Julia Kristeva attempts to expose the limits of Lacan's theory of language by revealing the semiotic dimension of language that it excludes. She argues that the semiotic potential of language is subversive, and describes the semiotic as a poetic-maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the symbolic, understood as culturally intelligible rule-governed speech. In the course of arguing that the semiotic contests the universality of the Symbolic, Kristeva makes several theoretical moves which end up consolidating the power of the Symbolic and paternal authority generally. She defends a maternal instinct as a pre-discursive biological necessity, thereby naturalizing a specific cultural configuration of maternity. In her use of psychoanalytic theory, she ends up claiming the cultural unintelligibility of lesbianism. Her distinction between the semiotic and the Symbolic operates to foreclose a cultural investigation into the genesis of precisely those feminine principles for which she claims a pre-discursive, naturalistic ontology. Although she claims that the maternal aspects of language are repressed in Symbolic speech and provide a critical possibility of displacing the hegemony of the paternal/symbolic, her very descriptions of the maternal appear to accept rather than contest the inevitable hegemony of the Symbolic. In conclusion, this essay offers a genealogical critique of the maternal discourse in Kristeva and suggests that recourse to the maternal does not constitute a subversive strategy as Kristeva appears to assume.

Kristeva's theory of the semiotic dimension of language at first appears to engage Lacanian premises only to expose their limits and to offer a specifically feminine locus of subversion of the paternal law within language. According to Lacan, the paternal law structures all linguistic signification, termed "the symbolic", and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture itself. This law creates the possibility of meaningful language and, hence, meaningful experience, through the repression of primary libidinal drives, including the radical dependency of the child on the maternal body. Hence, the symbolic becomes possible by repudiating the primary relationship to the maternal body. The "subject" who emerges as a consequence of this repression itself becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law. The libidinal chaos characteristic of that early dependency is now fully constrained by a unitary agent whose language is structured by that law. This lan-
guage, in turn, structures the world by suppressing multiple meanings (which always recall the libidinal multiplicity which characterized the primary relation to the maternal body) and instating univocal and discrete meanings in their place.

Kristeva challenges the Lacanian narrative which assumes that cultural meaning requires the repression of that primary relationship to the maternal body. She argues that the “semiotic” is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body which not only refutes Lacan’s primary premise, but which serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the symbolic. For Kristeva, the semiotic expresses that original libidinal multiplicity within the very terms of culture, more precisely, within poetic language in which multiple meanings and semantic non-closure prevail. In effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law.

Despite her critique of Lacan, however, Kristeva’s strategy of subversion proves doubtful. Her theory appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she sought to displace. Although she effectively exposes the limits of Lacan’s efforts to universalize the paternal law in language, she nevertheless concedes that the semiotic is invariably subordinate to the symbolic, that it assumes its specificity within the terms of a hierarchy which is immune to challenge. If the semiotic promotes the possibility of the subversion, displacement, or disruption of the paternal law, what meanings can those terms have if the symbolic always reasserts its hegemony?

The criticalism of Kristeva which follows takes issue with several different steps in Kristeva’s argument in favor of the semiotic as a source of effective subversion. First, it is unclear whether the primary relationship to the maternal body which both Kristeva and Lacan appear to accept is a viable construct and whether it is even a knowable experience according to either of their linguistic theories. The multiple drives that characterize the semiotic constitute a pre-discursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself. Manifest in language, in poetic language in particular, this prediscursive libidinal economy becomes a locus of cultural subversion. A second problem emerges when Kristeva maintains that this libidinal source of subversion cannot be maintained within the terms of culture, that its sustained presence leads to psychosis and to the breakdown of cultural life itself. Kristeva thus alternately posits and denies the semiotic as an emancipatory ideal. Though she tells us that it is a dimension of language regularly repressed, she also concedes that it is a kind of language which can never be consistently maintained.

In order to assess her seemingly self-defeating theory, we need to ask how this libidinal multiplicity becomes manifest in language, and what conditions its temporary lifespan there? Moreover, Kristeva describes the maternal body
as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially pre-cultural reality. Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability. In asking whether a pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity is possible, we will also consider whether what we claim to discover in the pre-discursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, an effect of culture rather than its secret and primary cause.

