

Holy Ferment: Queer Philosophical Destabilizations and the Discourse on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Lives in Christian Institutions

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Abstract

Employing insights from queer theorists this article explores what might be at stake philosophically in the contemporary ferment around homosexuality in the Western churches. Christina Hutchins argues that the ferment is an effect of the destabilization of the metaphysics of substance by queer discourse and practice. In other words, what gay Christians threaten is the notion that categories of identity are fixed and capable of categorization. This notion is built into the very grammar of our lives making it hard to think, act, write or speak outside of it, and much liberation, feminist and gay and lesbian theology has not attempted to do so. But as the hegemonic illusion is ruptured, Hutchins suggests that it is imperative for all those involved in the debate to come to terms with the violence and insufficiencies of the metaphysics of substance.

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If you participate as a member of a Christian religious community, if you teach in a seminary or know any candidates for ordination, if you are lesbian, gay, intersexed, bisexual, transgendered, or perilously straight, then you know that an unavoidable feature of Christian institutions at the turn of the millennium is the *ferment* stirred up by considerations of the inclusion of sexual deviants as full participants in religious and social life. “Ferment” comes from the Latin, *fermentum*, yeast, and the noun “ferment” refers to a living organism, such as a yeast, which causes fermentation by its enzymes. Hence we have beer and bread. The noun “ferment” also opens a broader more metaphorical meaning of a state of unrest, agitation, or a process of active— often disorderly— development, as in “creative ferment.” Being one of those wonderful words that is both noun and verb, significant in this context because, as the poet Pablo Neruda wrote, “the verb is the source and vivid life,”¹ *to ferment* is to undergo fermentation, to be in a state of complex, intense activity, or to work up into a state of agitation. From the most progressive of mainline denominations to the most vociferous assemblies of the

Christian Right, “ferment” tenders a dynamic, visceral image for the intensity of conversations on the perceived possibilities, values and threats that queer lives pose to Christian institutions and traditions. There is good evidence that Christians are “worked up” over issues of how to deal with those who live on sexual margins, when after their national assemblages during the summer of 2000, the United Methodist Church seems on the verge of un-uniting, of becoming two methodisms, and the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., finds itself smoothing over the disorder surrounding gay ordination by the seeming inaction of continuing established regulations.

I am no stranger to this ferment. In the early 1990's, while I was myself beginning to come out as lesbian, I pastored a United Church of Christ congregation as they undertook a two year self-study culminating in a congregational vote to become publicly Open and Affirming of people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual. While I in no way want to minimize the resistances, pains and trepidations involved in such processes, I have repeatedly noticed that churches in the midst of those difficult conversations display a kind of spiritual intensity, a liberatory energy and purpose. In my experience, the *ferment* of the Open and Affirming process offered the congregation of which I was a part a new way of understanding itself, not as a fixed entity, but as a community of self-fracture and expansion, a people *in the process of becoming* church.

Employing insights from several feminist theorists whose works are also considered inaugural for the field of queer theory, drawing particularly on the lesbian feminist theorist, Judith Butler and on her interpretation of Michel Foucault, this essay interrogates what is at stake *philosophically* in the ecclesial discourse on the recognition of marginal sexualities. Why have queer lives become such an overwhelming preoccupation for Christian institutions? Why do the conversations carry such a double charge of fear and energy? Why does such *ferment* accompany and characterize this particular discourse? Theological thinkers such as Carter Heyward, James Nelson, John Shelby Spong, Chris Glaser, Elizabeth Stuart, John McNeill, and Gary Comstock, among others, have written about lesbian and gay sexualities in the churches. They continue to do great service to progressive movements of inclusion and embodiment—efforts from which I have benefitted both theologically and vocationally. They have taken on biblical texts and traditional images of God, written about lesbian and gay spiritualities, and privileged the authority of human relationship over doctrine.² Other scholars such as John Boswell and Bernadette Brooten have deftly explored homoeroticism in the history of Christian institutions. But few scholars have interrogated the dynamics of this contemporary ferment for what might be at stake *philosophically*.

