



The Decon- struction of Sex

jean-luc nancy and irving goh

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY CLAIRE COLEBROOK

The Deconstruction of Sex

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The Decon- struction of Sex

JEAN-LUC NANCY AND IRVING GOH

Duke University Press

Durham and London

2021

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project editor: Lisa Lawley

Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan

Typeset in Carter & Cone Galliard by Copperline

Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nancy, Jean-Luc, author. | Goh, Irving, author.

Title: The deconstruction of sex / Jean-Luc Nancy and
Irving Goh.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. |

“A cultural politics book.” | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020048539 (print)

LCCN 2020048540 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478013426 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478014355 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478021643 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Sex—Social aspects. | Sex—Philosophy. |

MeToo movement. | Sexual abuse victims. | Sexual
harassment. | Sex in literature.

Classification: LCC HV6556 .N36 2021 (print) |

LCC hv6556 (ebook) | DDC 305.42—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020048539>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020048540>

gov/2020048540

Cover art: clin o'Hara slavick, *Procedure*. Collage, 2019.

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Introduction

Sex “Is” Deconstruction

The following conversation between myself and Jean-Luc Nancy on the topic of sex took place between March 2018 and June 2019. As stated in the preamble (“Opening Questions”) to the conversation proper, there could not have been a more opportune moment to raise the topic. Sex had become a heated, controversial subject by then, given that 2018 was the year when the #MeToo movement — the movement that exposed sexual abuse and harassment of women in the workplace by men in power — arguably reached its peak. In addition, sex abuse scandals involving the Catholic Church, as Nancy reminds us in the conversation, were also escalating then. And just the year before, in 2017, there gained momentum, perhaps more than the years before, in the movement for the recognition and affirmation of “transgender” or “gender-fluid” people, that is, those who not only refuse the restrictive definition of their gender in terms of a strict female/male binary but also seek to go beyond labels such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual.” With all that, contemporary society had to learn, in very quick time, to be extrasensitive when it comes to matters concerning sex. There have been at least two almost immediate and explicit responses. The first, which would seem to be the positive one, and which owes its debt to the #MeToo movement, is the demand for real change in the handling of sexual misdeeds in the workplace. There has been the col-

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lective encouragement of women to come forth and call out male bosses and colleagues guilty of such deeds; there has also been the increasingly rapid legal taking-to-task of those perpetrators, swiftly removing them from office and recognizing the criminality of their acts. In March 2020, the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, undoubtedly the most notorious perpetrator that incited the #MeToo movement, was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison. The second response, not surprisingly, was a reactionary one, resembling a vindictive retaliation to what #MeToo had done to supposed male “prerogative”: the deliberate reduction of a potential sexual relation to a cold, emotionless, or even affectless, contractual affair, where prior consent by all parties on all the terms and limits of that relation must be documented and signed. In that vein, which clearly reeks of remnants of toxic masculinity, all sexual relations must be approached with suspicion, best with a legal team in tow. Whichever the response, it was clear that sex had created sociocultural and institutional upheavals with effects that are still running their course today. These upheavals, in turn, have no doubt called for another way of thinking and speaking about sex, hopefully or ideally one that could be adequate and appropriate to contemporary sensibilities. Any discourse that seeks a return to toxic masculinity, to me at least, is definitely not the way to go; neither is that which spitefully pushes things to the extreme, reducing sexual relation to a contract or negotiation—and that, as will be seen in the conversation, is what Nancy strongly resists.¹ Instead, we need a discourse that can be respectful of, and sensitive to, all parties in a sexual relation. Yet it should also be one that does not repress all the undeniable and perhaps even irreducible problematic aspects of sex. That is at least the endeavor of this conversation.

But to go back to the context that gave rise to this conversation: other than the unleashing of real sociocultural and institutional upheavals that sex brought about, Galilée published the original French edition of Nancy’s *Sexistence* in 2017. *Sexistence* is an augmentation and development of Nancy’s argument on the ineluctable relation between existence and sex in all its senses, that is, sex not just as species reproduction, or gender, but also the act of making love,

