Freudian Slips
Gossy, Mary

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Introduction

This book comes from error and anger. The error part is the easier of the two to explain, so let me start there. In 1990 I was invited to contribute an essay to a collection on the relationship of psychoanalytic theory to the works of Cervantes. One of the editors of the volume suggested that I pick up where I had left off in the last chapter of a book I had published the year before. When I went back to look over that old chapter for some new ideas, I was shocked to discover that I had misread a very obvious meaning in the text at hand. Two men had stolen a prostitute from police custody; the one man wanted to rape her, since it had cost him so much trouble to get her, but the second man would not let him. The first man said, “All right then, I’ll marry her, and then you won’t be able to prevent me from doing what I will with her.” I He did marry her, we assume he got his way, and that is the end of the story. It is all perfectly clear in the Spanish text and in the translations. But I misread what happened. I thought that the second man, the one who tried to prevent the rape, was the one who married the girl. Despite my knowledge of feminist theory, it was (at the time) impossible for me to read the obvious, which was that in this case a young woman was forced to marry her would-be rapist.

The essay that I wrote for the collection was an attempt to analyze the psychological and political reasons for my misreading. In psychoanalytic terms this misreading qualifies as a Freudian slip, or a para-praxis, because its source is not ignorance but, rather, a repression. For various reasons, despite the fact that the words were staring me in the face, I could not accept their meaning.

From that essay I learned that, in political terms, the slip marks the undertow of an opposing political current and the point at which allegiance to opposing values has its strongest hold. For me the inabil-
ity to read *rapist* and *husband* together was tied to interpretations of the book that I had been taught in graduate school and marked my allegiance to an "old-boy" network from which I wanted to claim lineage—my identity as a radical feminist be damned. My slip showed me where orthodoxy was holding me back and interrupting my radical discourse.

A colleague at Rutgers, inquiring after my progress on the article, suggested that I take a look at the whole *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* by Sigmund Freud and write a book about it. At the time I was also considering doing a theoretical study of representations and responses to feminist pornography, but it was suggested to me by several people that such a book might not be the best project for a yet-to-be tenured assistant professor. So, I ended up writing this book on slips, which is, paradoxically, the more orthodox of the two projects.

Like the essay on misreading, *Freudian Slips: Woman, Writing, the Foreign Tongue* is an inquiry into the political implications of the slip, but it has a much broader context. It is an analysis of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* not only from a theoretical but also a textual perspective. It discusses how Freud writes about slips and what that writing can teach us about authority, teaching, theory, home, and what is foreign.

*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is a compendium of anecdotes that recount how slips happen. It is one of the most popular, in all senses of the word, of Freud's books. He stipulates that it is for the general reader and is not a theoretical text. Not by theorizing but by the endless hammering of its more than two hundred examples, in eleven editions and translations into at least twelve languages (in Freud's lifetime), it hopes to demonstrate the existence and mode of functioning of the unconscious in language. My first nightmare task was to try to find a way to organize the study, given that it would be impossible (for me) to do a close reading of every example. What I discovered was that the majority of the anecdotes in the book are about slips that were committed in reference to a woman's body, some fixed written text, or the words of (what was to the person making the slip) a foreign language.

These female bodies, these texts, and these foreign tongues are, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, identified with a feminized unconscious that threatens authoritative discourse. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was written to prove, authoritatively, that such an
unconscious exists. But, as Freud points out, slips are contagious. The feminized slipperiness of woman, writing, and the foreign tongue constantly interrupts and upends the authoritative writing of The Psychology of Everyday Life and jostles the book’s attempts to define and limit the slip. In anecdote after anecdote Freud, often in dialogue with a colleague “of academic background,” attempts to analyze slips and to show how they work to reveal repressed content. But, in the act of writing about slips, the book shows how theory itself slips, and does so most graphically, when it insists upon the dominance of masculine over feminine and native over foreign. The more the text seeks to control or eradicate difference, the more its own internal difference becomes readable.

