

Rethinking Desire: The Ontology Of Lack And The Edible Other

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with Elizabeth Grosz's critique of the conception of desire thought in terms of "lack," and argues that rather than rejecting this concept, it is necessary to disengage it from its historical association with the denigration of the female other and the ontologization of desire itself.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé entre en concurrence avec la critique d'Élizabeth Grosz sur la conception du désir perçu comme un "manque" et soutient qu'au lieu de rejeter ce concept, il faudrait le dissocier de son association historique avec le dénigrement de la femme autre que l'ontologisation du désir même.

DESIRE, LACK AND THE PROBLEM OF OTHERING

This paper is an exploration of the concept of desire. Specifically, I want to ask whether it is possible to "think" desire outside what Elizabeth Grosz (1995b) has recently called the "ontology of lack," which, she argues, has dominated its conception in Western thought since antiquity. In this understanding, desire is thought as an absence, lack, or "hole" in human "being," seeking to be filled or given substance. This ontology begins with Plato, is taken up by Hegel, and finds contemporary expression in psychoanalysis, especially in Lacan (Grosz 1995b, 176). As Grosz rightly notes, this model of desire is especially problematic for feminists, for it has traditionally been both *sexualized* and *heterosexualized*; in other words, the language of lack and absence versus presence and substance has historically been coded in terms of the binary opposition between male and female (178-9).

To these observations I would add the following proposition: because the language of lack has been *ontologized*, because it informs our conceptions about "being," it is also reflected in dominant notions of authentic and proper selfhood in general. For this has also been expressed

historically in binary terms of presence and absence; the paradigmatic subject of Western modernity is the self which needs to be self-identical, to discover and protect its own subjective "truth," and requires the establishment of the outside, antagonistic "other" to accomplish this. In short, desire as lack has become entwined with subjectivity and identity itself - specifically, with the kind of subjectivity which posits and maintains as "other" any thing which cannot be reduced to itself, to its own logic.

Given this problem, feminist attempts to rethink desire outside the terms traditionally associated with desire as lack - as a binary, heterosexist model of presence and absence - are especially relevant, and go beyond simply articulating feminine and lesbian desire. Irigaray's (1985; 1985a) use of the "language of essence" in her critique of Lacan is a case in point here; as are Judith Butler's (1993a) metaphor of the lesbian phallus, and Teresa DeLauretis' (1994) account of lesbian fetishism. All of these in different ways rework the terms of psychoanalysis, perhaps the most infamously "phallogocentric" discourse in Western philosophy, destabilizing it from "within."

In spite of the value of such explorations, Grosz argues that they mistakenly remain within the terms of the problem - which lies not just in

psychoanalysis, but in the very notion of "lack" itself. In her view, it is time to leave this model, with its implications of interiority, depth and negativity, behind us and to experiment with alternative ways of understanding desire altogether. To do this, she draws on what she refers to as a secondary, less privileged history of the concepts of desire and of corporeality existing alongside the trajectory defined by Plato, Hegel and Lacan. This begins with Spinoza, and can be found in Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari - all of whom focus on desire as a corporeal, productive phenomenon of bodily surfaces, rather than expressive of inner depths or psychic meanings (Grosz 1994a, 116).

My primary interest here is not to undertake a systematic comparison of these theorists, or to assess the relative merits of a Deleuzian versus a Lacanian approach to understanding lesbian desire (DeLauretis 1991; Grosz 1995a), but to ask two crucial and related questions which I think are raised by Grosz's critique: first, can desire be rethought outside "lack?" and secondly, does the discourse of lack have to be *ontologized*? It seems to me that framing these questions together is crucial. For it may be that desire cannot be imagined outside of "lack," as the desire for the *presence* of something. However, in my view what this "presence" is or "will be" is entirely open-ended - the motion of desire does not have to be dictated by the terms of phallogentrism, logocentrism, or anything else. Indeed, I believe that it is precisely the *ontologization* of the "lack" in desire which allows for, and even requires, that it be framed within these kinds of singular logics. For it is only in assigning "being" or "presence" to desire that its inherent fluidity and volatility can - and must - be contained according to some pre-given purpose or end.

