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THE IMMEMORIAL TIME OF GENDER:  
MERLEAU-PONTY'S POLYMORPHIC MATRIX  
OF ORIGINAL PAST

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In this paper, I tend to the concept of “immemorial past” or “time before time” and argue that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s turn in *The Visible and the Invisible*—a turn toward the conceptualization of time as chiasm and an ontology of the invisible—provides a rich resource for theorizing sexual difference, for the investigation of gender’s “original past,” that is, the polymorphous dimension of gender that grounds and coexists with the personal and present manifestations of gender.<sup>1</sup> I primarily engage with Megan Burke’s work on the anonymous temporality of gender.<sup>2</sup> I argue that, although useful to conceive as temporal the processes through which gender is sedimented, Burke’s account falls short in accounting for the different *kind* of temporality that the immemorial institutes, a temporality that is *generative* of meaning and signification. Burke’s blind spot prevents her from conceptualizing gender as emerging through self-differing; from thematizing the immemorial as the condition of possibility for the sedimentation of gender habits. As I will argue, shifting attention from the sedimentation and presence of gender habits to the fecund lack that grounds such sedimentation allows us to account for the structure that makes gender production, institution, and differing possible in the first place. Such a structure is a “fecund negativity,” a polymorphous field or depth, that points to the inherent instability and multiplicity of gender, to the fact that gender formation can be traced back to a plural and ambiguous ground that comes to expression in cultural-historical-linguistic manifestations. Furthermore, reckoning with the immemorial time of gender and, in turn, with gender’s ever-evolving and ever-becoming, lays the ground for a powerful critique of heteronormativity.

1. *The Immemorial Écart of the Flesh*

To understand the immemorial past of gender, we first need to grapple with Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of flesh as an attempt to develop a non-dualistic ontology that bridges the divide between self and world, subject and object, without erasing the specificity and difference of the two poles.<sup>3</sup> Self, others, and world emerge via self-divergence from flesh—an anonymous, impersonal tissue that generates differences “by dehiscence or fission of

its own mass.”<sup>74</sup> Articulating being as flesh has a twofold implication. First, it implies an intertwining and continual relation between touching and the touched, seeing and the seen, I and the other. This crossing over that takes place between the perceiver and the perceived brings Merleau-Ponty to claim that *reversibility* is always at play in flesh: “[W]e situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world.”<sup>75</sup> Merleau-Ponty illustrates the reversibility of the flesh with reference to the crisscrossing of touching and the tangible when two hands touch each other. When the right hand touches the left hand, the touching hand’s “movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it [the touched hand].”<sup>76</sup> Central to reversibility is that the “roles” of touching and touched are constituted by a slippage, a reversing of one into the other: “The ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.”<sup>77</sup> And yet, this “coiling back” never leads to complete unity or coincidence: “My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization.”<sup>78</sup> In the same way that I cannot experience, simultaneously, the one hand touching and the other being touched, so the reversibility of flesh is always *imminent*, existing on the verge of a completion that is never accomplished. Within reversibility, then, is this divergence, differing and deference—an *écart*.<sup>9</sup> Reversibility is possible precisely because “a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two.”<sup>10</sup>

This leads me to the second implication: Conceived as flesh, being is not a plentitude, self-coincidence. Rather, it is a fundamental openness, a diverging and dehiscing. Note that it would be a mistake to read the *écart* as introducing yet another dualism between the visible and the invisible, the self and the other, or as positing the self and world as absolute antinomies. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty carries out the interrogation of the self-other relation from *within* their encroaching. This is to say that Merleau-Ponty *reframes* the question of the self-other relation as one of mutual divergence, interrogating that which is prior to their division, that within and through which self and other—and more generally, difference—emerge.<sup>11</sup> As David Morris puts it, Merleau-Ponty interrogates the “global dynamics and directions of a field of being” out of which the sense of the I and the world emerge.<sup>12</sup> Locating his interrogation in this *in-between* allows Merleau-Ponty to state that “there is neither me nor the other as positive, positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two opennesses, two stages where something will take place—and which both belong to the same world, to the stage of Being.”<sup>13</sup> As observed, this shift in perception leads Merleau-Ponty to reconceptualize the relation of self and other as a chiasmic intertwining, reconceiving the self and the other such that each is the “possible of the other,” always encroached/ing upon the other.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, then, this opening is “not a *void*,” a lack or negation of being.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the *écart* is a “fecund negative,” the site, as the following discussion will

elucidate, of productive differing. This makes flesh “a pregnancy of possibles,” a “possibility, a latency” that accounts for difference in the unity of flesh.<sup>16</sup>