and sexual enjoyment either solitarily or with a partner or partners. Nancy first presented that idea as a talk, titled “Sexistenz,” in Hamburg in 2015; it then appeared in essay form as “Sexistence,” which I helped translate from French into English, in the journal *Diacritics* in 2016. The book form allowed Nancy, as said, to expound further on his ideas in the talk and essay versions. There is no doubt that *Sexistence* has been particularly alluring for those interested not only in the ontological status of sex but also in its mode of inquiry pursued with a line of thought that is commonly called “deconstruction.”² Indeed, there is no denying that Nancy’s mode of thinking is very close to Derridean “deconstruction.” Yet, to be sure, there are very specific differences between the two thinkers, leading quite often to amicable disagreements between them over certain concepts such as community, fraternity, and touch. Furthermore, Nancy is also known to be more “postdeconstructive” in the sense that his works are not delimited to a “linguistic turn,” a charge very often unjustly or wrongly made against Derrida’s, a charge furthermore based typically on Derrida’s earlier works that deal more primarily with structural issues of thinking, which admittedly give them the semblance of being abstractions from the real world. Nancy’s thinking, meanwhile, displays greater proximity with the world, never dissociating the object of thought from the real objects around it. His thinking is more explicitly in contact with the corporeal or the material, always underscoring the importance of bodies in, or in relation to, thought, thereby elucidating and explicating visceral sensations within a body and the sensorial experiences of being in physical touch with other bodies in the world, including the world itself.³ Highlighting the “deconstructive” mode of inquiry and/or rhetoric of *Sexistence* is not insignificant, because *Sexistence* might arguably be the first “deconstructive” work that is explicitly devoted to, or engaged with, sex. I reiterate that “sex” here very much pertains to sexual relations, especially in erotic or amorous forms. This is an important point to make because, clearly, sexual difference had already been dealt with by Hélène Cixous, who, like Nancy, is close to Derrida in person and in thinking, hence no stranger to “deconstruction” either, and by Catherine Clément and Luce Irigaray,

both of whom, while never identifying themselves with “deconstruction,” can be shown to share certain aspects of that line of thinking. Derrida himself, in the wake of all those works by the French feminists, had furthermore joined in the discussion on sexual difference, notably in his writings around the term “*Geschlecht*.” Yet, once again, other than sexual difference, “deconstruction” in general has more or less shied away from sex as we know it.⁴ That is, until the publication of *Sexistence*.⁵

Now, what could “deconstruction” tell us about sex today, other than what psychoanalysis had been trying to reveal to us, or even recent affect theory?⁶ In fact, its timing to deal with sex can appear to be untimely, but this untimeliness has to be understood in both negative and positive senses. It is untimely in the unfortunate sense, in the first instance, because the publication date of *Sexistence* just missed the timing for it to address the issues of #MeToo and “transsexuality” or gender “fluidity.”⁷ Having said that, and to be fair to Nancy, he could not have seen all those events exploding on the scene in 2018 while writing *Sexistence* for its 2017 publication. This conversation, then, is also an occasion for Nancy to explicate how some of his ideas in *Sexistence* can have implications for what is to come after those real events. The other untimeliness of *Sexistence* pertains to the idiom of “deconstruction” apparently falling out of fashion in academic discourse. Nevertheless, this conversation demonstrates that there remains a critical pertinence to “deconstruction” with regard to how we can think about, talk about, and approach sex today. It also shows that there is even a certain link between sex and “deconstruction.” That is also why this introduction bears the title “Sex ‘Is’ Deconstruction.” If it is not already evident, the title is a reformulation of the phrase “deconstruction is/in America,” which Derrida subjected to critique. Derrida was not content to allow the verb “to be” to establish any identification or homogenization of one term with the other; he refused the essentialization of one term by the other. He also resisted the preposition “in,” recognizing that one term can never be wholly contained by another. For Derrida, “deconstruction” can never be reduced or captured by either an “is” or an “in”; “deconstruction,”

to the contrary, always concerns a passage, that is, the movement of that which comes to pass. In that respect, if the thought *sex is deconstruction* is pursued in this conversation, the aim is definitely not to equate sex and “deconstruction.”⁸ That thought is meant to suggest, rather, that what comes to pass in sex is similar to that in “deconstruction.” In other words, what remains to be said of “deconstruction” has the potentiality to resonate with what is taking place with sex today, if not to help us grapple, at least a little, with all its current transformations. This is where the untimeliness — this time in a positive light — of “deconstruction,” in the sense of not being contemporaneous with the latest or trendier rhetoric or mode of thinking, can make a critical intervention. The untimely breaks with the present, with what presents itself in the moment, and in so doing, it might even reveal more of what is happening currently or expose what contemporary rhetoric or understanding refuses or fails to acknowledge. It digs deep into things and brings us along into those abyssal depths, where we not only face up to all the troubling dimensions or aspects of sex but also confront ourselves, where we have no choice but to face our darkest selves as revealed by our sex and/or sexual lives. That is precisely the trajectory of especially the first part of the conversation, where the endeavor is to bring to surface the intermingling of sex and “deconstruction.”