Even if we accept Kristeva’s theory of primary drives, it is unclear that the subversive effects of such drives can serve, via the semiotic, as anything more than a temporary and futile disruption of the hegemony of the paternal law. I will try to show how the failure of her political strategy follows in part from her largely uncritical appropriation of drive theory. Moreover, upon careful scrutiny of her descriptions of the semiotic function within language, it appears that Kristeva reinstates the paternal law at the level of the semiotic itself. In the end, Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice. In the final section of this paper, I will suggest a way to reconceptualize the relation between drives, language, and patriarchal prerogative which might serve a more effective strategy of subversion.

Kristeva’s description of the semiotic proceeds through a number of problematic steps. She assumes that drives have aims prior to their emergence into language, that language invariably represses or sublimates these drives, and that such drives are manifest only in those linguistic expressions which disobey, as it were, the univocal requirements of signification within the symbolic domain. She claims further that the emergence of multiplicitous drives into language is evident in the semiotic, that domain of linguistic meaning distinct from the symbolic, which is the maternal body manifest in poetic speech.

As early as Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), Kristeva argued for a necessary causal relation between the heterogeneity of drives and the plurivocal possibilities of poetic language. Differing from Lacan, she maintained that poetic language was not predicated upon a repression of primary drives. On the contrary, poetic language, she claimed, is the linguistic occasion on which drives break apart the usual, univocal terms of language and reveal an irrepressible heterogeneity of multiple sounds and meanings. Kristeva thereby contested Lacan’s equation of the symbolic with all linguistic meaning by asserting that poetic language has its own modality of meaning which does not conform to the requirements of univocal designation.

In this same work, she subscribed to a notion of free or uncathedected energy which makes itself known in language through the poetic function. She claimed, for instance, that “in the intermingling of drives in language we shall see the economy of poetic language” and that in this economy,
“the unitary subject can no longer find his place” (1984, 132) This poetic function is a rejective or divisive linguistic function which tends to fracture and multiply meanings, it enacts the heterogeneity of drives through the proliferation and destruction of univocal signification. Hence, the urge toward a highly differentiated or plurivocal set of meanings appears as the revenge of drives against the rule of the symbolic which, in turn, is predicated upon their repression. Kristeva defines the semiotic as the multiplicity of drives manifest in language. With their insistent energy and heterogeneity, these drives disrupt the signifying function of language. Thus, in this early work, she defines the semiotic as “the signifying function connected to the modality [of] primary process.”

In the essays that comprise Desire in Language (1977) Kristeva ground her definition of the semiotic more fully in psychoanalytic terms. The primary drives that the symbolic represses and the semiotic obliquely indicates are now understood as maternal drives, not only those drives belonging to the mother, but those which characterize the dependency of the infant’s body (of either sex) on the mother. In other words, “the maternal body” designates a relation of continuity rather than a discrete subject or object of desire, indeed, it designates that jouissance which precedes desire and the subject/object dichotomy that desire presupposes. While the symbolic is predicated upon the rejection of the mother, the refusal of the mother as an object of sexual love, the semiotic, through rhythm, assonance, intonations, sound play and repetition, re-presents or recovers the maternal body in poetic speech. Even the “first echolalas of infants” and the “glossalalas in psychotic discourse” are manifestations of the continuity of the mother-infant relation, a heterogeneous field of impulse prior to the separation/individualization of infant and mother, alike effected by the imposition of the incest taboo (1980, 135). The separation of the mother and infant effected by the taboo is expressed linguistically as the severing of sound from sense. In Kristeva’s words, “a phoneme, as distinctive element of meaning, belongs to language as symbolic. But this same phoneme is involved in rhythmic, intonational repetitions, it thereby tends toward autonomy from meaning so as to maintain itself in a semiotic disposition near the instinctual drive’s body” (1980, 135).

The semiotic is described by Kristeva as destroying or eroding the symbolic, it is said to be “before” meaning, as when a child begins to vocalize, or “after” meaning as when a psychotic no longer uses words to signify. If the symbolic and the semiotic are understood as two modalities of language, and if the semiotic is understood to be generally repressed by the symbolic, then language for Kristeva is understood as a system in which the symbolic remains hegemonic except when the semiotic disrupts its signifying process through elision, repetition, mere sound, and the multiplication of meaning through indefinitely signifying images and metaphors. In its symbolic mode, language
rests upon a severance of the relation of maternal dependency, whereby it becomes abstract (abstracted from the materiality of language) and univocal; this is most apparent in quantitative or purely formal reasoning. In its semiotic mode, language is engaged in a poetic recovery of the maternal body, that diffuse materiality that resists all discrete and univocal signification. Kristeva writes,