Although Merleau-Ponty’s image of the *écart* is extremely spatial, reversibility is more than a *differing*: it is also a temporal *deferring*. In “The ‘Backward Flow’ of Time,” Glen Mazis argues that “reversibility is an achievement within time;” reversibility is possible—its reversals can take place—only insofar as perception and experience are temporal phenomena.<sup>17</sup> This insight allows us to see that the gaping open of the perceiver and perceived, the dehiscence central to the chiasmic structure of flesh, is precisely that temporal thickness, which, found within the perceived (and the perceiver), holds *together* the perceiver (and the perceived) while also preventing the two from *coinciding*. This temporal deferring explains why the hand that touches is not identical to the (same) hand that is touched: even if infinitesimal, time has lapsed between the two instants.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes this thickness as an “immemorial past,” as a different *kind* of past, a past that, at once, grounds present time and, in Alia Al-Saji’s words, “maintains its opacity and non-coincidence”—namely, an immemorial past that remains irreducible to consciousness in the present while making the emergence of the present possible.<sup>19</sup> In the former sense, this past is an “impossible past” that remains at a distance, a past “such as it was one day *plus* an inexplicable alteration, a strange distance.”<sup>20</sup> To understand the meaning of this “strange distance,” we need to contend with the fact that the original past, as Al-Saji puts it, “institutes a different kind of temporality of life,” a “time before time” that is “*neither* an empirical past, *once present and now forgotten*, nor a layer of positivity, underlying experience but hidden from view.”<sup>21</sup> That is, the immemorial differs from the present not in degree, but in *kind*. The immemorial institutes a non-linear temporality, a temporality that accounts for the *internal growth of time*. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the temporality of the immemorial is one of internal growth when he observes that, “[p]ast and present are *Ineinander*, each enveloping-enveloped—and that itself is the flesh.”<sup>22</sup> Past, present, and future are not closed-off units or positivities independent of each other. Rather, each is a hollow, a *fecund* lack. This means that the past awaits the future for signification, while also generating meaning, thus signifying the present and guiding the future. In this sense, the past exceeds itself, always stretching forward, extending toward the future, straddled along by my sedimented history. At the same time, the present and the future point backwards; they turn to the past such that previous experiences come to form an ever-changing narrative that is recognizable and meaningful to me and that, signified anew, shapes the directionality of my future. Merleau-Ponty refers to this open-ended process as a “disarticulation,” a “decentering and recentering, zigzag, ambiguous passage.”<sup>23</sup> The ambiguity and disarticulation of time, the temporality instituted by the immemorial, is what allows for its internal growth. As a *fecund* negative, time grows internally by acquiring and generating new sense.

Conceptualizing the immemorial as instituting this different kind of temporality makes sense of Merleau-Ponty's remark that the immemorial past is originary or irreducible to the present. Indeed, the past that is signified/signifies is one that was never present, but that grows out of the past itself; it comes to existence as already past. It is in this sense that the immemorial breaks up the field of presence revealing itself as the ground or process that accounts for the way in which fields are instituted/instituting and for which the passage of presence/time can take place. Ultimately, then, the immemorial is not a thing or an idea, but a hollow or absence. Most importantly, this lack is not sterile, but a generative power of differential creation that makes possible the generation of sense via the intertwining of past, present, and future.

Note that on Merleau-Ponty's account the immemorial has a peculiar double character: it coexists with the present while simultaneously making the present possible, in a way analogous to how depth makes the perception of three-dimensional objects in space possible. The structure of the immemorial is such that it is in a *chiasm* with the present, situated in a symmetrical, reversible relationship with it. Indeed, past and present are intertwined and mutually co-constituting. Yet, the immemorial is also asymmetrically positioned vis-a-vis the present: qua "past that has never been present," the immemorial temporally pre-exists the present;<sup>24</sup> qua ground or condition of possibility, it structurally pre-exists the present, accounting for the internal growth of time and for the emergence of new meaning and sense.<sup>25</sup> In sum, then, the immemorial secures both the non-coincidence of past and present, while also allowing for the encroachment of the two.

