MATERIALITY, BECOMING, AND TIME:
THE EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Sociology
in conformity with the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(January, 2013)

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Abstract

As much of the scholarly literature shows, *gender* has served as a central organizing force for knowing and theorizing about sexuality. The governmentality of sexuality in Western societies over the last 200 years has led to sex being discursively implicated with reproduction, and this has had a profound effect on the ways sexuality has been theorized and understood in terms of gendered desire. The aim of this dissertation is to theorize an alternative approach to sexuality that decenters gender and gives attention to the materiality of sex and the body. Using existentialism and phenomenology, this dissertation offers a particular challenge to heteronormative conceptions of “sexual orientation” and “sexual identity” for their ostensibly timeless and enduring quality, or *being*. The research presented herein theorizes sexuality through an ontology of *becoming* that takes into account the diverse, multi-faceted nature of sexuality as a series of temporal experiences, attractions, desires, sensations, practices, and identities – that is, as a phenomenon.

A genealogical methodology is used to trace the discursive history of sexuality and demonstrate how modernist discourses of sexuality have influenced how sexuality is known and experienced. This research emphasizes the discursive constraints on knowledge about sexuality. In considering an alternative framework, the principles of existentialism and phenomenology are critically examined through the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Attention is then turned toward a non-classical paradigm of science to elaborate on an ontology of becoming and its significance for understanding the development of sex and sexuality. In conjunction, contemporary biological research is introduced to expand upon de Beauvoir’s (1996)
analysis of “the data of biology” on sexual difference and to help situate the sexed body as dynamic and developmental. An existential phenomenological approach theorizes sexuality as a self-project and the dialectical becoming between the sexed body and the sexual self. Because both the body and the self are contingent becomings that are open to instability and change, so too is sexuality. This alternative approach offers particular attention to the body in sexuality and considers the pre-discursive materialities of sexual desire.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation has itself been a becoming – a becoming of ideas, and also a becoming of academic selfhood. This becoming would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and motivation from a number of very important people. My supervisor Dr. Annette Burfoot is responsible for extracting this thesis from me, and I thank her for that and her patience. Her critical yet constructive feedback, along with her ongoing encouragement, helped bring this dissertation to fruition. I have truly enjoyed my time working with her as my supervisor and mentor.

I would also like to thank my other committee members, Drs. Roberta Hamilton and Richard Day. Roberta’s wisdom and attention to both my academic and personal development have influenced my own self-project and visions of becoming. Richard’s consistent support has been instrumental to my advancement through the program since my first year at Queen’s. Both are outstanding scholars, and I am grateful for their contributed expertise to my doctoral research. In addition, I would like to thank my external committee members Drs. Jane Tolmie and Sheila Cavanagh (York University) for their insightful comments and suggestions on this research.

Members of the Sociology Department have shown me incredible kindness and support throughout my years as a PhD student. Very special thanks go to Michelle Ellis, Wendy Schuler, Anne Henderson, Dr. Martin Hand, Dr. Vincent Sacco, Dr. Cathie Krull, and Dr. Rob Beamish for all of their assistance and guidance. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Abigail Bakan, Terrie Easter-Sheen, and Kathy Baer in the Gender Studies Department for their undying support, motivation, and patience as I balanced my teaching and administrative responsibilities with the final stages of this dissertation.
The completion of this work would also not have been possible without the laughter, love, encouragement, and good times that friendships bring. Thank you to Andrew, Jen, Chris, Christopher, Nick, Mira, Ivan, Breenne, Julie, Paulina, Martin, Jason, Jodi, Michelle, all those who were ever part of “The People’s House”, and the good folks at The Royal Tavern. You all have been a source of inspiration and motivation throughout this journey.

Although we live in separate countries, my family are never far from my mind or heart. So much love and thanks goes to my mother Deborah and her partner Rick, my sister April, brother-in-law Josh, and brother Michael for believing in me every step of the way. Their love and encouragement go beyond words. Much gratitude also goes to Karin and Michael, my mother- and father-in-law, for their ongoing kindness and support as both their son and I struggled simultaneously through our doctoral work.

Finally, I give huge thanks my partner, David, who stood by me from day one, encouraging me and pushing me until the bitter end. His love, patience, and undying support fuelled my motivation and helped me to build the strength and confidence to see this dissertation to its completion.
Statement of Originality

(Required only for Division IV Ph.D.)

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author. Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

Melissa K. Houghtaling

January, 2013
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sexuality is a unique research topic in that it traverses the literature in so many disciplines, including but not limited to sociology, psychology, biology, physiology, and genetics. Knowledge about sexuality produced within and among any given discipline depends on the paradigms, methods, values, and goals used in research in conjunction with the historical situation of the researcher. What I find curious about much of this knowledge, however, is the persistent focus on the sex or gender of the Other in relation to the subject. In other words, there is a fixation on knowing sexuality through gender, and this is done largely by way of classification of sexual orientation on a social scale, and by the adoption of sexual identity on an individual scale. Yet contemporary sexual orientations and identities fail to capture the full range of sex and gender diversity that actually exists beyond binary sex/gender systems. To be sure, some intersex, transgender, transsexual, and cisgendered people will reject gay, straight, or bisexual identities because they do not accurately represent their own sexual experiences, or they are prohibited from entering these communities due to cis-sexist sex/gender policing (Bockting, Benner, and Coleman 2009; Daskalos 1998; Namaste 2005; Rubin 2003). As such, I am highly critically of any description or model of sexuality that does not take into account the vast degrees of sex diversity and gender expression that exist among humans (Stein 1999). It is my aim in this dissertation is to contribute an original theory of sexuality that starts from the assumption of sex diversity.

Concentrating on sexuality as a sexual attraction to the same gender, another gender, or both genders seems to ignore the multi-faceted nature of sexuality as a set of
experiences, attractions, desires, sensations, practices, behaviours, and identities – that is, as a phenomena. The conceptualization of sexual orientation is based on a classification scheme devised in the 19th century and used throughout a large part of the 20th century to study deviant sexual behaviour, in which same-sex sexual relations were pathologized (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Foucault 1990; Rubin 1984). Whereas heterosexuality was deemed normal because it presumably accomplishes the “natural” reproductive function, homosexuality was deemed abnormal because it goes against nature and does not contribute to reproduction. This ostensibly “natural” link between sexuality and reproduction has been exploited by religious and political leaders, classical sexologists and criminologists, pro-natalists, and patriarchs to rationalize hierarchical sexual difference, gender oppression, and heteronormative categories of sexuality (de Beauvoir 1989; Epstein 1996; Grosz 1995; Hird 2000). In other words, the governmentality of sexuality led to sex being discursively implicated with reproduction, and this has had a profound effect on the ways sexuality has been theorized in terms of gendered desire in the academic literature.

In conjunction, I take issue with the popular assumption that heterosexuality is “natural,” because it is presumably what is practiced in nature. Yet within the last 15 years, there has been a considerable amount of biological research published documenting the vast range of sex, gender, and sexual diversity in nature among non-humans, making it rather difficult to maintain this assumption (for example, see Bagemihl 1999; Giffney and Hird 2008; Hird 2004a, 2004b; Mortimer-Sandliands and Erickson 2010; Roughgarden 2004a). This research strongly suggests that same-sex sexual behaviours, gender bending, and the varied morphology of sex in species does
occur in nature and thus is natural. Moreover, given that no species has died out because same-sex sex occurs, it becomes increasingly difficult to suggest heterosexuality is “necessary” to preserve or carry on the species. Ultimately, the evidence presented in these works challenge scientific discourses that attempt to universalize biological facts across nature, and especially of the life processes of (human) females.

Theories of sexuality that elide the existence of sexual diversity in both humans and non-humans paint a very narrow picture of sexuality. This dissertation is an endeavour in theorizing an alternative model or understanding of sexuality that begins by acknowledging sex diversity (beyond the simple existence of either male or female) and sexual diversity (beyond ideas of heterosexuality and homosexuality) throughout nature. Queer theory, I believe, has come closest to moving beyond a focus solely on gendered attraction or orientation by opening up to experiences and identities that counter heteronormativity. Queer is an inclusive term that recognizes non-heteronormative identities (transgender, transsexual, intersex, androgynous, genderqueer, and so on) as well as diverse practices such as bondage, kink, sadomasochism, and polyamory. As Cavanagh’s (2010) research suggests, those in LGBTI communities who adopt queer identities often use them differently to describe different aspects of the self – for example, when a person identifies as “queer” to describe one’s sexual and gender identity. In other words, those who align with a given queer identity often have very different gender embodiments, sexual experiences, and practices among them. Queer theory offers a way to think beyond heteronormative identities and to think about sexual and gender expression as flexible, diverse, and inextricably linked.
While gender is an important aspect to many people’s sexuality, I do not believe it is the only way in which to understand and theorize about sexual desires and sexual attractions. Gender remains a central organizing force for knowing and theorizing about sexuality in much of the academic literature. In an effort to ‘know’ sexuality differently, I seek in part to separate out sex from reproduction to achieve an understanding of sexuality that is not based on the direction of one’s gendered desire. By drawing from research on human and non-human sexuality, I intend to create a different picture of sexuality as it exists throughout nature and consider, in the same vein as Hird (2009), how sexuality is practiced by other species or organism in the nature to which we all belong. As such, this dissertation is about exploring the phenomena of sex and the materiality of pleasure. What else besides gender informs human sexual desires and attractions? Given that gender is expressed as a sense of self, what about the material “stuff” that turns us on? That is, I return to the materiality of sex and the body and “flesh out” an alternative and unique theory of sexuality. My aim is not to discount gender; rather, it is to open up an epistemological space through which to think about sexuality that does not depend solely on gendered meanings or relationships but takes into account the physical, material pleasures that make one feel sexual.

Sexuality has traditionally been rendered an ontological being insofar as sexual orientations and sexual identities suppose sexuality to be timeless and enduring qualities. I am interested in exploring an alternative understanding of sexuality based on an ontology of becoming. Becoming has been used in a number of different disciplines to describe various processes, phenomena, events and interactions. For instance, it is applied to describe the movement of particles and matter (Barad 2007; Parisi 2004; Prigogine
1980; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Schneider and Sagan 2005), evolution in nature (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 1997, 2001; Grosz 1999; Parisi 2004), the body (Braidotti 2002; Bray and Colebrook 1998; DeLanda 2001; Wilson 2004), and identity formation (Butler 1990; de Beauvoir 1949; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Plummer 1975; Sartre 1943). In this dissertation I utilize an ontology of becoming to garner an understanding of the processes and phenomena of sexuality as it relates to both individual and social existence.

In particular, existentialism offers a nuanced and unique understanding of becoming. Existentialism is a philosophy of human existence and an ethics of human action and involvement. It is concerned with human existence within a social, material world and takes special interest in the concepts of being and becoming as different modes of existence — a crucial distinction in this dissertation. My own interest in existentialism stems from the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty and their notion of becoming: life is predicated on and revealed through one’s becoming. Becoming is not merely the means to some significant and definite ends; it is a continual process that signifies activity, involvement, change, and potential, ceasing only with life itself. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is the epistemological counterpart to existentialism and signifies embodiment. It considers the dialectical relationship between the (sexual) body and the (sexual) self — a becoming, or in the case of this thesis, a sexual becoming. In this dissertation, I follow de Beauvoir’s idea of “becoming woman” and explicate an existential phenomenological analysis of sex and sexuality that challenges the use of gender-based sexual categorization and identity in both popular and academic discourses. A review of existing literature suggests there have been no previous attempts
to systematically develop an existential approach to sexuality. Therefore, I aim to expand on what de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty have written on sexuality and sexual difference and elucidate what I call “sexistentialism,” a theory of sexual existence. This includes a critical examination into such existential concepts as being, becoming, time, choice, praxis, the self-project, and situatedness.

In conjunction with these existential concepts, it is important at this point to state my own positionality as the author of this thesis. *Positionality* is an important concept in critical studies of gender, sexuality, and race, because it highlights how meaning, knowledge, and experience of the world depends in part on one’s position(s) or identities in relation to others. As Alcoff (1988) explains, there is no universal experience of Woman, rather, it is through the positions in which women find themselves that knowledge and identity are constructed. Taking into account one’s gender, sexual identity, race, age, and/or other social identities is crucial for understanding differences in experience and for emphasizing the various power relations at play in social relating. Throughout this dissertation I refer to “the human” and “the individual” in discussions about existentialism, but it must be understood that such references do not suggest a universal experience. All subjects are particularly located or positioned in the social world, so each subject is responsible for locating her/his own positions of privilege and marginalization, as well as recognizing the particular positions of others. I develop this existential-phenomenological approach to sexuality as a white, queer, thirty-something, able-bodied, academic, cisgendered woman. I recognize how these qualities constitute my experience and contribute to the development and execution of my own sexistential
projects, and that the contingent obstacles and freedoms I incur that cannot be generalized to other sexual subjects.

Along with philosophy, I also invoke science to develop an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality. A non-classical paradigm of science, which I introduce in Chapter Four, emphasizes uncertainty, complexity, and an ontology of becoming. Specifically, it recognizes an important ontological distinction between being and becoming – one that is not unlike the one made in existentialism. In particular, existentialism and non-equilibrium thermodynamics share a similar philosophy or worldview: the former as a philosophy of becoming, the latter as a science of becoming. Sartre’s theory that “existence precedes essence” and Ilya Prigogine and Isabella Stenger’s theory of “order out of chaos” in nature both underscore the primacy of chaos, ambiguity, irreversible processes, and the arrow of time that characterize life (de Beauvoir 1948, 1949; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Sartre 1943). I contend that these becomings illuminate both nature-in-process and humans-in-process as constructive irreversible processes that yield diversity, creativity, and novelty in life.

The outline for this dissertation is as follows. In Chapter Two, I utilize a genealogical methodology to trace the discursive history of sexuality and emphasize the discursive constraints on knowledge about sexuality. In doing so, I examine developments in knowledge about sexuality in Western societies from the mid-19th century to the present. In other words, how have modernist discourses of sexuality affected and/or influenced how sexuality is known and experienced? This also lends particular insight into the formation of the sexual subject over time. By examining how contemporary sexual orientations and identifications have been conceptualized, I aim to
show how human sexuality has been continually shaped and situated through an ontology of *being* that assumes an essential or enduring quality of the sexual self. This includes looking at the medicalization of sexuality and the subsequent emergence of sexology, the gay liberation movement, the introduction of gay/lesbian studies to the academy, and the role played by postmodernism, queer theory, and trans studies in opening up discourses of sexuality. Finally, I conclude the chapter by illuminating some paradoxes about sexual identity (Weeks 2003) that are useful for thinking through existentialist critique of sexual identity.

In Chapter Three I seek to answer the question, *why an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality*? I make the case that existentialism and phenomenology are a suitable philosophy and epistemology to use to develop a framework for understanding the phenomena of sexuality. I also explain why I am using existentialism and phenomenology over more established theoretical approaches to sexuality used in sociology today. The chapter begins with a brief history of existentialism and an overview of its key concepts and principles, and then I situate existentialism today within the postmodern era. From here I turn to a discussion on positivism as it became the preferred epistemology in classical sociology and then examine Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of positivism in his search for an alternative sociological method. I then discuss the philosophy and method of phenomenology and detail my specific interest the existential phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I conclude with a discussion on how I intend to apply and elaborate upon their work in thinking about sex and sexuality through existential phenomenology.
Chapter Four deals with the materiality of sex. In this chapter I consider phenomena of sex as it exists throughout the layers of the human body, as opposed to the constructions of sex on the surface of the body, and I theorize sex through a discourse that focuses on material processes rather than categories of sex/uality. As such, the body is approached as separate from the self and in terms of its own becomings. Thus, I move toward a phenomenological understanding of the body as a dynamic developmental system and, by extension, sex and sexuality as contingent processes of flux and materialization (Diamond 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Parisi 2008). In doing so, I go beyond the realm of the human to explore a variety of non-human processes of sex that occur in the biological materiality of the body, as well as the vast sexual diversity that exists in species across nature.

Because I am interested in these non-human examples, I begin this chapter by considering what a post-humanist approach means for an existential phenomenological theory of sexuality. I follow this with an overview of the philosophies of the classical and non-classical paradigms of science. The classical paradigm of science, deriving from the Newtonian model of physics, is based on an ontology of being and espouses determinist and reductionist epistemologies; non-classical paradigms, on the other hand, emerge from research in non-equilibrium and non-linear (post-Newtonian) sciences and alternatively emphasizes uncertainty, complexity, and an ontology of becoming (Guerra 1996; Prigogine and Stengers 1984). In particular, I argue that existentialism and non-equilibrium thermodynamics share a similar philosophy or worldview: the former as a philosophy of becoming, the latter as a science of becoming. This shared notion of becoming illuminates both nature-in-process and humans-in-process as constructive
irreversible processes that yield diversity, creativity, and novelty in life. Lastly, I move into a critical review of the first chapter of *The Second Sex*, called “The Data of Biology,” in which de Beauvoir’s analyzes biological research on sex and reproduction in nature influenced by the classical paradigm of science. As I argue, her analysis shows how diversity and ambiguity exist across species and links rather than separates or elevates humans from/above nature.

In Chapter Five, I bring together chapters two, three, and four and conclude with an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality. This approach, which I have also coined “sexistentialism,” takes special interest in time, becoming, and materiality. I consider how the forward direction of time, self-projects, and the materiality of sex interact in the expression of human sexual becomings. An existential approach to sexuality is original and introduces an alternative ontological, epistemological and theoretical approach to studies in sexuality. This dissertation will contribute to scholarly literature in sexuality studies and provide new ways to think about sexuality that have not yet been introduced to, nor systematically developed in, sociology and sexology. It makes an original contribution to studies in the philosophy of science and offers a particular challenge to the realm of sexual identity politics. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the limitations to an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality and suggestions for future research.

The following are a number of questions that guide the research in this dissertation: Why an existential approach to sexuality? What does a 21st century existential approach to sexuality look like? How does sexistentialism differ from prevailing theories of sexuality? How is sexual difference explained in “sexistentialism”?
What does this theory or approach contribute to identity politics? How does it challenge sexual identity specifically and sexual identity politics in general? Is an existential ethics applicable to nonhumans or other living beings in nature? What problems or tensions might arise in trying to collaborate existentialism and non-classical science? How might this notion of becoming bridge the gap between the social and natural sciences?
Chapter 2

From Orientation to Identification: A Discursive History of Sexuality

Contemporary Western sexual orientations and sexual identities – heterosexual and straight, homosexual and gay, lesbian, and bisexual – stem from 19th century classifications of the sexually perverse and focus on the direction of sex/gender-based desire. This chapter traces the discursive history of sexuality and examines developments in knowledge about sexuality in Western societies from the mid-19th century to the present. I contend that modern-day heteronormative discourse has reduced sexuality to categories of sexual orientation and identity premised on sex/gender preference. By examining the discursive history of contemporary sexual orientations and identifications, I aim to show how human sexuality has been continually shaped and situated through an ontology of being that assumes an essential or at least enduring quality of the sexual self.

To do this, I look at the medicalization of sexuality and the subsequent emergence of sexology, the significance of the gay liberation movement and the introduction of gay/lesbian studies to the academy, and the role played by postmodernism, queer theory, and trans studies in disturbing heteronormative sexualized identities and opening up discourses of sexuality (Butler 1993; Giffney 2009; Giffney and Hird 2008; Namaste 1996, 2005; Rubin 2003).

In this chapter I demonstrate how sexual being, manifested and reified through sexual orientation and identity, has dominated conceptions of sexuality and sexual desire. As such, I offer a critique of sexual identity politics informed by semantic or discursive questions, such as, how do homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual (and in conjunction, gay/lesbian, straight, bisexual) classifications guide or direct human sexual attractions.
and desires? How have modernist discourses of sexuality affected and/or influenced how sexuality is experienced? What exactly does sexual identity “identify” about the self? Is male/female desire (or attraction to maleness, femaleness, or both) the only way to understand sexual attraction, sexuality, or the sexual self? How do sexual identities reconcile or account for changes in sexual desires, feelings, situations, inclinations, attractions, etc.? As I interrogate the ontological positioning of sexuality as being, I further challenge the idea that sexuality, as it is captured in sexual identity, is timeless. I conclude this chapter by illuminating a particular gap in the scholarly literature on sexuality that this dissertation aims to fill: to think about sexuality through existential phenomenology, an epistemological approach that resists claiming a sexual identity because it is regarded as an act of bad faith (Sartre 1992) or inauthentic behavior (de Beauvoir 1996). Instead, I defer to the body in time and situation as the chief informant to both knowledge and experience of one’s subjective sexuality. In doing so, existential phenomenology couches sexuality and the sexual self as becomings of sexual experiences.

