

ON NE NAÎT PAS QUEER: FROM *THE SECOND SEX* TO MALE PREGNANCY

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The purpose of this paper is to point out some of the continuities between queer theories and Beauvoir's work. Mainly, to draw attention to some interpretations of Beauvoir that rethink the process of becoming one's own gender and, sometimes, of unbecoming the gender that one is supposed to embody.

Beauvoir not only said that "One is not born a woman, but becomes one", she also explained her famous statement by adding that

No biological, psychological, economic destiny defines the face that the human female assumes in the heart of society. It is civilization as a whole that elaborates this product, half-way between the male and the eunuch, that one qualifies as feminine. (Beauvoir 2010, 283)

Her breakup with the domain of biology as a grounding field for the understanding of the category of women couldn't be more explicit. Years later, second-wave feminists, especially in the United States, read *The Second Sex* as the introduction, within feminist thought, of the difference between biological sex and cultural gender. But some of the most productive readings of Beauvoir have questioned that very opposition many attribute to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

Monique Wittig: becoming lesbian

I'd like to start with Monique Wittig who, in 1979, gave a talk at the City University of New York Graduate Center, with the occasion of an international congress on Simone de Beauvoir's legacy. That congress was called "The Second Sex Conference". There, Wittig presented her provocative paper "One is Not Born a Woman" (1981), which explained her analysis of the category of sex, and the way she routed it in Simone de Beauvoir, well-known critic of the Myth of the Woman.

Men and women, Wittig argued, are nothing but the product, in cultural, linguistic and economic orders, of a relation of exploitation between social classes. In her words, “by admitting that there is a ‘natural’ division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that ‘men’ and ‘women’ have always existed and will always exist”. Thus, she defended a radical denaturalisation of the category of sex. This way she contested not only second-wave’s readings of Beauvoir’s work but, especially, the dominant ideology of radical feminism in the United States, which perceived lesbian communities and relationships as a form of living as authentic women, fully emancipated from the patriarchal order of society.

What Wittig was defending in front of her audience was certainly a very counterintuitive notion. In order to be really independent or emancipated from patriarchy, women should cease considering themselves as women. By achieving a real independence from men, the lesbian subject was conceived, in Wittig’s terms, as a privileged revolutionary subject which could transform social relations to the point of overcoming the sexual categories that structure social relations in the heteronormative order.

By doing so, Wittig focused attention on the social character of the category of sex rather than on gender-related issues. In many ways, her work can be read as a proposition to *unbecome women* as a way to resist the power relations that produce the distinction of human beings into two opposed and complementary categories.

As provocative as her paper could seem to an audience strongly committed to lesbian separatism, she had already articulated this kind of theoretical frame for feminism a few years before. In 1976, her paper “The Category of Sex” questioned the idea of sexual difference as a grounding field for feminist politics. Sexual difference, in her view, should be considered as nothing but a condition of possibility for heteronormativity and the subjugation of women.

The perennality of sexes and the perennality of slaves and masters proceed from the same belief, and, as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men. The ideology of sexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine / feminine, male /female, are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. [...] For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society. (Wittig 1976, 64)

In her view, fighting gender oppression should be accompanied by an overcoming of sexual categories, a task that she provocatively compared with the fight against the obligation to declare race in civil documents. If it was already clear that this obligation was a mark or a symptom of racial oppression, then why, Wittig argued, is the declaration of sex not considered by feminists as a symptom of sexual oppression? (Wittig 1982, 68).

Judith Butler: proliferating becomings

Judith Butler made a crucial intervention on this debate, widely seen as one of the inaugurating moments of queer theory. Her approach to Beauvoir is certainly different from Wittig's despite the fact that she recognises the strength and value of both Beauvoir's and Wittig's efforts to fight the reduction of "women" as a category pertaining to the cultural order of gender, to any possible conception of "sex" that could delimitate the normative features of the category itself. Not surprisingly, she points out the continuity of Beauvoir's and Wittig's criticism of the identification between "sex" and "women".

The identification of women with "sex", for Beauvoir as for Wittig, is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men. (Butler 1999, 26)

But she goes way further than Beauvoir in this kind of inquiry of the bio-material support of gender, and she does so without concluding, with Wittig, that sexual categories should be somehow dismissed or overcome. She asked Beauvoir, rhetorically speaking, about the origin of the process of becoming women. If it is the case that one's not born a woman, Butler reasoned, why should we consider that there is only one biological origin for the process of becoming one? Any subject can actually be born biologically female and not engage him/herself in the cultural process of becoming woman, in the same way that one can be born as whatever but a female and become woman.

