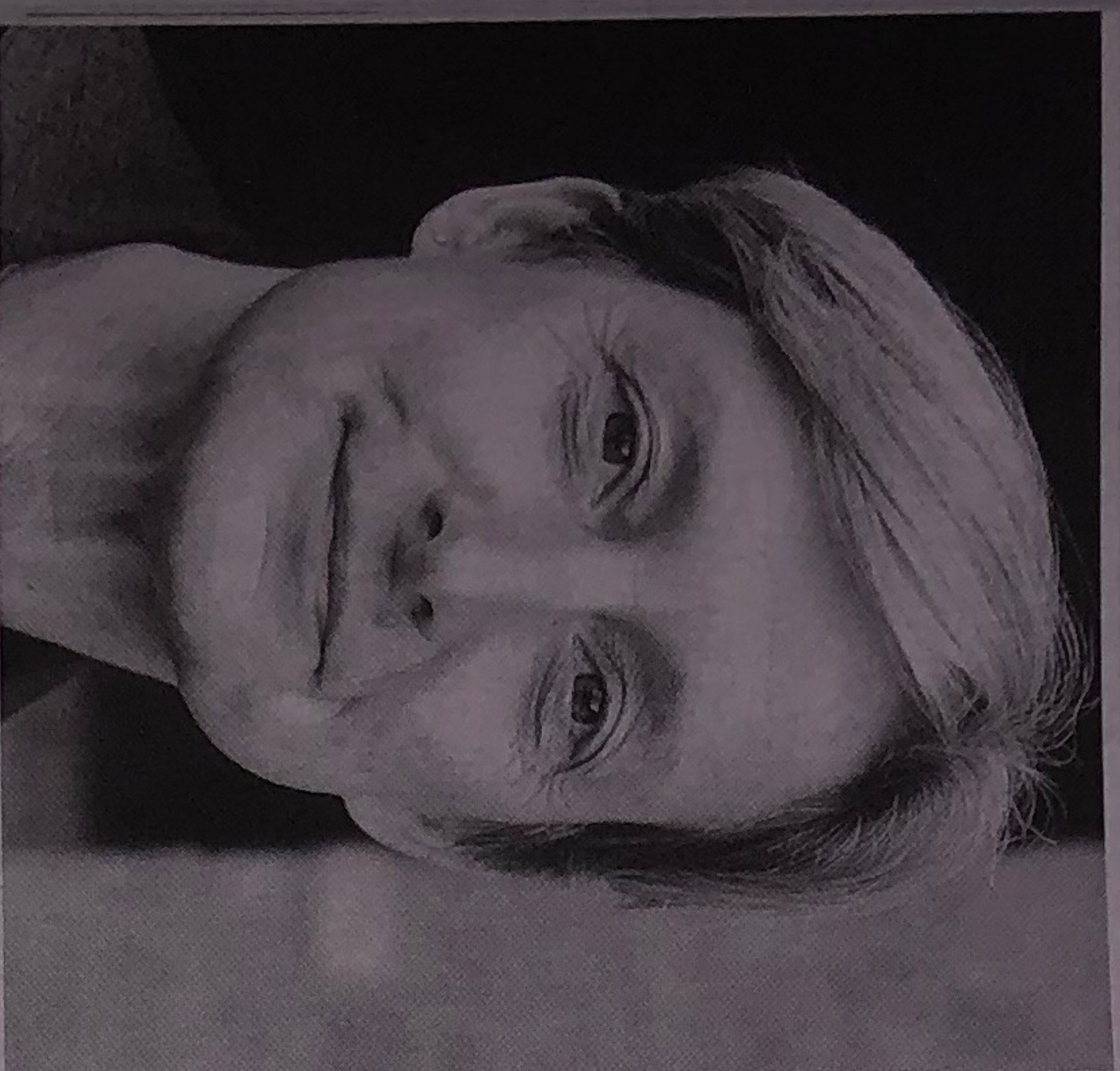




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JUDITH BUTLER From *Undoing Gender*

JUDITH BUTLER (b. 1956) is Maxine Eliot Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Currently, she is a visiting professor at Columbia University in New York City. She was originally trained in philosophy, and much of her work has been wide-ranging, considering gender studies and political and psychoanalytic issues, as well as concerns for how language shapes our understanding of not just the world, but ourselves.

Her work is often theoretical and influenced by the modern European theoreticians who have sometimes been described as post-structuralist. As a result, her writing has been criticized for being too indirect, abstract, and obscure. However, her book *Undoing Gender* (2004), from which the following selection is taken, is written in a style marked by clarity and directness, unlike many of her articles and other books. She has done a great deal of work focused on gender identity and on the nature of sexuality and argues that both are largely the result of socialization and the force of language in our society. She admits that this idea seems inherently contrary to common sense, but it is for that very reason that she asks us to listen closely to her reasoning. Given the power of language to shape ideas, and given the fluidity of the concept of gender, her argument is taken very seriously by psychologists and philosophers concerned with how individuals view their own nature.

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) was an immediately influential book, its powerful critique of the feminist movement resounding with both academic and popular audiences alike. In it, Butler argues against a “binary view of gender,” or a view that limits the definition of gender to a male body and a female body. Butler’s argument is that gender is flexible, a continuum from one pole to another of desire. Feminism in 1990, she felt, limited itself to two absolute categories — women and men — with the subsequent view that the focus of sexual desire was also limited to one of these two categories. However, as a lesbian herself and a researcher into gender issues, she knew that desire takes many forms and that feminists holding to their binary view limited

the movement as well as themselves. If feminists rejected the doctrine that biology is destiny on the basis of a male-female model, then it was necessary for them to explore their views of the nature of biology and the demands of society with more vigor.

Current research has shown that rigid categories of sexuality have been impossible to maintain. Transgender operations have proliferated enough that public figures have had national recognition in their efforts to change their perceived gender status. Queer studies has become a valid academic discipline in many major universities, especially now that efforts have been made to remove any stigma from homosexual and lesbian lifestyles. Same-sex marriage has become, if not common, more greatly recognized by state laws. Butler has been in the forefront of trying to change society’s awareness of how limitations in attitudes affect the perceptions of all of us.