This chapter is informed by a genealogical methodology. The genealogical method, elucidated in the work of Michel Foucault (1990), entails tracing the history of sexual discourses and lends particular insight into the formation of the sexual subject over time. A genealogical analyses essentially urges a historical awareness of our present situation, which is necessary not only to grasp the historicity of contemporary sexual categories but also to assess and change them (Foucault 1982). As Henry Rubin (2003) explains in his genealogical-phenomenological study of identity formation and embodiment in female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, a genealogy emphasizes the
discursive constraints on knowledge. It illustrates how the sexual categories from which people draw to make sense of their lives change with shifts in power-knowledge relations. Finally, I conclude the chapter by illuminating some interesting paradoxes of sexual identities (Weeks 2003) that arise out of this discursive history of sexuality.

2.1 Birth of the Sexual Individual

Foucault’s genealogical analysis of the modern subject is an exploration into the creation of the individual in society and the historical construction of subjectivity through relations of power and knowledge (Berard 1999). In this section I trace the discursive history of sexuality as it facilitated the creation of sexual subjectivity in society and contributed to the historical construction of sexual orientation and identity. I also employ Foucault’s notion of *governmentality* to demonstrate the modes of thought and techniques of government used by sovereign states to manage the sexual behavior of its people as particularized populations. Governmentalities include ideas about how to govern oneself, how to govern others, and how to be governed (Foucault 1990, 1991; Lacombe 1996). As Foucault (1991) explains, the decline of feudalism in Europe in the 16th century had increased the state’s power and control over the economy. The state was faced with the task of introducing the economy into political practice. It was dependent upon the family for its own reproduction, perpetuation, and prosperity; accordingly, it became concerned with how best to manage individuals, goods, and wealth in families. Foucault refers to these decisions for how to effectively control individual behavior in ways that benefitted the state as the *art* of government. For example, the state had fostered the ideal of the “good father” (ibid:92) as the patriarch who correctly managed members of his family.
and ensured the prosperity of his wealth. This form of self-governing from within the family, as opposed to appearing as a “top down” power from the state, exemplifies the art of government in practice (Pavlich 1996).

By the middle of the 18th century, populations in both Europe and the West had grown and demographically expanded, and the ability to manage individuals and govern the state became more complex. New techniques of governing were needed to manage the growth of new political economies. Concomitantly, as a result of the Enlightenment, Western European societies experienced significant epistemic developments that shifted the basis of knowledge, power, and ‘truth’ from the preachings of the Church toward empiricism and scientific reasoning (Deveaux 1994; Epstein 1996). What ensued was the science of government, concerned specifically with how to control the economic aspects of the population (Foucault 1990, 1991). The population, like the family, had its own patterns and regularities that could be tracked and measured in the collection of demographic information and statistics about birth and death rates, frequency of illness, and life expectancy. Foucault (1991) explains that “…the population is the subject of needs, of aspirations, but it is also the object in the hands of the government, aware, vis-à-vis the government, of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it” (100). In other words, the population became both an object of knowledge for the state as well as a field of action and correction, and it soon replaced the family at the centre of the economy. This did not mean the family was no longer important; on the contrary, state powers recognized the family as both “an internal element to the population [and] also a fundamental instrument in its government” (Foucault 1991:99). Therefore, although increases in the population meant that the state could no longer control individuals
directly through techniques developed under sovereign power, it could nevertheless access and govern individuals *indirectly* (but no less effectively) through the population and the management of the family (Dean 1999; Pavlich 1996).

The state was not interested in individuals’ goals and ambitions but in ways of influencing individual consciousness and shaping fields of possible action. Consequently, it was through the governmentality of the population that the *individual*, or individual subjectivity, was formed. Ontologically, Foucault situates the individual as a social construct who is both a subject *of* and subject *to* the rationalities and practices ingrained in one’s conscious (Berard 1999; Bevir 1999; Foucault 1982). The individual, he explains, actively constitutes oneself within the discursive parameters of what an individual “should” do or be; the fields of possible action serve as “regulatory environments” and direct individuals’ consciousness to act in ways that ultimately fulfill wider political aims (Pavlich 1996:715; see also Dean 1999). The individual is therefore regarded as an effect of power through both hegemonic discourses and disciplinary practices (Foucault 1980:98; see also Ruonavaara 1997). Whereas hegemonic discourses refer to the imposed language, knowledge, and ideology that often guide or shape experience, disciplinary practices are those that encourage individuals to monitor and regulate their own and other’s behavior in accord with state sanctioned values, morals, and ethics (Dean 1999). Consequently, the power of the state becomes both individualizing and totalizing: individuals are free actors insofar as they have agency to choose their actions and being in everyday life; however, these actions, choices, and ways of being are not original nor autonomous but instead discursively prescribed (Foucault 1982:782).
The gradual movement from sovereign power to governmentality affected how the state approached matters related to sex and how it managed the sexual individual. Toward the end of the 19th century, societies in both the United States and England were facing a growing morality crisis due to the extension of sex and sexuality beyond the ideals of the family. Moral reformers – politicians, doctors, religious figures, and middle-class women concerned with deteriorating maternal values – headed social movements in order to educate the population about the evils of masturbation, prostitution, sodomy, birth control, and “obscene” art and literature and the threat they pose to social purity (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Jackson and Scott 1996; Rubin 1984; Weeks 2007). Sexuality was no longer just a private concern, it also became a public health issue, and hence the sex of the population became a major target of government. Consequently, the sexual conduct of the population became both “an object of analysis and…a target of intervention” to be managed, policed, and regulated (Foucault 1990:26). The state tracked patterns and trends in the sexual lives of the population: birthrates, frequency of sexual disease, frequency of sexual relations, spinsterhood, fertility and sterility control, and any other sexual behaviors or factors that could impact the future prosperity of the population (Deveaux 1994; Foucault 1990; Grindstaff 2006).

Also by the end of the 19th century, scientific disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and psychiatry and had emerged and taken a special interest in the subject of sexuality, namely with regards to sexual deviance and pathology. Primarily empirical in approach, these disciplines housed authorities (experts) who discursively produced knowledge about sexuality that aided in disciplining both the sexual individual and the sexuality of the population (Foucault 1990). As a way to study, comprehend, and thus
help to manage the population order, these authorities of knowledge (doctors and scientists) employed classification practices to demarcate “abnormal” (non-procreative) sexual behavior from “normal” (procreative) sexual behavior. These dividing practices, which continue today, are used to separate the sexually perverse from society by way of, for instance, institutionalization or hospitalization (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Foucault 1990; Green 2002; Jackson and Scott 1996).

The medicalization of sexuality forced attention onto the individual performing the perverse act and transformed what was previously regarded as condemnable sexual behavior into an inherent characteristic of the individual (Foucault 1978; also see Epstein 1996; Grindstaff 2006; Lacombe 1996; Sell 1997). As Foucault (1990:43) recounts,

The 19th century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him…

“The homosexual” became a subject of study, and his deviant sexual behaviour was perceived as symptomatic of something deeply amiss within the psychological and physical essences of that person. Medical, psychiatric, and religious experts invited confessions from these “perverse” individuals in an effort to unveil the truth of their essential sexual being, desires, and attractions. In this way, confessions served as admissions of truth, as releasing one’s inner truth, and experts used these confessions to diagnose and subsequently label these individuals (Deveaux 1994; Foucault 1990).

However, this notion of “the homosexual” was not as consistently applied to women at the time. Some medical practitioners associated female sexual perversions with deteriorating mental health and hysteria as opposed to being contained within the essence
of the person. Because hysteria was a condition recognized in women only, many doctors
believed that it originated in sexually differentiated organs such as the clitoris or uterus;
and, as a result, some believed that removing the clitoris would help alleviate the same-
sex sexual desires brought on by the hysteria (Colson 2010). Others thought female
sexual perversion was attributed to social causes. For example, some writers in the late
1800s argued that sexual attractions between women was a consequence of developed
intellectual and professional skills. In efforts to undermine the first women’s liberation
movement, they wrote that if women gained rights to vote, higher education, and
economic independence, their sexual competency for childbirth and marriage would be
threatened (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988).

Subsequent to defining “abnormal” sexuality and homosexuality, doctors
established and defined what was “normal” or heterosexual sexuality. “Normal” sexual
development was couched in functionalist terms and emphasized particular
(hetero)sexual drives, sexual anatomy and gender identity that were assumed to be
conducive to reproduction (Deveaux 1994; Foucault 1990; Hird 2003; Namaste 1994;
Weeks 1981). As such, medical and psychiatric discourses of sexuality were shaped in
terms of binaries: heterosexual/homosexual, reproductive/non-reproductive,
normal/abnormal, and so on. These discourses were also heavily influenced by the
essentialist and bio-determinist thinking of the time. The medicalization of
homosexuality, while shifting focus from an individual’s behaviour to the individual
himself, had entrenched sexual abnormalities deep within the biological, physiological,
and/or pathological dimensions of the individual (Foucault 1990; Weeks 1981). These
classificatory systems of the sexually perverse, along with the dividing practices that
separated them from society, ultimately served as methods of social control (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Foucault 1982, 1990). The medicalized distinction between the homosexual and the heterosexual informed the field of individual “sexual action,” narrowing the definitions of what was deemed sexually normal and expanding the boundaries on what was abnormal (Foucault 1990).

Homosexual and heterosexual orientations, in other words, came into being as a medical and political-economic classification of the population. Sex and the body serve reproductive functions that could be used and controlled for national goals and ambitions. Managing the population by way of “bio-politics” exemplifies how hegemonic discourses effectively control the choices that women and homosexuals make in terms of their body and their sexual behaviours (Deveaux 1994). In this way, the body itself became a political field to be managed. Material institutions such as families and discursive institutions such as psychiatry and medicine affect the values and meanings associated with the body, and they direct embodied subjectivity toward conforming to socio-sexual norms (Braidotti 1991). The effect of these medical and psychiatric sexual discourses is the reification of modern day sexual orientations – and subsequently, as I will demonstrate below, of sexual identities (Deveaux 1994; Namaste 1996).

2.2 Sexual Discourses of the 20th Century

Disciplinary and governmental interest in managing sex persisted into the 20th century and, along with advances in science, technology, medicine, psychology, and psychiatry, the science of sex called *sexology* was established. Pioneered by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud, sexology was born in the modernist age.
where the modernization of sex entailed the naturalization of sex. Like other scientists at the time, sexologists deployed taxonomies, classificatory systems, and discursive binaries in an effort to establish “truths” about homosexuality (Simon 2003). The homosexual was a type of person with a distinct sexual experience, so sexologists endeavored to understand parameters of homosexuality, what distinguished it from other forms of sexuality, and its value or social worth to society (Foucault 1990; Weeks 1981). Knowledge about sex/uality within sexology was premised not on religious morality but on empirical evidence collected, recorded, and archived of pathological sexual experiences, pleasures, and confessions in humans. Yet similar to confessions used by religious authorities to extract truths from sinful individuals, sexologists employed one-on-one medical or psychiatric interviews to collect “confessions” of truth about a person’s sexual desires and pleasures, and then reproduced them as case studies.

The publication of the Kinsey reports in the 1940s indicated that homosexual desires and behaviors were widespread in society, challenging the idea that homosexuality resided in a small, diseased portion of the population (Weeks, Holland, and Waite 2003). Kinsey’s research moved away from the medical model of pathologizing homosexuality and other non-normative sexual practices and desires. Kinsey and his colleagues interviewed and documented the sexual histories of thousands of women and men with the aim of gathering a large enough sample of human sexual experiences to be representative of all forms of human sexuality in their relative frequency (Bullough 1998; Simon 2003). They later proposed the homosexual-heterosexual continuum – a bipolar, seven-point scale (0-6) extending from “exclusive heterosexuality” to “exclusive homosexuality” – to measure the degree to which a person
is attracted to one’s own, another, or both genders (Sell 1997; Simon 2003). Kinsey devised this model of sexuality as an attempt to deviate from the idea that sexuality was a rigid, mutually exclusive dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality and, as his research showed, to suggest that there are gradations in how people view their own sexuality (Sell 1997).

Nevertheless, dominant political discourses continued to associate homosexuality with pathology and corrupt sexual morals, and did so well into the middle of the 20th century. On both sides of the Atlantic, states were imposing various modes of social control to reinforce heteronormativity, sometimes holding national campaigns to publicly condemn homosexuality. For example, in the United State in the early 1900s, as women gained access to higher education and professional careers and were opting out of marriage and motherhood, pronatalists claimed that a college education would produce “functionally castrated” women who reject the “necessity of childbearing” and marriage, while others claimed it would produce “sexual incompetents” (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988:190). During the 1920s and early 1930s in Weimar Germany, politicians pushed for state rewards, paid maternity leave, and other maternal welfare benefits to encourage women to reproduce (McLaren 1999). With the rise of Nazi Germany in 1933, state rewards were geared toward women deemed fit enough to reproduce – that is, healthy straight Aryan women without signs of mental illness, physical deformities, blindness, and so on. As well, homosexuals were persecuted and sent to concentration camps, used in experiments, and even exterminated in part because they were presumed contrary to the reproduction enterprise (Haeberle 1981; Heineman 2002; McLaren 1999; Rosen 1999). Similarly, in the U.S. during the 1940s and 1950s, both communists and
homosexuals – sometimes conflated to be one in the same – became the subjects of political witch hunts and purges better known as McCarthyism (Bernstein 2003; Rubin 1984; Seidman 2001).

The culmination of these events spurred a number of identity-based, social equity movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including the black civil rights, sexual liberation, and women’s liberation movements. Leaders of the sexual revolution directed attention toward reasserting the values of same-sex sexual experiences and locating sources of their social oppression (Weeks 1981). The movement aimed to appropriate and redefine the homosexual, seeking recognition and the right to be “different but equal” in society. The appropriation of “homosexual” in turn reified categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality as different but nonetheless existing sexual orientations¹ (Hekman 2000; Richardson 1996; Seidman 1996).

Gay and lesbian activists at the time attacked the hegemonic order of society that privileged heterosexuality and reproduction over other sexual forms and expressions. These leaders advocated for a more positive approach to sexual diversity and the normalization of alternative forms of love; many also critiqued traditional forms of marriage and emphasized the notion of pleasure in sex (Epstein 1996; Jackson and Scott 1996; Richardson 1996; Seidman 2001; Singer 1996). By the 1970s, many homosexuals were beginning to “come out of the closet”, an expression signifying the confinement of same-sex sexual desires to the private realm, and were adopting gay or lesbian identities

¹ This is not to homogenize the subjectivities and experiences of those involved in the gay/lesbian movement. As Warner (2001) explains, the movement for sexual liberation was somewhat fractured between what he calls the “normal” gays and lesbians and the more radical “queers.” The normals, as it were, aimed to integrate into society. They looked to gender and sexual conformity as a means to gain both acceptance and respect into that society. But as queer theorists have pointed out, this attempt to normalize homosexuality is in essence an appeal to the “very ideas of normality and naturalness that originally scandalized [gay and lesbians]” (Seidman 1994:269, 2001; Warner 2001).
to publicly affirm the legitimacy of their same-sex relationships and desires (Grindstaff 2006; Medhurst and Munt 1997; Plummer 1996; Richardson 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 1994, 2001; Weeks 1981).

The discourse of the sexual revolution centered on a politics of difference and introduced *identity politics* to both public and social analyses. Identity politics refers to a kind of activism by persons who share an identity who seek to transform the negative conceptions associated with that identity (Bernstein 2005; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Epstein 1996; Seidman 1994). Identity politics in some ways essentializes identity, because it emphasizes sameness over time and across persons, for some even suggesting a biologically determined origin (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Jackson and Scott 1996; Weeks, Holland, and Waites 2003). Essentialized identities not only convey a strong sense of solidarity with others but are often regarded as epistemological, ostensibly conveying the natural or essential property of one’s sexual being.

Undoubtedly, sexual identity politics is an important political strategy that continues to prevail today (Ault 1996; Bravmann 1996; Dollimore 1997; Epstein 1996; Green 2002; McIntosh 1968; Medhurst and Munt 1997; Seidman 1996). Sexual identity and orientation enable groups to form under a common identity for a common cause, yielding strength and solidarity in working toward social change for minority groups. A collective identity has been necessary for individuals to organize and mobilize social movements, while at the same time making a previously invisible identity more visible. That is, the visibility and acceptability of homosexual identity itself was in part a goal for the sexual liberation movement (Bernstein 2005). Essentializing the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality has furthermore served as a strategic maneuver to
draw attention to sexual orientation as an inherent, immutable characteristic of individuals as opposed to a lifestyle choice. In other words, viewing homosexuality as inherent or inborn grants it the same status as race or sex and, thus, can be lawfully protected against discrimination (Bernstein 2005; Byne 1994; Grindstaff 2006; Seidman 2001; Whisman 1996). While not all activists wholly subscribed to these essentialist or biologically determined beliefs, many recognized its utility in gaining societal acceptance, recognition, respect, and protection from members and institutions of society.

By the 1980s, feminist academics and activists were becoming increasingly critical of how the experiences of white, heterosexual, able-bodied women were generalized to represent the experiences of all women. They argued for the need for a more complex analysis of gender – one that takes into account the intersection of multiple social locations, along with the constraints or opportunities that these locations can entail (Denis 2008). Intersectional analyses expose how some individuals are the site of multiple oppressions; for instance, an elderly black lesbian experiences her age, body, sexuality, and race in a particular web of power relations. There is no one kind of black experience, or black woman’s experience, or even black lesbian’s experience (Hill Collins 2000). As I demonstrate below, some of these discussions about the politics of difference are preserved in postmodernist thinking about identity and subjectivity (Yuval Davis 2006).

2.3 From the Modernization to Postmodernization of Sexuality

As I explicate in chapter four, the scientific method posited by Newtonian physics, along with the promise that science could deliver progress, certainty, and truth to its
researchers, was highly influential to the development of many disciplines in the human sciences. The epistemology of medical doctors, psychiatrists, and sexologists conducting sex research was heavily guided by reductionism, determinism, and objectivity. The use of mutually exclusive and exhaustive categorical systems partitioned sexual desire into a heterosexual/homosexual binary that corresponded with a normal/abnormal classification scheme, respectively. These reductionist categories (in)formed knowledge about sexuality at the time. Moreover, the epistemological absolutism associated with reductionist values ostensibly afforded the sexologist a sense of certainty in having complete knowledge (Auletta 2001; Giroux 1991). The more complete one’s knowledge is of homosexuality, the higher one’s confidence that the facts equal truths about sexuality. This paradigm is a reflection of modernist thinking about the sexuality (Simon 2003).

However, as evinced in the events of World Wars I and II, the world was anything but “certain,” and definitions of progress within the fields of science and technology raised serious moral and ethical questions about human existence. Indeed, the growing popularity of French existentialism in the 1930s and 1940s has been notoriously associated with illuminating these feelings and questions of uncertainty and ambiguity about the world. What is the meaning of human existence in a world consumed by wars, mass genocide, the looming threat of nuclear bombs and radiation, clashing political regimes, and so on? Concomitantly, how is one to understand the meaning of one’s own existence in this uncertain context? As I illustrated above, the multiple social movements taking place in North America and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s offered their own disruptions to modern society’s valued sense of certainty, stability, and truth. The
demonstrations in May 1968, for example, prompted reflections on networks of power that buttressed the discrimination and oppression of racial and sexual minorities (Braidotti 1991).

The effects of these demonstrations rippled through the academy, and emerging post-modernists began to express their disillusionment with conventional (modern) critical thought. Along with critiques of power, postmodernists also began interrogating ideas about universal identity. By the 1990s, postmodernism had become an entrenched paradigm of critique in academia. The postmodern critique is essentially premised on exposing the consequences of modernity as realized in today’s post-modern world. Postmodernists call into question the possibility of a universal subject and instead recognize pluralism in society; they decenter the subject in order to theorize alternative, intersectional experiences that underscore the idea that experience is contingent (Cerulo 1997; Giroux 1991; Simon 2003; Smart 2005). They furthermore acknowledge the powerful effects of discourse on shaping (sexual) experience (Milovanovic 1995; Smart 2005). Ontologically, modernists produce a discourse on sexuality that is centred on notions of being, identity, and certainty. In contrast, postmodernists contend that sexual experiences are much more nuanced than heteronormative classificatory systems lead on and, further, there are no universal truths to be “discovered” about human sexuality. Rather, sexual orientation and identity are socio-medical constructions that are afforded meaning through social interactions, relations, and material processes (Shakespeare 1998). Judith Halberstram (2005:6) sees postmodernism as both a crisis and an opportunity: “a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and an opportunity to rethink
the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, and its tendency
to resist or recapitulate.”

