1. Introduction

In accordance with the long-standing division between mind (psyche) and body (soma) native to traditional philosophical discourse, gender has long been conceived as a fixed essence coextensive with a set of static anatomical characteristics. The Cartesian metanarrative of a mind/body dualism has subsequently exerted significant influence across the human and natural sciences. Hence the uncontroversial assertion that only when the precondition of psycho-biological harmony is met can the rational agent to which the body belongs be deemed psychologically normal. Not only must bodily morphology cohere with highly scientized and normative societal expectations associated with the discursive construct of “biological sex,” but anatomy and identity must align without issue for the sexed subject. Deviance from the normal sexual object and/or the experience of gender dysphoria, then, can be swiftly and systematically pathologized by disciplinary apparatuses of power within biopolitical regimes.

Critical theoretical inquiry allows for the interrogation of myriad culturally, institutionally, disciplinarily, and interpersonally entrenched presuppositions which result from this kind of uncritical acceptance of the poles of the pathological and the normal. Queer and feminist analyses of so-called “deviant” behaviours, practices, and ways of identifying thus function to expose the construction and fallibility of sexual and gender norms, undermining their status as natural and original. Against the perceived inscrutability of essentialist logic, the notion of “gender identity” is imbued with implications of personal agency and autonomy. Identitarian discourses on gender and sexuality often position the ‘subject’ as a locus of agency, advocating for a quasi-existentialist notion of radical ontological freedom irrespective of, or in rebellious opposition to, externally imposed norms and values. This is precisely the tact Simone de Beauvoir takes in her 1949 opus Le deuxième sexe, which sparked a “seismic shift in [the] laws and attitudes” that affect women in the Western world (Borde & Malovany-Chevallier 2011, ix).

However, the consequent anti-essentialist revolution in feminist theory and politics stops short of eradicating the classical distinction between psyche and soma. In fact, the updated terminology of ‘gender’ and ‘sex,’ albeit politically productive, remains firmly predicated on the pernicious conceptual division between mind and body. Mainstream feminist invocations of “women” as an “unproblematic unity” have thus invisibly served to widen the gap between theory and lived experience (Butler 1990, 8). For example, the rigidly essentialist doctrine of trans-exclusionary radical feminism enacts the perpetuation of outmoded gender tropes and discounts the variety and variability of gendered experience by uncritically subscribing to an essentialist definition of “woman,” all under the guise of radical feminist critique. I expose the need for a serious reconsideration of the way we think about gender in the West in the wake of such inadequate frameworks. More specifically, I illustrate how the divergent fields of trans theory and critical posthumanism mutually disrupt or “queer” traditional feminist discourses, giving way to radically new ways of understanding gender in contemporaneity and beyond.

Feminist theory and praxis constitute lively socially and politically salient zones of deconstruction and contestation over and against the isomorphism of dominant discourses. But historical feminist movements and ideologies have accrued sharp criticism for advancing the rights of White European women at the expense of racialized, queer, and trans women. In contrast, transfeminist thought unwaveringly resists the pathologizing effects of medicalization and the cultural
misconceptions that have erroneously justified the violent societal oppression, erasure, and genocide of trans people. Trans-inclusive feminist discourses persist in the overtly political objective to recover the dignity of trans lives, even and especially when doing so entails divergence from traditional feminist methodologies or ideologies. Additionally, posthumanist feminist thought dismantles and displaces the masculinist, neurocentric presuppositions inherent to the traditional anthropological category of the ‘human.’

As such, the present analysis will emphasize salient points of connection between trans theory and critical posthumanism. I contend that the former constitutes an emergent field committed to exposing the assumptions latent in gender theorizing while actively foregrounding trans desires and political objectives while the latter is a growing area of contemporary discourse in which the distinction between the technological, ecological and biological spheres is increasingly occluded. First, I begin by taking stock of the way in which materialism and constructivism have been conceptualized in feminist theory historically. Second, I deconstruct both the diagnostic category of “gender dysphoria” as it appears in the most recent iteration of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the “beyond-the-binary” model of oppression, as defined by Talia Mae Bettcher (2016), to demonstrate their mutual inability to definitively conceptualize the complex phenomenon of gendered embodiment.