BUTLER’S RHETORIC

As a professor of rhetoric, Butler is deeply concerned with the ways in which language defines people and things. She points out that in some cases it is only through language that we understand the nature of reality — and at that, we cannot totally trust language to give us the complete truth about things. As a result of her concerns for language, she uses it very carefully and performs complex analyses at crucial points in her argument so as to guarantee us as clear a sense of understanding as possible.

The opening pages of her selection establish the general circumstances that she is interested in treating. She explains that she will focus on the human, on “the conditions of intelligibility by which the human emerges” (para. 1). She points to her subjects as “human love,” “norms,” and “ways of knowing, modes of truth, that forcibly define intelligibility.” Her point is that there may be ways of understanding norms and what it is to be human from a careful consideration of what is said and that what we say stands for the truth about humanity.

Once she has established her focus, she introduces us to a narrative of great interest and some complexity. She tells us the case story of David Reimer, a boy who accidentally had his penis burned and subsequently amputated at the age of eight months. The accident was the result of a doctor’s mismanagement of an electrocautery needle that he was unfamiliar with. What should have been a risk-free operation totally changed David. His parents, hoping to find a way for him to have a heterosexual life, took him to Dr. John Money at Johns Hopkins University to consult about what should be done. Money was famous for his sex transformation cases involving infants with anomalous sexual organs (often described as hermaphrodites). Money convinced the parents that David could be raised as a girl with great success. He explained that socialization, along with hormones, would establish gender and that David, renamed Brenda, would grow up as a girl and achieve a sense of female identity and feel normal. Money had a reputation for success in cases similar to this, and Brenda was raised as a girl never knowing about the medical mutilation during his infancy.

But the story was complicated by several things. One was that Brenda, as the subject of Dr. Money's scientific studies, was being studied by others to see how the gender change was working; she was frequently asked to disrobe and was examined by other doctors; she was questioned routinely about her feelings and her progress. Brenda became a medical subject and therefore did not experience what others might have considered a normal upbringing. By age two, Brenda began to show signs of gender-assignment discomfort, rejecting clothes chosen for her and choosing what were thought to be inappropriate toys, such as machine guns. Ultimately, Brenda rejected her female assignment and, at age fourteen, became David once again. He underwent another surgery to return himself to something close to the physical male norm.

Butler comments on all the phases of this narrative and ends her essay with a detailed analysis of the narrative that she presents of David's development. She also analyzes David's own account of his circumstances as it is told in the literature. The story has subtleties that Butler unravels in her quest to answer certain questions about what she calls "gender essentialism" and the relationship of gender and gender assignments to the body itself. The question of what constitutes a norm is also central to her interests in understanding the significance of David's experiences moving from gender to gender. Butler's analysis is detailed and thorough, but she admits that there are many aspects of this case that cannot be easily understood, especially by examining the narratives in which the case is presented. As readers of her narrative and her analysis, we are brought to an understanding of our own limitations in the face of narratives that limit our intelligence of what really happened. That is a major part of Butler's central point. Language comes between us and the reality, but that does not prevent us from trying to understand the reality of David's experiences.

Unfortunately, while Butler was preparing her book for press, David Reimer killed himself. She appends that information in a postscript at the end of the selection, but there is much more to the story that should be known. For example, David's was the first experiment by John Money on a child not born a hermaphrodite or with indeterminate genitals. Moreover, David was never told he was born a boy until he was fourteen years old. Once he was told, he said he knew why he had the feelings he had had when he was young and that now he did not feel like a freak. He had his breasts removed and then insisted on being given the FTM (female-to-male) surgery that restored him to his original gender. John Colapinto, who wrote a best-selling book about David, was not entirely surprised that David killed himself. Colapinto said that David had been taunted relentlessly as a child and that those experiences haunted him. In addition, his mother and brother had been clinically depressed. His twin brother Brian overdosed on antidepressants two years before David took his own life at the age of thirty-eight.

Butler focuses on David as an example of someone who struggled with gender issues while in the care of doctors who held to some fundamental decisions regarding the truth about gender and what it should look like. Butler makes us aware that such decisions are not easily reached nor are they easily defended.

❖ PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of this excerpt from Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*. Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

1. What is the relation of gender to personhood?
2. Is there an essential gender core (see para. 9)?
3. What was David Reimer's experience with gender reassignment?

From *Undoing Gender*

I would like to take my point of departure from a question of power, the power of regulation, a power that determines, more or less, what we are, what we can be. I am not speaking of power only in a juridical or positive sense, but I am referring to the workings of a certain regulatory regime, one that informs the law, and also exceeds the law. When we ask, what are the conditions of intelligibility by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all. So I propose to broach the relationship between variable orders of intelligibility and the genesis and knowability of the human. And it is not just that there are laws that govern our intelligibility, but ways of knowing, modes of truth, that forcibly define intelligibility.

This is what Foucault¹ describes as the politics of truth, a politics that pertains to those relations of power that circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth, which order the world in certain regular and regulatable ways, and which we come to accept as the given field of knowledge. We can understand the salience of this point when we begin to ask: What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? Subjectively, we ask: Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within

¹ Michel Foucault (1926–1984) Important French historian of ideas.

the given regime of truth? This is what Foucault describes as "the desubjugation of the subject in the play of . . . the politics of truth."

Another way of putting this is the following: "What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?" This question does not quite broach the question of what it is not to be, or what it is to occupy the place of not-being within the field of being. What it is to live, breathe, attempt to love neither as fully negated nor as fully acknowledged as being. This relationship, between intelligibility and the human, is an urgent one; it carries a certain theoretical urgency, precisely at those points where the human is encountered at the limits of intelligibility itself. I would like to suggest that this interrogation has something important to do with justice. Justice is not only or exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted. It also concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for "personhood" to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other. The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one which, justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human, but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, at the moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one's gender and, hence, the unrecognizability of one's personhood.

