

## The Nonbinary Orientation of Somaesthetics

T. J. Bonnet

**Abstract:** *To my lights, somaesthetics is already queer in its interdisciplinary orientation and pluralist mode of inquiry. It was from this theoretical position that inspired Richard Shusterman to shed new light on pre-modern cultures of sexual arts in *Ars Erotica* and played a part in the performance art piece with Yann Toma called *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*. I want to explicate this basic queer orientation of somaesthetics by first developing from Sara Ahmed's pioneer work in "queer phenomenology" with reference to Merleau-Ponty. I argue somaesthetics is more inclusive of the lived experience of queer bodies than Ahmed's reconstruction allows. From there, I push the implications of queer somaesthetics through the idea of countersexuality to expose its radical, deviant potential.*

*"The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.  
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,  
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.  
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,  
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,  
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers."  
From "The Man-Moth" by Elizabeth Bishop (2008, 10)*

Like Bishop's nocturnal creature, somaesthetics is a queer beast. If we look back to its possible Germanic roots, the word *queer* began with connotations of obliqueness, being crosswise, or peculiar. We can further unearth a meaning of twist or turn.<sup>1</sup> *Queer* still retains the meanings of strange or bizarre today but now overwhelming signifies gender and sexual orientations and expressions that defy heteronormative reality. To my lights, somaesthetics is already queer in its interdisciplinary orientation and pluralist mode of inquiry. It was from this theoretical position that inspired Richard Shusterman to shed new light on pre-modern cultures of sexual arts in *Ars Erotica* and played a part in the performance art piece with Yann Toma called *The Adventures*

---

<sup>1</sup> The precise etymology is unclear. Most sources, including the OED, trace the word to variants of the German *quer* but it is possible to relate it to the Latin *torqueo* and the Greek *τρέπω* by the Indo-European root *\*terkw-* (all meaning "twist" or "turn"). See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "queer, adj.<sup>1</sup>, Etymology", July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3759958359> Sara Ahmed (2006) writes it is specifically of Greek origin (161).

of *the Man in Gold*. I want to explicate this basic queer orientation of somaesthetics by first developing from Sara Ahmed's pioneer work in "queer phenomenology" with reference to Merleau-Ponty. I argue somaesthetics is more inclusive of the lived experience of queer bodies than Ahmed's reconstruction allows. From there, I push the implications of queer somaesthetics through the idea of countersexuality to expose its radical, deviant potential.

To begin, I will furnish my argument for the incipient queerness of somaesthetics. This can be articulated by focusing on what I call its *nonbinary* orientation. I mean this in two senses: first, nonbinary describes the anti-foundationalist and anti-dualist perspective of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics; second, nonbinary can encompass a class of gender identities that do not conform to either *man* or *women*, and I translate that for somaesthetics by saying it is nonbinary toward other modes of inquiry. Other terms adjacent to nonbinary in this way include genderqueer, genderfluid, bigender and agender. Sometimes nonbinary is abbreviated to NB or phonetized as *enby*. Others may opt for the term *two-spirit*, which comes from queer populations in Native American indigenous cultures (made especially to fight against the offensive term "berdache") (Jacob et al. 1997; Simpson 2017, 119-44, 255), however this identity marker is not without controversy.<sup>2</sup> Each individual must choose the vocabulary that most attracts them; for my purposes here, I use nonbinary because nonbinary tends to be the most popular term to describe a family of gender perspectives that escape binary categories like *man* and *woman*. In a similar way, somaesthetics does not evenly sit in either philosophy, cognitive science, cultural anthropology, and so on. Nonbinary can be understood as synonymous with interdisciplinary, therefore.<sup>3</sup>

## I. Somaesthetics and Pragmatism

Pragmatism, from which somaesthetics descends, has a studied history of challenging or outright defying inherited binaries and hard distinctions from the history of western philosophy. Particularly worthy of mention is the work of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. In his fiery book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey (1982) avers the basic issue of present philosophizing:

*Philosophy has arrogated to itself the office of demonstrating the existence of a transcendent, absolute, or inner reality and of revealing to man the nature and features of this ultimate and higher reality. It has therefore claimed that it was in possession of a higher organ of knowledge than is employed by positive science and ordinary practical experience, and that it is marked by a superior dignity and importance—a claim which is undeniable if philosophy leads man to proof and intuition of a Reality beyond that open to day-by-day life and the special sciences.* (92-93)

