Foucault’s account of the body is usually situated in its relation to history. While scholars disagree on the form this relation takes, they agree that Foucault conceives of the body as having a history and that this historical account of the body serves to problematize dominant ways of making sense of the body. In this essay, I shift the focus from a concern with what Foucault says about the body to how the body functions in his own discourse. Based on a spatial reading of the body, I contend that Foucault uses the body as a methodological tool that allows him to make visible and critically engage the ground on which knowledge about the body becomes valid. I end with a consideration of Foucault’s book on Herculine Barbin as an example of heterotopic critique and suggest that, as such, it draws our attention to the limitations of hegemonic systems of classification as well as practices of exclusion, erasure, and silencing that aim to immunize dominant epistemic spaces from critique.

Introduction

Foucault’s view of the body has received much attention in feminist philosophy. His idea that the body is not an objectively given metaphysical entity but an effect of historically and culturally specific practices of power and knowledge has proved helpful in understanding the ways in which our very bodies are subject to and formed by complex mechanisms of power. Yet, Foucault’s focus on the body as the source and product of historically specific regimes of power/knowledge has also generated criticism. Many feminist scholars argue that his
As a consequence, they contend, Foucault is unable to account for differences in the effects of power on the bodies of men and women and, thus, the gendered nature of embodied experience. An example of this approach is Patricia O’Brien, who, elaborating on Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power in the prison, suggests that female prisoners encounter the disciplinary space of the prison in a way that radically differs from male inmates (O’Brien 1978; O’Brien 1982). Moreover, Foucault’s ostensibly exclusive focus on the historical transformations of knowledge about and power over the body, which he illustrates in his genealogies of the medical gaze, disciplinary power, or sexuality, is said to be unhelpful for feminist philosophy because his prioritization of (legal, medical, or scientific) discourse effaces individuals’ pre- or non-discursive experience. In her reading of Foucault’s account of the farmhand in the History of Sexuality Volume 1, Linda Alcoff has taken Foucault to task for ignoring the salience of experience in cases of sexual violence. She suggests that feminists turn to phenomenology, rather than Foucault, to produce adequate accounts of sexual violence that take into consideration the meaning traumatic events have for survivors of sexual violence (Alcoff 2000).

In contrast to feminist criticism of Foucault, which centers on the alleged absence of experience in his work, a number of scholars have convincingly argued that Foucault is, in fact, a philosopher of experience insofar as he seeks to analyze experience as the space enclosed by axes of knowledge, power, and subjectivation (Flynn 2010; Han 2002; Huffer 2010; Lemke 2002; Oksala 2004; Oksala 2011; O’Leary 2009; Valverde 2004). Oksala, in particular, has made a number of important interventions in this context. Situating the body squarely within the field of experience staked out by knowledge, power, and subjectivation, she argues that the
experiential body emerges in Foucault’s work as a site of resistance against the very forces that act upon it. This experiential notion of the body, she contends, emerges in Foucault’s late work on sexuality as the necessary underpinning of his advice to turn bodies and pleasures into “rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality” (Foucault 1990, 157). Oksala claims that the sexualized body constitutes an experiential body in its double movement of “transgressing the limits between the normal and the abnormal” and contesting the “limit between the intelligibility and unintelligibility of experiences” (Oksala 2004, 110). Because the sexualized body “can multiply, distort, and overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences, and in this sense it is capable of discursively undefined and unintelligible pleasures,” it provides a privileged site of resistance to sexual normalization (Oksala 2004, 114). The experiential body, in other words, not only defies the norms imposed on bodies by normalizing practices, but it is also capable of experiences that cannot be understood or rendered comprehensible by dominant categories.