But what comes to pass with sex? To say the least, and to follow Nancy in *Sexistence*, it is indeed trouble, trouble for us, troubling almost every aspect of our lives. Sex troubles the entire constitution of our being: politically, ethically, ontologically, and even aesthetically. Just thinking about politics with a capital *P* to see how sex messes things up there, one can recall the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair, and that is just one case among so many others. To be sure, academia is not immune to sex complicating institutional politics either, as more sexual harassment cases — between faculty members, between faculty members and students, and between students — are reported, exposed, and dealt with. In all these, ethics, especially workplace ethics (and not just the question of “proper” conduct while holding office but also that of workplace sexual harassment and abuse, to not forget what #MeToo has brought to light), is al-

ready questionable. Sex as ethically compromising also pervades interpersonal relations: this is not just a matter of physical violence or abuse within a relationship; we also have to acknowledge that some of the psychological and/or emotional ways we go about our sexual relations with another and/or others can hurt too. Aside from our relations with others, sex gives us, individually, as much trouble as pleasure too, especially when questions of gender and/or sexual identity are at stake. When we assume that we have our gender and/or sexual identity all settled, sex can have the effect of destabilizing all that, putting all that into question, making us reel. “Gender trouble,” to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase, plagues us all. Looking into the past, we can see the violent history of the repression of homosexuals, who could not express their sexual preferences and desires freely and were forced not to come out of the closet. In a sign of progress, we now have a growing LGBTQ culture, where those with what were previously considered “deviant” sexual orientations can come to presence today, giving some the courage even to declare themselves “trans gender,” if not “gender-fluid.” This does not signal, however, the end of ontological troubles. “Autotheory” texts such as Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* and Maggie Nelson’s *Argonauts* show how those troubles remain, constituting an aesthetic problem as well, as long as sex is undeniably one way we style ourselves, a component of our self-representation.⁹ The aesthetic dimension of sex is also not lost on Nancy, who considers sex a form of expression of existence. Nancy prefers to say, though, in this conversation, “Sex is all the forms of art detached from the work, unworked.” In comparing sex to art, Nancy is not only underscoring for sex the unproductive dimension one finds in art’s relation to utilitarian functions or labor productivity; he is also taking a further radical step to proclaim, in contrast to art this time, the absence, if not the dissolution, of the final artwork in sex. But to come back to queer existence: we have to acknowledge that the LGBTQ community is still far from being wholly accepted everywhere. Regrettably, these individuals still continue to face discrimination and persecution, as made manifest horrifically and tragically by the 2016 mass shooting at the gay club Pulse in Orlando. In that regard, we

are still far from addressing the ethical issue of letting others be in their (sexual) differences or alterity.¹⁰

In short, one could say that sex is altogether an onto-ethico-politico-aesthetic reticulation in which we find ourselves always enmeshed. Where sex should be separate from all our dealings with the world, especially the political examples mentioned, it proves itself irresistible from being brought into the mix. Put simply, we just have trouble isolating sex from our being-in-the-world in almost every aspect. This is because, according to Nancy, sex constitutes our ontology, or rather co-ontology, since, for Nancy, ontology is always existence in relation to other existences and hence a singular plural matter; and it is this co-ontology that complicates our political, ethical, and aesthetic subjectivities. In that respect, one could also say that sex is first philosophy in Nancy. Or, to return to Nancy's terms, existence in the world is "sexistence," where sex is always already implicated in (co)existence, or always already complicating (co)existence. What sex adds to (co)existence is a sense of an overflowing, oftentimes uncontrollable excess, exposing each of us to, if not as, more than ourselves: with sex, it is never just the perpetuation of a species or simply our individual pleasure that is at stake but also our gender constitution, our sexual orientations and preferences, and our sexual desires, all of which might change or even exceed the limits of what we think they might be at each time. Sex, according to Nancy, is the bodily opening to the force physically felt by one body in relation to another (or others), a force mutually desired by these bodies, allowing each to be penetrated by another (I will return to the issue of penetration). How this force is corporeally felt by each body, and how each body penetrates each other, however, is never straightforward, never always well negotiated, notwithstanding the force being mutually desired. There is no knowing, especially no prior or anticipatory knowledge, as to how things will come to pass; sex constitutes, as Nancy puts it in this conversation, the bodily experience of a chasm that has neither ground nor limits. Adding to this troubling sensation is the confluence of positive and negative affects in sex: sex is "jouissance and anguish interlaced," to cite Nancy. Given such an abyssal ex-

perience, sex, as I would put it, effectively sees to the undoing of ourselves in terms of a subject, that is, the figure so certain of its capacity for rational thought and of its self-sufficiency in representing itself such that it presumes to occupy a fixed, sovereign position in the world. In other words, sex can be said to be the existential counterpart of the theoretical “dissolution” of the subject as made manifest by “deconstruction.” I would even say that sex exposes us as *rejects* in all the senses according to which I have theorized this term.¹¹ While the *reject* is quite the pessimistic figure, Nancy, in turn, articulates the “rejectivity” of/in sex in terms of abandonment, which is actually more optimistic than it sounds. So, we give ourselves to sex, and at the same time, we give ourselves up in sex; the excess of jouissance brought about by sex leaves our subjecthood pretty much abandoned. And yet, as will be further explicated in the conversation, it is precisely this abandonment that draws and keeps lovers together.¹² Other than abandonment, I would also say that sex leaves us pre-positioned, returning us to that at once ecstatic and anxious sensation of flux prior to the fictional positioned state of the equally fictionalized subject.¹³