This peculiar double character of the immemorial and the different temporality it inaugurates are best expressed via the concept of *institution* or *Stiftung*.<sup>26</sup> In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty states that understanding "time as chiasm" opens the way to grasping how the "*Stiftung* of a point in time can be transmitted to the others without 'continuity' without 'conservation.'"<sup>27</sup> I take Merleau-Ponty to be suggesting that institution entails this different kind of temporality of life—the immemorial. Let me be clearer. As articulated in *Institution and Passivity*, institution is a process through which a field or register of meaning is established, a field that enables me to make sense of other experiences and events. Note that institution is fundamentally ambiguous, always at once instituted and instituting. As instituting, the past opens a new register or field, "a different norm or meaning, according to which we experience or see differently" and that allows for the actualization of a different future.<sup>28</sup> As instituted, the past makes sense by reference to this register; the past acquires sense from within the instituting field. In this respect, the instituted past is the receptivity or openness to a field, within which it acquires sense.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, then, the instituting and the instituted encroach upon one another. The instituted acquires signification within an instituting field while also contributing to the instituting of new fields, to the generating of new meanings or significations. In this sense, past and present, like self and other, emerge in relation to the other and are the *possible* of the other.

This last point is central in grasping how the immemorial is operative in institutions. The instituted past, “the events which deposit a sense in me,” Merleau-Ponty observes, are not left behind “just as something surviving as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future.”<sup>30</sup> As it is instituted, the past partakes in the instituting of new meaning that is a “call to follow.” In this sense, the past exists in a futural mode, influencing and guiding the present and the future. Yet, the instituting of new meaning is also a reworking of the past itself. In this sense, the instituted is never a closed-off past, a fullness or positivity. Rather, the instituted past is a past that “both forgets and conserves;” it is a hollow, ever-open and endlessly awaiting future resignifications.<sup>31</sup> This is to say that the time of institution is immemorial—a time of internal and retroactive growth. With this in mind, we can see how the past is asymmetric to the present also insofar as it conserves its originality; new instituted/instituting processes generate new meaning retroactively, a meaning that was never present.

Immemorial time, then, is this different kind of temporality of life that secures the “internal growth of time” and the continual encroaching of past, present, and future. It is this past, a past that is at once intertwined with *and* not-reducible to the present, a past that is a hollow and growth, that is operative in institutions. Understood this way, the immemorial is the generative process through which sense, fields, and norms emerge. In what follows, I tend to the implications of acknowledging the fecund negativity of the immemorial for theorizing gender. As I will argue, the immemorial secures the differential production and sedimentation/expression of gender norms.

## 2. *The Immemorial Past of Gender: Gender as Ceaseless Differing*

Feminist theorizing of gender difference that engages the work of Merleau-Ponty is not new. Iris Marion Young and Sandra Bartky, for instance, employ analytical tools from the *Phenomenology of Perception* to conceptualize gender as the product of deeply sedimented and habituated articulations of behaviors, gestures, and actions.<sup>32</sup> Recent feminist literature on Merleau-Ponty that centers on the concept of “anonymity” to emphasize the temporal dimension of gender formation, however, is more akin to my interest in the temporal structure of gender.<sup>33</sup> These readings share a focus on the anonymous layer of experience and its relationship with the reflective or personal “I.” More precisely, they illustrate how, as a result of processes of habituation and sedimentation, the anonymous body becomes the repository of gender habits that “haunt” present expressions of gender. Conceiving anonymity as “essentially temporal,” Burke stresses the importance of framing anonymity as a structure of temporality distinct from the *cogito* insofar as it is only “through anonymous temporality that gender becomes a sedimented style of being.”<sup>34</sup> On Burke’s account, anonymity is “the past that has never been present,” “a different time or rhythm,” a “repressed past of my habitual body,” that is

generative of the experiences of the personal time of the present “I.”<sup>35</sup> Burke further explains the mutually influential relationship between the anonymous and the present body by observing that the anonymous past is generative of the present only insofar as there is a “forgotten” past, that is, sensations, habits, and relations that are never available to the present “I” and that emerge pre-reflectively through my body. In this sense, anonymous temporality “is the time of the sedimentation of gender habits” and norms.<sup>36</sup>