I suggest that the ecclesial considerations of homosexuality and other non-normative relations of gender, sex, and sexuality, provide an occasion, a moment of rupture, exposing philosophical or metaphysical assumptions that often have been otherwise obscured. Judith Butler's philosophical reconception of gender as an ongoing *process* of materialization— more

of a verb than a noun— provides a tool both sharp and nuanced enough to explore this philosophical terrain. Drawing on her characterization of the fixed categorical identities of gender, sex and sexuality as discursive fictions, effects of the regulatory regime of compulsory heterosexuality, I suggest that the discourse on queer lives in Christian institutions destabilizes the metaphysics of substance, a commonplace world view that shapes the margins of human bodies, constrains human relations, and funds conventional Christian ontologies of the self and of God. Prompted by the task Michel Foucault sets forth in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, of “the analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced,”³ and by the admonition of William Shakespeare, “Methinks thou doth protest too much,” I cite the excessive proliferation of particular questions and concerns within the ecclesial discourse on sexuality as evidence of the destabilization of the metaphysics of substance. I read the plethora of questions concentrated around a very few facets of sexuality as indicators of an attempt to “shore up” or re-fund a destabilized world view. By interrogating *which* concerns seem profusely generative, I seek to expose particular assumptions of the metaphysics of substance that are rent, depleted, or threatened by the ecclesial recognition of sexual minorities. I suggest that it is the way in which this discourse uniquely allows or even forces its participants to notice *how* the usually-obscured metaphysical *habits* of substantivizing grammar and categorization *shape and constrain our discourse, our human bodies and human lives*, that generates such ferment. I regard this exposure and the ferment that it generates as a unique creative opportunity. Because acting on unexamined philosophical assumptions increases the likelihood that one will remain dominated and constrained by the limits of those habits of thought, exposing metaphysical assumptions can increase human relational freedom and open possibilities for creativity, as well as unfold new trajectories for Christianity in an unknowable future.

Why is it that this *particular* discourse, focused as it is on queer sexualities within Christian communities, challenges culturally and religiously sedimented convictions of the stability of the body, the self and of God? Adrienne Rich, who in 1980 coined the phrase “compulsory heterosexuality” as the “preference” that “does not need to be explained,” suggests that when lesbian sexuality becomes visible it “is seen as requiring explanation.”⁴ And Eve Sedgwick suggests, “The most significant stakes for the culture are involved precisely in the volatile, fractured, dangerous relations of visibility and articulation around homosexual possibility.”⁵ What *are* the stakes for culture? And why are conversations surrounding homosexual possibility so volatile?

In her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin offers a further glimpse of why sexuality discourse, in particular, might garner such fervor: “Sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance.”⁶ For Rubin, this excess of significance displays itself in the ways we use sexual

acts to focus and carry morality claims in our culture. Rubin depicts one aspect of what she names the sexual hierarchy: “the need to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex.”⁷ Systems of sexual judgement, be they religious, psychological or feminist seek to locate particular acts and behaviors as falling on either the good or bad side of the line, such that, “The line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos.”⁸ As Rubin asserts, “This kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics. It grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged.”⁹ One way to read the discourse on sexuality in North American churches is as a slight motion or tremor of this “line.” Rubin also points out that most individuals draw a personal “line,” and in doing so mistake their own sexual preferences for a universalizing system or generally applicable morality.