The operations of the slip are terrifying to and disruptive of univocal authority. I have had to face the fact that, by virtue of the slip’s contagiousness, my own writing about it is bound to slip, too. But another point that this book tries to make is that, given that slips are unavoidable, there are ways that we can learn from them. The acceptance, rather than the denial of the slip, can create a new pedagogy, a way of learning in which authority is not seen as absolute and in which a slip is an occasion for a new dialogue, rather than a moment of shame to be forgotten as soon as possible. The slip insists on ways of meaning that exceed existing power structures and makes multiple meanings available.

I also argue that the categories of woman, writing, and the foreign tongue, the terms by which Freud theorizes the slip, are not arbitrary but, rather, clearly mark the terms of the slip’s political possibilities. Because of the way that it undoes gender relations, the slip helps to show not only that the dominance of masculine over feminine is a fiction but, beyond that, that dominance is an invention that has an insistent tendency to undermine itself. The slip marks not only the undertow of orthodoxy in radical discourses but also the disruptive currents in discourses that seek the stability of dominance. This dominance, whether sexual, academic, or political, is undone in the moment of slipping. Freudian Slips discusses how the reference to women’s bodies by scientists who seek to objectify those bodies results in the feminization of the scientists themselves. It shows how the desire to assimilate the power of a culture’s master texts, by quotation of and association with their canonical authors, wreaks havoc with the political motivations of members of the intelligentsia or academy who are
both within and without approved social definitions. Finally, my study analyzes the relationship between the native and the foreign and demonstrates how the use of the foreign—in travel narratives or foreign languages—can seem to be a method of getting away but inevitably leads back “home.”

I believe that the metaphor that dominates *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is that of the female body as foreign text. This metaphor informs every chapter of Freud’s book and slips in especially where it is least invited. Each chapter of my book analyzes the persistence of this metaphor from a different angle. The first chapter begins by pointing out that Freud *misquoted* Goethe’s *Faust* the first time he wrote down the epigraph for *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. I show that this slip takes place because of the slip in gender that characterizes Freud’s relationship with his friend Wilhelm Fliess; bisexuality, as theoretical problem and as personal relationship, makes it difficult to write canonically, and correctly. A strangely embodied femininity invades Freud and Fliess’s masculine correspondence and disrupts it. But this element, called Sorge, or Worry in *Faust*, points to a way of knowing and learning that other writers who have invoked its name (Heidegger and Derrida, in addition to Freud) have avoided, because Sorge, like the slip, worries the Faustian mind.

In the second chapter a man’s worries about a more concrete female body disrupt his intellectual and political rhetoric. An academic man who is Freud’s traveling companion laments the anti-Semitism that is blocking his career. He misquotes a part of the *Aeneid* in which Dido wishes for descendants who might avenge her upon Aeneas, and his slip leads to the unwelcome possibility that a foreign woman whom he met while on holiday might soon be providing him with a descendant he does not really want. In this anecdote the foreign is directly linked with a female body and a classic text. But the slipper’s inability to identify himself with the fate of that foreign, feminized body derails his own political project, which is to fight anti-Semitism. The slip marks a place where a new kind of political practice might be invented, but in this instance that possibility is set aside because of a need to adhere to structures of patriarchal legitimacy. The plight of Freud’s companion is similar to that of other people, like certain academics, for example, who are both within and without power and whose political urges toward change and survival are often co-opted by a yearning for respectability. But this slip, too, is a sign of the
possibility of the return of a radical repressed. When the friend quotes Dido, he is casting himself in the role of a woman who was abandoned by a traveling man. On some level an identification with the other has been acknowledged, if not mobilized.