I find Burke’s description an accurate first step toward the thematization of the temporality of gender, especially its articulation of the relationship between anonymous and present expressions of gender. Burke explains that, by repeatedly taking up and living gendered bodily expressions—and here the emphasis is on the pre-reflective—we institute a set of values and meanings that consolidate into a way of being in the world as a gendered subject while also informing future expressions of our gendered style. Referring back to the notion of time as *institution*, we see how the temporal sedimentation of embodied gender expressions at once is instituted and institutes gender. It institutes insofar as present gendered expressions set up new norms and values through which we experience differently, ultimately making possible a different kind of future. Gender is instituted insofar as the passage of gender expressions creates a *Stiftung*, a sedimentation of these habits and meaning that, in a way, delimits, orients, and informs future expressions. Significantly, the *Stiftung* takes place within an already established field of meaning which signifies the instituted gender. As observed, this *Stiftung* is a special type of conservation of these gendered manifestations. It is not a simple accumulation of present moments, but requires acquiring a certain distance from these sedimentations, a kind of “forgetting.” Burke explains that this forgetting implies that the sedimented past leaves a trace on the present at a pre-reflective level. This forgetting, Burke observes, accounts for why, “to most, gender is immemorial.”<sup>37</sup> That is, gender manifests and expresses itself in actions and gestures without requiring our awareness or consciousness of it; it is anonymous. Only when my gender performance is called into question, when I am forced to confront it and gain distance from it, do I become aware of my gender(ed) habits.<sup>38</sup>

As anticipated, however, although useful for framing anonymity in temporal terms and for addressing why it is so challenging to undo gender normativity, Burke’s account falls short in accounting for the *other*—and, arguably, more provocative—generative function of the immemorial past. Indeed, a closer look to her analysis reveals that Burke understands the immemorial via (pre-reflective) consciousness. That is, while explicitly drawing upon the notion of the immemorial past, Burke does not fully capture what is at stake in the formulation of past as immemorial, namely, that this past is different in *kind* not merely in *degree* from the present. Such an approach limits the extent to which Burke’s analysis can grasp and reckon with the “new temporality of life” instituted by the immemorial. On the contrary, carrying out an analysis of gender from the *in-between*, from the immemorial, reveals that the immemorial, like depth or the invisible, is the structural condition that makes

possible all gender sedimentation, institution, and its inherent polymorphism. This temporal-ontological ground is not a presence or a positivity as her reference to (anonymous and temporal) sedimentation may suggest, but a fecund negativity, a “polysemic and overdivergent matrix, a ‘mixed life’ that can suggest different futures.”<sup>39</sup> In “The Sense of Sexual Difference,” Lisa Guenther argues that this “polysemic and overdivergent matrix”—what she calls a “polymorphic matrix”—is the ontological background from which (the) sense (of sexual difference) arises via processes of mutual differentiation and resignification.<sup>40</sup> Following Guenther, I would suggest that this generating of differences via self-relation and self-divergence is characteristic of the temporality of the immemorial, of the internal growth of time. For gender, this means that my gendered body is a “pregnancy of possibles;” it inherently bears the “possible of the other,” thus enabling or making possible the difference of the other. Self-divergence, then, not only makes gender possible; it is also inherently constitutive of gender.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it would be wrong to reduce the immemorial to the pre-reflective sedimentation of gender habits insofar as sedimentation would remain bound by a phenomenology of subjectivity. Similarly, “forgetting” cannot be fully accounted for by that which “cannot be captured by my ‘I.’”<sup>42</sup> As we have seen, forgetting entails a past that comes to be as already past via resignification. Burke’s shortcoming, then, lies in not explicating that the immemorial time of gender is the hollow that allows for the emergence of meaning, for the institution of gender in the first place.

