

Processed Lives

Gender and Technology
in Everyday Life



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**Indiscretions: of body, gender,
technology**

Ira Livingston

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1

What is the shape of a human body? Moving through space and time, bodies wriggle out sinuous, snaky forms. With this moving picture of the spacetime body, one could begin to ask how body shapes tend to differ by sex, class, culture, historically. My body forms a series of zigzags across the USA, mainly; a frenetic series of smaller zigzags between home, school, work; even smaller zigzags of eyes and hands across paper, texts, screens, bodies. In any case, the multiple scales of such a shape make it a *fractal* structure; a body irreducibly *scaly* and *kinky*.

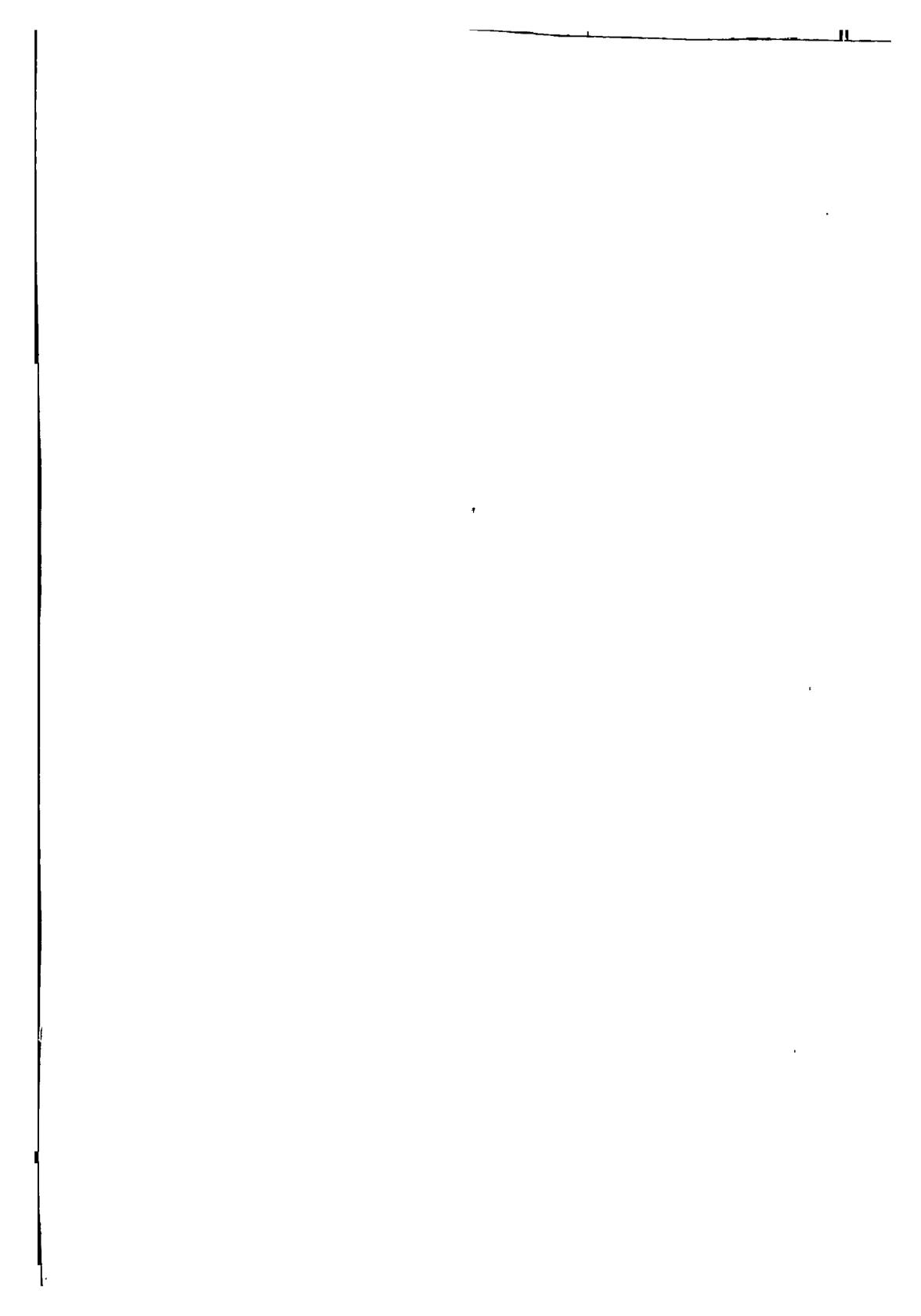
The shapes of collective life make the earth a Medusa's head. But these snaky things are not so discrete; the muscles and brains that orchestrate their wriggings are as much external as internal to them, and they leave wakes that widen out into the future: wakes of deaths, babies, buildings, books.