In my view, therefore, while Grosz's call to develop alternatives to the "ontology of lack" is a timely one, the same cannot be said for her argument that the notion of "lack" itself must be abandoned altogether; for thinking desire as *lack* and thinking desire through an *ontology* of lack have very different implications. While the latter is characterized by sexism and heterosexism, and is organized around the logic of "othering" in general,

the former has no necessary connection to these problems. Indeed, as I will argue, desire thought as lack is potentially a more fruitful concept for feminists and other critical theorists than Grosz's proposed alternative.

HEGEL AND THE ONTOLOGIZATION OF "LACK"

This claim will of course seem problematic, given the historical association of lack and negativity with the denigration of the other in Western philosophy and cultural practice. Without underestimating the systematic and often brutal reality of this association in all its forms, I believe that it is essential to emphasize its *contingent* nature - its *historical* rather than inevitable status. In my view, the historical entrenchment of this process does not entail its logical inevitability. Thus it is important to trace the roots of the association of "lack" with the "other" as a historical process. And as I will argue, a crucial aspect of this association has been precisely the *ontologization* of the lack in desire.

For this reason I begin with Hegel, although he is one of the more conservative members of the Western philosophical "canon" - in terms of both his autocratic pronouncements about the "nature" of women and their "place" in his philosophical and political system, and of the totalizing nature of this system as a whole. As many critics have pointed out, his thought is both phallogentric and logocentric. So what could Hegel have to say to feminists? And what could he possibly have to offer in the way of a lesbian rethinking of desire?

The short answer here is that Hegel's thought has indirectly impacted much feminist, as well as lesbian and gay discourse on sex and sexuality - specifically, through his influence on Lacan, who adopts a Hegelian notion of desire in his analysis of ego formation (Dean 1992, 48-50). More generally, Hegel provides the first, and certainly the most systematic, articulation of the integration of desire and subjectivity in its modern form, where primordial lack is turned into an active drive to subsume the other as a condition of self-integrity. Thus his writings illustrate the connection between the ontologization of the lack in desire and the

problem of othering.

At the same time, Hegel's approach also indicates that the notion of lack can be used to undermine this dynamic. For the most radical implications of his dialectic are tied in with this principle, even though Hegel himself imposes ontological closure on it. In particular, his view of reality as fundamentally relational and mediate - as *process* rather than *substance* (1967, 80) hinges on the notion of lack. For Hegel, it is because finite reality is not adequate to its concept, and elements are not complete in themselves (1991a, 84-88), that history "happens;" reality is a dynamic process motivated by these contradictions.

Hegel's understanding of subjectivity is central to this approach and it is here that the notion of desire as "lack" comes in. Desire for Hegel is what constitutes the "I," or self-consciousness itself (1967, 225), and is thus what motivates history. And this is precisely because desire is a lack. For as an emptiness, an absence, it *disquiets* and unsettles the subject, requiring it to *act* (Kojève 1969, 3); it receives real positive content only through the destruction, assimilation, or transformation of the object (Hegel 1967, 224-25).

Thus desire per se does not exist in a positive or substantive manner - it is realized through its *negative* relation to the real or present given (for example, the act of drinking is the negation of real water) (Kojève 1969, 134-35). *Human* desire, which creates self-consciousness, is directed beyond present reality, toward desire itself, which is oriented to an imagined *future* reality. It is this desire for the desire of another self-consciousness - the struggle for *recognition* - that inaugurates a dialectical process in which self-consciousness develops within and through social and historical development (Hegel 1967, 228-67).

The significant point here is that the movement of history operates on the principle of *negativity*, through the contradictions or gaps arising between concrete experience and the abstract concepts growing out of this experience (Hegel 1967, 96-7; 136-37). In terms of the desiring subject, the process depends on the principle of *lack* - on the fact that the self is not innately "there" as an autonomous and self-contained being, but requires the recognition of the other to supply this being

(229). The process is therefore potentially infinite, or at least open-ended, precisely because desire is understood as a lack; the desire for recognition is inherently unfulfillable because its "object" is the desire of another, which is not a present "thing" that can be obtained once and for all.

