

Cover sheet for:

The Shape of Selves (and Socialities) to Come: Post-Gender and Post-Sex Theory and Practice.

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Abstract:

There have been calls recently by prominent social theorists and queer theorists for future-oriented, re-constructive theory and practices which attempt to fuse radical destabilisations of identity with positive socialities which takes these deconstructions as their starting point and locus (Butler 2012; de Lauretis 2011; Sennett 2012; Weiner & Young 2011).

While there have been ongoing (albeit rare) normative arguments for getting rid of gender and moves towards strategies for imagining selves and societies 'beyond gender' (e.g. Risman, Lorber & Sherwood 2012), these calls rarely engage effectively with current significant theorisations around the ontological status of sex *and* gender. I argue that to consider these two impulses together would underpin a cohesive, positive praxis for a re-constructive way of understanding the self and others, and a way of behaving together, which is without the restrictive constituting forces of sexual difference and gender and as such represents a longer-term strategy.

This paper will consider the implications or corollaries of leading-edge ontological theory around sex and gender from 'new materialism' and 'post-constructionism' which radically destabilise the fixed and biological root of sexual dimorphism and the anterior construction of difference which constitutes sex and gender (Hird 2004; Lykke 2010), for the more socially and politically praxis-oriented approaches such as those of Lorber et. al. (2012).

I am concerned with where this ontology leaves re-constructive strategies for confronting the problematic of the inequalities of gendered societies and subjectivities and what might be the 'shape of selves to come' after queer theory's legacy, and after gender.

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...feminism needs a long-term strategy to undermine the overall gendered structure of the societies most of us live in (Lorber 2000: 82).

Alongside cabbages and carrots, which are not “opposites” of each other, there are courgettes, melons, and potatoes...distinctions are not necessarily hierarchical: vegetables are not placed on a scale of value (Delphy 1993: 4).

There are emerging ways to understand the enduring inequalities of gender which explain why past challenges to gender and the divisions and inequalities resulting from it may have failed or had limited impact. Emerging accounts of the ontology of gender offer insight into why it, and its inseparability from oppositional difference, exclusion and hierarchy, may have proven so stubborn as a way of understanding ourselves, underpinning our interaction with others and structuring societies. Theory emerging from under the monikers ‘new materialism’ (Hird2003) or ‘post-constructionism’ (Lykke 2010) - particularly in Australia and, more recently, Scandinavia - extend social analysis to biological sexual difference and dimorphism, challenging simplistic divisions of nature/culture and sex/gender, and attempting to develop more positive and less immutable accounts of the co-constitutive relationship between nature and culture.

After outlining these theoretical moves, this paper will indicate a contemporary interest in reconstructive thinking in social theory and then consider where these ontological accounts

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leavereconstructive gender politics. That is, what the terrain of activity and political aims should be for a politics concerned with minimising the negative impacts of sex/gender in light of these analyses. In this paper I argue that gender politics should extend its analysis to sexual difference as it is this which reifies and naturalises the concepts of sex and gender, and that the most productive aim would be to foster the eradication of sexual difference. I will justify this ontologically, normatively and practicably, including discussion of some practices which I suggest may be suitable means of doing so.

The Conceptual Strength of New Materialism and Post-Constructionism

In the history of this post-gender impulse there have been few robust normative proposals for the eradication or transcendence of gender difference. Those which do exist come from the psychology of androgyny (Bem 1975; 1995), sociology and feminism (Lorber 2000; 1986; Risman, Lorber& Sherwood 2012) and queer theory (Bornstein 1994; Feinberg 1998; Halberstam 1998). However all of these have tended to perpetuate the material/subjective split and limit themselves to expanded models of a perceived variable disembodied gender subjectivity, leaving notions of dimorphic biological 'sex' intact.

I posit, however, that these post-gender approaches are conceptually out of step with contemporary developments in ontological theory and their normative claims and political strategies would benefit from the influence of new materialism and post-constructionism. These new ontological accounts, then, posit the inseparability of sex, gender and sexual difference. However, rather than reifying this sexual difference, and thereby gender in the

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process, some accounts offer the conceptual bases for more long-term strategies for challenging and changing all of these. These are able to address the reasons that gender (when understood as separate from 'sex', and thus leaving sex immutable and unscathed) is so persistent. A good example of this work is Ann Fausto-Sterling's (2003) application of 'Development Systems Theory' (DST) to understanding the direction of causality between "sex" and "gender." Fausto-Sterling questions 'how function shapes anatomy' and is able to produce a less fixed, more mutually constitutive notion of biology and culture, refuting the claim that 'biological difference is...immutability' (Fausto-Sterling 2003: 125). Here Fausto-Sterling suggests that Judith Butler's notion of performativity can be extended to the "biological," such that 'relatively stable states of being emerge from a process of repetitive trial and error' (Fausto-Sterling 2003: 126). This model does not rely on the mind/body dualism and offers some room for agency and change, despite the mutual re-constitution of sexual difference, sex and gender. The question can now become, not whether sex is indeed difference based, or should take some other form, but whether "sex," being a socially constructed category, need exist *at all* as an aspect of identity.