We are still swimming in the wake of The Modern Body. *

2

Historians of bodies (see Duden 1991: 165–70; Laqueur 1987: 116) tell us that the premodern body in the West differed radically from the modern body which began to displace it in the eighteenth century. Radically porous in both its internal and external boundaries, the well-being of the premodern body depended on its openness to influxes and effluxes with the world. This body was also subject to the subtler flows of "sympathies" not only between it and the world but between its own internal flows. Even menstruation, for example, did not define a categorical difference between male and female anatomies, since it tended to be understood as one instance of a general ecology of fluids to which all bodies were subject; men or women could menstruate through their noses or the pores of their skin; bodily fluids were themselves fluid. Two things need to be said lest this openness be romanticized: first, that premodern sexual difference was not construed as difference in kind but in degree, female being construed as isomorphic but inferior; and second, that bodily openness entails a vulnerability that makes distinctions the subject of taboos and constraints.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the so-called modern body was configured as a defended citadel: "a mighty fortress is our God." The discretion of its external boundaries with the world, its closure, was established along with the discretion of its internal organs and systems. Disease was made less an ecologically dynamic and socio-culturally integrated phenomenon and more the effect of a discrete agent. A single discipline, medicine, established a virtual monopoly over the body in place of the range of kinds of practitioners who had



previously ministered to it. Monopoly disciplines and monopoly capitalism emerged hand in hand; the economic and organizational mandate for each, and for the body configured in their image, is hierarchical or vertical integration and monopolistic control, coded as Western, male, and middle class against a range of other more indiscrete bodies.

The modern *machine*, understood as an assemblage of discrete parts articulated to perform a specific task, came also to be opposed to the *organism* as working-class labor was opposed to professional work, the professions evolving as autonomous, hierarchically integrated and self-regulating, while artisanal and other kinds of labor were made increasingly subject to Tayloristic control. The exemplary postmodern machine, the computer, differs from the traditional machine in that it is reconfigurable and multi-functional in the interaction of "soft" and "hard" ware; opened to engagement in networks, it is subject to new dangers by virtue of its interdependence, necessitating not simple prophylaxis but *damage control*. Like the virus, the computer is maximally connected horizontally, making it subject to viral interference, but unlike the virus it has a vertical and hierarchical structure that makes it vulnerable, puts it at risk.

The postmodernization of the immune system has produced *flexible bodies* (Martin 1994); not defended citadels but radically porous, dynamically engaged and engaging. The Berlin Wall is dismantled and, in California, Proposition 187 is passed, insidiously admitting unregistered workers (on whom the economy depends) while rendering them non-persons. The discretion of bodies is increasingly belied by evidence of their implication in interdependent infrastructures where they are wired in and subject to stress as their privileged dysfunction. Another caveat is in order: reconfigurability and fluidity should not in themselves be celebrated as democratic openness: the mandates of postmodern incorporation are largely driven by the relentless logic of the postmodern corporation, which replaces vertical integration with outsourcing and horizontal partnerships, long-term capital investment with the terroristic mobility of international capital, workforce stability with continual de-skilling, re-skilling and temporary labor: these are the sharkish, swim-or-die logics of late capitalism.