However for Hegel, as is well-known, there *is* an end to this process. History is propelled by an ever unsatisfied desire for recognition by the other, but there will be an ultimate reconciliation or synthesis of self and other, subject and object, and an end to history, when Absolute Spirit is realized in the world (Hegel 1967, 138). This can be understood as an *ontologization* of, an assigning of "presence" to, the interconnected concepts of subjectivity and desire; through Hegel's imposition of a final and comprehensive totality, the volatility of these things is contained, and history is made into a closed system.

The connection of this metaphysic to the problem of "othering" is clear. Hegel's notion of our primordial communality, his insight that identity is constituted in and through otherness (1967, 81), is undermined as the recognition of the other is turned into the *reduction* of the other to the self. For invoking this final closure and unity is effectively an act of violence, of assimilation, in which difference is *absorbed*, defined only in relation to the singular logic of Spirit. Thus, as everything is incorporated into this logic, the specific "otherness" of the other is not recognized - or rather, it is measured as "other" only in relation to the self (Derrida 1986; Levinas 1981; Adorno 1990; Cornell 1992).

The definition of "Woman" as "man's" other in Hegel's system is one of the more striking examples of this dynamic. Indeed, it's arguable that the "othering" of women is not only inextricably linked to the logical hierarchy of the system as a whole, but necessary to it; the female "principle" is in general the passive and "undifferentiated" moment in the realization of concrete universality (Hegel 1970, 368), and women themselves are integrated into the process precisely (and exclusively) in their particular and "immediate" roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of men (Hegel 1967, 466-99; 1991, 158-219). Women's "place" is therefore always already decided: the totalizing logic of the

system can only allow for their recognition as "other" in relation to men.

What this excursus into Hegel shows, therefore, is that it is the teleological closure imposed on his system, and not the principle of "lack" within it, which leads to the association of "lack" with the phenomenon of othering - and that this is accomplished precisely through the *ontologization* of lack. As Absolute Spirit is posited as the presupposition and final end of the dialectical movement of history and human development, a singular ontological "presence" of a definitive and *directed* future is imposed on desire and subjectivity. The volatility and fluidity of these things, their open-endedness in terms of the future, is contained as the lack in desire itself is assigned a "content." Thus the lack which connects the self to the other (via the desire for recognition) is transformed into a definitive lack *in* the other.

LACAN AND THE PHALLOCENTRISM OF LACK

This process is carried over into Lacanian psychoanalysis, where it is expressed in the infamous phallogentrism of his thought. For what we find in Lacan is a tension or discrepancy between, on the one hand, a radical rewriting of subjectivity and desire as fundamentally mediated, fluid and social; and on the other hand, the imposition of a kind of teleological closure on the process through the equation of culture and language (the symbolic order) with paternal rule. As with Hegel, this tension can be understood by way of Lacan's ambiguous approach to the principle of "lack." It is through this principle that he formulates a conception of the ego that, as Grosz says, unsettles "the presumptions of a fixed, unified, or natural core of identity" (1990, 48-9); and it is through the *ontologization* of lack that the pre-given and unified subject is effectively reintroduced at the level of the "whole" - namely, in the structure of language and the unconscious.

Lacan incorporates Hegel's understanding of human beings' primordial lack into Freud's argument about the "narcissistic" formation of the ego - that the ego depends on its images of others for its identity - and comes up with a fundamentally

relational and fluid conception of the self (Dean 1992, 48-50). Like Hegel's "I" structured by desire, the developing subject in Lacan is not fundamentally "present," but *anticipatory*, oriented to the future (the search for a coherent identity), and purchased through a loss (of its imagined "oneness" with the world). The ego is not a prior or self-identical substance, but a projected image of bodily contours and boundaries - an unstable site of identificatory relations (Butler 1993a, 74-75).

As with Hegel, the development of the self in Lacan is motivated by a constitutive lack or contradiction - in this case, between the child's experience of fragmentation and alienation and its identification of itself as a unified totality. The subject seeks to fill this lack (which is unfillable) through a series of identifications - ultimately assuming an independent, speaking position in the symbolic order. Desire is what regulates this entry into language and law, and like Hegel's desire, it operates on the principles of negation and lack. It is a movement of substitution that creates a series of equivalent objects to fill the constitutive lack of subjectivity; initiated through the oedipal prohibition, it is an effect of language and the unconscious that creates an endless chain of substitutions for the perpetually absent/lost and forbidden object (Grosz 1990, 50-67).

