categorized as male or female, masculine or feminine.”[26] Masculine and feminine norms have thus become attached to the bodies of men and women through aligning human characteristics, such as “progressive” and “conservative,” with male and female bodies.

Moi argues that Brooks’ account of the sexed woman is noteworthy because his conception of women’s bodies generally influenced Western social structures in the early twentieth century.[27] This is evident when examining the works of Brooks’ contemporaries such as Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, who maintained that:

[23] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 16.
[24] *Ibid,* p. 6.
[25] Reference to Western society here is intended to emphasize the ways in which those significant to 16th-18th century English and American biological sciences provided the foundation for the sexed and gendered body that is widely used today in these cultures. Biological determinism, however, was not, and is not, isolated to Western societies. Unfortunately, a comparative analysis of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[26] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 12.
[27] *Ibid*, p. 15.

> Just as the ovum, large, well nourished, and passive, is a cellular expression of female characteristics, so the smaller size, less nutritive habit, and predominant activities of the male are summed up in the sperm.[28]

Significantly, it seems that the effects of such narratives about sexual difference are still apparent in many contemporary organisational and educational contexts. For example, teaching materials that provide high school students with their first understanding of sexual difference have continued to use sexed descriptions which are reminiscent of the early biological determinist. As Emily Martin shows in her examination of school biology textbooks, bodily processes such as reproduction are depicted within the confines of early biological determinist discourses. In examining such biological school textbooks, Martin comments that:

> It is remarkable how "femininely" the egg behaves and how "masculinely" the sperm. The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not move or journey, but passively "is transported," "is swept," or even "drifts" along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperm are small, "streamlined," and invariably active. They "deliver" their genes to the egg, "activate the developmental program of the egg," and have a "velocity" that is often remarked upon.[29]

What is common to Bacon, Brooks, Geddes, and Thomson, and the writers of contemporary biology high school textbooks, is that they all impose (knowingly or unknowingly) very specific characteristics onto reproductive organs, which have ultimately influenced patriarchal stereotypes of what a woman is.[30]

This is significant because the ways in which women are described influence social expectations about how they ought to behave. Although there is no empirical evidence for the belief that women are naturally "irrational" while men are naturally "objective," the stigma of this stereotype is enforced, for example, every time a woman's action is blamed on her menstrual cycle.[31]

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[28] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 12, p. 18. Moi provides a detailed discussion of how Brooks, Geddes and Thomson were at the forefront of nineteenth century's sexual difference research, which provided biological data to justify oppressive social sexual norms.

[29] E. Martin, 'The Egg and Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles', *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1991, p. 489.

[30] Martin goes on to argue not only that the egg is not passive ("the sperm and egg stick together because of adhesive molecules on the surface of each", *Ibid* p. 493), but that describing it as such slowed down the scientific enterprise of understanding human reproduction.

[31] For an interesting study on how women respond to the stereotype of their menstrual cycle causing irrational behaviours see: C. Shipman, M. L. Stubbs, and J. A. Wister, 'Mentioning Menstruation: A Stereotype Threat that Diminishes Cognition?', *Sex Roles*, vol. 68, no. 1-2, 2013.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the early biological determinist's conception of sex is by no means out-dated. In the next section I will discuss some theories from contemporary biological determinists who employ evolutionary theory in order to justify their patriarchal imaginings of women. This discussion will also bring forth some feminist responses to these claims.

Responses to New Biological Determinism

Unlike the early biological determinists, the 'new' biological determinist focuses on women's 'natural' state in relation to evolutionary social theory. The newer school of thought argues that women have been evolutionarily adapted to being subordinate to men and that patriarchal systems are the result of the natural social organisation of the human species.

William Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*,[32] for example, is presented as an evolutionary anthropological investigation of the natural relationship between men and women in society. In it he argues that men's physiology allows them to run social structures, such as economic systems, more efficiently than women. According to Goldberg, "economic systems" are not established in order to benefit men, but do so naturally because the evolution of the human species has determined that men operate better in these roles. This is a theme that is echoed in popular media. From films like *Wall Street* (1987) to *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), the men who personify economic systems are shown as naturally cunning and ruthless, and these qualities are further recognised as quintessentially masculine.

Contrary to Goldberg's hypothesis of the 'maleness' of economic systems or the popular imaginings of men's suitability for particular societal roles, however, stands Moira Gatens' feminist investigation of the division of labour in capitalist societies. Gatens posits that women's contributions to social structures have been

[32] S. Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, London, Temple Smith, 1977.

depreciated by the purposeful hierarchical placement of men and women in, for example, economic systems. 'Women's work,' which is often short hand for 'work done in the home,'[33] is not measured in traditional economic terms. This means that the time and labour put into domestic work is not credited in the way public sphere work is credited.[34]

Nancy Frasers critique of the "public sphere," as a space where "private persons" discuss "public matters,"[35] further emphasises this point. Fraser argues that capitalist conceptions of the public sphere "conflates at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse."[36] If, in capitalist societies, all of these routinely exclude women, then it would make sense that work done by women would not be considered legitimate by such anchors of power.

This strengthens Gatens' claim in two ways: first, it makes clear that different areas of society hold different levels of power. The public sphere controls government (which makes the laws), paid labour (which credits and rewards societal actors for their efforts), and public discourse (which validates social norms). The private sphere, on the other hand, represents tiny pockets of individuals whose interests have to move into the public sphere if they want to be recognised as legitimate. Secondly, and more to Gatens' point on capitalist societies, Fraser shows how difficult it is to redefine the private/domestic sphere, because of the concertation of power (held by men) in the public sphere.

Gatens explains that the depreciation of women's contributions to economic structures has played a fundamental role in disadvantaging women, and empowering men. This imbalance of power continues because the *sexing* of public and private spaces has come to seem natural. Gatens writes:

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[33] An operational sphere forced on women in the first place, as my earlier discussion of Brooks shows.
[34] Contributing to a nation sates' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or employment numbers, for example.
[35] N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.' *Social text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80 p. 57
[36] N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.' p. 57.

> It would seem that from the beginnings of the capitalist era women are conceptualized as *naturally* unsuited to the production of social value and hence falling outside the body politic. Even on the most severe of the early modern accounts of the legitimate polity, 'the liberty to buy, and sell, and otherwise contract with one another' was not denied to the *subject* of a Commonwealth [...]. Yet any or every man could command the labour of a woman. [37]

Further, women's exclusion from the workforce was used as evidence to emphasise that women were naturally bound to the domestic sphere, and in a vicious cycle, this domesticity was used to justify patriarchal characterisations of women:

> The major ethical requirement made of them [women] by the body politic was that they be obedient and chaste. Women thus come to symbolize, or literally embody, the natural, the familial and the domestic.[38]

This natural embodiment of the familial and domestic, were, therefore, imposed on women by the creation of the public and private spheres. Not, as it is often portrayed, that women are better suited for domestic affairs, thus necessitating the need to separate the public and private sphere by sex.

Although many of these restrictions have been surmounted, women are still given guidelines as to what is appropriate displays of womanhood in public spaces. In a qualitative study on the experiences of breastfeeding one mother reported that her boss had told her that pumping breastmilk in the workplace was interfering with her doing her job.[39],[40] This study shows that even when structural restrictions seem to have been overcome women are still prevented from openly displaying 'womanhood' in public spaces, reinforcing the idea that one ought not interfere with how men operate in such spaces. I would further argue that this case study also shows that, when in public spaces, women are constantly evaluated on how much they can disassociate themselves from their bodies and its 'womanly' capacities, like breastfeeding. The more women are able to perform

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[37] M. Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1991, p. 127.
[38] *Ibid*, p. 127.
[39] R. Powell, M. Davis, and A. K. Anderson, 'A Qualitative look into Mother's Breastfeeding Experiences'. *Journal of Neonatal Nursing 20*(6), 2014. p. 262
[40] I will discuss this study in more detail in the next chapter.

as though their bodies were like that of men, the more open to their presence public spaces become.

In the next section of this chapter, my discussion will turn to how feminist critiques of patriarchal scientific discourses have affected the ways that women's bodies can be defined and understood. I will also discuss the commonalities between feminist scientific investigations and feminist philosophical inquiries in relation to women's bodies.

Feminist Discussion on the Sexed Body

So far, I have discussed how women's bodies have been described as naturally sexed by biological determinists, and how these narratives have positioned women in social systems, such as the economy. I now wish to discuss the relationship between natural and constructed understandings of the body by first investigating reproduction. Susan Hurley argues that the noticeable diversity of "reproductive styles" in the natural world can be understood as "a matter of nurture as much as nature." [41] This concurs with Simone de Beauvoir observation that a woman's reproductive processes may be natural, but that human beings do not regulate such systems in the same ways as other female animals do, and therefore, these systems are not *completely natural*. Maternal processes, Beauvoir points out, are dependent on the kind of society in which a woman exists. For Beauvoir, reproduction is "not definitely prescribed in women – society alone is the arbiter." [42] In this way, women's bodies are their own, their society's, as well as natural biological entities.

Feminist projects that aim to simultaneously investigate both the biological body and the body as socially conditioned, however, may find it difficult to not retreat into social constructionist discourses. Biological discourses can easily reduce the body to its functions, and, in doing so, can perpetuate the narrative of biological

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[41] S. Hurley, 'Sex and the Social Construction of Gender: Can Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology be Reconciled?', in J. Browne (ed.), *The Future of Gender,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 108.
[42] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Random House, London, 1997, p. 67.

determinism. When faced with the challenging task of avoiding such reductive discourse, it is perhaps better to err on the side of constructionist discourses. As feminists investigating biological processes have noted, it is extremely difficult to write about the complex relationship between social and biological systems that affect the body without entirely focussing on constructionist narratives. Helen Keane and Marsha Rosengarten write of this challenge:

> [W]e want to emphasise how difficult we have found engaging with the biological as both an object and source of critique and how hard it is to produce sustained and specific accounts of the imbrication of (so-designated) psychic, social, semiotic and biological networks without falling back into the familiar habits of a conventional social constructionism.[43]

Keane and Rosengarten's essay "On the Biology of Sexed Subjects" discusses how bodies are conceived through scientific discourses. They investigate problematic discrepancies in scientific discourses when studying male and female bodies. Their critique reveals that such scientific discourses are far too simplistic. For them, understanding the body requires an analysis of human action and subjectivity, which includes understanding the complex network of "psychic," "social," "semiotic" and "biological" influences on an individual. These influences are difficult to discuss simultaneously, which is why it is seems easier to limit each of them to their constructed components. While each of these influences can be understood as constructed in some way, it is important to understand both their natural and constructed elements. I share Keane and Rosengarten's difficulties when considering the multiple aspects of the human experience in order to explain what it is to be a woman. It is my assertion that when each concept, namely psychic, social, semiotic and biological, is considered in isolation, the human subject does not seem fully explored. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the simultaneity of psychic, social, semiotic and biological conditions, which influence the experience of being a woman.