The postmodern turn encouraged the introduction of bisexuality studies. In part,
bisexuality theorists and activists sought to respond to early gay and lesbian theorists who
had criticized bisexuality for its instability and its potential to weaken the identities and
experiences many gays and lesbians had fought hard to establish and have recognized
(Angelides 2001; Eadie 1993; Green 2002; Hemmings 1993; Storr 1999). Theorists of
bisexuality take a special interest in notions of fluidity, variability, and contingency
associated with postmodernist discourse (Eadie 1993; Hemmings 1993). The (bi)sexual
subject is a continual process, in which identity and knowledge about the sexual self is
formed through experience, not through internal discovery of a self that exists prior to
experience (Plummer 1996; Rust 1993). Bisexual theorists also point out that bisexuality
is a viable alternative identity to heterosexual and homosexual, not simply a phase or
transition between the two, and it is also an identity that could work to potentially
dismantle the hegemonic heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Dollimore 1997; Rust
1993). At the same time, what takes places in the movements and transitions between
sites is just as important as attempting to situate oneself securely within an identity
(Hemmings 1993). As Rust (1993) explains, becoming bisexual not only ruptures the
heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy but also contravenes the idea of a single and ‘true’
sexual identity.

Queer theory also emerged along with the postmodern critique in the early 1990s.
Advancing social constructionist accounts of sexuality, queer theory developed in large
part due to disputes in the academy over the nature of sexual identity and the goals of
identity politics (Bernstein 2005; Grindstaff 2004; Hines 2010; Jackson and Scott 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Stein and Plummer 1996; Warner 2001). Meaning “strange” or “odd” and originally used as a gay slur, queer is a term taken up by sex radicals² as well as sexual and gender non-conforming folk as a symbol of pride and inclusion (Giffney 2009; Sanger 2010; Warner 2001). Queer has became an umbrella term for a range of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities (such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, genderqueer, intersex, transgender, and transsexual) and expressions and practices (such as sadomasochism, bondage/domination, kink, polyamory, and body modification). In this sense, queer theory does not seek to repudiate identity but instead to unsettle it, theorizing sexual identity as fluid, multiple, unstable, and fragmented (Bernstein 2005; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Butler 1990, 1993; Epstein 1996; Giffney 2004, 2009; Hines 2010; Ingraham 1996; Jackson 2003; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 1996, 2001; Storr 1999). In conjunction, queer theorists take into account how attributes such as race, age, or ability intersect with and diversify sexual experience, in this way decentering sexual identity and positing a “queerness” with many centers (Cerulo 1996; Epstein 1996; Giffney 2004, 2009; Green 2002; Jackson and Scott 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Namaste 1996; Sanger 2010; Seidman 1993, 1996). Following the postmodern turn, sexuality studies experienced a shift from trying to explain homosexuality to discursively interrogating the heterosexual/homosexual binary and deconstructing heterosexual norms and identities that control and discipline sexuality (Epstein 1996; Hines 2010; Ingraham 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 1996, 2001).

² Gayle Rubin is one such “sex radical,” and her 1984 article “Notes for a Radical Theory of Sexuality” was perhaps a preview to queer politics. Rubin examines the social privilege and acceptance that those with heteronormative sexual values enjoy, which those with non-traditional desires and tastes are criticized and oppressed. Thus Rubin offers a conceptual framework for a radical theory of sex that aims to identify, describe, explain, and denounce “erotic injustice and sexual oppression” in Western societies (149).
The queering and disturbing of sexual identity established a *queer politics*, which Bernstein (2005) describes as “the antithesis of identity politics” (56), because queer politics is premised on *difference* rather than sameness. The essentialized nature of gay and lesbian identities homogenizes same-sex sexual identities and experiences and gives way to homonormativity, thereby reinforcing the gay/straight binary and further encouraging an either/or discourse (Namaste 1996; Seidman 1996). Queer politics strives to be inclusive of all non-heteronormative identities, expressions, and practices and thus is based on a politics of difference and plurality (Hines 2010; Seidman 1996). Essentially, queer encompasses all that contradicts hegemonic (heteronormative) social and cultural norms.

The rise of queer studies in the 1990s afforded increased attention to transgender and transsexual identities and experiences, and today trans studies is making gains as a recognized field of study in the academy. Concomitantly, the rise of trans studies marked the beginning of a new transgender movement in a public struggle for transmen and transwomen’s basic civil rights and social recognition (Hines 2010; Meyerowitz 2002; Sanger 2010; Stryker 2008). However, many trans theorists and activists argue that queer theory has exploited trans identities in the academy as mere examples or potentialities that disturb the sex/gender binary, rather than taking seriously the everyday lives, struggles, and material needs of transpeople (Halberstam 2005; Hines 2010; Namaste 2005, 2009; Rubin 2003). Moreover, although queer theory/politics encapsulates non-heterosexual expressions and identities, modern expressions of sex, gender, and sexual identity nevertheless still depend the current two-sex system and hegemonic sex/gender arrangements for their expression (Hird 2000). Put differently, contemporary *sexual*
identities describe “unitary” sexual experiences (Hines 2010:8) and are considered by many trans people to be cissexist, that is, applicable only to non-trans persons who assume a particular (normative) congruence between their sex and assigned gender identity. As Namaste (2005) points out, some transpeople often reject or disassociate from gay/lesbian identities, because it is not how they describe or understand their sexual selves. At the same time, others have been ousted from these communities, because they do not fit the community’s definition of gay or lesbian and/or man or woman.

Moreover, acknowledging the particular sexual experiences of trans people helps to confirm the mutability and fluidity of sexual desires. For example, some trans folk report a change in their sexual desires and attractions after they transition and in conjunction with changes in their own sex and/or gender (Bockting et al. 2009; Daskalos 1998; Rubin 2003). If sexuality is fluid and mutable, then it is also contingent. As I contend throughout this thesis, sexuality is contingent in part on the material situation of the body. Phenomenologically, if the body is the situation through which one experiences desire and sensuality, how might changes in and of the body over time – anatomically and/or physiologically – affect one’s sexual experience of the self and of others? How do these material changes intersect with changes to identity and selfhood, and how might this alter imminent sexual desires and attractions?

But must the fluidity of sexuality always be gendered? Hegemonic discourses of sexuality, through the use of “sexual orientation” and “sexual identity”, have maintained a persistent focus on gender in sexual desire. I concur with Simon (2003:30) that gender is only one aspect of sexuality:

The most one can say about the dominance of gender in eliciting sexual interest or excitement is that it is a minimal precondition for most individuals most of the
time, and even then not necessarily for the same reasons. The issues of age, race, physical appearance, social status, quality, and history of relationship and the specifics of context, among other attributes, also play roles as compelling, if not more so, than that played by gender.

Gender is one of many qualities towards which humans gravitate sexually (Jacobsen 1993), but as I demonstrated above, feminist theories abound on the centrality of gender to sexuality and sexual identity. However, it is gender’s relationship with reproduction that has made it a privileged point in defining sexuality. The normalization of heterosexuality and the idea that “opposites attract” because procreation requires it that way has bound sexuality and gender together (Fee 2010:212). Yet the corollary to this is that the female body comes to symbolize that which is feminine, maternal, and essentially different. The stranglehold that discourse has over experience is significant. Heteronormative discourses do affect how sexuality is experienced, because they contain the established categories, classifications, definitions, and identities that are used to describe and create meaning of our sexual lives. These categories and identities can also limit experience to those described within available identities and categories. It is difficult to ‘move beyond’ discourse, because it is what is available to us.

Alternatively, I turn attention precisely to corporeal experience in order to emphasize not the function of sex but the material pleasures and sensations of sex. Following a similar line of thought to other sexuality studies scholars, I ask whether an understanding of sexual bodies can be achieved without the centrality of gender (Colebrook 1998; Hird 2004; Jackson 2006; Van Lenning 2004)? Put somewhat differently, what can be said about sexual experience as it is informed by the body? While I recognize that gender can also be material and even corporeal, I am chiefly
interested in a phenomenological epistemology located in the active, material, sexed body.

2.4 Conclusion: From Identities to Identification

This discursive history of sexuality demonstrates how knowledge about sexual desires has been shaped through medical classifications and socio-political movements, which in turn affects how sexuality is experienced. Situating sexuality as a being of self, sexual orientations and identities express a directional flow of desire toward a preferred gender. While the emergence of queer identities has opened up sexual expression beyond hetero- and homo-normative boundaries to be more inclusive, sexual identities can still be very exclusive, especially when one does not comply to cis-gendered definitions of man or woman. I end this chapter with a series of critiques and questions for identity politics, which begins to form some of the impetus behind theorizing an existential-phenomenological approach to sexuality. To do this, I review Jeffrey Weeks (2003) “paradox’s of sexual identity” to highlight some of the contradictory and fictional components of sexual identities. Like Weeks, my aim is not to completely repudiate sexual identity but instead offer an alternative understanding of how identities work with subjectivity and conceptions of the sexual self. In fact, it is perhaps the dialectical nature of these paradoxes that give such strong appeal to having and/or maintaining a sexual identity.

Sexual identities are both paradoxical and raise interesting paradoxes (ibid. 124). As Weeks (2003) explains, sexual identities:

1) *assume fixity and uniformity while simultaneously confirming the reality of fluidity, diversity, and difference*;
2) are deeply personal but at the same time tell us about multiple social identities;
3) are both historical and contingent;
4) are fictions, however, necessary fictions.

According to the first paradox, sexual identities are presumably fixed and uniform yet simultaneously confirm fluidity, diversity, and difference. In forming a sexual identity, one creates meaning and sense of personal sexual desires in an effort to figure out where one belongs amongst others in the order of society. To manage the existential fears of uncertainty and ambiguity about the sexual self, individuals may “fix” their sexual identity as a timeless attribute of the self, as something that one is now and has always truly been, had one known (ibid. 124). At the same time, the formation and adoption of a sexual identity is only possible with existence of other sexual values, beliefs, practices, and behaviours – that is, of other real possibilities and potentialities. As I demonstrated in this chapter, the more evidence that arises confirming the polymorphous nature of sex and sexual desires, the more compelled experts are to redraw classificatory boundaries and re-organize this variability. These classificatory and binary systems are often taken for granted as the only way to describe, define, or identify sexual desires and experiences.

The second paradox highlights how identities are deeply personal yet at the same time signal multiple social identities. Self-identity is central to sexual identity, and through identity formation individuals build personal narratives that incorporate experiences confirming “what we say we are” (ibid. 125). Sexuality is very personal, yet it is also enmeshed with one’s social belongings, meaning that one’s social becoming. Because sexualized identity informs others of how one situates oneself within the current social order – as gay, straight, queer, bisexual, female, male, transgender, and so on – it
also helps to achieve a secure sense of self and social belonging. Sexual identities, in other words, express both a distinction-from and a belonging-to.

Weeks’ third paradox shows that sexual identities are both historical and contingent. Sexual identities and orientations are historical, political phenomena that are imbued with power relations, such that heterosexual identities have enjoyed privilege and acceptance, whereas homosexual identities have been marked pathological and abnormal (ibid. 127). The taken-for-granted divide that bisects sexuality into homosexual and heterosexual not only produced but imposed modern day sexual orientations and, subsequently, sexual identities. According to the postmodern critique, there are multiple subjectivities and histories that intersect with one’s sexuality – for example, one’s race, class, age, ability, sex, gender, religion – and these affect both sexual identity and experience.

Sexual identities are highly contingent and depend on situational factors, opportunities, and chance (ibid. 128). A person takes up a sexual identity for many reasons, such as it having personal meaning, political significance, and/or community belonging. That person may also refuse or abandon an identity, because it may not resonate with the individual at that time or in that culture. Because sexual identity is also a site of trouble and contestation (Butler 1990), the emergence of new or alternative sex, gender, and sexual identities offers ways to challenge the “iron laws” of history and to envision both present and future possibilities (Weeks 2003:129). New sexual identities also indicate the range of human sexual diversity. Moreover, an identity will also have more and less meaning at different points in one’s life. As Weeks describes, sexual identity is not given by the continuities in one’s life, nor is in the rigidity of one’s desires;
rather, sexual identity is something that is actively made, worked on, and remade as one goes through life and responds to “the changing rhythms, demands, opportunities, and closures” experienced in the world (ibid. 125). A point I expound in chapters three and four, a static view of sex/uality denies the reality of living in a contingent, time-dependent world in which future situations are not immediately known. I argue the notion of time and uncertainty are important concepts in terms of understanding subjectivity and sexual identity. Identities cannot and do not exhaust the actual lived experience of sexuality.

Finally, in the fourth paradox Weeks explains that sexual identities are fictions, but they are necessary fictions. They are fictional, because they presume to describe or represent an assumed naturalness and truth to one’s sexuality. These identities can be taken, abandoned, or refused, and even the emergence of radical or non-heteronormative sexual identities are mythical, because they must be imagined as alternatives to existing ones (ibid. 129). As I showed above, gender-based sexual orientations and identities are historical inventions to order knowledge about sexuality in conjunction with procreative and heteronormative expectations of the state. The problem is that most people do not like to think about their sexual identity as fictional, because existentially it reasserts uncertainty/ambiguity and betrays what individuals want or need most – meaning in life and of self (ibid. 129). This is why sexual identities are necessary fictions, because they inform personal narratives, help makes sense of our sexual experiences, and give meaning to the sexual self.

Weeks’ (2003) “paradoxes of sexual identity” offers a critical view of the ways identities interact with subjectivity and conceptions of the sexual self. I agree with Weeks
that by denying the validity of sexual identities, there is the greater risk of disempowering individuals and groups who may have no other means to mobilize change. Yet he also points out that when sexual identities are asserted too firmly, one ends up trying to stabilize identifications, desires, and values that are actually always in flux (ibid. 124). In the following chapter, I explore existentialism and phenomenology as alternative approaches toward understanding sexuality. In particular, existentialism offers an ethics that dissuades from adopting a (gendered) sexual identity to describe one’s sexual being. Phenomenology is as an existential epistemology that emphasizes the role of materiality, corporeality, and sensuality toward understanding one’s pre-discursive sexual desires. In this way, I am concerned not with the being of sexual identity but the becoming of sexual experiences.
Chapter 3

Why an Existential Approach to Sexuality?

Existentialism is a philosophy of human existence and an ethics of human action and involvement. It is concerned with human existence within a social, material world and takes special interest in the concepts of being and becoming as different modes of existence. The difference between these two concepts rests on the conditions of existence: what exists and how it exists. This difference is critical to my thesis. The reason I have chosen an existential approach to sexuality stems from my dissatisfaction with contemporary ontologies of sex, sexuality, and sexual difference. Simone de Beauvoir in particular has applied her nuanced understanding of existence to sexual difference in very interesting ways. The distinction between an ontological being, an existence in-itself, and an ontological becoming, an active existence, serves as the foundation for developing an existential theory of sexuality.

In this chapter I explain why I am using existentialism and phenomenology over more established theoretical approaches to sexuality in sociology today. I begin with a brief history of existentialism and situate it in contemporary terms within the postmodern era, and then I discuss the key concepts and principles of existentialism. Despite its sociological implications, existentialism and, to a lesser but still significant extent, phenomenology were never entrenched methods or approaches in sociology. I follow this discussion with an exploration into how positivism became a preferred epistemology in classical sociology and then examine Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of positivism in his search for an alternative sociological method. Subsequently, I examine the development
of Husserlian and existential phenomenologies and detail my specific interest the existential phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I conclude by discussing how I intend to apply and elaborate upon their work in thinking about sex and sexuality through existential phenomenology.

3.1 Existentialism

To develop an existential-phenomenological approach to sexuality, I draw from the works of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty. This does not mean that all three philosophers agreed in their existentialist and/or phenomenological writings, however, their combined contributions do help to inform my theoretical approach. Sartre’s writings are critical for establishing the tenets of individual and social existential ethics and for illuminating the potential of existential-phenomenology as a research methodology in the social sciences. de Beauvoir’s work highlights a feminist interpretation of existentialism and, in particular, serves as an example of the application of a feminist existential ethics to issues of sexual difference and sexuality. Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s extensive writings on phenomenology establishes the epistemology of this thesis, underscoring the dialectical relationship between mind and body and specifically emphasizing the materiality and sensuality of experience.

While I do not draw directly from Martin Heidegger in developing an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality, his work was highly influential to other existentialists from the 1930s onward. Heidegger, like other existential thinkers, was interested in the dynamics of human existence in terms of choice and individuality (Polt 2001:14). Heidegger’s Being and Time was published in 1927 as a response to the
question of being, and it had a significant impact on existentialists in the 1940s. In it, Heidegger delves into questions of what it means for an entity to be, and how it is that we as humans understand what it means to be. He coined the term *Dasein* to refer to one’s being-in-the-world, as always engaged and participating in encounters with other beings and in the realm of meaning. *Dasein* is both temporal and historical, whose Being maintains ties with the past, present, and future (Polt 2001; Solomon 1980). For Heidegger, a human being comes into the world without knowledge of it; put differently, one is thrown into the world and, as such, has no predefined essence. One exists in specific conditions and within a historical and cultural situation – this is the *Dasein’s* facticity, or the situation of one’s existence (Gothlin 2003). Heidegger’s ideas about situatedness and facticity, as well as (in)authenticity and individual responsibility, are evident in the works of de Beauvoir and Sartre, as I show below.

In conjunction, Heidegger explores the role of time “in the phenomenology of human everyday being-in-the-world” and highlights the human task of making something of oneself and deciding who to be – that is, the separation between given being and possible being, or between being and becoming (Polt 2001:69). In particular, Heidegger contributed to the development of existential phenomenology and influenced future generations of existential phenomenologists such as Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, despite the fact he never accepted the label of “existentialist” (Davis 2010). It was perhaps Heidegger’s particular development of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which I explain below, that was most influential to de Beauvoir and Sartre (Gothlin 2003).
As Heidegger and other existentialists demonstrate, the difference between *being* (existence) and *becoming* (self-project, or possibility) is a crucial ontological and temporal distinction in existentialism. Being “is what it is,” constituting both presence and absence; it is what one is and also what one is not (Sartre 1992:28). Humans exist as beings who think and act and who grasp their being through their experience of it, as a phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty 2004; Sartre 1992). One’s being in the present is to make known the possibility of what one is *at that moment*. Being in the past comprises of already completed acts and “consumed possibility” of what one has been, although the meaning one attributes to this being is contingent on the present (Hayim 1996:49). Becoming, on the other hand, is not a state or condition at a given moment but a process directed toward the future (de Beauvoir 1989, 1996; Hayim 1996; Sartre 1968, 1992). The self-project is an incessant, goal-oriented endeavour in which one’s projects, values, and beliefs are continually chosen as one experiences and copes with the social world (Kotarba 1984). In this way, the self is embodied, and an individual is a being who is becoming. The aim of the existential self, therefore, is to synthesize the dialectical relationship between one’s being (being-in-itself) and one’s becoming (being-for-itself) – that is, the unity between *being* and *knowing* one’s self-project.

The existential *self* refers to an individual’s unique experience within the social field and within particular social conditions (Johnson and Kotarba 2002). The existential self has several modes of existence. *Being-for-itself* refers to one’s consciousness, as the realized awareness of the world and serves as the source of one’s choices and actions. Put simply, it refers to the subject. *Being-in-itself*, on the other hand, refers to a more inert existence not directed or motivated by consciousness but which simply *is*; it refers to the
object. It represents the material existence of things, such as the body, having a separate but not entirely disconnected existence from consciousness. Hayim (1996) describes the being-in-itself as “massified human actions” (xvii) – in other words, as that being or material entity which is acting; the materiality of action. Moreover, the relationship between the for-itself and the in-itself is dialectical, because human individuals are both an active subjects (being-for-itself) and objects acted upon by others (being-in-itself) (Sartre 1992, 2004). Humans are thus regarded as ontologically separate but socially affiliated, with distinctive corporeal boundaries between each other but living, occupying, and acting within the same social space in which others are acting and living (Hayim 1996:36).

