Journal of Somaesthetics

Queering the Soma

Volume 10, Number 1 (2024)

somaesthetics.aau.dk

Editorial Board

Published by
Aalborg University Press

Journal website
somaesthetics.aau.dk

The Journal of Somaesthetics was founded by Richard Shusterman, Else Marie Bukdahl and Ståle Stenslie. The journal is funded by The Joint Committee for Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences, NOS-HS and Independent Research Fund Denmark.

ISSN: 2246-8498

Contents

Editorial

Queering the Soma

Mark Dietrich Tschaepe

According to Richard Shusterman, "the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it—how bodily norms of health, skill, and beauty, and even our categories of sex and gender, are constructed to reflect and sustain social forces" (Shusterman 2020, 247). In this issue, authors consider somatic identities and behaviors that subvert somatic normativity, with a special focus on gender and sexuality. Most work in somaesthetics has been devoted to heteronormative identities, behaviors, and histories. There has been little devoted to those that fall outside this narrow category. This issue is dedicated to intersections between queerness and somaesthetics, broadly construed. Each author supplies a unique perspective on queering that pertains to gender, sexuality, and somaesthetics as a philosophical approach to experience. With this issue, we strive to continue expanding somaesthetics as an inclusive, open-ended, and melioristic approach to inquiry.

T.J. Bonnet's essay, "The Nonbinary Orientation of Somaesthetics" argues for what they call "the incipient queerness of somaesthetics." For Bonnet, *nonbinary* captures the anti-foundationalism and anti-dualism of somaesthetics. Drawing on the work of thinkers such as Sara Ahmed, Shannon Sullivan, and Paul B. Preciado, Bonnet argues that somaesthetics is a "natively queer philosophical orientation that not only matures the philosophy that came before it but also positions itself for subversive modes of actions."

In "Deviance and the Aesthetic Schema: Queer(ed) Somaesthetic Analysis of *Poor Things* (2023)," Kei Graves provides a queer(ed) somaesthetic analysis of the film's protagonist, Bella Baxter. Graves's argument "explores how Bella's body serves as a vehicle for learning through the sensual erotic, a source of social discourse on personhood, morality, and autonomy, and a space where others project hegemonic norms of beauty, gender, and sexuality." The analysis of Bella's character as queer(ed) parallels experiences of people who are marginalized and minoritized, especially those who identify and are identified as queer. Through a queer(ed) somaesthetic view of the film, Graves explores both how hegemony is imposed upon bodies marginalized as deviant and how the erotic may be used for self-actualization.

Two authors address drag performance specifically, providing important perspectives that contribute to work in queering somaesthetics. First, Dani Jenck's essay, "Politicization as Signification: Drag Performance as Hermeneutics," argues that drag personas and performances inherently challenge dualistic ideas of gender identity and expression. Jenck begins by applying a Ricouerian "framework of narrative onto drag performance by focusing on how the politicization of drag performance acts as narrative text that is layered onto and alongside drag performativity." From this framework, the author provides an account of their own experience as a drag queen. Jenck describes how the complexity of drag expands the scope and possibilities of Judith Butler's performativity theory regarding gender "while also further bolstering how their theory interweaves with other theories that concern the marginalization of peoples and bodies." Second, Megan Volpert's essay, "Shusterman Goes to Camp: An Ars Erotica of Somaesthetics in Drag Culture," addresses the lack of work that has been done concerning camping and queering in drag culture. Drawing on *Rupaul's Drag Race* as a somatic framework, Volpert uses drag as a way to begin queering *ars erotica*. She argues, "somaesthetics can and should theorize drag queening by describing how the bodily practices associated with it function to construct a queer culture with attendant aesthetic and moral values that may often run counter to those of the heterosexual majority in-group." This essay serves as an instrument to pave the way for somaesthetics to become more inclusive and less heteronormative.

"Foraging Amid Perplexity: Queer Pragmatism, Neuropragmatism, and the Erotic Arts" also expands on the notion of *ars erotica*. In this essay, Tibor Solymosi challenges Shusterman's proposal to develop a pluralistic *ars erotica* by using Catherine Malabou's recent philosophical work on the clitoris. Solymosi applies Malabou's idea of clitoridian philosophy with queer pragmatism and neuropragmatism as an expansive set of somaesthetic instruments that trouble phallocentric notions of ars erotica and contribute to more inclusive inquiry.

This issue also includes a performance artist's self-reflection about their work and an interview with a visual artist. Creator and performer, Rowena Gander, who has worked in pole dance for 10 years, critically analyzes her solo show, Barely Visible (2021). She focuses on the empowering and erotic potential of her performance and how expressions of sexuality emerge from her creative actions as a gay woman.

In their interview with the Journal of Somaesthetics, Ian Gerson provides insight into queer themes in their somatic art. They touch on themes that include trans as a verb, the concept of tremble, and the notion of illegibility as a form of protection. Speaking with JoS, Gerson explores how queer theorists and experiences influence their work with found objects, decisions concerning materials, and the creation of wearables.

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.[1] *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*

1 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.[1], 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.[2] 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.[3]

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,[4] 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.[5]

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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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*

8 "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' [*leibhaften*] 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.[9] 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

9 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 Dubrule 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 kinesthesis 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 identity 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[10]

10 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, Tschaepe (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 a 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.

Dubrule, 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–xlvii. 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 Małecki, 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.

Deviance and the Aesthetic Schema: A Queer(ed) Somaesthetic Analysis of "Poor Things"

Kei Graves

Abstract: *The following leverages a queer(ed) somaesthetic lens to analyze the protagonist of "Poor Things" (2023), Bella Baxter, as a figure of deviance. Bella's body, as a queer(ed) space, serves as a vehicle for learning through the sensual erotic, a source of social discourse on personhood, morality, and autonomy, and a space where others project hegemonic norms of beauty, gender, and sexuality. The article further examines queerness through her identity, actions, gender, and sexuality and challenges conventional norms, making her body a site for exploration and expression of deviation. Finally, the article examines the role of power, policing, and violence as a by-product of deviance, drawing parallels between Bella's experiences and those of queer people and other marginalized groups. By exploring Bella's character, the paper illuminates "Poor Things" (2023) as a compelling commentary on queer(ed) and embodied discussions of identity, autonomy, and personhood.*

"I am Bella Baxter. I am a flawed, experimenting person. I seek outings and adventures. Bella's so much to discover. And there is a world to enjoy, circumnavigate. It is the goal of all to progress, grow."
Bella Baxter, "Poor Things" (2023)

Yorgos Lanthimos' film "Poor Things" (2023) seemingly acts as what some have called a female version of Frankenstein. However, the film offers more than a mere duplication of a timeless classic. Instead, it provides a compelling commentary on the constructs of identity, autonomy, and beauty. The protagonist, Bella Baxter, emerges as a figure of deviance, her body depicted and existing as a queer(ed) space. The analysis explores how Bella's body serves as a vehicle for learning through the sensual erotic, a source of social discourse on personhood, morality, and autonomy, and a space where others project hegemonic norms of beauty, gender, and sexuality.[1]

The analysis examines Bella's queerness through its manifestation in her actions, her identity, and her gender and sexuality. First, her queer(ed) origins of reanimation and subsequent

1 The article uses terms like "womanhood," "mother," "female," and "vulva" to analyze Bella's body and describe her story. However, these terms are not inherently exclusive to any gender identity, expression, or experience.

departure from period-typical norms, including the child-mother relationship and Victorian aesthetic schema, invite the exploration as an embodiment of deviation.

Second, the analysis examines Bella's body as an avenue for her exploration and learning. Through her sexual and erotic experiences, Bella navigates her identity, establishes new ways of engaging with others, and seeks autonomy in those relationships.

Finally, the analysis articulates the role of power, policing, and violence as a by-product of deviance. Other characters' responses to Bella's deviation emanate from a need to control and correct behaviors contravening their aesthetic schema. These manifestations of power are also embodied and grounded in the desire to control Bella's body through actual or threats of violence.