That these ontological accounts are better able to address recent developments in understandings of how both gender and sex do not seem to best represent the identity experiences of many people. Thus they are better able to support the normative argument that sex and gender do not represent the most enabling way of understanding ourselves and others and would be better eradicated. The negative outcomes of sex/gender difference divisions for women have been well charted and have most often resulted in calls for valuing women equally either within masculinist norms or in a perceived uniqueness resultant of being women (for example Bem 1975; Daly 1979; Friedan 1965; Gilligan 2003; Irigaray 1985; Whitbeck 1989; Wolf 1998). However, empirical gender scholarship has widened, most

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obviously by focusing on the ambivalent impacts of constructions of manhood on men (Connell 1995; Kaufman 1999; Pascoe 2007; Woodhill & Samuels 2004). In addition to all of this is work on the negative impacts of the sex and gender order on those who do not just challenge the 'contents' of gender categories, but the 'containers' themselves (Delphy 1993: 3). Examples of this are intersex people, gender variant and transgender people (Chase 1993; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Feinberg 1998; Gagne & Tewkesbury 1998; Hird 2004; Turner 1999) which have led to the necessity of these more complex ontological accounts which include sex and problematize binarism and dimorphism. Proponents have argued that such approaches which take matter into account and consider where this leaves agency save feminism from 'critically under-theorized limbo' (Lykke 2010: 132).

I wonder, then, what might happen if the political and utopian conviction of feminist and queer dedications to transcending genders such as those listed above took seriously the ontological conviction of the contemporary theory emanating from new materialism and post-constructionism, and vice versa. This would entail taking the possibilities that this radical analysis of sexual difference leaves us with seriously, to consider other ways of understanding ourselves and others. This paper will now consider what reconstructive alternative subjectivities and socialities such accounts allow for and prefigure.

Normative Motivation and Position in Field: Praxis

Even among work which posits gender as thoroughly cultural, then, there is disparate and rare work which dares to follow the line of reasoning of gender deconstruction and propose that subjective and social life would be preferable without it (exceptions to this are Bem 1975; 1995;

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Delphy 1993; Fausto-Sterling 1993; 2000; 2003; Lorber 2000; 1986). There has, however, been even less extension of these claims to the corollary of exploring *how* it might be eradicated and what could replace it. Adding to this the more complex and more radical analyses outlined above which bring sex and the material into the debate and the coalescence of theory and practice is virtually non-existent. The logical corollary of contemporary accounts of sexual difference makes necessary new ways of understanding the self and others, less premised on a fixed and categorical biology *and* subjectivity.

There is a recent trend of work in social theory which gestures towards more practical considerations of new socialities and seeks practical solutions to getting along better, and to more enabling subjectivities. Sennett's *Together* (2012), for example, considers real-world practices of attempted co-operation that both do and do not work. This is framed as an attempt to fuse the conceptual and practical to think through *practical* solutions to getting on better. Sennett expresses an aversion to isolated theorising stating that ze¹ has grown 'tired of theorizing as a self-contained pursuit' (Sennett 2012: ix). More specifically, in the area of gender and sexuality studies, recent work has likewise shared a concern with what positive and enabling socialities the wonderfully deconstructive and critical stance of much queer theory (as, for example, in Edelman's *No Future* [2004]) makes possible. For example the recent special issue of *GLQ* on 'Queer Bonds' (Weiner & Young 2011) wherein both Butler (2011) and de Lauretis (2011), among others, recommend work on the socially and politically reconstructive practicability of the insights of queer theory.

I believe that these calls for positive sociality demonstrate the ethical and normative root which catalysed the work of much queer and gender theory and its deconstructions of taken

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for granted categorisations and understandings of the self. This is best illustrated by Butler's germinal call for a 'new sort of feminist politics' in *Gender Trouble*, which ze describes as one 'that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal' (Butler 1990: 5). Given these ontological premises, an area for enquiry in social theory is how biology and selfhood could and should be re-inscribed in some other way, which is more enabling than sexual difference.