Beauvoir is clear that one "becomes" a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from "sex". There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the "one" who becomes a woman is necessarily female. If "the body is a situation", as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all the along. (Butler 1999, 12)

Thus, her own approach to the question of gender takes into account all kinds of possible disruptions and incoherencies within what she called the heterosexual matrix: the norms that articulate relations not only between bodies and genders, on the one hand, but also between genders and desires on the other. According to her, feminism had to start to perceive gender not only as a social construct but also as one which does not provide any functional distinction between sex as a strictly natural and material field and gender as a cultural or sociolinguistic construct. Her description of gender fiercely rejected any attempt to clarify what a woman is in order to defend a feminist politics which operates in the name of coalition rather than in reference to any previously delimited field of representation.

Both her feminist reception of poststructuralism – or rather, as she puts it, her cultural translation of poststructuralism in feminist terms (Butler 1999, ix) – and her influential description of gender in relation with performativity retained Beauvoir's conception of gender as a process but somehow took it to its political and theoretical limit. She did so by assuming that gender cannot be constrained in only two categories, except for normative or disciplinary purposes. In fact, arguing against the idea that there is a unique possible origin for the process of embodying certain genders, she also engaged herself in the theoretical task of showing how the cultural construction of sex, taken in its most material sense, is part of the process of embodying a gender. That was her departing point in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999), but also one of *Bodies that Matter's* (Butler 1993) central theses. This criticism also worked as a direct way to dismantle the idea that certain gender identities are somehow in a privileged position when it comes to fighting patriarchy or gender normativity whether this privileged subject be “woman” in its traditional feminist sense or the lesbian subject of Wittig's intervention in radical feminism. As a consequence, feminism itself had somehow to become queer not only by taking into account the challenge that non-binary sexes and genders represent to the concept of sexual difference but also by following their impulse in the struggle against the restrictions that sexual difference, as a theoretical frame, imposes to the social live of gender and to the habitability of the whole spectrum of sex and gender diversity. In fact,

according to Butler, feminism can escape to its complicity with heteronormativity only by assuming as its own the task of proliferating the incoherencies inside the highly restrictive binary modes of thinking sex and gender. From this perspective, the proliferation of identities and of the politics of coalition between them turn into fundamental political tools for feminist politics, and a central part of a necessary destabilization of the

heterosexual matrix in order to expose the fictional character of the ontology of gender which governs the being cultural process of becoming a man or a woman. (Butler 1999, 33, 44, 150; Butler 2004, 38, 215)

This text continues, then, as an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity (Butler 1999, 44).

It has been argued that Butler's reading of Beauvoir is actually more related with what Beauvoir had become in the hands of second-wave feminism than with the interplay of culture and biology inherent of Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a situation. However, farther or closer to Beauvoir, Butler certainly overcame the hegemonic feminist distinction between sex and gender in the direction of a radical criticism of the way our understanding of nature, biology and matter is mediated by our cultural schemes of intelligibility. She clearly followed that path in *Bodies that Matter* and in her later discussions of gender and performativity. The impact of this criticism over contemporary feminism can hardly be overestimated.

Anne Fausto-Sterling: becoming intersex

Perhaps one of the most interesting ways that Judith Butler's criticism of the material or biological dimension of sex has been developed by queer theories is the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling. As a biologist, she has offered a very comprehensive criticism of the ways sex is thought of in scientific discourse, explicitly relating it with Judith Butler's work. She does so by affirming the importance of the challenge that intersexual bodies pose to the regulatory regimes that articulate the cultural intelligibility of sex, thus defying the medical protocols that attempt to hold back sexual diversity for the benefit of normative conceptions of what a human body should look like.

The feminist philosopher Judith Butler suggests that "bodies... only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas". The medical approaches to intersexual bodies provide a literal example. Bodies in the "normal" range are culturally intelligible as males or females, but the rules for living as male or female are strict. No oversized clits or undersized penis are allowed. No masculine woman or effeminate men need apply. Currently, such bodies are, as Butler writes,

“unthinkable, abject, unlivable”. By their very existence they call into question our system of gender. Surgeons, psychologists and endocrinologists, through their surgical skills, try to make good facsimiles of culturally intelligible bodies. If we chose to eliminate mixed-genital births through prenatal treatments (both those currently available and those that may become available in the future), we are also choosing to go with our current system of cultural intelligibility. If we chose, over a period of time, to let mixed-gender bodies and altered patterns of gender related behavior become visible, we will have, willy-nilly, chosen to change the rules of cultural intelligibility. (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 75–76)