In this essay, I propose a different account of the body in Foucault’s work by shifting the question from what kind of thing the body is to what function the body serves in Foucault’s critical project. As a consequence, rather than focussing on the body as a site of resistance, I argue that Foucault offers a spatialized way of thinking about the body that offers an important corrective to accounts that emphasize the historicity of the body, which I briefly outline in section 2. I then develop Foucault’s spatial account of the body as heterotopia, which, I suggest, allows us to perceive the body not merely as an object of power-knowledge, but as an important locus and instrument of knowledge production as well as philosophical and political critique. As such, the body serves an important methodological purpose in Foucault’s work and contributed to the development of a fuller picture of Foucault’s critical philosophy. As some scholars have
argued, Foucault relies on figures such as axes, coordinates, maps, quadrilaterals, tables, and so on, which operate not as metaphors, but as “spatial techniques” whose purpose is to undermine formalist and totalizing thought (Flynn 2010). An example of such spatial techniques are heterotopias, different spaces whose primary function is to make visible the epistemological space that constitutes the conditions of possibility of knowledge – and by doing so remind us that things could be otherwise (Foucault 1998b; Topinka 2010). Thus, in section 3, I examine a set of lectures that have received slight attention in order to elaborate Foucault’s spatial notion of the body, which must be understood in methodological terms as a heterotopia. That is to say, Foucault uses a spatial notion of the body as a technique that makes visible the way in which bodies are ordered by presenting us with a differently ordered body. I conclude with a consideration of the political implications of this methodological move by offering an interpretation of Foucault’s book on Herculine Barbin through the lens of the heterotopic body. I argue that Foucault’s juxtaposition of the heterotopic space of Barbin’s body with the epistemic space of medico-legal categories of sexual identity allows him to reveal the epistemic limitations of as well as the epistemic, ethical, and political injustices produced by these discourses. In particular, Foucault’s spatio-methodological use of the body as a strategy of politico-philosophical critique allows him to show that a contestation of accepted knowledge and ordering systems does not usually result in an expansion of knowledge. Rather, it provokes an assertion of dominant categories and triggers attempts to correct and assimilate that which challenges habitual ways of knowing.
Traditionally, Foucault’s account of the body is situated in its relation to history. Yet, even though most scholars agree that, for Foucault, the body has a history, there has been much disagreement about what exactly Foucault means when he talks about “the body” (Butler 1989; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Dudrick 2005; Hacking 1999). On the one hand, it might be suggested that Foucault is concerned with the concept of “the body,” which helps us categorize and organize diverse physiological processes. On this view, Foucault’s aim would appear as an attempt to demonstrate the variability of the body as a philosophical concept. As David Dudrick (2005) has pointed out, this claim is so “blandly reasonable” as to be unworthy of serious philosophical attention (Dudrick 2005, 228). If Foucault did, in fact, understand the body as a concept, the historicity of the body would amount to little more than intellectual history, that is, the history of the idea of the body. Given Foucault’s detailed genealogical studies and the sharp distinction he draws between genealogy and the history of ideas, such an interpretation hardly seems plausible. On the other hand, Foucault seems to deploy a different notion of the body, according to which “the body” does not merely function as a philosophical concept but as a real, material thing, an object that exists in the world. It is this material body that then becomes the site of historical inscription. Such a reading appears to be supported by Foucault’s suggestion, in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), that the body is “molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances” (Foucault 1991, 87). Foucault here seems to endorse a notion of the body as an ontological object which is, at the same time, the subject of historical construction. But what precisely does it mean to say that the body is historically constructed?
Johanna Oksala (2004) identifies three main interpretations of this claim. First, the body can be understood as represented in language and endowed with meaning. There is, in other words, no body independently of its culturally specific meaning. On this view, what is constructed is not the material body, but the meaning the body has for us and the ways in which we perceive and understand it. For Judith Butler (1989), this interpretation implies an ontological priority of the material body, according to which the body is not itself constructed but merely the site of construction. On this second view the body appears as the natural substrate on which cultural meaning is imprinted. That is, the physiological body is not itself constructed but functions as the surface of construction. This second interpretation, however, sits uneasily with Foucault’s claim that the material body itself has to be made an object of genealogical investigation, whose aim is to undermine the idea that the body is a natural given. Rather, a genealogy of the body reveals the body as an illusion and chimera, as a semblance of unity where there is multiplicity. It is, thus, not only the perception of a constant material body, which is historically variable, but the constitution of the body itself. According to a third interpretation, then, even the physiological and morphological aspects of the body are effects of culture, climate, diet, and so on (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). The body is all culture.

It might be argued that Foucault would endorse none of these interpretations, for they all attempt to situate the body along a continuum spanning between nature and culture. As Ladelle McWhorter (1989) has argued, this is a kind of thinking Foucault sought to overcome. Setting up the problem in a way that accepts the dichotomy of nature and culture fails to realize that the very discourse that does not let us conceive of the body in terms other than nature or culture is itself historically contingent. As a consequence, we have to think about the body in a way that overcomes and even undoes the categories of nature and culture. In order to challenge received
opinions of ostensible positivities such as nature, culture, or the body, Foucault typically turns to historical nominalism and applies a “principle of reversal” (Foucault 2010b, 229) in order to invert the “standard causal account of a phenomenon in cultural history with the result that the presumed cause is seen rather to be a function of what had been taken to be its historical effect” (Flynn 2010, 42). Showing how the things that have existence for us were actually brought into existence through contingent historical processes allows Foucault to reveal multiplicities where we see unity.⁶

Foucault applies this principle of reversal to accepted discourses about the body and shows that the body produces the illusion of unity where there is a multiplicity of biological processes, morphological features, and physiological functions. For instance, Foucault insists in a 1966 radio lecture, to which we will return shortly, that “Homer’s Greeks had no word to designate the unity of the body.”

There were raised arms, there were brave chests, there were nimble legs, there were helmets shimmering atop heads – there was no body. The Greek word for “body” only appears in Homer to designate a corpse. (Foucault 2006a, 233)

While parts of what we call the body certainly existed for the Greeks, “the body” did not. One might object that this argument fails to escape the nature/culture dichotomy it set out to overcome because the processes, functions, sensations, and parts, which are subsumed and named by “the body” are the very stuff we have in mind when we ask which aspects of the body are natural. Before I explain why I think this is not the case, let me consider how this objection might be understood. First, it could be read as a claim about the ontological invariance of those elements of the body that are natural. We have already seen that Foucault rejects this view. Second, saying that there is something natural about the body does not amount to saying that
these natural components are immune to change. The concept of the body does not name an unchanging natural kind or thing in itself, but picks out and unifies a set of variable elements, thereby allowing historically and socially specific discourses of nature and culture to function.

It should not be surprising that Foucault, the philosopher who refused to give us a theory of anything, does not develop a univocal and/or universal notion of the body. Instead of a theory of the body, we find an attempt to map the multiplicity of events, elements, practices, and sensations that are unified in historically specific ideas of the body. These ideas are correlates of discourses that are themselves situated in wider networks of power, which they mask at the same time as they allow them to function. By way of a historically nominalist analysis, Foucault destabilizes the unity of the body in order to reconceive it as the function of historically specific discursive and non-discursive practices, whose cause the body is usually said to be. This methodological strategy enables Foucault to disrupt habitual ways of understanding the body by way of revealing its historicity.