Sex is, as always, a messy affair; it never ceases to upend societies and cultures in every epoch, as Nancy will remind us. In that regard, we cannot reduce the thinking of sex to some clean, clinical, logical form of thought. That would only be sweeping the messiness of sex under the rug, keeping all the troubling aspects in the closet. We will need a thought that is at least commensurable to all that messiness, a thought that does not smooth out the rough edges of the problematic aspects of sex, one that does not pretend to have, or present, a clear picture of sex. In other words, we need a thought that does not claim to resolve all the messiness or troubles of sex; it must even continue to perplex our thoughts on sex, never allowing our thoughts to rest with regard to it. It will be a thought, then, whose idiom only delves into the layered, obscure dimensions of sex and stays there. Its idiom as such would also demand patience on the part of readers, as it brings them along in its indulgence in those layers or dimensions. It should be clear by now that the following conversation takes “deconstruction” to be

close to such a thought/idiom. To reiterate, sex and “deconstruction” are experiences of the chasm, through which we are always touching (on) something without quite knowing what that “thing” is, through which we see what we have come to anticipate as limits to constantly slip away, through which we realize that there is no ground or bottom to the “thing” of which we are experiencing or thinking. This also constitutes the difference between “deconstruction” and psychoanalysis, which has always sought to unravel the underlying secrets of sex, and recent affect theory, which arguably brings quite a fair amount of an optimistic and reparative or recuperative aspect to sex.¹⁴ “Deconstruction,” of course, is not without problems. One of them is the violence, although not pervasive or explicit at all in its discourse, that nevertheless subtends its idiom or language; this violence is seldom acknowledged by its authors and not very often picked up by scholars either. Nancy’s works do not escape this problem. No doubt, the lyrical or even poetic quality of Nancy’s writings, his uncompromised refusal of the negation of others (which he will associate with “murder” in this conversation), his denial of existence as sacrificeable, and his insistence on a touch that tactfully lets go rather than be an unrelenting death grip: all give the impression of a thought that is not only gentle or benign but also one that renounces violence. And yet Nancy’s “deconstructive” idiom, without advocating violence, can still be violent. Let me cite two examples of such a problem from *Sexistence*. One of the key terms there is “forcing” (*forçage*). Such language is admittedly suspect today in the wake of the #MeToo movement, for #MeToo not only opposes workplace sexual harassment and abuse of women by men in powerful positions but is also an effort to make real, structural changes in the treatment in general of women, demanding respectful regard for women, and greater sensitivity not only in situations of physical interaction but also in language use in all modes of communication. In that respect, “forcing” has the unfortunate effect of recalling all the insensitive, disrespectful, and oppressive acts of abusive men against women, leaving women to be on the passive, receiving end, with no recourse but to submit to, tolerate, and suffer such violence.

The other problematic term in *Sexistence* is “penetration.” This term is, again, rather untimely, because today sex is no longer thought of limitedly in terms of penetrative sex; there can be non-penetrative sex. To insist on “penetration,” besides, is also to somewhat stubbornly reinforce a heterosexual normativity, one that oftentimes demands one party to be submissive to the other, hence raising the specters of phallocentrism and toxic masculinity. My suspicion of Nancy’s rhetoric of “penetration” extends to a work prior to *Sexistence*, in fact. In *Dis-Enclosure*, Nancy’s first volume on the deconstruction of Christianity, we find Nancy saying, “A deconstruction is always a penetration.”¹⁵ Certainly, for Nancy there, the idea of penetration has philosophical underpinnings, as the earlier *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* would have instructed us. In this study of G. W. F. Hegel, Nancy understands penetration—which gets an entire chapter in this book as well as in *Sexistence*—as but the passage of thought.¹⁶ It is the passage of thought into the depths of things without, however, reaching the bottom or foundation of the thing in question, since each thing presents itself to and in the world differently at each time, hence essentially without a bottom or foundation (and “thing” here can mean anything: an idea, an inanimate object, myself, another living being, and even thinking itself). Such thinking does not presume any aspect of its object of thought as given but “posited in existence—that is to say, delved [*enfoncée*] into its infinite and concrete truth.”¹⁷ That is also why such a thinking, that is, penetration, never ends but is an “infinite task,” and each time is such that the experience of thinking renders any given concept, preexisting judgment, or prior reasoning invalid.¹⁸ As Nancy makes clear, this penetration goes beyond any presupposition of a penetrating-penetrated divide. In fact, “that which penetrates is itself penetrated,” Nancy says, and this is because thought here, as passage, as penetration, “is the thought of being itself.”¹⁹ In other words, penetration is but called for by thought itself—the thinking of my being, the thinking of the other as called for by the other, the thinking of an object as called for by the object, and so on. It is thought that thinks being in relation with its otherness and with others, and it is penetration

as such that brings thought and (co)existence into close proximity or even intimacy. Nevertheless, and to go back to the phrase “a deconstruction is always a penetration,” it remains undeniable that the rhetoric is affective of a visceral sense of violence, making us recall heterosexual normative discourses that always bring penetration to bear on sex.

