

Foraging Amid Perplexity: Queer Pragmatism, Neuropragmatism, and the Erotic Arts

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Abstract: *I address Shusterman’s challenge to develop a more inclusive and progressive ars erotica by relating it to Malabou’s challenge to recognize the bodily effects practicing philosophy has on identity. I frame these challenges through the lenses of queer pragmatism and neuropragmatism, given attention to pragmatism’s evolutionary conceptions of experience, inquiry, and intelligence. Through this framing, both somaesthetics and neuropragmatism are faced with perplexities from Malabou’s invitation to queer thinking itself.*

1. Foraging for Coherence? Introducing Challenges from Shusterman and Malabou

I consider Richard Shusterman’s challenge to develop an *ars erotica*—the reflective skills of lovemaking—for our contemporary culture that is more pluralistic and progressive than the erotic arts he considers in *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (2021a). My consideration presents a constructive challenge itself to his proposal by taking up Catherine Malabou’s recent philosophical work in queer theory that is critical of the dominant phallogocentric discourse of western philosophy. She encourages philosophers and non-philosophers alike to take up clitoridian¹ thinking, regardless of their biological anatomy or chosen gender. I bring these challenges together through queer pragmatism and neuropragmatism. Pragmatism’s evolutionary conceptions of experience, inquiry, and intelligence provide a common ground between Shusterman’s somaesthetics and Malabou’s clitoridian philosophy. Neuropragmatism is implicitly queer. Making this explicit not only offers engagement with queer pragmatism but also makes points of connection with the erotic arts and clitoridian thought.

A central theme in neuropragmatism is that life inherently forages for coherence in organisms’ continuous engagements with their environments. Given the challenges from Shusterman and Malabou, there is presently more perplexity than coherence. My purpose is to forage through some perplexities. I make no pretense to meeting the challenges or overcoming the perplexities.

1 I follow Malabou’s translator, Carolyn Shread, on different variants of an adjective for “clitoris”: “The affirmation of the neologism ‘clitoridian’ as a self-consciously politicized alternative to the standard medical ‘clitoral’ is an important contribution to this new body of thought, signaling its distinctiveness. While *clitoridian* exists in Italian, just as *clitoridien-ne* exists in French, the English clips the end of the word to the short ‘clitoral.’ Other English translations—for instance, of the work of Luce Irigaray by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill—respect the English term; here, I seek to reinforce ‘clitoridian’ as a second available term that offers us a productive and generative neologism. Our translations both track and advance our histories and epistemologies: here, we look to a clitoridian future” (Malabou 2022, p. xv).

In the spirit of John Dewey's remark that "a problem well put is a problem half-solved" (1938, p. 112), this essay is a success insofar as my entanglement of these challenges moves these felt difficulties closer to being problems well put.

My foraging begins by elaborating the challenges from Shusterman and Malabou. I then relate somaesthetics to neuropragmatism with their similar conceptions of experience, inquiry, and intelligence, in order to first frame the rest of the argument but also to begin the critique of Shusterman's *ars erotica* via neuropragmatism's emphasis on evolution. I continue the development of these pragmatist themes in relating both somaesthetics and neuropragmatism to queer pragmatism. This effort is intended to show both continuity and tension. My discussion of these varieties of pragmatism dovetails with Malabou's own work on plasticity and intelligence. I conclude by relating Malabou's earlier work to her clitoridian philosophy as a meaningful perplexity for continued consideration for pragmatic meliorism and *ars erotica*.

2. The Challenges Elaborated

In *Ars Erotica*, Shusterman introduces *ars erotica* as a term for "skilled methods or styles of lovemaking... with its various techniques, strategies, and aims" (2021a, p. 1). Shusterman reviews the erotic arts in historical traditions with "forward-looking goal of helping us to avoid possible blind spots in our current understanding of lovemaking by revisiting some elements of ancient erotic thought" (1). Sexual enhancement, however, is not the sole aim of *ars erotica*; it is "also to provide distinctive aesthetic pleasures and to cultivate qualities of understanding, sensibility, grace, skill, and self-mastery that go far beyond the limits of sexual activity" (1). Namely, the development of one's character is the end-in-view. The art of living is about one's own self-cultivation and is about engaging meaningfully with others; they require each other. This engagement is both natural and cultural. It is natural in that all humans share generic biological traits, functions, and other processes regarding sex and reproduction. These generic biological traits, however, are exercised in various ways across cultures. The norms regarding beauty and appropriate relations, including but not limited to sexual activity, also vary across cultures. And yet, such differences nevertheless point to underlying similarities. "As sexual expression provides a powerful medium for shaping one's own subjectivity and interpersonal relations," Shusterman explains, "the practice of *ars erotica* can constitute an important mode of self-cultivation with explicit regard for others" (2). This regard for self and others, however, is not constant across cultures as patriarchal and heteronormative values tend to dominate: "Comparing these different theories of *ars erotica* may reveal important commonalities (such as the objectification of women) but also might provide materials for a superior synthesis or erotic pluralism that could better serve our transcultural world" (2). These opening pages of *Ars Erotica* raise both a challenge and suggestive means for meeting it. The challenge is the synthesis of empirical data catalogued over time and across cultures regarding sexual activity and its role in living well with the recognition of an emerging transcultural world in which old binaries, old hierarchies, and old biases are being challenged. This historical review and philosophical reflection of the empirical catalogue provides insight into our current circumstances that nevertheless demand reconstruction as the art of living must adapt to changing conditions.

Ars Erotica is a work of somaesthetics but makes no mention of pragmatism. In "Pragmatism and Sex: An Unfulfilled Connection," Shusterman draws attention to the classical pragmatists' neglect of sexuality, reviewing the limited and often puritanical views of sex by C. S. Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey—all white, and cishet men—as well as

the work of Jane Addams and Alain Locke—“Neither of them married;” Shusterman observes, “nor did they conform to heteronormative sexual practice” (2021b, 3).² Despite this neglect, Shusterman finds some useful ideas, such as the underlying Darwinism and embodiment of experience. He suggests that:

If pragmatist meliorism insists on improving the experience and conduct of life by addressing the real problems of ordinary men and women rather than retreating into purely academic problems of professional philosophy, then surely the field of sexuality and erotic love presents a wealth of problems. It also supplies a realm of experience rich with potential for communicative meanings and for joys of consummation that help make life worth living, while biologically ensuring continued life possible through sexual reproduction. (2)

This ameliorative concern develops into Shusterman’s challenge, as he puts it at the end of “Pragmatism and Sex,”

...without forthright, concrete theorizing about sexual matters, we risk perpetuating mistaken assumptions and inadequate or harmful practices that result in experiences of painful disappointment instead of rewarding pleasure. Excited but still confused and uncertain about the promising pluralism of LGBTQ+ options, our culture needs more critical, yet positively reconstructive, thinking about sexuality and eroticism. This seems a worthy task for progressive pragmatist theory, if not also for other philosophical approaches. (25, my emphasis)

The clause I italicize in this passage brings pause in light of Malabou’s observations about the dominant phallogocentrism of philosophical discourse. Within philosophy, she observes, “only a handful of philosophers have ever dared to mention the clitoris, even though the work of these male thinkers is filled with references to other parts of women’s bodies—breasts, vagina, labia” (8). Jacques Derrida may have coined the terms, *phallogocentrism* and *phallogocentrism*, and deconstructed philosophical discourse’s “privileging of rectitude, erection (the architectural model of all that stands), visibility, the phallus as symbol and the concurrent reduction of woman to matrix-matter, mother, vagina–uterus. But on woman’s pleasure in philosophy—not a word” (9).

Malabou’s next statements are particularly revelatory given pragmatism’s interest in amelioration, in Shusterman’s emphasis on philosophy as a way of life, on the need for the erotic arts to aid our ability to live better, and Malabou’s views on intelligence. She writes,

From its origins, and still today, Western philosophical discourse is governed by phallogocentrism.