The being-for-itself is human consciousness that contains the potential and possibility to propel one into action; it motivates the self-project and gives rise to meaning in the world. Existentialists reject essentialism and biological determinism: one is not born with an essence but creates oneself in one’s facticity and through one’s self-projects (de Beauvoir 1996; Heidegger 1962; Sartre 1947, 1992). Sartre’s notion that “existence precedes essence” conveys the idea that one always originally exists as nothing(ess) until one acts and can give content and meaning to one’s life – in other words, existence precedes essence such that “man [sic] is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre 1947:58). The meaning of one’s life, of one’s essence, is constructed through conscious action and reflection. At the same time, one’s essence is only what one has been, because creation is continual; humans are in a constant mode of becoming (Hayim 1996; Russell 1979; Sartre 1947, 1992). Being-for-itself, in other words, indicates the individual mediation of meaning through the dialectical relationship
between consciousness/perception and situated being. This mediation is also the site of intentional action. Consciousness is “directed toward a state of being which is not present, that is, toward possibility” (Hayim 1996:xxxv). Temporally, one’s being is past and present, and one’s becoming is present and future; thus, there is always a separation from one’s essence, because it is always in the making. Essence and being can never exist concurrently (Sartre 1992). Given that essence is created, one is therefore responsible for who one becomes. In this way, existentialism offer an “ethics of action and involvement” (de Beauvoir 1996; Sartre 1947, 2004).

According to existentialism, the problem many have with adopting the ontological view of the self as becoming is that human consciousness seeks stability, permanency, and certainty in the world, not uncertainty and instability. One acts in bad faith when the self is perceived as being an object of something rather than a subject with freedom, and in doing so ostensibly separates consciousness from the awareness of other possibilities (Hayim 1996; Sartre 1947). One is both free to create the self and also responsible for that making; in this way humans are condemned to be free, a central ethics to existentialism (Sartre 1947, 1992). There is nothing inherent that compels or prevents one’s actions; rather, existence is intrinsically nothing (of nothingness), and consciousness forces one to actively create the self (de Beauvoir 1989; Sartre 1992). This is why consciousness is of something: it is intentionally directed outward toward something such as a goal, an object, and the like. At the same time, reflective consciousness allows humans to be critical of their own actions and in the development of individual and social projects.
To be clear, to be free does not mean to do whatever one wants but instead to be able to surpass the present state of affairs toward an open future of possibility (de Beauvoir 1996). Both Sartre (2004) and de Beauvoir (1989, 1996) point out that freedom is constrained by social and economic factors in conjunction with other points of facticity, including sex and race. Freedom is situated, and the choices and pathways available to individuals will differ among socioeconomic groups, for example (Stone 1987). Nevertheless, it is the human capacity for transcendence through which one becomes more than what one is (Sartre 1992). Consciousness contains the capacity for thinking beyond a given situation, providing possibility and potential; transcendence is a characteristic of consciousness, embodied in the in-itself. Accordingly, an individual is both what one is (in its being) and at the same time not all that one is (in its becoming) (Hayim 1996; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Sartre 1992). Immanence, on the other hand, occurs when one accepts a situation as fate and seemingly relinquishes freedom to be anything other than what one is (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996). Living in immanence implies that one has settled into a passive being, existing as an object of one’s life, rather than being a subject in their lived reality and working towards projects and goals. Thus, living in immanence is also in bad faith. The escape from freedom, Sartre reasons, is an attempt to grasp stability and permanency in knowing who or what one is, which ultimately fails because essence is neither stable nor permanent – the self is always in-progress (Hayim 1996).

Sartre’s rejection of essentialism and individual human nature, in conjunction with the ethical implications of bad faith, led him to also reject fixed individual self identities. To assume a fixed identity is an attempt to establish stability, for identity
represents or describes a self solidified as a being. Yet Sartre (1992) explains one cannot be an action, one can only play at being something; humans do not exist concretely as that role or identity but take it up in particular situations and at particular times. Even patterns in one’s behaviour cannot determine or decisively define who or what one is because, on the one hand, human individuals have the capacity and the freedom to contemplate and choose in one’s actions, possibilities, and essence. On the other hand, the future is always uncertain, and one can never know exactly what situations lie ahead and in what state of mind one will be in when she/he acts. The future cannot be secured in the patterns of the past and present (de Beauvior 1989).

To be sure, most discussions and criticisms surrounding (Sartrean) existentialism concern the content in *Being & Nothingness*, from which most of the above concepts and principles derive. Yet these concepts and principles also serve as a template for those he developed later in his equally voluminous *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (and its introduction, published separately as *Search for a Method*) and reveal the sociological dimension of existentialism. In *Being & Nothingness*, Sartre develops an ontology of human existence and the ethics of human action at the level of the individual, whereas in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he applies these concepts to the formation of the group and the possibility of collective action at the level of the social (Barnes 1968; Flynn 2005; Hayim 1996). Sartre cultivates a social and political philosophy aimed at analyzing the relation of human beings to each other, to the group, to the material world, and to history, thereby providing a “total view of man’s [sic] position in-the-world” (Barnes 1968:vii). Ultimately he brings together Marxism and existentialism in an effort to form a viable, ethical course for social action. However, instead of starting with institutions to
understand the social, Sartre begins with the individual: applying notions of individual freedom, choice and responsibility, Sartre transforms the self-project into a human- or collective-project with the possibility for social movements, social change (Sartre 2004; see also Hayim 1996), and social becomings.

Sartre extends the philosophical idea that “existence precedes essence” through Critique of Dialectical Reason as he sketches a theory of social action in which the individual, her/his social groups, and her/his field of practical action are all interconnected. The collective human-project, like the self-project, consists of individuals projecting themselves into the future and being responsible for both one’s individual essence and collective history as they relate to and cope with the world (Barnes 1968; Sartre 2004). Following Marx (1978), Sartre argues that the prevailing ideas and values of a period are the ideas and values of the dominant class, yet these values and views can also be transcended toward a different or alternative history (Goodwin 1971). History is the essence (what has been) of human societies because it, too, is mediated, created and afforded meaning. History in this sense is therefore a social responsibility. Sartre (2004) writes that human history and human action are dialectical processes between individuals, between individuals and the physical world, and between the individual and the group (Hayim 1996; Stack 1971). These social processes, or becomings, involve action and reaction, opposition, cooperation, and other kinds of interactions. Social action is the result of human praxis – intentional and meaningful action which signifies the subject’s passage from objective to objective through internalization (Sartre 1968). Praxis manifests as the method for one’s self-project.
Sartre (1968) describes the practico-inert as comprising all of those things which make up one’s experience of limitation or finitude, including the material environment. While humans are free and responsible for their presence in the world, a society with economic oppression, for instance, necessarily impedes on one’s creative acts, and freedom becomes an abstraction (Barnes 1968; Sartre 1968, 2004). In this way, the social field in which one acts is comprised of both instruments and obstacles to one’s self-project (and to human-projects and social projects), but whether something exists as an instrument or an obstacle depends on one’s goals and the direction of one’s actions. Human projects are human social behaviours determined in relation to real and present factors conditioning them, directed toward the future yet reflective of the past (Sartre 2004).

Overall, Sartre’s existential analysis of sociality is premised on the idea that consciousness and the world are co-constituted; indeed, the material-social world is co-constituted by human needs, and human needs can never be fully satiated (Hayim 1996). As de Beauvoir (1996) explains in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, the ambiguity of the human condition lies in the fact that each person is bound to all others and, thus, acquires meaning as an individual and as a social being: “in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects” (112). Here again is the existential problem of ontological co-existence of the individual human being and the socially affiliated/connected social human being. Existentialism reminds us that all social action necessitates attention to the individual as a subject with goals and possibilities in varying relationships with others.
Sartre’s (1947, 1992) and de Beauvoir’s (1989, 1996) early existentialist works can be read in part as a response to the times, for during the 1930s and 1940s many parts of the world faced the threat of large-scale wars, fascism, nuclear weapons, and genocide. Existentialism is a humanism and an ethics for living as responsible humans in world which is forever uncertain. Specifically, existential humanism underscores the idea that there is no other “legislator” in the world to decide for individuals and make meaning for them other than the individual her/himself, and no a priori meaning or value of the human individual nor of all of humanity (Sartre 1947:60). Through subjectivity and free will, one develops projects and aims toward the possibility of the future, beyond one’s present existence. But significantly, this free will is not one of absolute freedom but is limited by the existence and volition of other beings. Moreover, humans cannot in good faith attribute their behaviour and meaning of existence to any (biological, theological, political) force other than themselves. Sartre writes that “we cannot decide a priori what there is to be done” in one’s life because both actions and goals are contingent on the situation (ibid.51). Living ethically is not a “programmed” behaviour. One must take seriously the responsibility that comes along with choosing one’s actions, beliefs, values, and projects in both an individual and social context. In other words, human individuals have both an individual and social responsibility for their presence and activity in the world (Flynn 2005). An existential humanism informs an ethics of action and involvement for managing the ambiguity and uncertainty of the human condition (Sartre 1947:42).

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3 Examples of forces include “God’s will” in religion and “human nature” in sociobiological theories.
3.2 Positivism and the Search for a Method

In this section I examine the development of positivism in sociology and then discuss Sartre’s critique of positivism in his own search of an alternative method in sociological research. The Newtonian model of physics has served as a model of scientific investigation for scientists since the 19th century. Researchers from numerous disciplines have applied the methods of Newtonian physics to other subjects and developed methods to scientifically study and understand phenomena occurring at other levels of organization in the world (Harris 1990). As I detail further in the chapter four, the scientific method seeks to achieve epistemic certainty and a completeness of knowledge. The influence of the Newtonian model on some of the founders of sociology, such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, is evident in their contributions to empirical sociological investigation – and more specifically, to the development of positivism as a coherent, systematic study of society (Durkheim 1973; Simpson 1969).

Positivism relies on knowing by way of having positive or affirming evidence that can be proven empirically, offering more than speculation of truth and implying precision about a given aspect of the world (Comte 1969). Comte, who coined the term “sociology” in 1838, reasoned that sociology could also achieve these epistemic ideals and become more advanced as a discipline if it adopted an empirical, scientific approach to study social phenomena. Classical sociologists thus moved toward positivism to establish a “truly scientific sociology” that sought laws of social behaviour and social evolution, and that also facilitated a systematic understanding of the laws connecting and making sense of social phenomena (Simpson 1969:4). This approach furthermore upholds objectivity and calls for a clear division between the researcher and object. Laws of human social behaviour can be objectively known by sociologists, it is reasoned, because they exist
externally to the human mind. As such, many positivist sociologists regard social phenomena as functional and objectively defined by their inherent properties and functions (Durkheim 1998:75).

Positivists seek laws of statics (regularities in society) and laws of dynamics (factors inducing change in society) in order to understand how the “succession of human societies which constitutes humanity has evolved through time” (Durkheim 1973:9). Hypotheses about social phenomena are validated through the observation and collection of historical facts of past and present societies, and this knowledge is used to predict the direction of future events or behaviour. This kind of comparative history also requires *reason* in order to “scientifically connect” and make sense of these facts as cause-effect relationships governing social behaviour (Comte 1858, in Simpson 1969:102-3; Durkheim 1973; Gunaratne 2004). According to Durkheim (1973), this reasoning demonstrates the “advanced mentality” of positivism and scientific rationalism (5).

Differences between societies, or between evolving states of a society, are attributed to different structural and dynamic components at a given time. Studying the evolution and progress of humanity requires looking at both the structures of a society that maintain it (the statics of society) and those that influence its change (the dynamics of society) (Durkheim 1998).

As such, positivist sociologists approach societies as closed, isolated systems in which variables are controlled for and cause-effect relations can be determined. This allows them to predict and generalize patterns to other similar populations. Facts are gathered from numerous individual cases, and the statistics generated provide the means for studying social or collective facts. Quantitative measures and statistics ensure the
accuracy and certainty of social laws (Norton 1994). Social phenomena – the dynamics and interactions between people and social institutions – are treated as things (beings) and also as social facts (data) (Durkheim 1998). Interactions takes place outside of individual will and behaviour, and the effect is establishing fixed ways of acting in certain situations through the collective consciousness – that is, through social rules, etiquette, expectations, or norms (ibid 67). Social facts exist as truths about the social world that influence individual consciousness and ways of being (acting and thinking). Time serves as a measurement of change in the state of the collective mind and a marker of historical events (ibid. 71). As ways of being in society, social facts are often not material things yet are things “by the same right as material things” (Durkheim 1998:63). At the same time, social facts are contingent and depend on current environmental, social, and/or historical conditions.

With interest in social evolution or progression over the long-term, classical positivism is concerned with states of beings and changes in states of being. Society is presumed to be in a stable state of being and when certain forces or disturbances act upon it, it incurs a period of instability and eventually changes or transforms to achieve stability again. Stability is thus regarded as the natural state of society. Social change takes place when social structures break down and must be restructured in order to re-stabilize society. In this way, disruption is read as dysfunction. The statics and dynamics of society are linked to the notion of progress:

The dynamics of progress finally achieve a new statical state which in turn will generate its own dynamism. Man [sic.] looks for stability through change. This change is limited in intensity and speed by attempts to keep order while pursuing progress. When the drive for progress outruns the ability to modify the formerly statical conditions of existence, revolutions will ensue but they will be abortive (Simpson 1969:87, emphasis added).
Change and becoming are important in terms of what they yield: a stable and presumably progressive society. It is the being, not the becoming, that is emphasized, because an individual cannot transcend her own being or individual state of existence (ibid: 55); on the other hand, humans as a species (humanity) are always in a process of becoming or evolving.

In his later work, Sartre (1968, 2004) expresses his dissatisfaction with positivism as a methodological approach in sociology. Positivism, he explains, aims for explanation over comprehension; it carves up social reality into fixed categories, structures, and/or beings, and it holds little regard for the goals and possibilities that motivate individual and social behaviour (Hayim 1996). It treats the subject and the group as an in-itself – that is, a positively existing being – and reduces the subject to an inert thing, conferring a fixed nature to humans and making it appear as though human nature causes one’s actions and behaviours. In his essay “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,” Merleau-Ponty (1964) explores the methodological crisis within psychology, sociology, and history in which internal reasons for acting – philosophy, ethics, and opinions – have instead been deemed the result of external conditions and causes acting upon individuals (44).

Sartre endeavours to combine sociological method with existential ethics in an effort to foster a particular understanding of humans’ relations to the group, the nation, the physical universe, and to history. In his book Search for a Method (1968), originally the introduction for Critique of Dialectical Reason, Sartre explores an alternative theory of knowledge to positivism in the social sciences that combines philosophy, ethics, and
method. Research, he argues, needs to be emphasized as a living relation between humans; the study of humans must be undertaken as subjects approaching other subjects, because humans exist as both knowers and the known (Hayim 1996; Sartre 1968). To render the subject as simply an object – a physicalistic analysis – ultimately denies the social responsibilities of the sociologist as both researcher and as an individual acting in the world. Citing “microphysics” as a potential epistemological model for sociologists, Sartre (1968) lauds its gains toward dismantling the “mysterious boundary” (Schrödinger 1961:50) between subject and object in the mid-20th century. Microphysics, today known as quantum physics or quantum mechanics, recognizes the observer’s inseparability from the quantum experimental field and the affect the observer has on the system being studied (Heylighen 1990; Howard 1994; see also Fontana 1984); conversely, positivism favours a separation between the researcher and the experimental system in the name of objectivity (Sartre 1968:32). Social scientists, Sartre contends, must repudiate the idealist assumption of the dislocated researcher – what Sartre refers to as “bourgeois objectivism” (Sartre 1968:71) – and recognize the observer “in the midst of the real world” (Sartre 1968:32; see also Fontana 1984). Indeed, it was this attempt to dislocate the researcher from the world that made Heidegger critical of Husserl’s notion of pure consciousness or pure phenomenological description (Cooper 1999; Figal 2010).

Both Sartre and de Beauvoir’s philosophical explorations into the ethics of ambiguity and uncertainty of the human condition took them on a search for viable, ethical courses of social action in a post-war world. By emphasizing the researcher as a lived subject in the midst of the real world and not separate from it, Sartre recognizes the researcher as a situated knower with responsibilities. In what follows, I explore the
epistemology of phenomenology as developed by Edmund Husserl and later elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir, and Sartre as an existential phenomenology. The epistemological commitments of existential phenomenology are crucial to developing an alternative theory and ethics of sexuality.

3.3 Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is largely recognized as the founder of phenomenology. While his phenomenology is not existential, it was nonetheless a guiding force for future existential phenomenologists. Influenced by the works of Descartes and Kant, Husserl’s philosophy concentrates on the centrality of first-person experience (Solomon 1980). Philosophy for Husserl signifies pure knowledge – knowledge of what is – and represents “the universal science of the world” (Krisis §73, in Moran 2005). At the same time, Husserl is critical of existing sciences such as classical empiricism, naturalism, and biologism. Their heavy dependence on positivism narrows data to that acquired through the senses only, and they lack any philosophical quality (Cooper 1999; Moran 2005). These sciences also neglect to take into account the assumptions made in their observations, meaning knowledge is not “pure” but theory laden. Husserl wanted to establish philosophy as a rigorous science and “supply the rationally certain basis of all the sciences” (Tillman 1991:159). In 1901, he published Logical Investigations, in which he develops phenomenology as a descriptive, non-reductive science of what appears and explicates the relationship between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of content known. For Husserl, phenomenology clarifies how notions of logic and
knowledge – such as expression, sense, content, object, state of affairs, consciousness, judgement, and so on – belong to and form systematic knowledge (Moran 2005).

Husserlian phenomenology is not a science of facts but a science of essential being. It aims to establish a knowledge of essences apprehended in purity and of greatest generality – for instance, a physical object, thought, or value. Essence is what makes a thing what it is, and the manifest and self-evident character of essences is what Husserl calls *phenomena* (Cooper 1999; Solomon 1980). In his phenomenology, Husserl stresses that phenomena be described rather than analyzed or explained as a way to keep them theory-free and devoid of bias and presuppositions; accordingly, then, phenomenology is the description of objects for consciousness, that is, as one sees them, rather than for science or common knowledge (Solomon 1980). Thus, phenomenology can also be thought of as a science of the manifestations of consciousness and an examination into the basis of cognition (Ryle 1991). As Moran (2005) explains, Husserl’s phenomenology “is not concerned with the *existence* of what is perceived but with clarifying the *essence* of perception or cognition, and the *essence* of the perceived thing…” (188). It is interested in the nature of human consciousness, and it attempts to define those structures necessary to all experience and describe what is necessary for there to be any experience at all (Solomon 1980). Phenomenology therefore explores the correlation between subject and object, between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of content known.

According to Husserl (1980a), knowledge of essences is only possible when the phenomenologist “brackets” her/his *natural standpoint*. The natural standpoint refers to the “fact-world” of things and states of affairs in the world that one encounters (ibid.; see also Beyer 2011). The only thing which can be seen from the natural standpoint is the
natural world “that has its being out there… [It is] everything out of the world of nature through experience and prior to any thinking” (Husserl 1980a:113). By bracketing one’s natural standpoint, one suspends judgements, assumptions, and beliefs about the actual existence of things and persons in the world and is left with “the whole experienced world” (Ryle 1991:220; see also Cooper 1999; Moran 2005). The resulting “pure consciousness” is an immediate seeing and apprehending of world as it is given in its generality (Husserl 1980b). This region of being of pure consciousness is also referred to as a “phenomenological residuum” (ibid. 150).