I want to consider a legal and psychiatric case of a person who was determined without difficulty to be a boy at the time of birth, then determined again within a few months to be a girl, who decided in his teenage years to become a man. This is the story of David Reinner, whose situation is referred to as "the Joan/John case," one that was brought to public attention by the BBC and in various popular, psychological, and medical journals. I base my analysis on several documents: an article written by Dr. Milton Diamond, an endocrinologist, and the popular book *As Nature Made Him*, written by John Colapinto, a journalist for *Rolling Stone*, as well as several publications by John Money, and critical commentaries offered by Anne Fausto-Sterling and Suzanne Kessler in their important recent books.² David Reinner has now talked openly to the media and has chosen to live outside the pseudonym reserved for him by Milton Diamond and his colleagues. David became

"Brenda" at a certain point in his childhood which I discuss below, and so instead of referring to him as Joan and John, neither of which is his name, I will use the name he uses.

David was born with XY chromosomes and at the age of eight months, his penis was accidentally burned and severed in the course of a surgical operation to rectify phimosis, a condition in which the foreskin thwarts urination. This is a relatively risk-free procedure, but the doctor who performed it on David was using a new machine, apparently one that he hadn't used before, one that his colleagues declared was unnecessary for the job. He had trouble making the machine work, so he increased the power to the machine to the point that it effectively burned away a major portion of the penis. The parents were, of course, appalled and shocked, and they were, according to their own description, unclear how to proceed. Then one evening, about a year after this event, they were watching television, and there they encountered John Money, talking about transsexual and intersexual surgery, offering the view that if a child underwent surgery and started socialization as a gender different from the one originally assigned at birth, the child could develop normally, adapt perfectly well to the new gender, and live a happy life. The parents wrote to Money and he invited them to Baltimore, and so David was subsequently seen at Johns Hopkins University, at which point the strong recommendation was made by Dr. John Money that David be raised as a girl. The parents agreed, and the doctors removed the testicles, made some preliminary preparation for surgery to create a vagina, but decided to wait until Brenda, the newly named child, was older to complete the task. So Brenda grew up as a girl, and was monitored often, given over on a periodic basis to John Money's Gender Identity Institute for the purposes of fostering adaptation to being a girl. Then between the ages of eight and nine, Brenda found herself developing the desire to buy a toy machine gun. Between the ages of nine and eleven, she started to make the realization that she was not a girl. This realization seems to coincide with the desire to buy certain kinds of toys: more guns, apparently, and some trucks. Although there was no penis, Brenda liked to stand to urinate. And she was caught in this position once, at school, and the other girls threatened to "kill" her if she continued.

At this point, the psychiatric teams that were intermittently monitoring Brenda's adaptation offered her estrogen, and she refused this. Money tried to talk to her about getting a real vagina, and she refused; in fact, she went screaming from the room. Money had her view sexually graphic pictures of vaginas. Money even went so far as to show Brenda pictures of women giving birth, holding out the promise that Brenda might be able to give birth if she acquired a vagina. And in a scene that could have been the model for the recent film *But I'm a Cheerleader*! she and her brother were required to perform mock coital exercises with one another, on command. They both later

² John Money (1921–2006) Controversial psychologist and sex researcher; Anne Fausto-Sterling (b. 1944), author of "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough" (2000); Suzanne Kessler (b. 1946), author of *Lessons from the Intersexed* (2000). All three are important experts in gender studies.

reported being very frightened and disoriented by this demand and did not tell their parents at the time. Brenda is said to have preferred male activities and not to have liked developing breasts. And all of these attributions to Brenda are made by another set of doctors, this time a team of psychiatrists at Brenda's local hospital. The local psychiatrists and medical professionals intervened in the case, believing that a mistake had been made in sex reassignment here, and eventually the case was reviewed by Milton Diamond, a sex researcher who believes in the hormonal basis of gender identity and who has been battling Money for several years. This new set of psychiatrists and doctors offered her the choice of changing paths, which she accepted. She started living as a boy, named David, at the age of fourteen. At this point, David started requesting, and receiving, male hormone shots, and also had his breasts removed. A phallus, so it was called by Diamond, was constructed for him between the age of fifteen and sixteen. David, it is reported, does not ejaculate, although he feels some sexual pleasure there; he urinates from its base. It is a phallus that only approximates some of its expected functions and, as we shall see, enters David only ambivalently into the norm.

During the time that David was Brenda, Money continued to publish papers extolling the success of this sex reassignment case. The case was enormously consequential because Brenda had a brother for an identical twin, and so Money could track the development of both siblings and assume an identical genetic makeup for both of them. He insisted that both were developing normally and happily into their different genders. But his own recorded interviews, mainly unpublished, and subsequent research, have called his honesty into question. Brenda was hardly happy, refused to adapt to many so-called girl behaviors, and was appalled and angered by Money's invasive and constant interrogations. And yet, the published records from Johns Hopkins claim that Brenda's adaptation to girlhood was "successful," and immediately certain ideological conclusions followed. John Money's Gender Identity Clinic, which monitored Brenda often, concluded that Brenda's successful development as a girl "offers convincing evidence that the gender identity gate is open at birth for a normal child no less than for one born with unfinished sex organs or one who was prenatally over or underexposed to androgen, and that it stays open at least for something over a year at birth." Indeed, the case was used by the public media to make the case that what is feminine and what is masculine can be altered, that these cultural terms have no fixed meaning or internal destiny, and that they are more malleable than previously thought. Even Kate Millett³ cited the case in making the argument that biology is not destiny. And Suzanne Kessler also cowrote with Money essays in favor of the social constructionist thesis. Later Kessler would disavow the alliance and write one of the most important books on the ethical

³ Kate Millett (b. 1934) Important feminist and author of *Sexual Politics* (1990).

and medical dimensions of sex assignment, *Lessons from the Interscared*, which includes a trenchant critique of Money himself.