² Addams had a same-sex partner, while Locke is believed to have had same-sex relations. Henning is critical of Shusterman’s discussion on Addams in which Henning freely describes Addams’ lesbianism (Henning 2023a, p. 7). While it is easy to characterize Addams as a lesbian and Locke as a gay man, doing so is presumptive as it takes contemporary terms (themselves in flux) and applies them to individuals who may never have ascribed to such labels. Readers may wonder why I labeled Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey as cishet, a term none of them is likely to have heard yet self-ascribe. One reason to do so is that they were clearly in the majority of their time, from which today’s heteronormativity descends. Another reason is that they discuss biology and sex in their writings that generally fit a heteronormative view. Locke wrote nothing about sex. Addams did, but, as Shusterman puts it, her “concern with sex is not at all about how it should be practiced but rather how it should be avoided until marriage” (2021b, p. 23). Henning’s criticisms of Shusterman regarding Addams seem to equivocate between sex and eros, with an endorsement of a Platonic, and therefore, disembodied, love (Henning 2023a, p. 8). As I am not presently interested in textual exegesis, I have no further comment on that matter. Rather, the point of this note is to acknowledge the possible dangers of applying contemporary labels to historical figures.

For all that, one of philosophy's tasks, in terms of both research and ethics, has always been to shed light on areas of life that, for one reason or another, remain hidden, buried or repressed. To name the clitoris in philosophy is to bring it into sight. But how can this be achieved without shading it again? If philosophical language is itself a logical excision, how can the clitoris be thought? (9)

The relationship between the clitoris and thought is taken up by Malabou in a manner that has striking similarities with pragmatism's emphasis on continuity between body and mind, a point to be discussed in the next section and later in the discussion on Malabou. For his part, Shusterman is concerned with discussing pleasure, promoting it as part of pragmatic meliorism's interest in addressing the wealth of problems regarding sexuality and eroticism. His effort, on the one hand, is explicit about the need to be and value in being more inclusive of not only cis, and trans identities but also of gender non-conforming identities. On the other hand, Shusterman's approach, at least due to the historical subject-matter, tends toward the patriarchal, the phallogocentric, and the heteronormative. Shusterman commits the phallogocentrism Malabou decries by never using the word, *clitoris* (though *genitals* may imply it). The index to *Ars Erotica* has 8 mentions of "penis," 12 of "genitals," and none of "phallus," "breasts," "labia," "vagina," "vulva," or "clitoris." Since indexes are not exhaustive nor inclusive of every term within a manuscript, and since word searches are easily performed on electronic documents, I list both the first page a term is mentioned and the number of subsequent mentions.

Penis: p. 22, 72 times

Genital(s): p. 5, 101 times

Phallus: p. 79, 7 times

Breast(s): p. 36, 40 times

Labia: p. 206, 1 time

Vagina: p. 140, 24 times

Vulva: p. 53, 27 times

Clitoris: 0 mention

As Malabou contends, philosophers simply do not mention the clitoris. Remember that Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* is a historical review of major world traditions. He does not consider peoples indigenous to the Americas, to sub-Saharan Africa, or to Oceania (an oversight I address in the next section). Such a review reflects the patriarchal and phallogocentric bias of those traditions. The philosophical aspirations of both Shusterman and Malabou—the amelioration of life and the revelation of hidden areas of life—must speak to this neglect of the clitoris.

This neglect is particularly interesting for both neuropragmatism and queer pragmatism. In terms of the neural anatomy, the clitoris is historically poorly studied, especially in comparison with the penis. The first known count of nerves in the human clitoris was only completed in 2022, raising the count roughly 20% from previous estimates that were based on livestock studies (White 2022). This research was led by Blair Peters, assistant professor of surgery at Oregon Health and Science University, as part of research in transgender care, particularly phalloplasty that re-purposes clitoral nerves for a penis in transmasculine patients. Peters's research on the number of clitoral nerves was made possible from the donations of tissue from "transmasculine volunteers who underwent gender-affirming genital surgery" (White 2022). Consider the following remark by Peters that contextualizes the findings:

It's startling to think about more than 10,000 nerve fibers being concentrated in something as small as clitoris [sic]... It's particularly surprising when you compare the clitoris to other, larger structures of the human body. The median nerve, which runs through the wrist and hand and is involved in carpal tunnel syndrome, is known for having high nerve fiber density. Even though the hand is many, many times larger than the clitoris, the median nerve only contains about 18,000 nerve fibers, or fewer than two times the nerve fibers that are packed into the much-smaller clitoris. (White 2022)

The clitoris has far greater nerve concentration than the far-larger hand that plays such a defining role in human life. Learning this fact, however, does not come solely from an interest in women but from growing awareness and acceptance of queer lives. For both Shusterman's and Malabou's challenges to be met, neuroscience and philosophy, especially regarding plasticity, central to both the brain and transitioning somas, deserves attention.

3. Queering, Somaesthetics, and Neuropragmatism

This section is an initial introduction to neuropragmatism via somaesthetics. This discussion is necessary in order to provide some key terms for subsequent discussion of not only Malabou but of queer pragmatism. To that end, I begin with Karen Barad's discussion of the term, *queer*, in order to establish a point of contact with the pragmatism of somaesthetics and neuropragmatism. From there, I begin with the underlying pragmatism, drawing specifically from Dewey. Having discussed Dewey's body-mind, Shusterman's soma, and neuropragmatism's CE, I briefly return to the human clitoris from an evolutionary-developmental (evo-devo) perspective to further complicate Malabou's challenge in light of a limitation of Shusterman's *Ars Erotica*.

In "Nature's Queer Pformativity," Barad turns natural law against its typical Christian adherents, who wield the principle—namely, that if it is found in nature, it is morally permissible, and if it is not found, then it is not permissible—against any deviation from heteronormative practices. Many Christian moralists appeal to natural law to justify their homophobia. Barad provisionally grants them their principle and shows how queer nature is, all the way down to the quantum level. By their own logic, it follows that there is nothing morally impermissible about deviations from heteronormativity because there is no such normativity found in nature. Nature, as Barad's title states, is queer. But what does it mean to be queer or to queer something? Barad gives a provocative answer that resonates with core theses of pragmatism. She writes:

...given that queer is a radical questioning of identity and binaries, including the nature/culture binary, this article aims to show that all sorts of seeming impossibilities are indeed possible, including the queerness of causality, matter, space, and time. Queer is not a fixed determinate term; it does not have a stable referential context, which is not say [sic] that it means anything anyone wants it to be. Queer is itself a lively mutating organism, a desiring radical openness, an edgy protean differentiating multiplicity, an agential dis/continuity, an enfolded reiteratively materializing promiscuously inventive spatiotemporality. What if queerness were understood to reside not in the breach of nature/culture, per se, but in the very nature of spacetime mattering? (Barad 2012, p. 29)

The rejection of easy binaries like mind/body and nature/culture as well as a re-thinking of causality, spacetime, and matter are discussed in Dewey's pragmatism (e.g., Dewey 1925, 1929,

and 1938). Similarly, Dewey's interest in creative intelligence in nature and in democracy resonate with Barad's rejection of fixed stable references or meanings and her endorsement of mutating protean multiplicities. For both Dewey and Barad, there is a rejection of modern dualisms (be it Cartesian substance dualism or Kantian noumena-phenomena) in favor of understanding intelligent inquiry in the dynamic relations of nature.³

Living, as the pragmatist conceives it, means engaging with a world full of possibilities that promote and undermine viability. Nature, as Dewey suggests, is both precarious and stable (1925). Through a long, blind evolutionary process, viability—the ability to live—evolved as the creative tension between precarity and stability. An organism with too much stability finds itself fixed as there is no movement, and thus no growth. Growth is also impossible when precarity is too great, for there is no regularity, no order, no ability to predict, let alone intervene (Solymosi 2023). To cohere is not just about holding a set of propositions that do not contradict. Far from it. To cohere is to work with, to fit in one's world. An organism forages for coherence with its environment. Key to understanding foraging for coherence is rejecting old dualisms, separating mind from body and from world. In light of evolution, such views are best left to the waste bin of history, for they do nothing to improve upon life. They detract but do not ameliorate. They leave us incoherent. Coherence, when and wherever it's achieved, is pleasant. This is crucial for understanding pragmatism's conception of inquiry (Solymosi 2018, 2023, and 2024).