2 For one, "two-spirit" did not originally refer to a distinct gender identity. What we would call nonbinary or genderqueer identities have particular signifiers unique to different Native cultures. Margaret Robinson (2019) catalogues many of them and explains that "two-spirit identity asserts that the meaning of sexual or gender difference among Indigenous people is to be found in Indigenous cultural frameworks rather than Settler categories" (7). Robinson expounds further that two-spirit "homogenizes distinct genders across nations, and may overwrite terms such as *agokwe*, undermining Indigenous language survival" (7). Qwo-Li Driskil (2010) forwards that queer studies and Native two-spirit critiques need to "doubleweave" with each other: "Two-Spirit critiques can simultaneously push queer studies to a more complex analysis of nation while also incorporating the critiques of heteropatriarchal nationalisms that queer studies offers in order to fight against heterosexism, homophobia, and rigid gender binaries in decolonial theories and activism" (77).

3 I spell nonbinary without a hyphen. This helps to soften a little the negative nature of the prefix—some people would like their gender identity to reflect them positively—and somewhat shares the classical compound look of somaesthetics. Concerning the intentions behind the spelling, Shusterman (2014) writes, "I remained captivated by the superior beauty of the diphthong form of 'aesthetic,' where the 'a' has no apparent phonetic or semantic function. One reason I chose the term 'somaesthetics' for my research in embodiment was indeed to make the 'a' of 'aesthetics' distinctly functional in that compound through its 'soma' component" (26).

Dewey is contesting the distinction between reality and appearance, which can be traced back to Plato. This distinction pairs with others like theory and practice, subject and object, etc. Dewey desires to upend this history by following the pragmatic maxim of C. S. Peirce to attend to the consequences and practical outcomes of inquiry. In *Experience and Nature*—itself dedicated to disrupting the disjunction between nature and experience—Dewey (1981) provides a test of value for any philosophy: “Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?” (18). Therefore, regarding these outdated notions, Dewey (1982) raises the question: would not their elimination or revision “encourage philosophy to face the great social and moral defects and troubles from which humanity suffers, to concentrate its attention upon clearing up the causes and exact nature of these evils and upon developing a clear idea of better social possibilities[?]” (151).

Richard Rorty continued Dewey’s reconstruction project. He honed on pragmatism as distinctly anti-essentialistic and anti-dualist, primarily to overcome philosophy’s Platonic inheritance. Familiar binaries like reality and appearance, fact and value, ought and is—these are the obstacles philosophy needs to overcome. For Rorty, the most natural starting-point for philosophical inquiry is language (Rorty 1982, xx). Rather than revising philosophical method (which leaves certain questions unchecked), Rorty desires philosophy to commit to a radical contingency and work toward *redescription* rather than *reform*:

*If one takes the core of pragmatism to be its attempt to replace the notion of true beliefs as representations of “the nature of things” and instead to think of them as successful rules for action, then it becomes easy to recommend an experimental, fallibilist attitude, but hard to isolate a “method” that will embody this attitude.*  
(Rorty 1991, 65-66)

Rorty (2014) therefore follows certain *dogmata*, such as “One cannot transcend language”; “philosophical problems are problems about what language to speak in order best to suit our purposes;” and a “philosophically perfect language...may not be suitable for everyday use, but this is not a defect in it” (57). Rorty believes pragmatism can be useful for feminist politics,<sup>4</sup> but his preoccupation with language-games leads him to distrust any kind of identity politics. In turn, he believes that progress for liberatory politics (e.g., gay liberation) would eventually efface the meaning and usefulness of identity terms.<sup>5</sup>

In following pragmatist aesthetics, somaesthetics seeks a middle-way in critiquing philosophical binaries. On the one hand, it adopts a somatic naturalism taken from Dewey, integrating the tired binary of body and mind into a single, cohesive entity (soma) while structuring that lived experience toward a melioristic goal of improving and enhancing it: “Aesthetic experience is differentiated not by its unique possession of a particular element but by its more consummate and zestful integration of all the elements of ordinary experience [...] and giving the experiencer a still larger feeling of wholeness and order in the world” (Shusterman 2000b, 15). Likewise, on the other hand, what improvements need to be sought (private, public or otherwise) is contextual. Somaesthetics therefore promotes a pluralistic toolbox approach or what is known as an “inclusive disjunctive” logic. We use what we have available and change or