Keeping all of the above in mind, the phrase “a deconstruction is always a penetration” will function like a guiding thread, on the one hand, for a critical inquiry into the relation between “deconstruction” and sex in the conversation; on the other hand, it also serves as a starting point for Nancy to address the issue of violence underlying his rhetoric of “penetration” (and “forcing”). The aim is to mine, once again, the positive untimeliness of “deconstruction” and explore, first, how the “deconstructive” rhetoric on penetration and force with regard to sex can possibly play out, if not be reconciled, with post-#MeToo sensibilities and, second, how a “deconstructive” understanding of penetrating and “forcing” or force can help us confront something perhaps inevitable or even irreducible about sex from which #MeToo sensibilities are arguably shielding us. With regard to “penetration” and “forcing,” Nancy’s “postdeconstructive” line of thought will lead us back to the question of bodies, recognizing the essential penetrability of bodies, a penetrability made not only by sexual organs but also by the eyes through gazes, fingers or hands, and even the nose (and this not necessarily by means of odor), except this penetrability gives place to penetration, especially in sex, only if the body is open to, or welcoming of, its penetrability by the other. In the tenderness of Nancy’s thinking, this occurs between lovers in an amorous, erotic sexual relation. This sexual relation is where the play of forces occurs between bodies. In this case, the penetrated body is not merely passive to the force of penetration by the other: admittedly, it exercises or even exerts its own implicit force in drawing the other to him- or herself. The desire to keep experiencing this play of forces all over again is what keeps lovers together; or, more radically, it is the mutual abandonment of each self in sex to this play of forces that draws lovers together. Of course, we cannot ignore or deny the

real occurrences where many (usually men, regrettably) force themselves on others (usually women, unfortunately) in order to dominate them sexually, against the will and/or desire of the latter. This will not be “penetration” in the “postdeconstructive” sense according to Nancy; neither will this be a play of forces. This is but a unidirectional will to power on the part of the sexual aggressor or oppressor, a will that ruthlessly inserts its body into the other, seeking nothing but the negation of the other, refusing any reciprocal or mutual relation of forces. This is a resistance to the abandonment of the self; this is instead the insistence to proclaim the presumed sovereignty of a phantasmatic subject. We recognize this as rape, and rape, in Nancy’s view, is no less a form of “murder.” In a move that can be considered not only critical but also condescending, if not mocking, of those who practice such a singular, violent sexual smothering of the other by exploiting an unequal power dynamics, Nancy also considers sex in such cases “impoverished sex,” if not a “miserable wretchedness.”²⁰

In all, *Sexistence* presents itself as a problematic text, but it would be precise to say that it is problematic in the Deleuzian sense, that is, positively problematic by constituting a philosophical problem in itself, which demands further philosophical inquiry and explication. This conversation seeks to fulfill those demands. As suggested throughout this introduction, though, this conversation is not content to leave things simply as explication. It is hoped that this conversation also serves as a critical intervention in how we negotiate all the complications of our sexual lives in the contemporary world. As I write this introduction between the second half of 2019 and the first of 2020, we are just emerging from the travails of the #MeToo movement. That does not mean that all the problems with sex, especially sexual violence, abuse, and harassment, have been eradicated; #MeToo is far from over. Nevertheless, we are now beginning again to reevaluate, rethink, and recalibrate our sexual relations with others, and we are undoubtedly trying to make sense of all that, to make sense of the irresistible and restless sense of sex complicating every aspect of our lives. We certainly need to negotiate the “thrust” (*poussée*), as Nancy says, of our “sexistence,” such that it

does not degenerate into an oppressive, dominating will to power, as mentioned. Put another way, #MeToo has given us the chance to relearn how to approach others in a sexual relation: respectfully, tactfully, sensitive to how much of our bodies to put forward before the other, while at the same time keeping the forces of sexual relation in play, that is, allowing the desires of each lover to be articulated without shame or judgment, including desires that veer toward the forceful, if not playfully violent, provided that those desires are also, in turn, desired by the other lover. It is also a chance for us to put a stop to our imaginary sovereign position whereby we discriminate against, or deny, the sexual preferences or orientations of others, as if we are ever so sure of our own sexuality or sexual identity in the first place (to reiterate, sex, or “sexistence,” will reveal the contrary, if we only care to come to terms with that). To be sure, this conversation does not aim or claim to solve the problems that sex is creating today; it certainly does not assume that it will be able to change the world (this conversation is definitely not a manifesto). In fact, to repeat, this conversation does not seek any resolution with regard to all the troubles that follow sex; rather, it underscores precisely the troubling aspect of sex, recognizing that we will always be troubled by it, because the troubles never end (if we recognize that existence and sex are inextricably, intimately linked) and new troubles are always brewing. It acknowledges that the smallest contribution it can possibly make is to initiate some small steps toward those aforementioned recalibrations in our approach to sexual relations. And even though it does not lay down a program for that (a program is never on the order of “deconstructive” thought), one could say that the least it insists on is for all of us to begin with a certain humility, which involves our admitting to a non-knowledge of what passes before/during/after sex, our recognizing ourselves more as *rejects* or abandoned than as sovereign subjects before/during/after sex.