In the next section, I develop an alternative interpretation of Foucault’s account of the body, which focuses on the way in which the notion of the body functions in his work. Put differently, instead of asking what might be said about the kind of thing the body is, I am interested in what the notion of the body does for Foucault. This line of inquiry is not concerned with whether Foucault thinks the body is natural, historical, or experiential. Rather, I attempt to show that the concept of the body serves a particular function in Foucault’s own discourse. Specifically, my contention is that Foucault uses the body, or better particular bodies, as a methodological tool that allows him to make visible the ground on which usual classifications and distinctions of bodies – for example by sex, race, weight, age, physical or cognitive ability, and so on – become valid. By juxtaposing habitual ways of thinking about the body with radically different
knowledges of bodies, Foucault is able to reveal the contingency and deficiency of the criteria according to which we have “become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things” (Foucault 1998b, xxi).

Foucault’s spatial account of the body

That Foucault conceives of the body as a heterotopia is clear from two radio lectures he delivered in December 1966. The second lecture, “Utopian Body,” was preceded by a talk on heterotopias, titled “Les Hétérotopies,” which effectively, if not explicitly, sets out the conceptual framework for the second broadcast and paves the way for the development of an account of the body as a spatial technique. In “Les Hétérotopies,” Foucault distinguishes between utopias, places that do not exist in reality, and heterotopias, that is, places that are real but absolutely different from other spaces. Heterotopias are spaces which “defy all other spaces, which are destined in a sense to efface, offset, neutralize, or purify them” (Foucault 2013b, 40; my translation). To illustrate this idea, Foucault cites as examples of heterotopias, such as gardens, attics, cemeteries, cinemas, theaters, fairgrounds, mental institutions, brothels, prisons, colonies, Club Med resorts, and even the parental bed, “in which one discovers the ocean, because one can swim between the sheets.”

But the bed is also the sky, because one can bounce on the springs. It is the forest, because one hides in it. It is the night, because one becomes ghost under the sheets. Finally, it is pleasure, for when the parents return, one will be punished.

(Foucault 2013b, 40; my translation)

The real space of the bed is at the same time a place that does not exist, and this utopian place is contained within the actual space of the bed. The bed is not a utopia strictly speaking, for
it cannot be said to have no place. Instead, it is a “localized utopia” (utopie localisée) in which an actual space becomes the site of a utopia (Foucault 2013b, 40).

Foucault maintains that every culture has these “real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites (contre-espaces), a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”

Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 1986, 24)

Heterotopias do not merely represent real spaces in distorted or inverted form, but rather juxtapose a real place and its reversal within the same space. They pose a challenge to real places precisely through their internal tension. Heterotopic spaces – the prison, cemeteries, the asylum, or colonies – emerge as effects of concrete social formations, while at the same time constituting “mythical and real contestations of the space in which we live” (contestations mythiques et réelles de l’espace ou nous vivons) (Foucault 2013b, 41). Without necessarily changing real space, heterotopias nevertheless contest it by forcing us to look at it from a perspective that disrupts our habitual ways of seeing: the prison is a place for punishing and correcting criminals but it also produces recidivism; the ship of fools removes the mad from the city but sets them free on the oceans; the cemetery moves death to the margins of the city but accords each individual a place of worship. Freedom and confinement, reverence and exclusion, misconduct and correction not only conceptually require one another but also enter into a constellation in heterotopic space, where they are not merely juxtaposed and separated by borders that can be
crossed, but coiled up in a spiral. Heterotopias are contestations of the space in which we live precisely because they contain, within a single place, incompatible spaces.

It is their function as spaces of contestation that give heterotopias their important methodological status in Foucault’s work. In the same way Foucault avails himself of genealogy to offer counter-histories, he uses heterotopias to present counter-spaces. Just like genealogical counter-histories have as their main goal to uncover the historical conditions of possibility of the present, heterotopias serve the purpose of making visible and confounding the historical a priori of the dominant organization of space. In the words of Shannon Winnubst, the power of heterotopias lies in their ability to force us into “that space in which thinking is faced with the very task of making order” (Winnubst 2006, 9). As a consequence, heterotopias play an important methodological role in Foucault’s work for they enable him to expose the ground on which knowledge becomes possible.

This is particularly clear in The Order of Things, where Foucault cites Borges’ “Chinese Encyclopedia” to draw our attention to the limitations of our own thinking precisely by juxtaposing it with an alternative order. For Foucault, the Chinese encyclopedia problematizes our ostensibly normal, objective, and universal order of knowledge, in which things are arranged “into unconnected islets” (Foucault 1994c, xx), by drawing our attention to another culture “entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think” (Foucault 1994c, xxi). By bringing real and fantastic animals into the same space by way of the familiar ordering principle of the alphabetic series, Borges’ encyclopedia removes the operating table on which our system of thought orders, divides, and classifies objects. As Winnubst explains, “it is this danger of losing all separation between these realms that threatens our
thinking” because “these categories must be delimited if we are to grasp their qualitatively different ontological work in the world” (Winnubst 2006, 7). As a heterotopic space, Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia confronts us with an alternative ordering of space that not only makes visible the limitations of our own ordering codes, but also reveals the particularity and contingency of systems of classification and knowledge production.