4 See his essay “Feminism and Pragmatism” (Rorty, 1998).

5 For instance, concerning feminism Rorty (1998) writes, “if this future comes to pass, we pragmatists think, it will not be because females have been revealed to possess something—namely, full human dignity—that everybody, even they themselves, once mistakenly thought they lacked. It will be because the linguistic and other practices of the common culture have come to incorporate some of the practices characteristic of imaginative and courageous outcasts.” (224)

create the tools we need for wherever our somaesthetic inquiry takes us. As Shusterman (2012) explains,

*the aim is not to provide essentialist philosophical definitions, but to bring together and deploy the various things we know (or can learn) about embodied perception (aesthesis) and action and about socially entrenched body norms and practical somatic disciplines, so that this knowledge can be used in practice to enrich our lives and extend the frontiers of human experience as we now know and imagine it. Somaesthetics, as I repeatedly insist, is a field of practice as well as theory, a field admittedly far too large for any one researcher to explore or master on her own, and too complex in structure for me to summarize here. (188)*

It is on this foundation that somaesthetics could be called nonbinary in the first sense I indicated.<sup>6</sup>

Shusterman's writings on sexuality and gender politics offer a solid lead for expanding the potential of somaesthetics in this field of study. He identifies some incipient clues that classical pragmatists like Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead recognized the qualitative importance of sex in human experience but they all stopped short of discussing erotic desire and sexuality proper. Comparing the latter group to the queer lives of fellow pragmatists Jane Addams and Alain Locke, Shusterman (2021b) posits that because of their uncritical adherence to white heteronormative culture, "they did not feel the issue of sex as a pressing personal problem, and therefore an issue that insistently demanded substantial philosophical analysis" (3). There are other factors to consider (such as a latent puritanism and class incentives), but the point is that pragmatism was set to make headway in the study of sexual activity and even gender expression but failed to do so.<sup>7</sup> Somaesthetics, in contrast, is more stridently progressive in understanding and promoting the aesthetic power of sexuality. In *Ars Erotica*, Shusterman (2021a) outlines the somaesthetic utility of pre-modern arts of sex (*ars erotica*) and their value "as a means of cultivating one's humanity, a method of meliorative care of the self that likewise essentially implies a regard for others; most minimally of one's erotic partners but also more widely for society with its customs and mores" (9). Importantly, studying *ars erotica* discloses presumptions and beliefs of the cultures they originate from: "*ars erotica*'s range of knowledge extends into the deepest principles that shape a culture, namely, the fundamental philosophical and religious views or vales that structure and guide its way of life" (16). Thereby, social realities like patriarchy, gender essentialism and heteronormativity become clear. Somaesthetics is nonbinary in the second sense I maintained because the tenant of meliorism involves both a self-reflexive critique of its modes of inquiry and a fixed attention on enhancing one's present living and flourishing. We can elaborate by analyzing the notion of orientation and the crucial role of habits.

## II. Orientation and Habits

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) is an excellent example of how queering philosophy both challenges and expands its reach and discourse. By analyzing the friction in crucial parts

6 See also Anne Water's "Language Matters: Nondiscrete Nonbinary Dualism" (2004), which briefly describes what a nonbinary, complementary dualism entails versus noncomplementary dualism, the latter of which is emblematic of Euro-American colonialism.

7 Bethany Henning (2023) claims Shusterman misreads or underestimates Locke and, especially, Addams on this point. However, her paraphrase of Shusterman's argument is hyperbolic and her defense of Addams' high praise for chastity does not attend to the textual evidence Shusterman provides. In fact, Shusterman, myself and many if not all of the names in the references would agree with this line from Henning: "If we are up to the task, I see the basis for queer ecologies of desire that offer an opportunity to re-imagine courtship, reproduction, parenting, aging and dying with possibilities for bio-diverse practices that American philosophers have a unique capacity to explore" (9).