Money's approach to Brenda was to recruit male to female transsexuals to talk to Brenda about the advantages of being a girl. Brenda was subjected to myriad interviews, asked again and again whether she felt like a girl, what her desires were, what her image of the future was, whether it included marriage to a man. Brenda was also asked to strip and show her genitals to medical practitioners who were either interested in the case or monitoring the case for its adaptational success.

When this case was discussed in the press, and when psychiatrists and medical practitioners have referred to it, they have done so in order to criticize the role that John Money's institute played in the case and, in particular, how quickly that institute sought to use Brenda as an example of its own theoretical beliefs, beliefs about the gender neutrality of early childhood, about the malleability of gender, of the primary role of socialization in the production of gender identity. In fact, this is not exactly everything that Money believes, but I will not probe that question here. Those who have become critical of this case believe that it shows us something very different. When we consider, they argue, that David found himself deeply moved to become a boy, and found it unbearable to continue to live as a girl, we have to consider as well that there was some deep-seated sense of gender that David experienced, one that is linked to his original set of genitals, one that seems to be there, as an internal truth and necessity, which no amount of socialization could reverse. This is the view of Colapinto and of Milton Diamond as well. So now the case of Brenda/David is being used to make a revision and reversal in developmental gender theory, providing evidence this time for the reversal of Money's thesis, supporting the notion of an essential gender core, one that is tied in some irreversible way to anatomy and to a deterministic sense of biology. Indeed, Colapinto clearly links Money's cruelty to Brenda to the "cruelty" of social construction as a theory, remarking that Money's refusal to identify a biological or anatomical basis for gender difference in the early 1970s "was not lost on the then-burgeoning women's movement, which had been arguing against a biological basis for sex differences for decades." He claims that Money's published essays "had already been used as one of the main foundations of modern feminism." He quotes *Time* magazine as engaging in a similarly misguided appropriation of Money's views when they argued that this case "provides strong support for a major contention of women's liberationists: that conventional patterns of masculine and feminine behavior can be altered. . . ." Indeed, Colapinto proceeds to talk about the failure of surgically reassigned individuals to live as "normal" and "typical" women or men, arguing that normality is never achieved and, hence, assuming throughout the inarguable value of normalcy itself.

When Natalie Angier⁴ reported on the refutation of Money's theory in the *New York Times* (14 March 1997), she claimed that the story of David had "the force of allegory." But which force was that? And is this an allegory with closure? In that article, Angier reports that Diamond used the case to make an argument about intersexual surgery and, by implication, the relative success of transsexual surgery. Diamond argued, for instance, that intersexed infants, that is, those born with mixed genital attributes, generally have a Y chromosome, and the possession of the Y is an adequate basis for concluding that the child ought to be raised as a boy. As it is, the vast majority of intersexed infants are subjected to surgery that seeks to assign them to a female sex, since, as Cheryl Chase, points out, it is simply considered easier to produce a provisional vaginal tract than it is to construct a phallus. Diamond argues that these children should be assigned to the male sex, since the presence of the Y is sufficient grounds for the presumption of social masculinity.

In fact, Chase, the founder and director of the Intersexed Society of North America, voiced skepticism about Diamond's recommendations. Her view, defended by Anne Fausto-Sterling as well, is that although a child should be given a sex assignment for the purposes of establishing a stable social identity, it does not follow that society should engage in coercive surgery to remake the body in the social image of that gender. Such efforts at "correction" not only violate the child but lend support to the idea that gender has to be borne out in singular and normative ways at the level of anatomy. Gender is a different sort of identity, and its relation to anatomy is complex. According to Chase, a child upon maturing may choose to change genders or, indeed, elect for hormonal or surgical intervention, but such decisions are justified because they are based on knowing choice. Indeed, research has shown that such surgical operations have been performed without parents knowing, that such surgical operations have been performed without the children themselves ever having been truthfully told, and without waiting until the child is old enough to offer his or her consent. Most astonishing, in a way, is the mutilated state that these bodies are left in, mutilations performed and then paradoxically rationalized in the name of "looking normal," the rationale used by medical practitioners to justify these surgeries. They often say to parents that the child will not look normal, that the child will be ashamed in the locker room, the locker room, that site of pre-pubescent anxiety about impending gender developments, and that it would be better for the child to look normal, even when such surgery may deprive the person permanently of sexual function and pleasure. So, as some experts, such as Money, claim that the absence of the full phallus makes the social case for rearing the child as a girl, others such as Diamond argue that the presence

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of the Y is the most compelling evidence, that it is what is being indexed in persistent feelings of masculinity, and that it cannot be constructed away.

Thus, in the one case, how anatomy looks, how it appears to others, and to myself, as I see others looking at me—this is the basis of a social identity as woman or man. In the other case, how the genetic presence of the "Y" works in tacit ways to structure feeling and self-understanding as a sexed person is the basis. Money thus argues for the ease with which a female body can be surgically constructed, as if femininity was always little more or less than a surgical construction, an elimination, a cutting away. Diamond argues for the invisible and necessary persistence of maleness, one that does not need to "appear" in order to operate as the key feature of gender identity itself. When Angier asks Chase whether she agrees with Diamond's recommendations on intersexual surgery, Chase replies: "They can't conceive of leaving someone alone." Indeed, is the surgery performed in order to create a "normal-looking" body after all? The mutilations and scars that remain hardly offer compelling evidence that this is what the surgeries actually accomplish. Or are these bodies, precisely because they are "inconceivable," subjected to medical machinery that marks them for life?

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Another paradox emerges here—one that I hope to write about further on another occasion—namely, the place of sharp machines, of the technology of the knife, in debates on intersexuality and transsexuality alike. If the David/Brenda case is an allegory, or has the force of allegory, it seems to be the site where debates on intersexuality (David is not an intersexual) and transsexuality (David is not a transsexual) converge. This body becomes a point of reference for a narrative that is not about this body, but which seizes upon the body, as it were, in order to inaugurate a narrative that interrogates the limits of the conceivably human. What is inconceivable is conceived again and again, through narrative means, but something remains outside the narrative, a resistant moment that signals a persisting inconceivability.