Foucault’s discussion of the methodological and epistemological salience of heterotopias in The Order of Things has interesting implications for his account of the body as a heterotopic space in the lecture “Utopian Body.” For if the body is a heterotopia and heterotopias have the specific function, in Foucault’s work, to confound the divisions and classifications of familiar systems of thought and knowledge, it seems plausible to suggest that Foucault is less concerned with what the body is rather than with using the body as a tool to examine, question, and upset habitual ways of making sense of the body. Indeed, in “Utopian Body” Foucault not only describes the body in ways characteristic of heterotopias, but in doing so also paints a picture of the body that is simultaneously eerily familiar and radically different from how the body is usually understood. This is because Foucault effectively mobilizes a first-person account of bodily experience to which his readers can relate in order to show that we all experience the body as utopia, on the one hand, and as an inescapable “pitiless place” (*topie impitoyable*), on the other (Foucault 2006a, 229). Foucault first suggests that the experience of the body as an oppressive, pitiless place is the reason why utopias were invented. As places in which we have “a body without a body,” utopias offset the daily experience of the body as the “same presence, same wounds.”

In front of my eyes the same unavoidable images are drawn, imposed by the mirror: thin face, slouching shoulders, myopic gaze, no more hair – not handsome
at all. And it is in this ugly shell of my head, in this cage I do not like, that I will have to reveal myself and walk around; through this grill I must speak, look and be looked at; under this skin I will have to rot. My body: it is the place without recourse to which I am condemned. (Foucault 2006a, 229)

It is to “erase the sad topology of the body” (Foucault 2006a, 230) to escape from this body, “against this body (as if to erase it) that all these utopias have come into being” (Foucault 2006a, 229). In fact, he contends, the first utopia might well have been the utopia of an incorporeal body. But this utopia, he subsequently argues, is not, in fact, a response to the mercilessness of the body. Rather, the body is the source of all utopias. This is because the body is not only experienced as a pitiless place, but also as “withdrawn, captured by a kind of invisibility from which I can never really detach it.”

This skull, the back of my skull, I can feel it, right there, with my fingers. But see it? Never. This back, which I can feel leaning against the pressure of the mattress, against the couch when I am lying down, and which I might catch but only by the ruse of the mirror. And what is this shoulder, whose movements and positions I know with precision, but that I will never be able to see without dreadfully contorting myself? (Foucault 2006a, 231)

In contrast to the experience of the body as oppressive and pitiless, as a cage from which I cannot escape, there is also an experience of the body as “light,” “transparent,” and “imponderable” (Foucault 2006a, 231). This body is not a thing, which limits me, but it is me. I am not, or at least not only, a mind that inhabits a body, which is different from it. Rather, I am a living, breathing, thinking, moving body, an ensemble of mental states, physiological functions, sensations, movements, hidden and accessible places, and so on. In the fractured and scattered
experience of being a body, Foucault maintains, the body effectively appears as utopia, as a “place outside all places … where I will have a body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected – always transfigured” (Foucault 2006a, 229). Insofar as I do not experience the body as a thing that I have and that is somehow separable from me, but rather do not notice it at all, the body is not there – it is a utopia. “For me to be a utopia,” Foucault says, “it is enough that I be a body” (231; my emphasis). As a consequence, Foucault suggests he was wrong to claim that utopias were invented to erase the body; rather they are “born from the body itself” and only turned against it later (Foucault 2006a, 231). The archetype of all utopias, so to speak, is a particular experience of the body, namely the experience of a subject as being a body or being embodied. In this experience the body is not given to me as an object, but it is lived, felt, and experienced as both indistinguishable from me and undifferentiated in itself.

Foucault’s example of small children is illuminating in this regard, for during the first year of their lives they “have a dispersed body of limbs, cavities, orifices” (Foucault 2006a, 233). As developmental psychologists have demonstrated in so-called mirror-self-recognition tests, children are not able to recognize the image in the mirror as their own rather than that of a playmate until the age of fifteen to eighteen months (see Amsterdam 1972; Rochat and Zahavi 2011). While they are aware of their limbs, surfaces, and affects, and are able to use them to interact with the world, it is only during their second year that they become conscious of their body as a distinct object in space. In other words, children have to develop conceptual thought, that is, a particular way of organizing knowledge, in order to distinguish between their embodied experience and their body as an organized entity that exists in the world. Only then is it possible
to understand that “I can not only move, shift, but I can also move it, shift it, change its place” (Foucault 2006a, 229).

In the same way children become conscious of their bodies in a conceptual sense, the utopian body that I experience in my being embodied is confronted with an alternative view of the body as a merciless place “when I hurt, when a pit is hollowed out in my belly, when my chest and throat choke up, block up, fill up with coughs” (Foucault 2006a, 231). An undifferentiated experience of being a body is also contested when we realize, in the reflection of the mirror, that “we have a body, that this body has a form, that this form has an outline, that in this outline there is a thickness, a weight. In short, that the body occupies a place” (Foucault 2006a, 233) – or when our body is “looked over by someone else from head to toe,” “spied from behind, watched over the shoulder, caught off guard when I least expect it” (Foucault 2006a, 231). But this alternative view of the body as an organized entity, which confronts and contests our undifferentiated experience of being the body as a dispersed assemblage of body parts, sensations, and biological functions, is not always painful or oppressive:

Maybe it should also be said that to make love is to feel one’s body close in on itself. It is finally to exist outside of any utopia, with all of one’s density, between the hands of the other. Under the other’s fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyelids. Love, also, like the mirror and like death – it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that
surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is *here*.

(Foucault 2006a, 233)

The gaze of the other, for better or worse, gives us a different view of the body and assigns “a space to the profoundly and originally utopian experience of the body” (Foucault 2006a, 233). The body is no longer “light, imponderable” (Foucault 2006a, 231); rather, we “become thing” (Foucault 2006a, 231). The utopian body, this place that does not have a place in reality, is confronted and contested by “the absolute place, the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied (*le petit fragment d’espace avec lequel, au sens strict, je fais corps*) (Foucault 2006a, 229). At the same time as it is the object of a panoptic gaze, the body is also “the zero point of the world” around and in relation to which “things are arranged, […] there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a backward, a near and a far.”