This shortcoming has an important implication: while she discusses the fluidity of gender with reference to the immemorial past, Burke fails to capture the full extent to which gender is inherently unstable and fluid.<sup>43</sup> In addition to her explication of the immemorial in terms of “forgetting,” Burke argues that gender is immemorial in the sense that it is “never fixed, never memorialized.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, “insofar as anonymous time enfolds the emergence of my ‘I,’ my self is at once more than just the ‘I.’”<sup>45</sup> She observes that, although at first contradictory to the concept of gender as sedimentation, the indeterminacy coexists with it; prior to its sedimentation or habituation, sensory experience is anonymous and indeterminate. Using a language that reminds us of institution, Burke claims that the pre-personal body undoes the “I” as it constitutes it by instituting new registers and meanings. The personal “I” is not static or unchanging. Rather, by engaging in different bodily practices it can actualize the pre-personal and anonymous in different ways. This temporal indeterminacy, she claims, explains Silvia Stoller’s understanding of gender as a “*surplus* which makes different experiences possible.”<sup>46</sup> This plurality or surplus of anonymous temporality is such that experiences of confrontation with one’s gender habits can lead the subject to engage in (conscious or unconscious) practices that “undo” gender norms, that change one’s gendered style by differently actualizing or performing gender.

While not incorrect, this account leaves us wondering about the mechanism or the structure that makes the surplus and the instability of gender possible in the first place, especially from a temporal perspective. The full sense of the

generative power of the immemorial and, thus, the inherently unstable and fecund structure of immemorial gender can be understood only by following through with the claim that the immemorial ground is different in *kind*—it is an “abyss” that, as process of self-differentiation, makes sense and difference possible. If Al-Saji is correct in arguing that “Merleau-Ponty inscribes the immemorial past as invisibility in the structure of flesh,” then the immemorial is that which *opens* time, making the passing and sedimentation of present moments possible; it is that which allows for the institution of gender norms.<sup>47</sup> As time is a structure requiring the fecund negativity of the immemorial to make possible the existence and flow of the present, gender similarly requires the immemorial fecundity to secure its emergence in the first place. Without this destabilizing, instituting negativity, present expressions of gender would have no way to manifest themselves and no reason to pass. In this sense, the immemorial makes possible the present/gender and ensures its passage and its changeable nature.

Hence, fundamental to a comprehensive account of the temporality of gender is, first, understanding the immemorial past as the pre-existing structure that functions as differential creator. As Al-Saji observes regarding time, the immemorial structure, in this case, of gender “creates diacritical differences within the world and in this way it makes the world [and, specifically, present gender expressions]...visible.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, present manifestations of gender become visible at the intersection of forces that work in the background, invisible and immemorial. Significantly, it is because the immemorial is a fecund lack ever-seeking new meaning, that gender expressions differ from person to person; that gender is never the empty repetition of the same. In this sense, gender is always in the temporal mode of becoming, never recurring as self-identical. Second, similar to how the invisible/fecund negativity coexists with the visible/present and is held within it, so gender holds the diverging within itself, at an ontological level, ensuring the destabilizing of present gender expressions and their fluidity. No matter how stable and resistant to change certain gender norms become and are experienced to be, gender norms emerge out of a dynamic and ever-changing matrix, a configuration that continually seeks new signification and meaning. Indeed, as *Stiftung*, gender norms are a “decentering and recentering, zigzag, ambiguous passage.”<sup>49</sup> From these considerations, it follows that it is a mistake to reduce or describe gender to a finite number of categories. Present gender expressions are only a momentary manifestation of a much more radical and *indefinite* surplus or excess. The future, as Stoller reminds us, is open to “other possible and not yet named identifications.”<sup>50</sup>

### 3. *Toward a Political Phenomenology*

Recognizing, as Merleau-Ponty does, that the formulation of gender as binary is a “Western problem” allows us to call into question strict gender (hetero) normativity and any societal model that endorses rigid identity and gender