One reason that it is so hard to identify consciously with the oppressed other (that which is foreign and feminized) is that the existing symbolic system makes it seem dangerous to do so. A heterosexual man has been taught that he will lose that which is most precious to him if he does not follow the rules. The problem is that the slip proves that it is impossible always to stay within the approved grammar. The third chapter of my book picks up from the possibly pregnant girlfriend of the Aeneid quotation and follows a series of references in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life to pregnant women, especially mothers, and their relationship to the meaning of the slip. These mothers often appear in Freud’s writings on screen memories, and I analyze a series of them in which a boy child remembers (or can’t remember) his mother’s body, pregnant with an unwelcome sibling. In these cases, which have to do both with fetishism and pregnancy, the female body is textualized as if it were a letter of the alphabet that initially, at least, spells out the priority of the male. But pregnancy upsets the order of the alphabet of castration and displaces the phallus from its position at the origin of language. On one level the boys’ memories of their mothers’ pregnancies turn the mother tongue into a foreign language. On another level, that of the slip, the same memories suggest a knowledge of a female body before castration, a knowledge that makes the construct of masculinity uncomfortably full of unplanned meanings and makes the man who remembers aware of new etymologies for his experience.

The scary thing about the fourth chapter is that it shows that slips can happen in one’s native tongue as well as in foreign languages. Freud and a new friend both misquote another of Goethe’s poems, this one “The Bride of Corinth.” The (male) friend cannot decide whether he is in the position of a bride or of a groom. In this case he is quoting the words of another (poetic, and thus foreign, words) as a way of participating in Freud’s authoritative discourse—but what happens is that, in trying to accede to authority, he has slipped into a submissive position. Here and elsewhere in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life theory is a homoerotic dialogue among men that works very hard to exclude women. Yet that theory is built on constant
reference to femininity, and the concrete reality of the female bodies that it represses insistently returns to undermine it. The slips that are narrated in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* show again and again that there is a female body that makes sense and whose insistent meanings exceed the definitions of a theoretical femininity.

The collision between a theoretical fantasy of femininity and the concrete experiences of female bodies inevitably brings us, in the fifth chapter, to the case of Dora, which Freud was writing at the same time as *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Many people who have written on Dora have mentioned this fact, but no one has discussed what it might mean to the theory of the unconscious expounded in Freud’s book on slips. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was published immediately after Freud wrote it and went into eleven editions, ten of them “enlarged.” The Dora case, on the other hand, was kept from publication for four years before it finally came out. Now, the anecdote is the fundamental structure of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and it is no coincidence that the etymology of the word *anecdote* is “that which is not published or given out.” The overpublished, excessive book on slips, so full of anecdotes that it becomes fragmented, is a compensatory publication of the unpublished Dora case; *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is a hysterical embodiment of the repressed “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria.”

According to his letters to Fliess, Freud was writing *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* before, during, and after he was writing Dora. The “Fragment” might thus be read as a part of the book on slips. In fact, there is some direct intertextuality. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* Freud tells a story about how he came to choose the name Dora for a patient whose case history he was writing. But, because of their relation to a slip that Freud’s pupil Sandor Ferenczi reports, other anecdotes about hysterical girls make ever stronger connections between the two works. One day Ferenczi wrote *anektode*, instead of *anekdote*, in his journal. *Tode* is the German word for death, and Ferenczi’s slip led me to an examination of the ways in which a living female body that exceeds the definitions of theory can be threatened with death by a theoretical discourse, the *anektode*, that will not learn its language.

Despite the real terrors that *anectodal* theorizing evokes, it is worth remembering the context of Ferenczi’s slip. A Gypsy had been sentenced to death by hanging and asked as a last request to be able to
choose the tree from which he would hang. Despite much searching, he never found an appropriate tree. The moral is that the Gypsy, as archetypal foreign other, offers a model of a rhetoric that is not silenced or murdered by existing laws. Part of my work at the end of chapter 5, and throughout *Freudian Slips*, is to suggest ways of writing theory that free, rather than sacrifice, the bodies of women.

The last part of the book, which is not a chapter but more of a conclusion and epilogue, is concerned with the writing hand of a woman and to what degree the pen in that hand is as murderous as any other. It is based on a dream in which I, a non-native Spanish speaker and professor of Spanish literature, tried to write that “all narrative has blood on its hands” in Spanish, on a blackboard. It tells the story of how living, writing, and reading through error, in contact with the blood of a female body that is not dying, can indicate a way to make sense beyond co-optation or silence. I try to suggest some positive ways that slips can be used to promote discourses that value difference (of all kinds, but especially sexual difference) instead of repressing or colonizing them.