Thus the assumption of independent subjectivity (as a speaking "I") in the symbolic is also phantasmatic, and never absolute. At the same time, the symbolic itself, as defined by the paternal law of kinship, is assigned absolute status by Lacan - which means that the gender hierarchy through which subjectivity is constituted is universalized. For he posits the phallus as the single defining term in the linguistic construction of the subject - as the crucial signifier in the distribution of authority and a speaking position, and also of the lack marking castration. For Lacan, it is the "signifier of signifiers" - a representative of the structure of language and of signification, both of which themselves operate through lack, or the gap between signified and signifier. By means of the phallus, the subject comes to occupy the position of "I" in discourse; by means of signification as lack, the subject can use language in place of a direct or unmediated relation to nature or the "Real," which

it must relinquish (Grosz 1990, 121-25).

Lacan denies any inherent, causal connection between the penis and the phallus, which, as a signifier, is not an organ or an imaginary projection, but part of the relational linguistic system of the symbolic. The father's "difference" is thus redefined in terms of linguistics, the unconscious, and social relations - the child's submission is to "paternal metaphor" rather than the biological father per se. So the castration complex, seen by Lacan (as by Freud) as crucial to the child's entry into culture, is understood in a narcissistic rather than an anatomical sense; it involves not the imagined loss of a penis, but the imagined loss of fusion with the mother, through the introjection of the father's phallus conceived as a signifier (Grosz 1990, 98-105).

Thus the "lack" attributed to women (especially to the mother) is not an anatomical or "Real" lack, but rather a linguistic and unconscious construction necessary for men to be construed as "having" the phallus (for no one can really possess it). The penis takes on the function of the phallus only because there are those that lack it; it is the mark or trace which *produces* the exclusion of women as it produces the illusion of masculine "completeness" and self-sufficiency, by representing women as corporeally lacking or incomplete. Women are thus regarded as castrated, and men as "having" the phallus, because of the illusory identification of penis and phallus - the penis becomes the defining characteristic of both sexes by its presence or absence.

Although the equation of penis and phallus is illusory and misrecognized, however, it is still for Lacan what constitutes human desire, and the symbolic order itself. It is through this fantasy of identification (of penis and phallus) that the phallus operates as the signifier of lack - the marker of presence and absence; and thus as the *universal* term which differentiates the sexes, assigning one's place in the symbolic as "having" or "being" the phallus. For it is precisely because the phallus is *not* the penis - the negative connection between these things - that it is able to signify (Butler 1993a, 84). As the privileged signifier of lack, the phallus is therefore assigned what Grosz calls an "*a priori* masculine privileging" - it is assigned a masculine

status *before* its cultural and symbolic inscription (Grosz 1990, 123). Butler (1993a) describes this move as a "performative" one; the assertion of the phallus as a privileged signifier and *not* an imaginary effect or projection, is itself constitutive of the privileging of the phallus. For if it were an imaginary effect, it would be as decentered and tenuous as the ego itself (82).

With this move, a kind of ontological closure reminiscent of Hegel is imposed on subjectivity and desire; while the assumption of the "Name of the Father" is rarely entirely "successful" (Grosz 1990, 47), it is still posited as the definitive future which gives meaning to the present. And this "totality" hinges even more explicitly than Hegel's on the "othering" of women in particular; as Grosz points out, both sexes are distinguished not on the basis of (Saussurian) linguistic difference, where each term is defined by all the others, but in terms of a dichotomous opposition: not as "A" and "B," but as "A" and "not-A" - where one term (A) is somehow prior in relation to the others, and defines these by its presence or absence (1990, 124; 139). Thus, while Lacan emphasizes the slippage in language that prevents gender identity from ever being finally guaranteed or linked to an outside referent, he posits the semantic structure of gender as frozen or fixed in and as the unconscious itself (Cornell 1992, 86).