Husserl’s phenomenology serves as a method of bracketing and suspending beliefs about the fact-world and is carried out as graded reductions, producing *phenomenological reductions* (Husserl 1980b, 1980c; Moran 2005). As he saw it, phenomenological reductionism guarantees “purity” in description and aids in the discovery of essences (Solomon 1980). Ultimately, phenomenological reductions reduce descriptions to essences and focus on the meaning of phenomena (Solomon 1980:21). Phenomenological reduction does not deny scientific facts, it only suspends them so that philosophy can begin with what is immediately given or presented before us. One’s knowledge, for instance, about Lake Ontario is irrelevant to the description of what one sees. For Husserl, all objects of thought (real and fictional) are mind-transcendent, meaning objects have “identity conditions” that transcend cognitive experiences: “the objects *transcends* the act of perceiving it” (Moran 2005:53). When phenomenological reduction is consistently executed, one is left with pure consciousness (*noetic* – the act/processses of thinking; gives sense to object of consciousness) and its correlate, the meant world (*noematic* – what is thought; the sense of the object) (Husserl 1980c:155).
Husserl argues that the phenomenologist must also bracket belief in the existence of selves or persons, including one’s own self. Although notions of the self\(^4\) are typically conceived as something that retains identity and possesses a particular psyche over time, selves are actually contingent, empirical entities and therefore also subjects of investigation; so in order to grasp this essence of the self, the self it-self must be bracketed (Cooper 1999; Moran 2005). Bracketing therefore involves a “splitting of the ego”, a transcendental experience which consists of looking at and describing the reduced *cogito* – what it *means to be* an entity (Husserl x/1980; Moran 2005). As a result, Husserl claims the self leads a double life where, on the one hand, it maintains the natural attitude, and on the other hand, also becomes aware of “the functioning of [its] world-creating subjectivity” within the natural attitude (Husserliana 34:399, in Moran 2005).

For Husserl, therefore, knowledge and understanding belong to *spectators* rather than *agents*. Through phenomenological reductionism, the one’s practical knowledge, beliefs, and interests are bracketed and becomes “the non-participating spectator of [his] acts and life” (Husserl *The Paris Lectures*:30, in Cooper 1999:49). Because the self is bracketed, it is not considered a concrete entity at the centre of one’s intentions. Husserl insists that knowledge and understanding are the result of the disengaged being that does not reflect – the spectator view. For this reason, the engaged and participating agent cannot be the vehicle of knowledge and understanding for Husserl (Cooper 1999:50). Rather, by understanding how consciousness works, one could understand how knowledge is achieved, and this fuels one’s desire to explicate the basics of consciousness. The directedness of consciousness, or *intentionality*, implies that action

\(^4\) It is important to note that the “I” for Husserl is a consistently ambiguous term. In some cases, “I” refers to an empirical self, while at other times it refers to the pure consciousness for which that self is an object of investigation (Cooper 1999).
intends an object and that “every intentional experience… has its intentional object”, be it a real material object or an ideal object like a number (Cooper 1999:44; Solomon 1980). All objects are an object-for-a-subject, and all experience relates to a subject (Moran 2005; Solomon 1980; Tillman 1991). Indeed, the subjective and intersubjective being of consciousness is a “mystery of mysteries” (Moran 2005:2).

3.4 From Husserlian Phenomenology to Existential Phenomenology
Heidegger was a student of and assistant to Husserl from 1919-1923 at the University of Freiburg (Polt 2001). Throughout the 1920s, Heidegger progressed from being one of Husserl’s students to becoming the “rival shaper of the new field of phenomenology” (Davis 2010:13). Heidegger contributed significantly to the development of existential phenomenology and was highly influential to Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, despite the fact that he never accepted the label of “existentialist” himself (ibid.). His critique of Husserlian phenomenology entailed the fact that Husserl developed it as a scientific method rather than, as he saw it, a methodological conception about the fundamental possibility of human thinking (Figal 2010; Heidegger 1980a). For Heidegger, human existence is more than mere cognition as a spectator. As he saw it, phenomenology is concerned with the “how” of that research rather than the “what” of the objects of research (Cooper 1999; Heidegger 1980a). He rejected Husserl’s phenomenological reductionism and the idea that knowledge is the result of the disengaged being that does not reflect – the spectator (Figal 2010).

Heidegger’s Being and Time, Sartre’s Being and Nothingness, and Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception are all attempts to construct a system to
phenomenologically describe both everyday life and extraordinary experiences (Polt 2001; Solomon 1980). In particular, all three rejected Husserl's phenomenological reductionism that reduces objects to their essence and the natural world to the "contacts of consciousness" (Cooper 1999:46). In conjunction, they also deny that pure consciousness or pure phenomenology is possible, because consciousness cannot bracket or abstract itself from the world – consciousness is always being-in-the-world and always at work in the world. Consciousness is not just a knowing consciousness, they argue, but an acting, willing, and contemplating consciousness; thus, they deny the possibility of spectator knowledge, because consciousness cannot be separated from the world (Cooper 1999; Solomon 1980). This point illuminates another crucial difference between Husserlian and existential phenomenology: while both begin with the first-person standpoint, the latter shifts attention away from the basis of knowledge and towards the basis of human action. Existential phenomenologists approach consciousness as a way of understanding what it is to be a person, whereas Husserlian phenomenologists approach consciousness as a way of understanding what knowledge is (Solomon 1980). Essentially, existential phenomenology is concerned with the universal features that are necessary for some one/thing to be regarded as a "human" – abilities to act, to plan to use language, to evaluate, and most importantly to ask ethical questions about what one should or should not/ought not do (Solomon 1980).

As Solomon (1980) explains, the question of what it is to be human is approached on two levels in existential phenomenology: first, what does it mean to be a human person in general, and second, to be the person who one is? These questions of being and self-identity manifest in Heidegger and de Beauvoir’s work as authentic and
inauthentic behaviour, and in Sartre’s work as bad faith and good faith/sincerity. The self is not an entity to be discovered but a component of a knowing being that reflects, decides, and enacts. Solomon qualifies this as the difference between being and knowing:

…to be a person is to be in a position to raise the question of who one is. But this is not a question of knowledge; one does not find out who he is. He decides, and acts upon his decision. He does not find that he is selfish, he make himself selfish…In other words, the existentialist answer to the question “Who is man” is, roughly, “whatever he decides to be.” And the answer for each of us to the question of “who am I” is: whatever I make myself. (Solomon 1980:30)

Being a human is a process of becoming; there is no essential self to search for, no knowledge to be discovered that would reveal to one who/what one is.

Simply put, then, existential phenomenology is concerned with the ways individuals experience things and the meanings things have in their experience – that is, the study of phenomena (Smith 2011). In particular, phenomenology is interested in the significance of things, objects, events, time, the self, and others as they arise and are experienced in lived reality. Epistemically, it privileges experience and emphasizes the dialectical relationship between bodily existence (the material/corporeal) and personal existence (the self). Knowledge of the world is gained through one’s existential experience of it, through a myriad of structures of experience including sensations (hearing, touching, seeing, feeling, and smelling), memory, imagination, emotion, perception, desire, embodied action, linguistic activity, and social behaviour (Merleau-Ponty 1989, 2004; Smith 2011). Therefore, it is only through lived experiences that one can comprehend and give meaning to the world (de Beauvoir 1989; Lester 1984; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Sartre 1992). This fluidity and continuity between the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself that contribute to processes of thought express part of the “ontological mystery” of human existence (Ricoeur 1991:292).
However, when one introduces freedom, as existentialism does, these ontological mysteries ultimately become existential mysteries (Ricoeur 1991).

The body is an important epistemological tool for acquiring knowledge of the world (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996). The body is always an “owned body” at the centre of sensing, perceiving, and reflecting (ibid:293; Merleau-Ponty 2004). Phenomenologists aim to describe and analyze the materiality of essences through lived, sensuous experiences (Cooper 1999; Heinämaa 2003; Merleau-Ponty 2004). All subjects have a material existence in the midst of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty (2004), the world does not form around the individual or observer; rather, the observer is entangled in the world and inseparable from it. Bodily existence represents one’s anchorage in the world and contains one’s unique viewpoint or situation in that world. The body, as he describes it, is “only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world” that provides the possibility of presence in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2004:192). It serves as the starting point of “truth,” because one cannot separate from one’s bodily situation or disengage from the world in which one exists (Merleau-Ponty 2004). In this way, the body is regarded as a situation and not a thing: “it is our manner of being [and relating] in the world, our ‘anchorage’ in this world, or the entirety of the ‘grasps’ which we have of things” (de Beauvoir 1945:364, in Heinämaa 2003; de Beauvoir 1989; Merleau-Ponty 2004). Similarly, de Beauvoir (1989) contends that the body is always situated in a social, material, economic, biological, historical world. This means that on the one hand, the body is temporal and historical; on the other hand, it suggests that social and biological “facts” about sex and the body are contingent on a given historical period. The body (and/or extensions/prosthesis of the body) is critical to lived experience, because it is the
medium through which one approaches, senses, and absorbs the world. One’s hodological space – that is, one’s personal orientation to the world and the space through which one gains knowledge about the world (Sartre 1968:79) – is what composes one’s field of possibilities in a given situation. This space also represents one’s existence in the social field amid various pathways and obstacles which may facilitate or hinder the fulfillment of one’s project.

Phenomenology is a science of experience which seeks to account for space, time, and the world as each are lived (Heinämaa 2003; Merleau-Ponty 2004). Human experiences are temporal and thus irreversible, meaning one cannot “un-experience” something or reverse an experience; however, the meaning associated with that experience can always be reinterpreted, remade, reflected upon, rewritten, and so on. In her analysis of the situation of women, de Beauvoir (1989) explains how patriarchy has manipulated the notion of femininity into a timeless quality that confines women to empty repetition, in which “future” and “past” take on equal meaning: “It is easy to see why woman clings to routine; time has for her no element of novelty, it is not creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past…In this play of cyclical phenomena the sole effect of time is a slow deterioration…” (599). The idea of the timeless or eternal feminine, associated with the “facts” of woman’s (biological, psychological, social) destiny, has denied woman creative activity and agency and instead forced her to a life of repetition, duplication, and preservation. Becoming woman is seen a continuous repetition of the feminine/of feminine expectations.
3.5 Existential Phenomenology and Sexuality

Developing an existential theory of sexuality will undoubtedly be met with some criticism. Numerous feminist scholars have, over the years, criticized existentialism as a philosophy laden with sexism. As well, some have attacked de Beauvoir’s analysis as a grotesque portrayal of and disdain for the female body, while others have perceived her philosophy as encouraging women to be more like men in order to succeed in the world. In this section I will address these criticisms and concerns and then foreshadow how I utilize existential phenomenology toward an alternative understanding of sexuality and sexual difference in the conclusion of this dissertation.

Existentialism has been called misogynistic because it is presumed to be premised on male – or more specifically, Sartrean – ideology. This point has been brought up time and again with reference to the negative portrayals of the female body that Sartre offers in Being and Nothingness (for example, see Collins and Pierce 1973; Fishwick 2002; le Doeuff 1979; Lloyd 1984, in Mahon 1997). De Beauvoir, too, has been accused of adopting similar negative images from Sartre’s work. Portrayals of the body in de Beauvoir’s work trouble many feminists because they suggest that women’s bodies are the cause of their own oppression as a sex, suggesting that women are inherently inferior (Mahon 1997; Marks 1986; Hughes and Witz 1997; Zerilli 1992). Prominent French feminists such as Luce Irigaray (1985), Hélène Cixous (1981), and Julia Kristeva (1986) have criticized de Beauvoir’s work for further suggesting that for women to be “free,” they must ultimately strive to become men (see Stavro 1999, 2000; Vintages 1999). De Beauvoir’s application of Sartrean existentialism in The Second Sex (SS), in addition to her on-and-off intimate relationship with Sartre, have caused some feminist theorists to regard de Beauvoir as a “disciple” of Sartre and thus blind to the sexism that ostensibly
pervades both of their work (Arp 1995; Fishwick 2002; Cottrell 1975, Elshtain 1981, and Okely 1986, all in Mahon 1997). Others, however, vehemently argue that de Beauvoir is a philosopher of her own and not a mere follower of Sartre. They were influential to each other’s work and shared many basic themes and concepts, but they developed them in different ways with somewhat different goals or visions in mind (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Simons 1995; Stavro 1999).

De Beauvoir’s work on sexual difference has stimulated on-going debates about her use of biological determinism. It is clear in *The Second Sex* that de Beauvoir oscillates between sexual difference as a social construction and as a biological fact, and these debates have raised several interesting insights as to how feminists read de Beauvoir (Arp 1995; Fishwick 2002; Witz 2000). As Arp (1995) observes, those who accuse de Beauvoir of biological determinism usually narrow their focus to her chapter on the ‘data of biology’. To read de Beauvoir as an essentialist, however, is to neglect the existential philosophy that guides her entire analysis. Indeed, it misses her point entirely as she lays down this “data” in order to criticize it. The first three chapters of *The Second Sex* analyze the situation of woman according to traditional research in biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism in order to explicate how woman became the second, inferior sex. One is not born but becomes a woman through enacting socially defined and anticipated feminine behaviours and attitudes, and her inferior status is the result of patriarchy aimed at preserving man’s subject status and woman’s object status (Arp 1995; Butler 1986; Fishwick 2002). Furthermore, as I explore in chapter four, de Beauvoir’s existential analysis of the “data of biology” offers an insightful challenge to the ontology of sexual difference. In her examination into sexual diversity, reproduction,
hermaphroditism, and parthenogenesis among non-human animals, she challenges scientific discourses that universalize biological facts across nature, and especially the life processes of females and offers strong evidence against the assumption that sex exists as a simple dichotomy. Existentialism’s rejection of biological determinism furthermore affords a particular challenge to the notion of sexual identity and sexual orientation.

Sartre and de Beauvoir both criticize the heteronormative assumptions sustained by psycho-physiological and biological theories of sexuality in the 1940s. Specifically, I am interested in how de Beauvoir philosophizes sexuality in the context of becoming and in Sartre’s theorizing of the sexual self-project. Both emphasize the role of freedom, choice, contingency, and uncertainty in the making of the sexual self. Because human individuals do not have a predetermined essence, they are also not destined to desire any sex/gender in particular. Sexual desire is determined neither by anatomy nor in patterns of behaviour (de Beauvoir 1989; Sartre 1992). Russell (1979), one of few scholars who has theorized sexuality using Sartre’s philosophy, writes that accepting or assuming a sexual fate is inauthentic, because it is “to pretend that what I am ‘essentially’ or ‘by nature’ is once and for all established” (37). Sexual desire as expressed in terms of sexual orientation and sexual identity transforms desire into a kind of sexual fate. It is an attempt to grasp a stable and permanent sexual self but one which ultimately fails, because sexual desire is neither stable nor permanent (Hayim 1996). Desire is always contingent and situated; to be sure, a self-described heterosexual (or homosexual) presumably does not sexually desire all persons of the other (or same) sex/gender (Sartre 1992: 499-500).

An ontology of sexual becoming promotes fluidity and variability that is different from postmodern approaches to sexuality. Existentialism is critical of sexual identity
because, ethically, it is inauthentic; to claim that one is gay or straight, for instance, is an attempt to secure stability and permanency of one’s a sexual being (Sartre 1992). Moreover, it limits the exploration or expression of one’s sexual existence to sex/gender desire. Positing sexuality as an ontological becoming reveals its active character, as a process in which the sexual self is expressed and projected, and this offers interesting new avenues through which to theorize about and explore sexuality. An existential theory of sexuality, I suggest, moves beyond the centrality of gender in sexual desire toward a focus on the material, the sensual, and the phenomenological. Thus, I argue for a more profound consideration of the materialities and qualities associated with sexual desire and arousal. Using a phenomenological approach, I underscore the materiality of sexuality by considering experiences of the sensual and pleasurable.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the development and method of existential-phenomenology. As I have shown, existentialism is a philosophy of human existence, and as a humanism it offers an ethics for acting responsibly in the world given this freedom. Furthermore, it presents an alternative mode for theorizing about both individual and social actions in the world which emphasizes possibility, self projects, and becoming(s). Existentialism affords attention to individuals as they are situated within the larger social field and explores interconnections amongst the individual, her/his social group, and her/his field of practical action (Hayim 1996).

As I detail in the conclusion of this dissertation, I use phenomenology to guide an existential approach to sexuality. Existential phenomenology posits the body as existing
separate from yet interconnected with the mind, and their dialectical relationship forms the embodied subject. By illuminating this dialectical relationship between the personal self and the bodily self, I treat sexuality (sexual desires and arousal) as a phenomenon. The body is phenomenologically crucial to sexual experience, for it is an essential element to one’s being-in-the-world (de Beauvoir 1952:37). The experience of another’s sexed body is always in relation to one’s own body and situation. The body is the material vehicle to the sensuous, so changes to the body can affect sexual experience (de Beauvoir 1952; Merleau-Ponty 2004). This approach to sexuality differs considerably from traditional discourses that theorize sexuality through sex/gender preference. In other words, through existential phenomenology, I look to emphasize the material processes and experiences of the sexed body a priori to the (gendered) meanings drawn from heteronormative discourses. In conjunction, I follow de Beauvoir’s (1989) argument that sexual arousal and desire are initiated by certain physical or material qualities which do not have or require a sex/gender. Sexuality is not an isolated domain because, phenomenologically, it interacts with consciousness, things, bodies, sensations, smells, sounds, and textures – the materialities of pleasure (de Beauvoir 1989:377; Sartre 1992).

An existential phenomenological approach to sexuality therefore will focus on the materiality of experience as it contributes to meaning and, thus, what becomes knowledge and truth. Ethically, the individual is responsible for that meaning (and knowledge) created and reproduced, as well as the implications of that knowledge. Yet as de Beauvoir (1996) writes in The Ethics of Ambiguity, ethics does not provide “recipes”, it only suggests methods. An ethics encouraged from one’s own “sexistential” viewpoint is a
reminder of the responsibility that accompanies the freedom and volition to carry out one’s (sexual) projects.
Chapter 4

The Materiality of Sex

Our lives are circumscribed by sexuality. We come from a void, we go to a void. In between we live. Our lives, and our deaths, are mediated by sex. We appear on this Earth through an act of sex, which begins an irreversible act of aging...As a form of material organization, we are over three billion years old, but as conscious personalities, we are at most a few decades. – Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, What is Sex?

The inclusion of irreversibility changes our view of nature. The future is no longer given. Our world is a world of continuous ‘construction’ ruled by probabilistic laws and no longer a kind of automaton. We are led from a world of ‘being’ to a world of ‘becoming.’ (Ilya Prigogine, Is Future Given?)

In the last chapter, I outlined the principles of existentialism and phenomenology and made the case that together, existential-phenomenology lends itself well to theorizing about sexuality. The body is phenomenologically crucial to sexual experience, for it is an essential element to one’s being-in-the-world (de Beauvoir 1952:37). It is the material vehicle to the sensuous, so changes to the body can affect sexual experience (de Beauvoir 1952; Merleau-Ponty 2004). In this chapter, I concentrate on the body as it exists separate from the self and in terms of its own becomings. In doing so, I move beyond the realm of the human to explore a variety of non-human processes of sex that occur in the biological materiality of the body, as well as the vast sexual diversity that exists in species across nature. I critically review the first chapter of Simone de Beauvoir’s (1989) The Second Sex, entitled “The Data of Biology,” which examines sex and reproduction in both human and non-human species. As I argue, her analysis shows how diversity and ambiguity exist across species and link rather than separates or elevates humans from/above nature.
At the same time, the existence of this diversity and ambiguity poses a particular challenge to scientific discourses that universalize biological facts across nature, and especially the life processes of females. These discourses portray the sexed body as fixed and obedient to ‘laws’ of nature (de Beauvoir 1989:9). As de Beauvoir points out, facts of sexual difference and reproduction take on particular meanings once interpreted through the human perspective, and feminists theorists continue to interrogate the ostensibly “natural” link between sex, sexuality, and reproduction and the ways it has been exploited and used to rationalize hierarchical sexual difference, gender oppression, and heteronormative categories of sexuality (de Beauvoir 1989; Epstein 1996; Grosz 1995; Hird 2000). Thus I also demonstrate in this critical review how sex has been discursively implicated with reproduction, and I consider the effect this has had on theorizing sex/uality.

In conjunction, I expand upon some of the biological research de Beauvoir uses in “The Data of Biology” with contemporary research on sexual difference. Writing in the 1940s, de Beauvoir’s ‘data of biology’ was taken from biological research influenced by the classical paradigm of science. As I explain in subsequent sections, the classical paradigm of science derives from the Newtonian model of physics that is premised on an ontology of being and espouses determinist and reductionist epistemologies. Non-classical paradigms, on the other hand, emerge from research in non-linear and non-equilibrium sciences and alternatively emphasize uncertainty, complexity, and ontologies of becoming (Guerra 1996; Prigogine and Stengers 1984). Specifically, I apply a non-classical paradigm to explore knowledge about sex and sexuality through a discourse that focuses on material processes rather than categories of sex/uality. By introducing
research from non-equilibrium thermodynamics and non-linear biology – or sciences of becoming – I offer supplementary research to de Beauvoir’s analysis on the material becomings of sex as they occur physio-chemically, thermodynamically, and developmentally within the body. By de-centering the human, I concentrate on the material becomings of sex that interact with and affect human experience of sex. As such, I consider phenomena of sex that exist throughout the layers of the human body, as opposed to the constructions of sex on the surface of the body. Thus, I use a non-classical paradigm and sciences of becoming to move toward a phenomenological understanding of the body as a dynamic developmental system (Diamond 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Parisi 2008) and, by extension, sex and sexuality as contingent processes of flux and materialization.