As well as critiquing scientific discourses, Keane and Rosengarten are also concerned with feminist "theories of embodiment [that] have proceeded 'as

[43] H. Keane, and M. Rosengarten, 'On the Biology of Sexed Subjects', in *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 17, no. 39, 2002, p 262.

though the nature of biology is immaterial.'"[44] Some feminist theorists themselves can fall into the trap of limiting their arguments to a radical resistance to scientific discourse, thus succumbing to the limited framework of constructionism. As Evelyn Fox Keller argues it is difficult to "deal with the truly radical critique that attempts to locate androcentric bias in the 'hard' sciences, indeed in scientific ideology itself."[45] By critiquing the scientific method, a radical feminist critique "takes us out of the liberal domain and requires us to question the very assumption of objectivity and rationality that underlie the scientific enterprise."[46] Keller believes that feminists who deny scientific methods of understanding the body do themselves a disservice because they ignore significant physiological influences of women's embodiment. Keller continues:

> [T]he task of feminist theoretic in science is twofold: to distinguish that which is parochial from that which is universal in the scientific impulse, reclaiming for women what has historically been denied to them.[47]

I would argue that feminists should not take a wholly pessimistic or suspicious interest in scientific enquiries of the body's nature. While one cannot assume that the social meaning of women equates to their biological make up, there certainly is a relation between the materiality of the body and the way that women live in the world. The menstrual cycle is part of many pre-menopausal women's monthly routines, for example, and by gaining a better understanding of this process we can reimagine and redefine its social meaning. The same would be true for breast feeding. A better understanding of the biological and physical aspects of breastfeeding (how often a breastfeeding mother might need to express milk, the energy needed to produce breastmilk etc.) would help redefine what 'appropriateness' means in the workplace with regards to breastfeeding. The study of the body does not have to produce biologically deterministic sexed accounts of women. If we are to understand how women are affected by the social

[44] H. Keane, and M. Rosengarten, p. 261.
[45] E. F. Keller, 'Feminism and Science', in E. F. Keller & H. E. Longino (eds.), *Feminism and Science*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 30.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] *Ibid*, p. 31–32.

meaning of their bodies, we also have to understand the body that is placed in these social situations.

In this section I have argued that not all biological investigations need be reductive and that feminist theorists need not be radically skeptical of biological investigations. It is reasonable to discuss women's bodies as influenced partly by natural process and partly by constructed experiences. The following and final section of this chapter will discuss how feminist accounts of gender have been influenced by psychoanalytical studies. I will show that these accounts of gender cannot escape the psychoanalytical framework from which they were appropriated.

Psychoanalytical Studies and the Creation of Gender

Due to the reductive assumptions made about women by the biological determinists' conception of sex, feminist movements found refuge in more recent discourses on embodiment in psychoanalytical fields of research from the 1960s and 1970s. The psychoanalyst Stoller and his contemporaries were, at the time, intrigued by the accounts of trans men and women who claimed to feel as though they were in the "wrong body."[48] From their accounts, Stoller hypothesised that there were at least two identity-forming mechanisms that could affect the experience one has of being an embodied subject: first, the body or one's biological sex, and secondly, one's gender, which was described by Stoller as the experience of feeling like a man or a woman. As Moi claims, with respect to Stoller's hypothesis, "the distinction between sex and gender emerged from a concern with individual identity."[49]

Stoller differentiates between a gender role and a gender identity. One's gender identity "starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not to another."[50] According to

[48] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 21.
[49] *Ibid*, p. 21–22.
[50] R. J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, London, Karnac Books Ltd, 1984, p. 10.

Stoller, one is aware that one belongs to a particular sex based on the kind of body one has, and this awareness begins one's process of identification with gendered norms. Stoller describes one's gender role as:

> [T]he overt behaviour one displays in society, the role which he plays, especially with other people, to establish his position with them insofar as his evaluation of his gender is concerned.[51]

In short, one's gender identity is based on the association one makes to a sexed body. However, this association need not be to the biological sex that one is assigned at birth. What follows from this analysis is that one's sex and one's gender could be understood as wholly different concepts.

In contrast to this, Debra Bergoffen understands sex and gender to be inextricably linked arguing that the

> experience of transsexuals, of the transgendered, and of the intersexed reveal the ways in which sex and gender bleed into each other. They also suggest that to ask whether sex and gender are natural givens or cultural constructs is to ask the wrong question. Nothing human is naturally given. No cultural construct arises *ex nihilo*.[52]

For Bergoffen, sex and gender are not a mutually exclusive dichotomy. All human subjects are both sexed and gendered, but not in the same ways, and not for the same reasons. Feminine and masculine characteristics that seem culturally or socially created may also have a relationship to the body. Similarly, characteristics that are defined as being purely biological or natural are informed by social constructs. While Stoller's investigation led to a radical separation of sex and gender, Bergoffen's explanation of these terms deduce that they are, to an extent, indistinguishable from one another, or at least ambiguously related. With regard to the lack of accommodation for ambiguity in Stoller's study, Wendy Holloway argues that "social psychology's attempts to understand the difference between the sexes has been confounded by the consequences of [a sex/gender] dualism."[53]

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[51] R. J. Stoller, p. 10.

[52] D. Bergoffen, 'Simone de Beauvoir: (Re)counting the Sexual Difference', in Card, C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 249.

[53] W. Hollway, *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science*, London, Sage Publishers, 1994, p 98.

When separating one's self from one's body, as Stoller's sex/gender divide does, it is easy to disconnect the body from subjectivity.

For the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, gender roles and gender identities meant that femininity, a socially constructed characteristic, could become wholly disassociated from women's bodies. What this implies is that cultural or social influences are able to 'create' characteristics of femininity associated with the female body. Moi explains that feminists who were in dialogue with psychoanalytical perspectives, largely ignored Stoller's conception of a gender role, focusing rather on gender identity. The feminist conception of gender identity differed from Stoller's account of gender identity in that the former was principally affected by patriarchal societies.[54] The feminist notion of gender was used to explain feminine characteristics displayed by women who were attempting to live up to patriarchal expectations.

The feminine self, according to gender theorists such as Val Plumwood,[55] is the self that learns to associate its body with patriarchal norms. A "degendering feminist,"[56] then, believes it possible for feminine norms to be unlearned. However, as Gatens argues, in order for this to be possible the following two claims about gender identity would also have to be accepted:

> 1. The body is neutral and passive with regard to the formation of consciousness, which is implicitly a rationalist view; and
> 2. One can definitively alter the important effects of the historical and cultural specificity of one's 'lived experience' by consciously changing the material practices of the culture in question.[57]

These claims argue that gender identity is a purely social construct and that it does not have any direct connection to the body. If all feminine traits are conditioned, one can, with enough education and counter-cultural influences alter the effects of gender. If this is the case, then the body is merely a blank slate upon which socially relevant information is inscribed after birth. However, as Gatens argues:

[54] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 22–23.
[55] V. Plumwood, 'Do we Need a Sex/Gender Distinction?', *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 51, 1989.
[56] M. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 7.
[57] *Ibid.*

> [T]he body can and does intervene to confirm or deny various social significances in a way that lends an air of inevitability to patriarchal social relations. A thorough analysis of the construction of the specificity of female experiences, which takes account of the female *body*, is essential to dispelling this 'air.'[58]

What Gatens suggests is that women's bodies are not arbitrarily related to certain social or gendered characteristics. Because a woman's body is capable of menstruating, for example, this experience might also be culturally coded to include "shame and modesty – both characteristically feminine attributes."[59] Does it follow, then, that when men experience "shame" and "modesty," the experience of these is qualitatively different to women because men do not have the same bodily associations to these attributes? If Gatens is right that bodily differences create different lived experiences, then the answer would have to be yes.

Ultimately, as Gatens argues, one cannot wholly disassociate one's lived experience from one's body. The human experiences of shame and modesty will be qualitatively different depending on one's embodiment. As such, embodiment affects the kinds of subjective experiences that women have. Being female and having feminine characteristics are partly constructed, but a woman's experience of the feminine is an embodied experience and is thus not obviously separate from the experience of being female. If embodiment and social conditioning both play significant roles in women's experiences, neither being a prerequisite for the other, then a constructionist gendered discourse that attempts to completely separate gender or the feminine from the body does not fully describe the experience of being a woman.

The next chapter of this thesis will provide a detailed analysis of the feminist poststructuralist desire to problematise sex and gender, and, by extension, the category of women altogether.

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[58] M. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, p. 10.
[59] *Ibid*, p. 14.

Chapter 2: The Gendered Body

In the first chapter of this thesis I argued that a focus on the sexed body alone cannot fully explain what it is to be a woman. This is because, the sexed body can only refer to *what* kind of body is lived, rather than satisfactorily answer *how* or *why* each woman chooses to live her body the way that she does. This chapter will argue that, just as a focus on the sexed body limits understandings of the what it is to be a woman, so too does a focus on the a purely gendered body.

I will begin this chapter with an analysis of poststructural perspectives on the sexed and gendered body. I will focus on Judith Butler's argument that the meaning of the body is completely constructed. I will also consider how Butler conceptualises women, as a social group, which is, according to her, a product of the heteronormative sex/gender binary. In the final section of this chapter, I will give an account of sexual difference. Overall, the aim of this chapter is to defend the idea of women as a social group, despite the failings of the sex/gender binary. I will show that a sexual difference theory can provide evidence for the common embodied experiences that women share.

A Brief Look at Poststructuralist Perspectives

Poststructuralist hypotheses vary significantly from one to another because there is no one defining theory that informs the poststructuralist agenda. Butler, for example, gives genealogical favour to different philosophical movements, *as well as* theorists, for developing poststructuralist thought. She argues that postructuralism is not a static theoretical approach:

> [I]t is not a unitary set of texts, but a wide range of works that emerge in the aftermath of Ferdinand de Saussure, the French Hegel, existentialism, phenomenology, and various forms of linguistic formalism.[60]

What Butler means by this is that there are many differing perspectives and foundations to poststructuralism. Common to poststructuralism, though, is a

[60] J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 195.

challenging opposition to Western Enlightenment and its focus on universal truth and objectivity. As Susan Bordo explains that the poststructuralist is able to challenge the constructions of power, human subjectivity and language by contextualising them in a history that is bound to social relations.[61]

For poststructuralists, the biological determinist conceptions of sex ultimately fail to describe the body as such. This is because the biological determinists' conception of sex is both patriarchal in nature and positions the meaning of the body as universal and objective. The objectivity of the sexed body as conceived by the biological determinists cannot be realised because, according to poststructuralists, there first exists a language that socially categorises men and women as different sexes with different capabilities, prior to any biological evidence that empirically proves this to be the case. For example, the sexed language Francis Bacon used to describe women preceded any hypothesis he had about the biological make up of men and women.

If we use a poststructuralist approach to critique the biological determinist conception of sex, then we can distinguish between a biologically material body and a purely sexed body. Simply, the former will have no stable meaning, and the latter is based on a socially prejudiced discourse. According to poststructuralism, bodies are infused with histories and social relations, and biological deterministic theories of the body merely contribute to an already prejudiced sexed social system.