In any poetic language, not only do the rhythmic constraints, for example, go so far as to violate certain grammatical rules of a national language but in recent texts, these semiotic constraints (rhythm, vocalic timbres in Symbolist work, but also graphic disposition on the page) are accompanied by nonrecoverable syntactic elisions; it is impossible to reconstitute the particular elided syntactic category (object or verb), which makes the meaning of the utterance decidable (1980, 134)

For Kristeva, this undecidability is precisely the instinctual moment in language, its disruptive function. Poetic language thus suggests a dissolution of the coherent, signifying subject into the primary continuity which is the maternal body.

Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (from whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed, instinctual, maternal element (1980, 136)

Kristeva’s references to the “subject” of poetic language are not wholly appropriate, for poetic language erodes and destroys the subject, where the subject is understood as a speaking being participating in the symbolic. Following Lacan, she maintains that the prohibition against the incestuous union with the mother is the founding law of the subject, a foundation which severs or breaks the continuous relation of maternal dependence. In creating the subject, the prohibitive law creates the domain of the symbolic or language as a system of univocally signifying signs. Hence, Kristeva concludes that “poetic language would be for its questionable subject-in-process the equivalent of incest” (1980, 136). The breaking of symbolic language against its own founding law or, equivalently, the emergence of rupture into language from within its own interior instinctuality is not merely the outburst of libidinal heterogeneity into language, it also signifies the somatic state of dependence on the maternal body prior to the individuation of the ego. Poetic language thus always indicates a return to the maternal terrain, where the maternal signifies both libidinal dependence and the heterogeneity of drives.
In "Motherhood According to Bellini", Kristeva suggests that, because the maternal body signifies the loss of coherent and discrete identity, poetic language verges on psychosis. And in the case of a woman's semiotic expressions in language, the return to the maternal signifies a pre-discursive homosexuality that Kristeva also clearly associates with psychosis. Although Kristeva concedes that poetic language is sustained culturally through its participation in the symbolic and, hence, in the norms of linguistic communicability, she fails to allow that homosexuality is capable of the same non-psychotic social expression. The key to Kristeva's view of the psychotic nature of homosexuality is to be understood, I suggest, in her acceptance of the structuralist assumption that heterosexuality is coextensive with the founding of the symbolic. Hence, the cathexis of homosexual desire can only be achieved, according to Kristeva, through displacements that are sanctioned within the symbolic, such as poetic language or the act of giving birth.

By giving birth, the women enters into contact with her mother, she becomes, she is her own mother, they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond (1980, 239).

According to Kristeva, the act of giving birth does not successfully reestablish that continuous relation prior to individuation because the infant invariably suffers the prohibition on incest and is separated off as a discrete identity. In the case of the mother's separation from the girl-child, the result is melancholy for both, for the separation is never fully completed.

As opposed to grief or mourning, in which separation is recognized and the libido attached to the original object is successfully displaced onto a new substitute object, melancholy designates a failure to grieve in which the loss is simply internalized and, in that sense, refused. Instead of negating the attachment to the body, the maternal body is internalized as a negation, so that the girl's identity becomes itself a kind of loss, a characteristic privation or lack.

The alleged psychosis of homosexuality, then, consists in its thorough break with the paternal law and with the grounding of the female "ego", tenuous though it may be, in the melancholic response to separation from the maternal body. Hence, according to Kristeva, female homosexuality is the emergence of psychosis into culture.

The homosexual-maternal facet is a whirl of words, a complete absence of meaning and seeing, it is feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes, and fantasied clinging to the maternal.
body as a screen against the plunge for woman, a paradise
lost but seemingly close at hand (1980, 239-40)

For women, however, this homosexuality is manifest in poetic language
which becomes, in fact, the only form of the semiotic, besides childbirth,
that can be sustained within the terms of the symbolic. For Kristeva, then,
"the" overt homosexuality cannot be a culturally sustainable activity, for it would
constitute a breaking of the incest taboo in an unmediated way. And yet why
is this the case?