Optimistically, in the third and final portion of the essay I envision a future in which biological methodologies and philosophical modes of ontologizing sexed subjectivity continue to be radically transformed by the antireductionist insights of posthuman and trans/feminist thought. Specifically, I elucidate one example of how evolutionary theory on sex determination and sexual dimorphism can be “queered” by cutting edge thinking at the interstices of evolutionary biology and gender theory, namely Malin Ah-King’s and Sören Nylin’s (2010) dynamic model of sex.

2. Dueling Dichotomies: Nature/Culture, Determinism/Constructivism

For Michel Foucault, “[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 1984, 73). Power and knowledge conspire together to influence the production of ‘truths’ derived from dominant methods of scientific, humanistic and social scientific inquiry. Each of the various disciplines therein (including psychology, biology, psychiatry, sociology and anthropology) have spawned interrelated epistemological regimes heavily influenced by dominant structures of power, allowing these disciplines to remain mutually complicit in the historical maintenance of patriarchal assumptions about gender. As such, the domain of critical feminist thought has found it necessary to shed light on the myriad ways in which the deeply culturally entrenched privileging of masculinity has led to the systemic oppression of women.

According to the standard Anglo-American feminist social constructivist hypothesis, gender and the various discursive configurations thereof amount to little more than cultural constructions. Bodily materiality is construed “not as essence, but as a bare scaffolding on which discourse and performance build a completely acculturated being” (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 6). Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir’s classic Le deuxième sexe helped catapult the social constructionist hypothesis to predominance over its opposing sexological and psychoanalytic formulations of biology as destiny (Borde & Malovany-Chevallier 2011, 58). Of course, the two antithetical theories of constructivism and bio-determinism (and I question their mutual incompatibility) are predicated to a degree on the anthropological categories of nature and culture. Since the 1980s feminist scholars have claimed dominion on the concept of nature, arguing that women’s oppression is closely linked to the unjustified exploitation and domination of nonhuman animals and natural environments. Amid the recent posthuman turn in feminist thought, however, the traditional distinction between nature and
culture has been eroded in favour of a dynamic interrelation between the natural, ecological, animal and human realms. In Braidotti’s words, the rigid distinction between nature and culture “is being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction” (*The Posthuman 3*).

However, the ever-increasing demand for intersectionality and self-reflexivity in feminist thought since the turn of the century has allowed for precious little unity or consensus on the notion of womanhood; debate abounds on whether it ought to be essentialized and universalized, or whether the category of ‘woman’ should continue to exist at all. Therefore, contemporary feminist theorizing on the topic of gender (and sexuality for that matter) continues to be haunted by the opposing spectres of determinism and constructivism. Tensions inevitably ensue when one is adopted to the exclusion of the other.

2.2 Butler: The Gendered Convergence of Materiality and Discursivity

While many feminist theorists categorically reject the notion of biological essentialism, its absolute antithesis, namely pure social constructivism, is not immune to critique either. Regardless of whether gender is seen as a social construction or a determined biological imperative shaped by physiological factors, the chasm between mind and body insidiously prevails. Thus, Judith Butler (1990, 1993) embarks on a sustained interrogation of the undertheorized materiality of *sex*; throughout her seminal works she demonstrates that discursivity is woven through the very concept of “matter” itself, debunking the supposed neutrality of bodily matter.

Counterintuitively, Butler calls into question or “troubles” the very intervention that served feminist praxis so well amid the turmoil of the civil and women’s movements, namely the *sex/gender* dyad: questioning the immutability of sex, she avers in the opening pages of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender,” proposing the “consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (Butler 1990, 9-10). Thus, she makes inroads to reconsider the crumbling foundation on which feminist praxis has historically been predicated, namely the dominant twentieth century formulation of *sex-gender*. Despite the admittedly productive historical impact of such a contrived distinction, she demonstrates that bodily materiality is always already saturated with discursivity and thus affected by masculinist processes of codification: discerning “the history of sexual difference encoded in the history of matter, it [becomes] radically unclear whether a notion of matter or the materiality of bodies can serve as the uncontested ground of feminist practice” (Butler 1990, 26).