In the next section of this chapter, I will focus specifically on the poststructuralist feminist works of Judith Butler, as her positioning of bodies as completely gendered has presented powerful challenges to our understanding of sex and gender.

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[61] S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body: Tenth Anniversary Edition*: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 2003, p. 277.

Who Does 'Woman' Represent?

> "[S]ex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls.[62]

This section will discuss how sex, as a concept, is a "regulatory force" on the body, and how conceiving of sex as a natural extension of the biological body can produce meaning that is alien to the body. My discussion that follows will predominantly critique the conceptions of sex and gender from Butler's *Gender Trouble*,[63] one of the first, and most renowned, in-depth poststructuralist critiques of the sex/gender binary.

When describing what her intentions for *Gender Trouble* were, Butler states:

> I had two aims at the time: the first was to expose what I took to be a pervasive heterosexism in feminist theory; the second was to try to imagine a world in which those who live at some distance from norms, who live in the confusion of gender norms, might still understand themselves not only as living liveable lives, but as deserving a certain kind of recognition.[64]

Through *Gender Trouble* Butler aimed to focus on feminist accounts of gender that unwittingly support heterosexist paradigms. According to Butler, some formulations of sex and gender inadvertently support a picture of heterosexuality as the only natural experience because they focus on the binary of men/women. According to Butler, discussions which focus on reactions to the body as biologically determined by sex perpetuate heteronormative discourses.

Sex, as conceived of by the biological determinist, naturalises the male and female relationship. The sexed body distinguishes men and women from one another by justifying and making sense of sex specific social differentiations. Feminist movements sought to destabilise these sex specific social differentiations by adopting a gendered framework in order to understand how feminine stereotypes affect women. Gender, in these accounts, captured what biological determinists

[62] J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 1.
[63] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 2008.
[64] J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 207.

framed as sexed social differentiation, and theorised these as gendered norms and as independent from women's bodies. However, even though these theories destabilised biological deterministic conceptions of sex, they did not challenge the naturalising of binaries, such as male/female, and by extension man/woman.

Butler argues that 'men' and 'women' are untenable categories in themselves.[65] As I understand it, part of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* is to critique the ways that the definition of the individual 'woman' has influenced the construction of a general conception of 'women.' 'Woman' exists, according to Butler, because we exist within discourses that frame, validate and normalise human experiences that fit within social binaries; these binaries are most notably that of sex/gender, male/female, feminine/masculine and man/woman.[66] Butler argues that, by extension, the binary of man/woman reinforces the norms created by both the male/female binary and the feminine/masculine binary. Through continuing to validate the categories of 'men' and 'women,' feminist accounts of the body have kept in place the gendered ideals of femininity and masculinity as directly related to men and women through the male/female binary. This, Butler argues, creates a heteronormative framework for thinking about subjectivity.

In order to point out the heteronormative inclinations in some feminist thought, Butler first destabilises the assumed subject of feminism: women. She aims to do this by arguing that 'women,' when understood as a different sex to 'men,' is an utterly gendered concept. Butler opens the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," by describing the prominent position that women have occupied within feminist debates. She argues that, as a social category, women have been depicted with an already "existing identity."[67] For her, the category of women in feminist theory "not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political

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[65] While the terms women and men refer to embodied subjectivities; gender based on sexual differentiation, the terms 'women' and 'men' refer the untenable categories of individuals defined by a heteronormative sex/gender binary.
[66] In this context, sex is closely associated with the male/female binary, and gender to masculine/feminine norms.
[67] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 2.

representation is pursued."[68] Butler's critique is concerned with the limitations of a feminist theory that assumes 'women' to be a clear social category, and for whom feminist movements seek to represent and recognise political needs. For Butler, a feminist theory that prioritises the representation of women – in theory and in politics – without first considering whether 'women' is a useful category that ought to be prioritised, is severely limited in its approach to social justice. In order to develop her critique, Butler investigates how feminist writings have come to identify women as their subject. Have feminist writings, Butler asks, taken for granted that 'women' are a unified group?[69] Butler argues that feminist critiques should question "how the category of 'women', the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought."[70]

As I discussed in the first chapter, feminist theory has a long history of reacting against what Toril Moi describes as a *pervasive picture of sex*. These reactions have sought to destabilise social structures of power and prejudice that have consistently disadvantage women in all public and private spaces on the grounds of their sex. Of this feminist impulse, Butler questions whether "the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism [women] is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions."[71]

The feminists of the 1960s and 1970s enthusiastically argued against a deterministic sex that equates a woman to her ovum, but left 'women,' as a concept, intact, and thus the feminine/masculine binary intact. If Butler is right, does the defence of a unified concept of 'women' also support the *natural* feminine state of such a group? Furthermore, does the prioritisation of women in feminism exclude (and thus disadvantage) those who do not consider themselves, and those who are not considered by others, to be women, both of whom are nonetheless subject to the same prejudices? Is it possible that even those who see themselves

[68] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 2.
[69] *Ibid*, 3–5.
[70] *Ibid*, p. 4.
[71] *Ibid, p. 6.*

as women are not adequately represented by the category of 'women'? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, perhaps it would be worthwhile to reconsider the category of 'women' altogether.

Butler argues that a universal concept of 'women' was based on a Western feminist narrative that conceived of patriarchy as operating identically in all political and cultural spaces. For Butler, then, 'women,' as a social group, is merely a part of an outdated feminist perspective that views patriarchy as affecting all people in the same ways. Butler questions whether the category of 'women,' in feminist discourse, is still dependant on previous reactions to the pervasive picture of sex.[72] Butler does note, however, that even though "the claim of universal patriarchy" today "no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did,"[73] that "the notion of a generally shared conception of "women," is "much harder to displace"[74] than the idea of a universal patriarchy.

Women live in vastly different political, cultural, racial, and economic circumstances. Butler would argue that there can be no universal category of 'women' because what it means to be a woman depends on each individual's experience of these circumstances. The term 'women' cannot refer to an assumed shared experience of being a woman. For example, a middle-class woman who fights for universal suffrage could contribute to the exploitation of an underclass woman of the same society.

The subjective experience of power and privilege differs from one social context to another. One example of women being privileged by oppressive systems, and perpetuating the validity of a universal experience of patriarchy, is that of the Women and Gender Conference in Durban in 1991. This was the first national gender conference to take place in post-Apartheid South Africa. Although their intentions were good, those who were notably privileged by the South African Apartheid system of racial segregation, namely white women, assumed a position

[72] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 6.
[73] *Ibid*, p. 5.
[74] *Ibid*.

of moral authority on all gender issues. This left the rest of the women in attendance feeling as though they were "invited primarily to witness exhibitions of hegemonic wisdom and to endorse whatever diagnoses and proposals academically established feminists had to offer."[75] Those in attendance who were not privileged by Apartheid could clearly recognise that their situation, as 'women,' was vastly different from those theorising about a universal patriarchy. There seemed to be almost no common ground between the privileged and oppressed in attendance, the result of which was the inability to produce a dialogue about their shared experiences of patriarchy.

In light of Butler's critique of the category of 'women,' what can be seen from the Women and Gender Conference in Durban is an emphasis that the term 'women' does not seem to fulfil the feminist aim for representing the socially unrepresented. By maintaining 'women' as the subject of feminism, either because it is easier to react against oppressive structures as a unified group, or because the grouping has been assumed purely as a reaction to patriarchal norms, it is possible feminists perpetuate a system of exclusion by maintaining the group.

As I have already mentioned, for Butler the category of 'women' is identity forming. That is, the category of women is prescriptive as opposed to descriptive. Associations of persons with the category of 'women' seeks "coherence" and "continuity," which are not "logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility."[76] Indeed, Butler's ultimate poststructuralist goal is to understand how all human norms are socially constructed.

It should be clear by now that much of the reason that 'women' is a prescriptive category of gendered social norms, according to Butler, is because of the construction of, and reaction to, biological determinists' conceptions of sex. As Butler argues, "sex" is a "regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs,"

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[75] D. Lewis, 'The Politics of Feminism in South Africa', in M. J. Daymond (ed.), *South African Feminism: Writing, Theory, and Criticism 1990 – 1994*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1996, p. 94.
[76] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

meaning that "sex," by differentiating male and female bodies, gives rise to feminine and masculine norms. For Butler, sex is an "an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time."[77] In other words, the materiality of the sexed body as male or female prescribes masculine or feminine norms, which are naturalised over time, to the bodies of 'men' and 'women.'

So far, I have shown that, for Butler, 'woman' is not a universal category that is useful to feminist thought, and that assuming that the materiality of the body is the same as the sexed body, contributes to a naturalised understanding of subjectivity. I will now explore how 'women' can be considered to be a heteronormative category based on this naturalisation of both the sexed and gendered body.

Unintended Heteronormativity in Feminist Writing

Feminist theorists have often been criticised for theorising women's experiences through privileged heterosexist, class and race biases.[78],[79] Butler explains that heteronormative theories organise sex and gender in a way that assumes a natural state of sexuality, which disenfranchises those who do not neatly fit into existing gendered or sexed categories. She argues that:

> Gender can denote a *unity* of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender – where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self – and desire – where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or relation of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality.[80]

For Butler, the categories of 'men' and 'women' are only stable when understood as naturally oppositional, just like their ancillary terms – female/male, feminine/masculine. This stability of 'men' and 'women,' then, does not account

[77] J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 1.
[78] S. L. Bartky, *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and Other Essays*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, p. 69.
[79] Such criticism is reminiscent of those from the Women and Gender Conference in Durban, which I have already mentioned.
[80] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 30–31.

for the existence of persons as categorised outside of this heteronormative paradigm.

The naturalisation of 'woman' and 'man' as binary concepts creates false links between sexuality and desire. If gender binaries are neatly linked to sexed binaries, then a stable ideal of heterosexuality remains as an underlying assumption, in that women and men naturally desire the other. Thus, the category of women shows itself to be a heterosexist construction. As Butler argues, the categories of 'male' and 'female' reinforce the categories of 'men' 'women.'[81] Butler describes the naturalisation of heterosexuality as follows:

> The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in the consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire.[82]

This means that femininity and masculinity are oppositional and wholly different from one another and, furthermore, that these oppositional terms are associated with specific sexed bodies. For example, desire for female bodies is associated with masculine norms. As such, in patriarchal societies, a woman who desires another woman is understood to 'unnaturally' depart from the sexed normative framework. If we understand "this construct called 'sex' [to be] as culturally constructed as gender,"[83] then heterosexual binaries need not be understood as 'natural,' and the discourse available to describing sexuality is freed from the naturalising binary of men/women. The next question to ask, then, is whether we need to forgo the social group 'women' in order to address the heteronormative discourse of the sex/gender, male/female binary.

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[81] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid,* p. 9–10.