Similarly crucial is understanding the continuity between body and mind that Dewey introduces as *body-mind*, which Shusterman reconstructs as *soma*, and neuropragmatism embeds in the Deweyan conception of experience as the evolutionary unit of organism-environment transaction (Dewey 1925; Shusterman 2008; Solymosi 2023). What distinguishes body-mind from inorganic matter is the complexity of material organization that promotes self-sustaining and healing capacities, where activities don't merely happen to happen but become directed toward specific ends(-in-view),⁴ such as bodily maintenance, repair, and regulation internally and via the external milieu (1925, pp. 196, 211, 217). Shusterman develops Dewey's anti-dualism further with somaesthetics. Shusterman elaborates on what the term means:

...we can briefly describe somaesthetics as concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice (the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). The term "soma" indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the "aesthetic" in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing the soma's perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the body/mind dichotomy) and its aesthetic uses both in stylizing one's self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things. (2008, pp. 1–2)

A pillar in Dewey's conception of inquiry is that it begins and ends with the qualitative; that, in its embodiment, inquiry is inherently aesthetic. While Shusterman's contrast of soma with inorganic matter becomes questionable given Barad's queering of nature, what remains

3 Dewey's use of terms like *interaction* or *transaction* and Barad's *intra-action* deserve further discussion than I can provide here. I suspect that neuropragmatism's symbolization of the unit of evolutionary experience as CE would benefit from such discussion. This is especially so in light of Malabou's discussion of Dewey on intelligence and experience in section 5.

4 These processes are products of evolution, so there is no grand teleology at work. Nevertheless, telic processes do evolve, so that specific activities are goal-oriented. But that a task has a goal does not imply that there is conscious awareness of that goal. That degree of awareness is a later evolutionary development made possible by the evolution of symbols, gestures, and language generally.

important is the emphasis on perception and stylization through relations in activities with the body in the world. This dynamic relating is key to neuropragmatism.

Neuropragmatism takes as its orientation Dewey's proposal that "To see the organism *in* nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems which haunt philosophy. And when thus seen they will be seen to be *in*, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process" (1925, p. 224, italics in original; Solymosi 2023). Neuropragmatism follows Dewey on two other points: his conception of experience as organism-environment interaction and his postulate of continuity. Both points relate directly to the nested processes of neurotransmitter-in-synapse-in-neuron-in-cortex-in-brain-in-body-in-nature.⁵ In terms of experience as the dynamic transaction between organism and environment, neuropragmatism emphasizes the continuity between inner and outer, that is the continuity across the semipermeable barrier of the cellular membrane or the organic skin. Since experience is inherently educative, since there are new problems to learn about and solve, leading to evolutionary adaptation, since experience is life function, evolution as organism-environment adaptation and experience as organism-environment entanglement are co-extensive. So thorough are these continuities that neuropragmatism symbolizes experience as the diphthong, *CE*, to indicate there is no real separation of organism from environment.

While there are continuities between organism and environment, no organism is strictly identical to any other, nor is the environment fixed, final, or unchanging. The evolutionary emphasis of *CE* implies the differentiating multiplicity, as Barad puts it. While she focuses on various natural phenomena from atoms to stingrays, from lightning to amoeba, I turn my focus to an evo-devo perspective on the human clitoris. As noted above, the human clitoris has been poorly studied in comparison to the human penis. Sexual dimorphism is a simple distinction that may facilitate some inquiries; but if researchers believe that this distinction reveals what is already there in nature prior to inquiry, then they not only commit what Dewey called the intellectualist fallacy (1929) but are also bound to be surprised by what in fact goes on in nature.

Terminology is itself perplexing on these issues. The heteronormative account would have us believe that there is simply the male penis and the female clitoris. Queering this account suggests that there may be continuities across present-day soma across cultures as well as throughout human history, indeed evolutionary history. In terms of the latter, these organs are part of reproductive systems that share a common ancestry. As the biologist Richard O. Prum writes, "homologous reproductive body parts—like the clitoris, labia, ovaries, penis, scrotum, and testes—are...ontological individuals that cannot be defined by any essential properties or features" (2023, p. 44). This homology suggests the evolutionary continuity of *CE* in which there are similarities amid differences without any essences or fixities. But still this perspective does not explicitly acknowledge another possible continuity that terms like *glans* or *clitorophallus* do. These terms focus more on the similarity than on the difference. This is particularly important when we consider surgical interventions for transmasculine patients, for whom the relatively small clitorophallus is separate from the urethra. Successful therapy, including exogenous testosterone and/or phalloplasty, masculinizes the clitorophallus into a penis in which there is no separation of the urethra from the glans (Grimstad et al. 2021).

⁵ These processes work not only within an individual organism but across its population. This population is itself in a historical evolutionary process of change through adaptation. There is, in other words, continuity between individuals of the same species (so they're similar but not identical), continuity over time at the individual and population levels (so the individual's more complex processes develop out of more simple processes; and more complex traits are the accumulation of previous, though more simple, adaptations).

The evolutionary homologies of these organs predates the evolution of human beings as most mammals have some variation of these reproductive organs. Humans are unique, however, in that the female clitoris is external to and notably separate from the vagina. This fact raises questions about the role of female orgasm in humans generally and why the human clitoris evolved so far from the vagina. This question is taken up by James Kennedy and Mihaela Pavličev in “Female Orgasm and the Emergence of Prosocial Empathy: An Evo-Devo Perspective” (2018). The details are well beyond the limits of this essay. I provide a brief overview of Kennedy and Pavličev’s proposal, drawing on the terms introduced in my argument thus far.⁶

First, recall that Malabou observes the lack of discussion of the clitoris among philosophers and proposes that thinking the clitoris may serve the ameliorative goals of philosophical practice. Such goals are shared by Shusterman’s *Ars Erotica*. Barad’s approach to queering suggests myriad differentiations throughout nature’s performance. That sense of continuity resonates with pragmatism’s emphasis on continuities in CE. That the human penis and the human clitoris both evolved from a homologous evolutionary predecessor of the glans or clitorophallus should not be surprising. Similarly, the primate penis and the primate clitoris can be discerned.⁷ The difference in anatomical relations between species is clear. In primates, coitus is sufficient stimulation for both male and female orgasm because the clitoris is close to or internal to the vagina, such that penetration would sufficiently stimulate the clitoris, thereby inducing lubrication of the vagina and subsequent orgasm. In humans, the clitoris is at too great a distance from the vagina to stimulate orgasm through coitus alone. This raises questions about why the human clitoris would evolve to be at such a distance. Kennedy and Pavličev propose that this adaptation is that it contributed to prosocial empathy, regardless of what initiated the distancing.

Two remarks from neuropragmatism’s CE are relevant. First, Kennedy and Pavličev are not arguing for why the clitoris initially moved, rather they recognize that exaptation is a likely explanatory mechanism. Exaptation happens when a trait evolved for one purpose becomes repurposed through new selection pressures to serve another purpose (see Solymosi 2018 and 2024). For whatever evolutionary reason, Kennedy and Pavličev suggest, the clitoris became more external to the vagina, thereby opening up new possibilities for stimulation. This leads to the second point from neuropragmatism, the neural. Kennedy and Pavličev suggest that a mechanism like mirror neurons are at play in the evolution of human female orgasm given the externalization of the clitoris. The mirror neuron system is a controversial proposal in neuroscience that claims to account for why observing another person perform an action often leads to the observer being able to perform that action sufficiently well, even though they never performed it before. Whatever the exact neural mechanism is for this ability is not of present interest. What is of present interest is the fact that humans, especially, are able to take up the perspective of another (what they feel or think), often referred to as intersubjectivity.

Kennedy and Pavličev contend that intersubjectivity benefitted from the externalization of the clitoris and the prosocial effects of female orgasm in humans. They write:

6 This proposal takes up a heteronormative perspective as it focuses primarily on male-female sexual relations. There is brief consideration of female-female relations in the context of alloparenting. While the heteronormative perspective is chosen by these authors, it is by no means the only evolutionary perspective that can be taken. Non-heteronormative sexual activity would also contribute to morphological changes. Whether these different perspectives or different sexual encounters would have similar or different morphological effects is beyond both the scope of Kennedy and Pavličev’s argument and my own. My purpose in reviewing their research is not to endorse definitively, especially to the exclusion of other evolutionary factors or possibilities. Rather, I consider their perspective as part of an exploration of the plasticity of human nature, as suggested by the evolution of the human clitoris and the further effects in sociocultural activities in and beyond the sexual, as not fixed, not essentialist, but dynamic and capable of not only change but creative direction.

7 I do not know the extent to which, among primates, there are ambiguities in the clitorophallus. Given the difficulties of accessibility of primate populations, as well as the risks for primatologists to study a sufficiently representative population, this data may not yet exist. Given the emphasis in this paper on continuities throughout nature, we should not be surprised to find among primates variation in the morphologies of the clitorophallus.