Where paths and spaces come to meet, the body is nowhere. It is a kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine. My body is like the City of the Sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate. (Foucault 2006a, 233)

As the point of intersection of all possible perspectives and the point of reference of everything that exists around it, the body is both “transparent and opaque, visible and invisible, life and thing” (Foucault 2006a, 231). It is active and passive, observer and observed, the point from which the world is arranged and the point on which the world converges.

The originally utopian experience of the body Foucault describes is, thus, always confronted by an experience of the body as acutely present. The body, in other words, is a heterotopia *par excellence*, and the experience of the body is profoundly heterotopic. More importantly,
however, in order to show that the body is a heterotopia Foucault describes the body in a way that makes it function as a heterotopic space. His description of the body brings together reality and utopia in the same space, thereby forcing us to confront the very ground on which order is established and thinking becomes possible. As the site of its own problematization, the heterotopic body maps the space of knowledge in which bodies become meaningful and makes visible the historically specific ground on which statements about the body become possible, necessary, true, or false.

In the next section, I argue that Foucault’s methodological use of the body as heterotopia provides a useful framework for interpreting his book on the French hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin on two registers. First, Barbin’s experience of their body is profoundly heterotopic; their body is a real place without a space in the epistemic field of medico-legal discourses of sexual identity. Second, by presenting Barbin’s account of their body alongside scientific reports and literary works, Foucault seeks to put Barbin’s body to work as a heterotopia that critically confronts dominant ways of making sense of the body. In doing so, he is also able to problematize the risks involved in a heterotopic critique of normative ways of thinking and knowing. For even though Barbin’s body has the potential to galvanize a rethinking of medico-legal categories through which bodies are understood by bringing to the fore the limitations of legal and medical discourses of the body, the physician’s response is to displace the deficiency of his system of thought and project it onto Barbin’s body, which in its failure to conform to normative classifications becomes itself the site of limitation and failure.
Herculine Barbin as heterotopic critique

Unlike most other of Foucault’s books, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (1980), a collection of personal memoirs, medical reports, and literary representation of the story of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, presents archival documents without commentary or analysis. As a consequence, the significance of this book in relation to the rest of Foucault’s work is difficult to determine. While many commentators regard it as a minor work, others have highlighted its importance as an “elaboration on Foucault’s political assertions in *The History of Sexuality*” (McWhorter 1999, 200). Those who emphasize the political significance of Barbin’s story have variously interpreted it as testifying to the trouble caused by or the violence exerted on bodies that do not match the grid of intelligibility staked out by a rigid apparatus of sexuality, which emerged in the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and conceived of sexual identity in medico-anatomical terms (Dreger 2000; Davidson 2004; Glover and Kaplan 2009; Hekman 2000; Hekman 2010; Moscovici 2000; Wing 2004), or as showing that sex is not the cause but the effect of sexual desire, and that desire rather than biological sexual difference is the only thing that is “real” (Butler 1990; Wijngaard 1997). For McWhorter, Foucault’s book on the French hermaphrodite is an elaboration on his call to focus on bodies and pleasures as the points of attack on normalizing power, and Barbin’s memoirs are indicative of an admittedly unsuccessful act of resistance against sexual normalization (McWhorter 1999). Oksala, by contrast, zeroes in on the form rather than the content of the book to argue that it is carefully designed to show the shortcomings of both Camille’s first-person account and the third-person account of medical experts in articulating Camille’s true sexual identity. Rather, she suggests that it is the very juxtaposition of both perspectives that brings into focus the sharp discrepancy
between the external perception of the body as an object of law and medicine and the internal perspective of a subject’s embodied experience. While I believe Oksala is right to emphasize the reciprocal relationship between the experience of a subject and historically and socially specific bodies of knowledge and relations of power, it is not my aim in this essay to focus on what exactly Foucault’s presentation of Barbin’s case tells us about bodily experience. Rather, I want to focus on the way in which Foucault puts Barbin’s body to work in order to make visible the order on which knowledge about the body, in particular the sexed and gendered body, is built. By affording Barbin’s personal memoirs the same status as an autopsy report or a novelistic rendering of their life, Foucault erodes the gridlines that separate fiction from reality, experience from science. As a consequence, it is possible to regard Barbin’s body – as well as their recounting of their experience of the body – as a heterotopia that has the potential to confound normative conceptions of the body.

Foucault begins by mapping the epistemic space of sexual knowledge in order to set the stage for a confrontation with the differently ordered space of Camille’s body. He explains that in the Middle Ages, hermaphrodites were regarded as beings with two sexes, and this perception was reflected in legal practice. Foucault elaborates on this point in his 1975/76 Collège de France lectures *Abnormal* (2004), where he argues that until 1599, the year in Antide Collas was one of the last hermaphrodites to be burnt alive simply because of their hermaphroditism, hermaphrodites were regarded as monsters, that is, beings that transgressed civil, natural, and divine law by way of mixture of two sexes. While hermaphrodites were executed solely by virtue of being hermaphrodites in the Middle Ages, from the seventeenth century onward they were forced to choose their dominant sex and faced punishment for making use of their additional sex. It was only with the emergence of a scientific discourse of biology and its concepts of
physiological function and anatomical structures that individuals came to be seen as having a true biological sex. Once medical experts were assumed to be able to determine the true sex of an individual, “it was no longer up to the individual to decide which sex he wished to belong to, juridically or socially. Rather, it was up to the expert to say which sex nature had chosen for him and to which society must consequently ask him to adhere” (Foucault 2010a). Barbin’s body defies this space partitioned by medical and legal discourses of sex, which assigned each individual a fixed place as either male or female. In a system of knowledge where bodies are either male or female, Camille inhabited the interstices that separate these very categories. Foucault’s juxtaposition of his description of the epistemic space of sexual knowledge with the counter-space of Camille’s body thus brings to light the ordering code of sexual knowledge precisely by populating the very space that separates them.