The Materiality of the Body and Performativity

Moi argues that Butler's conceptualisation of sex and gender is "completely disembodied, and the body itself is divorced from all meaning."[84] This is because, for Moi, Butler places all the meaning of the body within the realm of gender and socially constructed behaviour. This would suggest that the materiality of the body does not directly contribute to its socially constructed meaning. Critiques of this kind are frequently expressed about Butler's conception of a gendered body. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler responds to such critiques by asking "why is it that what is constructed is understood as an artificial and dispensable character?"[85] To claim that Butler has not considered the body within her theorisation of 'women' is to misjudge what her ultimate project might be. In my opinion, Butler's intent in *Gender Trouble,* is not to dismiss the capacity of one's body to shape a situation, but to move away from the idea that gendered identities, as gendered *norms*, need to be restricted to any one kind of body.

If 'women' and 'men' no longer exist as categories, then femininity and masculinity, as pejorative or prescriptive characteristics, will no longer determine or describe specific groups of people. Butler argues that:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.[86]

In short, Butler argues that if we understand gender to be radically independent from the body, there is no reason to think that any one body ought to be attached to any specific gendered construct. While the body that enacts Butler's gender is not prescribed by the gendered act, this does not mean that the act is not embodied. Butler's gender, as we have seen, raises questions about the idea of the sexed body. Butler questions whether sex, if removed from the sex/gender binary, can be critiqued as being as culturally constructed as gender is thought to be. The

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[84] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 74.
[85] J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. xi.
[86] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 9.

meaning of sex, for Butler, comes into existence through the same cultural, historical and discursive means as gender does. If this is the case, then "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[87]

For Butler, gender can be understood as independent from the body, and no specific body need have any specific gendered meaning. If we can isolate corporeal meaning from the body itself, then sexed bodies and gendered interpretations of that body, are not connected. If this is the case then interpretations of the body are not about the materiality of the body itself, and describing the body as either male or female is arbitrary. It is because of this that Butler's *Gender Trouble* is seen as a pioneering text in transgender studies and queer theory; her study opens spaces for persons to transcend the restrictive bounds of male and female norms. This, in turn, opens up the field of describable experiences to more than those who identify as 'women' and 'men.' In this way, the process of acquiring gendered and cultural meanings is different from the process of becoming the sex of the body one has.[88]

In the first chapter, and in agreement with Moira Gatens, I argued that in order for feminists to discuss gender identity as being wholly constructed, they also need to discuss how individuals have come to agree with and assume certain gendered norms as their own. This narrative depends on what Butler describes as 'performativity,' the act of *doing* gender. For Butler, gender seems natural because it is constructed through "specific corporeal acts."[89] That is, gender is constructed through performed acts of the body. Thus gender, for Butler, is embodied, and since the body has been so successfully constructed by sexed discourses, 'women' 'naturally' act out a feminine gender.

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[87] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.
[88] J. Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in H. Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader: Second Edition*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 188.
[89] *Ibid.*

Butler continues her explanation of what performativity is by stating that:

> One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well.[90]

In other words, one's bodily performance need not be, indeed cannot be, identical to others who perform the same gendered acts. Different embodied subjects, then, continuously act out gender differently. Because gendered acts are not common to subjective individuals' past or present experiences, it follows that, in the future, our definitions of gender will also inevitably change. Therefore, gender cannot be located or owned by any one type of body, and femininity is not distinguishable from other gender norms just because all 'women' supposedly perform it. For Butler:

> Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender and without those acts there would be no gender at all.[91]

Performativity is then the process of practicing a gender, and these practices can be performed to the point where the practitioner believes it is a natural extension of the self. For Butler, gender is not natural, and neither are specific gendered acts an expression of natural female or male bodies.

For many feminists, however, performativity detaches the body from the constructed characteristics it supposedly performs. It is the task of the next section of this chapter to discuss some of these critiques.

Criticisms of Butler's Account of Performativity and Gender

It is generally accepted feminist thought that Butler is right to destabilise the sex/gender binary as a natural binary that is able to describe only two kinds of bodies. But, Moi argues, women, all women, "will transcend the category of

[90] J. Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 189.
[91] *Ibid*, p. 190.

femininity, however it is defined."[92] Women, as embodied subjects can live out their embodiment without it prescribed as only one of two 'natural' ways to be in the world – women and men. Gender does not, and cannot, describe a unified experience of being a woman, nor can it create an identity group that all women belong to. 'Woman' does not necessarily have to imply a normative performance. If one is describing the lived experience of women as embodied subjects, then, I believe, it is possible to identify and describe experiences that only women can have, while avoiding the heterosexism that Butler cautions against. Heteronormativity is not a necessary precondition to describing the experiences that women have.

One of Moi's concerns with performativity is that it is unclear whether or not Butler wishes to separate the 'doer' from the 'deed.' Because performativity positions the 'I' of the embodied subject as identical to the gendered 'deed,' it seems as though Butler wishes to merge the subject with the performed gender. For Moi, gender performativity is a term designed to ensure that we do not think of identity and subjectivity as something that precedes social norms.[93] This seems strange to Moi because, for her, the gender that is performed is created by social norms. In contrast to Butler, Moi wishes to present a picture of the relationship between the body and the world as mutually constructing the other. For Moi, a better picture of an embodied subjectivity is one she credits Beauvoir with theorising, one that "is an open-ended, ongoing interaction between the subject and the world."[94] This is different from a performed gender, because Moi presents an ambiguous relationship between natural and constructed acts, whereas Butler cannot distinguish between the constructed act and the constructed body.

Bordo provides a different critique of Butler's performativity, she argues that:

> Just how helpful, for example, is an emphasis on creative agency [performativity] in describing the relation of women and their bodies to the image industry of post-industrial capitalism, a context in which addictive bingeing and purging, exercise compulsion, and "polysurgical addictions" are flourishing? Do we have a multi-million-dollar industry in

[92] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 8.
[93] *Ibid*, p. 56.
[94] *Ibid*.

> corrective surgery because people are asserting their radical and ethnic identities in resistance to prevailing norms, or because they are so vulnerable to the power of those norms?[95]

Bordo's primary frustration with Butler's conception of performativity is that it attends neither to the ways that certain social norms target women specifically, nor to the ways that women's bodies are used by industrial capitalist societies to influence women's behaviour. Furthermore, Bordo argues that it is not a simple misuse of language that makes societal appeals to women's bodies effective. Women see themselves, or versions of the selves they wish to be, in the media and are undeniably affected by the bodily expectations they see. The representation of women in the media is, I would argue, an obvious manipulation of feminine norms. But this does prevent women from being affected by these images through the identification with the bodies that are portrayed. Although there exists no universal experience of womanhood, the images, ideals and stereotypes associated with a woman's body ultimately effect and perpetuate as much.

Performativity is a powerful tool in the feminist toolbox, but, as Bordo's argument shows, performativity also needs to account for why depicting women's bodies in all forms of media is as affective as it is. Surely the women who are targeted by such images do associate and identify with the bodies they see in such adverts and films. Many women identify their body as being like the bodies of those shown in the media, as these bodies, even though manipulated, do speak to the experiences many women have of their own bodies.

The media is not the only source of gendered and embodied expectations of women as a group. Rape culture, for example, increases the vulnerability of all women in a society, regardless of the subjectively lived experience of each woman. Although women in different contexts will experience the crime and its aftermath differently, it predominantly affects the bodies of women. Women may not need to act in any specific way, or in accordance with any specific cultural norm in order to still be vulnerable as a group to the phenomenon of sexual harassment, assault and rape.

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[95] S. Bordo, p. 295.

For Butler, if one can disassociate gender from the sexed body as conceived by biological determinism, then there are no longer any resources available to justify a unitary sense of 'women.' Therefore, the destabilisation of 'women' prevents persons from identifying with a construction that is based on a mistaken idea of embodiment. There are, however, experiences of living one's embodiment that necessarily tie women to one another. Although I do not think that these common experiences create an *identity* for women as a group. This is because the subjectively lived experience of being a woman need not hold any particular identity-forming criteria. There need not be any normative association to the body because there are no biological or social destinies that necessarily create 'women.'

In the next section of this chapter I will discuss sexual difference in the experience of being a woman. While 'woman' is not a universal identity, a study of sexual difference is significant to understanding what is common to women's experiences.

Sexual Difference and the Experience of Construction

This section gives an analysis of gender and women's bodies. Gatens argues, in response to the socially "coded" feminine experience, that bodily differences are "*qualitatively* different"[96] depending on the kind of body one has. That is, although gendered norms may look as though they are entirely socially constructed, such that they could be applied to any kind of body, when we consider the 'feminine male' we see that this is not so. This is because the 'feminine male' necessarily takes these qualities to be associated with women's bodies in order to consider them feminine. This is important because without women's bodies providing a foundation for femininity as gender, the *performances* that Butler considers constitutive of gender could not be socially coded as feminine.

[96] M. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, p. 10.

In contrast to Butler, Gatens' priority is to defend the role of the body as a lived experience. In order to do this she turns to Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the body in *The Second Sex*, and its implications for biological investigations into materiality and embodiment. Beauvoir's central question in *The Second Sex* is: why is woman the *Other*?[97] For Gatens, Beauvoir's answer to this question is not only found in cultural, historical and linguistic contexts, but also in the way women live their bodies.

Beauvoir commences *The Second Sex* with a chapter entitled "The Data of Biology," which has prompted many critics to accuse Beauvoir of reductively discussing the role of biology in women's embodiment.[98] However, as Gatens shows, for Beauvoir, although one's biological body is constantly present, it in no way dictates how women choose to live their bodies.[99] Although a woman's biological body emphasises certain experiences, such as child-birth and motherhood, they do not determine "how one interprets" these experiences "or how they are lived by the free subject."[100] As Gatens explains, "[o]ne's biological sex may be experienced as a boon or a burden, one's skin color may be lived in pride or in shame, and one's social status may be lived in acquiescence or revolt."[101]

Although one's biological sex may be lived and experienced differently, this does not prevent women from being bound to the human species in a way that men are not. The experiences of menstruation and pregnancy, for example, continuously remind women of their embodiment, and emphasise the "iron grasp of the species."[102] In a detailed description of the menstrual cycle, Beauvoir paints a picture for her reader of how powerful this experience is for women. She writes:

> This complex process, still mysterious in many of its details, involves the whole female organism, since there are hormonal reactions between the ovaries and other endocrine

[97] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 69.
[98] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?* p. 60.
[99] M. Gatens, 'Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look', in Card, C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 270.
[100] M. Gatens, 'Beauvoir and Biology', 270.
[101] *Ibid*, p. 268.
[102] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 63.