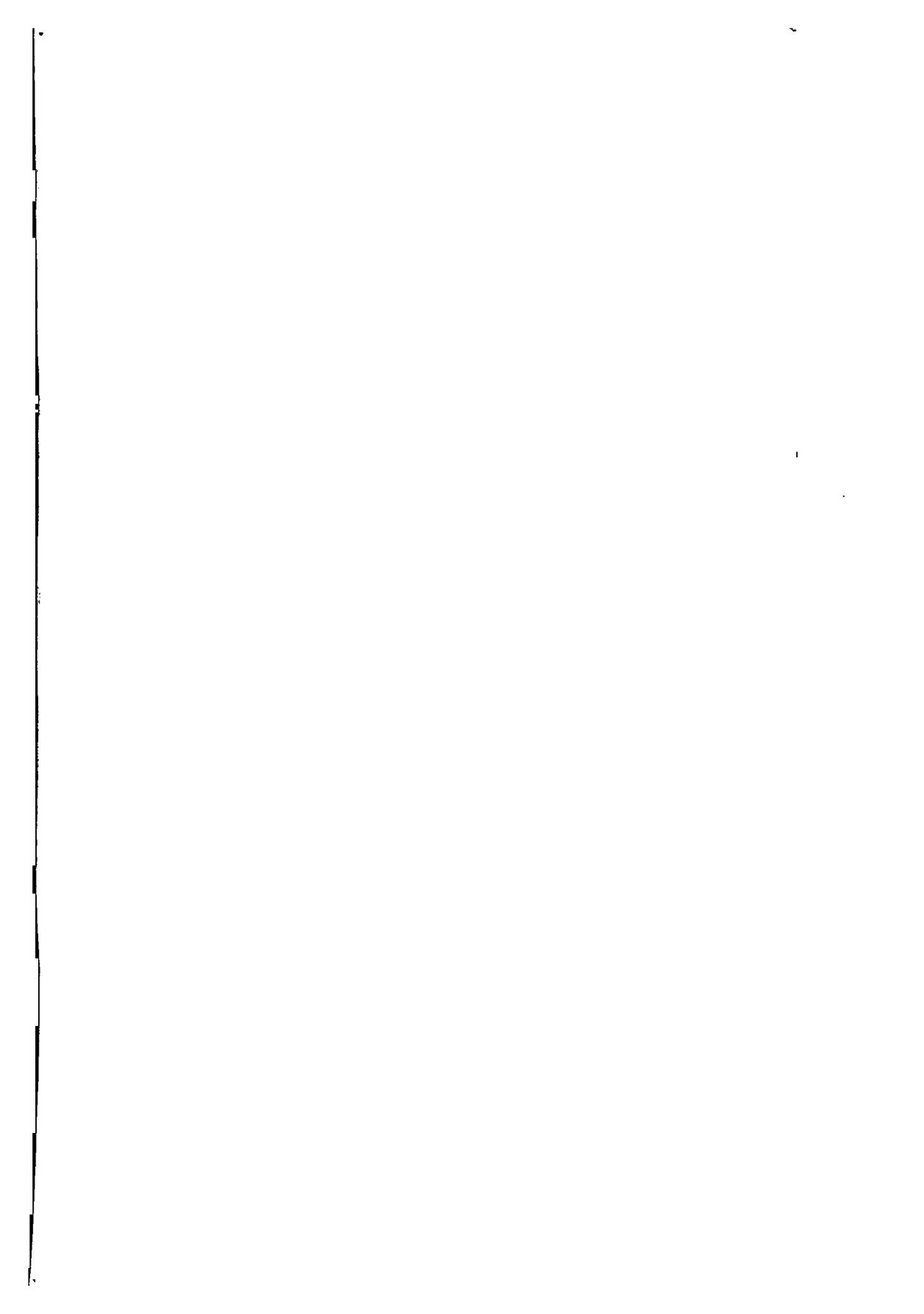
Postmodernity, then, cannot be characterized as a "return" of the premodern, since what modernity imposes over all phenomena is precisely the distinction modern/premodern; it is instead what *disturb* this distinction that merits the name postmodern. If modernity's colonization of all realms of human activity has been thorough, it has always been contested at every point and at every moment, subject to the unconscious it produces through its primary repressions and exclusions, to its Others who are both marginalized and granted a certain constitutive agency even as this agency is construed as criminality or pathology.