Bella’s body and subsequent experiences present parallels to the actual lived experiences of marginalized groups, particularly queer people, both historically and contemporarily. The analysis establishes these connections as a component of the queer(ed) somaesthetic exploration of the film.

1. Queering Bella’s Body

Bella's body serves as both a location and a catalyst for queer(ed) aesthetic discourses throughout the film. As the story unfolds, the audience discovers that Bella was formerly Victoria Blessington, a pregnant woman who completes suicide. Dr. Godwin brings her back to life by reanimating her using the brain of Victoria's baby. Dr. Godwin's actions create a queer(ed) somatic relationship between Bella and her body, deviating from a normative self-body relationship. If queerness is a sensory and relational difference destabilizing the "foundations upon which identity and sexuality are constructed" (Phillips, 2009; Halperin, 1995), then Bella's self-body relationship becomes inherently queer. She simultaneously embodies both her mother and child yet exists as neither.

A queer(ed) somaesthetics recognizes queerness as an embodied difference expressed through one's thought processes, social interactions, and expressions of gender, sexuality, and personhood. Bella's deviation in her self-body relationship marks a profound difference from the typical self-body relationship and a departure from a typical mother-child relationship. In a normative relationship, after nine months, the child no longer shares their mother's body. In this case, Bella forever maintains the connection to her mother's body as she inhabits it while not retaining her mother's previous experiences or knowledge. Instead, her unique circumstances and origin require a (re)learning and (re)fashioning of her sense of self. While her body retains the marks of her former life, including the c-section scar from her surgery, her mind does not contain these memories.

One can draw a comparison between Bella's experiences of (re)learning and (re)fashioning further with some experiences of transitioning as a transgender or gender diverse person. For example, suppose someone transitions, then they might begin to re(learn) and (re)fashion their sense of self through their gender expression (i.e., chosen name, pronouns, or clothing), how they move through the world (i.e., ways of speech or movement such as walking or positioning their bodies), and what memories or experiences they choose to retain as a part of their understanding of self (i.e., one's deadname, baby pictures, or association with family). These moments may be a space of intentional divergence from the dominant social schemas that instruct a person to align with their assigned sex or gender without question. Bella's experience can mirror the opportunity for the "reconstructing and the reinvisioning of self and possibility," which serves a vital purpose in the lives of queer people (The New School & hooks, 2014).

2. Embodied Deviation from Victorian Schema

Bella's body further deviates from the aesthetic norms for women in Victorian London (1872-1901). Sociohistorical, cultural, and temporal factors that inform culture shape aesthetic discourses (Schusterman, 1999; James, 2013). These discourses shape the aesthetic gaze as it views and evaluates bodies (James, 2013; Brady, 2013). While responses may vary, the conceptualizations of sameness or difference in aesthetically viewing bodies inform one's aesthetic schema (Norman, 2004; Delong, 2023). Presentations aligning with familiar aesthetic preferences produce positive responses (beauty), while those deviating from the schema produce negative responses (ugliness) (Norman, 2004; Hagman, 2006; DeLong, 2023; Cohen, 2013).

Initially, Bella's portrayal aligns well with the physical expression of womanhood during the Victorian Period in many ways. She appears to the audience as a young woman with pale skin, large blue eyes, and long black hair. Women met conventionally attractive criteria if they had clear faces, bright eyes, tinted lips, pale skin, dark hair, and eyebrows (Lennox, 2016). However, Bella deviates from these beauty ideals by wearing her hair down and free flowing along her back throughout the film. A vital piece of the social schema for Victorian women included how they wore their hair. Women who met the social schema and embodied ideas of piety and chasteness wore their hair covered. While those who did not were unchaste or morally depraved as "a woman's long hair… is the emblem of her femininity…a symbol of her sexuality, and the longer, thicker and more wanton the tresses, the more passionate the heart beneath them is assumed to be" (Aspinall, 2012, para 5-6).

Understanding the schema for Victorian women is valuable to the reading of Bella's character, who ultimately dresses and styles herself according to her desires and preferences rather than conforming to the preestablished social norms. During the Victorian Period, the term 'fallen woman' describes a woman who does not meet the dominant social schema, one who differs from societal expectations and consequently is viewed as a representation of ugliness, or darkness, and as something in dialectical opposition to the 'angel in the house' or representation of beauty (Nochlin, 1978; Aspinall, 2012; Lennox, 2016). Bella's flamboyant fashion choices (Ciminello, 2023), coupled with her deviating behaviors, make her stand out compared to other characters in the film.

3. Queering Bella's Sexuality

Bella's sexuality deviates from the social schema, influencing others' reactions to her. A pivotal example occurs shortly after Max McCandles, Dr. Godwin's former student and assistant hired to track Bella's progress, joins the research team. Initially, Max is fascinated by Bella, finding her physically attractive and viewing her first as an adult woman and second as a developing experiment prone to occasional violent fits. The awareness of his preestablished attraction is valuable to understanding the shifting alignment of Bella to Max's schema. As Bella advances developmentally from an 'infant' to an age where she can use more complex language, she becomes aware of her body's capability for sexual pleasure. The film depicts her discovering masturbation while eating breakfast alone at the dining room table. Elated, she calls in Mrs. Pim, the housekeeper, to demonstrate how she makes her own 'happiness' on Mrs. Pim.

Understandably, Mrs. Pim responds negatively to the attempted non-consensual attention but also loudly instructs Bella not to masturbate at all. Max also scolds Bella, who asserts that the behavior is "inappropriate for polite society." Max, who still finds Bella's physical form beautiful,

reacts in disgust to her newfound sexual awareness. He responds with ugliness through his disgust, motivated by discord within his schema.

Bella's action of embracing and seeking pleasure is queerness in action. Queerness is not necessarily about sex, though that can be a component of it. Instead, queerness can be "about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" within one's society (The New School & hooks, 2014). During the Victorian Period, women were to be sexually engaged only with one man and were not to seek pleasure independently. They were to be 'objects of pleasure for men to use.' In opposition to this perspective of her body as property for others, Bella engages with the "epicenter of female sexuality in which pleasure and repression collide on an embodied fault line that is both private and public, political and existential, symbolic and corporeal" (Waskul et al., 2007, p. 152).

Bella deviates from expected behavior in seeking her pleasure through masturbation, in speaking frankly about masturbation and her pleasure openly, and in attempting to entice others into engaging in the same action. Queerness is grounded in difference by its very nature. It leans away from historically accepted ways of being, such as cisgender, heteronormative, and patriarchal dominant cultural hegemonies – generating new ways of being and knowing within our societies (Phillips, 2009; Walks, 2014).

The reactions of ugliness from Mrs. Pim and Max can draw another valuable parallel as an allegory for queer experience. In many societies informed by heteronormative, patriarchal, and Abrahamic religions, the experiences and identities of queer people encounter ugliness. This ugliness manifests verbally through statements of denial or unacceptance, reactions of disgust, and even violence, much like Bella experiences verbal denial and admonishment from Mrs. Pim and Max. Despite this adverse reaction, this moment in the film illustrates Bella transcending beyond the social forces that attempt to control her way of being and claims her liberatory and affirming sense of autonomy (Friedman, 2019; Schneewind, 2009). In doing so, it mirrors how queer people may navigate negative responses to their identities and personhood to establish empowerment and strive for self-actualization.

Beyond allegory, there is an inherent and literal sense of queerness and beauty in Bella's reclamation of her body. In Paris, Bella begins working at a Brothel where she meets Toinette, a young Black woman. Toinette, outspoken and educated, helps Bella navigate a sex-worker world and introduces her to philosophies and politics that further Bella's social awareness. Toinette finds Bella beautiful in their sameness, two women engaging in sex work and seeking a better and more equitable world. Toinette illustrates her affections through her words and actions, including an erotic scene between Toinette and Bella.