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Despite Diamond's recommendations, the intersex movement has been galvanized by the Brenda/David case, able now to bring to public attention the brutality, coerciveness, and lasting harm of the unwanted surgeries performed on intersexed infants. The point is to try to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed genital attributes might be accepted and loved without having to transform them into a more socially coherent or normative version of gender. In this sense, the intersex movement has sought to question why society maintains the ideal of gender dimorphism⁵ when a significant percentage of children are chromosomally various, and a continuum exists between male and female that suggests the arbitrariness and falsity of the gender dimorphism as a prerequisite of human development. There are humans, in other words,

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⁴ Natalie Angier (b. 1958) A science correspondent for the *New York Times* and author of *Natural Obsessions* (1988), a study of cancer research.

⁵ **Gender dimorphism** Theory that the only genders are male and female, based on the male and female bodies.

who live and breathe in the interstices of this binary relation, showing that it is not exhaustive; it is not necessary. Although the transsexual movement, which is internally various, has called for rights to surgical means by which sex might be transformed, it is also clear—and Chase underscores this—that there is also a serious and increasingly popular critique of idealized gender dimorphism within the transsexuality movement itself. One can see it in the work of Riki Wilchins,⁶ whose gender theory makes room for transsexuality as a transformative exercise, but one can see it perhaps most dramatically in Kate Bornstein, who argues that to go from F to M, or from M to F, is not necessarily to stay within the binary frame of gender, but to engage transformation itself as the meaning of gender. In some ways, it is Kate Bornstein who is now carrying the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir:⁷ if one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, then becoming is the vehicle for gender itself. But why, we might ask, has David become the occasion for a reflection on transsexuality?

Although David comes to claim that he would prefer to be a man, it is not clear whether David himself believes in the primary causal force of the Y chromosome. Diamond finds support for his theory in David, but it is not clear that David agrees with Diamond. David clearly knows about the world of hormones, asked for them and takes them. David has learned about phallic construction from transsexual contexts, wants a phallus, has it made, and so allegorizes a certain transsexual transformation without precisely exemplifying it. He is, in his view, a man born a man, castrated by the medical establishment, feminized by the psychiatric world, and then enabled to return to who he is. But in order to return to who he is, he requires—and wants, and gets—a subjection to hormones and surgery. He allegorizes transsexuality in order to achieve a sense of naturalness. And this transformation is applauded by the endocrinologists on the case since they understand his appearance now to be in accord with an inner truth. Whereas the Money Institute enlists transsexuals to instruct Brenda in the ways of women, and *in the name of normalization*, the endocrinologists prescribe the sex change protocol of transsexuality to David for him to reassume his genetic destiny, *in the name of nature*.

And though the Money Institute enlists transsexuals to allegorize Brenda's full transformation into a woman, the endocrinologists propose to appropriate transsexual surgery in order to build the phallus that will make David a more legible man. Importantly, it seems, the norms [that] govern intelligible gender for Money are those that can be forcibly imposed and behaviorally appropriated, so the malleability of gender construction, which is part of his thesis, turns

⁶ Riki Wilchins (b. 1952) An activist who focuses on gender norms but who is best known for bringing transgender people into public acceptance.

⁷ Kate Bornstein (b. 1948) A transsexual and author of *Gender Outlaw* (1994). Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) was a celebrated French writer and philosopher and author of *The Second Sex* (1953).

out to require a forceful application. And the “nature” that the endocrinologists defend also needs a certain assistance through surgical and hormonal means, at which point a certain nonnatural intervention in anatomy and biology is precisely what is mandated by nature. So in each case, the primary premise is in some ways refuted by the means by which it is implemented. *Malleability is, as it were, violently imposed. And naturalness is artificially induced.* There are ways of arguing social construction that have nothing to do with Money's project, but that is not my aim here. And there are no doubt ways of seeking recourse to genetic determinants that do not lead to the same kind of interventionist conclusions that are arrived at by Diamond and Sigmundsen. But that is also not precisely my point. For the record, though, the prescriptions arrived at by these purveyors of natural and normative gender in no way follow necessarily from the premises from which they begin, and that the premises with which they begin have no necessity of itself. (One might well disjoin the theory of gender construction, for instance, from the hypothesis of gender normativity and have a very different account of social construction than that offered by Money; one might allow from genetic factors without assuming that they are the only aspect of “nature” that one might consult to understand the sexed characteristics of a human. Why is the “Y” considered the exclusive and primary determinant of maleness, exercising preemptive rights over any and all other factors?)

But my point in recounting this story to you and its appropriation for the purposes of gender theory is to suggest that the story as we have it does not actually supply evidence for either thesis, and to suggest that there may be another way of reading this story, one that neither confirms nor denies the theory of social construction, one that neither affirms nor denies gender essentialism. Indeed, what I hope to underscore here is the disciplinary framework within which Brenda/David develops a discourse of self-reporting and self-understanding, since it constitutes the grid of intelligibility by which his own humanness is both questioned and asserted. It seems crucial to remember, as one considers what might count as the evidence of the truth of gender, that Brenda/David was intensely monitored by psychological teams through childhood and adolescence, that teams of doctors observed her behavior, that teams of doctors asked her and her brother to disrobe in front of them so that genital development could be gauged, that there was the doctor who asked her to engage in mock coital exercises with her brother, to view the pictures, to know and want the so-called normalcy of unambiguous genitalia. There was an apparatus of knowledge applied to the person and body of Brenda/David that is rarely, if ever, taken into account as part of what David is responding to when he reports on his feelings of true gender.