Significantly, this non-classical paradigm recognizes an important ontological distinction between being and becoming – one that is not unlike the one made in existentialism. “Sciences of becoming” that follow a non-classical paradigm include non-equilibrium thermodynamics and chemistry, non-linear biology, complexity studies, and developmental systems theories (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Napinen 2002; Prigogine 1997). Existentialism and non-equilibrium thermodynamics, I argue, share a similar philosophy or worldview: the former as a philosophy of becoming, the latter as a science of becoming. Moreover, I demonstrate the ways in which Sartre’s idea that “existence precedes essence” and Ilya Prigogine and Isabella Stenger’s idea of “order out of chaos” in nature both underscore the primacy of chaos, ambiguity, irreversible processes, and the arrow of time that characterize life (Prigogine and Stengers 1984; de Beauvoir 1948, 1949; Sartre 1943, 1992). Indeed, all phenomenological descriptions of the world are
dependent on the arrow of time. In both evolution and one’s essence, what is in the present is not all there is; both essence and evolution are continual processes of becoming that unfold and create over time (de Beauvoir 1989; Prigogine 1980; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Sartre 1947, 1992). I contend that these becomings illuminate both nature-in-process and humans-in-process as constructive irreversible processes that yield diversity, creativity, and novelty in life.

With interest in these non-human examples, I begin this chapter by considering what a post-humanist approach means for an existential-phenomenological theory of sexuality. I follow this section with a discussion of both the classical and non-classical paradigms of science and the influence these models have had on knowledge and theories of sex and sexuality. In the final section of this chapter, I engage in a critical review of de Beauvoir’s “The Data of Biology” and explore the phenomena of sex as they exist throughout and beyond the human body.

4.1 Toward a Post-Humanism

Generally speaking, humanism is a position or focus on human values, concerns, capacities, and worth. These values typically assume that humans occupy a position above other animals, non-humans, and sometimes nature itself. As I explained in chapter three, existential humanism specifically is an ethics of action and involvement for living as responsible humans and managing the ambiguity and uncertainty of the human condition (Sartre 1947:42). It is premised on the idea that one’s being/existence is not an end in itself, because one has yet to be determined in her/his imminent becomings. Through subjectivity and free will, self-projects are established and accomplished in an
effort to liberate and realize the self beyond present existence; in a word, transcend. Moreover, existential humanism suggests that neither human individuals, nor the whole of humanity, have a priori meaning or value; there is no other “legislator” in the world to decide for and make meaning for humans other than humans themselves (ibid. 60). Accordingly, what separates humans from non-humans is this ability to assign meaning to things and experiences, as well as the conscious recognition of their own mortality (de Beauvoir 1989, 1996).

Post-humanism is a term that has been expounded by a number of scholars recently to describe a position that moves beyond the centrality of the human over other beings or phenomena in nature. Definitions and uses of the term “post-humanism” (sometimes “transhumanism”) vary; however, in this dissertation I am most concerned with processes of sex and sexuality in non-human entities, including animals, plants, cells, and other living beings, as well as amongst non-living beings such as molecules, particles, and other matter. Recognizing the ways that humans and non-humans constantly affect each can blur the distinction between human and non-human (Barad 2007; Hayles 1999; Hird 2009; Parisi 2004). At the same time, it is less my objective to blur this distinction and more so to show how humans, like all species, are a part of and result of nature (Birke 2010; Jantsch 1980; Margulis and Sagan 2000), and they are no more important than nature. I de-center the human subject then in order to pay particular attention to processes of materialization and the material becoming of sex, and then consider how these processes affect or interact with human experience of sex. I am interested in the phenomena of sex as it exists throughout the layers of the human body, as opposed to terms of sexual anatomy only. This means considering the dynamic
material becomings of sex as they occur physio-chemically, thermodynamically, and developmentally within the body and in terms of movements, flows, processes, and affects.

Biological determinist arguments often use non-human animals to exemplify how (human) gender is entrenched in biology in order to justify sexual difference and to suggest that heterosexuality is “natural” and serves a biological imperative in nature (Birke 2010; Fausto-Sterling 1997; Grosz 1995). However, there are numerous examples throughout “evolution’s rainbow” (Roughgarden 2004a) that challenge these assumptions. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, in some species in nature there exists only one sex, while in others there are numerous sexes and/or genders. There are also species and organisms that can reproduce without sex; some that engage in sex for pleasure and not reproduction; and others that engage in various kinds of same-sex sexual behaviour. In consideration of the various evidence I present on sex and reproductive diversity in nature, I echo Hird’s (2009:92) line of questioning and consider “what might we learn from thinking about sex, reproduction, sexuality, and sexual difference as a majority of the earth’s biota practice these processes?”

De Beauvoir’s (1989) “The Data of Biology” is a rigorously researched analysis of how woman has been reduced to her biology, a reproductive being enslaved to the species who seemingly has more in common with the female animal than the human male with his freedom and subjectivity (23). At the same time, de Beauvoir utilizes numerous biological examples throughout her chapter to exemplify some interesting similarities between non-humans and humans in terms of sexual development, diversity, and ambiguity as they exist throughout nature, in ways linking rather than separating humans
from nature. As she shows, biologists have written women into the biology-is-destiny equation; this is often why feminists have tended to ignore biological data and animal studies, because of this idea that sex/gender are fixed in nature/biology (Birke 2010). Yet humans are not fundamentally different from other species; together, humans and non-humans are a part of nature, a result of nature (Birke 2010; Jantsch 1980; Margulis and Sagan 2000). It can be said then that a post-humanist feminist perspective regards nature as consisting of fluxes and flows, diversity and creativity (Barad 2003, 2007; Parisi 2004).

In the following two sections, I explore two paradigms in physics: the classical paradigm and the non-classical paradigm. The classical paradigm, modeled after Newtonian physics and anchored in an ontology of being, had a profound effect on the knowledge produced about sex and sexuality. Non-classical paradigms, on the other hand, are modeled on non-linear and non-equilibrium physics and utilize an ontology of becoming. In particular, I examine the non-classical paradigm of science associated with research in non-equilibrium thermodynamics and non-linear biology in order to garner knowledge about the material processes rather than categories of sex and sexuality.

4.2 The Classical Paradigm of Science: Sciences of Being
Isaac Newton’s work in physics during the 17th century transformed how scientists viewed, studied, and understood the physical world. Newton aimed to provide a universal description of nature that could explain “the motion of all bodies subjected to forces of every possible origin” by way of the laws of nature (McCall 2001:16). Newtonian physics posits a mechanical, deterministic world ruled by cause-effect relations, and its
methods analyze and mathematically predict the motion of objects in a given system (Auletta 2001; French 1971; Guerra 1996; Heylighen 1990; McCall 2001). This approach to studying physical systems influenced what is known as the classical paradigm of science (Harman 1982; Heylighen 1990; Howard 1994; Näpinen 2002; Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

Newton conceived matter as a substance in its own right, separate from form and “fully in being, incapable of becoming” (Grier 1990:230). Matter exists in terms of ontological being, the existence of a substance with all its attributes and properties. Beings have an essence, or essential properties that constitute that existence. These properties can be observed or measured and therefore are determined and distinguished from one another (Carriero 1990; Dupre 1995). Because there are complex aspects of space and extreme distinctions between particular things cannot be detected phenomenologically, Newton reasoned that the universe needed to be simplified in order to understand these systems. This made way for the closed system experiment, used to examine systems and matter that are self-contained, reversible, and unaffected by time. Ontologically, closed systems can be separated from other closed systems (and other beings, forces, or influences) and studied; epistemically, the conditions of a system are contained and controlled in an effort to minimize the effect of outer influences on the system or objects being studied (French 1971; Mittelstaedt 2004; Overton 1994). By simplifying notions of space, time, and motion into mathematical equations, the classical scientist escapes – or rather, negotiates – the complexities of nature in order to comprehend its dynamics at a more fundamental level.
In this way, closed systems offer the possibility of complete knowledge, because all properties of the system can be perfectly measured, and mathematical equations can be calculated to predict that which cannot be observed (Auletta 2001; Norton 1994). Reductionism, determinism, and objectivity constitute the “epistemological absolutism” of classical physics, affording the scientist a “completeness of knowledge” and increasing certainty in the description and prediction of the physical world (Auletta 2001:2). Certainty is an epistemological ideal; to know with confidence and certainty is to believe that other values are not possible (ibid.; Heylighen 1990). Having complete and certain knowledge furthermore recognizes a timeless world, because everything about a system is given at any particular instant; time does not alter the basic components of the system (Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

Throughout the 19th century, researchers from disciplines outside of physics applied the methods of the Newtonian model to other subjects and developed methods to scientifically study and understand phenomena occurring at other levels of organization in the world (Harris 1990). The influence of the Newtonian model on early sociologists August Comte and Emile Durkheim is clear with the development of positivism and “social physics” in classical sociology (Bosserman 1995; Urry 2004). As I discussed in chapter three, Comte is most notable for his contributions to the development of positivism as a coherent, systematic method and framework for studying society (Durkheim 1973; Simpson 1969). Positivism relies on knowing by way of having positive or affirming evidence that can be proven empirically, therefore offering more than speculation of truth, and in this way implying precision and certitude about a given aspect of the world (Comte 1969). Like Newtonian physics, positivism seeks laws of statics.
(regularities in society) and laws of dynamics (factors inducing change in society) to understand how the “succession of human societies which constitutes humanity has evolved through time” (Durkheim 1973:9). Societies are viewed as closed, isolated systems in which variables are controlled for and cause-effect relations can be determined, allowing the sociologist to predict and generalize patterns to other similar populations. Social facts exist as truths about the social world that influence individual consciousness and ways of being (acting and thinking). They are studied “from the outside” just as physical phenomena in nature are studied, and time serves as a measurement of change and a marker of historical events (Durkheim 1973:18).

Classical positivism is concerned with states of beings and changes in states of being. Society is presumed to be in a stable state of being (stasis) and when certain forces or disturbances act upon it (dynamics), it incurs a period of instability and eventually changes or transforms to achieve stability again (equilibrium). Stability is regarded as the natural state of society, and social change takes place when social structures break down and must be restructured in order to re-stabilize society. In other words, change and becoming are important in terms of what they yield: a stable and presumably progressive society. It is being, not becoming, that is emphasized, because an individual cannot transcend her own being or individual state of existence (Simpson 1969); at the same time, humans as a species (humanity) are recognized as always in a process of becoming, or evolving.

This classical paradigm of science was not only influential to sociology but also to those “sciences of being”/disciplines interested in studies of sexual pathology, such as sexology and psychiatry. As I demonstrated through a discursive history of sexuality
(chapter two), doctors and researchers utilized mutually exclusive and exhaustive categorical systems to partition sexual desire into a heterosexual/homosexual binary that corresponded with a normal/abnormal classification scheme, respectively. These divisions produced an order of knowledge about sexuality that fixes it as an existence of being, in ways stabilizing heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual desires while also ‘simplifying’ and making it easier to study. A non-classical paradigm of science, on the other hand, is concerned with instability, flux, and processes in nature. By introducing this paradigm, I direct focus toward the material processes rather than categories of sex and sexuality.

4.3 Non-Classical Paradigms of Science: Sciences of Becoming

Whereas the classical model of science is concerned with beings that are ordered and systems that are stable, non-classical models of science take interest in disordered becomings and unstable systems. It is the processes involved with change and not just the fact of change that are most interesting to scientists working within a non-classical paradigm of science. Ilya Prigogine’s research in non-linear thermodynamics led him to coin the phrase “physics of becoming” to underscore the significance of irreversibility, chaos, self-organization, and time in nature (Prigogine 1980). Prigogine joins a group of other prominent scientists such as Albert Einstein, Max Plank, Niels Bohr, and David Bohm who have helped form a new discourse of post-Newtonian physics in the twentieth century (Bosserman 1995).

Prigogine received the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1977 for his theory of dissipative structures and irreversible processes pertaining to the second law of
thermodynamics. Thermodynamics is a branch of physics concerned with the conversion of different forms of energy that occur between systems and between different states of matter (Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Rao 2004). In particular, Prigogine was interested in the irreversible processes that happen when open systems are far-from-equilibrium, or unstable and chaotic. In shifting focus from closed systems to open systems, Prigogine expanded upon the role of entropy (the loss of energy) in the second law of thermodynamics (Coveney 1988; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Tucker 1983). Irreversible processes illuminate the significance of the arrow of time – that there is a difference between past, present, and future – and result in changes to the system that cannot be reversed (Prigogine 1980). For any irreversible process, entropy – the amount of energy in a system no longer available for doing work – must increase, whereas for a reversible process (in classical dynamics) it remains constant (Coveney 1988). When elements of the system are lost, it makes it impossible for the system to return to its previous state. Irreversibility is illustrated in the universe’s inevitable movement toward decay and disorder – the essence of the second law of thermodynamics. Although the second law of thermodynamics is often viewed as “terrible” and destructive within the realm of Newtonian physics (Tucker 1983), Prigogine argues that irreversible processes play a positive and very constructive role in nature and especially in evolution, because they give rise to order within a system by way of dissipative structures and self-organization (Coveney 1988; Prigogine 2003; Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

Far-from-equilibrium open systems lead to new states of matter as a result of the interactions between the system and its surroundings (Prigogine and Stengers 1984:12; Kurzyński 2006). Dissipative structures are systems that exist in these chaotic, far-from-
equilibrium conditions and that are simultaneously disintegrating and emerging (Milovanovic 1997). Examples of dissipative structures include humans, animals, hurricanes, and even life itself. While *structure* is generally thought of as static, Prigogine chose the term “dissipative structure” to underscore the close interplay between structure, flow, and change (or dissipation) (Capra 2002; Coveney 1988; Prigogine 1980, 2004). As he explains, dissipation requires continual energy going in and out of the system. As these energy flows become coherent and organized, the system comes closer to equilibrium and maintains its overall structure in spite of (or rather, because of) an ongoing flow and change of components. However, when flows of energy become extremely complex and chaotic, they produce fluctuations that are too great for the system to absorb, thereby forcing it to reorganize (Prigogine 1983:1). The result is “order out of chaos”: the appearance of new forms via the phenomenon of self-organization (Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

Self-organization brings out the appearance of new system structures without pressure or involvement from outside the system; the only constraints on the organization of the system are internal (Fenzl 2003). Self-organization exemplifies the dynamic origins of development and evolution by way of creativity and the generation of new structures. Emergence, on the other hand, deals with the appearance of new properties of the system, which is fundamental to the dynamics of open systems (Capra 2002; Fenzl 2003). The point at which a system goes from chaotic to ordered is the *bifurcation point*, that critical point of change at which numerous “choices” and “solutions” appear to the system (Prigogine 2004:2; Prigogine and Stengers 1984). From here the system “chooses” which pathway to take; or, put differently, entities acting within the system
communicate and “nudge” it toward a particular direction. This nudge illustrates the notion of self-organization. As Fritjof Capra explains, self-organization demonstrates how “life constantly reaches out into novelty,” forming the origins of development, learning, and evolution in all living systems (Capra 2002: 13-14).

Prigogine’s (1980, 1997, 2004; and Stengers 1984) research ultimately broadened the purview of the second law of thermodynamics by expounding the role of time in physical processes. Events in nature do not happen all at once, nor do they simply appear or come into being; phenomena in nature occur in sequences of time in which we see ecosystems and species evolve, transform, and die out. The interplay between these various states of existence led Prigogine (1980) to distinguish between “physics of being” and “physics of becoming.” Prigogine chose the philosophical term being to describe static dynamics that are characteristic of classical physics, and becoming to describe thermodynamic irreversibility with an emphasis on the arrow of time. As such, being and becoming represent as two separate albeit entangled phenomenon that occur in systems far-from-equilibrium. Beings refer to ordered, stable entities or things (the system; the actors), whereas becomings refer to processes and evolutions arising from instability (a dynamic existence). Significantly, becoming maintains its own ontological status and cannot be reduced to being. Sciences of becoming that fall within a non-classical model – such as non-linear biology, dynamic systems approaches, and developmental genetics – emphasize the processes of change and highlight the importance of disorder, instability, diversity, disequilibrium, non-linear relationships, and irreversibility in the world. To be sure, nature itself is characterized by irreversible processes and self-organization, where disorder and chaos can be seen as constructive processes and the fundamental sources of
order in the world and, as Prigogine (2004) puts it, depicts the ‘natural’ state of affairs in nature.

This “new scientific rationality” (Guerra 1996:486) of a non-classical or post-Newtonian paradigm of science calls on chaos and uncertainty as the basic laws of the universe. By accepting the temporal limits to knowledge, this paradigm necessarily privileges uncertainty over certainty and possibility/probability over predictability as fundamental principles of science. In other words, the recognition of the arrow of time imposes limits on epistemological certainty and what can be known, in this way embracing human’s temporal embeddedness (Prigogine 1997). The capacity to experience the reality of the moment is vital to understanding phenomena in the world. Phenomenologically, this is precisely how humans experience reality; time is tensed, and humans do distinguish between past and present moments and have future anticipations.

In non-classical science, the researcher’s awareness of the arrow of time also implies that the researcher is part of the phenomenon studied, because the researcher is the one who discovers, measures, observes, and so on (Prigogine 1980). Moreover, our internal experience of time – that associated with consciousness (and notions of self) – contradicts the classical view of the world as timeless, mechanical, and external to the mind/self. The arrow of time explains why humans are not both young and old at the same time; rather, humans experience life as becoming of age, of selfhood, and so on.

In concluding this section, I want to illuminate some interesting similarities between non-equilibrium thermodynamics (as a science of becoming) and existentialism (as a philosophy of becoming). Prigogine and Stenger’s idea of “order out of chaos” and the existential notion that “existence precedes essence” both underscore the primacy of
irreversible processes and the arrow of time. In both non-equilibrium thermodynamics and existentialism, becomings signify processes; in the former, from disorder to order, and in the latter, from nothingness to something meaningful. These becomings unfold over time, because neither nature’s order nor a person’s essence are given all at once (de Beauvoir 1989; Prigogine 1980; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Sartre 1943, 1947). Becomings, in other words, illuminate both nature-in-process and humans-in-process and, in both cases, manifest as constructive irreversible processes that give rise to diversity, creativity, and novelty in life. Indeed, nothing interesting ever happens at equilibrium; it is at the brink of chaos and ambiguity that order and meaning can begin to take shape. In existentialist terms, human life is a series of self projects (becomings) in which one attempts to make sense of the chaos, disequilibrium, and ambiguity that characterizes life (Prigogine and Stengers 1984; de Beauvoir 1948, 1949; Sartre 1943, 1947). Moreover, human experiences are irreversible, because the past (personal history) cannot be undone, reversed, or “un-experienced”; one can never return to exactly the same conditions of a previous state or point in one’s life. Thus, all phenomenological descriptions of the world are dependent on the arrow of time. Creating one’s essence, like the evolution of nature, suggests that the present is not all there is; both essence and evolution are continual processes in the making.

Post-humanists, along with existentialists, insist that humans have no inherent higher meaning or purpose, for meaning is something created via consciousness and action. However, the phenomenon of life as a natural complex energy system does have a purpose – it is not a theological one, but a material, thermodynamic one that moves toward stability and equilibrium; in other words, death. Nature abhors a gradient, and that
goal to achieve a steady state drives both human and non-human existence, extending throughout the strata of the body and nature (Schneider and Sagan 2005). Both scientists and philosophers have pointed out the existential crisis humans in particular face in the awareness of their own mortality, and this has implications for both evolution and ethical action. Biologists Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan (1997) explain quite simply that in order to live or continue on into the future, humans must “have sex and die as conscious individuals” (115). In striking similarity to the second law of thermodynamics, de Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that every living moment “is a sliding towards death…”, and humans must not “deny this death which it carries in its heart” (de Beauvoir 1996:127). At the same time, she reminds the reader that every movement towards death is life, and what one makes of one’s life depends on what one does, or becomes. Indeed, as humans, it is our responsibility to become what we are. “Life” in all realms of nature, human and non-human, is activity (Schneider and Sagan 2005; Prigogine 1997).