During this sex scene, Bella's body transforms from purely a queer(ed) entity to a character with a queer identity. As an identity, queerness can represent the spectrum of the LGBTQIA+ community and "different hegemonic identities of gender and sexuality" (Walks, 2014; Weston, 1993). Her sexuality, which previously had been admonished by Mrs. Pim and Max, is now on display and celebrated by a close person in her life. The film's unabashed illustration of Bella and Toinette's sexual engagement is essential after showing numerous heterosexual scenes between Bella and various men. It queers what the viewer comes to believe about Bella's body and sexuality throughout the film by showing her finding pleasure with another woman.

One critique of the film revolves around whether Bella, in her sexual explorations, is capable of consent due to her 'mental age.' While this paper aims not to explore this component of the discussion, a few considerations regarding the film and consent exist. Throughout the film, the audience is not aware of 'how old the brain of the baby is' within Bella's character. Early on, it is apparent that she is still learning to walk, talk, and interface with others in her world. When

Bella becomes sexually active later in the film with Duncan Wedderburn and others, viewers can make meaning about her behavioral patterns and disposition. However, the film does not address her 'mental age.' Some commentary from individuals who worked on the film, such as the intimacy coordinator Elle McAlpine, envisions Bella as 16-17 (Hunt, 2024). While, Emma Stone, the actress who portrays Bella, shares that she did not see Bella as a child in any of those scenes (Harrison, 2024). Other opinions suggest that the film, regardless of the 'age' of Bella in the scenes offers important representation and commentary of masturbation for girls and women in a world that does not teach them about their bodies (Roberts, 2023). The author contends that these are valuable questions and considerations in exploring the film but are outside the scope of this analysis.

4. The Embodied Sensual Erotic as Sense-Making

Bella's erotic sensuous experiences serve as her means of accessing, learning about, and understanding the world. As histories, beliefs, and ideas inform one's experiences, the brain constructs meaning, which shapes one's interpretation and construction of meaning (Schusterman, 1999; James, 2013; Ford, 2023). A valuable component of these experiences encompasses the sensual, sexual, and erotic experiences, both real and imagined (Lorde, 2007; Sartwell, 2021; Schusterman, 2023). Activities like masturbation are a method of somatic discovery, providing a space for sensual and erotic information gathering for the embodied self (Waskul et al., 2007; Roberts, 2023).

Following the infamous masturbation scene, Bella's sexual relationship with Duncan enables her access to varied experiences, advancing her growth and development. His affections and doting enable Bella to visit faraway lands like Spain and Alexandria, try new foods like oysters and pastries, and gain valuable world experiences that illustrate the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. In her travels, she forges new friendships with Harry Astley and Martha Von Kurtzroc, who introduce her to new ideas through sharing books, experiences, and philosophical dialogues. These relationships and experiences are only made possible through the access provided through her sexual engagement with Duncan.

Bella's engagement in sex work further acts as a learning mechanism by challenging her sense of erotic schema. When Duncan and Bella arrive in Paris after a series of sordid events, they appear penniless, and, to make money, Bella chooses to work at a brothel. During that first client-sex worker exchange, she finds that the man uses her only for his pleasure. To Bella, that is a new experience, and the lack of interest in their mutual erotic satisfaction shocks her. After becoming a full-time resident and worker within the brothel, Bella learns that, ultimately, the transactional exchange does not meet her desire or need for the sensual or erotic as a pleasurable learning tool. It deviates from her schema as a form of ugliness that drives her desire to change it (Cohen, 2013).

In the face of ugliness, Bella queers her relationship with her clients to generate change claiming the power of the erotic. She enacts her will by establishing boundaries and processes with her clients, involving humor, story-telling, and bodily hygiene to make the process more enjoyable for them both.

These additions not only queer the client-sex worker relationship through transformation but also create beauty for Bella. Several scenes illustrate the change within the client-sex worker relationship, such as her meeting with a working-class man who shares with her the story of how he fell off his bike as a child or the time she and another client took turns telling jokes, and they laughed before having sex. These moments create a point of connection, intimacy,

and learning that Bella leverages to further her sensuous needs and, inadvertently, those of the clients. The sharing of vulnerability between Bella and her clients creates an opportunity for shared connection and trust (Ward, 2022), even if transactional, which brings her closer to her desired schema. She is, to the viewer's knowledge, the only sex worker in the Brothel who uses this strategy, and it ultimately makes her the most sought-after as well (Roberts, 2024).

Bella's use of the erotic as a learning tool also allows her to teach through the erotic. In queering her client-sex worker relationship, she not only establishes and claims a beautiful exchange for herself but creates a unique experience for her clients. The vulnerability and sharing provide pleasure not only through sexual activities but also through epistemic pleasures of knowing, learning, and receiving knowledge from others (Gill, 2014).

Bella's queering of the client-sex worker roles empowers her within the erotic, allowing her to change the social conditions to align with her sensual aesthetic schema and regain her physical autonomy. The body that previously was an 'experiment' by Dr. Godwin, to an object of desire and intrigue by Max, then an object of possession and obsession by Duncan, and temporarily an unruly tenant by Madame Swiney, is now able to act within her proclivities and to do so while obtaining knowledge.

Bella experiences a deeply embodied sense of gender-based oppression through the challenges she navigates in a patriarchal society that devalues women. Her actions following the changes to her client-sex worker relationships illustrate the power of reclaiming her labor from an oppressive, unfeeling system by engaging in it how she so chooses. The reclamation of her body and her labor allows her to "develop a healthy relationship to her sexuality; she knows sex should be enjoyable for her, not just for men, and that she should not be coerced into it" (Roberts, 2024, para 22). Finally, Bella's deliberate deviation from the dominant schema as a woman embracing the sensual and erotic provides direction for how she navigates the Brothel space as a sex worker and, ultimately, as a woman who will choose to leave that space.

While the body offers epistemic opportunities, it also serves as a space for domination and policing (Lorde, 2007; Sartwell, 2021; Armstrong, 1996). The body as an aesthetic object is evaluated and valued based on numerous criteria. The space where bodies may align or diverge from their society is also where they become objects of power or oppression to control or police others (Bishop & Wojtanowski, 2018; Foucault, 1990). These dynamics play a central role in the film for Bella, a character actively seeking autonomy and the authority to make decisions regarding her body and its use.

Bella's body, as a target of the aesthetic gaze, is also reduced to a sexual object that many desire to control. Lorde's (2007) concept of power in the erotic as connection or pornographic abuse illustrates how various characters attempt to punish Bella's deviation from their aesthetic schema. Duncan is a prominent character who seduces Bella's soma with ideas of freedom (both physical and sexual) and an escape from the 'polite society' referenced by Max. Like Max, Duncan is captivated by Bella's innocence and childlike disposition and is forthcoming and explicit with his sexual desires towards Bella. He views Bella as a conquest, representing his schema for what he defines as an ideal woman. That ideal schema includes one who is insatiable, interested in him, who validates his sexual prowess, and who can look good on his arm as he engages in his debaucherous actions of gambling and drinking. Initially, Bella begins their sexual journey aligning with Duncan's schema. However, that quickly changes following their arrival in Lisbon.

Bella's desire for autonomy becomes apparent through her desire to explore the city, engaging in self-pleasure by way of embodied experiences with the world around her, and engaging in sexual activities with other men. One such incident in Lisbon occurs when Bella disappears for the day, exploring the city streets, drinking, and ending her escapades by returning to Duncan,

who discovers she has engaged in sexual activities with another man. For Bella, the exchange between her and this mystery man is a product of her naivety and lack of understanding of the man's intentions with her. She views it purely as an experiment or learning opportunity and is confused by Duncan's horrified reaction to the discovery. He is so distraught at his inability to control her actions that he steals Bella away onto a Ship in a chest, kidnapping her to exercise control over her body.