Technological determinism attributes sovereign agency and shaping power to technology, provisionally at least even by putting it in the subject position in a sentence: "How do new technologies change our understandings of ourselves?" Perhaps we understand that this is just a way of speaking, like saying that the sun rises; or that it is a way of opening a question, the first move in what must quickly become a dialectical dance marathon between "technologies" and "ourselves," one which often ends with the same two tired partners. On the other hand, it is almost as easy to start by saying that technology is shaped by culture: "How do we enact our changing understandings of ourselves through new technologies?" Even with careful reminders that culture also comprises material and technological practices, this formula usually remains in the old orbit of idealism, as if "ourselves" and our "understandings" come first and are then merely expressed.

These two gambits tend to structure discourse on the body as well: a "constructionism" in which passive, soft flesh is configured by culture; and an "essentialism" in which the body represents a bottom line of certain biological constraints or identities that are, in effect, irreducibly prior to any discourse that may take them up. These are caricatured versions, usually presented as straw men so that the presenter can "problematize" or "complicate" or "deconstruct" them, a maneuver that usually has the effect of re-installing the caricatures.

The repeated loops of the circuit between these two gambits are themselves a kind of argumentative machine, a discourse generator, an episteme-engine. As Bruno Latour has pointed out (1993: 51–5), this exemplary modern machine usually functions to induce another division within each party to the dichotomy, between the "hard" part, that seems to be an unconstructed agent, and the "soft" part that is shaped by the other (e.g. sex and gender, in the classical formation). In other words, the machine perpetually downloads its binary program.

How can we rethink bodies and technology not as agents and patients, not as constructed or constructing, not as hard or soft but rubbery and slippery? Not as the payoff of a long argument but as a starting point? Start by thinking of machines as displacements and condensations of constellations of social and economic practices and relations, epistemological assumptions, ideologies, natural laws, contextual engagements, etc. It is precisely the machine's overdetermination – the impossibility of reducing it to a single function, of making it work perfectly smoothly – that makes it semi-autonomous. Such a machine thus constitutes a kind of *fetish*, and in all of this does not differ from the body. It is important here to resist Freudian or Marxist pathologizations of the fetish whereby proper sexual investment erotizes the genitalia (not a detachable part or a certain vignette) or



whereby value properly inheres in human activity and relations (not in their alienable products). The way to resist these regulatory regimes is to recognize fetishization as an exemplary form of embodiment: "embodiment is significant prosthesis" (Haraway 1991: 195). A fetish embodies a contradiction, never simply to resolve or neutralize or transcend it but to animate and activate it, to prolong it.

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In her compelling essay "The Lesbian Phallus," Judith Butler omits the word "dildo" in characterizing the "plasticity, transferability, and expropriability" of the phallus (1993: 61). Butler's strategy works to foreclose a reductionist reading by taking seriously Lacan's dictum that "the phallus can function only when veiled;" discourse is secreted around it rather than flowing through it. I want to put the dildo back in, for a moment, as an epistemological device, to think about its implications for prosthetic embodiment.

What most readily appears about dildo use to one accustomed to thinking of sex as a non-cyborg activity is that the use of a dildo involves a certain asymmetry or even incommensurability in the economy of sexual pleasure (making it exemplary for various other sexual practices); that is, between the kinds of pleasure given and taken. This characterization is often made to function as a foil to the perfect reciprocity of pleasure supposed to attend genital sex, but it can also provoke recognition that sexual "intercourse" cannot possibly be reduced to an exchange of orgasm-for-orgasm even if mutual orgasm is involved; in fact, a sex of simple reciprocity ("apples for apples"), if it exists, which I doubt, might merit the term "homosexual." Such a completely rationalized sexuality would resemble the dream of a global capitalism in which all exchanges are reconciled in a single economy, as against a "gift" economy structured around the impossibility of reciprocation. In such an economy, the gift produces obligation; that is, the gift by definition cannot be returned in kind. On the other hand, then, where the kinds of pleasure and the economies in which they signify – that is, what each partner gets – are multiple and to some extent incommensurable (either between partners or for an individual) the act or relationship may well be said to be "heterosexual." Needless to say, many of what are now called homosexual acts and identities are exemplary here. Where no single meta-economy can absolutely regulate, reconcile or even discretely enumerate the multiple economies at work, the question of what is happening at any given moment or of what kind of relationship it is or could be will be somewhat volatile, continually under construction. I will discuss the consequences of this volatility in a moment.