of Merleau-Ponty's (and Husserl's) phenomenology, Ahmed (2006) unpacks "orientation" in the tangled sense of both bodily comportment and gender/sexuality preference. "To be orientated," she writes, is "to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way" (1). She adds that orientation encompasses "how the bodily, the spatial, and the social *are entangled*" (181, n. 1, emphasis original). Spatiality and proximity introduce "a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (7). Moreover,

*The "here" of bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings: the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression; just think of goose bumps, textures on the skin surface, as body traces of the coldness of the air. (8-9)*

This indicates a receptive affectivity but orientation also directs attention and affect, which demonstrates "the direction we have taken in life" (32). The above entanglement of "the bodily, the spatial, and the social" describes the normative ("straight") orientation against which "queer" defines itself. Accordingly, gender "becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces" (58); it works as a "bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over time" (60). In short, gender is a somatic orientation in how it becomes entrenched in spaces and how they navigate and live in them. Habits, naturally, are the mechanisms of somatic orientation but I wish to raise a criticism before proceeding.

Early in the book, Ahmed explains that the reason she begins with phenomenology is because it emphasizes "the importance of lived experience," which she identifies with the Husserlian "living body (*Leib*)" (2). *Leib*, however, is not the only German word for "body." Its counterpart is *Körper*, the "physical body." To make it simple, the distinction is one between our subjective, internal sense of the body (*Leib*) and our objective, external presentation of the body (*Körper*). Husserl and Merleau-Ponty did not make a hard dualism out of the binary, and Helmuth Plessner, to give an example, worked to complicate the relationship.<sup>8</sup> In Ahmed's phenomenology, however, there is a clear preference for *Leib* as the object of analysis and that unconsciously excludes some aspects of queer orientation. Ahmed wants to suggest that "disorientation" can be a useful tool in queer politics; she explains that disorientation is a "becoming oblique" that "is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle" (162). She states it can work as a "disorientation device" (172) and that queer bodies act by attracting similarly eschewed objects into their orbit, in a sense *invading* the "straight" space. But how precisely does that attraction work? Her example of the "contingent lesbian" only accounts for lesbian desire. What about external, queer representation via fashion, behavior, speech, or performance? External and physical appearances are an integral part of challenging heteronormativity and sexual essentialism.

Somaesthetics recognizes how, in Ahmed's (2013) words, "compulsory heterosexuality... shapes what it is possible for bodies to do" and that "norms surface as the surface of bodies; norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are 'impressed upon' by the world, as a world made up of others" (423). But somaesthetics also utilizes corporeal means of expression. This is why Shusterman (2010) denotes the lived body as soma:

*My reason for preferring the concept of soma is not only that the Leib/Körper distinction is neither entirely clear to me nor uncontested in German philosophical*

<sup>8</sup> "It was overlooked that man has, not a univocal, but an equivocal relation to his body, that his existence imposes on him the ambiguity of being an 'embodied' [*leibhaftig*] creature and a creature 'in the body' [*im Körper*], an ambiguity that means an actual break in his way of existing. It is this brokenness that distinguishes what phenomena like laughter and tears suggest: the impenetrability of man's relation to his body." (Plessner 2020, 32)



*discourse but also that somaesthetics is just as much about Körper as Leib, exploring the use of the body's external representations and physical performances for aesthetic self-stylization.* (217)

Somaesthetics opens the way to transforming entrenched norms by means of aesthetic expression.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this plays into the idea of a queer, somatic style. I will return to this below; for now, let us turn to the topic of habits. This will reinforce my critique above and gesture us further into the nonbinary orientation of somaesthetics.

Habits in bodily orientation are a critical component in its construction. Ahmed (2006) writes, “the body is habitual insofar as it ‘trails behind’ in the performing of an action; insofar as it does not pose ‘a problem’ or an obstacle to the action, or it is not ‘stressed’ by ‘what’ the action encounters” (130). Habits are the result of repeated actions that get sedimented into our (unconscious) behavior. What Ahmed is lacking, however, is the same as Merleau-Ponty, namely what Shusterman (2008) calls “lived somaesthetic reflection” (63). Habits are better understood when they are subjected to deliberate, mindful attention. Importantly, habits attend to the performativity of embodied experience. Feminist philosophers have seized on the workings of habits in Dewey particularly for understanding “gendered existence” (Sullivan 2000, 24). Their insights are pivotal for a somaesthetics of gender.