The present thesis is that the anatomical separation of orgasm from the reproductive function in humans may have led to the emergence of a new kind of prosocial empathy or intersubjectivity. The fact that coitus alone is reliably sufficient for the male's but not for the female's orgasm set the stage for a selection criterion where females preferred to mate with males who had a particular kind of social insight, motivation, and self-discipline that enabled them to elicit orgasm. The preferred male would have been one showing an active interest in his partner's experience; he would have the interpersonal sensitivity to identify what "works" sexually and to adjust his behavior in response to her responding, and the motivation and self-discipline to defer his own ejaculation until she had reached orgasm. We are proposing that a cluster of empathic prosocial tendencies may have come to dominance in the human species as a consequence of this sexual selection process. (2018, p. 67)

This intersubjectivity is also embodied. Kennedy and Pavličev refer to the notion of "body-mapping" where one "identif[ies] one's body with another's, where an individual can feel in their own body what the other person is experiencing in theirs" (67). This is especially intriguing because male and female bodies are not identical: "For a man to bring a woman to orgasm, he has to stimulate body parts he literally does not have (homology between penis and clitoris is not obvious); he has to read her mind about phenomena that are not part of his own experience" (67–68). Such intersubjectivity may not share in anatomical symmetry but can draw on a continuity in emotional understanding of sexual arousal, where the emotional understanding provides the cues that are not afforded by physical similarities.

Physical similarities may have also promoted further evolutionary consequences regarding alloparenting. Where males are tamed by females through heterosexual intercourse that delays male orgasm, females could engage in bonding activities through orgasm that does not require the same intersubjectivity by which adept males are able to bond with females. In either case, there is an increase in social bonding that Kennedy and Pavličev suggest is a reflection of the sexual plasticity of human females (70), who had a degree of choice in selecting adept males, thereby increasing the possibilities for social bonding, be it in pair-bonding with a male partner or with a female alloparent.

And yet patriarchy persists. Kennedy and Pavličev acknowledge this and must address it along with the misleading belief that males are inept at stimulating female pleasure. Part of their response is to acknowledge that evolution doesn't necessarily select a specific trait for a specific activity or skill, but rather for a bricolage of related and generalized skills beyond the sexual situation. So, the prosocial empathy of males adept at stimulating female orgasm also works in other situations that require intersubjectivity as well as self-discipline, for instance. Furthermore, these situations are contingent in the various relations at work. That males became more prosocial and empathic does not mean that their societies were not patriarchal. That is, if Kennedy and Pavličev's evo-devo perspective better characterizes the answer to the question of why human female orgasm evolves with a clitoris distanced from the vagina as a matter of increasing prosocial behavior among males, we today must take pause at how great the violence against females may have been prior to this taming of males.

Evolutionary accounts are notoriously difficult because our access to the past is indirect and piecemeal. Kennedy and Pavličev are mindful of this. They relate their proposal to contemporary human societies in Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa that further complicates the

heteronormativity of western patriarchal societies historically and present day. These populations are not considered by Shusterman, which is unfortunate given the attention they give to the clitoris. In the Melanesian island culture of East Bay, men engage in extended foreplay with women. A similar engagement of extended foreplay is found in the Truk group of Micronesia, in which clitoral stimulation, via the penis, is paramount, as seen in the "technique called gichigich" that leads to several hours of erotic activity during which the woman orgasms dozens of times (71). Kennedy and Pavličev further note that "These Micronesian techniques resemble practices known in Central Africa as Kunyaza, Kachabali, and other names" (72).

This is a missed opportunity for Shusterman to begin to meet a challenge like Malabou's. Kennedy and Pavličev note that some Chinese Taoist practices emphasize withholding male orgasm as do Indian and Islamic texts, sharing a concern with female orgasm (Kennedy and Pavličev 2018, p. 72). But withholding male orgasm and developing specific techniques for clitoral stimulation are not the same thing. Moreover, while Shusterman may have been better able to begin to write about the clitoris, the problem of patriarchy remains. All of these cultures of Oceania, Africa, and the others discussed by Shusterman remain patriarchal with violence against women not uncommon (72). The focus in this section, furthermore, has been on bodily organs, not on their symbolic roles as expressed by terms like phallogentrism or the clitoridian. Nevertheless, the pragmatist notions of body-mind, soma, and CE are enriched by this consideration as it initiates further reflection on what it could mean to think the clitoris, as Malabou suggests we try.

Soma is the target of somaesthetic practices of amelioration. The erotic arts focus on the soma of, at least, the individual practicing the art. If there are more individuals engaged in the erotic experience, then the entanglements emphasized by CE become particularly vital for reconstructing *ars erotica* toward a more inclusive future. Barad's emphasis on the dynamic continuities of and through nature are even more suggestive about the possibilities of eros. Such possibilities, as Barad suggests, are queer. Pragmatism, including but not only somaesthetics and neuropragmatism, has implicit affinities with queer theory. But only recently have those parallels been explored. I take up queer pragmatism in the next section and return to neuropragmatism in the following to further engage in both Shusterman's challenge to be more inclusive in the erotic arts and Malabou's proposal to think the clitoris, to embrace the clitoridian.

4. Queer Pragmatism

Recent scholarship brings queer theory together with pragmatism, notably through the work of Dewey (Henning, 2023a, 2023b; Tschaepé, 2023). Dewey's emphasis on creating continuities and possibilities out of old dichotomies establishes an affinity between his pragmatism and queer theory. I begin by reviewing Tschaepé's "Cruising Uncertainty: Queering Dewey against Heteronormativity" because their perspective has previously aligned with neuropragmatism (Tschaepé 2013 and 2014) and because their work on queering Dewey further informs the challenges from Shusterman and Malabou. This alignment, moreover, provides a platform for Henning's work on the queer pragmatist.

Tschaepé weaves together queer theory and Dewey's pragmatism via previous feminist pragmatists' efforts to bridge Dewey with feminist theory. Tschaepé reconstructs Dewey's ideas regarding inquiry, habit, and growth along the lines of both feminist and queer theorists to engage in moral imagination about queer futurity, positive notions of failure, and growing sideways. Tschaepé explains that the value in queering Dewey is that Dewey's experimental inquiry, in

its development of relations between events, including persons, is anti-essentialist, promoting more novel senses of growth than what heteronormative culture and absolutist thinking permit (2023, pp. 64–66, 70). In developing Dewey’s ideas for today’s context, Tschaepe adds to the toolkit of queer theorists, aiding their effort to resist and ameliorate the oppressive and violent situation in which we find ourselves. For present purposes, I review what Tschaepe means by *queer*, *queer futurity*, *failure*, and *growing sideways*.

Tschaepe asserts that “*Queer theory* is a broad class of critical work that includes inquiry concerning sexuality, gender, race, disability, and other categories of identity that is in opposition to the essentialism of heteronormativity” (60). To queer, in pragmatist terms, is *to reconstruct* the problematic situation in which heteronormativity’s essentialism stifles, suffocates, oppresses, and violates regarding sexuality, gender, race, disability, and other categories of identity. Tschaepe conceives of *heteronormativity* as a power hierarchy that privileges, without warrant, binaries of gender and sexuality, namely *cisnormativity*, “the assumption that cisgender is the norm and should be valued over and above all other forms of gender identity” (61). Heteronormativity also entails the normative principle of *compulsory heterosexuality*, which is to say, that the default standard in much if not all of everyday life orients around a *straight assumption* and a *gender fatalism* (61). For Tschaepe, such terms all operate on the presumption “that gender and other categories of identity are natural and essential, thus determining what is and what necessarily will be the case” (61). That is, such terms and categories are fixed and final, somehow warranted, it is purported, by transcendental a priori principles or supernatural religious beliefs. None of which is endorsed by the pragmatic naturalism of neuropragmatism or somaesthetics.

The oppression of this essentialism is well illustrated by *straight time*, which is the presumption that daily life must be organized and has always been organized and should always be organized around bourgeois heterosexual practices regarding schooling, marriage, and reproduction (61). Straight time thus endorses and enforces a strict sense of *growing up*, meaning that a child should learn to read, to do arithmetic, etc., at specific ages or grade levels, that matters of sexuality develop at times specified ahead of any child’s actual development, and that such sexualization is not something children are thought to do until young adulthood. This essentialism presumes too much and ignores the empirical realities of CE. Some children learn to read or do math at different rates than the statistical norm, yet most nevertheless learn such skills. As for sex and gender, children are born into cultures that are already sexualized and gendered, so to declare that children are free from that is simply to ignore the reality that expectations and norms are forced upon children, often to their detriment. It is detrimental because it ignores the possibility of *growing sideways* which recognizes “growth in multiple directions without clearly discernible endpoints that do not accord with fitting into straight time” (62). Growing sideways affords CE greater creative possibilities, especially when understood in terms of failure and the value of inquiry in overcoming it.