Expanding on the insights of Foucault, Butler demonstrates that the hierarchy of gender corresponds to the inbuilt hierarchical binary structure of language itself. Hence Butler recasts gender as a discursively constituted fiction, an unstable “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” which congeal over time to form the appearance of a static identity (Butler 1988, 519). Since Butler’s text first productively interrogated the staid assumptions of late twentieth century feminist discourses, numerous theorists have likewise endeavoured to interrogate the commonplace belief that gender is merely epiphenomenal to the primary phenomenon of fixed biological sex. Indeed, a growing attentiveness to abjection and embodiment on the part of feminist discourses in conjunction with poststructuralist deconstructions of normative taxonomies has expedited the disintegration of ‘*sex*’ as a static category. Unruly bodily forms such as intersexuality and transsexuality suggest ‘*sex*’ as socially inscribed (Hird 2000).

As such, a new methodological objective began to rear its head within the intersecting domains of queer and feminist theory: namely, to resist the privatization of gender to the psychic realm. For although this tendency does not necessarily reinforce the tired thesis that gendered behaviour, and thus gender identity, can simply be indexed to biology, the line between careful, nuanced criticism of
the confluence of discursive factors contributing to the formation of gendered subjectivity and rigid adherence to the doctrine of social constructionism is razor thin. And the prevalence of such methodological uncertainty is dangerous insofar as dogmatic and unreflective investment in the social constructionist paradigm surreptitiously upholds the problematic characterization of mind and body as discrete, self-enclosed entities.

Although trenchant criticism has been waged against Butler’s celebrated theory of performativity (Prosser 1998), I make no attempt in these limited pages at a comprehensive critique of performativity. I do intend, however, to prevent the monolithic influence of the performative hypothesis within the field of gender studies from overshadowing the proliferation of novel alternative ways of conceptualizing gender in the contemporary theoretical sphere – one of which I outline in some detail in the third section of this article.

3. Deconstructing the Clinical Model of Trans: Toward A Critique of “Gender Dysphoria”

Through the analysis in this section I cast a critical eye on the clinical diagnosis of gender variance as a strictly psychological phenomenon and its consequent failure to account for the variegated, heteroglossic, and concretely embodied character of gendered experience. Emphasizing that the current diagnosis remains tied to a legacy of intrusive clinical practices, I draw attention to the erasure and devaluation of felt embodied experiences of gender within the clinical paradigm resulting from its one-dimensional focus on dysphoria.

The normative assumptions underpinning the Western system of binary gender, naturalized and normalized under the guise of scientific objectivity, consequently become invisibilized to the extent that the validity of the system as a whole appears uncontroversial. However, the neat dichotomous view of gender is quickly complicated in cases where there appears to be a misalignment between an experience of gender and assigned sex. Gender crossings are invariably pathologized within the dominant paradigm; the analytically disruptive phenomenon of trans signifies a point of rupture in the normative fabric of the gender binary system, one which leads not only to classificatory challenges but to grave empirical consequences for those who traverse gender boundaries. In North America, trans people suffer disproportionate levels of lethal violence compared to the rest of the population; gender-based murders and assaults are carried out with alarming frequency against individuals who fail to live up to societal standards by “passing” as one gender or the other.2

In recent years, the unique perplexities of gender-related mental illness have received long overdue recognition in the literature, as evidenced by significant efforts on the part of the American Psychiatric Association (hereafter APA) to address trans from a holistic perspective, distancing itself from the outmoded idea that trans identification itself signifies a psychiatric disorder and opting to focus instead on dysphoria as the key indicator of the presence of a mental “disorder.” Because of the unique status of gender dysphoria disorder in comparison to virtually every other mental disorder in the DSM-5, it is important to note that distress about the incongruity between assigned and felt gender is the precondition for a positive diagnosis of gender dysphoria. However, the experience of distress in relation to one’s gender identity is by no means a necessary part of being trans.