Sharon Sullivan (2000) brings together Dewey’s philosophy of habits with Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender to argue that “cultural customs (i.e., habit at the level of society or culture) delimit the particular gendered and other options available to individuals and thus tend to reproduce themselves through individuals’ habits.” She adds, “Through our bodily habits, we incorporate our culture’s gender (and other) constructs. The constructs that prevail within the culture(s) in which I am anchored will inform the habits that I develop—that is, the person that I become” (28). Dewey and Butler reveal that understanding the structure in which gender is conditioned and performed feeds into the act of transforming it. “Gender binarism,” for instance, is not overcome by “jettisoning...our current gendered constructs and habits” (30); rather, we have work from within, toward “*replacing*” those constructs. “The incorporation of our culture’s gender constructs means that we can reconfigure our culture in and through the ways we embody it. ...We can and should see gender binarism as powerfully real in our lives and as refashionable because it is not an essential ‘given’” (33). Sullivan relies on Butler’s understanding of gender as “*a stylized repetition of acts*” (31) to supplement the lack of gender discussion in Dewey. However, she ultimately finds that Dewey, more so than Butler, provides ways of conceptualizing how to effectively change our gendered habits, namely through education and cultivating flexible habits of inquiry and experimentation. Her example of the double-bind many women philosophers find themselves in—adopting a masculine posture as a “philosopher” with the cultural expectation of the “passive” women—depicts how “a body stylized in ways made possible by the conflict of rigid habits might suggest ways of being gendered different from both the rigidly masculine and feminine options available in our current binary system” (36).

Amanda Dubrule (2022) concurs, and suggests that language too can be a site for transformation. This can be seen in our use of pronouns: “When we discuss our pronouns with others, we are transforming what we have so often taken for granted, and providing an opportunity for new understandings of what gender can mean for new generations” (50). Some queer people prefer gender neutral pronouns like they/them; others are open to all pronouns or neopronouns. Queer identities, in any case, challenge our presumptions about gendered

---

<sup>9</sup> One example is a poem by Rilke that Shusterman (2023) analyzes to reveal the importance of gender transformation and how Rilke’s work undermines macho-masculine poetics.

traits and characteristics. Our encounters with those identities or with our own can effect a radical change in habitual behavior: “By taking seriously neutral pronouns, queer identities, gender politics, and so on, we can begin to make coherent categories we previously lacked the vocabulary for” (50). Furthermore, embodying the friction between cultural norms is identified by Carolyn Pedwell (2017) as “inhabiting ambivalence,” which is crucial to a “politics of habit.” She finds that a “politics of habit resonates in important ways with a critical pragmatists approach that addresses mind-body-environmental assemblages through provisional socio-political goals pursued on multiple interconnected fronts” (112). Pedwell also draws on Dewey with other writers to emphasize that we must “understand the imbrication of cognitive, affective and physiological processes with political and environmental conditions and infrastructures in temporalities that scramble past, present and future” (115).

Somaesthetics can be an advocate for these goals because it offers two significant tools absent in the above. The first is the aforementioned notion of “lived somaesthetic reflection” as a means for understanding and correcting habits. The second is cultivating a “somatic style.” The former brings gender habits to the forefront, allowing them to be critically interrogated, while the latter depicts a self-fashioning end that can reaffirm queer modes of living while challenging heteronormativity. Outlining these two elements will aid us in pushing somaesthetics toward more radical projects.

### III. Reflection and Style

Foreground and background operations in somaesthetics can be a source for confusion and misunderstandings. I deal with these and other disputes in another article (Bonnet 2023) but the principle is simple: somaesthetics utilizes mindful awareness of embodied habits as a ground for changing them, ideally toward enrichment of one’s experience. It should be reiterated that the soma covers one’s subjective experience *and* external representation, a distinction between “the perceptual or inner dimension of somaesthetics and the dimension of external body representations” (Shusterman 2012, 111). What Ahmed lacks is the latter, as argued above. The feminist philosophers responding to Dewey show the relevance of habits toward constructing a gender identity and Dubrulle uses the example of queer pronouns as an interpersonal habit that can be subjected to examination and reflection. Somaesthetics pairs naturally with Dewey’s ideas on education, experimentation and language for changing gendered habits by encouraging mindful attention to one’s behavior *and* attending to the body’s external aesthetics. This part leads to the importance of somatic style.