politics.<sup>51</sup> Following Merleau-Ponty's ontology requires that we explicitly affirm this polymorphism of gender and the constitutive instability of gender norms.<sup>52</sup> That is, we need to come to terms with the fact that gendered bodies are not the instantiation of a fixed, a-temporal Platonic idea or metaphysical essence. Gender is volatile: Not only can every gender be actualized differently; but every present manifestation of gender is already that of which it is the possible. Indeed, understanding gender as the *possible* of the other creates what Guenther calls a "porous zone of interpenetrating possibilities in relation to which no single being could posit itself as purely masculine or purely feminine."<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that, by stressing gender's polymorphism, I do not mean to negate the problematic reality of living one's own gender under rigid heteronormative social structures. On the contrary, accounts that emphasize the oppressive weight of rigid gender norms point to the ways in which social norms and structures institute fields of meaning and signification that can curtail the subject's own sense-making activity; they reveal the extent to which the ontological is already interwoven with the historico-cultural, and invite an analysis of the ways in which the ontic affects the ontological.<sup>54</sup> The degree to which the fluidity of gender can be performed depends on the social and political context. Social institutions and norms institute fields of meaning that can facilitate or discourage (the acknowledgment and taking up of) this polymorphism. The strength of Burke's analysis is precisely that it reminds us that the pre-reflexive and anonymous time of gender sedimentation makes the undoing of gender normativity a difficult task; that gender norms acquire a degree of ontological fixity.

By emphasizing the immemorial structure of gender, my intention is twofold. On the one hand, I intend to account for the ontological structure that allows for gender norms to emerge in the first place. On the other hand, reckoning with the dynamism of immemorial gender gives us hope for change and fuel for an emancipatory politics. It gives us hope insofar as it points out that, even under the most (hetero)normative and gender oppressive society, change is possible, and does happen; social norms do not necessarily need to precede individuals' adjustment to new norms. It gives us fuel for an emancipatory politics insofar as acknowledging the inherent instability of gender has (at least) two political implications. First, it draws attention to the fact that gender is a temporal achievement, a *becoming*, as Simone de Beauvoir would put it, that takes place vis-à-vis previously instituted fields of means. Hence, it emphasizes the fact that the perpetuation of oppressive social institutions, norms, and structures does not express or correspond to the ontological make-up of gender. Rather, it is a choice that institutes fields of meaning that can curtail individuals' sense-making activity in harmful ways. Second, acknowledging the polymorphous structure of immemorial gender can (and *should*) motivate social and political change; it can (and *should*) encourage a more tolerant and accepting societal attitude toward non-normative gender performances.<sup>55</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 243, 296.
- 2 Megan Burke, “Anonymous Temporality and Gender: Rereading Merleau-Ponty,” *philoSophia* 3, no. 2 (2013): 138–57.
- 3 Regarding the subject-object relationship, in the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states that “this subject-object dialogue, this drawing together, by the subject, of the meaning diffused through the object, and, by the object, of the subject’s intentions—a process which is physiognomic perception—arranges round the subject a world which speaks to him of himself, and gives his own thoughts their place in the world.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 132. This passage speaks to the constitutive and creative interrelation of perceiver and perceived and the incomplete unity of self and the world.
- 4 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 146. Merleau-Ponty refers to this process of dehiscence as a “coil[ing] back upon itself” (140), or “invagination” (152), a term that is taken up by Luce Irigaray as indicative of the silenced feminine dimension of flesh. Luce Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- 5 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 160.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 133.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 140, 147. Merleau-Ponty observes that, on the verge of coincidence, “one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.” *Ibid.*, 147.
- 9 As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the fabric of possibilities that closes the exterior visible in upon the seeing body maintains between them a certain *divergence* (écart).” *Ibid.*, 272. Merleau-Ponty extends the reversible structure of touch—of flesh—to other senses, most notably vision, ultimately claiming that vision and touch exist in a chiasmic relationship. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (p. 136) Irigaray criticizes Merleau-Ponty for assuming that touch and vision are in a reversible, non-hierarchical relationship. She claims that “the tangible is, and remains, primary in its opening,” that is, that touch grounds the other senses, including vision.
- 10 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 123.
- 11 As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[b]efore the essence as before the fact, all we must do is situate ourselves within the being we are dealing with, instead of looking at it from the outside—or, *what amounts to the same thing*, what we have to do is put it back into the fabric of our life, attend from within the dehiscence.” *Ibid.*, 117.
- 12 David Morris, “The Time and Place of the Organism: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy in Embryo,” *Alter: Revue de Phenomenology* 16 (2008): 70.
- 13 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 263.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 228.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 250, 132–33. The extent to which flesh allows for difference and does away with a metaphysics of presence is controversial. Irigaray claims that flesh “is always the same:” “The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s). ...[There is] no Other to keep the world open.” Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 170, 183. In *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida raises the concern that Merleau-Ponty fails to posit the invisible or non-coincidence as the central and regulating principle of his ontology. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Instead, Derrida charges, Merleau-Ponty posits the visible or coincidence as the ideal that is only momentarily deferred by the dehiscing of flesh. On the other hand, thinkers