Nevertheless, it bears remembrance that transsexuality and transgender identity have long been perceived to signal psychological disorder: the DSM-III employed the general terminology of “sexual deviation” to conflate psychological issues related to gender with paraphilias or “psychosexual disorders” (Sorrentino 2016). To the credit of the epidemiological integrity of the APA, measures have been implemented to combat the inadequacy of such diagnostic categories, rooted as they were in the primitive sexological discourses of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the fields of medicine and psychiatry have witnessed significant practical and epistemological advancement in their dealings with
trans patients: an array of hormonal, surgical, and psychotherapeutic options is presently available to trans people who seek them.

Despite such institutional attempts to combat the overtly pathologizing tendencies of the old clinical classification of trans, the widespread stigmatization of the phenomenon of transgender identification continues to perpetuate the systemic pathologization of gender-nonconforming individuals both in the medico-psychiatric sphere and in wider society. Incidentally, this negative aspect of the sociocultural perception of non-normative gender expression is paralogous to that of sexual nonconformity; in many ways the shift in thinking reflected in the current literature bears striking resemblance to the sociocultural evolution of homosexuality, which was removed by the APA from the second edition of the DSM in 1973.

The current clinical understanding of trans in the DSM-5 refers to “a marked incongruence between the gender [one has] been assigned to (usually at birth, referred to as natal gender) and [one’s] experienced/expressed gender” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 453). This definition corresponds to what Talia Mae Bettcher coins the “wrong-body model” in which “transsexuality involves a misalignment between gender identity and the sexed body” (Bettcher 2014, 383).

3.2 Rethinking the ‘Beyond-the-Binary’ Model of Trans Oppression

In contradistinction to the wrong-body model, there is also the beyond-the-binary model, which endorses the claim that “because transgender people don’t fit neatly into the two dichotomous categories of man and woman, attempts are made to force them into this binary system” (Bettcher 2014, 384); this model arose largely as an attempt to alleviate the intense, widespread hostility directed toward gender nonnormative individuals in society. Nikki Sullivan aptly describes the driving force behind the paradigmatic transgender movement as an “attempt to move beyond dichotomies” (Sullivan 2003, 116).

Although the social traction accrued by this movement has secured empirical benefits for trans people, and this is not to be discounted, it is nonetheless predicated on a problematic theoretical foundation, namely the beyond-the-binary model itself. Talia Mae Bettcher has criticized the beyond-the-binary model for its tacit recapitulation of dominant gender terms insofar as nonbinary identities nevertheless rely on the gender binary for their coherence:

In a beyond-the-binary model, to say that trans people are marginal with respect to the binary is to locate them in terms of the categories “man” and “woman” as dominantly understood. If trans bodies have different resistant meanings, the decision to say of those bodies that they are “mixed” or “in between” is precisely to assume a dominant interpretation. So the problem is not the rigidity of the binary categories but rather the starting assumption that there is only one interpretation in the first place (the dominant one) (Bettcher 2014, 390).

Bettcher’s criticism suggests that the transgender movement has overinvested in disidentification with the gender binary in its hasty pursuit of an exit from the harmful and pathologizing consequences of the dominant gender binary. The transgender paradigm’s cathexis to nonconformity has ironically resulted in the unwitting recapitulation of the very dominant paradigm it seeks to overthrow insofar as nonnormative gender identities are sustained precisely by their oppositional, antagonistic relation to dominant gender terms. Therefore, trans theory finds itself faced with the task of overcoming once and for all the starting assumption of binary gender itself – in short, moving beyond the beyond-the-binary model as it were.