But *why* this “excess of significance” surrounding the “line” that marks the moral (de)valuation of various sexual “deviations?” I believe that the agitated questions and vociferous opinions generated in the ecclesial discourse on institutional inclusions of queer identities, the exaggerated emphases of particular concerns, are *effects* of explicit philosophical destabilizations. Our culture’s compulsory heterosexuality is embedded in and complicit with a particular and hegemonic philosophical world view, a way of thinking about selves, bodies and persons that is also entailed in many Christian doctrines. This world view, which I am calling *the metaphysics of substance* (a Nietzschean term utilized by Butler), assumes that a subject is stable, fixed and autonomous: the ‘I’ exists, grammatically and metaphysically, before ‘I’ engage in any actions, roles or relationships. A metaphysics of substance, in treating sex, race, gender, sexuality, and human beings in general, as well as God, as more or less fixed, pre-discursive realities, also assumes that certain attributes or essences of those realities can be readily described and named by categories.

Further, the inseparability of conventional English grammar and a metaphysics of substance means that, as Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, “Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground.”¹⁰ Our grammatical rules and our commonplace metaphysical habits reinforce one another; the two may, in many ways, *be* inseparable, constantly emerging as conjoined motions of language, thought and action. Butler cites the Nietzsche scholar, Michel Haar, who argues that philosophical or metaphysical positions act as constraining psychosocial illusions when they focus on “Being” and “Substance” as ontological realities prior to language. These illusions are constructed and sustained by the subject-predicate formulation of grammar. Butler restates Haar’s claim that the constructs “Being” and “Substance,” far from revealing the powers that order reality, “constitute the artificial philosophical means by which simplicity, order, and identity are effectively instituted.”¹¹ The illusion results from a belief in or constraint of reality by grammar. Haar writes, “It was grammar (the structure of subject and predicate) that

inspired Descartes' certainty that the 'I' is the subject of 'think,' whereas it is rather the thoughts that come to 'me': at bottom, faith in grammar simply conveys the will to be the 'cause' of one's thoughts. The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances, fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality."¹²

To momentarily glance back to the 17th century, Rene Descartes posited Substance as that which exists by itself, independently of anything else. He further theorized that the world is composed of substances of two kinds: bodies and minds. Human minds and souls are, for Descartes, immaterial, while bodies and their functions and acts are material entities characterized by attributes of extension (they fill space), solidity, and impenetrability. Being material substances, bodies generally follow what Descartes, as a mathematician, admired as the predictable, mechanical laws of natural science. Since the substances called "minds" do not have "extension," Descartes replaced the mechanical laws of "extension" with "thinking" or reason. Reliable ideas are "clear and distinct" (complementary to the solidity and impenetrability of material substances), and thought, though because it is of the "mind" remains utterly distinct from material "bodies," is a motion *like* the motions of bodily extension, characterized by linear relations of cause and effect.¹³

It is our Cartesian inheritance, what is still a commonplace world view, our "faith in grammar" to reiterate Haar's phrase, or as I will call it for the purposes of further exposition, *the fiction of billiard ball reality*, that is destabilized by the discourse on queer lives. I believe it is the exposure of this common sense world view as illusion, the *failure* of the ability to theorize or think of persons (particularly the bodies of others) as substantive, independent "things" in a Cartesian or grammatical sense, that produces such ferment in ecclesial conversations on deviant sexualities. In what follows, I explicate one fissure or depletion in the metaphysics of substance,¹⁴ an instance of the destabilization rendered by the consideration of queer lives.

In order to examine how the discourse on queer lives destabilizes the metaphysics of substance, I utilize a much-used but none the worse for wear (!) image for the extension, solidity, and impenetrability of substances, that of the billiard ball. While the billiard ball image was developed as a means of critique by Hume,¹⁵ a successor of Descartes, the image actually provides a useful way of exploring the contemporary hegemony of Cartesian cause and effect relations. Following Descartes' notion of a substance, and according to common sense, a billiard ball exists, or at least continues to exist, once made, by itself. It is a firm little bounded body, independent of anything else. When one billiard ball smacks another made of the same impermeable substance, a singular, linear cause and effect relationship is exhibited. In certain controlled situations, billiard ball reality offers a very useful set of relational approximations about how bodies interact, about causes and effects. In fact, the entire game of billiards is based on the predictability and exactness of such lines of cause and effect. Unfortunately, so are many