> organs, such as the pituitary, the thyroid, and the adrenals, which affect the central nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system, and in consequence all the viscera. Almost all women – more than 85 per cent – show more or less distressing symptoms during the menstrual period. Blood pressure rises before the beginning of the flow and falls afterwards […]. It is during her periods that she feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing; it is, indeed, the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it; each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow.[103]

It is through such processes that we learn, as Beauvoir puts it, that "[w]oman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than itself." [104] What this means is that, like all embodied subjects, women experience the world and being in the world through their bodies, and bodily processes. Although it is not an experience that all women have, most women who do experience menstruation, as described by Beauvoir, do so in societies which were not built to cater for such experiences, and which only reluctantly accommodate its lived realties.[105] This is also true, I would argue, for those experiencing pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

Women who experience childbirth or breastfeeding are also constantly remined of their bodies and have to navigate a world that wants to place moral and social meaning on these bodily experiences. The opening sentence of one study of breastfeeding mothers is, for example,: "Breastfeeding provides numerous health benefits to both the mother and the nursing child;"[106] and while this is factually correct, it also serves as a reminder to those who can nurse their new born infants, that, if they care for the health of their baby, they will indeed breastfeed. The social significance placed on bodily functions is often internalised by women. Another study found that new mothers reported high levels of anxiety based on the pressure to be able to breastfeed their new born, even though relatively little is known about why or how some women are able to produce lots of breastmilk and others are not.[107]

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[103] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 61.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] One example of this reluctance is how little is known about conditions like endometriosis in both the public imagination and in health professions. Endometriosis is often dismissed as sever period pain, which, although one symptom, is definitely not the whole picture. But because it is seen as a 'woman's issue' and associated with period pain, very few public-sector work places will let a woman take time off to treat the symptoms.
[106] Powell, R., Davis, M., and Anderson, A. K., A Qualitative look into Mother's Breastfeeding Experiences. *Journal of Neonatal Nursing 20*(6), 2014. p. 262
[107] Spencer, R. L., Research Methodologies to Investigate the Experience of Breastfeeding: A Discussion Paper. I*nternational Journal of Nursing Studies 45*(12), 2008. p. 1825.

Women are constantly being pulled back to their bodies, and social significance is attributed to their bodily processes in ways that men do not experience. We need not understand these experiences within the confines of the sex/gender binary, however. As Debra Bergoffen suggests, we should move away from the idea that are women and men are separately incomplete subjects.[108] We should move towards having conversations that seek to understand all embodied subjects as wholly ambiguous subjects in their own right. This, too, can prevent us from falling into the heterosexist trap about which Butler warns us. If each subject is whole and ambiguous, then neither the idea of man or woman relies on a comparison to the other half of a limited binary.

Butler, in *Undoing Gender*, agrees that sexual difference can be an interesting aspect of feminist interpretations of 'women's' subordination, but it does not necessarily mean that she agrees that bodies are sexually differentiated in the way Gatens and Beauvoir argue that they are. For Butler, one's subjectivity is neither "simple facticity," nor is it "simply an effect of facticity."[109] Sexual difference theory, as argued for by Beauvoir and Gatens, does not seek a natural expression of femininity or masculinity. Indeed, Butler, Beauvoir and Gatens agree that what we have come to understand as feminine or masculine norms come from mythological narratives of the body. However, for Gatens and Beauvoir, it is essential to acknowledge what kind of situation a woman's body is, and to understand how sexual differences have been framed as feminine and masculine. Similarly, Moi argues that it is only possible to understand what a woman is if we are able to forgo gendered and sexed descriptors. Moi, I believe, would agree with Gatens that Beauvoir seeks to signal femininity as being an oppressive structure that binds women to the species, in a way that men are not, without letting it become the only significant property of the female bodily experience.

So far, I have shown that the sexed body, as conceived of by the biological determinist does not explain what a woman is. I have also shown that a purely

[108] D. Bergoffen, 'Simone de Beauvoir: (Re)counting the sexual difference', p. 263.
[109] J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 185.

gendered understanding of women, or woman-as-gender, also does not capture what it means to be a woman. As I will argue in the final chapter of this thesis that neither account can fully describe the subjective experience of being an embodied subject. Given that neither pure sex nor pure gender captures the subjective experience of being a woman, an alternative perspective is needed to understand what a woman is. In this regard, as my next and final chapter discusses, I turn to a phenomenological account of the *lived body.*

Chapter 3: The Lived Body

In *What is a Woman?*[110] Toril Moi argues that when the rhetoric of either gender or sex is used to describe how women experience the world, a comprehensive understanding of the body and women's subjectivity is lost.[111] As we have seen so far, when biological investigations attempt to describe what might look like a theory of subjectivity, through sexed understandings of the body, the subjective experience disappears and becomes biological 'function.' Because one's biological make-up does play a significant role in determining the kind of body one has, it is possible to manipulate biological descriptions to seem as if they not only describe a functioning body, but also describe ways of being in the world. This view of the sexed embodied experience, as we have seen, significantly limits our understanding of human capabilities. As such, accounts in which women's subjectivity is reduced to an effect caused by the female body are left wanting. Similarly, an account in which women's subjectivity is reduced to a social construction performed by the body is also limiting. As I have explained, a gendered focus on social construction, in opposition to sexual differentiation, cannot account for the shared embodied experiences specific to women.

In this chapter, I now turn to the phenomenological understanding of subjectivity and the lived experience. An investigation into how one lives one's body can, I shall argue, account for both the biological as well as the social body. In order to elucidate this final claim, I shall defend the notion of the *living body* as described by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The notion of the *living body* is also employed by Simone de Beauvoir in order to describe women's situation specifically. For Beauvoir, the *living body* is not just the body in a situation, but is itself a situation. The *situated lived body* is the most comprehensive explanation of women's subjectivity. I shall describe what the *living body* is, and what the phenomenological existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, describes as one's situation. I shall do this in order to distinguish between the biological determinist conception of the sexed body of women, and Butler's gendered femininity.

[110] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*
[111] *Ibid*, p. 4.

The *situated lived body* of women can be distinguished from both the biologist's and the social constructionist's notions of femininity. This is important because sexed and gendered accounts of women's embodiment contribute to their being Othered, by what Toril Moi calls patriarchal femininity,[112] that which creates problematic associations between the body and feminine practices. In short, the *situated lived body* focuses on women's embodied subjectivity as lived experience. Women's lived experience is oftentimes a situation characterised by oppressive forces. However, addressing the effects of patriarchal femininity for the *situated lived body* cannot be done through a purely sexed or purely gendered discourse. Sex and gender are always ambiguously lived and therefore cannot be differentiated.

The Living Body

The first concept related to the *living body* that I will discuss is the idea of the *natural scientific* attitude as presented by Husserl. I will then discuss Husserl's account of the *personalistic* attitude. Husserl maintains that we cannot assume just a *natural scientific* or just a *personalistic* attitude to living bodies, because living bodies are neither simply natural objects, nor simply social entities. I shall also describe Merleau-Ponty's notions of the *anonymous* body and the *personal* body. These, I believe, add value to Husserl's conception of the *living body* as the *anonymous* body and the *personal* body further show the ambiguity between natural and constructed lived experiences. Each concept provides different insights into the *living body*, and I will show that when a woman's embodiment is understood as a *living body*, it is a body that encapsulates all of these concepts. I will describe each of these terms because later in this chapter I will make use of the term the *living body* to describe why a woman's body ought to be taken as lived in a particular way.

[112] T. Moi, 'Ambiguity and Alienation in the Second Sex', *Feminism and Postmodernism,* vol. 19, no. 2, 1992, p. 97.

Edmund Husserl's conception of the *living body* began the phenomenological philosopher's search for new ways to talk about a living and experiencing body.[113] For Husserl, we experience the materiality of things in vastly different ways. Although all living beings have facticity – characteristics that limit the freedom to act – we do not experience all things as merely having facticity. A rock, for example, simply has facticity, and it thus has no consciousness or freedoms that are affected by its facticity. The way persons perceive of a rock is different to the way persons perceive of other humans or animals.[114] This is because we understand, experience and approach beings with consciousness and sentience differently to the way we approach things we know to be inanimate. That we see inanimate objects as different from the way we see and experience humans or animals seems clear, but Husserl goes further within his analysis and argues that a person can experience different bodies differently. Indeed, we can even treat the same body differently in different situations depending on our attitude towards the body.

When we perceive a body as just having facticity, we perceive it through what Husserl calls the *natural scientific* attitude. [115] When this happens, as Sara Heinämaa explains, we deprive all "meaning, value, and purpose" [116] from the living body. This is most easily noted when bodies are studied. As Husserl explains:

> All men and animals we consider in this attitude are, if we peruse theoretical interests, anthropological or, more generally zoological Objects […]. What has been said concerns all our fellow men as well as ourselves, to the extent that we consider ourselves theoretically precisely in this attitude: we then are animated Bodies, Objects of nature, themes of the relevant natural sciences.[117]

That is, while it is possible to acknowledge that a human's facticity is something significantly different to that of the rock, it does not always protect us from being able to experience bodies as void of meaning. By studying the body, the body can

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[113] S. Heinämaa, 'The Body as an Instrument of Expression', in Card, C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 67.

[114] S. Heinämaa, Heinämaa, *Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, p. 26.

[115] *Ibid*

[116] *Ibid*

[117] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: Volume II*, trans. F Kersten, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1983, p. 192.

become an object of nature. But objects do not have the ability to express freedom. The *natural scientific* attitude, however, must not be confused with previous discussions of biological determinism. It is not the point that the use of biology inherently denies meaning and value from being placed on the body. Indeed, as was noted in the first chapter, the problem with biological determinist conceptions of the sexed body was not the denial of value of women's bodies, but the imposition of oppressive values. The *natural scientific* attitude on the other hand, as Heinämaa explains, refers to instances when "we no longer experience people, or even animals; instead, we experience merely material things."[118] That we are capable of just taking the materiality of the body as all the human body is, speaks to our understanding that the materiality of the body is important to how we perceive it. However, Husserl warns us against taking the body as just a material object. If we do this, we miss the other aspects of the *living body*, the aspects that make the embodied subject capable of acting freely.

It is important to understand the living body as multi-faceted. There exist biological facts about the body's processes, but these facts are only a small part of the complexities of the embodied subject. For Husserl, the *living body* is distinguished from other material things because it experiences sensations, such as pain and pleasure. As he puts it:

> Hence the Body is originally constituted in a double way: first, it is a physical thing, *matter*; it has its extensions, in which are included its real properties, its color, smoothness, hardness, warmth, and whatever other material qualities of that kind there are. Secondly, I find on it, and I *sense* "on" it and "in" it: warmth on the back of my hand, coldness in the feet, sensations of touch in the fingertips.[119]

For Husserl, living bodies are not only physical things and the centres of sensation, but are also the point of origin of free movement. The body moves in order to move other things. The *living body* is also unique in its materiality in that it perceives everything in relation to it; all other things are near or far from the living body.

[118] S. Heinämaa, *Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, p. 26.
[119] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, p. 153.