The act of self-reporting and the act of self-observation take place in relation to a certain audience, with a certain audience as the imagined recipient,

before a certain audience for whom a verbal and visual picture of selfhood is being produced. These are speech acts that are very often delivered to those who have been scrutinizing, brutally, the truth of Brenda's gender for years. And even though Diannond and Signundsen and even Colapinto are in the position of defending David against Money's various intrusions, they are still asking David how he feels and who he is, trying to ascertain the truth of his sex through the discourse he provides. Because Brenda was subjected to such scrutiny and, most importantly, constantly and repeatedly subjected to a norm, a normalizing ideal that was conveyed through a plurality of gazes, a norm applied to the body, a question is constantly posed: Is this person feminine enough? Has this person made it to femininity? Is femininity being properly embodied here? Is the embodiment working? What evidence can be marshalled in order to know? And surely we must have knowledge here. We must be able to say that we know, and to communicate that in the professional journals, and justify our decision, our act. In other words, these exercises interrogate whether the gender norm that establishes coherent personhood has been successfully accomplished. The inquiries and inspections can be understood, along these lines, as the violent attempt to implement the norm, and the institutionalization of that power of implementation.

The pediatricians and psychiatrists who have revisited the case in recent years cite David's own self-description to support their point. David's narrative about his own sense of being male that supports the theory that David is really male, and that he was, even when he was Brenda, always male.

David tells his interviewers the following about himself:

There were little things from early on. I began to see how different I felt and was, from what I was supposed to be. But I didn't know what it meant. I thought I was a freak or something . . . I looked at myself and said I don't like this type of clothing, I don't like the types of toys I was always being given. I like hanging around with the guys and climbing trees and stuff like that and girls don't like any of that stuff. I looked in the mirror and [saw] my shoulders [were] so wide, I mean there [was] nothing feminine about me. I [was] skinny, but other than that, nothing. But that [was] how I figured it out. [I figured I was a guy] but didn't want to admit it. I figured I didn't want to wind up opening a can of worms.

So now you read how David describes himself. And so, if part of my task here is to do justice, not only to my topic, but to the person I am sketching for you, the person around whom so much has been said, the person whose self-description and whose decisions have become the basis for so much gender theorizing, I must be careful in presenting these words. For these words can give you only something of the person I am trying to understand, some part of that person's verbal instance. Since I cannot truly understand this person, since

I do not know this person, and have no access to this person, I am left to be a reader of a selected number of words, words that I did not fully select, ones that were selected for me, recorded from interviews and then chosen by those who decided to write their articles on this person for journals such as the *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*. So we might say that I am given fragments of the person, linguistic fragments of something called a person, what might it mean to do justice to someone under these circumstances? Can we?

On the one hand, we have a self-description, and that is to be honored. These are the words by which this individual gives himself to be understood. On the other hand, we have a description of a self that takes place in a language that is already going on, that is already saturated with norms, that predisposes us as we seek to speak of ourselves. Moreover, we have words that are delivered in the context of an interview, an interview which is part of the long and intrusive observational process that has accompanied Brenda's formation from the start. To do justice to David is, certainly, to take him at his word, and to call him by his chosen name, but how are we to understand his word and his name? Is this the word that he creates? Is this the word that he receives? Are these the words that circulate prior to his emergence as an "I" who might only gain a certain authorization to begin a self-description within the norms of this language? So that when one speaks, one speaks a language that is already speaking, even if one speaks it in a way that is not precisely how it has been spoken before. So what and who is speaking here, when David reports: "There were little things from early on. I began to see how different I felt and was, from what I was supposed to be."

This claim tells us minimally that David understands that there is a norm, a norm of how he was supposed to be, and that he has fallen short of the norm. The implicit claim here is that the norm is femininity, and he has failed to live up to that norm. And there is the norm, and it is externally imposed, communicated through a set of expectations that others have; and then there is the world of feeling and being, and these realms are, for him, distinct. What he feels is not in any way produced by the norm, and the norm is other, elsewhere, not part of who he is, who he has become, what he feels.

But given what we know about how David has been addressed, I might, in an effort to do justice to David, ask, what did Brenda see as Brenda looks at himself, feels as he feels himself, and please excuse my mixing of pronouns here, but matters are becoming changeable. When Brenda looks in the mirror and sees something nameless, freakish, something between the norms, is she not at that moment in question as a human, is she not the spectre of the freak against which and through which the norm installs itself? What is the problem with Brenda such that people are always asking to see her naked, asking her questions about what she is, how she feels, whether this is or is not the same as what is normatively true? Is that self-seeing distinct from the way s/he is seen?

He seems clear that the norms are external to him, but what if the norms have become the means by which he sees, the frame for his own seeing, his way of seeing himself? What if the action of the norm is to be found not merely in the ideal that it posits, but in the sense of aberration and of freakishness that it conveys? Consider where precisely the norm operates when David claims, "I looked at myself and said I don't like this type of clothing." To whom is David speaking? And in what world, under what conditions, does not liking that type of clothing provide evidence for being the wrong gender? For whom would that be true? And under what conditions?

Brenda reports, "I didn't like the toys I was being given," and Brenda is speaking here as someone who understands that such a dislike can function as evidence. And it seems reasonable to assume that the reason Brenda understands this "dislike" as evidence of gender dystopia, to use the technical term, is that Brenda has been addressed time and again by those who make use of every utterance that Brenda makes about her experience as evidence for or against a true gender. That Brenda happens not to like certain toys, certain dolls, certain games, may be significant in relation to the question of how and with what Brenda likes to play. But in what world, precisely, do such dislikes count as clear or unequivocal evidence for or against being a given gender? Do parents regularly rush off to gender identity clinics when their boys play with yarn, or their girls play with trucks? Or must there already be a rather enormous anxiety at play, an anxiety about the truth of gender which seizes on this or that toy, this or that proclivity of dress, the size of the shoulder, the leanness of the body, to conclude that something like a clear gender identity can or cannot be built from these scattered desires, these variable and invariable features of the body, of bone structure, of proclivity, of attire?