When people fail to live up to heteronormative expectations, like straight time, the feeling of failure can easily overwhelm and defeat a person. But Tschaepe advocates for *queer futurity*, in which a better future with richer possibilities is not only imagined but is worked toward (62). This ameliorative effort requires accepting the loss of the entitlements and privileges afforded by heteronormativity. It also means reconstructing failure not as defeat but as part of the learning process, as part of the inquiry required to become a different being in the world than the essentialist is certain one must be. “Failure,” Tschaepe explains, “prevents settling for problematic standards—norms, values, and beliefs—that are commonly accepted as natural or worthwhile” (62). They relate failure not only to inquiry but to the rejection of certainty as a failed

quest itself, writing that “The failure of certainty expands conceptions and practices of growth beyond heteronormative strictures of growing up. Rather, growing sideways includes an array of possibilities that moves beyond assumed verticality of adulthood and utilizes uncertainty and change through inquiry” (63). Such verticality connotes erection, whereas growing sideways encourages differentiating multiplicities of relations.

Dewey’s rejection of the quest for certainty does not mean a rejection of norms, standards, or values. Rather, Dewey conceives of experimental inquiry as rejecting essences and fixities in favor of stabilities via the creation of new relations between events (1929). When it comes to reconstructing *ars erotica* for our transcultural and queer world, the heteronormativity inherent in much of the world’s wisdom traditions can be challenged through this queering of pragmatist inquiry. By understanding human nature as adaptive and plastic, in conceiving of experience as CE , and thereby highlighting the soma’s innervations and how the brain-in-the-body is intimately and creatively engaged with its environment, neuropragmatism affords an experimental framework for developing new techniques out of the old in ways that do not entail the loss of pleasure, the loss of eros, nor the loss of beauty. Rather, these new techniques are not generated *ex nihilo* but are adjustments that come from various failures in CE and the consciously deliberate effort to adjust parameters and conditions to better understand variables at work in erotic experiences—including extending and enriching what counts as erotic, as reproductive, and as family beyond the bourgeois heteronormativity queer theory aims to challenge.

These forms of meliorism are themselves open to and deserve further reflection and criticism. Henning’s “Where Pragmatism Gets Off” (2023a) is a forceful response to Shusterman’s “Pragmatism and Sex” (2021b). As much of her disagreement with Shusterman is over exegesis of Dewey’s views on sexuality, it is not relevant to my argument here. However, there are points of contact in her view with neuropragmatism that I recognize in the effort toward greater amelioration and hope for a reconstruction of *ars erotica* for queer CE . One point of contact is her stating that “the extensively minute ways that a human organism is intimately connected with its environment—including its fellow human organisms which provide the occasion for *meaning*” (2023a, p. 5). She goes on, however, to criticize Shusterman for, purportedly as far as I can see, “overemphasizing genital intercourse” as that “is a particular failure that is endemic to the heterosexual, masculine imagination” (5). She goes on to state in a parenthetical that “Trenchant belief in such spurious concepts as ‘skill’ and ‘technique’ is another [particular failure], despite the fact that carnal knowledge of one partner is only seldom transferable to the context of another” (5).

It would be all too easy to simply dismiss both of these claims out of hand. For the first criticism is unfounded by a cursory read of Shusterman’s introduction to *Ars Erotica*, where he is straightforward that there is far more to lovemaking than genital intercourse or orgasm (2021a, pp. 5, 6). As far as the second remark about technique and skill, Shusterman takes time to explore the etymologies and further connotations of these terms (2021a, 4). Nevertheless, I believe Henning voices a genuine concern many people have when it comes to incorporating the scientific, the technical/technological, or the experimental into our most intimate and qualitatively rich affairs. The fear is not simply of a reductive scientism or eliminativism. Rather, it is the very real possibility that a lover could become so caught up in cognitively exercising a technique and thereby loses or even fails to exercise the finesse, the tenderness or care that such intimacy requires. Thus, one risks becoming objectified (without consent) and having their pleasure neglected or robbed. It is not hard to imagine that consensual sexual activity, regardless of intent, is hoped to be easy going and successful. But, to Shusterman’s distinction between sex

for its own sake and erotic artistry as both an end in itself and a means toward greater education about oneself in one's world, we can and ought to allow for careful conceptions of *techne* that afford meaningful failure within an erotic and caring setting. To do otherwise is to commit to essentialist normative standards.

Another point of contact between Henning and neuropragmatism is in her queering Dewey via her conception of queer ecologies. Though her conception of eros is prima facie far broader than Shusterman's in *Ars Erotica*, the cash value is apparent: where Shusterman is focused on the sense of erotic having to deal with lovemaking as a source of meaning, Henning is less concerned with that specific source, focusing more on a related but distinct problem that queer ecologies can address:

I see queer ecologies as answering a real contemporary problem: there is a lacuna we need to address as our disillusionment with the family romance deepens. The nuclear family, that central misery responsible for so many of the neuroses that Freud detected in his study of psychic suffering, has demonstrated its inadequacy to provide support [sic] the needs of the couple and their children: children suffer from the limited availability of caretakers and archetypes, and the couple suffers at the limits of their own finite energy against the herculean task of prioritizing partnership, their livelihoods, and the immense dependency of offspring. (51)

Like Tschaepe, Henning is concerned with the negative effects of heteronormativity. Like Tschaepe, Henning sees a resource in Dewey's philosophy available for queering.

Unlike Tschaepe, Henning does not provide a working definition of *queer*, only relating her project to Sarah Ahmed's having "queered" phenomenology (51). Henning's contrasting phenomenology and pragmatism, nevertheless, can be illuminating in understanding both what she means by *queer* and *ecology*. Henning writes that "They [the phenomenologist] describe our *Entrelacement*, or intertwining, which characterizes the flesh—a chiasmatic relationship between the visible and the invisible, the touching/touched, enveloping/enveloped. In short, they embrace a method of sensitivity to the minute nuances of sensuous life" (51). Such a description shares a strong affinity with CE, indeed gestures toward the clitoridian.

5. Neuropragmatism and Malabou on Plasticity and Intelligence

Evolution happens because there is a disequilibrium between organisms and their environment that leads to competition for limited resources. The traits that provide an advantage to acquiring those resources *and* that are heritable are the traits that are good enough for survival in that ecological niche. Of course, evolution affects not only the organism but also the environment, as the organism changes its traits, skills, and actions, the environment is also changed, leading to different distributions of resources. The cycle goes on, so long as the tension between precarity and stability affords creativity. Among the products of this blind but creative process of evolution are regulatory mechanisms. First homeostasis evolved to return the organism to a previously established set point in reaction to environmental change (e.g., some animals sweat when overheated, shiver when too cold). This responsive return to a previously fixed point is more advantageous than not. But more advantageous still is having a brain, understood as nervous tissue distributed throughout the organic body. What a brain provides the organism is anticipation and preparation of the body for what is likely to happen in the environment. This regulatory mechanism is allostasis. Like homeostasis, it seeks stability; but, as the different

prefixes indicate, there is a change in, not a return to, equilibrium. Often, the change is temporary as seen in the stress response. But over time the change can lead through the overload of stress to greater precarity (disease, disability, dysfunction, even death), or adaptation in CE .

As en-brained organisms evolve to form social groups, social allostasis also evolves (Schulkin 2011). The anticipatory regulation is not restricted to a single brain in a single body but extends to include the social group, generating norms out of dynamic equilibria. Health, notably, can be understood allostatically as the dynamic equilibrium or fitting of organism and environment (Sterling 2020). Just as being healthy feels good, so does inquiry, figuring things out, solving problems (Solymosi 2018). Another way of expressing this regulatory mechanism is to conceive of it in terms of culture, the symbolic scaffolding that affords organisms new opportunities for relating to each other and navigating their environments. Culture is continuous with nature, as a phase of nature (Solymosi 2023). Yet another way of expressing these regulatory possibilities in light of the dynamism of CE is with the term, *plasticity*, which William James first used to discuss the behavior of the brain and body (1890) and has continued to influence pragmatism (Dewey 1922), from neuroplasticity to phenotypic plasticity to social plasticity (Johnson and Tucker 2021; Johnson and Schulkin 2023). Indeed, sexual plasticity, as discussed in section 3 above, is integral to the evolution of social allostasis as a driver of intersubjectivity and prosocial empathy.