of our political assumptions and rights, legal regulations, and religious and theological habits. That such predictable, linear, singular, visible cause and effect relationships are a commonly held belief in terms of human beings, our relationships, behaviors, and categorical identities, is evidenced in the ecclesial sexuality discourse by the omnipresent question—and the plethora of literature that addresses it—as to *the* predictable, singular “cause” of homosexuality. Sedgwick calls this “the question of ontogeny, ‘What is the cause of homo- [or of hetero-] sexuality in the individual?’”¹⁶ This question continually surfaces in Open and Affirming conversations, in literature of the Religious Right, as well as in secular culture, for example in the search for “the gay gene.”¹⁷ The agitated resolve of the question “What is *the cause* of homosexuality?” betrays how the consideration of marginal sexualities occasions a thorough threat to or rupture in the hegemonic fiction of singular, linear cause and effect relationships. The diffuse and widespread emergence—the promiscuity, if you will—of the ontogeny question attests to how *commonly* people in our culture assume a metaphysics of substance and the illusions of simplicity, order and identity which it installs.

The much reiterated question and answer refrain of ontogeny seeks to repair damage and reinstate the metaphysics of substance. The damage is done to the metaphysics not only by an increasing profusion of marginal sexualities in the discursive space, but by the fact that reflection on or discussion of marginal sexualities tends to expose sexual cause and effect relationships as neither singular nor linear, but as multiple, diffuse, and ultimately unknowable. As Butler writes “There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of these terms captures or determines the rest. Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear.”¹⁸

In attempting to reinstate the metaphysical illusion of singular, linear cause and effect relations, the ontogeny question works to obscure the ways in which any category of thought that poses as a singular *cause* (for example genetic/biological determinism) is, rather, an *effect* of regulatory power. Returning to billiard ball reality, what is obscured is that when one single, independent ball taps another, the subsequent simple, ordered cause and effect interaction is itself an *effect*. The game of billiards is *constructed* to optimize linear cause and effect: the balls are made of hard wood, finished in a special shiny lacquer; the felt-topped surface of a pool table is designed to minimize or homogenize all other interspersions and interactions. This highly orchestrated elimination or invisibilization of more complex and sustained relations makes it seem *as if* the billiard balls simply cause each other’s motion, that cause and effect relations are linear, visible, and predictable.

This construction or illusion of simple cause and effect is analogous to that produced in language by the grammatical subject-predicate formulation. As Butler writes in *Bodies That*

Matter, “I would suggest that it takes a certain suspicion toward grammar to reconceive the matter in a different light.”¹⁹ In the new preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, she wonders how one can think and write philosophically “outside” a metaphysics of substance when one necessarily needs the grammar, its constraints and causal illusions, in order to communicate at all. She writes, “... neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself.. It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed upon the thinkable itself.”²⁰

While in order to retain necessary cultural intelligibility, we may not be able to readily abandon conventional grammar, perhaps by refusing to simplify and order sexual identities into linear relations of cause and effect we *can* minimize the re-obfuscation of the hegemonic power relations that reify a metaphysics of substance. Eve Sedgwick claims that the question of ontogeny itself, of the singular cause, is one that has developed through what she calls “gay-genocidal nexuses of thought.” Thus queer-affirmative work “does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals.”²¹ What might it mean if we were to minimize, in most human interchange, our reliance on illusions of singular, linear cause and effect, if we were to refuse our own nostalgic demand for singular originary authority and for the predictability and exactness of simple, ordered relations? What might such a minimization or refusal do to our habits of constructing ourselves and one another through categorical identities and to the varied, plural, shifting, complexly layered humanities that such habits effectively circumscribe? Might our conventional political, legal, linguistic and religious habits begin to emerge into a clearer and more sustained visibility *as* habits, conventions, effects, rather than as ontological causes, eternal certainties and origins? And how might we become more deliberately responsive and responsible to processes of iteration rather than to the maintenance of illusions that linear cause and effect relations are the means of human and divine agency in the world?