Interestingly, she proposed what she later called an ironic intervention in the biological conceptualisation of sex when, in 1993, she offered a five-sexes model of human bodies which, departing from the classical depiction of hermaphroditism, added the categories of herms, merms and ferms to “strictly” male and female bodies (Sterling 1993). Rather than affirming the existence of a discrete distribution of sexed bodies with these categories, she sought to destabilise the sexual binarism that is usually taken for granted in medical, biological or, in a very general sense, cultural descriptions of the human sexed body. Later, she admitted to having offered this model only for strategic reasons. She even referred to it as a “tongue in cheek” paper (Sterling 2000, 78), and adopted instead a model of sex including a wide range of variations along multiple axes as a result of a profound questioning of reductive binarisms in chromosomal, phenotypical – both in primary or secondary sexual characteristics – hormonal and neurological approaches to the category of sex. Consequently, by means of a thorough revision of medical and biological literature, Fausto-Sterling describes intersexuality as a fundamental, integral part of the way sex presents itself in human bodies instead of marking it as a pathological exception to a presupposed biological monotony. She does not do so, though, by offering something like a more natural way of talking about sexual diversity. Rather, she takes the way we construct the reality of sex through scientific discourses and institutional medical practices very seriously. She explicitly notices, following Butler, that sex is involved in performative processes of cultural reproduction, regulated by cultural schemas of intelligibility which are often reinforced by recourse to prenatal treatments or unconsented reconstructive surgery.

The latter is one of the practices that Fausto-Sterling more firmly rejects of our contemporary “treatment” of intersexuality.

Stop infant genital surgery. We protest the practices of sexual mutilation in other cultures, but tolerate them at home. Some of my medical colleagues are apparently so scandalized by my thoughts on intersexuality that they

refuse to discuss them with me. Perhaps they think I am sacrificing the well being of unfortunate children on the altar of gender politics. How could I possibly consider using a poor intersexual child as a battering ram to assault the fortress of gender inequality? From the point of view of caring medical practitioners, this critique makes some sense. In the midst of daily medical crises that require rapid and highly pragmatical solutions, it is hard to step back, survey the broad picture, and ask whether another response is possible. Nevertheless, one reason I am convinced that my proposal is neither unethical nor implausible is that the medical “cure” for intersexuality frequently does more damage than good. (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 79–80)

What she offers, in a close relation with intersex associations’ claims (such as the Intersex Society of North America), is an alternative form of scientific discourse on sexual difference, an alternative way of constructing sex. That is, one which does not render the possibility of becoming intersex, the possibility of not being sexually normalized by unconsented medical practices, as an undesirable or unlivable one.

Jack Halberstam: becoming a masculine woman

While Anne Fausto Sterling relates Butler’s account of gender performativity with the ways sexual binarism is contested by intersex politics, Jack (Judith) Halberstam is possibly the most important author relating it with the way some women become gendered against the norms of hegemonic femininity. His study on female masculinity explores the kind of dissident ways of becoming gendered implicit in Butlers’ use of the idea of proliferation. The departing point to his influential *Female Masculinity* (Halberstam 1998) is the claim that masculine women have played a major role in the historical process of the construction of masculinity. His analysis negates the existence of any original model of masculinity, any biological or natural privilege for the so-called masculine bodies to embody masculinity. Further, he states that queer masculinities are in fact epistemologically more relevant and useful than conventional ones when it comes to studying masculinity itself. The reason for affirming the advantages of an entirely queer approach to masculinity is that, while breaking with the naturalized privilege of white, middle-class, male masculinity, the so-called subordinate masculinities show us better how masculinity is actually constructed.

If what we call “dominant masculinity” appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity’s social construction. Masculinity, this

book will claim, becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body. (Halberstam 1998, 2)

In addition to its theoretical relevance, Halberstam's cultural and historical analysis of female masculinity represents a powerful political vindication of certain forms of becoming woman. This becomes especially clear when he argues that contemporary masculinity studies tend to pass over any reference to women performing masculinity (Halberstam 1998, 13–14), a neglect that constitutes, especially when we think of lesbian countercultures, a radical failure to understand how masculinity is constructed, lived, inhabited and resignified in everyday life.

Masculinity, of course, is what we make it; it has some important relations to maleness, increasingly interesting relations to transsexual maleness, and a historical debt to lesbian butches. (Halberstam 1998, 144)

Throughout his essay, Halberstam explores a wide range of gender practices and identities, including diverse zones of indeterminacy between transgender, transsexual and lesbian communities, resulting in an authentic proliferation of female masculinities in the intersections between feminism, masculinity and queer studies, which relates with some of the most polemic concerns of feminism in the last decades: Halberstam's could be rightfully considered one of the latest contributions to the so-called feminist sex wars that divided feminism in the early eighties. More specifically, it can be read as a response to that strand of radical feminism that actively rejected butch identities on the grounds of depicting them as a politically undesirable copy of heterosexual roles within lesbian communities. By contrast, Halberstam forcefully shows feminism should value masculine femininity precisely because it brings into question the privilege of male bodies for embodying masculinity. From that point of view, the proliferation of butch, drag kings, transgender men and other identities plays a fundamental part in the feminist struggle against all forms of gender oppression, whether heteronormative versions of feminism are able to perceive it or not: female masculinity's history belongs to the history of masculinity, on the one hand, and to the history of feminism on the other.