Plasticity is the characteristic thread through Malabou's work, as she has engaged with Hegel and Derrida to neuroscience and artificial intelligence to feminism and queer theory. Her conception of plasticity has illustrated its own plasticity as it has evolved from maintaining a real distinction between the organic brain and the mechanical computer to embracing a genuine continuity between brains and machines. I turn to Malabou's plastic conception of plasticity because she weaves together several important themes but also because her work presents a challenge to thinking about CE and about soma. For both approaches have said nothing about clitoridian soma.

I begin with Malabou's early view on plasticity, relating it to both body and politics. I turn to her embrace of a Deweyan conception of intelligence that challenges, critiques, and cares for plasticity creatively. Plasticity and intelligence are primed for the reconstructive queering Malabou provides of the clitoris and thus of philosophy. This reconstruction is integral for imagining and enacting an *ars erotica* for our transcultural world that is educational and ameliorative, regarding erotic experiences as related to their biocultural environments.

In asking, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, Malabou interrogates not only the history of the idea of the brain but also the consciousness of the brain as a history (2008). This genealogy is framed in terms of *plasticity*, indeed that the brain—any and all nervous tissues—is plasticity. She explains:

*According to its etymology—from the Greek *plassein*, to mold—the word plasticity has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to receive form (clay is called “plastic,” for example) and the capacity to give form (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery). Talking about the plasticity of the brain thus amounts to thinking of the brain as something modifiable, “formable,” and formative at the same time. Brain plasticity operates... on three levels: (1) the modeling of neuronal connections (developmental plasticity in the embryo and the child); (2) the modification of neuronal connections (the plasticity of synaptic modulation throughout life); and (3) the capacity for repair (post-lesional plasticity). (5)*

Malabou notes that “plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create” as in the explosivity also connoted by *plastique*, such as nitroglycerine (5). She concludes, “We thus note that plasticity is situated between two extremes: on the one side the sensible image of taking form (sculpture or plastic objects), and on the other side that of the annihilation of all form (explosion)” (5).

People as not only organisms with brains but also as organisms consciously aware to the fact that they have brains are, on the one hand, very similar. But, on the other hand, the very nature of plasticity, its modifiability that resists return to previous states, means that not only do people learn and become different from learning but also that none of us are identical because we each have our own histories, our own experiences and interactions with the world that are both forming us and formed by us. Given this tension between a shared evolutionary history of the species and one’s own idiosyncratic history, Malabou raises two corollary questions, first, “What good is having a brain, indeed, what should we do with it?” (11) and, second, “What should we do so that the consciousness of the brain does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?” (12)

The second question leads Malabou to raise the often overlooked distinction between plasticity and flexibility. The latter not only overshadows the former but oppresses creativity in this neoliberal context that demands the worker to constantly adjust to new work demands. Malabou elaborates:

The problem is that these significations grasp only one of the semantic registers of plasticity: that of receiving form. To be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode. Indeed, what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius. (12)

In plasticity, Malabou finds “semantic wealth” that empowers humans to liberate themselves from their histories, to become agents over their own trajectory, capable of changing their destiny (17). Plasticity’s wealth means that humans can understand themselves as self-cultivating works of art. More questions arise:

The question that inevitably poses itself is thus: How can we know how to respond in a plastic manner to the plasticity of the brain? If the brain is the biological organ determined to make supple its own biological determinations, if the brain is in some way a self-cultivating organ, which culture would correspond to it, which culture could no longer be a culture of biological determinism, could no longer be, in other words, a culture against nature? Which culture is the culture of neuronal liberation? Which world? Which society? (30)

The answers to these questions may be found in Malabou’s later engagement with Dewey on democracy and education, as well as her contention that the clitoris is an anarchist.

Malabou rejects the promise of cybernetics because of its focus on physico-mathematical structures and symbol manipulation (35). Such deterministic formalism is anathema to the creative potential of plasticity. “Opposed to the rigidity, the fixity, the anonymity of the control center [of cybernetics],” Malabou suggests, “is the model of a suppleness that implies a certain margin of improvisation, of creation, of the aleatory” (35). By emphasizing the brain as plasticity, as

both receiving and giving form, Malabou argues that the brain's interactions with its environment disrupts vertical hierarchies of command and control, while embracing and creating fluidities (35–36)—an anticipation of the clitoridian and the dismissal of the phallogocentric.

In *Morphing Intelligence*, Malabou continues the genealogical efforts initiated with her reflection on plasticity but with the focus on intelligence (2019). After her initial discussion of Dewey's conception of intelligence as method, she returns to her earlier distinction between organic brain and cybernetic machine with a striking admission:

I was indeed mistaken in What Should We Do with Our Brain?: plasticity is not, as I argued then, the opposite of the machine, the determining element that stops us from equating the brain with a computer. As I have said, that opposition can only derive from the old critical conflict it claims to challenge... A clear understanding of automatism would have allowed me to see that plasticity was becoming the privileged intersection between the brain and cybernetic arrangements, thereby sealing their structural identity. (113)

Malabou gets to admitting to this mistake through a dialectical interpretation of Dewey's conception of intelligence as method.

Beginning with a distinction between *automatism* (involuntary movement without a soul) and *automaton* (“that which moves by itself”), Malabou draws out the tension that initiates inquiry (100). She relates these senses of automatism (mechanical constraint in opposition to freedom) to Dewey's conception of habit (1922). Namely, that habits are what the environment does to the organism. Habits both make doing within CE actionable but also afford frustration, perplexity, and failure, effecting inquiry to overcome doubt. As Malabou puts it, “Without habit, intelligence has no past. Without intelligence, habit has no future” (2019, p. 101). Since intelligence is always action-oriented practical problem solving, it “is always in transition. Its dynamic is one of movement, never one of final causes” (102). She elaborates further:

So we find ourselves back with habit. Identifying a problem “intelligently” involves adding to perspectives on it. A perspective is a way of seeing that is always derived from past experience. Perspectives, or viewpoints, on a situation are in fact prior experiences crystallized into habits. We start by seeing what others have seen. In this sense, even when they seem original, we always inherit perspectives. Deliberation and decision making will be all the more effective in an intelligent inquiry if they are better informed about the way in which past experiences articulated possibilities and how the problem was solved at that time. So, if perspectives are always past possibilities, how does novelty arise? It is precisely the reconsideration of perspectives that reveals what is no longer possible in them and calls for reworking. Reliving a putting into perspective of past possibilities in the present allows a simultaneous appreciation of their promise and their obsolescence. (103)

Since “intelligence itself is only a habit—the habit of solving problems... it always refers to past experience” (104). From here, Malabou develops Dewey's conception of intelligent inquiry in experience:

Intelligence is the search for homeostasis, for an equilibrium that is neither purely derived from past stability nor purely given a priori but also that occupies the midpoint between a priori and a posteriori. Strangely, this midpoint is what

Dewey calls experience. Experience is not one of the intermediary terms. It is not confounded with the empirical; rather, it is the mediator between a priori and a posteriori. What does this mean? Experience should not be confused with the fact of having “an” experience. Experience is the continuum of life, which moves forward thanks to various specific experiences that extend it every day, like raindrops constantly filling and regenerating a river. (106–107)

This difference between experience and experiences brings Malabou back to automatism and its relation to intelligence. Differentiating experience from experiences “forms the basis of a process of disappropriation of the self;” the distancing of oneself as an object as other subjects would see them, thus “allow[ing] individuals to envisage their consequences in a dispassionate impersonal manner” (108). This skill is at the heart of Dewey’s experimentalism as it undergirds both his conception of science and of democracy as participatory. “Rooted in the nervous system,” Malabou continues, “the possibility of distancing oneself from the self is automatic. Yet it is intelligent. Intelligence is automatically what it is: belonging to no one” (108).

Though automatic, this skill of intelligence reflects the two senses of automatism as routine habituation and as autonomous process. Malabou explains that “automatism produces disappropriation”—the conflicting of beliefs, as habits of action, the doubt, uncertainty, and stress, effecting inquiry—“and, through it, the pluralization of intelligence, a process that reveals multiple points of view to the subject. To be intelligent is to look from many sides simultaneously. The natural automatism of intelligence reveals its collective, that is, social, nature” (108–109).