- such as Lisa Guenther and Gail Weiss seem to suggest that the reversible structure of flesh, understood as “a pregnancy of possibles,” not only allows for difference, but constitutes it. Lisa Guenther, “The Sense of Sexual Difference,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 16, no. 2 (2011): 19–33; and Gail Weiss, “Écart: The Space of Corporeal Difference,” in *Chiasmus*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 203–18.
- 17 Glen Mazis, “Merleau-Ponty and the Backward Flow of Time: The Reversibility of Temporality and the Temporality of Reversibility,” in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, ed. Shaun Gallagher and Thomas Busch, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 53–68, p. 56.
  - 18 See also Judith Butler, “Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty,” *Chiasmi International* 10 (2008): 333–47, p. 346, where Butler attributes the non-coincidence of the chiasm, of the same hand touching and being touched, to the “temporally non-coincident ontology of the flesh.”
  - 19 Alia Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Personal,” *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 47.
  - 20 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 124, 124.
  - 21 Alia Al-Saji, “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLV (2007): 186, 184; emphasis added.
  - 22 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 268.
  - 23 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 197, 87.
  - 24 Paradoxically, the immemorial institutes a temporality of life such that the present is resignified after it has taken place. In this sense, the immemorial past comes after the present.
  - 25 As observed, the immemorial past is not based on presence; it comes into existence as already past. In this way, there is a fundamental asymmetry between past and present: the past is temporally and structurally anterior to the present.
  - 26 In *Institution and Passivity* (p. 77) Merleau-Ponty defines institution as a process entailing “those events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history—or again the events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future.”
  - 27 *Ibid.*, 267.
  - 28 Al-Saji, “Temporality of Life,” 187.
  - 29 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 13.
  - 30 *Ibid.*, 77.
  - 31 *Ibid.*, 187.
  - 32 Iris M. Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Sandra Bartky, *Feminism and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
  - 33 Burke, “Anonymous Temporality and Gender;” Sara Heinämaa, “Personality, Anonymity, and Sexual Difference: The Temporal Formation of the Transcendental Ego,” in *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Christian Schues, Dorothea Olkowski, and Helen Fielding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 41–59; and Silvia Stoller, “Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism,” *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2010): 175–82. Although concepts like “sedimentation” and “habit” do imply time, neither Bartky nor Young explicitly focus on the temporal dimension of anonymity.
  - 34 Burke, “Anonymous Temporality and Gender,” 145. While Stoller claims that understanding anonymity in temporal terms is only one way in which anonymity can be conceptualized, Burke is adamant in asserting that anonymity is temporal through and through.

- 35 Burke, "Anonymous Temporality and Gender," 145, 146.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 38 Burke provides examples of practices such as harassment or gender-shaming through which gender expression is called into question, thus forcing the subject to confront her gender habits and become aware of them. *Ibid.*, 152–53.
- 39 Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 193.
- 40 Reflecting on approaches that uphold what David Morris calls "ontological localism," i.e., approaches that locate the sense of sexual difference in either biology or social messages, Lisa Guenther argues that they miss "the whole field of being out of which meaningful determinations arise, the ontological background in relations to which things and past may be distinguished in the first place, and the process of mutual differentiation which gives rise to recognizably different beings." "The Sense of Sexual Difference," 20. Although Burke does not fall into the trap of ontological localism, her focus on presence does miss capturing the fecundity of the ontological field of being which gives sense to sexual difference.
- 41 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 250. *Ibid.*, 228.
- 42 Burke, "Anonymous Temporality and Gender," 152.
- 43 As such, Burke's account makes itself vulnerable to a criticism similar to the one Leonard Lawlor advances against M. C. Dillon in "The End of Phenomenology: Expressionism in Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 15-34.
- 44 Burke, "Anonymous Temporality and Gender," 152.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 46 Silvia Stoller, "The Indeterminable Gender: Ethics in Feminist Phenomenology and Poststructuralist Feminism," in *Janus Head: Special Issue on Feminist Phenomenology* 13, no. 1: 17-33. Stoller explains that anonymity is comparable to the background against which a figure emerges. As such, it can be understood as a "surplus." See "Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism," 177.
- 47 Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 184.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 49 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 87.
- 50 Stoller, "Indeterminable Gender," 27.
- 51 Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 221.
- 52 For a detailed account of the instability of gender norms, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 53 Guenther, "The Sense of Sexual Difference," 25.
- 54 Al-Saji discusses how the presence of an overdetermined past (taking Fanon's predicament as her case in point) disproportionately weighs upon the present. The overdetermination of the past forecloses the possibility of re-inscribing the present and the past with new meaning. "Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past," *Insights*, 6, no. 5 (2013): 2-13.
- 55 As anticipated, given the sociality of the immemorial, moving forward would thus require carefully investigating the connection between the ontological and the ontic.