Style, for Shusterman (2012), negotiates several ambiguities simultaneously, namely “the honorific versus merely descriptive; the generic versus the personal; the explicitly conscious or reflective versus the merely spontaneous or unconscious; the voluntary versus involuntary; the permanent versus the contextual” (316). Style is a difficult quality to isolate, for it may be used in an approving sense of a person’s character or merely descriptive of a person’s idiosyncrasy (honorific/descriptive); or it may reflect a product of conscious deliberation or an accidental fact of habit (reflective/spontaneous). Style is therefore amorphous. If we wish to take up crafting a somatic style, some key traits should be emphasized. For instance, a somatic style utilizes all sense faculties and should not be reduced to just visual appeal. Aesthetically, we can incorporate voice intonation or modulation (e.g., some folks will change their vocal register depending on their clothing); the sounds of clanging jewelry; piquant fragrances; interpersonal physical conduct and so on. Somaesthetics can also incorporate acute bodily senses like proprioception and kinesthesia to appreciate styles of posture and gait. Another important trait is that all parts

of the body play into a somatic style. The face may be the most expressive part of the body but hands and legs exhibit personality as well. Likewise, we have the factor of the body schemata which covers habits of behavior and feelings. Shusterman (2012) explains, “By governing so much of our behavior, these entrenched body schemata or habitual dispositions of behavior and experience inevitably also shape somatic style. Indeed,” he continues, “if habits constitute so much of the self, then such somatic schemata of perception, action, and feeling should be central to one’s personality rather than being a superficial adornment” (333).

Somaesthetics understands style as an integrated mode of behavior that expresses one’s personality. Style is not opposed to substance; rather, style penetrates the soma (the inner and outer) to create a “spirit” of continuity (Shusterman 2012, 334). It could be called a kind of dramatization: style is the product of putting the body into a certain frame and successfully works in the dialectic between “active intensity and structural frame” (Shusterman 2002, 234). Such a consummate “aura” is difficult to attain, however. It requires both awareness of where one is now and where one wants to be:

*Self-stylization is original, distinctive, and demanding precisely because we must cease to be our ordinary selves so as to become our higher selves. This demand does not imply a return to one’s original nature that has been stifled by culture. On the contrary, this project of self-perfection requires culture. Since one does not find the higher self already present in oneself, one must seek guidance toward constructing it. (Shusterman 2000a, 212)*

Style can be understood as a product of artistic self-creation. Someone who is on the journey of understanding their queer identity, for example, has to attend both to one’s personal sense of identity (“I identify as genderfluid”) and interpersonal presentation (“I prefer they/them”). Finally, perhaps most importantly, style has to be enacted, exercised, experimented: “the final formula for genius and style lies in the unformulable details of actual practice.” (Shusterman 2000a, 217)

My initial conception of the “nonbinary” orientation of somaesthetics consisted of (1) its anti-dualism and pluralism and (2) its nonconformity with other modes of inquiry. The first is the basis for the second. This incipient orientation in somaesthetics allows it to deal with queer and gender studies because of how it understands entrenched habits and cultural normativity on the lived body. But it also provides the tools for changing those habits with a positive conception of somatic style. We have yet to see how somaesthetics can be put to work for social change. This leads me to add a third meaning for the nonbinary orientation of somaesthetics: (3) nonbinary can also be understood as a positive and deviant or dissident position that outright defies particular forms of normativity. To demonstrate this, I introduce the idea of “countersexuality” by Paul B. Preciado and illustrate its resonances with somaesthetics.

#### **IV. Somaesthetics and Countersexuality**

Preciado (2018) affirms a somaesthetic understanding of the lived body, writing, “We make ourselves a body, we earn our own body—we pay a high (political and affective) price for it.” Gender and sexualities, moreover, “are collective institutions that we simultaneously inhabit and perform” (11). Preciado defines sexuality “as a political and yet sometimes unconscious aesthetics of the body and its pleasure.” (8) His method of interrogating and challenging norms<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> In his words, “to become foreign to your own sexuality” (Preciado, 2018, 8).



is through “countersexuality,” which aims not for pleasure nor for identity construction but rather exuberance, experimentation, and freedom (10). Countersexuality, furthermore, consists of (1) “a critical analysis of gender and sexual difference” and (2) “aims to replace this social contract we refer to as ‘nature’ with a countersexual contract.” The “contract” is a literal one, a document that attests to one’s abrogating of the “natural conditions” of one’s assumed gender and to one’s commitment to see oneself and others as “living bodies” through and through (20). In short, countersexuality radically negates the political demarcations of sexual practices and gendered living toward an open expression of bodies as lived bodies.