In the following section, I critically review the first chapter of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, titled “The Data of Biology,” and apply knowledge emerging from “sciences of becoming” to elaborate on the biological information de Beauvoir presents.

### 4.4 “The Data of Biology”: A Critical Review

In the introduction of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1989) makes a crucial distinction between females and women, and what later became known in feminist discourses as the distinction between sex and gender. Sex, like biology, has typically been regarded as fixed, because it exists in the realm of the natural, whereas gender is seen as more fluid
and socially constructed on top of sex – hence de Beauvoir’s thesis, one is not born but becomes a woman. No female is born a girl or a woman, and not all females become women; to be considered a woman, a female must possess “that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (xxv). Yet de Beauvoir claims the term female has acquired a negative connotation, serving as “an insult” in the way that it “imprisons [woman] to her sex” (3). In other words, by reducing woman (a social idea) to female (a biological idea), she is ensnared as nature’s vehicle to create, maintain, and perpetuate the species, in which most of her time is expected to be caretaking and maintaining as opposed to creating (25); hence for women, biology becomes destiny.

De Beauvoir ultimately uses the first chapter of *The Second Sex*, called “The Data of Biology,” to shows how facts of sexual difference take on particular meanings once interpreted through the human perspective. Extremely thorough and rigorously researched, the chapter offers an investigation into sex diversity in nature by analyzing bio-material discourses of sexual difference and sexual reproduction in both humans and non-humans. De Beauvoir contends that scientists have written women’s inferiority and ‘natural’ role as biological reproducers into biology, in part contributing to woman being poised as the Other sex. She purposely adopts the “finalistic language” of the natural sciences if only to illustrate the fundamental and very existential idea that if every biological and physiological function entails a project (something to be done), then all biological facts must imply transcendence (10). In making this claim, de Beauvoir is clear that she has no interest in providing a philosophy of life nor dissertating the relationship

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5 de Beauvoir’s nuanced vision of sexual difference might arguably be a result of the existentialist observations of mind versus body, such that gender (identity) is a sense of self in terms of femininity and/or masculinity, and the sexed body as becoming male, female, or intersexed. de Beauvoir’s foresight into transgender and transsexual identities and her attention to intersexuality offers a more radical view of sex and gender than many feminists are willing to grant her.
between life and consciousness. Biology is part of one’s becoming but it cannot define one’s entire being.

De Beauvoir begins “The Data of Biology” by stating that while sexual differentiation exists within the human species for the purpose of reproduction, this difference does not exist consistently throughout nature, nor is it always clear-cut. There are organisms in nature that reproduce without sex – for example, single-celled amoebas and sporozoans. These and other organisms reproduce through processes such as blastogenesis (reproduction by way of budding) and schizogenesis (reproduction by fission, or cell division) (4). De Beauvoir finds the vitality of bacteria and protozoa especially impressive, as they can reproduce without sex “indefinite[ly]” and without degenerating (5). In addition, there are organisms that practice parthenogenesis, a form of non-sexual reproduction in which a female egg develops into an embryo without male fertilization. In presenting these examples, de Beauvoir attempts to de-emphasize sexual difference as necessary to procreation specifically and to life generally. She even points to recent (circa 1948) experiments exploring the possible redundancy of males for reproduction in certain species, including the honey bee, sea urchin, starfish, and frog (4-5). Finally, de Beauvoir examines alternative ways in which sexual reproduction itself can be accomplished. For example hermaphrodites have the presence of both male and female reproductive organs and can reproduce through self-fertilization or cross-fertilization. This is commonly found in plants and “lower” animals such as annelid worms and mollusks (5).

De Beauvoir’s point is to show that sexual and asexual reproduction coexist in nature, and both succeed in perpetuating the species. This leads her to conclude that the
differentiation of gametes, much like differentiation between species, appears to be the “accidental” result of evolution (5). Sexual difference developed for the function of reproduction in certain species, but this differentiation itself is contingent and should be taken as no more than “simply an irreducible fact of observation” (6). As nature clearly shows, sex and reproduction are not analogous, and de Beauvoir even entertains the possibility of hermaphroditic or parthenogenic societies in the future (7). Nevertheless, men/biologists have exploited this link between sexual difference and reproduction to corroborate woman’s place in the home and as the second sex. This biologically determinist view has discursively enslaved women to the species simply through her reproductive capacity and forced heterosexuality as the “natural” norm. However, de Beauvoir argues that if sexual difference exists for the function of reproduction, and every function entails a project or something to be done, then the function of reproduction can also be transcended (10). The problem is that this transcendence has traditionally been easier for males, because their bodies are not locked up in menstruation, pregnancy, or breastfeeding. A man’s reproductive life “is not in opposition to his existence as a person” (32), and biologically it is not nearly as intrusive to the body; it does not interfere with how he grasps and interacts with the world, nor does it limit his projects. As de Beauvoir writes, “[W]oman, like man, is her body, but her body is something other than herself” (29).

De Beauvoir contends that while biology clearly shows that sexual difference is an indisputable fact in nature, the actual material differentiation between the sexes is not omnipresent in cell structure or division, nor is it imperative to “any basic phenomenon” of life (5). However, it is worth noting the translator’s corrective footnote to this claim:
In modern evolutionary theory, however, the mixing of hereditary factors (genes) brought about by sexual reproduction is considered highly important since it affords a constant supply of new combinations for natural selection to act upon. And sexual differentiation often plays an important part in sexual reproduction. (fn1, 5)

To begin, the translator, Howard Parshley, was a professor emeritus of zoology at the time he translated *The Second Sex*. Fifteen years before, in 1933, he had written a book called *The Science of Human Reproduction: Biological Aspects of Sex* that essentially highlights the importance of sexual complementarity in sexual reproduction (Simons 1999). Parshley is not necessarily wrong when he says that sexual differentiation plays an important role in sexual reproduction – namely, the mixing and rebalancing of the gene pool among species – but his footnote completely misses de Beauvoir’s point about the prevalence of non-sexual forms of reproduction in nature. By trying to correct de Beauvoir’s ‘data of biology,’ Parshley attempts to reassert the centrality of dominant scientific discourse on sexual difference.

What is more, earlier in this footnoted paragraph de Beauvoir underscores the “especially striking” fact of bacterial reproduction to explicitly contest the position of some biologists – and I would include Parshley – that sexual differentiation is indicative of a more complex organism. Yet sex (and thus, sexual difference) was not selected for in animals or humans – rather, it was the only way they could develop, as the result of long-term symbiosis (Margulis and Sagan 1997; Parisi 2009). Bacteria developed the first forms of sex, reproductive strategies, and important life processes such as metabolism, multicellularity, nanotechnology, sensory and locomotive apparatuses, and death (Hird 2010; Margulis and Sagan 2000). Considering that humans owe their very existence to bacteria, it seems difficult to claim that sexual difference is imperative to the phenomena
of life. While sexual reproduction has been occurring for hundreds of millions of years, organisms such as bacteria have been reproducing without sex for billions of years. In fact, the norm for the first two billion years of life on earth was single-parent reproduction without sex (Hird 2009; Margulis and Sagan 1997).

When taking into consideration the myriad of reproductive ‘technologies’ employed across nature, most living beings in four out of five kingdoms do not require sex to reproduce (Margulis and Sagan 1997; Roughgarden 2004a, 2004b). For species who do require sex to reproduce, the organism itself must produce specialized sex cells and must expend time and energy looking for and establishing relations with a mate, posing interesting challenges to the cost-effectiveness sexual reproduction when compared to parthenogenesis or non-sexual reproduction (Jantsch 1980; Laqueur 1990; Margulis and Sagan 1997; MacKay 2001, in Hird 2009). Species that do not require sex to reproduce do not develop sexually differentiated cells, meaning gender differences also do not develop. In fact, even in species such as humans that do sexually reproduce, the cells that make up the body actually alternate between the unmated (haploid) and the mated (diploid) (Hird 2009; Margulis and Sagan 1997). Sexual difference, it seems, is not nearly as pervasive within the body nor throughout nature as Parshley and other biologists contend.

At its most basic level, sex is genetic recombination, the mixing and uniting of genes (DNA molecules) from more than one source to produce a new individual (Margulis and Sagan 1997; Roughgarden 2004b). Sex originated from DNA repair. Billions of years ago when there was no ozone layer, bacteria were subject to extreme solar radiation. Sunlight had ripped through the bacteria and split them apart, and the
high-energy radiation caused the cells to mutate. Although they had developed genetic repair to deal with things like radiation damage, they were nevertheless unable to fix and re-join their own DNA. As a result, they began to integrate other’s DNA and, hence, the beginning of sex (Margulis and Sagan 1997).

In bacterial sex specifically, one partner donates some or all of its genetic material to a partner (the receiver); in acquiring these genes through horizontal transfer, the receiver incurs genetic change and immediately becomes a new organism, because genes are passed fluidly. Importantly, because the number of organisms does not increase in bacterial sex, it is not a reproductive process (Margulis and Sagan 1997:239). As de Beauvoir notes, bacteria reproduce through fragmentation (cell division) and split their DNA into two, producing absolutely identical bacteria to the parent. Life for bacteria expands through this urge for cell division, which is why bacteria and other prototists are immortal; although they can be killed, they do not experience natural, programmed death (Margulis and Sagan 1997, 2000). Sexually reproducing species like humans, on the other hand, experience death because life extends via vertical gene transfer, that is, through generations. The genetic material from two parents are mixed and diluted during fertilization, at the beginning of the life cycle, and this creates an entirely new being that grows, matures, and dies (Jantsch 1980; Margulis and Sagan 1997).

Sex, in other words, started off as a survival tactic for bacteria, in which the integration of foreign DNA into one’s own DNA (genetic infusion) allowed them to persist in a “chemically chaotic and irradiated world” (Margulis and Sagan 1997:67). Significantly, sex is also a side effect of thermodynamic dissipation in that it maintains far-from-equilibrium conditions and increases disorder through which various types of
self-organizational processes occur, leading to chemical fluctuations and/or the appearance of spatial structures (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). Today, sex is how living dissipative systems propagate in a time-dependent universe heading toward disorder and decay (Schneider and Sagan 2005:154). Indeed, sex begins an irreversible aging process that leads to death; as Margulis and Sagan (1997) so eloquently put it, “…we are born, sexually reproduce, and die rather than vice versa” (32). Sex is the means through which certain species reproduce physiological systems like their own but which are new and sometimes, though not always improved to ensure future existence. In these ways, sexual reproducers achieve both biological ends (continuation of the species) and those of physics (movement towards equilibrium or death) (Margulis and Sagan 1997).

These becomings of sex illustrate the materiality of energy and flow. The composition and decomposition of the bodies of organisms occurs in accord with the second law of thermodynamics: bodies exemplify open dynamic developmental systems which are organizationally closed but otherwise open to energy and material flows that, like all open complex systems, require gradients (Capra 2002; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Parisi 2004; Schneider and Sagan 2005). Living organisms experience these flows constantly through basic processes of living such as eating, breathing, excreting, and sex. As Margulis and Sagan (1997: 32-3) remark, it is perhaps no coincidence that many natural pleasures tend to involve orifices and flows, such as thrusting, sucking, and coming, drinking and eating, defecating and urinating, sweating and sneezing, and even music (as sound waves entering the ear) and vision (as light waves permeating the pupil).

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6 It is important to note that when speaking about sex in this way, I am not attempting to put forward a patriarchal or heteronormative paradigm of reproduction or birth. Sexual reproduction necessitates the fusion of egg and sperm cells, and this can be accomplished within or without the body. This fusion is also not dependent on gender differences.
Another point at which de Beauvoir challenges essential sexual difference is by highlighting the similarities that exist across sexes in the process of reproduction. As she explains, fertilization necessitates both egg and sperm: an egg cannot be fertilized without sperm, and sperm are of little reproductive use unless they encounter an egg that enables a new organism to thrive. The role of egg and sperm are “fundamentally identical”, she argues, because the individuality of both gametes are lost and at the same time transcended (13). The male provides the stimuli (fertilization) needed to evoke new life, and the female element (egg) enables this new life to grow as an organism. With no existing research at the time that could detail the “physio-chemical reactions that lead up to gametic union”, de Beauvoir concludes that there is nothing to suggest that either the sperm or egg hold a prominent role in fertilization or procreation (ibid.).

Today there is knowledge about the thermodynamics of sex that can elaborate upon de Beauvoir’s claims and offers new ways for thinking about the material becomings of sex. As Margulis and Sagan (1997) point out that “[I]n biology, 1 + 1 does not equal 2. Rather, 1 + 1 = 1, as in one sperm plus one egg equals one fertilized egg” (5). Specifically, the process of fertilization occurs as the sperm enters the egg and the haploid cells meet; the two begin to fuse, combine chromosomes, and become one diploid cell, restoring “genetic quorum” (Roughgarden 2004a:191). The diploid nucleus divides many times to form an embryo, which grows and develops from assemblages of interacting cells working under genetic, thermodynamic, and environmental constraints (Capra 2002; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Hird 2002; Jantsch 1980; Margulis and Sagan 1997; Parisi 2004). The developing, living organism is always changing and maintaining through relations between microcellular and multicellular entities. The body, therefore, is
in a constant state of physically becoming; composed and decomposed by the activity of molecules, forces, energies, and thousands of chemical processes that work to keep that organism – be it an amoeba or a human being – alive, from life to death (Capra 2002; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Parisi 2004; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Saul 1958). The body moreover practices combinations intersex, reproduction, and heterogeneous exchange with the environment at every material strata (Hird 2002; Margulis and Sagan 1997; Parisi 2004). From a post-humanist view, then, humans too are emergent phenomena like other physical processes in the world (Barad 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2000).

These self-generating networks and processes that keep an organism alive is also known as autopoiesis. Cells feed on continual flows of matter and energy from their environment to stay alive in far-from-equilibrium conditions, but in heading towards equilibrium they will start to decay if the cellular metabolism does not utilize flows of energy to restore dying structures (Capra 2002). While the same overall structure of these dissipative structures is sustained through the continual flow and change of components, they can also bring “the spontaneous emergence of new forms of order” (Capra 2002:13). As flows of energy increase, the system may become so completely instable that it reaches a bifurcation point and the system “branches off” into a new state where determined structures and order emerge (ibid. 13). The point at which chromosomal or cellular sex is determined and subsequent features emerge throughout embryonic development are examples of bifurcation points. In this way, dissipative structures can be understood as complex becomings, not beings. Whereas many biologists (including Parshley) think about “complexity” in terms of structure – for instance, according to how many different cell types an organism has – dissipative structures illustrate complexity in
terms of *processes* of emergence – in a word, becomings. One might consider, for example, how many bifurcations an embryo incurs in the organism’s development to determine its morphological complexity (Capra 2002:14). Thus the human body is anything but fixed or stable; rather, as Jantsch (1980, in Schneider and Sagan 2005) describes, it is “a Prigoginean flow of processes, a networked whirl of genes and cells in a non-equilibrium biosphere spun out by a creative, novelty-generating, non-equilibrium universe” (104). No matter what strata – be it social, biological, or physical – bodies are always in situation; they are – we are – active material becomings.

Significantly, de Beauvoir approaches sex as developmental and not as something static or given with existence. Although males and females are sometimes portrayed as virtually two difference species, de Beauvoir reminds the reader that in actuality they are really just “variations on a common groundwork” (14). At the beginning stages of embryonic development, the tissue which ultimately forms the gonads is indifferent to the sexes, and at a particular stage become either testes or ovaries; thus, there is a period of time that the sex of the embryo cannot be determined by examination. Sex is not immediate or given, and although genotype is determined at fertilization, phenotypic sex can still be highly can be affected by the environment in which it develops (15). The existence of hermaphroditism and intersexuality are a case in point. de Beauvoir even suggests that the *soma* (body) initially exists as a “neutral element” upon which hormones direct and affect sexual characteristics (ibid.). But before de Beauvoir can discuss her research on the existence of sexual variation and diversity in nature, the translator again offers his “expertise” on de Beauvoir’s biological claims. Parshley’s
response to the idea that the soma might be a “neutral element” asserts the notion that normal is right and abnormal is wrong:

In connection with this view [of the soma as neutral], it must be remembered that in man [sic.] and many animals the soma is not strictly neutral, since all its cell are genotypically either male (XY) or female (XX). This is why the young individual normally produces either the male or the female hormonal environment, leading normally to the development of either male or female characteristics. (15, emphasis added)

For one, de Beauvoir demonstrates over the next several pages that this “normal” pathway is just one of many that the development of sex may take, and in doing so details the similarities as well as the ambiguities that exist in sexual development. Again, the translator misses de Beauvoir’s larger point and feels compelled to remind the reader about what is deemed normal in t(his) field of research. This itself is striking, considering de Beauvoir is skeptical from the beginning of how women are portrayed in biology.

As well, current biological research on sex development helps to paint a more diversified picture of becomings of sex and corroborates some of de Beauvoir’s claims. As she explains, during the first couple weeks of development, both XX and XY embryos develop an indifferent gonad, named for its existence in both embryos. Up until the sixth week of development, XX and XY embryos are anatomically identical with a set of female (Müllerian) ducts and a set of male (Wolffian) ducts – and this is regardless of the sex chromosomes within the cells (Fausto-Sterling 1992; Rosario 2009; Swain and Lovell-Badge 1999). Thus, after six weeks of fertilization, all embryos have what they need to develop into either male or female: they are sexually bipotent (Fausto-Sterling 1992; Rosario 2009). However, at present it is unclear which gene(s) are involved in triggering sex determination. Some argue it is through the dominance of the SRY gene on the Y chromosome that actively directs the indifferent gonad to develop testes in males;
the absence of this gene means ovaries will develop and the Wolffian ducts will degenerate (Swain 1999; Wade 2007, in Rosario 2009). Others suggest the trigger is through a gene present in both sexes, given documented cases in which XX individuals developed testes without the presence SRY, as well as XY individuals who developed ovaries because of a duplicate X chromosome gene, causing a “double dose” of X and overriding the influence of the SRY gene (Fausto-Sterling 1992; Rosario 2009). This said, the soma may not be “neutral” at the start in the way de Beauvoir suggests, given its potential for both developmental paths, but the developing soma is surely not as deeply or essentially sexed as either male or female as Parshley suggests.

While classical biology tends to portray sex or sexual differentiation through mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories of male and female, de Beauvoir is quick to note that this division is actually quite ambiguous throughout nature (4). The production of sperm and egg (gametes), for example, can occur in the same animal as it does in hermaphrodites. There is also the occurrence of gynandromorphism among insects and crustaceans in nature, a condition in which the body resembles a sexual “mosaic” of male and female areas (15). Traditionally, biological determinist arguments use non-humans to exemplify how (human) gender is entrenched in nature/biology and to suggest that heterosexuality is “natural” and serves a biological imperative in nature (Birke 2010; Fausto-Sterling 1997; Grosz 1995). However, contemporary biological research demonstrates numerous examples throughout “evolution’s rainbow” that turn these assumptions on their head. For example, most plants and flowers and many animal species are intersex, having both male and female sex organs within the same individual, while other species including the coral goby and some fish are transsex, changing their
sex between female and male (Hird 2004b). As well, there are many animals who often engage in various kinds of same-sex sexual behaviour for pleasure, such as insects, spiders, seagulls, bonobos, Japanese macaques, bighorn sheep, and whiptail lizards (Alaimo 2010; Bagemihl 1999; Hird 2004b; Roughgarden 2004a).

Finally, de Beauvoir points out that humans and non-humans who are intersexed possess varying extents of both male and female characteristics, even when the sex cells are expressly XX or XY. Specifically, intersex conditions are often caused by hormone hypersensitivity or insensitivity, meaning hormone levels change so neither sexual potentiality is “exclusively realized” (16). Given the existence of intersex and hermaphroditism in nature, de Beauvoir concludes that one cannot define females as possessing eggs and males as possessing sperm, given that this relationship between the organism and the gonads is “quite variable” (ibid.). Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) research into the medical management of intersex infants and the social construction of sex corroborates that claim. A renown biologist and feminist, Fausto-Sterling’s work demonstrates that male and female are best understood as existing at the extreme ends of the biological continuum. There are many bodies and configurations in between that consist of varying components of female and male. The most common types of intersexuality include congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), in which an XX child shows varying degrees of masculinized genitalia and masculinization at puberty; androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), in which an XY child is born with highly feminized genitalia; gonadal dysgenesis, occurring mostly in XY children whose gonads do not develop properly; Turner Syndrome, a form of gonadal dysgenesis in females who lack an X chromosome (XO) and thus do not develop ovaries and lack secondary sex
characteristics; and Klinefelter Syndrome, a form of gonadal dysgenesis in males who are born with an extra X chromosome (XXY) (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Most of these conditions are not life-threatening, however, some forms of CAH can severely disrupt one’s salt metabolism and can be life threatening if not treated, while others with irregular development of the gonads may experience related health issues such as urinary tract infections if not treated.