Kristeva accepts the assumption that culture is equivalent to the symbolic,
that the symbolic is fully subsumed under the "Law of the Father", and that
the only modes of non-psychotic activity are those which participate in the
symbolic to some extent. Her strategic task, then, is not to replace the sym-
bolic with the semiotic nor to establish the semiotic as a rival cultural possi-
bility, but rather to validate those experiences within the symbolic that per-
mit a manifestation of the borders which divide the symbolic from the
semiotic. Just as birth is understood to be a cathexis of instinctual drives for
the purposes of a social teleology, so poetic production is conceived as the site
in which the split between instinct and representation coexist in culturally
communicable form.

The speaker reaches this limit, this requisite of sociality, only
by virtue of a particular, discursive practice called "art." A
woman also attains it (and in our society, especially) through
the strange form of split symbolization (threshold of language
and instinctual drive, of the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic') of
which the act of giving birth consists (1980, 240)

Hence, for Kristeva, poetry and maternity represent privileged practices
within paternally sanctioned culture which permit a non-psychotic experience
of the heterogeneity and dependency characteristic of the maternal terrain.
These acts of poesis reveal an instinctual heterogeneity that exposes the
repressed ground of the symbolic, challenges the mastery of the univocal signi-
fier, and diffuses the autonomy of the subject who postures as their necessary
ground. The heterogeneity of drives operates culturally as a subversive stra-
gety of displacement, one which dislodges the hegemony of the paternal law
by releasing the repressed multiplicity interior to language itself. Precisely be-
cause that instinctual heterogeneity must be re-presented in and through the
paternal law, it cannot defy the incest taboo altogether, but must remain
within the most fragile regions of the symbolic. Obedient, then, to syntacti-
cal requirements, the poetic-maternal practices of displacing the paternal law
always remain tenuously tethered to that law. Hence, a full-scale refusal of
the symbolic is impossible, and a discourse of 'emancipation', for Kristeva, is
out of the question. At best, tactical subversions and displacements of the
law challenge its self-grounding presumption. But, once again, Kristeva does not seriously challenge the structuralist assumption that the prohibitive paternal law is foundational to culture itself. Hence, the subversion of paternally sanctioned culture cannot come from another version of culture, but only from within the repressed interior of culture itself, from the heterogeneity of drives that constitutes culture's concealed foundation.

This relation between heterogeneous drives and the paternal law produces an exceedingly problematic view of psychosis. On the one hand, it designates female homosexuality as a culturally unintelligible practice, inherently psychotic, on the other hand, it mandates maternity as a compulsory defense against libidinal chaos. Although Kristeva does not make either claim explicitly, both implications follow from her views on the law, language, and drives.

Consider that for Kristeva, poetic language breaks the incest taboo and, as such, verges always on psychosis. As a return to the maternal body and a concomitant de-individuation of the ego, poetic language becomes especially threatening when uttered by women. The poetic then contests not only the incest taboo, but the taboo against homosexuality as well. Poetic language is thus, for women, both displaced maternal dependency and, because that dependency is libidinal, displaced homosexuality as well.

For Kristeva, the unmediated cathexis of female homosexual desire leads unequivocally to psychosis. Hence, one can satisfy this drive only through a series of displacements: the incorporation of maternal identity, e.g. by becoming a mother oneself, or through poetic language which manifests obliquely the heterogeneity of drives characteristic of maternal dependency. As the only socially sanctioned and, hence, non-psychotic displacements for homosexual desire, both maternity and poetry constitute melancholic experiences for women appropriately acculturated into heterosexuality. The heterosexual poet-mother suffers interminably from the displacement of the homosexual cathexis. And yet, the consummation of this desire would lead to the psychotic unraveling of identity, according to Kristeva. The presumption is that, for women, heterosexuality and coherent selfhood are indissolubly linked.

How are we to understand this constitution of lesbian experience as the site of an irretrievable self-loss? Kristeva clearly takes heterosexuality to be prerequisite to kinship and to culture. Consequently, she identifies lesbian experience as the psychotic alternative to the acceptance of paternally sanctioned laws. And yet why is lesbianism constituted as psychosis? From what cultural perspective is lesbianism constructed as a site of fusion, self-loss, and psychosis?