For Duncan, these actions mark the advent of Bella's dramatic deviation from his schema through her actions of individual personhood, intellectual development, and sexuality. He employs his power to impede or stop her deviation by using methods of control. In another incident, Duncan forcefully removes Bella from a table when she spits something unpleasant onto her plate. He holds her arm painfully before telling her, "You will confine yourself to three phrases. 'How marvelous. Delighted. And how do they make the pastries so crisp?' Yes?" The dominant culture wields power as a weapon as Duncan illustrates in his treatment of Bella.

Aesthetics must consider the insurmountable role of power as that which creates, reinforces, and is created and reinforced by dominant social hegemonies of the beautiful, the sensual, and the erotic. Power creates and reinforces hierarchies wherein those having access to abilities, people, or resources can advance or sustain the conditions wherein their power is enactable (Schusterman, 1999; Young, 2011; James, 2013; Ford, 2023). One of the many ways power manifests is through the policing and punishing of undesirable characteristics and reinforcing and praising desired ones. In the context of real Victorian London and the setting of "Poor Things," the dominant culture is patriarchal, cisnormative, and heteronormative, as much of the population aligns with the established social schema by being cisgender and heterosexual (Foucault, 1990; Friedman, 2019).

A queer(ed) somaesthetic approach considers how power reinforces somatic schemas of domination and control. Duncan's treatment of Bella illustrates patriarchal notions of who holds power in their relationship. It is an attempt to control not only her sexual self but her literal way of experiencing the world. Duncan's attempt to exercise power over Bella further parallels the policing of hegemonic norms that scrutinize queer people for their deviations from the dominant social schema of expected behavior and portrayal.

Duncan's reactions to Bella's deviation from the schema also inform his view of her value and morality. The Victorian social schema establishes these connections, portraying women as 'angels' or 'fallen' based on their individualized, subjective choices in decorating and using their bodies. A notable example of this is following Bella's experience with Duncan when he learns that she has engaged in sex work to earn them money. He lashes out at her, telling her that “whoring is the worst thing that a woman can do” before taking her money and leaving her alone in Paris. Duncan's engagement in the discourse of Bella's profession manifests as avoidance and anger as his specific schema dictates what professions and actions are acceptable for women. The reaction Duncan can further parallel the queer experience wherein individuals may place moral value upon the alignment or deviation of one's sexuality, gender, or gendered expression with the hegemonic norm. The reaction of ugliness by those who place negative moral judgment upon queer people may then manifest as avoidance or anger, like Duncan, per the discord in their individual schemas.

While at the brothel, Bella experiences further power exerted over her through her divergence from the typical sex worker-madame relationship. While working at the brothel, Bella establishes her autonomy in her client-sex worker relationships by infusing her subjective preferences into the erotic exchange. Having grown her confidence, Bella attempts to advocate for herself and the other sex workers by inquiring why the staff cannot choose which clients they wish to serve.

The suggestion deviates from the typical client-sex worker and client-madame relationship in that it positions sex workers with more power and autonomy over their engagements. Bella has found enjoyment and alignment with her schema in holding more control over what her client relationships look like and believes there is value in expanding this opportunity.

The suggestion to shift the client-sex worker dynamic is queer in that it extends outside of preestablished heterosexual hegemonic norms at the time. It offers opportunities for transforming the sex worker-client relationship from a subservient transaction wherein the sex worker must comply with the client's wants regardless of their preferences to a more equal exchange. A reality wherein one views the sex worker as a sexual expert or teacher and the client as a student who, rather than merely fulfilling their sexual desires, can have them "explored, considered, transformed, and engaged in a way that recognizes the ontological specificity of the parties involved" (Cahill, 2024, p. 848). In this way, transforming the client-sex worker relationship would offer a Foucauldian shift in power that embodies capillary power, extending into the learning processes, aspects, and actions of life (Foucault, 1980; Ivashkevich, 2012).

Madame Swiney's reaction to Bella's deviation from the schema is ugliness by way of violence. After refuting Bella's suggestion, Madame Swiney reinforces the power dynamic by stating ”that is the way things are” before dismissing the women. She meets with Bella privately and bites her ear to the point of drawing blood. A practice she will repeat and one which uses her body to police the bodies of the women under her employ. Bella has broken the unspoken rules about who holds positions of power and makes decisions within the brothel. Her action establishes that deviation from the brothel's subcultural norms will result in decisive and painful actions.

A final point of embodied erotic discourse central to the film is the role and symbolism of Bella's vulva, with an emphasis on the clitoris. To omit the emphasis on the vulva when discussing her body would do a disservice to the film. Bella explores her sexuality and pleasure through activities such as masturbating, engaging in penetrative sex, and receiving acts of oral sex (without reciprocating). These activities are more than gratuitous depictions of sex. They serve as critical points of development and growth for Bella.

The source of Bella's pleasure, her clitoris, is identified as the literal and symbolic source of her deviation. The audience meets Alfie Blessington, the husband of the deceased Victoria Blessington, in the final act. Following his and Duncan's interruption of Bella and Max's wedding, Bella goes to his estate, which is under duress due to his cruelty towards the staff. He believes that Bella (who he insists is Victoria) ran from him. In reckoning with the perception of Bella's deviation from the schema, Alfie schedules to have Bella castrated. Much like others in the film, he attempts to exert power over Bella through violence, believing that removing what he views as a literal and symbolic representation of rebellion and a threat to their marriage. Female castration in Victorian England was a method of controlling women. While it was not a standard procedure, clitoridectomy could occur in response to "behavior [s] seen as unfeminine and as a threat to marriage…[including] "distaste for marital intercourse," "a great distaste for her husband," violent behaviour, or even just answering back" (King, 2018, para 4). The discourse around Bella's body, sexuality, and the totality of her development and actions throughout the film lead to this climatic moment in a mirror to Victorian history.

Finally, recognizing the clitoris is a source of pleasurable sensuality that historically and arguably contemporarily is viewed as taboo and shameful. Its history and erasure (both literally and figuratively) can render it as "symbolic, corporeal, and experiential territory that may be occupied by others, in this case, men" who wish to exert extreme power and violence over others (Waskul et al., 2007, p. 166). The threat of castrating the protagonist attempts to sever not only

a source of embodied pleasure and joy but symbolically hinders her somatic experiences of knowing, being, and experiencing.

5. Conclusion

A queer(ed) somaesthetic analysis of "Poor Things" offers a valuable exploration how power is wielded over marginalized bodies in reaction to perceptions of deviance and the power of the erotic as a learning and self-actualizing mechanism. The analysis established Bella's queerness through its manifestation in her actions, her identity, and her gender and sexuality. Her body is a site of (re)learning (re)fashioning of her sense of self. Through her sexual and erotic experiences, Bella navigates her identity, establishes new ways of engaging with others, and seeks autonomy in those relationships. These embodied experiences are further established a site of power, policing, and violence as a by-product of deviance. Others' reactions to Bella illustrated how ugliness fuels reactions striving to control and correct behaviors contravening their aesthetic schema. These explorations serve as both an example and allegory for the experiences of queer people in historical and contemporary societies.