4. Gender Ambivalence and Frames of Posthumanity
If anything is obvious considering the present state of gender politics in North America it is that the centuries-old conception of gender as static and binary cannot withstand the socio-political turmoil of the present age. Nor can we continue to invest our faith in the regulatory fictions of compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurity amid the shifting currents of change in relation to sex, gender and sexuality in our epoch. At least since the notion of a “human nature” appeared on the scene during the rational revolution of the Enlightenment with its accompanying masculinist ontological assumptions about gender, gender inequality has been a subject of heated social debate. Historically, uniformity in the way we think about and perform gender has gone unquestioned; normative gendered frameworks have been adopted nearly ubiquitously within the scientific, medical, psychiatric, and political spheres. Even the seemingly radical interventions forged by twentieth-century feminist critiques of science regarding the coextensivity of gender in relation to sex characteristics have not resulted in a considerable rupture in the dominant conceptions of sex and gender at a fundamental level.

Many late-continental philosophers (especially the existential phenomenologists and poststructuralists) have dared to push the boundaries of the modern European tradition by dispensing with the traditional binaries of self/other, consciousness/world and so forth. Critiques of dualistic thinking have culminated in ground-breaking reconsiderations of our relationship to ourselves and the world. Accordingly, anti-humanist and explicitly “posthumanist” discourses serve in various ways to deconstruct and problematize the long-held distinction between instinctual animality and conditioned sociality – and they do so over and against the tired anthropocentric formulation of Man, the sovereign, rational and highly individualized subject of modernist discourse. The death of the humanist subject holds deep implications for the question of sexual difference as it pertains to both humans and nonhuman animals. Braidotti observes that

Sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences, from being categorical boundary markers under Humanism, have become unhinged and act as the forces leading to the elaboration of alternative modes of transversal subjectivity, which extend not only beyond gender and race, but also beyond the human. (Braidotti 2013, 98)

Thus, the ‘post-human’ necessarily exists in a state of radical interconnectivity with the multiple environments constitutive of the world of which she is a living part. Posthumanism unsettles the poststructuralist notion of ‘subjectivation’ insofar as, from a post-anthropocentric perspective, the social forces constitutive of the sexual and racialized differences that play out on bodies do not appear to be distinct from those bodies in any meaningful sense. The ontologically stable entity previously known as the “human organism” is recast as a multivalent surface on which the social and the biological continually convene – one vulnerable to social inscription but which is also itself an integral part of the multiple and dynamic environments that sustain its life.

Accordingly, I argue that the recent trend of posthumanity within humanities research has inadvertently breathed new life into the stagnant field of gender theorizing: in the shockwave resulting from the explosion of the concept of the human (and along with it the culturally entrenched characteristics of individuality, sovereignty, and so on), the normative concepts of sex and gender have also been exploded. Dialogue between posthumanism and gender theory has culminated in the generation of an interesting claim: namely that neither gender nor sex exist in the way we may think they do. Whether we invest our faith in the neo-Beauvoirian claim that gender is a purely discursive construct, or we believe that sex can be reduced to physiology, gender eludes our analytic powers of description, which must be rendered in language. Even a compatibilist view of social construction and biological determinism is not equipped to address the infinite complexity of the lived phenomenon of
gender. Indeed, in the “post-gender world” in which Donna Haraway’s cyborg resides (Haraway 1991, 104), “Nature and Culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other” (Haraway 1991, 105).

Lacking the security that once accompanied the scientific certainty of endocrinological sex determination, we find in the posthumanist epoch that the entity once enclosed within the terminology of the “human organism” now appears as a chaotic, unstable, disorganized locus of discursive and environmental forces. This new vision of the human appears to be utterly recalcitrant to the conferral of static traits, whether anatomical or physiological, hormonal, indicators of sex according to current endocrinological methods of sex determination. Nevertheless, even within a radical posthuman interpretive framework it does not appear that humanity has altogether transcended the concept of gender as such.

Rather, the conceptual frame of posthumanism brings into clarity the ways in which gender is implicated in the complex and dynamic systems that support the existence of human, nonhuman and inhuman forms of life. As such, posthumanist theory endeavours to trace the notions of sex, gender and sexuality as they traverse the borders of internality and externality, revealing their entanglement in a complex web of sociocultural meanings and biological imperatives. The post-anthropocentric theoretical paradigm hence finds itself in need of new conceptual frames through which to view these phenomena as dynamic, perpetually changing, processual, responsive.