In conclusion, I propose that in the contemporary conversations about gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual lives in the churches, the sense of threat and the terror of foundations giving way, experienced and given voice to by many people, in fact occur as something foundational, however illusory, *is* giving way. Queer lives, in unfixing or playing between, mismatching the categories of sex, gender and sexual desire, reveal that the metaphysics of substance, the faith in grammar that funds much Christian theology as well as many of our common understandings of what it is to *have* or to *be* a sexuality or a gender, a race, an ethnicity or a member of a community, is no longer a sufficient world view. Considerations of queer lives unbury questions about what it means even to *be* human, a self, a person. A metaphysics of

substance is not dynamic enough to make sense of a world where categorical boundaries are exposed as culturally and linguistically coalesced processes that continually compose and constrain human lives. Nor is it only concepts of the self that are disturbed. Conversations around queer lives in the church, if seriously engaged, reveal the inadequacy of the philosophical basis of much Christian theology, including many feminist and other liberation theologies that rely on an ontology of pre-discursive being as the starting point for theoretical reflections on liberation, love, agency, justice, and the essential value of human and divine natures. Though approaching this inadequacy from other directions, Catherine Keller, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Ellen Armour,²² and others, have begun to develop theological possibilities that, as they move away from the fixed, unified subject of a metaphysics of substance and toward subjectivities—the myriad, ongoing processes by which apparent subjects are constituted—also move away from the fiction of simple and linear cause and effect relations. Though it is impossible to live, move or communicate “outside” of the language of the subject, beyond the metaphysics of substance that linguistically inscribes us, partial destabilizations do provide new opportunities for novel theological approach. Perhaps the unhinging of cause and effect relations as simple, single and linear, and the exposure of their contribution to the continual reproduction of a metaphysics of substance opens a set of approaches that may circumvent some of the pitfalls and impossibilities inherent in attempts to deconstruct “the subject.” Certainly the unhinging of simplistic cause and effect opens fresh questions and possibilities for theology. For instance, how might common conceptions of resurrection and atonement shift when viewed as processes in which agency is dynamic, historically contingent, plural, diffuse and ultimately unknowable? Likewise, if effects arise in/from (oppressively) contextual constellations of contributing relations, how does such a world view affect religious faith in, for example, incarnation, not as a singularly directed event, but as a multifariously constituted effect? How might Christianity reconstitute its focus and sense of identity from the nostalgic fiction of singular causes to a set of hegemonically shaped effects with broad implications and future consequences?

The metaphysical ruptures or exposures facilitated by the discourse on queer sexualities bear, shape and produce both despair and hope. If to be religious, to be human, is to be inescapably historically and culturally contingent, then the shocking realization of the inseparability of our lives from the institutional sites and habits that violently constrain bodies, thoughts and relations can be a source of despair. An agency that is dynamically embedded in and limited by ongoing processes of iteration can seem too diffuse, too abstract, too fluid to be a dependable source of hope.

However, at the beginning of this essay I mentioned that congregations in “Open and Affirming” processes seem to display a spiritual vitality, a sense of church not as *being*, not as fixed, but as *becoming*. Perhaps there is a burst of energy when we release ourselves from the

hegemonic illusions of simplicity and order that accompany a metaphysics of substance, an immense relief because billiard ball expectations continually fail us religiously, politically, globally, and in the most intimate complexities and nuances of our lives. Perhaps, too, the vital ferment surrounding queer lives signals a hope beyond the terror of foundations giving way or even beyond the energies of relief when failed world views begin to be exposed. Judith Butler proposes that what cannot be fully expressed by any category, by our grammar or by our commonplace, hegemonic world view, will “persist in its disruptive promise.”²³ *Ferment* is a verb of becoming, the verb of bread dough, of an uncontrollable relational expansion. It is the verb of a “yeast which a woman hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened” (Matthew 13:33). Perhaps that which exceeds its prescribed discursive domain, the excesses of rising dough, the expansions of human and divine love and novel ways of relating, the verb of becoming, *will* persist in disrupting whatever would seek to contain and control it, freeing our lives and our laughter at the same time.