Gender is therefore not solely performative or habitual (as Butler maintains); gender lies in “the materiality of the body” (28). Indeed, Preciado believes gender and gendered norms should be construed as “forms of prosthetic incorporation” (137). We can see here how countersexuality understands “sex and gender as technologies of the soul and body” (129). The paradigm prosthetic/technology for Preciado is the dildo. If somaesthetics is an open toolbox of philosophies, analyses, and practices, countersexuality’s box is full of dildos. What Preciado calls “dildotectonics” imbibes the artificial construction and mimicry of the dildo to centralize its toolbox of “technologies of resistance...and moments of rupture in the body-pleasure-profit-body chain of production within straight and queer sexual cultures” (41-42).

Preciado provides instruction on some countersexual practices. These, I argue, are somaesthetic in practice. “Masturbating An Arm,” for example, is “dildotectonics applied to a forearm”; the idea is to invest the feeling and intention found in the penis for masturbation into the forearm:

*The dildo-arm is taken in the right hand and stroked up and down, intensifying the blood circulation up to the fingers (operation: jerking off a dildo-arm). The left hand opens and closes rhythmically. The blood pumps harder and harder. The feeling is musical. The melody is the sound produced by rubbing the skin. The body breathes in line with the rhythm of the stroking. (49-50)*

This somaesthetically inclined practice is meant to liberate the pleasure and excitement of orgasmic arousal from its normative place in the penis. The forearm thereby transforms into a prosthetic penis, a functional dildo. Where somaesthetics promotes practices and theories that enhance one’s aesthetic perception, countersexuality tries to radically upend how one experiences and expresses pleasure with the body. The process of upending those norms can be enacted by promoting discomfort, which Mark Tschaepe (2021) has shown to be an important aspect of somaesthetic inquiry.

Another example is “How to Pleasure a Dildo-Head.” This exercise requires at least three individuals, all signatories of a countersexual contract. One person has their hair shaven as part of the practice. With a red pen or marker, a rough sketch of a dildo is drawn around their (now shaven) skull. The same individual holds a significant amount of red water in their mouth while the other two participates stroke the dildo-head. When it “climaxes,” the dildo-head spews the held water incrementally, finally letting out an orgasmic moan for the finale. Like with “Masturbating An Arm,” countersexuality utilizes the Foucauldian notion of “technology” to interrogate how sexuality is controlled through “reified” and “objective” desires and pleasures that merely *seem* to be based on “natural predispositions (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.)” (128). For Preciado, dildotectonics are meant to be protests and dismantle “naturalized sexual practices and the gender system” to form an “assembly of an endless multiplicity of singular bodies” (21).

Now, while I argue countersexuality can be usefully incorporated into somaesthetics, there

are limitations. Shusterman has also drawn on Foucault to augment somaesthetics but he departs from Foucault where he appears to overemphasize transgressive, homosexual S/M, including the explosive and intense rush of pain and pleasure in fist-fucking. Shusterman (2008) charges that Foucault is unnecessarily “one-sided” on this issue, to the detriment of ignoring “the importance of cultivating somatic pleasures that altogether escape the sexual frame” (35). Preciado is subject to a similar critique: though these prosthetic practices are challenging and deliberately *un-natural*, the aforementioned goals of “exuberant expenditure, affect experimentation, and freedom” (10) can be accomplished by other, indeed natural, means. In other words, it is conceivable to be countersexual while focusing on the enhancing one’s experience with a diversity of forms of sexual pleasure, “natural” and “unnatural.” However we chose to challenge entrenched, coercive standards in sexuality, somaesthetics reminds us that we are ultimately concerned with a living, sentient soma that critically negotiates between our automatic, unanalyzed habits and deliberate, transformative attention.