4.2 Post-anthropocentric Figurations of Gendered Embodiment

Implicit within the deceptively tidy notion of “the body” are myriad questions concerning language, culture, subjectivity, individuality, and identity. Importantly, these concepts cannot be conceived of as entirely separate from one another but are each deeply interconnected. Moreover, the complexity and ambiguity of what we commonly call “the body” is exponentially exacerbated by its inextricable entanglement with discursive categories including sex, gender, sexuality, and race. Embedded within and written across the surfaces of our bodies are a host of internalised, ethically charged, often conflictual meanings and intensities. These may take the form of social scripts, cultural narratives, hegemonic norms, and rigidly enforced moral values. Although the body can be construed as a site of oppression and coercion affected by disciplinary societal intervention, it can also be mobilized as a site of volitional contestation and resistance. As such, the notion of agency, though philosophically problematic, is key to forging productive linkages between trans identity and the inescapable fact of embodiment.

The body is marked by difference – sexual and racialized differences determine the (un)intelligibility and (in)humanity of bodies under the dystopian rule of biopolitical regimes. In keeping with the Foucaultian conception of biopolitics, Rosi Braidotti argues that “contemporary capitalism is ‘bio-political’ in that it aims at controlling all that lives” (Braidotti 2013, 95). As such, trans bodies are unjustly abjected from normal life and relegated to the margins of culture and discourse. Indeed, Rosi Braidotti argues that the “dialectics of otherness is the inner engine of humanist Man’s power, who assigns difference on a hierarchical scale as a tool of governance” (The Posthuman 68). “All other modes of embodiment,” she continues, “are cast out of the subject position and they include anthropomorphic others: non-white, non-masculine, non-normal...peoples” (The Posthuman 68). Literary and cinematic representations of transness deprive humanity to trans bodies by depicting them as monstrous and function to pathologize trans or nonbinary subjectivity as schizophrenic or horrifically disordered – e.g. Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 thriller Psycho (Universal Pictures 1998). Such misrepresentations of trans identity are fuelled by a desideratum of adequate frameworks to address the phenomenon of embodied transgender subjectivity in Western culture.
The clinical diagnostic attitude toward atypical gendered experience and expression intoned by the DSM-5’s overarching diagnosis of gender dysphoria outlined in the previous section is predicated on a highly idealised picture of sexed subjectivity dependant on a certain harmonious relation between the morphological and the psychical within the so-called human subject. This approach is fundamentally incongruous with the anti-humanist or “post-anthropocentric turn” in Rosi Braidotti’s parlance (Braidotti 2013, 38, 43, 57, 60, 75). Braidotti and other posthumanists proffer that multiple domains previously thought to be distinct are in fact inextricably entangled. “Once the centrality of anthropos is challenged,” writes Braidotti, “a number of boundaries between Man and his others go tumbling down, in a cascade effect that opens up unexpected perspectives” (Braidotti 2013, 65-66).

From the unexpected vantage points opened up by the “demise of anthropos” (Braidotti 2013, 95), the natural can be viewed as intimately intertwined with the cultural; borders between the material and the corporeal, the mental and the psychical, begin to dissipate; bodily matter is recast in terms of its complex intertwining with multiple environments; the dividing line between human consciousness and inhuman technologies grows razor thin. Through a posthumanist lens, dominant conceptions of sex and gender appear to be hopelessly divorced from the actuality of lived experience in our highly normative reality – in particular, the multiplicitous domains of queer and gender-variant experience shine forth against the normative backdrop of gender dimorphism and heterosexual reproductive relations within a constricting socio-symbolic matrix of masculine domination and female subordination.