Notes:

¹Pablo Neruda, *Fully Empowered*, transl. Alastair Reid, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 9.

² For a good overview of recent books on gay/lesbian studies and/or queer theory and religion, see Laurel Schneider, “Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology, *Religious Studies Review*, vol 26, no 1 (January 2000), 3-12.

³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, transl. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 102. In this paper I am attempting to utilize Foucault’s nuanced developments of the dynamic operation of power in culture as a methodological approach. “There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. *We must not expect the discourses on sex to tell us, above all, what strategy they derive from, or what moral divisions they accompany, or what ideology— dominant or dominated— they represent; rather we must question them on the two levels of their tactical productivity (what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure) and their strategical integration (what conjunction and what force relationship make their utilization necessary in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur).*” (Ibid., 101-2, emphasis mine.) By interrogating “the tactical productivity” of certain pervasive questions/concerns in the ecclesial sexuality discourses, particularly the question of ontogeny, in this essay I seek to show how the metaphysics of substance is strategically and continuously reinstated.

⁴Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, et al, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp 227-254.

⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp 3-44.

⁶Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, et al, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13. Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” along with Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* and Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* are considered inaugural texts in queer theory.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 15. Rubin displays how “Good” sex, that is “Normal, Natural, Healthy, Holy” sex is portrayed as “Heterosexual, Married, Monogamous, Reproductive, At home,” and “Bad” sex, i.e. “Abnormal, Unnatural, Sick, Sinful, Way Out” sex, as “Transsexual, Fetishist, Sadoomasochist, For money, Cross-generational.” Between “good” and “bad” lies what Rubin depicts as the “Major area of contest.” The contested list begins close alongside the “good” list and slants increasingly downward toward the “bad”: “Unmarried heterosexual couples, Promiscuous heterosexuals, Masturbation, Long-term stable lesbian and gay male couples,” taking a sharp step toward the “bad” with “Lesbians in the bar,” and “Promiscuous gay men in the baths or in the park.” It is important to notice that Rubin depicts the “line” of moral judgement as drawn, not between the “major area of contest” and “bad” sex, but between “good” sex and the “Major area of contest.” Ibid., 14 . Ethicist Kathy Rudy points to such a “line” in contemporary Christian institutional life, even in “progressive” congregations: “when gay men and lesbian women seek community with Christianity today, they are most often granted membership only on the condition of monogamy. Thus, many left-leaning, liberal, or radical Christians today argue in favor of gay marriage or commitment ceremonies within the church so that lesbians and gay men can take part in church life.” Rudy notes that this “line” serves to obscure the complexity and richness of those relations that fall on the “far” side of it. “By allowing the main or primary issue of gay activism in the church to be the blessing of same-sex unions, we obscure the complicated sexual lives of many gay [and straight!] people, particularly those who live their lives in more complex communities.” (Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 79.)

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, (1990), 1999), 189.

¹¹ Ibid., 27.

¹² Ibid., 28. Judith Butler is quoting Michel Haar, “Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,” *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David Allison (New York: Delta, 1977), pp 5-36.

¹³ That Descartes (1596-1650) holds a kind of chiasmic complementarity between “thinking” and the motions of material “extension” is apparent in the following passage: “I have a clear and distinct idea of myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other, I possess a distinct idea of body, inasmuch as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that this I is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body and can exist without it.” (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, E.S. Haldane and G.R. Ross, eds., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1641] 1970, 190).

¹⁴ The example developed in this paper of the destabilization of linear cause and effect relationships is one of several instances of metaphysical rupture that I am currently in the process of exploring.