As Barbin’s memoirs show, their experience was one of inhabiting a space that “was not marked out in this world that shunned me, that had cursed me” (Barbin 2010, 3). From Camille’s point of view, their body was unlocalizable in accepted systems of classification. As a consequence, Camille lacked the categories to render their experience intelligible. “I am feeling a certain hesitation,” Camille wrote, “for I am about to begin the hardest part of the task that I have imposed upon myself.”

I have to speak of things that, for a number of people, will be nothing but incredible nonsense because, in fact, they go beyond the limits of what is possible. It will be difficult for them, no doubt, to get an exact idea of what my feelings were in the midst of the extraordinary peculiarities of my life. (Barbin 2010, 15)

The “enormous distance that separated me from them, physically speaking” (Barbin 2010, 26) resulted in “inexpressible uneasiness” and feelings that “no words could express” (Barbin
2010, 25). To understand what Camille felt, “one would have had to be me” (Barbin 2010, 57). While it was clearly possible for Camille to name and describe their features – a thin, boyish figure; light down on their upper lip and cheeks that grew thicker when Barbin tried to shave it; flat chest and skinny limbs; absence of menstrual periods – Barbin’s body exhibited them in a way that did not correspond to any of the categories that render modes of being socially intelligible. Yet, Barbin predicted that after their death “a few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped up on a single human being” (Barbin 2010, 103). Rather than eliciting awareness of the limitations of legal and scientific knowledge and a broadening of categories to include Barbin’s ambiguous body, Barbin’s contestation of categories imposed by medical and legal practices triggered an attempt to absorb deviance into the space of knowledge itself.

The account of the physician, who conducted Barbin’s autopsy, quite literally represents an effort to put Camille’s body back on the operating table and assign a space to their deviant appearance. For the physician, Camille’s misfortune was the result of an error at the time of their birth. In a context when biology assigned each individual a single true sex to which corresponded a civil status, a set of behaviors, and a desire directed towards the other sex, Camille’s ambiguous body, which defied the mutually exclusive categories of medicine and law, appeared as the result of an error of a physician who failed to look hard enough to discover the true sex of Camille’s body. A simple oversight at Camille’s birth led to “twenty years in the clothing of a sex that was not his own, at the mercy of a passion that was unconscious of itself until the explosion of his senses finally alerted him about the nature of it, had his true sex recognized and at the same time became really aware of his physical disability, whereupon, disgusted with his
life, he put an end to it by committing suicide” (Foucault 2010a, 122). From the perspective of established knowledge, in other words, Barbin’s body was by no means unclassifiable. One merely had to look in the right place to determine their “true” sex. While Camille’s embodied experience was profoundly shaped by sexual ambivalence, ambivalence itself was simply impossible for the physician. In a system of classification that established validity based on anatomical function, sexual identity could be unequivocally determined in reference to sexual functions and anatomical structures. In such an all-encompassing system, there were no unintelligible beings, only imperfections and deviations. To the doctors of the seventeenth century and onward, hermaphrodites were the stuff of fables (Foucault 2004, 72). For the scientist, Camille’s suffering could have been avoided had their “penial body” and “apparent labia majora” with their “globular bodies” been correctly identified as what they “really” were: an “imperfect penis” and divided scrotum with testicles (Foucault 2010a, 126). Because medical discourse cannot conceive of the “simultaneous presence of two sexes in a single organism,” the physician can no longer conceive of the hermaphrodite as a mixed being, but as “a defective structure accompanied by impotence” (Foucault 2004, 72).

Even though Camille’s embodiment certainly contests received systems of classification and categories of sexual identity, the physician’s account makes it perfectly clear that contestation itself does not automatically lead to a reorientation of dominant modes of thought. Rather than generating new knowledge and new relations of power, contestation provokes an assertion of dominant categories as well as corrective intervention. Barbin’s hermaphroditic body is no longer regarded as a monstrosity that “calls law into question and disables it” (Foucault 2004, 64), but is instead included in the epistemic space of law and science as a “somatic abnormality” (Foucault 2004, 73). As a consequence, I respectfully disagree with those scholars, who interpret
Barbin’s memoirs as testimony of an ultimately unsuccessful act of resistance to sexual normalization. By reading Barbin’s memoirs as a methodological intervention rather than an account of experience and its reciprocal relationship with bodies of knowledge, relations of power, and forms of subjectivation, Foucault is able to draw our attention both to the limitations of hegemonic systems of classification as well as practices of exclusion, erasure, and silencing that aim to immunize dominant epistemic spaces from critique.

Conclusion

Foucault’s book on Herculine Barbin as well as his first-person reflections on the body in “Utopian Body” stand testament to the methodological salience of embodied experience for Foucault’s critical project. Based on rich descriptions of embodied experience, Foucault develops a spatial account of the body as a heterotopia, which is the site of its own permanent contestation and problematization. By developing a spatial account of the body, Foucault is able to deploy the body as a heterotopia, which makes visible the historically specific ground on which knowledge about the body is produced and organized. In analogy to his genealogical counter-histories, these heterotopic counter-spaces present us with alternative orders, thereby revealing and problematizing habitual ways of knowing.