So what does my analysis imply? Does it tell us whether the gender here is true or false? No. And does this have implications for whether David should have been surgically transformed into Brenda, or Brenda surgically transformed into David? No, it does not. I do not know how to judge that question here, and I am not sure it can be mine to judge. Does justice demand that I decide? Or does justice demand that I wait to decide, that I practice a certain deferral in the face of a situation in which too many have rushed to judgment? Might it not be useful, important, even just, to consider a few matters before we decide, before we ascertain whether it is, in fact, ours to decide?

Consider in this spirit, then, that it is for the most part the gender essentialist position that must be voiced for transsexual surgery to take place, and that someone who comes in with a sense of the gender as changeable will have a more difficult time convincing psychiatrists and doctors to perform the surgery. In San Francisco, FTM⁸ candidates actually practice the narrative of gender

essentialism that they are required to perform before they go in to see the doctors, and there are now coaches to help them, *dramaturgs*⁹ of transsexuality who will help you make the case for no fee. Indeed, we might say that Brenda/David together went through two transsexual surgeries: the first based on a hypothetical argument about what gender should be, given the ablated¹⁰ nature of the penis; the second based on what the gender should be, based on the behavioral and verbal indications of the person in question. In both cases, certain inferences are made, ones that suggest that a body must be a certain way for a gender to work, another which says that a body must feel a certain way for a gender to work. David clearly came to disrespect and abhor the views of the first set of doctors and developed, we might say, a lay critique of the phallus to support his resistance:

Doctor said "it's gonna be tough, you're gonna be picked on, you're gonna be very alone, you're not gonna find anybody (unless you have vaginal surgery and live as a female)." And I thought to myself, you know I wasn't very old at the time, but it dawned on me that these people gotta be pretty shallow if that's the only thing they think I've got going for me; that the only reason why people get married and have children and have a productive life is because of what they have between their legs. . . . If that's all they think of me, that they justify my worth by what I have between my legs, then I gotta be a complete loser.

Here David makes a distinction between the "I" that he is, the person that he is, and the value that is conferred upon his personhood by virtue of what is or is not between his legs. He was wagering that he will be loved for something other than this or, at least, that his penis will not be the reason he is loved. He was holding out, implicitly, for something called "depth" over and against the "shallowness" of the doctors. And so although David asked for and received his new status as male, has asked for and received his new phallus, he is also something other than what he now has, and though he has undergone this transformation, he refuses to be reduced to the body part that he has acquired. "If that's all they think of me," he begins his sentence, offering a knowing and critical rejoinder to the work of the norm. There is something of me that exceeds this part, though I want this part, though it is part of me. He does not want his "worth justified" by what he has between his legs, and what this means is that he has another sense of how the worth of the person might be justified. So we might say that he is living his desire, acquiring the anatomy that he wants in order to live his desire, but that his desire is complex, and his worth

⁸ FTM Female-to-male surgical transformation.

⁹ *dramaturgs* Those who supplement the dramatic production of a play through research.
¹⁰ *ablated* Amputated; making a portion of the body nonfunctional.

is complex. And this is why, no doubt, in response to many of the questions that Money posed: Do you want to have a penis? Do you want to marry a girl? David often refused to answer the question, refused to stay in the room where Money was, refused to visit Baltimore at all after a while.

David does not trade in one gender norm for another, not exactly. It would be as wrong to say that he has simply internalized a gendered norm (from a critical position) as it would be to say that he has failed to live up to a gendered norm (from a normalizing, medical position), since he has already established that what will justify his worth will be the invocation of an "I" which is not reducible to the compatibility of his anatomy with the norm. He thinks something more of himself than what others think, he does not fully justify his worth through recourse to what he has between his legs, and he does not think of himself as a complete loser. Something exceeds the norm, and he recognizes its unrecognizability. It is, in a sense, his distance from the knowably human that operates as a condition of critical speech, the source of his worth, as the justification for his worth. He says that if what those doctors believe were true, he would be a complete loser, and he implies that he is not a complete loser, that something in him is winning.

But he is also saying something more—he is cautioning us against the absolutism of distinction itself, for his phallus does not constitute the entirety of his worth. There is an incommensurability between who he is and what he has, an incommensurability between the phallus he has and what it is expected to be (and in this way no different from anyone with a phallus), which means that he has not become one with the norm, and yet he is still someone, speaking, insisting, even referring to himself. And it is from this gap, this incommensurability, between the norm that is supposed to inaugurate his humanness and the spoken insistence on himself that he performs that he derives his worth, that he speaks his worth. And we cannot precisely give content to this person at the very moment that he speaks his worth, which means that it is precisely the ways in which he is not fully recognizable, fully disposable, fully categorizable, that his humanness emerges. And this is important because we might ask that he enter into intelligibility in order to speak and to be known, but what he does instead, through his speech, is to offer a critical perspective on the norms that confer intelligibility itself. He shows, we might say, that there is an understanding to be had that exceeds the norms of intelligibility itself. And he achieves this "outside," we might speculate, by refusing the interrogations that besiege him, reversing their terms, and learning the ways in which he might escape. If he renders himself unintelligible to those who seek to know and capture his identity, this means that something about him is intelligible outside of the framework of accepted intelligibility. We might be tempted to say that there is some core of a person, and so some presumption of humanism, that emerges here, that is supervenient to the particular discourses on sexed and gendered intelligibility

that constrain him. But that would mean only that he is denounced by one discourse only to be carried by another discourse, the discourse of humanism. Or we might say that there is some core of the subject who speaks, who speaks beyond what is sayable, and that it is this ineffability that marks David's speech, the ineffability of the other who is not disclosed through speech, but leaves a portentous shard of itself in its saying, a self that is beyond discourse itself.