4.3 Transex and Toxicity: Reimagining the Socio-Ecological Construction of ‘Sex’

“Biology is instrumental,” asserts evolutionary biologist Malin Ah-King, “in establishing and perpetuating societal norms of gender and sexuality” (Ah-King 2013, 46). Thus, it is crucial to guard against the trap of pure biological essentialism as well as the danger of bias on the part of individual scientists. At the same time, Sara Ahmed has warned against the conceptual possibilities that may be closed off as a consequence of feminism’s “routinized antiessentialism” – or what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have described as the “installation of an automatic antibiologism as the unshifting tenet of ‘theory’” (Ahmed 2008).

Through a critical posthumanist frame, sex surely cannot be encompassed by supposedly neutral and objective scientific terminology, but it simultaneously remains irreducible to social construction. The intimately gendered dimension of experience is recalcitrant to linguistic attempts to define it in static terms. Though the proliferation of discursive forms of gender identification represent sites of empowerment for many people, such terms do not succeed in fully capturing the complexity of lived gendered experience. One example of a current mobilization of posthumanist thought against the hidden biases of biology can be seen in the groundbreaking reconsideration of hormonal sex differentiation articulated in a recent article co-authored by Malin Ah-King and gender theorist Eva Hayward. The dynamism of sex is thrown into relief against the toxically saturated technologically-industrialized environments in which organisms live at this advanced stage of globalization and capitalism. In their essay, Ah-King and Hayward “turn to a model of sex,” pioneered by Malin Ah-King and Sören Nylin (2010), “that emphasizes sex as a dynamic process in which organisms have more or less ‘open potentials’ of sex, sex related characteristics, and behavior” (Ah-King & Hayward 2013, 6). Such an open model of sex not only holds radical implications for bio-medical and psychiatric understandings of sex but also harbours potential to unrest socio-cultural conceptions of sex currently prevalent in society. The authors effectively explode the concept of sexual difference to the extent that sexed abnormalities can no longer be rendered as iterations of sexual difference but rather come
to be understood as dynamic responses to environmental potentials. Indeed, this is not “difference as usual” in the authors’ parlance (Ah-King & Hayward 2013, 8).

Furthermore, because processes of sexing happen to occur within the context of our bio-industrial-chemical advanced age, sexed potentialities that get expressed, as well as the concept of sex itself, are always toxically saturated. The authors emphasize the socio-ecologically constitutive nature of sexed corporeality over and against conventional biological formulations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Entangled in complex social and ecological environments, individuals find themselves involuntarily interpellated in ongoing and perhaps unresolvable processes of sexed improvisation. The implication: the traditional notion of sexual difference, whether construed biologically or psychoanalytically, is recalcitrant “bumptious forces of bio-industrial-chemical advances” (Ah-King & Hayward 2013, 7). Thus, on this front, notion of sexual difference fails to account for the “liveliness” of bodies, the fundamental dynamism and responsiveness of bodily matter.

However, Ah-King’s and Hayward’s radical definition of sex does not, of course, magically erase the pathologizing effects of centuries of entrenched cultural and scientific truths about sex, constructed as they may be. Indeed, Elizabeth Grosz’s prescient insight that “the body is lived in accordance with an individual’s and a culture’s concepts of biology (Grosz 1990, 44) still rings true. Proponents of a utopian transgender paradigm that sustains itself via its antagonistic relation to the hegemonic gender paradigm align themselves, however unwittingly, with a self-defeating counter-discourse predicated on the exclusion of transsexuals who find themselves “nonconsensually subsumed under the transgender umbrella” (Bettcher 2014, 385). Echoing Sandy Stone in her monumental Posttranssexual Manifesto, I stress Judith Shapiro’s point, directed at “those who might be inclined to diagnose the transsexual’s focus on the genitals as obsessive or fetishistic…that they are, in fact, simply conforming to their culture’s criteria for gender assignment” (Stone 1993, 231). Scholarship in the vein of transgender studies and queer theory has a methodological responsibility, I claim, to remain attuned to the broad-ranging diversity of trans experience even when it is not convenient during its ongoing quest to undermine the authority of essentialist logos. This means refusing to invalidate narratives of transsexuality and intersexuality that do not conform to the usual formulae of transgender resistance.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, my point in this article is that post-anthropocentric scholarship at the interstices of trans/gender studies and biological science holds a vast amount of untapped potential to shift the way we think about sex. Moreover, I have argued that the adoption of a post-anthropocentric framework has the potential to shift the foci of current debates in gender theory and feminist thought toward uncertain futures. I advocate for the maintenance of a close proximity between trans theories and the burgeoning posthuman discourses of the contemporary moment that seek to recuperate dynamic notions of animality, ecology, and materialism while resisting the historical stasis of anthropocentrism. Acknowledging the points of critical unity that exist between the fields of posthumanism and transfeminism, I contend, serves to combat the residual effects of humanism on interrogations of the boundaries of gendered embodiment.