Pragmatism, as a philosophy, has been reluctant to extend its distaste of reified binaries into embodied, gendered living. Sullivan’s reading of Dewey has proven fruitful for understanding gendered habits and following their lead, Tschaepé (2023) demonstrates how queering Dewey can produce a “queer pragmatism” which could produce “critical tools for undermining absolutist and essentialist ideology that are being used to police identity, desire, and growth” (70). In tandem, I advance that in somaesthetics, we have a natively queer philosophical orientation that not only matures the philosophy that came before it but also positions itself for subversive modes of actions. I introduce countersexuality as an example of a somaesthetically adjacent critical practice that works not just outside the normative boundaries of sex and gender but also tries to introduce somatic practices that disrupt those boundaries. I argued somaesthetics is queer because of its nonbinary orientation, in other words because of its pluralistic and interdisciplinary fashion of inquiry. In this way, somaesthetics is primed to contribute new insights for queer theory (as I show with Ahmed) and with pragmatist and feminist philosophies of sex and gender (as I depict with Sullivan and company). Beyond that, somaesthetics also possesses the tools for radical habits of protest (countersexuality being a specific example).

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2013. “Queer Feelings.” In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter, 422–41. New York: Routledge.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. 2008. *Poems, Prose, and Letters*. Edited by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz. New York: Library of America.
- Bonnet, T.J. 2023. “Addressing Common Misunderstandings of Somaesthetics.” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 20 (4): 378–97. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-bja10075>.
- Dewey, John. 1981. *Experience and Nature*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. *The Later Works, 1925-1953* 1. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1982. “Reconstruction in Philosophy.” In *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 77–201. 12. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2010. “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (1–2): 69–92.

- Dubrulle, Amanda. 2022. "Gender and Habit: John Dewey and Iris Marion Young on Embodiment and Transformation." *The Pluralist* 17 (1): 45–51.
- Henning, Bethany. 2023. "Where Pragmatism Gets Off: Sexuality and American Philosophy." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 59 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.2979/csp.2023.a900114>.
- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds. 1997. *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Pedwell, Carolyn. 2017. "Transforming Habit: Revolution, Routine and Social Change." *Cultural Studies* 31 (1): 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1206134>.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 2020. *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*. Translated by James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Preciado, Paul B. 2018. *Countersexual Manifesto*. Translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Robinson, Margaret. 2020. "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 67 (12): 1675–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1613853>.
- Rorty, Richard. 1982. "Pragmatism and Philosophy." In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii–xlvi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1991. "Pragmatism without Method." In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 63–77. *Philosophical Papers 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- . 1999. "Feminism and Pragmatism." In *Truth and Progress*, 202–27. *Philosophical Papers 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. "Realism, Categories, and the 'Linguistic Turn.'" In *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy*, edited by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia, 55–68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139626538.005>.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2000a. *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2000b. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2002. *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2008. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2010. "Soma and Psyche." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24 (3): 205–23. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.24.3.0205>.
- . 2011. "Soma, Self, and Society: Somaesthetics as Pragmatist Meliorism." *Metaphilosophy* 42 (3): 314–27.
- . 2012. *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. "The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogical Reflections on a Notion and

a Name.” In *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, edited by Wojciech Mąlecki, 11–32. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

———. 2021a. *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2021b. “Pragmatism and Sex: An Unfulfilled Connection.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 57 (1): 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.57.1.01>.

———. 2022. “Pragmatist Philosophy for Our Times: Reviewing Rorty’s Legacy.” *Society* 59 (5): 583–90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00769-x>.

———. 2023. “Self-Transformation as Trans-Formation: Rilke on Gender in the Art of Living.” *The Journal of Somaesthetics* 9 (1/2): 46–57.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sullivan, Shannon. 2000. “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change.” *Hypatia* 15 (1): 23–42.

Tschaepe, Mark. 2021. “Somaesthetics of Discomfort: Enhancing Awareness and Inquiry.” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 13 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.2264>.

———. 2023. “Cruising Uncertainty: Queering Dewey against Heteronormativity.” *Pragmatism Today* 14 (2): 59–72.

Waters, Anne. 2004. “Language Matters: Nondiscrete Nonbinary Dualism.” In *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, 97–115. Malden: Blackwell.