From Matt Rice to Thomas Beatie: becoming a pregnant man

Male pregnancy is, probably, one of the strongest recent confrontations of the normative ideals that orchestrate how one should become one's own

gender. Over the last years, we have seen in the media the stories of some trans men who have made the decision to temporarily interrupt their hormone treatments so they could become pregnant. They have done so for different reasons, but they all have done it without rejecting their chosen genders. They have also chosen to get pregnant in a very public way, conceding interviews and allowing the dissemination of images of their pregnant bodies by all kinds of media around the world – this decision has consequently exposed them to multiple forms of criticism. Most of it comes from obviously transphobic points of view but they have received criticisms, also, from within the transgender communities. Both kinds of criticism, which rely on more or less strict normative frames of gender intelligibility, have received wide coverage in the press and on TV shows, internet forums and other media. Notwithstanding, some of these frames seem to have been positively transformed, becoming more inclusive than they were, even if by virtue of an odd equilibrium between certain frames of intelligibility and the mass media's economic interests.

In the year 2001, Matt Rice, the boyfriend of queer theorist Pat Califia, decided to interrupt his hormone treatment so he could get pregnant. Being both trans and queer activists, they conceded interviews in different forums, such as *The Village Voice* (Califia 2000), a mainstream magazine from New York. Every other media, though, completely ignored their story. The fact that they were not only gay but used to be a lesbian couple didn't help the perception of Matt Rice as a "real" man planning to give birth to his own baby. Apparently, in the eyes of mainstream press, he was not a man at all. When, seven years later, Thomas Beatie took the very same decision, things were, somehow, completely different. He also conceded an interview to a magazine, *The Advocate* (Beatie 2008, 24), but now mass media were much more inclined to listen and repeat his story. Not only he was straight but he lived in a suburban area where he and his wife, who was not trans but a cisgender woman, had always been perceived as just another straight cissexual couple. The mass media snowball started doing its work. He was quickly – and wrongly – labeled the "World's First Pregnant Male". He was even interviewed on the very famous Oprah Winfrey TV show. Given the extraordinary media impact of Beatie's story, the press in the United States was anxious to find other news about this "new" form of pregnancy. They completely ignored the case of a pregnant Spanish man (even though he was gestating twins), possibly because he was not a US citizen, but they did cover the case of a gay trans couple from the United States. This pregnant male, who was living in a gay relationship, the very same way that Califia and Rice were, was entitled to be frequently referred to as "World's Second Pregnant

Male”. Something – presumably Beatie’s story and the economic benefits it generated – had changed the media’s frame of gender intelligibility, making them able to recognize something they previously could not: the gender identity of a pregnant non-heterosexual man.

Certainly these slight changes in the limits of masculinity intelligibility do not mean that becoming a pregnant male has become easy in any sense. Both medical and social prejudices – Butler’s heterosexual matrix – can and do interfere in unpredictable ways with the projects of pregnancy of transgender men, who can easily find themselves reduced to abject figures of radical unintelligibility. But we cannot help but acknowledge that something has positively changed since Pat Califia and Matt Rice conceded their historical but widely ignored interview: Matt Rice was not recognised as a pregnant man the way other trans men, later on, were, even if in sensationalistic terms.

Going public, on the always uncontrollable terms provided by the media, about one’s own way of becoming queer is always an ambiguous endeavor with the most unpredictable outcomes. It can, and often does, entail a domestication of one’s own queerness for the consumption of the public, or it can be part of a transformation of gender normativity on a wide scale. Sometimes, as with Beatie’s story, it entails both processes at the same time, and even one by virtue of the other. And it certainly can be a way of exposing oneself to very diverse forms of violence.

There is no way of balancing these contradictory elements in any normative prescription of how one should manage the dilemmas of public exposure, whether it is through the media or through any other means, nor *a priori* ways to anticipate the political effects that certain forms of public exposure can have on the positive transformation or restrictive consolidation of social frames of cultural intelligibility or gender and sexuality. But we can possibly agree that the Foucauldian difference between “being a homosexual” and the political imperative of “becoming one” entails the risk of making many decisions on that very same field of unanticipatability. In fact, somewhere along the processes that lead us from forms of being to forms of becoming, accepting or rejecting the siren calls of public exposure in any given situation, lies a certain responsibility, the kind of queer responsibility that marks the difference between being queer and becoming one.

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