Yet, the dual experience of the body as utopian and pitiless or, in Barbin’s case, ambiguous and in need of correction and conformity, not only reveals the limitations of knowledge about “the body,” which is itself the effect of discourses that articulate the body as a unitary phenomenon determined by nature and culture; it also hints at the ethical and political valence of these limitations. In particular, Foucault’s work connects in interesting ways with the burgeoning
literature on epistemic injustice. By way of conclusion, I want to point out some possible directions for future research.

Barbin’s memoirs throws into sharp relief the way in which accepted systems of classification exclude, silence, and erase modes of being that do not map onto the order of knowledge. Following Miranda Fricker, this inability to comprehend one’s experience and render it intelligible for others constitutes hermeneutical injustice. Fricker further distinguishes hermeneutical injustice from testimonial injustice, which is a denial of credibility to a speaker due to prejudice. In contrast to Miranda Fricker’s argument for the primacy of testimonial injustice, Barbin’s case suggests that testimonial injustice is an effect of hermeneutical injustice. Doubtful that “society, which is so severe, so blind in its judgments, would give me credit for an impulse that might pass for honesty,” Barbin predicted that people would “try to falsify it instead and treat it as if it were a crime on my part” (Barbin 2010, 79). Barbin thus hints that individuals, who contest established knowledge, are not merely misunderstood, but that their failure to communicate their experience in socially intelligible ways results in their being discredited. In other words, the prejudicial denial of credibility appears to be a response to individuals, whose inability to render their experience intelligible contests the grid of intelligibility itself.

One way of responding to such epistemic injustices might be to argue for a broadening of categories and new ways of knowing. Yet, even if a broadening or multiplication of categories is achieved, this does not liberate us from the existing order of knowledge. The specification of so-called disorders of sexual development, for example, assigns a condition to individuals with ambiguous sexual identity, but is nevertheless based on assumptions about a true biological sex whose development is inhibited by physiological dysfunctions – dysfunctions, no less, which can subsequently be treated and corrected. In such a system, Barbin would have found a place,
perhaps as an individual suffering from Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, but one has to wonder if the pathologization of one’s mode of being is any less violent and unjust than the rectification of civil status undergone by Barbin.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, while Barbin’s case is a particularly obvious example of the injustice and violence experienced by those who fail to be socially intelligible, Foucault’s work on the utopian body suggests a more general inability to translate embodied experience into communicable terms. In short, we all know what it means to exist in the interstices, to not be intelligible to others. In some way and to different degrees, we are all subject to the injustice and violence engendered by the constraints of systems of thought. This suggests that even new ways of knowing would hardly be able to adequately address epistemic injustice. If Foucault is right that all knowledge has historically specific conditions of possibility, which make some modes of being meaningful and others unintelligible, it seems plausible to assume that new forms of knowledge will engender their own effects of exclusion and erasure. There will always be statements that are false, experiences that are incommunicable, and modes of being that are in need of correction. Drawing on Foucault’s suggestions that we need practices of freedom rather than liberation (Foucault 1994b), it might be suggested that the most helpful response to the violence and injustice perpetrated by the necessity of order of all knowledge is to “be convinced of [the] sincerity” of even unintelligible accounts of experience (Barbin 2010, 15). The challenge is, then, not to overthrow systems of knowledge and relations of power, but to play the games of power and knowledge with as little domination as possible.

--University of Memphis
1. For a more detailed discussion of Foucault’s notion of the body in relation to phenomenological discourses of *Leiblichkeit* see my (2015).

2. In a similar vein, Lynne Huffer notes the complex interaction of sexual experience and medical knowledge about sexuality, which generates a dynamic by which sexuality, ultimately, becomes “unknowable and unnameable” (Huffer 2010, 38). For an alternative discussion of the body as an “interface” in a dynamic exchange with other objects see (Latour 2004).

3. For important discussions of sexual normalization and normalized bodies see also (Heyes 2007; McWhorter 1999).

4. I am indebted to Jonathan Wurtz for helping me think through the relationship between Foucault’s historical and spatial accounts of the body.

5. See also (Crampton and Elden 2007; Elden 2001; Han 2002; Hong and Ferguson 2011; Oksala 2004; Oksala 2011; Topinka 2010; Winnubst 2006).

6. Foucault carries out this kind of analysis in a number of his works. In *History of Madness*, he suggests that the discovery of madness as an illness has to be understood against the background of social, political, and economic imperatives of early capitalist society. Similarly, *The Birth of the Clinic* raises doubt about the traditional view that medicine distinguishes between health and disease based on knowledge of their true nature, instead arguing that the criteria of this distinction are themselves linked to wider transformations in the organization of knowledge. *Discipline and Punish* shows that transformations in penal practices were not effects of an increase in humanitarianism, but the correlate of new forms of disciplinary power. The transformation of medical and punitive practices through the emergence of disciplinary power also gave rise to the mad and the criminal as subjects. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues
that discrete practices, morphological features, pleasures, and behaviors came to be understood in terms of sexuality during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See (Foucault 2006b; Foucault 1995; Foucault 2008; Foucault 1990). In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault gives the name “transactional realities” (*réalités de transaction*) to these “transactional and transitional figures” like madness, illness, criminality, or sexuality, which are “not a primary and immediate reality” but which “although they have not always existed are nonetheless real” (Foucault 2010c, 297).