Butler's question, "Does heterosexuality exist?" must be answered in the negative if hetero is taken to mean binary difference, which is not

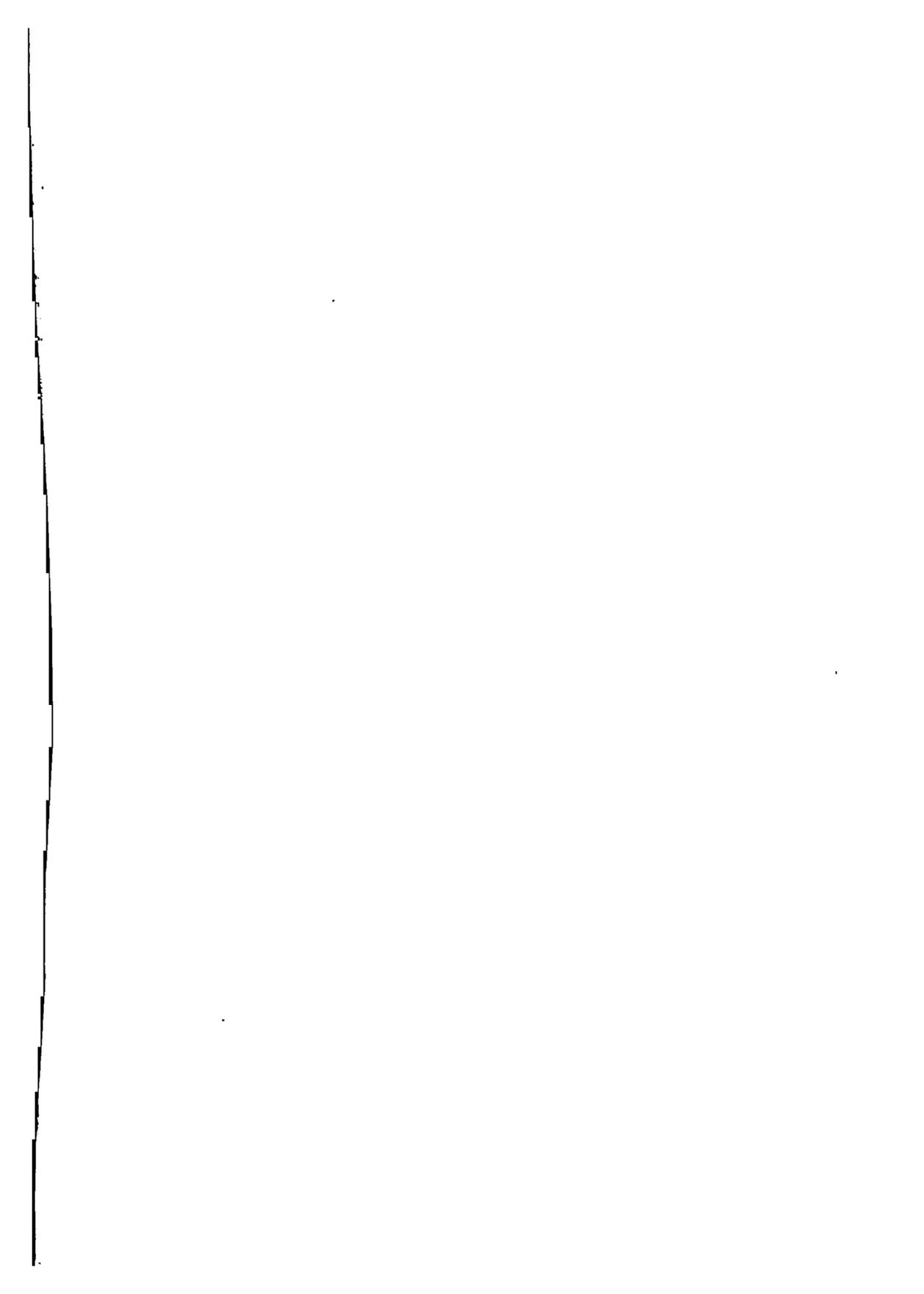
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sexy, not really difference except in a radically neutered sense, positively dysfunctional as the sole operator even of straight sex, which also has to be much more local and playful and potentially disruptive even if part of straight (especially masculine) identity has depended on the denial of this fact. Furthermore, then, sex can be sex only as it *also*, though not exclusively, displaces and condenses other kinds of relations that are not explicitly sexual.