The original conversation was conducted entirely in French. Nancy and I agreed to the four parts or chapters that structure the conversation and proceeded in the order as presented here. Each part was

translated and edited as soon as both of us agreed it was complete. The entire manuscript was revised again when the conversation was over. The dialogue within each part, therefore, is not simply replicated as how it played out according to our correspondences; some parts were cut and others moved around only so as to give the conversation greater flow and coherence.

All notes are also mine, except in the third part, where Nancy requested one in order to explicate a little further his term of “semi-rape,” which — let it be said clearly at the outset — is not something Nancy endorses at all; the term is raised as a critique of the unspoken but codified practices, especially in the entertainment industry, all exposed by the #MeToo movement, by which newer actors or musicians feel compelled to acquiesce to provide sexual favors in order to kickstart or advance their careers. Also, as Nancy and I have no intention to publish the original conversation in French as yet, I have chosen to include bracketed glosses of the French in this text where translation might be contentious.

As a summary of the conversation, the first part, as already mentioned, dives deep into the issue of the relation between sex and “deconstruction” and critically interrogates Nancy’s provocative statement that “a deconstruction is always a penetration.” There is quite a bit of Nancy here, which might lead to this part taking on the semblance of a quasi-interview. This is necessary, because before Nancy can defend his statement, we will first need to elicit from him his definition of “deconstruction.” The second part stays in the thick of things and problematizes the question of touch in sex — no doubt a hypersensitive question in the age of #MeToo. We take into account the negotiation of forces and consider how to mitigate them, should we maintain the idea that penetration (in whichever form) is always (already) present in sex; we also consider possible touches that are not explicitly physical, and here we postulate how those might be transmitted via affect. I will add here that by articulating sex in relation to, or even in terms of, affect, we could perhaps better understand how sex is essentially irresistible, uncontrollable, unappeasable: its affective force makes us beside ourselves or “outside of ourselves,” as Nancy would put it, making

us feel the desire or even exigency of being in contact with another in a sexual relation, hence making us seek another, making us tremble or quiver with pleasure, joy, anxiety, and trepidation; it makes us defy limits, or, rather, it undoes the limits that we have set for ourselves for our otherwise “normal” daily conduct, oftentimes leading us to sexual acts that might at times transgress good/bad, violent/nonviolent, appropriate/inappropriate, proper/improper, normal/abnormal distinctions. As affect, it is also very much the undecidable (despite the will or even good intentions of our rational minds) and, therefore, the unsayable or the inexplicable, or else “the unnameable,” according to Nancy, which renders it indeed “unbearable,” as Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman put it in their *Sex, or the Unbearable*. In the third part, and in a bid to discourage the thought of a phallogentric, dominating, violent penetration in sex, we posit the radical claim that sex is that through which we effectively lose and/or abandon all our senses of subjecthood, and this is where the *reject* figures rather strongly. From there, we will ask what happens to lovers: How do they, as *rejects*, maintain their sexual relation? In the final part, we take into account the difficulty of speaking about sex (further problematized by #MeToo, no doubt). Here, we articulate that difficulty in terms of “interdiction,” that is, what is forbidden to say, what is said between lovers or in between other things, and what remains to be said.²¹ Those are, at least, three senses of sex that leave their traces in language, and we explore how they find their way into literature—with particular references to Clarice Lispector and Henry Miller (picking up from discussions on other writers such as Mohsin Hamid, John Donne, and Sally Rooney in previous chapters)—or what we call “s/exscription.”