Throughout this work I have been conscious not only of my slips and errors but also of an anger that is related to them. Not all errors are slips; slips are errors that you make when you know better, and for that reason they contain a hint of perversity, of willful deviation, of going where you want to go, instead of where the rules tell you to go. The whole of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is full of travel stories and of slips that happen in or because of them—of people straying, erring, wandering, from their accustomed paths and then finding out things that they needed, but didn’t want, to know. To err, to wander freely, is essential to knowledge. While I was writing this book, I often felt the need to wander, to get up out of my chair and walk the fifteen blocks to the bank or just around the park. I went out on the streets of the East Village in New York City the same literature professor and feminist theorist that I was when I was inside my apartment sitting at my desk. But theory did not matter to the violent discourses I encountered on my walks. In the thirty or so minutes that my identifiably female body moved autonomously through neighborhoods, good and bad, on the way to Union Square, every time, and more than once, men, visibly of all classes and races, subjected me to verbal assault. It was wintertime, and I was wearing heavy clothing and my habitual boots and jacket. I am six feet tall but otherwise not
particularly noticeable. Nevertheless, at least two or three times on each walk, in each direction, men directed sexual comments at me. These locutions are familiar to women who do not spend most of their public time in automobiles or accompanied by a protective male; comments range from the disturbingly violent and obscene to the ridiculous. What made me angry about them was that they hemmed in my wandering. In response to them, I constantly found myself changing course, trying to figure out a way to move through the city without being bordered or defined by these words, which were impossible to ignore. It is possible not to respond and to pretend you don’t hear what the man is saying, but it doesn’t stop the words from reaching you. Similarly, it is possible to engage the man with some kind of comeback, but these usually backfire. It struck me that my position as a woman walking on the street and being harassed by this male discourse was analogous to the position of the feminist theoretician. How is it possible to make my own discourse in an environment that is overdetermined and controlled by another discourse that seeks to silence and override it?

I wanted a feminist theory that would change my experience on the streets of New York. Most academic feminist theory is singularly ineffective in this regard. The possibilities, from essentialism to the performance of gender, all require a large investment of energy in response to the dominant discourse. I, on the other hand, wanted that time and energy for myself and the people to whom I choose to respond. The men on the street do not care where I stand in reference to questions about the construction of gender. They simply see an identifiably female body on the move, and they want to detain it in its movement. They want to control the slippery female, too, and it makes me mad.

So, my question is, what kind of practice of difference can help me survive in my (culturally encoded) difference? My female body is the ground of my experiences in the civilized discourses of gender. It is a form of intelligible difference that has made me and is part of what I am now. Whether I identify with it or not, it determines the way that power acts out on me. I would like to continue to err in it, as it is. And at this point that is the only practice I can suggest: to keep on slipping. In this book I say that to slip, and to acknowledge the slip, will redirect the conscious discourse in which the slip occurs. Similarly, exposure to a foreign language will eventually make changes in
a native tongue. A foreign word that many theoreticians use for political practice is praxis; this commonly known fact is of no special note, except that the word echoes in the technical English term for Freudian slip, which is parapraxis. Freud's word, Fehlleistung, has no equivalent in English, so his translator had to coin one. Fehlleistung means "faulty function"; parapraxis means, in this context, "doing incorrectly," but in terms of a political practice parapraxis has additional possibilities. Para- can mean "beside" and "beyond," as well as "incorrectly" and "similar to." A feminist parapraxis could be a way of continuing one's errant movement along the streets, of either the urban or the academic marketplace, not responding to and thus not detained by that which seeks to halt whatever self-determination is possible to a female body. In such a parapractic, or slippery, juxtaposition of two discourses, the dominant one cannot retain the same position it had before its contact with the slip. The insistent autonomous error that a visible, mobile, public female body represents should, theoretically, alter the language of domination. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life it is possible to see, at any rate, how the bodies of women, as opposed to abstractions of femininity, slip through theoretical discourse and make their own impractical, parapractic kind of sense.