Estimates suggest that at the high end, up to 2% of all live births exhibit some sex ambiguity (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Hird 2000). Indeed, people with mixed sex appear non-existent because, for one, intersex conditions are not always visible on the surface and may not be detectable until, for example, when trying to reproduce. Second, medical and scientific methods have classified people who are intersexed out of existence. According to Western medicine, intersex is considered to be a defect, a medical emergency in need of immediate correction (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Doctors often tell the parents of an intersex child that their child is male or female, it is just that embryonic development is incomplete, as opposed to telling them their child is intersexed (ibid. 64). This reasoning follows the idea that nature is fixed and that sex is supposed to exist as male or female, restoring the two-sex system. To be sure, the tactics used to determine which sex to assign the infant are variable; sometimes reasoning is based on the appearance of anatomy, and other times it is based on future reproductive capacity. As Fausto-Sterling (1992:84-5) asks, “At what point in its growth do we stop calling the genital tubercle a clitoris and start calling it a penis? How small does a penis have to be before we call it a clitoris?” Definitions of sex itself are never clear cut, and doctors rarely rely on chromosome make-up to determine sex. Moreover, decisions made about sex are based
on a model of heteronormativity, because sex is assumed to line up with gender and with sexuality in a particular or “normal” way.

The medical management of intersexuality is ethically problematic for several reasons. For one, the infant or child is rarely involved in the decision making process or even told about their condition, and often the parents are not well-informed about the need for and effects of surgery (Ehrenreich and Barr 2005). Once the “best” sex is decided (Hird 2000), the child must endure years of surgeries and therapies in efforts to help the child fit in and function as both physically (anatomically) and psychologically healthy human beings. Not only are these reconstructive surgeries often painful, but they include some rather questionable practices such as exercising a small dildo into a new vagina to dilate it (presumably to fit a penis), or masturbating a male-designated infant to ‘test’ erectile function (Ehrenreich and Barr 2005; Fausto-Sterling 2000). The end result of extensive surgeries is often the loss of sexual sensations and pleasure, too. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, many intersex conditions do not pose any health problems to the individual, rendering the above surgeries and therapies largely unnecessary. Sadly, all of this is done to “help” the patient become psychologically and socially well-adjusted but which often ends up being counterproductive to one’s psychological well-being (ibid.). This has led to the formation of organizations such as The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) that work to strengthen the voices of those who are intersexed, to inform the public, and to end the “shame, secrecy, and unwanted genital surgeries” of those persons born with anatomy considered atypical by the medical community.

But sex development does not stop at birth. de Beauvoir explains how hormones work as both stimulators and inhibitors in sex development and facilitate the growth of
the body’s secondary sex characteristics. Both the gonads and the genitals continue to grow after fetal development and throughout childhood, and as the individual approaches puberty, sex expands beyond anatomic development to include secondary sex characteristics, all of which are furthermore affected by nutrition, health, levels of physical activity, and acts of randomness (see also Fausto-Sterling 2000). Indeed, the body continues to be affected by these elements throughout life and can continue to affect sex. As an example, in some elite female athletes, the loss of body fat to below a certain fat-to-protein ratio will cause menstruation to cease (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As well, sexual physiology and anatomy change over time and with age. One’s physique as an infant, a teenager, a thirty-something, and a senior is not constant. Not only does one’s body change but so does the experiences of one’s sexual body as it transforms over time.

As the ‘data of biology’ in this section reveals, sex is not static. Sex, like gender, is a becoming; and given that sexuality derives from the phenomenological body, sexuality can also be seen as a becoming in tandem with changes in sexual body structure, function, and internal/external image (Fausto-Sterling 2000:243). In other words, given that sex is not static, the ways in which we experience our sex and our sexed body are not static either.

4.5 Conclusion

At the end of “The Data of Biology”, de Beauvoir concludes she is not convinced that either sex hormones or sexual anatomy are sufficient to define the human female; rather, it is her “functional development” and capacities that distinguishes her from the human male (25-26). In separating out sex and reproduction, I have expanded on de Beauvoir’s
evidence of vast sexual diversity in nature and elucidated the complex materiality of sex. The problem with essentialized ideas of sexual difference is that they are based on thinking about components of a system – penis, clitoris, physique, etc. – and not about the sexed-body as a developmental system, constantly active, incurring flows, changing. Both body and behaviour are part of an interconnected system such that human sexuality may be viewed through interconnecting layers, “from the cellular to the social and historical” (Fausto-Sterling 2000:253).

While the phenomenon of reproduction is founded in the very nature of being, the perpetuation of species does not require absolute sexual difference. Sexual difference is not the be-all and end-all of human existence, nor is sexual differentiation necessary to human existence. As de Beauvoir argues, one’s being in the world “implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view toward this world,” yet this existence does not require a particular sexual structure or morphology outside its chemical make-up as a Homo sapien (7). However, patriarchal (and heteronormative) arguments that rely on essentialized sexual difference tend to move from significance to necessity. Absolute sexual differentiation is significant for reproduction in sexually reproducing species, but it is not a necessity to keep the species going.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I conclude with a sketch of an existential-phenomenological approach to sexuality for the 21st century and illustrate the contributions this approach will make to sexuality and feminist theories.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: An Existential Phenomenological Approach to Sexuality

“...the sexual life is a sector of our life bearing a special relation to the existence of sex. There can be no question of allowing sexuality to become lost in existence, as if it were no more than an epiphenomenon.”
(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception)

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, knowledge about sexuality throughout the last 200 years has been based on an ontology of being and values associated with reproduction and heteronormativity. In Chapters Two and Four I demonstrated how classical scientific approaches to sex and sexuality rely heavily on the use of dichotomies (such as the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual divides), reductionism (where the complexity of sexuality is reduced to genes, brain structure, reproduction, sex/gender preference), determinism (where genetics or other biological structures are believed to cause or determine sexual orientation), stability (sex and sexuality are inherent and unchanging), and timelessness (fixed over time). These methodological values have contributed to knowledge about sexuality that is based on a gendered relationship between sexed humans and in relation to reproduction. Homosexuality as a sexual orientation came about through disciplinary interest in deviant sexual desires and behaviours that were incongruent with pro-natalist values and morals. Subsequently, bisexual and heterosexual orientations were conceptualized to describe other directions of gendered desire. With the sexual liberation movement in 1960s, sexual orientation gave way to sexual identity and the beginnings of sexual identity politics. While sexual identity has become an important construction for understanding and making sense of
one’s sexual self in the social world, it also limits how one understands sexuality generally and one’s sexual self more specifically.

How one comes to describe the sexual self is in part based on the categories and terms available from dominant discourses, and as I have shown, contemporary discourses in sexuality are still primarily concerned with gendered desire. In this conclusion, I theorize an existential phenomenological approach to sexuality in which I decenter but not discount gender in sexuality. Moreover, while sexual(ized) identities like queer, pansexual, and bisexual in their own ways may de-emphasize gender in describing one’s sexual attractions and desires, it is perhaps the idea of “identity” that is most troubling from an existential phenomenological perspective. As I conclude this dissertation, I bring together chapters two, three, and four and consider a “sexistentialist” approach to sexuality that takes special interest in time, becoming, and materiality. In doing so, I consider how the forward direction of time, self-projects, and the materiality of sex interact in the expression of human sexual becomings.

I begin with the premise that sexuality is embedded in existence and that the capacity for sexuality originates in the existence of a sexed body (Margulis and Sagan 1997; Merleau-Ponty 2004; Sartre 1992). As I proposed in chapter four, the body is best understood as a dynamic developmental system, and the bio-physiological materiality of sex and sexuality, while not directly experienced, does affect one’s bodily situation and sexual experience. Using the philosophy of phenomenology as well as scientific research from non-linear biology and non-equilibrium thermodynamics, I showed how the body is always in situation, both materially and socially, and it is also always changing and in flux as it responds to, for instance, health conditions, hormones, decay, weather, aging,
athletic training, surgery, consumption, and so on (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012; Weeks 2003). In other words, instability, uncertainty and ambiguity are inherent to both the human condition and to life itself (de Beauvoir 1989, 1996; Prigogine 1997, 2003; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Schneider and Sagan 2005; Sartre 1992). The fluxes between stability and instability, between certainty and uncertainty, between ambiguity and clarity are also inherent to morphologies of sex and sexuality. De Beauvoir’s (1996) analysis of the data of biology, corroborated by current non-linear biological data, points to the fact that sex itself is also dynamic and developmental, evidenced from fertilization well into puberty, adulthood, and old age. The sexed body is not fixed, nor is it timeless. Ontologically, therefore, I move the body into the realm of becoming and theorize the sexed body and the sexual self together as a dialectical becoming. In this way, the manifestation of one’s sexuality and sexual desires is viewed as a phenomenon that occurs through overlapping and interconnecting layers of biology and culture throughout one’s lifetime (Diamond 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012). What is more, given the body’s situational and fluctuating quality, the sexual desires that emanate from the sexed body can also fluctuate, proving them to be much more fluid than entrenched (Diamond 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2012).

The body is a curious entity. It is us, yet we are more than our bodies, because the body is both subject and object (de Beauvoir 1949). The body is one’s being or anchorage in the world, as well as the being of others in the world. In phenomenology, the body also works as an epistemological tool for “knowing” or grasping sexuality as the material experience of one’s own sexed body and in relation to another’s sexed body (Heinämaa 2003; Merleau-Ponty 2004; Sartre 1992). The discovery of one’s being-for-others – that
is, of one’s social existence – is a “rediscovery of corporality, and hence of sexuality…” (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008:108). Ontologically, one’s sexual-being-in-the-world and sexual-being-for-others convey the idea that one has a being that desires and also a being that is desired by others. As Sartre (1992) explains, “…I desire him (or her) as he is and as I am in situation in the world and as he is an Other for me and as I am an Other for him” (499). One’s sexual bodily being is always situated in relation to some one or some thing. However, it must be understood that “this Other is not necessarily for me – nor I for him – a heterosexual existent but only a being who has sex” (ibid. 500). Sexual desires do not flow from one’s organs nor are they programmed in the mind; rather, they develop over time in conjunction with sexual, gender, and cultural practices. By decentering gender in the phenomena of sexuality, one’s sexual existence is understood in terms of having the capacity for sexuality, but because one’s essence is not predetermined, one is not destined to desire any sex or gender in particular.

Significantly, an existential phenomenological viewpoint explains sexual desire as being initiated by material qualities that do not have or require a sex or gender (de Beauvoir 1949; Sartre 1992). Sexuality is interaction with consciousness, objects, bodies, sensations, smells, sounds, and textures. The pleasure of sex, of sexuality, is experienced through the materiality and sensuality of that which is smooth, creamy, hard, soft, wet, rough, hairy, and so on – that is, the materiality that excites us (de Beauvoir 1949:377; Sartre 1943). These “polymorphous perversions” (Freud 1982) – or as I prefer, polymorphous pleasures or desires – know no sex or gender. Polymorphous desires are mutable and multidirectional, situated and contingent. From this point I argue that perhaps it is not so much “women” and “men” that are sexually desired but instead those
qualities and material forces, albeit often associated with gender, that arouse and excite. To be sure, many of these sensual qualities and material phenomena exist across sex and gender. For example, the penis and the clitoris originate from the same tissue and are undifferentiated during the first six weeks of development. As they develop after birth, both have the capacity to express sexual arousal through tumescence, erection, and throbbing. During sexual arousal, humans – females, males, intersex individuals, men, and women, whether trans- or cis-identified – can experience wetness in the anus, within the vagina, or at the tip of the penis, and as well as the hardening of the nipples. Sexual human beings can also all experience orgasm and some form of ejaculation. At the same time, all women and men have some areas of smooth skin and some areas of hair throughout their body. Yet there is also great material difference and variation among those of the same sex in terms in terms of size, shape, texture, colour, and function/performance. In other words, human beings demonstrate degrees of sexual similarity and difference with each other.

In accordance with an existential phenomenological approach, then, the body takes an active role in sexuality and as opposed to “being” a vehicle and object of experience. Merleau-Ponty’s (2004:181) notions of “erotic perception” and “erotic comprehension” help to explain how the body itself comprehends and desires and elaborate on the role of the body in sexuality. Erotic perception occurs as one’s (sexed/sexual) body aims at and becomes aware of another (sexed) body. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the phenomenon of erotic perception takes place specifically in the

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7 I also recognize that these phenomena can be impaired in some individuals. For example, individuals who suffer from a sexual dysfunction, are paralyzed, have had varying degrees of reconstructive surgery, or have experienced sexual trauma may very well have difficulties accomplishing some of these things. What is important is that material phenomena of the sexed body is not so different across gender/sex.
material world and not the mind; in other words, a kind of bodily consciousness. Erotic comprehension, on the other hand, is desire. The body comprehends through the desire that makes it gravitate toward another body. Together, erotic perception and comprehension underscore the body’s active sexual desiring through material attractions that are not laden with meanings of gender; that is, pre-discursive material desires. In this way, the body’s sexual desires refer to the sexual stimuli, not in the knowledge, meaning, or significance of the sexual stimuli.

Nevertheless, the omnipresence of the sex/gender binary reinforces rigid ideas about sexual difference, which in part has informed the conceptualization of sexuality into gendered sexual orientations and identities. This is problematic, because sexual orientation is concerned with heteronormative gender preference and a cis-sexist assumption about congruent sex. As I discussed in chapter two, many intersex, transgender, and transsexual individuals do not identify with the sexual experiences subsumed under homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual orientations (and identities). Moreover, these contemporary sexual orientations and identities fail to capture gender diversity across the different (hormonal, chromosomal, anatomical, etc.) configurations of sex in humans (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Thurer 2005) and, are often either rejected by transgender, transsexual, and intersex persons, or are policed by cis-gendered communities. Indeed, one should be critical of any description or model of sexuality that does not take into account the vast degree of sex and gender diversity that exist in humans (Stein 1999).

In order to move beyond sexual orientation and identity as the primary ways for understanding sexuality, I theorize the becoming of sexuality through the idea of the
sexual self-project. In doing so, I emphasize the role of freedom, choice, contingency, and uncertainty in the making of the sexual self. According to existentialism, accepting or assuming a sexual fate (in the form of a sexual identity or orientation) is inauthentic, because it is “to pretend that what I am ‘essentially’ or ‘by nature’ is once and for all established” (Russell 1979:37). One flees responsibility for who one is and coasts on the assumption of a uninterrupted sexual existence. To treat sexual desire as a being of gendered desire as opposed to a becoming of material forces transforms polymorphous sexual desires into a kind of sexual fate. It is an attempt to achieve comfort in a stable and permanent sexual self amid the ambiguity of existence, yet this is something one ultimately fails at, because sexual desire is neither stable nor permanent (Hayim 1996). Desire is always a contingent and situated becoming; presumably, a self-described heterosexual (or homosexual) does not sexually desire all persons of the other (or same) sex/gender (Sartre 1992: 499-500).

The fluidity and continuity between the sexual-being-in-itself and the sexual-being-for-itself express part of the “ontological mystery” of human existence (Ricoeur 1991:292). However, when one introduces freedom, as existentialism does, these ontological mysteries ultimately become existential mysteries (ibid.). The question then is not, what does it mean to exist as a sexual being but instead, what does it mean for me to exist as a sexual being and also as a sexual being for others. It is not only just about “who I am” and “who I desire” but also “who I am becoming.” An existential phenomenology of sexuality as an ethics, then, is concerned with “the intentionality which follows the general flow of existence and yields to its movements” (Merleau-Ponty 2004:181). It
specifically underscores sexuality as a project or becoming of the sexual self that is always situated, continually in the making, and thus never finally determined.

While identity itself is problematic to existentialism, it would be a mistake to repudiate sexual identity all together. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, the socio-sexual identities people adopt and inhabit “work” in so far as they order and help give meaning to individual needs and desires; however, they are not direct manifestations of those needs and desires (Weeks 2003). The embodied subject can give name and meaning to corporeal sexual experiences through sexual identity, but it is important to remember that this identity describes a direction of sexual attraction according to gender, not the actual bodily, sexual experience itself. A phenomenological approach to sexuality, in other words, sheds light on sexual experience \textit{a prior} to gendered meanings. While more alternative identities can be made up to express the range of human sexual desires and experience – something queer theory has helped achieve – it is instead action and not identity that is privileged in existential sexuality. Thus, sexuality is theorized as a continual construction that is, as part of one’s (sexual) self-project. This conceptualization moves away from “identity” and instead toward “identification.” It involves recognizing that sexual desires and sexual responses are contingent on bodily and social situations. While it may be easier, so to speak, to understand sexuality by breaking it down into categories of (gendered) preference and pathologies, it is a different thing to look at the processes and becomings of, not the beings of, sexuality and sexual desire. Indeed, these processes and becomings may be more telling of the individual self than connecting the facts of one’s being over time.
Therefore, the sexual self is not a timeless *being*; it is a time-dependent *becoming* that is open to instability and change (Butler 1993; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Giffney 2009). One’s sexual existence now is not the same as it was twenty, ten, or five years ago – or even last month. Given that sexuality is viewed as a dialectical relationship between the sexual body and sexual self, a body and/or self in flux necessarily means a sexuality in flux. The arrow of time makes experience irreversible, so a being can never be its past or be the same as its past, because the conditions, situations, demands, and opportunities are necessarily different. The arrow of time becomes a source of possibilities for the self, and it guides one instead toward thinking about the kind of (sexual) person one wants to *become*. Phenomena of sex move away from traditional explanations and descriptions of sexuality that tend to center on gender and reproduction. They offer a view of sexuality that embraces instability and uncertainty as part of one’s sexual journey. As such, one is encouraged to take sexuality as a sexual project of the self while at the same time affording attention to the body and the pre-discursive materiality of pleasure.

With such a strong focus on materiality, one apparent limitation to an existential phenomenological theory of sexuality is its applicability to those who may be limited in how they experience their bodies – for example, individuals who are paralyzed or live with a disability that limits the sensual experience. In a similar vein, it may be difficult to theorize the materiality of pleasure with those who’s “felt sense” of their body is not necessarily congruent with their physical body as it is perceived from the outside (Salamon 2004). As Salamon (2004) explains in her phenomenological and psychoanalytic account of the body, for some trans- and even cis-gendered people, the body that one feels is not always the same body one has – for example, a transman who
ignores his breasts and imagines having a penis and scrotum. In other words, “the relationship between the material and the phantasmatic in accounts of bodily being” reveal the tension in the ways that the materiality of the body is both present and absent to consciousness (ibid. 2). Similarly, Rubin (1998) explains that phenomenology recognizes the bounded agency of embodied subjects “who mobilize around their body image to sustain their life projects” (ibid. 30). In doing so, the phenomenological method returns agency to transgender subjects and affords them authority on their own narratives, in which transpeople’s stories create a place to find “counterdiscursive knowledge” (ibid. 30). I would argue, however, that the approach I outlined in this dissertation is in part compatible with both Salamon’s and Rubin’s work, and in future research this consideration of the phantasmatic could be worked into a sexistentialist approach to better account for the sexual experiences of some transwomen and transmen.

This dissertation serves as a new, constructive theory about sexuality, as opposed to simply a critique or response to hegemonic ideas about sexual identity. It contributes to scholarly literature in feminist theory, sexuality studies, studies in the philosophy of science, and identity politics. It makes an original contribution to feminist science and the realm of identity politics by challenging the use of sexual identities and demonstrating how they can be both self-deceptive and a means of social control. It also offers increased consideration to bodily experience and the materiality of sex and pleasure. By decentering gender, I contribute an alternative lens through which to view sex and sexuality and, combined with an existential ethics, offer a challenge to sexual identity politics by reframing sexuality identity in terms of the sexual self-project – ontologically,
that is, from being to becoming. Finally, this dissertation introduces existentialism and phenomenology into sociology by demonstrating their usefulness to sociological inquiry.
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