By projecting the lesbian as “other” to culture, and characterizing lesbian speech as the psychotic “whirl-of-words”, Kristeva constructs lesbian sexuality as intrinsically unintelligible. This tactical dismissal and reduction of les-
bian experience performed in the name of the law positions Kristeva within the orbit of paternal-heterosexual privilege. The paternal law which protects her from this radical incoherence is precisely the mechanism that produces the construct of lesbianism as a site of irrationality. Significantly, this description of lesbian experience is effected from the outside, and tells us more about the fantasies that a fearful heterosexual culture produces to defend against its own homosexual possibilities than about lesbian experience itself.

In claiming that lesbianism designates a loss of self, Kristeva appears to be delivering a psychoanalytic truth about the repression necessary for individuation. The fear of such a 'regression' to homosexuality is, then, a fear of losing cultural sanction and privilege altogether. Although Kristeva claims that this loss designates a place prior to culture, there is no reason not to understand it as a new or unacknowledged cultural form. In other words, Kristeva prefers to explain lesbian experience as a regressive libidinal state prior to acculturation itself rather than to take up the challenge that lesbianism offers to her restricted view of paternally sanctioned cultural laws. Is the fear encoded in the construction of the lesbian as psychotic the result of a developmentally necessitated repression, or is it, rather, the fear of losing cultural legitimacy and, hence, being cast—not outside or prior to culture—but outside cultural legitimacy, still within culture, but culturally "out-lawed"?

Kristeva describes both the maternal body and lesbian experience from a position of sanctioned heterosexuality that fails to acknowledge its own fear of losing that sanction. Her reification of the paternal law not only repudiates female homosexuality, but denies the varied meanings and possibilities of motherhood as a cultural practice. But cultural subversion is not really Kristeva's concern, for subversion, when it appears, emerges from beneath the surface of culture only inevitably to return there. Although the semiotic is a possibility of language that escapes the paternal law, it remains inevitably within or, indeed, beneath the territory of that law. Hence, poetic language and the pleasures of maternity constitute local displacements of the paternal law, temporary subversions which finally submit to that against which they initially rebel. By relegating the source of subversion to a site outside of culture itself, Kristeva appears to foreclose the possibility of subversion as an effective or realizable cultural practice. Pleasure beyond the paternal law can only be imagined together with its inevitable impossibility.

Kristeva's theory of thwarted subversion is premised on her problematic view of the relation between drives, language and the law. Her postulation of a subversive multiplicity of drives raises a number of epistemological and political questions. In the first place, if these drives are only manifest in language or cultural forms already determined as symbolic, then how is it that we can verify their pre-symbolic ontological status? Kristeva argues that poetic language gives us access to these drives in their fundamental multiplicity, but this answer is not fully satisfactory. Since poetic language is said to depend
upon the prior existence of these multiplicitous drives, we cannot, then, in circular fashion, justify the postulated existence of these drives through recourse to poetic language. If drives must first be repressed for language to exist, and if we can only attribute meaning to that which is representable in language, then to attribute meaning to drives prior to their emergence into language is impossible. Similarly, to attribute a causality to drives which facilitates their transformation into language and by which language itself is to be explained cannot reasonably be done within the confines of language itself. In other words, we know these drives as ‘causes’ only in and through their effects and, as such, we have no reason for not identifying drives with their effects. It follows that either (a) drives and their representations are coextensive or (b) representations preexist the drives themselves.

This last alternative is, I would argue, an important one to consider, for how do we know that the instinctual object of Kristeva’s discourse is not a construction of the discourse itself? And what grounds do we have for positing this object, this multiplicitous field, as prior to signification? If poetic language must participate in the symbolic in order to be culturally communicable, and if Kristeva’s own theoretical texts are emblematic of the symbolic, then where are we to find a convincing ‘outside’ to this domain? Her postulation of a pre-discursive corporeal multiplicity becomes all the more problematic when we discover that maternal drives are considered part of a “biological destiny” and are themselves manifestations of “a non-symbolic, non-paternal causality.” This presymbolic non-paternal causality is, for Kristeva, a semiotic, maternal causality or, more specifically, a teleological conception of maternal instincts.

Material compulsion, spasm of a memory belonging to the species that either binds together or splits apart to perpetuate itself, series of markers with no other significance than the eternal return of the life-death biological cycle. How can we verbalize this prelinguistic, unrepresentable memory? Heraclitus’ flux, Epicurus’ atoms, the whirling dust of cabalistic, Arab and Indian mystics, and the stippled drawings of psychedelic—all seem better metaphors than the theory of Being, the logos, and its laws.