References

Armstrong, M. (1996). "The effects of blackness": Gender, race, and the sublime in aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54(3), 213. doi:10.2307/431624

Aspinall, H. (2012). *The Fetishization and objectification of the female body in Victorian culture - Arts and culture.* Retrieved from https://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-two/the-fetishization-and-objectification-of-the-female-body-in-victorian-culture

Baxter-Wright, D., & Williams, S. (2024, January 20). *Why are people talking about the poor things sex scenes?* Retrieved from https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a46349183/poor-things-sex-scenes/

Brady, E. (2012). Reassessing aesthetic appreciation of nature in the Kantian sublime. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 46(1), 91-109. doi:10.5406/jaesteduc.46.1.0091

Brady, E. (2013). The sublime, terrible beauty, and ugliness. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 166-182. doi:10.1017/cbo9781139018098.010

Cahill, A. J. (2014). The difference sameness makes: Objectification, sex work, and queerness. *Hypatia*, 29(4), 840-856. doi:10.1111/hypa.12111

Carpenter, B., O'Brien, E., Hayes, S., & Death, J. (2014). Harm, responsibility, age, and consent. *New Criminal Law Review*, 17(1), 23-54. doi:10.1525/nclr.2014.17.1.23

Ciminello, S. (2023, November 28). Interview: From discordant ensembles to condom capes, 'Poor things' costume designer Holly Waddington talks about Bella Baxter's sartorial expedition. Retrieved from https://awardswatch.com/interview-from-discordant-ensembles-to-condom-capes-poor-things-costume-designer-holly-waddington-talks-about-bella-baxters-sartorial-expedition/

Cohen, A. (2013). Kant on the possibility of ugliness. *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* 53(2), 199-209. doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayt002

DeLong, R. M. (2023, December 1). Understanding your aesthetic response: Communicating fashion: Trend research and forecasting. Retrieved from https://open.lib.umn.edu/

communicatingfashion/chapter/chapter-2-understanding-your-aesthetic-response/

Dyck, N. (2009). Restoring perspective: Life & treatment at London's asylum. Retrieved from https://www.lib.uwo.ca/archives/virtualexhibits/londonasylum/hysteria.html

Ford, J. (2023). *Teaching the actuality of revolution: Aesthetics, unlearning, and the sensations of struggle.* Madison, WI: Iskra Book.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings,* 1972-1977. Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction.* Vintage.

Friedman, D. (2019). *Before queer theory: Victorian aestheticism and the self*. JHU Press.

Hagman, G. (2006). *Aesthetic experience: Beauty, creativity, and the search for the ideal.* Rodopi.

Handler, R. (2023, December 8). Emma stone has created one of cinema's most shamelessly sexual characters. Retrieved from https://www.vulture.com/article/emma-stone-in-poor-things-yorgos-lanthimos.html

Harrison, E. (2024, February 10). Emma stone responds to claims that poor things is 'sexist' and 'exploitative'. Retrieved from https://uk.news.yahoo.com/emma-stone-responds-claims-poor-104752437.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG6mH3jAgm_lScgfa-IyRoNUaHSzmDt62NU_sZ4GBcbhcO58mMYXVbLXbWYd2Unx4f1Mqln4y4ENdKeOWT3WgYw2-ruyyg-7i8xq9Po1Omhc0XMamTSL7KQHgDy4NWZX884K2qB77ovzND1D8_NEvq4pSXM-CBDnD5ZJtiLq99ie

Hunt, E. (2024, January 30). 'With orgasm people strive for oblivion': Poor things' intimacy coordinator on consent, orgies and Emma stone. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/jan/30/poor-things-sex-scenes-intimacy-coordinator-elle-mcalpine-yorgos-lanthimos

Irvin, S. (Ed.). (2016). *Body aesthetics.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198716778.001.0001

Ivashkevich, O. (2012). Rethinking Children: Power, pedagogy, and contemporary art education Practices. *Art Education*, 65(1), 40-45. doi:10.1080/00043125.2012.11519159

James, R. (2013). Oppression, privilege, & Aesthetics: The use of the aesthetic in theories of race, gender, and sexuality, and the role of race, gender, and sexuality in philosophical aesthetics. *Philosophy Compass*, 8(2), 101-116. doi:10.1111/phc3.12002

King, A. (n.d.). Aesthetic attitude. Retrieved from https://iep.utm.edu/aesthetic-attitude/

King, H. (2018, October 29). The rise and fall of FGM in Victorian London. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-fgm-in-victorian-london-38327#:~:text=Yet%20in%201860s%20London%2C%20one,as%20a%20threat%20to%20marriage

Lorde, A. (2007). S*ister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

Levine-Clark, M. (2019). "I always prefer the scissors": Isaac Baker Brown and feminist histories of medicine. *Health Humanities Reader*, 215-225. doi:10.36019/9780813562483-024

The New School, & Hooks, B. 2. (2014). Are you still a slave? [Video]. Retrieved from https://livestream.com/thenewschool/slave

Norman, R. (2017, June 29). Norman's three levels of design. Retrieved from https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/norman-s-three-levels-of-design#:~:text=Don%20Norman%20proposes%20the%20emotional,visceral%2C%20behavioral%2C%20and%20reflective

Phillips, C. (2009). *Difference, disagreement and the thinking of queerness*. Borderlands, 8(2).

Roberts, S. (2024, January 15). The shame and pleasure of masturbation: Poor things gets girls' early sexual feelings right. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/the-shame-and-pleasure-of-masturbation-poor-things-gets-girls-early-sexual-feelings-right-220662

Sartwell, C. (2021). The erotic and the political: The Somaesthetics of sex in social context. Eidos. *A Journal for Philosophy of Culture,* 5(4), 152-155. doi:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0048

Schneewind, J. B. (2009). Autonomy, obligation, and virtue: An overview of Kant's moral philosophy. *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 248-276. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199563012.003.0014

Shusterman, R. (1999). Somaesthetics: A disciplinary proposal. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57(3), 299. doi:10.2307/432196

Soble, A. (2009). A history of erotic philosophy. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46(2-3), 104-120. doi:10.1080/00224490902747750

Spicher, D. (n.d.). Aesthetic taste. Retrieved from https://iep.utm.edu/aesthetic-taste/#:~:text=For%20David%20Hume%2C%20taste%20is,an%20act%20of%20the%20imagination

Stern, M. (2023, September 1). 'Poor things' director talks Emma stone's weird, wild sex scenes. Retrieved from https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-news/poor-things-emma-stone-wild-sex-scenes-yorgos-lanthimos-venice-film-festival-1234816571/

Walks, M. (2004). "We're here and we're queer?": An introduction to studies in queer anthropology. *Anthropologica*, 56(1), 3-16.

Ward, C. (2023). Audre Lorde's erotic as epistemic and political practice. *Hypatia*, 38(4), 896-917. doi:10.1017/hyp.2023.76

Waskul, D. D., Vannini, P., & Wiesen, D. (2007). Women and their clitoris: Personal discovery, signification, and use. *Symbolic Interaction,* 30(2), 151-174. doi:10.1525/si.2007.30.2.151

Weston, K. (1993). Lesbian/Gay studies in the house of anthropology. Annual Review of Anthropology, 22(1), 339-367. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.22.1.339

Zangwill, N. (2023). Aesthetic judgment (Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy). Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-judgment/#:~:text=To%20recall%2C%20it%20was%20argued,universal%20validity%2C%20where%20that%20can

Zhu, Z. (2022). Aesthetic object. *Chinese Aesthetics in a Global Context*, 65-90. doi:10.1007/978-981-16-7747-2_3

Politicization as Signification: Drag Performance as Hermeneutics

Danica Jenck

Abstract: *Judith Butler's seminal book,* Gender Trouble*, categorizes drag performance as an indicative example of gender performance. In it, they categorize drag performance along binary lines of gender "opposites". I argue that Butler's theory does not hold if the nuance inherent to drag performance is taken into consideration. In examining its complexity, I establish that the artform and its performers are politicized. Through this politicization, I explore how drag performers and drag performance are signified and are able to be understood hermeneutically as a way to expand Butler's initial theory.*

Keywords: *drag performance, gender performativity, politicization, hermeneutics*

1. Scope of Performativity

Judith Butler's Gender Trouble discusses how gender is performative emphasizing that drag performers "[play] upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (1990/2007, p. 187). Much of Butler's argument about gender performativity hinges on this idea that gender is not strictly tied to one's gender assignment at birth. However, this identification of drag performers and drag performance has permeated much of the literature in queer theory scholarship without much critical analysis as to whether this classification of drag is correct or accurate (Browne, 2007, p. 114; Cooper, 2020, p. 107; Halberstam, 2002/1998, p. 236; Hobson, 2013, p. 37).