7. The first talk, “Les Hétérotopies,” was never published, but it was based on the lecture “Des espaces autres” (“Of Other Spaces”), which was delivered in March 1967 at the *Conférence au Cercle d’études architecturales* and published in 1984. The second broadcast, “Les corps utopique” was translated into English by Lucia Allais, Caroline A. Jones, and Arnold Davidson from the recording of Foucault’s radio lectures, and is included in (Jones 2006). Both texts were published in German translation, accompanied by a transcript of the original broadcasts, in 2013 in (Foucault 2013a).

8. On Foucault’s use of the spiral see, for instance, (Foucault 1990; Foucault 1994a; Foucault 1998a).

9. In their discussion of Foucault’s use of Borges’ Chinese Encyclopedia as a heterotopia in *The Order of Things*, Hong and Ferguson argue that Foucault’s use of spatial techniques and, in particular, heterotopias offers a trenchant critique of normative spatial arrangements, which are premised on a hierarchical, gendered and racialized ordering of discrete and comparable spaces. Yet, they claim that Foucault ultimately fails to provide a successful critique of Western modes of spatialized reasoning because he does not consider and actually remains within a way of thinking that is made possible by material conditions of race. Specifically, they suggest that in
his very effort to undo Western modes of thought Foucault turns to an orientalist representation of China as the site of unreason without questioning the basis on which China and the West appear as comparable social formations. One might reply, following Winnubust, that the Chinese Encyclopedia is Borges’, not China’s, and that it operates on the register of a fable whose purpose is not to represent China as the place of unreason, but to emphasize the deficiencies of Western thought. Moreover, even if Hong and Ferguson were right that Foucault ignores the importance of race in this instance, I do not think that this is reason enough to condemn his critical mobilization of heterotopias tout court as a failed project that is undone by Foucault’s unawareness of the materiality of race. In fact, a number of scholars have shown that Foucault takes race rather seriously, albeit in unusual and controversial ways. See (Gómez 2005; Feder 2007; Ferguson 2012; Heiner 2007; Kelly 2004; Macey 2009; Mader 2011; McWhorter 2009; Sheth 2009; Stoler 1995; C. Taylor 2011; Winnubst 2012). In my view, it would be more productive to replace the language of failure with an attempt to use Foucault’s analytic tools to go beyond Foucault and critically interrogate the gaps and silences in his work.

10. I thank Shaun Gallagher for helpful discussion of this point.

11. The French phrase “faire corps avec” is usually translated as “to be one with.” I agree with the translators, however, that Foucault seems to have a more literal meaning in mind, for he emphasizes that the body is the concrete space assigned to an indeterminate experience of embodiment.

12. My discussion here echoes Foucault’s use of the Panopticon, which might be regarded as another example of a spatial technique and perhaps even a heterotopia. In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault examines Bentham’s Panopticon as the architectural figure of a new kind of normalizing power, which works on the body of the individual by implementing a system of
absolute visibility. The panoptic mechanism operates by fragmenting space from the point of view of a central tower and allocating each individual a strictly defined space, in which she can be seen without being able to see herself. I find the language of panopticism helpful because the body, like the Panopticon, houses a subject at the central point in space and a subject confined to a segment of space staked out by forces outside of her control. Insofar as the subject experiences herself as the point in space in relation to which space is arranged, her position in the world corresponds to the position of the observer in the central tower. Yet, to the extent that the body is experienced as a place in which the individual is subject to a panoptic gaze, the individual resembles the prisoner whose place is fixed in a strictly partitioned space of hypervisibility.

13. Foucault’s highlights the importance of the gaze and perspectival vision throughout his works. In particular, his analysis ofVelázquez’ painting *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* (1994) shows that the position of the spectator is marked out as that point in space on which all perspectives represented in the painting converge. The different perspectives coinciding in the painting – that of the painter, that of the other figures depicted in the painting, and that of the mirror – reveal that the position of the characters being painted is also “that space in which we are, and which we are” (Foucault 1994c, 4). See also (Flynn 2010; Close 1987; Knips 2008; Ogborn 1995; Searle 1980).

14. Foucault found the autobiographical notes of Herculine Barbin, who was also known as Alexina and Camille, in the archives of the Department of Public Hygiene while doing research for his project on the history of sexuality. According to the dossier included in (Foucault 2010a), Barbin’s name was Adélaïde Herculine Barbin, called Alexina. Foucault states that “the first name Camille seems to have been a convention that was invented either by Tardieu [a nineteenth-century French physician], when he published Alexina’s recollections, or – more
probably – by herself” (Foucault 2010a, 120). I will refer to Barbin as Camille rather than Herculine or Alexina because this is the name that appears in Camille’s memoirs. Moreover, in French, Camille is a gender-neutral name and preserves the ambiguity of the narrative, which resists all sexual identification. Despite Camille’s determinate legal status, first as woman and then as man, I will adopt the singular they in order to reflect the indeterminacy of Camille’s embodied experience. Even though this decision makes the following paragraphs more cumbersome to read, it reflects and respects Camille’s embodiment.

15. Miranda Fricker calls the inability to render one’s experience intelligible hermeneutical injustice. According to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice occurs when “a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2009, 1).

16. For a genealogy of intersex and the ethical issues surrounding it see (Feder 2014; Rubin 2012).

Acknowledgments

I thank Tobias Nikolaus Klass, Mary Beth Mader, Luvell Anderson, and Shaun Gallagher for discussions of earlier drafts of this article. I also want to thank the editors of this journal and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and encouraging feedback.

Works Cited