In so far as straight genital-to-genital sex allows a simple and false equation between pleasure received and given, that is, in so far as it allows sex to be bracketable from its multiple economies, it follows that the dildo is both more *attached* and more *sensitive* than the penis. At the same time, a dildo is more obviously not simply a switchboard or relay that channels and regulates, more like a productive obstacle that libido flows around, like air around a wing whose asymmetry produces both uplift and turbulence. A way of generalizing this figure is to say that sexual difference operates among us rather than between us; if it divides us, it divides us from ourselves as it does from others; it is a *fractal* difference.

A linear relation requires at least one autonomous agent who is the originator of his acts and sole proprietor of his body: the capitalist and existentialist "free agent"; the "liberal subject" of modernity. It does not demand one party to act monolithically as subject and the other to be exclusively objectified, and you underestimate its sophistication if you leave it at that. Rather, its meta-economy, its endlessly deferred heaven of just rewards, works by holding out an ideal space of final analysis where "in the end the love you take / is equal to the love you make." The effect of this deferred reciprocation may construe the parties as having in effect both "soft" and "hard" parts, but the important thing is that it allows the relationship to be construed as "soft"; entirely subject to being made by the parties rather than vice versa (the fiction of the free market or liberal social contract): it is the one-and-only-one straight line configured by the two points, a workable definition of "straight." If the "strange attractor" of non-linear desire is always already configured in a complex play of projections and introjections, partly inertial and repetitive and partly mutational, in what sense can I say that my desire is my own? Who is servicing whom and in exchange for what? If sex is impossible without a significant element of this kind of non-linearity, and if such non-linearity has characterized feminine sexuality, that is, if a woman is someone for whom the statement that "sex is also not sex" is more likely to make sense, then the upshot is that there is only one kind of sexual relation and it is, in effect, a lesbian relation. I would like to say furthermore that everyone knows this.

Non-linear systems are both more volatile in their vulnerability to certain small and often unpredictable variations, but also, finally, more stable, able to reconstitute themselves in the face of otherwise



devastating shocks. The important point here is that in practice this economy is not perpetually shifty; quite the contrary, it is its inherent shiftiness that requires that it be negotiated, that it be constituted as this negotiation; juggled with care if it is to stay in the air. It is the fiction of a rationalized and linear economy, on the other hand, that must be sustained by violence and vampirism. I am not quite happy with the legalistic sense of the word "negotiation," but my dictionary does say that it means "intercourse with a view to coming to terms on some matter." The non-linearity of negotiation is operative in so far as what the parties negotiate are the terms by which each will be construed as competent parties to the negotiation; it is this contradiction between being always already constructed and continually under construction that now animates gendered bodies.