¹⁵ The British empiricist/sceptic, David Hume (1711-1776), utilizes the example of playing billiards to undo cause and effect relations by a different approach than the one I take here. For Hume, just because a causal event has dependably happened a particular way before (the white ball, hit a particular way, hitting the green ball a particular way, causing the green ball to plunk into the pocket) does not mean that it is certain to happen again, that there is a necessary cause and effect connection. Arising from felt regularities of experience, and dependent on the existence of constant conjunctions, necessary causal connection is an *idea* projected onto the world.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 9.

¹⁷ One symptom of the hegemonic cultural stress on the ontogeny question is displayed when parental, familial or a friend’s “acceptance” of a lesbian daughter, sister, or a gay son, brother, or friend so often turns precisely on the knowledge/belief that homosexuality is a biologically determined “orientation.” As one parent writes, “I listened to a scientist make a case for nature, not nurture, as the cause of homosexuality. I began to put away my overwhelming guilt... I am not afraid or ashamed any more... I am secure in the love of God for me and for my son.” (Luann Conaty, in *A Family and Friend’s Guide to Sexual Orientation: Bridges the Divide Between Gay and Straight*, by

Bob Powers and Alan Ellis, New York: Routledge, 1996, 218.) In the face of the recent codification of the human genome, the discourse about the search for a “gay gene,” or discourse about the search for any gene acting as “the cause” of a particular characteristic or disease rather than as a possible genetic *contributor* to a condition, offers strategic ontogenic evidence of the hegemony of singular, linear causal approaches to particular effects.

¹⁸Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp307-320.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* New York: Routledge, 1993, 7. In fact, the grammatical illusion of simple cause and effect obscures the mechanism that sustains the essentialism/constructionism opposition that has plagued much feminist and lesbian/gay/queer theory. The essentialist/constructionist debate, itself a particularly pervasive form of the ontogeny question, breaks open once one begins to explore the relation between grammar and the metaphysics of substance. As Butler writes, “Indeed the propositional form ‘Discourse constructs the subject’ retains the subject-position of the grammatical formulation even as it reverses the place of subject and discourse... This view informs the misreading by which Foucault is criticized for ‘personifying’ power: if power is misconstrued as a grammatical and metaphysical subject, and if that metaphysical site within humanist discourse has been the privileged site of the human, then power appears to have displaced the human as the origin of activity. But if Foucault’s view of power is understood as the disruption and subversion of this grammar and metaphysics of the subject, if power orchestrates the formation and sustenance of subjects, then it cannot be accounted for in terms of the ‘subject’ which is its effect. And here it would be no more right to claim that the term ‘construction’ belongs at the grammatical site of subject, for construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both ‘subjects’ and ‘acts’ come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability.” (Ibid., 8-9) Or as Foucault puts it as he is explicating the process of confession, grammar, the metaphysics of substance, and the speaking subject work together to obscure agency: “The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement... [However] the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks [the subject] (for it is he who is constrained)...” (*History of Sexuality, Volume I*, 61-2)

²⁰Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1999), xviii-xix.

²¹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 40. Earlier in the book, Sedgwick writes about her own approach in writing: “...instead of speculating on causes, the book explores [homosexuality’s] unpredictably varied and acute implications and consequences.” (Ibid., 9) Thus she refuses to address the question of ontogeny, and this refusal to address questions through linear cause and effect approaches has become a characteristic of subsequent queer theory.

²² See for instance, Catherine Keller’s exploration of the human and divine when “Self is an event, a process, and no fixed substance, no substantive.” (*From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 194) Or Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “If changing the subject is to proceed beyond inclusion, it must go forward as a change that has no subject to ground itself in.” (*Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 395) Or more recently, Ellen Armour, “To follow this deconstructive course is not to pave over the fissures in this ground (the context of metaphysics and its reflections) so that other racial and sexual economies can emerge. It is to strive to keep woman open as a site of contestation on which and through which theorizing and theologizing differences between women can take place.” (*Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 183.)

²³Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 318.