Butler could not have anticipated trans studies or how their theory helped to establish the literature on gender identification and performativity. With this in mind, I will argue that it is worth examining the limits of gender performativity on one of the populations that Butler cites as an indicative example for their theory. Their foundational analysis on drag performers and drag performance leads to many complications especially because trans drag queens and cisgender drag queens undermine Butler's inherent analysis. Additionally, many "traditional" and "nontraditional" drag queens cite the art form in exploring and discovering their gender identity (Cooper, 2020, p. 107-108). In exploring the significance of a drag performer taking on a drag persona—regardless of how dissimilar that persona is with that performer's gender identity—I will show that the act itself of choosing to take on a drag persona and performing as that persona inherently challenges ideas and expectations of gender expression and gender identity.

In critiquing Butler's performativity theory and expanding its scope to explore how their analysis of gender performance and gender expression is interconnected and cannot be analyzed along dualistic lines of separation, I will also take into consideration the ways in which bodies are politicized. If all gender performance and all gender expression are fundamentally interconnected, then both the performance and expression of gender must be examined in relation to each other. This can be shown by examining by how either gender performance or gender expression are socially controlled and regulated by focusing on how the history of drag performance in relation to the LGBTQ+ community in the United States—particularly laws that attempt to regulate non-normative self-expression or identity—turn the performative art into signs and symbols. The politization of marginalized bodies turns those bodies into a sign and symbol that can be used to make the person living, participating, or interacting with the marginalized group recognizable only in caricature, propaganda, or rhetoric.

This politization is further compounded when examining the relationship queer geography has in drag performance as it concerns signification. In one sense, I am taking a Ricoeurian understanding of hermeneutics and applying his framework of narrative onto drag performance by focusing on how the politicization of drag performance acts as narrative text that is layered onto and alongside drag performativity. I will supplement Ricoeur's ideas alongside others whose analysis of fashion and dress are useful when considering implications for how appearance defines and constrains politicization. I will also augment this argument by examining my own experiences as a drag queen through this theoretical lens. By transforming the body into a sign and symbol, a hermeneutic undertaking of drag performance can be done in relation to its history in the United States and what this in turn indicates towards future politicization of the LGBTQ+ community.

2. Signifying Locational Space

If we are to view the drag performer's body not as a physical presence but instead as something performative and politicized, then that means that their body cannot be separated from the space that it is in. This is an experience that members of the LGBTQ+ community and drag performers know all too well. The LGBTQ+ community, like many other marginalized communities, has a different relationship to space and embodiment than those who are not a part of the community. This is because the bodies of the LGBTQ+ community occupying space implicate the space through what those bodies signify and represent. With visibility comes vulnerability, and staying fixed in one location opens up the opportunity for violence and exclusion towards non-dominant social groups. Safety and security experienced by members of dominant social groups is understood and experienced differently than marginalized communities. "It is no surprise, then, that queers are frequently suspicious, fearful and unable to relate easily to the fixity and certainty inhering in most dominant ontologies of 'place.' Indeed, many queers find a certain amount of solace, safety and pleasure being in motion or nowhere at all" (Knopp, 2007, p. 23). Yet, the mere suggestion of harm easily interrupts that solace. While staying in motion or existing nowhere does not prevent the possibility of harm, these unconventional forms of space occupation significantly reduce the likelihood of experiencing it.

This relationship of signification found in spaces that are implicated by the presence of LGBTQ+ bodies is reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and his idea of narrative. Much of Ricoeur's ideas on narrative focuses on literary concepts of author and metaphor and heavily draw on Roland Barthes's ideas of authorial intent. Postmodern hermeneutics, which Ricoeur's ideas reside within, relies on narrative as it helps to establish what makes interpretation possible

and how such interpretation can occur. While I will not focus my analysis on what Ricoeur had to say about narrative in a literary sense, Ricoeur's discussion of reference as it concerns author and metaphor are notable here. For Ricoeur, reference acts as a way for the author to connect the text to the reader as well as to place where the text is in relation to other texts that exist in the world (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 36). Applying this concept to this description of queer geography makes the LGBTQ+ bodies existing within space the text and existing in relation to other texts. This relational reference exists regardless of the amount of LGBTQ+ bodies residing within a space. Instead, what matters more is if those bodies are perceived as LGBTQ+. That mere perception that one is a member of the LGBTQ+ community by way of how their body is referenced is enough to elicit a connection as it exists within socially constructed spaces in the heteronormative society we live within.

However, in addition to spaces drag performers occupy being associated with their marginalization, the drag performer's body becomes more than their physical form as they move and interact within space. It is also the collective presence of work, performance, and the space in which all within can exist authentically in a constructed reality that is mutually agreed upon between performer and audience. No words need be spoken when one enters the stage; the makeup, the costumes, and the music does all of the speaking for a drag performer. "It isn't enough anymore just to be a person wearing glittery clothing on stage: drag [performers] must do more to differentiate themselves, to be unique—otherwise, they cease to be worthy of their audience's attention" (Onclin, 2020, p. 156). The body is the drag performer's canvas and the stage, lights, and sounds are the environment which accentuate the performance as art. This again connects with Ricoeur as the drag performer's body is now the text itself being referenced within the performance.

> **
> *I took a deep breath, anxious to audition to the drag group that regularly performed at my favorite bar in town.*
>
> *I had heard about the auditions about two weeks prior. When I inquired further about the audition process, I was told to arrive at the auditions "in face" with one to two songs picked out that I was ready to perform to. I was also told that I could have one person with me at the auditions as moral support. The audition process was a little different from what auditions were like in theatre. I decided to go for it wanting nothing more than to be in a creative, performing space where I could express myself and find a way for me to further develop my performing skills in an artform that I had never done but had always wanted to do.*
>
> *The day of the auditions I had arrived early with my then-partner, in face as instructed. I had been listening to my audition song on loop, but I was hopeful and determined to become a part of the performing group.*
>
> *It did not take much longer until the rest of the auditionees and the producers had arrived. Once the producers were present, they invited us in to the auditioning space and informed everyone auditioning what the audition process was going to entail. We were informed that the only people who could be inside while the audition was occurring were the producers, the auditionee, and the person who came with the auditionee as moral support. Additionally, we were told that when we entered for our audition that we would need to say our name, our personal pronouns, our*

persona, and the pronouns of our persona.

After the producers had informed everyone present what to expect, one of my auditionees volunteered to audition first. The rest of us filed outside and waited. While waiting, we determined who would audition and in what order. It was not long until it was my turn to enter.

When I entered the audition space, I took another deep breath and shook out my nerves.

"What's your name?" one of the producers asked me.

"Danica Jenck," I said, doing my best to keep my voice level while they took notes.

"What are your pronouns?" they continued.

"She/her," I replied.

"And what's your drag name?" one of the other producers asked me.

"Adinee Waters," I said, hoping that my voice wasn't revealing how nervous I was.

"What are your persona's pronouns?" the other producer asked me.

"She/they."

3. History of Marginalization and Rhetoric

Drag performance has a long history in the United States rooted in LGBTQ+ culture. While many scholars would originate drag's history in ancient Greece and Rome and in theatrical spaces, the politicization of drag performance did not become explicitly connected to LGBTQ+ rights and the LGBTQ+ community within the United States until after Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic (Andrew, 2023). Prior to this connection, Western drag performance came out of male and female impersonation in theatrical performance (Halberstam, 2002/1998, p. 232-233). An argument could be made that the existence of male and female impersonation in Western theatre tradition is inherently political due to whose bodies were allowed to be on stage and what those bodies could present as. Regardless, the histories of male and female impersonation helped make drag performance possible in the United States.

While the performing arts in the United States have a history of freedom or flexibility on what bodies could present as concerning gender identity, the same cannot be said of its government or medical system. The United States government and its medical professionals have a history of defining and regulating normative sexual behavior and relationships. This included who could marry and under what circumstances, homosexuality being defined as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973 (Price, 2018, p. 89), and the illegalization of various sexual acts that were outside of marriage or nonprocreative in nature (Price, 2018, p. 98). Today, this regulation of sexual behavior focuses on transgender people's right to use sex-segregated facilities, such as bathrooms and locker rooms (Price, 2018, 90). However, the disdain towards those of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States extends out to also include things that are not directly connected to sex or gender.