The connection of this rigid erection of sexual difference in/as the unconscious and the logocentrism found in Hegel is evident; both, as Drucilla Cornell explains, "set Woman's place in stone through an appeal to an unshakable system and to the truth of the whole" (1992, 78). Is it then possible to "think" desire as lack without repeating the logic of phallogentrism and the problem of "othering?" But this question also indicates that lack itself is not the "cause" of the problem; rather, it is precisely when lack is assigned such a "presence" as part of a larger totalizing ontology that it becomes coded as sexual polarization and the denigration of the other.

REFIGURING DESIRE: BEYOND LACK?.

This returns us to the questions raised at the outset: can desire be rethought outside the discourse

of "lack?" and must this discourse necessarily be framed as an *ontology*? What I have tried to show with the preceding discussion of the "ontology of lack" in Hegel and Lacan is that these two questions must be framed together; for it is only if the latter is not asked that the former arises. It is when "lack" is ontologized that it becomes necessary to abandon the term altogether; for as we've seen, this framework operates on the principles of exclusion and "othering" in general, and in the case of psychoanalysis in particular, implies the impossibility of women's, and especially of lesbian, desire.

This conflation of the principle of lack with the "ontology of lack" is, I would argue, what underlies Grosz's rejection of the principle of lack *tout court* as a means to understand desire. Indeed, she at times seems to slide between the *historical* association of lack with, for example, phallocentrism, and the assumption that these are *necessarily* connected. Thus she argues that an alternative notion of desire, such as that proposed by Deleuze and Guattari:

... cannot be but of interest to feminist theory insofar as women have been the traditional repositories and guardians of the lack constitutive of desire, and insofar as the opposition between presence and absence, reality and fantasy, has traditionally defined and constrained woman to inhabit the place of man's other. Lack only makes sense insofar as some other, woman, personifies and embodies it for man. (Grosz 1994, 165)

But why should lack *necessarily* require the "othering" of "woman," or indeed any other social category of people, or of things at all? Or, to put this another way, what underlies the need to "make sense" of lack in the first place? - to assign it some definable ontological presence? What Grosz's astute observations on this point reveal is precisely the *historical* entrenchment of the association of lack with the "other" in western thought and cultural practice. But they beg the question of how this association has come about, and in particular, of the ways in which it is tied in with the ontologization of lack.

Because this latter issue is not addressed, moreover, the *processes* by which lack has been ontologized also remain unexamined in Grosz's argument - namely, those by which lack is invested with the "presence" of some overall normative version of truth and "reality." And this analytical gap is carried over into her assessment of alternatives to this discourse: when Grosz proposes that we "refigure" desire in terms of Deleuzian "intensities and flows," the possibility that the same kind of proclivity toward ontological closure may be found here is not fully considered. Indeed, it is because the models upon which Grosz bases her proposed alternative to the "ontology of lack" do elide negativity and lack that equally totalizing views of the nature of "reality" find their way in.

Rather than Hegel or Lacan, Grosz suggests we take our cue from Spinoza, who saw desire as a "positivity or mode of fullness which produces, transforms, and engages directly with reality" (Grosz 1994a, 222 n.1). In Deleuze and Guattari (1983) in particular, she argues, this approach is taken up in an especially radical and promising way, for they explicitly adopt Spinoza's conception of the "univocity of being." Here all things - human, animal, textual, sociocultural and physical bodies - are assigned the same ontological status. This means, for example, that subject and object, and "inner" and "outer," can no longer be understood as binary opposites, or even as discrete entities; these must be seen, rather, as parts of a "series of flows, energies, movements, strata, segments, organs, intensities" (Grosz 1994, 133 and 167). Difference itself is also thereby reconceptualized - it can no longer be "subordinated" to identity, but must be understood as something "in and of itself" (164). Unlike Derrida's notion of *differance* or the trace marking the inherent impossibility of presence (i.e., as something negative), Deleuzian difference is thought as force, affirmation, action and effectivity (Grosz 1995, 129).

Desire in this view is conceived as an "actualization" rather than a yearning based on lack; it does not aim for an object, but only for its own self-expansion (Grosz 1994, 164). It is thus nomadic, unpredictable, and creative; defined as a "process of production without reference to any

external agency" or to any internal need for unity and self-certainty, it opposes "organism" itself - organization, function and structure. Thus, what is created (and fragmented) in the movement of desire are "assemblages" - provisional linkages between "elements, fragments, flows"; ideas and things which all have the same ontological status (167-70).