These aspects of the *living body* are what make the living body the origin of our perspective on the world, and a manner of being in the world.[120]

The body, however, is not the origin of *all* meaning for the human subject. The situation in which the body exists affects the embodied subject. In other words, meaning is placed on the body from forces that are external to it. These forces are social, such as experiences created by interacting with other people, as well as environmental, such as, the conditions one lives in. Therefore, because I am an embodied subject I can affect and be affected by other people and the environment in which I live, this has consequences for the meaning of my situation.[121]

The *living body* can act on the world, and be affected by the world, and the combination of these creates meaning for the lives we live. For Husserl, this meaning is explained further through a deeper understanding of the social relations and interactions we experience. He explains this through the *personalistic* attitude of the *living body*, which is:

> [T]he attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion.[122]

The *personalistic* attitude is how we find meaning from interactions with other people in what Husserl sees as the *living body*. It is important for Husserl, however, that neither the *natural scientific* attitude nor the *personalistic* attitude is independent from the other. According to Heinämaa, Husserl's phenomenological perspective of the *living body* "allows us to study the relations between the *naturalistic attitude* and the *personalistic attitude.*"[123] For Husserl, the *living body* cannot be studied as just a scientific or just a social/personal kind of existence. The embodied subject is neither an inanimate object with pure facticity, like the rock, nor a being that is only affected by *personalistic* attitudes.

[120] S. Heinämaa, *Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, p. 29.
[121] S. Heinämaa, 'The Body as an Instrument of Expression', p. 69.
[122] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, p. 192.
[123] S. Heinämaa, 'The Body as an Instrument of Expression', p. 72.

Heinämaa explains that Merleau-Ponty further developed the description of the *living body* by working directly from Husserl's account of it.[124] Merleau-Ponty agrees that in order to comprehend their subjectivity, all subjects have to take the social and natural conditions of their embodiment into account. For him one ought not only consider the *natural scientific* attitude and the *personalistic* attitude towards the body, but also the living bodies perception of the world in which it lives. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> '[L]iving' (*leben*) is a primary process from which, as a starting point, it becomes possible to 'live' (*erleben*) this or that world, and we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and lights through sight, to sounds through hearing, to the body of another through sexuality, before arriving at the life of human relations. Thus sight, hearing, sexuality, the body are not only the routes, instruments or manifestations of personal existence: the latter takes up and absorbs into itself their existence as it is anonymously given. When we say that the life of the body, or the flesh, and the life of the psyche are involved in a relationship of reciprocal *expression*, or that the bodily event always has a psychic *meaning* these formulations need to be explained.[125]

Merleau-Ponty's description of the *living body* includes the *personal body*, which is more akin to the psyche and the *anonymous body* which is akin to the flesh. Our *anonymous body* provides our *personal body* with what it perceives. It provides us with sensory information about the world that we are not necessarily conscious of. Some of the things that we do not know that we see or hear, for example, become part of our unconscious perception of the world, and is absorbed by our *anonymous body* and these anonymous perceptions sustain our personal perception of the world. These perceptions directly influence our experience of being in the world as *lived bodies*. One way to become aware of the influence our *anonymous bod*y has over how we experience the world is to alter any of the senses our *personal body* perceives. If one were to go blind, for example, the information received through sight would be noticeably absent from our conscious experience. Information that we were not aware we were receiving through sight would also be lost. We are conscious of what we are seeing and

[124] Although Merleau-Ponty's approach to the living body does differ in some ways, a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this thesis. For an in-depth discussion on how Merleau-Ponty's conception of the living body challenges Husserl's living body see: Taylor Carman's discussion of it in 'The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1999.
[125] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, p. 160.

hearing, but we are not always conscious that we are seeing and hearing these things. This is important because the conception of the *anonymous body* draws attention to the influence of social and environmental experiences that we are not immediately aware of. Consequently, the anonymous experiences and personal experiences of the body are ambiguously intertwined.

So, from the phenomenological perspective of the *living body*, it becomes impossible to only consider the body as just material. The body, as described by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is our way of perceiving and experiencing the world. Furthermore, the body is significant to understanding ourselves in relation to others. Husserl's notions of the *natural scientific* and *personalistic* attitudes, as well as Merleau-Ponty's *anonymous* and *personal bodies* are fundamental to understanding Beauvoir's conception of the *lived body as a situation*, which she contextualises in feminist thought.

In *The Second Sex*, and with reference to Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir argues that "[w]oman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself."[126] For her, a woman's body is, like all human bodies, the origin of her perspective on the world, but it is also alien to itself in certain ways because of the kinds of bodies women have. When a woman's body menstruates or reaches menopause it acts in a way that is foreign to her and in ways that are beyond her control. Furthermore, for women, the menstruating body, for example, carries meaning that she herself does not give to it, and so it is simultaneously who she is and what she is not. Therefore, although all human bodies might at times act in a way that is foreign to their will or desire, women's experiences are specific to their bodies. These experiences are a woman's situation.

[126] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 61.

Situation and Free Project:

On the basis of what I have just described as the *living body*, I will now discuss the phenomenological account of situation and the free project. I will later show that the *living body* is itself a situation, and not just a body in situations. Before I discuss the body as situation, I will first discuss what the free project and situation are for the phenomenologist.

As Sartre explains, the free project and situation are inseparable:

> [The free project] illuminates the surroundings of the situation. But already the surroundings lay siege to and color the original project. What is more, the situation defines itself insofar as it is surpassed by the project and the project has no signification except as the project of changing *this* disposition of the world; therefore it gets defined by the situation. Situation and project are inseparable, each is abstract without the other and it is the totality 'project and situation' that defines the person.[127]

One's situation is then the context in which human beings are positioned in the world. One's situation is also where the free subject engages with the world and with others in the world. As Sonia Kruks puts it:

> [F]reedom, that is, subjectivity, is indestructible: whatever our condition we are free to choose. When we act on each other, we can act only on each other's exteriority: on each other's *situation*.[128]

One of the most renowned expressions of the extent of human freedom was made by Sartre when he famously stated that the "slave in chains is as free as his master."[129] By this, Sartre meant that the slave, although shackled by the master, still has not been denied the ability to live his situation as a free being. The slave is not prevented from having a situation in which to act freely. So, if we are to take on Kruks' understanding of freedom, the slave, as a subject, only has his external situation affected by the master. However, if one's situation and free project are inseparable, then one has to concede that the situation of the slave prevents

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[127] J-P. Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. D. Pellauer, London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 463.
[128] S. Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity, and Society*, London, Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1990, p. 85.
[129] J-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. H. E. Barnes, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 570.

certain kinds of projects from being open to him. This is the case *because of* the situation of being a slave.[130]Although it might be true that the master's options are also restricted in some ways, none of the options given to the slave affects the situation of being a slave. The kinds of free choices open to the slave do not or cannot prevent him being a slave. The slave's free project, as defined by the situation of being a slave, is actively limited by being shackled. Perhaps the slave is presented with the choice of whether or not to wipe his brow when he sweats, but to take these kinds of choices as equivalent to those of the master's seems superficial. As Kruks argues further, the slave's "*effective* freedom is more limited than that of his master" (emphasis added).[131] The slave's situation does not deny him his free project and the ability to choose in any given situation, but it does, necessarily, mean that he is prevented from making choices that would have much effect on the situation itself.[132]

This lack of choice of one's situation can also be useful when describing women's situation within oppressive patriarchal structures. Although each individual has their own situation in which they choose specific meanings, common situations and limitations of freedom create ties among those whose freedoms are limited in the same ways. These ties are called "ensembles." [133] What Kruks means by this is that although women are indeed free to choose within their own situation, they are not always given the freedom to choose the situation itself. This happens *because* they are women, and as such will be presented with similar situations to other women.

One lives an embodied subjectivity within situations such as the situation of one's class and one's culture. Beauvoir argues that the lack of freedom of women's situations is an effect of the body being placed within different social situations which are often limiting and restrictive. Women's freedoms, for her are also restricted because of the kinds of bodies women have, which makes the body itself a situation. Moi explains that by this Beauvoir "means that the body-in-the-world

[130] S. Kruks, p. 90–91.
[131] *Ibid*, p. 91.
[132] *Ibid*.
[133] *Ibid*, p. 94.

that we are, is an embodied intentional relationship to the world."[134] The situations that women are placed in and the free project of women create certain possibilities and restrictions. This is also evident in women's embodied situation and its relationship to the free project. In other words, just as women exist in a social world that creates and restricts certain possibilities for women to act out their free project, women's bodies also restrict and create certain possibilities. This does not mean that persons with different embodiments do not also have bodies that are situations, but instead that women's bodies are particular kinds of situations with specific restrictions and possibilities.

For Beauvoir, it is important that "the body [is] the instrument of our grasp upon the world" but "the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another."[135] When the world is apprehended through a woman's body it is experienced differently than when it is apprehended through other kinds of bodies. For Moi, to deny the influence of the materiality of the body in women's subjectivity is to be guilty of either an idealistic subjectivism, which might be the consequence of conceiving of the body as being absolutely gendered, or a harsh objective empiricism, where the body's meaning and value is created solely on the evidence we have for how it functions.[136] Neither an idealistic subjectivism nor a harsh empiricism can convincingly explain the human experience. This is because "the body is neither pure nature nor pure meaning."[137]

The *living body* is neither a purely biological entity (and so cannot be approached with just a *natural scientific* attitude), nor a purely social entity (that can be approached with just a *personalistic* attitude), but both social and biological. The body is our instrument of perception of the world, and it can be understood as the way we apprehend the world. One can then not describe being culturally or historically situated, for example, without also describing all of the aspects of the *living body*, which include the *natural scientific* and *personalistic* attitudes, and *personal* and *anonymous* bodies, as I have already discussed. Furthermore, if the

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[134] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 67.
[135] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 65.
[136] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 68–69.
[137] *Ibid,* p. 69.

free project is fundamentally related to the situation, and if the body is a situation, then reference to the body is needed in order to describe how the free project is limited and lived.

So far in this chapter I have discussed Husserl's insights into the *living body* by offering the concepts of the *natural scientific* attitude and the *personalistic* attitude as simultaneously occurring in the *living body*. This is an important step in understanding that natural perspectives and social perspectives are never lived in isolation from one other. We are always experiencing and being experienced by others as natural *and* social beings. I then described Merleau-Ponty's *anonymous* and *personal body* which showed that, not only is the body ambiguously lived by having social and natural meanings bleed together, but also that our ways of receiving information and knowledge about the world is ambiguously received. This shows that the *living body* must be taken to retrieve knowledge and understanding from both the natural state of the body and the social world. This larger bodily schema compounds the natural and the social in everyday acts. The *living body* is also a body in a situation, and this situation is acted upon by our free project. As I discussed in relation to Sartre, our situation and free project are inseparable. In this regard, and in agreement with Beauvoir, I argued that the *living body* is always a situated body, and, furthermore, that the body itself is a situation.

All of these steps are important to understanding how femininity, as a constructed ideal of what women are supposed to be in the world, makes woman the Other. This is because, as I shall now argue, femininity acts as an imposing and oppressive force on women's situation. This is because it limits the *effective* freedom that women have in the world. In the next section of this chapter I will show the different ways that women are oppressed because of the kinds of bodies they have.