Here, the repressed maternal body is not only the locus of multiple drives, but also the bearer of a biological teleology, one which, it seems, makes itself evident in the early stages of Western philosophy, in non-Western religious beliefs and practices, in aesthetic representations produced by psychotic or near-psychotic states, and even in avant-garde artistic practices. But why are we to assume that these various cultural expressions manifest the self-same principle of maternal heterogeneity? Kristeva simply subordinates each of these cultural moments to the same principle. Consequently, the semiotic
represents any cultural effort to displace the Logos (which, curiously, she contrasts with Heraclitus' flux), where the Logos represents the univocal signifier, the law of identity. Her opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic reduces here to a metaphysical quarrel between the principle of multiplicity that escapes the charge of non-contradiction and a principle of identity based on the suppression of that multiplicity. Oddly, that very principle of multiplicity that Kristeva everywhere defends operates in much the same way as a principle of identity. Note the way in which all manner of things 'primitive' and 'oriental' are summarily subordinated to the principle of the maternal body. Surely, her description not only warrants the charge of orientalism, but raises the very significant question whether, ironically, multiplicity has become a univocal signifier.

Her ascription of a teleological aim to maternal drives prior to their constitution in language or culture raises a number of questions about Kristeva's political program. Although she clearly sees subversive and disruptive potential in those semiotic expressions that challenge the hegemony of the paternal law, it is less clear in what precisely this subversion consists. If the law is understood to rest on a constructed ground, beneath which lurks the repressed maternal terrain, what concrete cultural options emerge within the terms of culture as a consequence of this revelation? Ostensibly, the multiplicity associated with the maternal libidinal economy has the force to disperse the univocity of the paternal signifier, and seemingly to create the possibility of other cultural expressions no longer tightly constrained by the law of non-contradiction. But is this disruptive activity the opening of a field of significations, or is it the manifestation of a biological archaism which operates according to a natural and "prepaternal" causality? If Kristeva believed that the former were the case (and she does not), then she would be interested in a displacement of the paternal law in favor of a proliferating field of cultural possibilities. But instead she prescribes a return to a principle of maternal heterogeneity which proves to be a closed concept, indeed, a heterogeneity confined by a teleology both unilinear and univocal.

Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female libidinal drive that constitutes an ever recurring metaphysical principle. Here Kristeva reifies maternity and then promotes this reification as the disruptive potential of the semiotic. As a result, the paternal law, understood as the ground of univocal signification, is displaced by an equally univocal signifier, the principle of the maternal body which remains self-identical in its teleology regardless of its "multiplicitous" manifestations.

Insofar as Kristeva conceptualizes this maternal instinct as having an ontological status prior to the paternal law, she fails to consider the way in which that law might well be the cause of the very desire it is said to repress. Rather than the manifestation of a prepatal causality, these desires might attest to
maternity as a social practice required and recapitulated by the exigencies of kinship. Kristeva accepts Levi-Strauss' analysis of the exchange of women as prerequisite for the consolidation of kinship bonds. She understands this exchange, however, as the cultural moment in which the maternal body is repressed rather than as a mechanism for the compulsory cultural construction of the female body as a maternal body. Indeed, we might understand the exchange of women as imposing a compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce. According to Gayle Rubin's reading of Levi-Strauss, kinship effects a "sculpting of sexuality" such that the desire to give birth is the result of social practices which require and produce such desires in order to effect their reproductive ends (Rubin 1975, 182).

What grounds, then, does Kristeva have for imputing a maternal teleology to the female body prior to its emergence into culture? To pose the question in this way is already to question the distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic on which her conception of the maternal body rests. The maternal body in its originary signification is considered by Kristeva to be prior to signification itself, hence, it becomes impossible within her framework to consider the maternal itself as a signification, open to cultural variability. Her argument makes clear that maternal drives constitute those primary processes that language invariably represses or sublimates. But perhaps her argument could be recast within an even more encompassing framework: what cultural configuration of language, indeed, of discourse, generates the trope of a pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity, and for what purposes?

By restricting the paternal law to a prohibitive or repressive function, Kristeva fails to understand the paternal mechanisms by which affectivity itself is generated. The law that is said to repress the semiotic may well be the governing principle of the semiotic itself, with the result that what passes as "maternal instinct" may well be a culturally constructed desire which is interpreted through a naturalistic vocabulary. And if that desire is constructed according to a law of kinship which requires the heterosexual production and reproduction of desire, then the vocabulary of naturalistic affect effectively renders that "paternal law" invisible. What Kristeva refers to as a "pre-paternal causality" would then appear as a paternal causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality.