Presence and absence are thus replaced with a notion of "pure" and open-ended "becoming" - what bodies aspire to is pure surface, intensity, and flow, not unity or oneness. For bodies in this conception are no longer seen as unified or unifiable organisms, centered either physiologically or psychologically; they are, rather, elements or fragments of "a series of desiring machines." When the body is freely amenable to the flows and intensities of the "desiring machines" that compose it, it becomes the "Body without Organs;" not a transcendent body, but one "in abundance" of its own organic organization, in direct relation "with the flows and particles of other bodies and things" - a tendency to which all bodies aspire (Grosz 1994, 168-69).

As Grosz argues, this approach avoids the problems of sexual polarization and the positing of "woman" as other which is so crucial to the "ontology of lack." Since the very terms of presence and absence, inner and outer, and subject and object are jettisoned, no singular standard or thing can be assigned ontological priority, and no particular difference can be assigned the status of the denigrated other. Indeed, this framework is therefore fundamentally non-hierarchical - it refuses to seek (and by definition *cannot* seek) a single explanatory logic or exemplary paradigm.

Grosz notes that Deleuze and Guattari have been criticized by feminists for, among other things, appropriating feminist theory and politics while neutralizing women's sexual specificity (1994, 161-64). For example, because of women's subordinated status in patriarchal society, the metaphor of "becoming woman" is posited as "the law" for the destabilization of binary unities found in all becomings; and the figure of the "girl" (as "the site of a culture's most intensified disinvestments and recastings of the body") is set up as the universal (and hence decorporealized) equivalent of the transgressive interderminacy of

becoming in general (174-82). Grosz argues that in spite of these kinds of shortcomings, Deleuze and Guattari can still contribute to a much-needed feminist refiguring of desire - for their work "does not have to be followed faithfully to be of use in dealing with issues that they do not, or perhaps even cannot, deal with themselves" (such as lesbian desire). Specifically, we can still take advantage of the fact that they "refuse to understand desire in negative terms" or to "structure it with reference to a singular signifier, the phallus," and that "they enable desire to be understood not just as feeling or affect, but also as doing and making" (1995b, 180).

To this I would respond that, again, negativity does not necessarily require the structuring of desire around a singular signifier; and that, as seen in the discussion of Hegel and Lacan, desire thought in terms of lack *is* fundamentally productive - in that it is necessarily an activity rather than a "thing." As an activity, it is the mark of our inherent relatedness with others - a relatedness which is not "external" to the self, but which rather *precedes* and *constitutes* the self (Butler 1991, 26-7). Moreover, this productiveness has no necessary "destination" dictated by "lack" per se - this is imposed when the principle of lack is invested with an ontological "presence," itself accomplished through the adoption of some totalizing view of the nature of reality.

In fact, I would argue that it is precisely the "refusal" to allow the principles of lack and negativity into their understanding of desire that allows for Deleuze and Guattari's omission of sexual difference in their analysis; and I would add, moreover, that this refusal makes it difficult to use their approach consistently without repeating this or similar problems of neutralizing qualitative differences.

This problem can be traced to the adoption of Spinoza's monistic conception of "being" as a way to theorize difference; in Hegelian terms, this forecloses mediation because it denies contradiction. This is not to say that ontological divisions are required to account for difference, of course (Hegel's own system is a critique of this notion); but rather that difference must be thought in *relational* terms - which entails a negative "moment" between the different elements.

Moreover, negativity does not have to carry hierarchical connotations; in other words, it does not logically require that some particular elements (subjects, identities, concepts, or whatever) must provide the privileged (normative, teleological or *a priori*) standard against which other elements are measured. Similarly, the distinction between subject and object, self and other, and inside and outside, does not necessarily have to entail antagonism, violence, and exclusion; this, as I've argued, is a *historical* development, not a logical or inevitable one. Attempting to "flatten out" such distinctions themselves, rather than focusing on the ways in which they have been historically constructed as oppositions, does not address this process. Indeed, this can itself be seen as a "totalizing" move which undermines the open-endedness of "becoming" which Deleuze and Guattari (and Grosz) want to emphasize.