Women's Bodies and Oppression

Heinämaa articulates the aim of the phenomenologist as follows:

> The task of the phenomenologist is to study the ontic meanings of […] phenomena, their constitution as different kinds of realities and objectivities; that is, as entities, occurrences, processes, events, facts, and so forth.[138]

In light of Heinämaa's characterisation of the task of the phenomenologist, when Beauvoir asks why is woman "the Other?"[139] What her question emphasises is how it is that women experience being Othered as an occurrence. I shall argue that women's Otherness, and their experience thereof, is informed by conceptions of feminine ideals in society.

To understand how it is that the *lived body* as a woman's situation comes to experience the Otherness of femininity, we have to also understand how we, as human beings, come to experience materiality. If the body does, as Gatens suggests, "intervene to confirm or deny various social significances,"[140] then perhaps femininity, as a socially significant characteristic of women, might not be arbitrarily related to women's bodies.

If, as I have already discussed, our bodies affect the way we perceive the world, and see ourselves in the world, then it is conceivable that women will apprehend being in the world in specific ways because of their bodies. Oftentimes, reactions to women's bodies are based on expectations that women ought to conform to a feminine ideal. Here I am using femininity as Iris Marion Young does in "Throwing Like a Girl," she explains that femininity is:

> [A] set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. Defined as such, it is not necessary that any women be "feminine" – that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women.[141]

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[138]S. Heinämaa, *Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, p. 21.
[139] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 69.
[140] M. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, p. 10.
[141] I. M. Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl', p. 140.

For example, a woman in a business meeting might be treated differently than a man, *because* she is a woman. The men in the meeting might not react as aggressively towards her, and these kinds of reactions are based on structures and conditions that restrict women in society based on feminine ideals, such as timidity.

The situation of women, I will now argue, is oftentimes oppressively restricted because of the interpretations of the kinds of bodies women have. It is then important to understand what I mean by oppression, and how this is dependent on women having the bodies they do.

First, let us consider what oppression is. Kruks argues that it is possible for:

> [A] systematic attempt to modify the social situation of a group of people so as to prohibit them from developing a free transcendence which will compete with that of the oppressors. As such, oppression involves the establishment and maintenance of relations of social inequality.[142]

Although I agree with Kruk's definition, it is also important to understand the depth and breadth of oppressive mechanisms, and how they are maintained within social structures. In this light, Young posits a definition of oppression in "Five Faces of Oppression." I shall rely on her definition of oppression because it describes how systems of social inequality are created and maintained. All the mechanisms for oppression described by Young can be related, in some way, to women's embodied situation.

Young claims that, in its abstract definition, oppression is usually designated to one who suffers from an "inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings."[143] Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" offers an account of how oppressive relationships do not always fit within conventional ideas of an exercise of tyrannical power by a ruling group.

[142] S. Kruks, p. 96.
[143] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 40

Oppression, however, should also be understood as occurring in practices of education, bureaucratic administration, as well as within the production and distribution of goods and services. All of these are examples of powerful structures within societies that, if implicitly biased or discriminatory due to the "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules,"[144] result in oppressive practices. However, these structures do not have clear discriminatory policies, and are not governed automatically by racist, sexist or classist laws, and as such are not obviously comparable with tyrannical power.

Young describes oppression with reference to five disabling constraints place on individuals because they are members, or are seen to be members, of particular groups. The first 'face' of oppression that Young describes is that of *exploitation*. Exploitation, especially within Marxist discourses, is commonly associated with class discrimination and is explained by Young as being the "steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one group to benefit another."[145] A group suffers from exploitation when the social structures that operate systems, such as status or wealth, constantly deplete one group's power in order to benefit another. This process does not necessarily operate within strict economic power systems, in that obvious economic benefits are not always taken from one group and given to another. A woman, for example, can be seen to be exploited when social norms insist that her energy and time ought to be spent taking care of the family, and the energy she uses in this exercise is not given the same status as other forms of labour. As a social phenomenon, this form of exploitation most commonly affects those with a woman's body. This is primarily because women who give birth to children, are expected, as a consequence, to be the primary care givers for children without being recognised for the time or energy invested in this practice. Furthermore because it is recommended that women breastfeed their infants for at least 6 months, with many in health fields suggesting a nursing period of up to 2 years, most public sector work environments do not accommodate women bringing their children with them, forcing breastfeeding mothers to either stay at

[144] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 41.
[145] *Ibid*, p. 49.

home for 6 month or to feel as though by going to work they are acting against the interest of their child.[146] These expectations of domestic and maternal care can also be seen as feminine norms.

The second face of oppression that Young describes is *marginalization*, which refers to the systematic process of disregarding or ignoring the needs of groups of people within society.[147] Through marginalisation, groups that are disregarded are prevented from having access to the same modes of power as other members of the same society. Women are disregarded and marginalised, for example, whenever they are prevented from accessing certain rights and liberties because of the kinds of bodies they have. Women's access to health resources, for example, such as safe abortion methods, or contraceptives are often denied. As such, the denial of these resources prevents women from accessing the same rights and freedoms as other members of the same society. Part of the reason for which women are denied these rights, I think, is that patriarchal societies do not accept that a woman's body is hers to control. This is reminiscent of Francis Bacon's description of women, as discussed in the first chapter. When women's bodies are thought of as more akin to nature, and to passions, women are seen as unable to make rational, objective choices. This is an association that specifically affects women's bodies. In relation to the feminine, it is not difficult to imagine that those who believe women ought to be denied the right to health care also reject the idea that women ought to be sexually active. This too would be imbedded in the defence of the feminine ideal of the chaste and virtuous woman.

Powerlessness is the third face of oppression that Young describes. Powerlessness is usually related to professionals and non-professionals, as recognised by the employment structures of a particular society. In these societies, professionals are recognised as active contributors to social structures, and, as such, are thought to be more deserving of its benefits than non-professionals. Women have commonly been denied access to certain educational avenues because they were/are thought

[146] Spencer, R. L., Research Methodologies to Investigate the Experience of Breastfeeding: A Discussion Paper. I*nternational Journal of Nursing Studies 45*(12), 2008. p. 1824.
[147] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 53.

to be incapable of contributing to certain disciplines. My discussion in the first chapter of Ruth Bleir's account that women were denied access or the ability to contribute to the sciences is an example of this. This form of oppression is also evident in work environments that deny women maternity leave, or give women less upward motility in promotions for reasons such as pregnancy. Powerlessness, however, is not limited to these relationships. Young argues that powerlessness can become oppressive when:

> The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect.[148]

Powerlessness, then, extends beyond work environments and translates into a lack of what Young calls "respectability" in all social spaces.[149] By this, Young wishes to point to the social encounters that grant certain persons authority based on assumptions about their capabilities and influence within the society. Referring to North American culture, Young argues that women and persons of colour are most notably affected by this form of oppression, in that women and persons of colour have to first prove that they are worthy of respectability in every day interactions before others are willing to take their opinions or suggestions seriously.[150] The ideal feminine woman is often thought of as modest and quiet, and, importantly, obedient. Under this picture of the feminine ideal, women are not immediately offered respect because such an individual ought to not have opinions or suggestions of her own making.

The fourth face of oppression is that of *cultural imperialism*, which is often discussed with reference to a hegemonic power that prevents groups of people from expressing their own beliefs and/or practices openly.[151] When those who do not conform to the hegemony their dissent can be responded to with force. What Young means by this is that hegemonic power seeks to instil a sense of uniformity of the society in which it exists. For this reason, when persons or groups disregard

[148] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 57.
[149] *Ibid*.
[150] *Ibid*, p. 58.
[151] *Ibid*.

this uniformity, the legitimacy of the hegemonic power structures are compromised, and are therefore threatened. This can be seen to affect women's bodies when, for example, heteronormative societies consent through inaction to practices such as corrective rape. Corrective rape, a crime most commonly affecting lesbian women, aims to discipline and convert a woman's sexual desire for other women. Having a woman's body, and being associated with the heteronormative expectations of a woman, are intrinsically related to a society's tolerance of this form of oppression.

Young also describes a form of cultural imperialism that is far subtler. Instead of violently opposing cultural practices of a group, social systems can silence a group by delegitimizing such practices, thereby making them invisible. This can be seen when, for example, social norms ignore the legitimacy of lesbian couples. Although all homosexual couples would face the same kinds of discrimination, I think that heteronormative patriarchal societies often delegitimize lesbian couples because women are understood in many ways to be the property of men. As such, the existence of a lesbian woman challenges the patriarchal feminine conception of women being the property of men, and this will be so whether or not she conforms to other feminine norms. In term of cultural imperialism then, when those with women's bodies who do not conform to heteronormative social rules are ignored or denied the same rights as others of the same society, they are under the influence of a cultural imperialist oppressive force.

The last face of oppression that Young offers is *violence*.[152] A random act of violence does not necessarily mean that a victim suffers from oppression; for example, getting into a bar fight is not obviously oppressive. Oppressive violence occurs when members of a group know that they "must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person."[153] The fear of oppressive violence is therefore used as a way of intimidating persons into submitting to social norms because of their association with a socially categorised group. Women in patriarchal

[152] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 61.
[153] *Ibid*.

societies, for example, are constantly aware that they are targets for sexual assault, such as rape, and are constantly aware that because they are women they must fear and protect themselves from this form of violence. I would argue, however, that even if a woman is not constantly made aware that she ought to fear a sexual attack on her body, she is still a target for this kind of violence. If women are not aware that they should be prepared for such an attack, they will be made aware of this fact after the attack. As much is evident in cases when women are blamed for being victims of rape when they have imbibed alcohol, or when, after the crime, they are criticised for having worn clothing that is 'too provocative.' In these cases, women's oppression in patriarchal societies is brought back to their bodies, resulting in their being blamed for the actions of the oppressors.

Oppression, according to Young, takes place when one or more of the mentioned 'faces' affects an individual due to their association to a group. Oppression, therefore, is specific to those who are identified or identify themselves with a certain group. This is important because, in order for women to be oppressed, there has to be some connection among them for oppressive forces to affect them as individuals. I believe that women are categorised similarly, and experience similar phenomena because of their embodiment. In the next section of this chapter I will now discuss how women can be seen as a group.

Women Oppressed as a Group

Young explains what the concept of a social group entails. She argues that members of a group often share similar situations and experience, as follows:

> Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way.[154]

On this account similar situations can group persons together. A state of oppression can occur when any individual's capacities to express their needs or opinions are limited because they are members, or seen to be members, of a

[154] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 43.

certain group. I have chosen to use Young's discussion of oppression because I think that it illuminates the myriad of ways in which women are oppressed across classist, racial and cultural lines. There are certain kinds of experiences and societal structures that will effect women because their bodies are culturally coded to be seen in as feminine. Although women will experience these kinds of oppressions differently, and some forms of oppression will only be felt by some women in society, the fact that someone is exploited, marginalised, powerless, culturally dominated or the victim of random acts of violence, *because* they are seen as women based on their bodies, is important. Furthermore, all women who experience any one form of oppression do so as embodied subjects, which entails that these forms of oppression become a part of their perception of the world.