From here, Malabou’s discussion of Dewey focuses on the inherently social nature of intelligence. We have already seen how the evolution of the human clitoris may have contributed to the intersubjectivity entailed by social intelligence as well as the dynamics of CE promoting social allostasis. Malabou notes how current power dynamics that are actively against experimental democracy inhibit growth of intelligence, notably by preventing the development of perspectives—a reduction in intersubjectivity and a disruption to social allostasis. Only education can guarantee intelligence’s success: “Education is precisely what enables intelligence to dissolve and recreate its own habits, to imagine the multiplicity of possibilities to put knowledge to the test of action and thus to act independently from official norms” (111). Here Shusterman’s hope for future erotic arts education and Malabou’s clitoridian perspective become salient as both target the amelioration of CE. Regarding school, Malabou endorses Dewey’s vision of an organized cooperative community in which the child not only learns but feels as both a participant and contributor to the community’s growth (111–112). Returning to intelligence and automatism, Malabou writes:

The battle against passive automatism is achieved through creative automatism. Education is never organized by a must-be but rather according to the development of arrangements that, for Dewey, essentially take the shape of cooperative projects with three steps: observing the surrounding world, documenting, and formulating judgments after all these materials are correlated. These steps always respect granting the practical meaning of the activity through group discussion and never follow a pre-ordained formal order. (112)

I cannot help but think of Tschaepé’s critique of terms like heteronormativity, cisnormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, the straight assumption, and gender fatalism as paradigmatic of the hegemony of a pre-ordained formal order.

This returns us to Malabou's admission of mistake in her earlier work, that there is a difference between the plastic brain and the deterministic computer. If plasticity is the source of agency insofar as it is in tension with the automaticity of regular habits, then the contrast between brain and machine can no longer be maintained. Indeed, Malabou writes, "There's no denying it: the brain and computer have a reciprocal and 'mirroring' relationship. Consequently, any discourse of resistance that tries to protect the naturalness of intelligence against its capture by technology is futile" (115). Indeed, Malabou continues to recognize in ways that resonate with neuropragmatism's emphasis on continuities within CE and between nature and culture: "so I repeat that the traditional ways artificial intelligence has been critiqued, that is, the demonization of technology and the inverted valuing of the 'human' and 'natural,' are irrelevant" (115). Indeed, the old binaries are irrelevant, so much so that a queering of neuropragmatism and of *ars erotica* requires coupling between pragmatism and queer theory.

6. The Anarchy of the Clitoris

Most relevant for Malabou's conception of intelligence is the problem-solving reorganization of activity that is also the healing or self-repairing that plasticity affords, whether it is machine or organism. Plasticity and allostasis are entangled. This entanglement is anti-dualist and receives provocative attention in Malabou's reflections on philosophy and the clitoris in *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought* (2022), a rich reflection on the cultural history of the clitoris in the West. My focus is on the first and last two chapters of the book.

"Clitoris," Malabou says in the introductory chapter, is "The secret nub that remains, resists, unsettles the conscience and wounds the heel, the only organ whose sole purpose is pleasure—that is, the only one with 'no use'" (1–2). She goes on to imagine a twenty-first century gynecologist who...

...is explaining to a dumb-struck male audience how the clitoris responds to a penis, dildo, fingers or tongue during love-making, describing how it moves and the form it takes during penetration or stroking. She describes how the clitoris is the vagina's accomplice, its partner. But also how it plays solo. How the clitoris enjoys a dual erotic orientation: swaying along with the movements of the vagina during penetration, but also stiffening and standing up like a crest. Sometimes both, other times just one. Opting for neither one, the clitoris confounds dichotomies. (2–3)

Malabou continues that "This double life, which presents a direct challenge to the heterosexual norm, was also ignored for centuries" (3). She goes on to enumerate various presumptions about the clitoris, such as the psychoanalytic claim that there is only one sex organ, or that the clitoris is a maimed penis, leading to the extremes of the nymphomaniac or the frigid. Let's not forget the historical and ongoing mutilations of the clitoris for fear of it.

Though Malabou acknowledges claims that things have changed, moving rapidly "from second- and third-wave feminisms to ultra-contemporary transfeminism" (5). The clitoris no longer belongs to women alone and serves as a symbol for the queer challenges to traditional views of sexuality and gender. "And yet..."

The reason I'm writing this book is that it seems nothing has really changed. Sexual mutilations are common practice, still. Pleasure is off-limits for millions of women, still. And still today the clitoris remains the physically and psychically erased

pleasure organ. Also, doesn't dismissing one form of erasure inevitably amount to erasing it otherwise? Isn't to recognize one reality simultaneously to misrecognize it differently? Isn't shedding light always an act of violence? Stroking with one hand, rubbing out with the other. (6)

Through her research, Malabou has been led “to conclude that to touch the clitoris—in a figurative sense, and perhaps too in reality—is always, on every occasion, to experience a *caesura*” (7).⁸ In rethinking common contrasts, selections, distinctions, differences between clitoris and vagina, clitoris and penis, clitoris and phallus (“unlike the penis, the clitoris refuses to obey the law of the phallus” (7)), biology and symbol, sex and gender (7), *caesura* reveals not only differences but “fractures the paradoxical identity of difference by revealing the multiplicity it shelters” (8).

This leads Malabou to the question of why focus on the clitoris and not other parts of the body or genitals? “Because,” she explains, “it’s a silent symbol” (8). As discussed above, there is very little said among philosophers about the clitoris. To return to a passage quoted at length above, Malabou asks, “To name the clitoris in philosophy is to bring it into sight. But how can this be achieved without shading it again? If philosophical language is itself a logical excision, how can the clitoris be thought?” (9)

To begin answering this question, Malabou identifies herself as a radical feminist far “from the terfs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists)” (11). “Even if it is not necessarily a woman’s clitoris,” she suggests, “the clitoris remains the mysterious place of the feminine. Which means it still hasn’t found its place” (12). In language strikingly similar to her Deweyan conception of intelligence, its call for a plurality of perspectives, Malabou writes that she “seek[s] to amplify diverse voices and to find a balance through them between the extreme difficulty and extreme urgency of speaking the feminine today” (12).

The penultimate chapter of *Pleasure Erased* begins with Malabou’s recounting “the effect that entering into a powerful discipline of the mind (philosophy is just one such example) can have on the sexuality and gender of the person—be they he or she—who joins such a circle of thought” (105–106). Having long abandoned the idea that philosophy or its discourse is asexual, Malabou makes explicit the relation between the clitoris, the soma, the brain, and the erotic:

I’ll admit that today I’m far less interested in tracking down textual phallogocentrism than in exploring the somatic shaping power of philosophy. Contrary to what is generally assumed, philosophy shapes bodies. I tried to show this elsewhere in regard to the relation between thought and its other organ—the brain. Philosophy does not do work on bodies solely for orthopedic purposes. It’s not just about disciplining. It also sculpts an erotics that enables new connections between intellectual energy and libidinal energy. I am not referring to an idealized or metaphorical sexuality; I’m talking about a sexualizing effect on discourse. (106)

She goes on to describe this effect in her own experience as her experience coming into philosophy and her experience coming into her body became “one and the same experience” (107). She says this only to elaborate that since she thinks, she no longer has the same body—recall her description of Dewey’s conception of experience as a river that is refilled and regenerated by raindrops—but, rather, several given her various experiences, philosophical and sexual: “My

⁸ In the translator’s preface, Shread writes that Malabou “develops the structuring concept of *l’ecart* in concert with the clitoris. It is important to distinguish her conception, translated here as ‘caesura,’ from the use of the same word by Jacques Rancière, in whose work it is translated alternately as ‘interval’ or ‘gap,’ as well as from Jacques Derrida’s *différance*” (2022, xiii).

efforts to loosen up my desire, to enrich my ‘sexual relationships’ with other partners—he, she, they are not only real, but also virtual, logical, textual—also shaped my clitoris, left it trembling quivering, alive in an entirely new way that has nothing to do with sublimation” (107).