Grosz herself cautions that Deleuze and Guattari seem to imply the existence of an inevitable process of increasing fragmentation, which is random in occurrence, but has an apparent pre-given destination; "[they] imply a clear movement toward imperceptibility that is in many ways similar to the quest of physics for the microscopic structures of matter, the smallest component, the most elementary principle" (1994, 179). In my view, this is a totalizing process reminiscent of Hegel's own - the movement is in the opposite "direction" (towards dissolution rather than identity), but just as monolithic in its result; and perhaps even more so - for we can ask whether the process has a final destination where all things are dissolved, and hence reduced to sameness.

Adopting a conception of difference as a thing in itself, a "pure" positivity, in other words, undermines any meaningful account of *differentiation* - of how things become differentiated and identified, how they relate in time. For it seems to me that it is impossible to conceive of *time* itself without some notion of differentiation through negation - where each present moment is constituted through the negation of a past one. This means that activity and change themselves cannot be accounted for, for activity, including the activity of becoming, is necessarily temporal; it happens in space, but also through

time. As Butler says, "an act is itself a repetition, a sedimentation, and congealment of the past which is precisely foreclosed in its act-like status." Indeed, she argues, construction itself, including the social inscription of bodies, can be understood as process of "sedimentation" of temporal acts - a kind of spatialization of time through the postulation of discrete and bounded "moments" (1993, 244 n.7).

These kinds of processes, I would argue, cannot be adequately theorized through such a singular notion of reality or being, which effectively *reduces* time to space. Thus, for example, the conceptualization of the body as an inscribed surface, the effect of power and knowledge (Foucault 1979, 1980) does not address the processes by which this very construction and inscription is also one of differentiation and exclusion; as Butler argues, which bodies *don't* matter is as important a question as how bodies are "materialized" (1993).

Accounting for the movement of desire is problematic in the same sense; it is described as a series of practices and as an actualization, but the temporal nature of this motion is obscured. In effect, desire is itself given "presence" - ultimately, it must be defined as some kind of "life force" aiming at self-expansion, the intensification of the "flows" of life. While this indeed gives us an account of desire that is both creative and nomadic, it does not tell us much about its operations through time, especially the ways in which it is enacted as the "sedimentations" described by Butler. Thus the "productivity" and "creativity" of desire is itself undertheorized.

I would argue that thinking desire as "lack" is the only way to conceptualize its temporal nature. For if desire is an absence, it can only "be" through temporal acts in space - it is not a spatial "thing" in itself. Moreover, it is this temporality which constitutes the inherent open-endedness of desire; as I've argued, there is nothing *necessarily* either teleological, phallogocentric or logocentric in thinking desire as "lack." Desire is fundamentally the absence of presence; but this does not have to mean that it is always the absence of the presence of the phallus, or of Absolute Knowledge, or of any teleological final end or realization. Indeed, linking the "lack" of desire with these things is precisely

what constitutes its ontologization, the attempt to make it "present;" and this process can only be understood as the reiteration and enactment of existing "sedimentations" of power relations (such as the subordination and "othering" of women).

In short, thinking desire in "Hegelian" terms, as the absence or lack of a future that we seek to make present - in other words, as an activity which is oriented to the future - does not have to be shaped by Hegelian (or Lacanian) conclusions. The future that we desire does not have to be a pre-given one - like the full "self-presence" of Absolute Knowledge. The "nomadic" nature of desire, in my view, is "given" precisely by its "lack;" this is what makes desire open-ended, contingent, and fundamentally relational. What this tends toward is not the totalization and closure invoked by *Geist*, or

the unity and self-identity of subjectivity, or the reduction of all discourse to the singular logic of the phallus. These things themselves are historical "sedimentations" of human relations and activities, which are marked by, and indeed require, the establishment of the excluded, opposition "other" as a condition of their existence and "truth." The association of presence and absence, completion and lack, with the binary opposition of male and female is a part of these historical processes, not the "lack" of desire per se. Indeed, what thinking desire as "lack" says to me is that it is radically open-ended; that it speaks to the future, and that the future is unwritten.

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