Part of the reasons for the oppression of women, as the discussion of the sexed and gendered body has shown, is concerned with the definitive nature of a sexed or gendered self. If the sexed body refers to the biological functions of the body, or if the gendered body is the feminisation of the sexed body, both sex and gender have 'characteristics' that try to define women. The ovum, for example, has certain qualities that can be defined, exaggerated and used to create stereotypes of women.

When women's bodies are oppressed by patriarchal feminine norms, they are no longer understood to be *lived bodies.* In all the examples I have mentioned of women being oppressed, the instance of oppression can be drawn back to women's bodies as being associated with feminine patriarchal norms. These norms, I believe, all contribute to the idealisation of women's bodies, and ultimately a feminisation of women. As I have already mentioned, femininity, for Young, is "a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by women themselves."[155] In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss how femininity is oppressive whenever it limits the situation of being a woman because of her embodiment.

[155] I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 31.

Femininity as Oppressive

One of the ways that oppressive relationships can be sustained is when, as Kruks argues, the "lot" of the oppressed "appears to them so natural, so immovable, that no choice of how to live their situation appears possible."[156] This is because the situation of being oppressed seems natural. As Beauvoir states:

> [O]ne of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not revolt against nature.[157]

Beauvoir compares this naturalisation of oppression to the justifications of exploiting the worker. She argues that the natural hierarchies in society demand that the worker is only capable of fulfilling the role of the worker in a society. This sense of naturalisation of oppression is not foreign to women and their situation. As I argued in the first chapter, many scientific enquiries took great pains to insist that women are *naturally* domestic and docile. This naturalisation has resulted in some women accepting that their bodies do in fact resemble the ideal patriarchal feminine, or that it should. This is part of the reason why, as I showed in the second chapter, Susan Bordo does not wholly
accept Judith Butler's idea of a gender as performed. The resemblance of women's bodies to feminine ideals results in a naturalised oppression, which is systemic but seems ordinary within social structures. Women may not revolt against being exploited, marginalised, powerless, the object of cultural imperialism or of random acts of violence, because it seems natural that women are domestic, or that they have less power over their bodies and health.

If it is agreed that women, as a group, share similar experiences of oppression, then the next question to ask is: why is it that women's subjectivity/freedom is so effectively denied by the systems described by Young? For Kruks, the most oppressed woman "has no way of living her otherness as a free choice,"[158] and this

[156] S. Kruks, p. 97.
[157] S. de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman, Ney York, Citadel Press, 1976, p. 83.
[158] S. Kruks, p. 103.

is because their bodies *are situations*. Women's free projects and embodied situations are inseparable. All five faces of oppression, as I have shown, when they affect women, affect their embodied selves.

While patriarchal femininity is an oppressive state of being, feminine characteristics are not necessarily arbitrarily related to the bodies of women. The image of a timid and docile woman is oppressive if, by virtue of this, women are seen to be constantly (naturally) timid and docile, and because of this, prevented from taking on certain roles in society. However, this does not mean that some women are not timid or docile at times. For example, such docility or timidity is not inconceivable for a woman who has just given birth. It is problematic, though, when a pervasive image of docility and timidity, borne from some postpartum observations, leaks into the expectations of what it is to be a woman. That is, if a woman is taught that part of her nature is to be timid, it may result in her taking experiences of being timid as a natural reflection of the kind of person she is.

Sandra Lee Bartky explains that the 'naturalised' experiences of docility and timidity can confuse even the most ardent of feminists, and that even a woman who is extremely self-assured might question whether some parts of her subjective being are just naturally passive. Bartky, a lecturer in an academic institution, sometimes questions what aspects of her behaviour are influenced by feminine norms. Bartky asks whether "[t]he timidity display at departmental meetings, for instance […] is nothing more than a personal shortcoming," or whether it is "a typical female trait, a shared inability to display aggression, even verbal aggression?" [159] Bartky further explains that:

> Uncertainties such as these make it difficult to decide how to struggle and whom to struggle against, but the very possibility of understanding one's own motivations, character traits and impulses is also at stake.[160]

[159] S. L. Bartky, 'Towards a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness', in Vetterling-Braggin, M., Elliston, F. A., English, J. (eds.), *Feminism and Philosophy*, New Jersey, Rowman & Littlefield, 1989, p. 29.
[160] S. L. Bartky, 'Towards a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness', p. 29.

This uncertainty of "whom to struggle against," I would argue, is another example of the naturalisation of oppressive mechanisms. In this instance, the cultural imperialist ideal of femininity may hinder how women identify who the oppressor is exactly. This is because the oppressor is a pervasive cultural norm, but is disguised as embodied 'natural' reactions to situations. Bartky argues that this might be a challenge for feminism at large because:

> [F]eminists suffer from what might be called a "double ontological shock": first, the realization that what is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening; and second, the frequent inability to tell what is really happening.[161]

Feminists have fought, and do fight, political battles against authorities who refuse to grant women equal pay for equal work, for example, or health legislation that prevents women from having abortions. These struggles can be seen as being waged against hegemonic powers and broader social structures, like that of the criminal justice system or legislative branches of a national government, that deny social justice to women. However, when the struggle against oppressive forces is actually a struggle against an image of oneself, even women who know that feminine norms are not natural extensions of their facticity might lack the resources or language to identify how to move away from an association with these cultural norms. If one believes in certain binary gendered social norms it can be difficult to change the overall patriarchal structure. If, for example, a woman believes that it is inappropriate for women to breastfeed at work, it can be difficult for that same woman to articulate why other aspects of such a work environment may be preventing her from succeeding within it.

Women, as Other, are consistently oppressed because of their bodies, and this oppression, whether it be in the public or private sphere has become a part women's bodies *as a situation*. For Beauvoir, the woman who does not concede to a sense of patriarchal femininity, and who dresses and acts in a way that subverts patriarchal expectations, is further Othered by society. Beauvoir writes:

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[161] *Ibid*.

> In refusing her role as an object, she is defying society; she is perhaps an anarchist. If she simply wants to be inconspicuous, she must remain feminine.[162]

For Beauvoir, it is possible to resist patriarchal femininity, but this resistance is not easy because women live in a world that systematically oppresses them. At the same time, because all women transcend femininity, women also constantly challenge this oppression. Beauvoir writes:

> Hence the paradox of their situation: they belong at one and the same time to the male world and to a sphere in which that world is challenged; shut up in their world, surrounded by the other, they can settle down nowhere in peace. Their docility must always be matched by a refusal, their refusal by an acceptance, in this respect their attitude approaches that of a young girl, but it is more difficult to maintain, because for the adult woman it is not merely a matter of dreaming her life through symbols, but of living it out in actuality.[163]

It may never be possible to distinguish between what is truly different between women's natural and conditioned experiences of the world. The pervasiveness of patriarchal norms has perhaps distorted how women evaluate their situations to such an extent that feminists will always be in dialogue about the representation of women's bodies and their embodied lived experiences. The representation of women in the media, for example, might always be a point of contention. However, within these discussions the body can neither represent pure gender nor pure sex. Women experience the world through a *lived body*, a body that is ambiguous in terms of sex and gender. For this reason, I agree with Beauvoir's concluding remarks in *The Second Sex*:

> If, however, both [men and women] should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity.[164]

If we are able to explain the lived experience through ambiguous bodies that social norms are anchored to, if we are able to understand human biology as always situated, and able to investigate human biological processes all the while understanding patriarchy to be the dominant cultural norm, then, it is my contention, that biological studies will certainly be considered to be partly socially

[162] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 546.
[163] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 608–609.
[164] *Ibid*, p. 737.

contracted, and embodied prejudicial social norms will be easier to reconstruct. If we understand the body an neither wholly sexed nor wholly gendered then perhaps patriarchal femininity will no longer be an overwhelming characteristic of women's bodies, and consequently their freedom.

Conclusion

> To analyse lived experience is to take as one's starting point the experiencing subject, understood as always situated, always embodied, but also as always having a dimension of freedom. Subjectivity is neither a thing nor an inner, emotional world; it is, rather, our way of being in the world.[165]

Toril Moi captures in this excerpt how I believe we should talk about women's subjectivity, we should always remember that women are free embodied subjects, and this informs their way of being in the world. I began this thesis questioning whether the stereotypical 'womanly' acts that I have participated in were natural or conditioned characteristics of my subjectivity. I thought that, if these characteristics were a part of my sexed self, then they might be natural. However, I have shown that these stereotypes or patriarchal feminine characteristics are not altogether natural extensions of women's bodies. By highlighting the materiality of bodies, however, I have shown that feminine norms are not arbitrarily related to women's bodies. Separating sex and gender, when describing women's embodied experience of the world will always leave us wanting a fuller account of the lived experience. Throughout this thesis I have argued that by ignoring socially constructed oppressive norms biological determinists misrepresent what a woman is, and through their (wilful) misunderstandings, they create expectations of what a woman ought to be.

I then moved on to question how much of femininity is a gendered characteristic, that is, to what degree are feminine norms that are associated with women's bodies socially conditioned? In answering this question, I argued, in agreement with Judith Butler, that feminine norms might be an extension of the sex/gender binary, which in turn creates the male/female binary and therefore also the feminine/masculine binary. When femininity is understood as constructed, it is possible to see how the sex/gender binary leads to a hereronormative understanding of both sex and gender. However, in opposition to Butler's thoughts on performativity, I showed that women, as a social category, are not an altogether gendered category. There is a way, I argued, to discuss women as a social group

[165] T. Moi, *What is a Woman?*, p. 81.

without the precondition of heteronormativity. The way to do this is to discuss women's subjectivity through the phenomenological perspective of the *living body*.

The conception of the *living body* provides the vocabulary necessary to analyse the human embodied experience. This experience is complex and layered by social and natural situations. When one's situation and free project are explained in conjunction with the *lived body*, it becomes clearer that sex and gender are not experienced in isolation from one another, as the body is itself a situation. If the body is a situation, and all bodies apprehend the world differently, but women's bodies provide – to an extent – similar situations, then women, as a group, can have similar lived experiences. However, as I explained in my final chapter, some of these lived experiences can be oppressive. This is because patriarchal feminine ideals have been impressed upon women's bodies, and, for some, these oppressive situations are indistinguishable from their natural being.

In considering a way forward, I argued that in order to escape oppressive patriarchal feminine norms we need to understand the embodied lived experience as being ambiguous. That is, the *lived body* is neither a matter of pure biological fact, nor of pure social construction, but an ambiguous amalgamation of both. If we depart from using either sex or gender as the descriptor of the lived experience of being a woman, then the woman who participates in feminine practices is not the enemy of feminism, and the woman who does not participate in feminine practices is not the anarchist. Both are living lives in which all moments are natural and constructed. We cannot make sense of a description of an experience that isolates one from the other.

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