The lived body, the soma, CE , is vividly at play but not without challenge. Here it is worth bringing in Shusterman’s conclusion to *Ars Erotica*’s “Speculative Postscript: Decoupling Beauty from Love and Inventing the Aesthetic,” in which he suggests that modern dualism between mind and body led to the invention of the aesthetic because the historical connection, since Plato, of eros and beauty had become reductively carnal and inadequately spiritual (2021a, 391–392). This often led to a blurring between love and lust as seen in Hobbes and Spinoza (392–393). With the pietism of Kant, aesthetics could maintain its nobler ideals, so long as the body was neglected, and the soul disinterested in beauty. “Beauty,” Shusterman writes, “to maintain its ennobling spiritual quality and edifying uplift, had to forsake the erotic with its impure sensuality and passion for possessive union” (394). Before closing with his observation that Nietzsche’s aesthetics came close to restoring eros and beauty, Shusterman discusses Schopenhauer’s extreme division between the brain-based, cognitively rich aesthetic and the genital-based, cognitively deficient, and desirous will: “For Schopenhauer, ‘the genitals are the real *focus* of the will, and are therefore the opposite pole to the brain, the representative of knowledge” (395). Neuropragmatism on its own terms is anathema to Schopenhauer and the western aesthetic tradition here. Somaesthetics is similarly against such unwarranted dichotomizing. *Ars erotica*, as Shusterman concludes, must reject this separation of love and beauty (396). Malabou, however, takes matters further, when she writes:

It’s not about my non-binary mind and my clitoridian body. Intellectual non-binarism is the opposite of a de-sexualization. Likewise, the clitoridian libido is not separate from the intellect. My clitoris is on synchronous alert with my brain; the burning line stretches from one extremity of my being to the other. Strangely, this line challenges me to “identify” myself sexually, even as the categories available for doing so become increasingly porous. (2021, p. 107)

The porous nature of culture as a phase of nature, and of CE comes to mind in Malabou’s sharing her experience. Neuropragmatism, despite its emphasis on the innervation of the whole soma, has thus far failed to touch upon the continuity and synchronicity between the brain and the clitoris, on the eroticization of intelligence. I wonder whether Malabou’s experience illustrates growing sideways in that she rejects the binaries and nevertheless finds herself in the strange position of trying to identify herself sexually. If Shusterman fails to discuss the clitoris, he becomes phallogocentric. If Malabou fails to identify herself sexually, does she commit the very erasure she aims to prevent? I struggle to imagine a phallogocentric man writing, without consequence, that his phallic libido is not separate from the intellect. And yet, the phallogocentrism of western philosophy is an active dissection of the brain from the genitals, as Schopenhauer so vividly describes it. I wonder whether Dewey’s body-mind is a burning line throughout CE .

A critic may wonder what is so special about Malabou’s experience, her emphatically feminine and clitoridian experience, as opposed to a masculine or phallic experience. Malabou reminds us that there is no symmetry here beyond the recognition that gender and sex are not coextensive: “... so many studies, analyses, representations—artistic or other—have been devoted to this anatomy, this virility, to the logics of masculinity in general, that we simply cannot equate them with approaches to feminine anatomy, where the representations and schema amount to no more than a few stereotypical snapshots. Clearly, there is a disproportionate visibility here” (113). Among the

lessons to be learned from this is that any reconstruction of *ars erotica* for a queer future must be sensitive to this asymmetry, to this invisibility that is “the reality of the feminine” (113).

Immediately, Malabou raises another provocative question: “But what meaning can a philosopher’s experience have for non-philosophers?” Her answer is not the universalizing, phallogocentric view: “It’s just the same as any confession—any narrative of initiation, trauma or transition” (113). As she elaborates, she makes the point both neuropragmatism’s CE and somaesthetics’s soma both endorse and yet fail to appreciate in their neglect of the clitoridian: “The biological body is never alone or self-sufficient. It always moves beyond its first casing..., shaped by discourses, norms, representations. A body is always an arrangement for the transfer, circulation and telepathy between an anatomical reality and a symbolic projection” (114). Otherwise, “if the body were nothing but an anatomical given,” Malabou observes, returning us back to the theme of health and repair, “it would not survive its wounds” (114). CE’s impulsion to cope and ameliorate yields symbolization through which the self both re-identifies and disidentifies. For Malabou, this nexus of body and symbol, nature and culture, is through philosophy. “But there are others—so many others” (114).

In embracing the non-binary nature of philosophy in opposition to its phallogocentrism, Malabou advocates for deconstruction. She suggests “A clitoridian zone of the *logos*” (115). Rejecting essentialism, Malabou invites her readers to experience new forms of ecstasy: “The clitoris in texts signals the place where philosophers pleasure themselves and give up identifying with their anatomical sex and social gender” (115). How an individual does this is unique to their experience, to their nexus of the biological and symbolic, to their queer CE.

For Malabou, some of the attempts to reclaim the clitoris remain too phallic (115–118) in their maintaining traditional power hierarchies, effectively attributing to the clitoris what has long been the sole domain of the phallus. Such discourse, Malabou argues, brings us back to the old problems of duality, of “the passive/active dichotomy and its disastrous effects, in terms of both the connotations of a logic of virility and of the renewal of the vaginal and the clitoridian that it revives” (118). Malabou rejects the analogy with the phallus: “Clitoridian pleasure is not the effect of piercing, penetration or stabbing” (118).⁹ She rejects the power relation others give to the clitoris because “The clitoris is an anarchist” (119).

The final chapter of *Pleasure Erased* culminates in the cultural critique afforded by the clitoridian. Just as Tschaep discusses the limitations and oppressions of straight time, Malabou traces the violence of heteronormativity and neoliberalism to western philosophy’s obsession with first principles, with *arkhé*. This obsession “assigns a temporal order by privileging what comes first, both in the order of power and chronologically. Hence, anarchy means without hierarchy or origin” (120). To phallogocentrism, this is nothing but chaos and disorder. But, Malabou observes, there is a sense in which anarchy refers to self-organization without a command structure. This self-organization is inherent in evolutionary processes as signified by the nonlinear dynamics of CE as well as in allostasis. Though Malabou is writing of political solidarity in the history of anarchy, the parallel with biology is undeniable: “Order without command or origin is not necessarily disorder—in fact, not at all—rather, it is an other arrangement, an order composed without domination. One that comes only of itself and that counts only on itself” (121). Indeed, recalling Malabou’s discussion of Dewey’s conception of experience and education, the continuities extend from the biological through intelligence to the sociocultural.

⁹ What can be learned from Micronesian techniques like *gichigich* that employ the penis as clitoral stimulators, not as piercers, penetrators or stabbers?

Just as Dewey concludes “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” (1939), with his statement that growth in ordered richness of experience results from democracy’s rejection of authority external to experience—viz., of *arkhé*—Malabou considers the clitoris in similarly anarchic terms: “its pleasure dynamic detached from any principle or goal. There’s no governing a clitoris. Despite all attempts to master it via patriarchal authority, psychoanalytic diktak, moral imperatives, the weight of custom or ancestral ballast—it resists” (2022, 121). And just as Dewey sought the defeat of domination, so does Malabou as she reminds us that feminism is an active effort in this fight against *arkhé*. She concludes *Pleasure Erased*:

But to be without a ruling order [arkhé] is not to be without memory. That is why it’s essential we not amputate feminism from the feminine. The feminine is, first and foremost, a reminder; it recalls the multiple forms of violence done to women, yesterday and today—every instance of mutilation, rape, harassment, femicide. Clearly, the clitoris is in many ways the depository of this memory, simultaneously symbolizing and incarnating all that is unbearable in the autonomy of women’s pleasure. At the same time, as I have said, the feminine transcends woman, denaturalizes woman and, in so doing—beyond the depravity of all the terrible and tiny abusers—it envisages a political sphere that is an indifference to mastery.

The feminine is that which ties this memory to this future. (123)

7. The Clitoridian, *Ars Erotica*, Foraging Amid Perplexity

I have only begun foraging through several related and superficially unrelated discourses, from somaesthetics and neuropragmatism to queer theory and evo-devo. My efforts at foraging, though incomplete, are in response to Shusterman’s call to move *ars erotica* forward by recognizing and including queer lives. My efforts are also in response to Malabou’s challenge to philosophy generally, to give up on the phallocentrism and take up the clitoridian. Shusterman’s *Ars Erotica* is inherently phallocentric because the histories he considers are patriarchal and sexist if not outright heteronormative, and because the philosophical enterprise remains phallocentric. Malabou’s challenge, however, perplexes Shusterman’s challenge because the entire tradition of *ars erotica* neglects the clitoris as does most of the philosophical tradition. Queer pragmatism, I have suggested, complements and offers useful tools for and from queer theory generally in taking up clitoridian thinking. In bringing together these various and, perhaps conflicting, perspectives on the soma, the brain, on intelligence, and on anarchy and democracy, I hope to have contributed to a needed but perplexing conversation. The uncertainty and likely failures in this effort, however, will not be in vain, so long as future thinking, including my own, about these issues finds greater coherence.

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