As explored earlier, the LGBTQ+ community's presence in a location implicates and associates that space with the community. This concept can also be seen in action with the AIDS epidemic.

> *In the early 1980s, reports of a mysterious disease, dubbed the "gay cancer" and the "gay plague," began to surface in the national media. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had just published two reports that described the emergence of rare diseases among gay men. . . . By the end of 1981, there were a total of 270 cases of a severe immune deficiency among gay men. It was becoming clear that a new, deadly disease was rapidly spreading within some populations in the United States—gay men, intravenous drug users, Haitian refugees, and hemophiliacs. By August 1992, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had named this new disease* Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome *(AIDS)* (HIV.gov, 2020; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016). (as cited in Price, 2018, p. 92)

People with AIDS were shunned and blamed for acquiring the disease. The focus for blame was placed on CDC-defined risk groups, particularly gay men, intravenous drug users, and people of color (Price, 2018, p. 92). "Subsequently, people living with AIDS at the time were denied roles in community life. In other words, they became 'socially dead' long before their biological deaths (Wright, 2013)" (as cited in Price, 2018, p. 93). Acquiring the disease was a death sentence and functionally excluded the person with the disease from the consideration or care from society at large within the United States.

However, AIDS being a death sentence did not have to be the case if there was government intervention during this time despite the stigma associated with the disease. Unfortunately, the AIDS epidemic was not publicly acknowledged by the Reagan administration until 1985 (Price, 2018, p. 92). During the pivotal time to help find a cure for thousands of people who were dying from the disease, efforts were instead spent on vilifying those with the disease.

What led to the Reagan administration publicly acknowledging the AIDS epidemic was due to creative efforts by various members of the LGBTQ+ community and drag groups to raise awareness and change public perception. In 1983, playwright and activist Larry Kramer and several of his colleagues formed the Gay Men's Health Crisis, a New-York based service group that supported people with AIDS, in response to the federal government's lack of attention to the AIDS crisis. Other notable groups that formed in response were ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), established in 1987 in response to proposed exorbitant costs of initial medications used to treat HIV/AIDS, and the National Association of People with AIDS, established in 1983 and was the first organization to advocate for the rights of those living with HIV and AIDS. What makes ACT UP unique is that they created their own unique logo (Silence = Death) that helped to act as the slogan that represented the movement as well as to hold political and religious leaders accountable (Price, 2018, p. 93-94). Drag queens assisted in AIDS crisis efforts by hosting events or lending their abilities to fundraising efforts with groups like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in San Francisco being one of the most famous groups to have assisted those with AIDS (Andrew, 2023). These events, along with various instances of people living with AIDS being discriminated against, led the forefront of awareness efforts. AIDS was only formally recognized by the Reagan administration after a close friend of Reagan's wife had died of the disease (Price, 2018, p. 95). This led to the United States government funding research efforts for a cure that still continue to this day.

The history of the AIDS epidemic, as well as other past and current political issues that disproportionately impact the LGBTQ+ community, is representative of the phenomenon of sex

panic. Sex panics are a specific type of moral panic that encompass a range of issues that concern sexuality with moral panic being described as:

> *the process in which a situation, social condition, or group of people is seen as a threat to the norms, values, and interests of a society, which in turn arouses social concern and widespread fear. . . . Moral panics can result in social changes within a community and political action, including harsher laws, stricter enforcement practices, and increased surveillance. Moreover, moral panics are reliant on the work of the mass media and moral entrepreneurs (i.e. those who start the panics such as public authority figures) to thrive and spread.* (Price, 2018, p. 90)

Moral panics and sex panics have both shaped the political landscape of the United States while in turn creating the conditions that enabled the marginalization of disaffected communities. These panics helped to legitimate their marginalization. It is a kind of chicken and egg situation when examining the social and political conditions of various issues associated with the LGBTQ+ community in the United States because it is hard to say whether it is the law or stigmatization that is the cause of disempowerment. Regardless of the source, it is clear that both rhetoric and politics were and are intimately connected in LGBTQ+ issues.

Part of what makes the AIDS epidemic so significant to the LGBTQ+ community and its history in the United States is because being LGBTQ+ had neither legal nor medical recognition from intervention or surveillance. In many ways, this is still true or can become true once more for many LGBTQ+ peoples in the United States today. Without the drag community helping to assist and stand up for their fellow peers in the LGBTQ+ community during the AIDS epidemic, the LGBTQ+ community within the United States would look very different today. It is this politicization and community efforts that makes drag performance seem synonymous with the LGBTQ+ community.

As explained in my earlier section on the relationship between space and drag performers, the perception of LGBTQ+ bodies as LGBTQ+ is enough to elicit signification with space. The history of the AIDS epidemic here demonstrates how both the LGBTQ+ community and drag performers become synonymous and that references via their bodies now signify rhetoric associated with said bodies. In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the association is that of disease and deviance. The AIDS epidemic is a sex panic that triggered conservative, reactionary backlash due to various convergence factors that made it easy to discriminate against marginalized groups, particularly gay men, during the health crisis. Keeping Ricoeur's hermeneutics in mind, this means that those bodies, now defined as one homogenous sign, can now be referenced in association with other negative symbols, such as calling AIDS a "gay disease." These negative symbols act as the basis to discriminate as these symbols are justified *a priori* via external signification.

4. Contemporary Marginalization of Drag Performance

It is worth noting that drag community is not one monolithic group. Many have historically disagreed on the nature of drag performance and whether the focus or emphasis on performance is politics or entertainment (Hilbert, 1995, p. 464). Additionally, the drag community has issues defining how and who can perform. The pervasive image of a drag performer is a flamboyant cisgender gay man dressing as, sounding like, and acting like a "woman" (Andrew, 2023). Because of drag's long history and its associations in the United States with the LGBTQ+ community, it is also hard to ignore the fact that attempts to legalize bans on drag performance as an art form

during 2023 for fears of "harming children" appears as a veiled way to criminalize the LGBTQ+ community through a performance art that is colloquially associated with this marginalized community.

Multiple states attempted to pass laws banning drag performance during the summer of 2023. In an NPR article, "Despite all the talk, no states have active laws banning drag in front of kids," Josie Lenora notes that all of the drag laws that were attempting to ban drag performances have either been struck down in violation of the First Amendment or have been changed to not mention drag performance at all. Notably, people in favor of banning drag in the presence of children cite that drag and drag performance induce prurient interest, or excessive interest in sexual matters, in children.

> *"Most drag shows do not appeal to the prurient interest," says JT Morris, an attorney for the free-speech group Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. "Even if they did, saying something appeals to the 'prurient interest' under the First Amendment is not enough to regulate it," he says, noting that this kind of language makes it harder for a bill to hold up to basic legal scrutiny. "You can't pass a state law based on disagreement with somebody's viewpoint. It's a textbook First Amendment violation."* (Lenora, 2023)

While attempting to ban gender expression and gender performance violates the First Amendment, the fact that attempts were made in that direction in multiple states with such explicit reference to sexual matters is reminiscent of the history of censorship and hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community in media and in government.

These attempts at national and state-located drag performance bans have also directly impacted the spaces in which drag performers and their enthusiasts exist. This is true regardless of whether those spaces exist in states that did not create nor attempt to enforce a drag ban. Game and Grog Bar, a former bar that was located in Yakima, WA, boarded up their windows in response to possible protests to a drag show amidst other protests and violence in the Central Washington area (Tri-Cities and Pasco) related to drag shows in May 2023. Notably, on the former bar's Facebook page, it cited that these various protests and violence in the Central Washington area were because of those associated with bigoted hate groups like The Proud Boys (as cited in D'Anella, 2023). In anticipation of protests, the bar and its affiliated drag group, Gaymer and Allies, sought out volunteer security guards, with multiple people showing up to the Tuesday drag show (D'Anella, 2023). This politicization of drag performance is in line with sex panics that have resulted in laws and environments in the United States that are hostile towards the LGBTQ+ community. This suggests that while drag performers and their bodies are politicized, that does not mean that the spaces they occupy are exempt from politicization and that this politicization occurs regardless of whether any laws are in effect to ban drag performance.