The Shape of Selves to Come:

A lot of voices tell us to think nondualistically, and even what to think in that fashion. Fewer are able to transmit how to go about it, the cognitive and even affective habits and practices involved, which are less than amenable to being couched in prescriptive forms (Sedgwick 2003: 1).

In considering what might replace sexual difference as a way of understanding ourselves and others, I draw inspiration from solution-based practices which have arisen as practical attempts in the real world to deal with and challenge the restrictions of sexual difference or sex/gender. As Sedgwick's quotation indicates, there are few considerations of such practical corollaries. However, practices exist in anarchist, intersex and queer communities which do represent different ways of relating to yourself and others, ways concerned explicitly with offering the most freedom possible to participants and avoiding 'negation' through restrictions resulting from current dominant ways of understanding sex/gender (Nicholas 2010). These examples can offer insight by illustrating both possible solutions to theoretical impasses, and attempts which have failed. I argue that a preferable and more long-lasting alternative to positivist and essentialising understandings of subjectivities and biologies would

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be but rather a relational ethic rather than yetmore positive identities which risk exclusion (Heckert 2010). A relational ethic can be understood as a mode of approaching the self and the other based on theminimal and truly queer and post-gender principle or ethic that ‘People are different from one another,’ (Sedgwick1990: 22).

I acknowledge that such a project is indeed grounded in ever present risks of collapsing in on itself, of closure which necessitates practices whichinhere means through which to resist this (Nicholas 2010). Queer approaches to pedagogy do just this. Understanding queer as an anti-normalising impulse, queer pedagogy is concerned with developing reading practices - that is ways of understanding - not grounded in foundational preconceptions:

Queer theory and pedagogy place at stake the desire to deconstruct binaries central to Western modes of meaning making, learning, teaching, and doing politics. Both desire to subvert the processes of normalization (Luhmann 1998: 128).

Queer pedagogy is more about the *relationship between* the learners and what they are seeking to understand than it is about content or subject matter. It is about fostering a scrupulous visibility (Spivak 1994: 153) and a reciprocalrelationship to knowledge.Kopelson’s understanding is that ‘queer is a term that offers to us and our students an epistemological position - a way of knowing, rather than something to be known’ (2002: 25). If this is extended to understanding the self and others, this queer ethic would hopefully result in a more enabling, less predetermined collective context in which to develop oneself and relationships with others. Such practices are apparent in anarchist ‘free skools’ and queer communities and spaces where people are approaching knowledge with such an ethos (Nicholas 2012; 2010).

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Approaches to communication are also critical terrains for fostering alternative ways of being. Foucault's (1984) 'dialogical ethic' and practice of 'problematization' sums up what I envisage a more enabling mode of communication to look like. 'Real-world' examples of this are Non-Violent Communication practices (NVC 2007: n.p.) and anarchist community practices. For example, collectively developed and shared speaking protocol and consensus-based decision making which inheres a particular attitude to the self and other (Climate Collective 2009: 3):

Collective social movements, such as the feminist and the queer movements, generate conceptual and normative resources, create networks of psychological and emotional support, and foster counterpublic spaces, all of which aid individuals in their efforts to resist regulatory regimes by providing new modes of recognition, new possibilities for attachment and thus, new ways of becoming subjects (Allen 2005: 218).

Other prefigurative practices of various communities, such as gender-neutral naming and pronouns represent an understanding of the ongoing co-constitution between the self and the community. Additionally, a contemporary resurgence of interest in gender neutral child-rearing has highlighted the complex interrelations in the social imaginary between the biological, social and personal, and in parallel between sexual difference, sex and gender. However, these practices also represent attempts to consider how the creation of these meanings may be intervened in on an individual and collective level.

Conclusion

Gender activism should extend its critique and analysis to the binary impulses of sexual difference and consider ways that non-dualistic thinking throughout subjective and social life could be fostered. This would not undermine its political power but alleviate some

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conceptual inconsistencies, create a more inclusive analysis and result in more long-term and far-reaching strategies. Such strategies need to focus not just on explicitly gendered aspects of life, but on the ways that the self and others are understood within dualistic and hierarchical frames, and need to foster a more complex and reciprocal way of understanding different people.

¹ I use gender neutral pronouns throughout this paper as a prefigurative act of attempting to foster perceptions not predicated upon sexual differentiation.

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