Notes

INTRODUCTION. SEX “IS” DECONSTRUCTION

- 1 Other thinkers who disagree with this contractual delimitation of sexual relations include Kelly Oliver and Slavoj Žižek, evident in their respective posts, “Consent Is Not a Contract” (December 26, 2016) and “The Moebius Strip of Sexual Contracts” (July 16, 2018) on the *Philosophical Salon*, a platform hosted by the *LA Review of Books*. For Oliver, consent to a sexual relation cannot be reduced to a contract especially because “consent as contract disavows the changing dynamics of individual identity, desires and wishes.” Contracts are also settled at a time prior to the agreed act, but sex “is an ongoing negotiation and renegotiation and, therefore, consent must be continually given as the sexual activities take place,” thus challenging the a priori and the supposed efficient nature of a contract. More importantly, for Oliver, “in terms of sex, consent that was freely given in the beginning can be withdrawn at any time. And this is a central problem of conceiving sexual consent (and other forms of consent, too) in terms of the contract model.” According to Oliver, then, consent “means being sensitive to each other, sensing and perceiving the agreement of the other,” a “thoughtful journey together, ‘with-thinking’ or thinking with as much as with-feeling or feeling with,” all of which constitutes a “critical politics of affect.” As will be seen in the conversation, such affective sexual politics is something Nancy and I gesture toward. As for Žižek, his concern is the violence that belies the contract. As he says, “In sexual exchange, . . . the form of free contract can conceal coercion and violence: one of the agents agrees to a sexual contract out of fear, out of emotional blackmail, out of material dependency.” Violence, albeit not in relation to

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any sexual contract but the sexual encounter, is also an issue for Nancy and me in our conversation. And for a pre-#MeToo feminist critique of the notion of a contract, see, of course, Pateman, *Sexual Contract*.

- 2 In my view, this “deconstructive” outlook marks the critical difference between Nancy’s project and Foucault’s study of the biopolitics of sexuality in his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976–84). In Foucault’s own words, “the object” of his endeavor “is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in [the Western] world,” that is, “to search . . . for instances of discursive production . . . , of the production of power . . . , of the propagation of knowledge” with regard to sexuality (*History of Sexuality*, 11, 12). As is evident from both *Sexistence* and this conversation, these are not Nancy’s concerns.
- 3 For more on the difference between Derrida’s “deconstruction” and Nancy’s “postdeconstruction,” see James, “Differing on Difference.”
- 4 One could recall Derrida avowing to want to know the sex lives of philosophers, as he explained in the 2002 documentary *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering. That comment was not followed up by any real discussion, however. It would take Paul B. Preciado in *Testo Junkie* to take up that challenge and recount his sex life while critiquing “pharmacopornographic biocapitalism” (35).
- 5 To be precise, though, the engagement with sex has been nascent in some of Nancy’s works prior to *Sexistence*. Notable ones include *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (2001); *La naissance des seins* (2006), whose first iteration was in 1996; and *Nus sommes* (2006), written with Federico Ferrari. But again, these works do not fully deal with sex per se: the first is Nancy’s explication or even critique of Lacan’s infamous phrase “il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel”; the second, even though taking breasts as its point of departure, is actually more invested in the notion of emergence and formation of forms; and the third, working through images of nudes, questions what comes to presence when the body presents itself, especially when nude.
- 6 Some recent examples include Aaron Schuster’s *Trouble with Pleasure* and Alenka Zupančič’s *What Is Sex?* from the side of psychoanalysis, and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s *Sex, or the Unbearable*, also a conversation book, from the side of affect theory intersecting with queer theory.
- 7 Speaking of untimeliness, it is perhaps necessary to acknowledge that #MeToo arrived in France quite belatedly. It even had an unfortunate beginning when a letter signed by about one hundred high-profile

women in France, including the actress Catherine Deneuve and the writer Catherine Miller, brushed it off as a form of American “political correctness.” See Chiche et al., “Nous défendons une liberté.” Significant progress made since then would include the denunciation of the writer Gabriel Matzneff, who celebrated his pedophilic exploits in his writings under the aegis of French libertinism. The denunciation came in January 2020 after the publication of Vanessa Springora’s *Le consentement*, which recounts how, when still only fourteen, she was manipulated by Matzneff, then fifty, into a sexual relation. Matzneff has since been charged, and the police have called for other victims to come forth to testify. Another recent significant gesture displaying solidarity with #MeToo is the walking out by actress Adèle Haenel and director Céline Sciamma when Roman Polanski, still facing charges of statutory rape of a thirteen-year-old girl and other accusations of sexual assault, was named best director during the César Awards in March 2020.

- 8 Here, it has to be acknowledged that, despite the “is” being in quotation marks, the title of this introduction remains very much a misnomer. It is, at best, a provocation.
- 9 These texts may also be regarded as the actualization of Foucault’s call for the parrhesia, that is, the daring to speak the truth, of one’s sexuality beyond the limits set by heteronormative discourse. Within the framework of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault would also consider such writings a “care of the self.”
- 10 Even though race is beyond the scope of the present conversation between Nancy and myself, I am not incognizant of the need to address the question of race in relation to sex and/or sexuality as well. For example, Celine Parreñas Shimizu has underscored for us how Asian American women have long been under a perverse, stereotyping Caucasian male gaze that sees them as “hypersexual beings” (*Hypersexuality of Race*, 1). Ja’nina J. Garrett-Walker, Dominique A. Broussard, and Whitné L. Garrett-Walker have also noted how “hegemonic patriarchal masculinity,” based on white heteronormativity and heterosexuality, has negatively impacted Black sexualities especially among Black males (“Re-imagining Masculinities,” 70). Of course, the response to these is not to downplay Asian and/or Black sexualities. Thus, Shimizu seeks to dwell on the “excessive sexuality” (4) of Asian women on screen, so as to elucidate the “complex experiences of sexuality and . . . the beauty emergent from the chronicles of [their] sexual histories and the survival of sexual subjection” (5). The ends of her endeavor are