## **The Immemorial Time of Gender: Merleau-Ponty's Polymorphic Matrix of Original Past**

In this paper, I tend to the concept of “immemorial past” and argue that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's turn in *The Visible and the Invisible*—a turn toward the conceptualization of time as chiasm and an ontology of the invisible—provides a rich resource for theorizing sexual difference. More precisely, I argue that acknowledging the different *kind* of temporality of life that the immemorial institutes—a temporality that is *generative* of meaning and signification—invites us to investigate gender's “immemorial past.” Shifting attention from the sedimentation and presence of gender habits to the fecund lack that grounds such sedimentation allows us to account for the structure that makes gender production, institution, and differing possible in the first place. Such a structure is a “fecund negativity,” a polymorphous field or depth, that points to the inherent instability and multiplicity of gender, to the fact that gender formation can be traced back to a plural and ambiguous ground that comes to expression in cultural-historical-linguistic manifestations.

### **Le temps immémorial du genre : la matrice polymorphe du passé originel selon Merleau-Ponty**

Dans cet article, je m'appuie sur le concept de « passé immémorial » et montre que le tournant merleau-pontien du *Visible et l'Invisible* – vers la conceptualisation du temps comme chiasme et d'une ontologie de l'invisible – constitue une riche ressource lorsqu'il s'agit de théoriser la différence sexuelle. Plus précisément, je montre que reconnaître les différents *genres* de temporalité de vie que l'immemorial institue – une temporalité qui est *génératrice* de sens et de significations – nous invite à examiner le « temps immémorial » du genre. Passer de la sédimentation et de la présence des habitudes de genre au manque fécond qui fonde une telle sédimentation nous permet de rendre compte de la structure qui rend possible la production, l'institution du genre et de différer le possible à la première place. Une telle structure est une « négativité féconde », un champ ou une profondeur polymorphe, qui souligne l'instabilité inhérente et la multiplicité du genre, le fait que la formation du genre peut être retracée jusqu'à un fond pluriel et ambigu qui s'exprime dans des manifestations culturelles, historiques et linguistiques.

### **Il tempo immemoriale del gender. La matrice polimorfica merleau-pontiana del passato originale**

Nel presente articolo, intendo elaborare il concetto di “passato immemoriale” e mostrare come la svolta di Merleau-Ponty nel *Visibile e l'invisibile* – una svolta verso una teorizzazione del tempo come chiasma e verso un'ontologia dell'invisibile – costituisca una risorsa particolarmente ricca per pensare la differenza sessuale. In particolare, vorrei sostenere che comprendere i diversi tipi di temporalità della vita che l'immemoriale istituisce – una temporalità *generativa* di senso e significato – ci porta a considerare il “passato immemoriale” del *gender*. Spostare l'attenzione dalla sedimentazione e dalla presenza delle abitudini di genere, alla mancanza feconda che sottende una simile sedimentazione, ci permette di prendere in esame la struttura stessa

che rende possibile la produzione, istituzione e differenziazione del genere. Una tale struttura corrisponde ad una “negatività feconda”, un campo polimorfo o profondità che fa segno verso l’instabilità e la molteplicità inerenti al *gender*, ovvero al fatto che la formazione del genere può essere rintracciata in un orizzonte plurale e ambiguo, che si esprime attraverso manifestazioni culturali-storico-linguistiche.