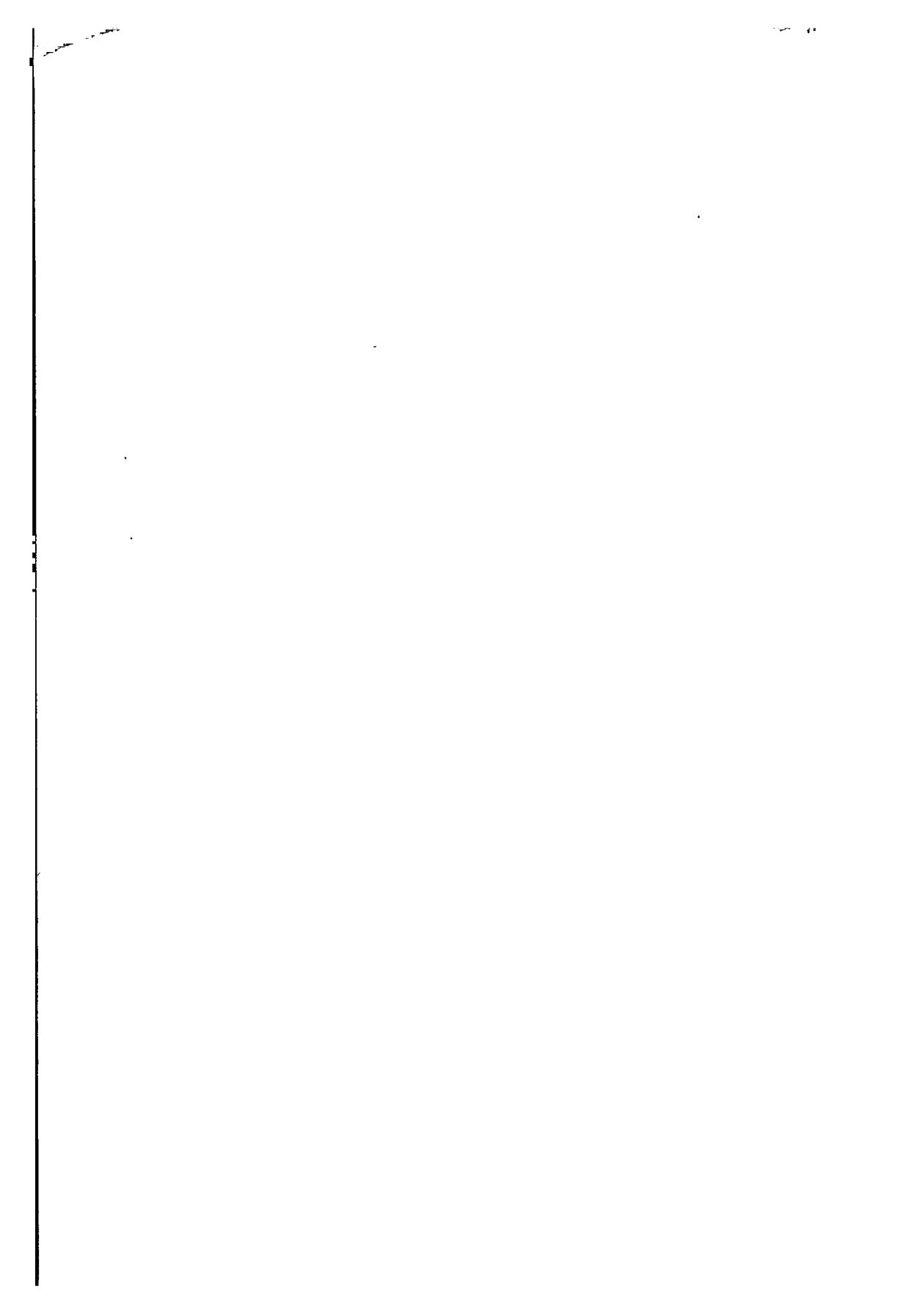
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In her essay "Virtual Systems" (1992), A. R. Stone writes about technologies such as Virtual Reality, electronic conferencing and phonestex as "narrow bandwidth" media: unlike face-to-face contact, in other words, these technologies rely on a very narrow range of kinds of information and on a limited amount of whatever information signifies for them (usually simplified visual images in VR, the typewritten word online and the electronically reproduced voice on the phone). Narrow bandwidth allows more opportunities for users to "pass"; to sustain cross-gender or other identities or to remain ambiguous; it thus also becomes a site where identities can be even more rigorously policed. In any case, rather than thinking of narrow bandwidth modes as impoverishments of the kinds of information they allow *through* their limited channels, Stone engages them as challenges that enrich the interpretive play stirred up *around* them. Such an engagement does not worship the *deus ex machina* of postmodern technologies but extends the Derridean priority of *writing*. To understand the capacity of technology to produce oppressive and liberatory effects, think of a channel not only in terms of how it regulates, organizes and polices what goes through it but how it disturbs, enriches or impoverishes what goes around it; think of a channel the way an elk confronts an oil pipeline.

6

Finally or not, the genome, that exemplary "intelligent machine"; not the totalitarian master of all living information systems but a grain of sand in a world that is our oyster, an *irritant* around which bodies are secreted, bodies not inert, but in turn becoming strung into loops.

History's arching back
(and monstrous flukes
emerge) still stranger.



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