Significantly, the figuration of the maternal body and the teleology of its instincts as a self-identical and insistent metaphysical principle—an archaism of a collective, sex-specific biological constitution—bases itself on a univocal conception of the female sex. And this sex, conceived as both origin and causality, poses as a principle of pure generativity. Indeed, for Kristeva, it is equated with poesis itself, the activity of making that in Plato's Symposium is held to be an act of birth and poetic conception at one end. But is female generativity truly an uncaused cause, and does it begin the narrative that takes all of humanity under the force of the incest taboo and into language?
Does the prepaternal causality whereof Kristeva speaks signify a primary female economy of pleasure and meaning? Can we reverse the very order of this causality and understand this semiotic economy as a production of a prior discourse?

In the final chapter of Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he cautions against using the category of sex as a "fictitious unity [and] causal principle", and argues that the fictitious category of sex facilitates a reversal of causal relations such that "sex" is understood to cause the structure and meaning of desire

the notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified (1980, 154)

For Foucault, the body is not ‘sexed’ in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an ‘idea’ of natural or essential sex. As an instrument and effect of power, the body only gains meaning within discourse in the context of power relations. Sexuality is an historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity. As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce ‘sex’ as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis.

Foucault’s framework suggests a way to solve some of the epistemological and political difficulties that follow from Kristeva’s view of the female body. We can understand Kristeva’s assertion of a “prepaternal causality” as fundamentally inverted. Whereas Kristeva posits a maternal body prior to discourse which exerts its own causal force in the structure of drives, I would argue that the discursive production of the maternal body as pre-discursive is a tactic in the self-amplification and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. Then the maternal body would no longer be understood as the hidden ground of all signification, the tacit cause of all culture. It would be understood, rather, as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire.

From within Foucault’s framework, we are compelled to redescribe the maternal libidinal economy as a product of an historically specific organization of sexuality. Moreover, the discourse of sexuality, itself suffused by power relations, becomes the true ground of the trope of the pre-discursive maternal body. Kristeva’s formulation suffers a thoroughgoing reversal: the symbolic and the semiotic are no longer interpreted as those dimensions of language which follow upon the repression or manifestation of the maternal libidinal
economy This very economy is understood instead as a reification that both extends and conceals the institution of motherhood as compulsory for women. Indeed, when the desires that maintain the institution of motherhood are transvaluated as prepatriarchal and precultural drives, then the institution gains a permanent legitimation in the invariant structures of the female body. Indeed, the clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of its reproductive function is inscribed on that body as the law of its natural necessity. And Kristeva, safeguarding that law of a biologically necessitated maternity as a subversive operation that preexists the paternal law itself, aids in the systematic production of its invisibility and, consequently, the illusion of its inevitability.

In conclusion, because Kristeva restricts herself to an exclusively prohibitive conception of the paternal law, she is unable to account for the ways in which the paternal law generates certain desires in the form of natural drives. The female body that she seeks to express is itself a construct produced by the very law it is supposed to undermine. In no way do these criticisms of Kristeva’s conception of the paternal law necessarily invalidate her general position that culture or the symbolic is predicated upon a repudiation of women’s bodies. I want to suggest, however, that any theory that asserts that signification is predicated upon the denial or repression of a female principle ought to consider whether that femaleness is really external to the cultural norms by which it is repressed. In other words, on my reading, the repression of the feminine does not require that the agency of repression and the object of repression be ontologically distinct. Indeed, repression may be understood to produce the object that it comes to deny. That production may well be an elaboration of the agency of repression itself. As Foucault made clear, this culturally contradictory enterprise of repression is prohibitive and generative at once, and makes the problematic of ‘liberation’ especially acute. The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation. In order to avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed, it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, not to its ‘natural’ past nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.
NOTES

1. For an extremely interesting analysis of reproductive metaphors as descriptive of the process of poetic creativity, see Wendy Owen, 1985.

2. See Plato's Symposium, 209a of the "procreancy of the spirit", he writes that it is the specific capacity of the poet. Hence, poetic creations are understood as sublimated reproductive desire.

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