not very different from mine and Nancy's here, since what lies at the horizon of hers is "the ambiguity and ultimate unknowability of race, sexuality, and representation" (5). The authors of "Re-imagining Masculinities" propose Black Queer Feminism as a way to counter white heteronormative/heterosexual masculinity. Otherwise, Jennifer C. Nash, not unlike Shimizu, "shifts from a preoccupation with the injuries that racialized pornography engenders to an investigation of the ecstasy that racialized pornography can unleash" (*Black Body in Ecstasy*, 2). Nash is interested in "possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy" and "how black pleasures can include sexual and erotic pleasures in racialization" (2, 4).

- 11 See Goh, *Reject*.
- 12 The optimistic treatment of abandonment, in ontological terms, can also be found in Nancy's essay "Abandoned Being." There, he explicates that being, when seemingly abandoned by all the ways of articulating itself because they appear to be exhausted, must be understood as the freedom of existence from "all categories, all transcendentals" ("Abandoned Being," 36). It is from there that being can avail itself of yet another abundance of ways of enunciating itself, as it "opens on a profusion of possibilities" (37) beyond existing ones.
- 13 See Goh, *L'Existence prépositionnelle*.
- 14 I note here too that Nancy, even though evidently familiar with both the rhetoric and arguments of psychoanalysis, resists psychoanalysis's line of thought. This is made clear in Nancy's "The 'There Is' of Sexual Relation" and *The Title of the Letter*, the latter written with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. As will be seen in the conversation, Nancy once again takes his distance from psychoanalysis by refusing to structure any understanding of sex on the notion of lack or the castration complex or anxiety.
- 15 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 44.
- 16 The idea of passage here no doubt resonates with what Derrida says about "deconstruction," as mentioned earlier, in light of his critique of the phrase "deconstruction is/in America."
- 17 Nancy, *Hegel*, 17, translation modified.
- 18 Nancy, *Hegel*, 17, 16.
- 19 Nancy, *Hegel*, 17.
- 20 "A miserable wretchedness" is my translation of Nancy's "une grande misère." The latter recalls the phrase "une grande misère sexuelle" or "a great sexual deprivation," which was deployed in the letter signed by the hundred high-profile women in France denouncing the #MeToo

movement, to describe actions by men who exploit situations such as a crowded subway to brush themselves up against women or to touch them. The same signatories play down such actions, even to the point of calling them a “nonevent.” As I see it, Nancy is not in agreement with these signatories, and thus uses a similar rhetoric only for a more severe critique of those men.

- 21 The governing of such discourses of the forbidden has, of course, been analyzed by Foucault not only in *The History of Sexuality* but also in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures at the Collège de France.

CHAPTER ONE. TROUBLING THOUGHT(S)

- 1 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 44.
- 2 To be fair to Nancy, it is more than clear in *Dis-Enclosure* that what is at stake in the phrase “a deconstruction is always a penetration” is nothing less than the undoing of all phallogocentrism.
- 3 [Trans. note: I translate *corps sexués* as “sexual bodies” in order to underscore the difference between Nancy’s usage of the term *sexué* and Luce Irigaray’s. I would say that Irigaray’s *sexué*, which she herself has translated as “sexuate” (in “Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us”) or has been translated by others as “sexuated” (in *The Way of Love*), is a more loaded term, since she seeks to describe not only the body’s erotic disposition in a sexual relation with another body but also the body that is no less sexualized in its individuality.]
- 4 In an email dated April 11, 2020, Nancy explicates the phrase “un corps est un sexe,” translated here as “a body is sexual,” to mean that the body “bears, in various ways, the marks of its gender or even mixed genders [*genres mêlés*],” and these marks are “physical, physiological, oral,” and even “ontological.”
- 5 In the same correspondence cited previously, Nancy says that sex in this passage means “sexual reality,” that is, “the fact of being sexual or having sexual activities, regardless of one’s gender.” Sex here, he continues, is “like a functionality [*une fonction*], something like respiration.”
- 6 Nancy is referring to “Double plongée aux abîmes.”
- 7 [Trans. note: I am translating *abîme* as “chasm,” rather than the usual “abyss,” throughout this text. This is because, as will be seen later, Nancy makes a distinction between *abîme* and *abyss*; the latter he associates with the English “abyss.”]
- 8 See Derrida, “Time Is Out of Joint,” 25–28, 17.