But what I would prefer is that we might consider carefully that when David invokes the "I" in this quite hopeful and unexpected way, he is speaking about a certain conviction he has about his own lovability; he says that "they" must think he is a real loser if the only reason anyone is going to love him is because of what he has between his legs. The "they" is telling him that he will not be loved, or that he will not be loved unless he takes what they have for him, and that they have what he needs in order to get love, that he will be loveless without what they have. But he refuses to accept that what they are offering in their discourse is love. He refuses their offering of love, understanding it as a bribe, as a seduction to subjection. He will be and he is, he tells us, loved for some other reason, a reason they do not understand, and it is not a reason we are given. It is clearly a reason that is beyond the regime of reason established by the norms of sexuality itself. We know only that he holds out for another reason, and that in this sense, we no longer know what kind of reason this is, what reason can be; he establishes the limits of what they know, disrupting the politics of truth, making use of his desubjugation within that order of being to establish the possibility of love beyond the grasp of that norm. He positions himself, knowingly, in relation to the norm, but he does not comply with its requirements. He risks a certain "desubjugation"—is he a subject? How will we know? And in this sense, David's discourse puts into play the operation of critique itself, critique which, defined by Foucault, is precisely the desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth. This does not mean that David becomes unintelligible and, therefore, without value to politics; rather, he emerges at the limits of intelligibility, offering a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe the human. It is precisely because we understand, without quite grasping, that he has another reason, that he is, as it were, another reason, that we see the limits to the discourse of intelligibility that would decide his fate. David does not precisely occupy a new world, since he is still, even within the syntax which brings about his "I," still positioned somewhere between the norm and its failure. And he is, finally, neither one; he is the human in its anonymity, as that which we do not yet know how to name or that which sets a limits on all naming. And in that sense, he is the anonymous—and critical—condition of the human as it speaks itself at the limits of what we think we know.

Postscript: As this book was going to press in June of 2004, I was saddened to learn that David Reimer took his life at the age of 38. *The New York*

Times obituary (5/12/04) mentions that his brother died two years earlier and that he was now separated from his wife. It is difficult to know what, in the end, made his life unlivable or why this life was one he felt was time to end. It seems clear, however, that there was always a question posed for him, and by him, whether life in his gender would be survivable. It is unclear whether it was his gender that was the problem, or the “treatment” that brought about an enduring suffering for him. The norms governing what it is to be a worthy, recognizable, and sustainable human life clearly did not support his life in any continuous or solid way. Life for him was always a wager and a risk, a courageous and fragile accomplishment.

❏ QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. What is most shocking about David Reimer’s childhood experiences?
2. What are some of the problems inherent in establishing gender norms?
3. Butler talks about gender essentialism. What does she mean by that term?
4. What seems to be the basis of Dr. John Money’s assurance that gender identity is largely socialized?
5. What does David Reimer’s experience seem to say about the nature/nurture debate?
6. To what extent do you think a child’s choice of toys defines his or her gender?
7. Why did children treat Brenda so badly when she was a child? What motivates children to taunt someone like Brenda when she behaved differently from what they thought was normal?

❏ SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. In paragraph 14, Butler talks about gender dimorphism. Explain what she means by the term and use the narrative about David Reimer to clarify what you think about the limits of gender identification based on the dimorphism of a male body and a female body. If you feel there are no limits, then explain how David Reimer’s story clarifies your position.
2. Judging by the way people behave in your environment, what do you feel the markers of gender difference are? How are they expressed in social situations? How do you think Butler might describe gender differences in our society? How are they expressed in terms of clothing, attitudes, interests, language, and appearance? What are your views on gender-appropriate clothing, attitudes, interests, language, and appearance? Do most of your friends agree or disagree with you?
3. In his narrative, David denies that his value as a human being is limited to “what he has between his legs” (para. 29). Examine his narrative and decide whether you agree with Butler’s analysis of this statement and her declaration that in

deciding for a sex change he “does not trade in one gender norm for another.” How much does “what he has between his legs” define him as a human being? Butler agrees with David on this issue. Do you? How do you think your peers generally feel about how genitalia define them in the estimation of others? How do you respond to their views on this issue?

4. In paragraph 30, Butler talks about David’s sense of worth. She says, “We might be tempted to say that there is some core of a person . . . that emerges here.” Reflecting on David’s own narrative about himself, defend or attack the view that there is a basic core to a person that may or may not be altered or affected by gender or gender choice. Does David’s story shed light on the concept that people have a basic core? What seems to be Butler’s view on this issue?

5. Is the feminist movement aided by the story of Dr. Money’s treatment of David Reimer? Is Butler correct in feeling that feminists limit themselves by assuming that there are only two genders and that they are based entirely on anatomy? Feminists reject the idea that anatomy is destiny, so would they not agree with Butler on this issue? If gender is not based on anatomy, what might it be based on? Does Butler give you any hints?

6. **CONNECTIONS** How do the questions of trust and distrust help clarify the principles that Butler develops in her argument? What in Karen Horney’s essay (p. 500) helps Butler make her case? How might Horney, as a psychologist, react to the story of David Reimer and his experiences in sex change? To what extent would Butler be likely to be suspicious of the categories that Horney establishes?

7. **CONNECTIONS** How could Butler use the findings about the behavior of the tribes Margaret Mead studied in “Sex and Temperament” (p. 236)? Mead reviews the ways in which our society “assigns different roles to the two sexes” and then goes on to examine the tribal groups that she lived with. Why would the study of a tribal society shed light on the question of gender difference or sameness in our society? How would Mead analyze Butler’s narrative of gender behavior? What would she find to agree with and what would she question? How does reading Mead help you better understand the concerns of Butler? How does reading Mead affect your understanding of what David Reimer experienced at the hands of the medical community?

8. Butler’s description of the difficulties David Reimer experienced reveals a great deal about cultural attitudes toward gender and how they affect an individual. In a brief essay, describe what you feel are the cultural attitudes toward gender in your town, city, or state. How do they appear similar to or different from the cultural attitudes you have experienced at your college or university? How do they appear similar to or different from the cultural attitudes toward gender that you experienced in high school? How have you changed since high school in your attitude toward gender issues?