That gender and sex are discursive concepts means they are imbued from the outset with phallogocentric norms endemic to the structure of language itself. Therefore, perhaps the much-desired revolution in the way we conceive of gender can follow only from a renunciation of the traditional view of the human. Specifically, the traditional view of the human subject as a rational agent, the view of humanity that privileges rationality over creativity and stasis over dynamism, must be reckoned with. Because the Kantian prerequisite of “rational agency” is predicated on linguistic norms that perpetuate hierarchal dualistic systems including the exclusionary and oppressive gender
binary, the subject must be radically reconstructed to pave the way for a radically new conception of “gender” and new frontiers of gendered being which could bear little or no resemblance to the normative versions of those terms.

Thus, I hold that future discourses on gender, heeding the interventions of trans and posthuman theory, cannot serve the same oppressive function as they have historically when deployed by dominant capitalist, patriarchal and scientific regimes (even if they opt to retain our normative nomenclature). Moreover, it will be imperative to continually transgress the boundaries between the formerly rigidly discursive categories of “gender” and “sex” without tacitly and regressively conflating of the two. Subsequently, I contend, philosophical discourses can productively re-envision gendered ways of being-in-the-world. Whether the new gender paradigm incorporates new definitions of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ or entails the complete destruction of those concepts, let us usher in the uncertain future of gender theory while rigorously and unapologetically foregrounding the liberatory objectives of those who are systematically injured and relegated to the margins of society because of their gender identities within our current paradigm.

Elden Yungblut

Endnotes


Bibliography


Sex in Posthuman Futures: Rethinking Gendered Embodiment in the Anthropocene

In a gesture analogous to Friedrich Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, critical posthumanist Rosi Braidotti (2013) heralds the demise of anthropos in the twenty-first century and the myriad possibilities opened up by this epoch-defining event (95). Humanist formulations of subjectivity and ‘the body’ constitute rigid epistemological closures that lead to the abject marginalization of bodies and subjectivities that transgress or exceed normative expectations. In contrast, post-anthropocentric theorizing opens up the notions of gender, sexual difference, and sexuality to ambivalent spaces in which the delimiting binaries perpetuated by modernist discourses – such as nature/culture, human/inhuman, pathological/normal – have effectively been exploded, allowing historically marginalized subjectivities to be validated and foregrounded.

Considering the dystopian biopolitical nature of techno-industrialized advanced capitalist Western societies, I argue that highlighting the discord inherent in and produced by modernist theoretical structures is necessary to dismantle the exclusionary and oppressive norms enforced by disciplinary apparatuses of power within current biopolitical regimes. Trans theories productively reopen debates closed by feminist thought while critical posthumanism undermines the traditional notion of the subject and resists the foreclosure of alternative ontological possibilities. The tumultuous spaces opened up by trans discourses illustrate that the phenomenon of gender can be viewed through many different interpretive frames.
Accordingly, I critically explore salient points of connection between contemporary trans and posthumanist discourses. I argue that the convergence of these two fields can radically alter the way sex is conceived both as a linguistic construct and a complex entanglement of biological, ecological and environmental factors. Specifically, I focus on a recent theory exemplary of my thesis pioneered by evolutionary biologist Malin Ah-King and animal ecologist Sören Nylin (2010) in which the authors recast ‘sex’ as a dynamic process in contradistinction to the stable and dimorphic conventional notion of biological sex.