> **
> *One thing that scared my drag group were posters that were vandalizing walls at a local park and local college that displayed vile, bigoted transphobic language. Those posters read "Samurai Monkey says no to grooming and child sexual mutilation" to an image of a samurai standing next to a no symbol over an inclusive pride flag and "Keep your schools clean" alongside an image of a person throwing away symbols of a Black Lives Matter fist, an inclusive pride flag, and a symbol of a D enclosed in a circle.*

It made my stomach sick that there were people where I lived that felt comfortable enough to vandalize public spaces with their hate and bigotry.

After discussing with my fellow drag members what to do and airing my frustrations, I decided to write a letter to the editor. No one else felt comfortable enough to write or do anything as they were concerned about their personal safety and keeping their families safe. While I sympathized, I felt a fire in my gut.

A few days after I had submitted my letter, I received a follow-up inquiry from an editor that asked for clarifying details about the posters and whether any reports were filed. I told them what I knew.

That letter was published a week after I had submitted it.

5. Ad-dressing Hermeneutics

Because the drag performer can (and often does) make every aspect of their body and the space they occupy while performing into art, they, like other performance artists, transform their body, clothes, and physical surroundings into a text. While much of my initial hermeneutic framework analyzes drag performance via Ricoeur, I do not aim at limiting this essay by only focusing on Ricoeur. As mentioned earlier, Ricoeur's hermeneutics on text was heavily influenced by Barthes. Barthes's discussion of authorial intent would make for an interesting analysis as it concerns queer subjectivity and relationality in drag performance, such an analysis is outside the scope of this paper.[1] Instead, I will focus on Barthes's analysis of the body and dress.

Barthes initially introduced the concept of analyzing the body and dress through fashion as a form of desire. Important to Barthes was distinguishing what about fashion signified certain markers and characteristics that allowed people to interpret what others wore.

> *The plastic meaning of a garment depends a great deal on the continuity (or discontinuity) of its elements, even more than on its form. On the one hand, we could say that in its profane way the garment reflects the old mystical dream of the "seamless": since the garment envelops the body, is not the miracle precisely that the body can enter it without leaving behind any trace of this passage? And on the other hand, to the extent that the garment is erotic, it must be allowed to persist here and disintegrate there, to be partially absent, to play with the body's nudity. Continuity and discontinuity are thus preempted by an ensemble of institutional features: the garment's discontinuity is not content merely to exist: it either plays itself up or plays itself down.* (Barthes, 1983/1984, p. 136-137)

Notable here is the use of the term "erotic" as it concerns the relationship between garment and body. To label or call something erotic means to place a signification of desire (specifically sexual) onto the thing itself. There is nothing inherently erotic about pieces of fabric; instead that relationship is conjured and connected in how the fabric, made garment, is worn on the body and how both are perceived (such as claiming an art form that centers on performative expression through fashion induces prurient interest).

1 One can argue that such a case has preemptively been made as in Sarah Hankins article "Queer Relationships with Music and an Experiential Hermeneutics for Musical Meaning."

Because the drag performer incorporates their body and surrounding space into their performance, this complicates signals to the audience in terms of identifying the performer's gender. Identifying and addressing an individual as a particular gender are two different experiences and expressions.

> *Emphasising the ways in which sexed bodies, identities and spaces are always becoming – and, specifically, the need to conceptualise these as momentary, fleeting and needing to be re-performed – enables the instability of the dichotomies of gender and sex (male/female, man/woman) to come into view. This approach is particularly important given that sexed and gendered body identities are often naturalised through these processes such that they are invisibilised. (*Browne, 2007, p. 114)

Adding in the fact that core to drag performance is creative gender expression and presentation, this means that the drag performer's gender and the drag persona's gender do not have to align along binary "opposites" to legitimate the performer or their performance. To suggest that there are "opposite" genders when discussing the gender of a drag performer and their persona makes invisible gender identities which do not adhere to the more common male or female gender identifications. This, in turn, risks turning Butler's theory into a reductive theory of gender binaries.

Joanne Entwistle drives the connection between dress and body further in "The Dressed Body" by suggesting that the dressed body participates and engages in social spaces, regardless of what the dressed body is wearing and how it moves. She points out that bodies that do not conform to social convention risk exclusion or ridicule (Entwistle, 2001, p. 33). Entwistle also examines discussions of power from Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Bourdieu to show how fashion is interconnected with ideas of power, knowledge, and value. While her insights focus on the dressed body in everyday life, these insights can also apply to drag performance. The fact that there were a number of failed laws attempting to criminalize drag and drag performers because of their fashion and dress while doing stylized gender performance and that those performers become a text embodied within the space in which their presence gets implicated by their association, then that means that the body becomes a text that can be understood hermeneutically *through* gender performativity.

One scholar who has done initial work in this direction is Kathryn Hobson. In her article, "Performative Tensions in Female Drag Performance," Hobson explored the significations of a drag performance that she had watched. Hobson clarified that she had watched the drag performance as an audience member despite having a connection to the drag community as a performer. After clarifying, Hobson described watching a performance to George Michael's "Faith" that objectified the female-coded performer and how the white male-coded performer both reinforced and undermined ideas of masculinity and power. Important to her analysis is the context of where this performance is done. Hobson saw this performance in a stereotypically Cuban-themed bar and noted how ironic and disconcerting it was to be in the space owned by a white person and it being occupied by mostly white people. Despite the bar being a queer-friendly space, she left feeling unsafe due to the narratives that the queer environment fostered through this drag performance. At the very end of her article, Hobson makes a call to the queer community, with a focus on drag performers in particular.

> *As queer community members, activists, and scholars invested in justice we should be sensitive to the oppression of others, especially the members of our own*

> *communities, so as to not further marginalize and alienate them. This essay asks that drag performers be intentional in their performative choices, realizing the ideological nature that these performances both imitate and create. We must all be intentional and self-reflexive in our identity performances. We must be willing to do the work of critique that asks us to be intersectional and to challenge dominant notions of queer so that we can build sustainable communities committed to reflexivity, intersectionality, and justice.* (Hobson, 2013, p. 49)

While Hobson does not explicitly call their work a hermeneutic task, their analysis of various choices performers had made in conjunction to the space in which the performance took place is a hermeneutic undertaking. Hobson explicitly connects drag performers to both their performance and histories of oppression and marginalization. Tying her observations in with this theoretical framework helps to further complicate and strengthens Butler's original theory. Incorporating the complexity of drag performance into Butler's theory expands its scope and possibilities while also further bolstering how their theory interweaves with other theories that concern the marginalization of peoples and bodies.

> **
> *About a month before I was to make my debut as Adinee Waters, I was in a drag rehearsal with other members in my drag performance group. I kept on running through my debut song, moving stiffly and finding it difficult to connect myself and my persona to the music. I kept on getting pointers from one of my fellow drag members on how to move more femininely, telling me how to move my hips in a way that didn't look inherently awkward.*
>
> *No matter what they told me, I was not getting it. My hips weren't moving right.*
>
> *"Here, let's try this," one of the producers said.*
>
> *"Follow me," they said and I listened.*
>
> *"Stand with your back straight against the wall."*
>
> *I did as I was told, taking note how uncomfortable it was for me to try to stand with my back as flat as possible against the wall.*
>
> *"Now, you want to move your hips using only your legs while your back stays against the wall. You do not want your back to move away from the wall."*
>
> *I moved my hips as instructed, feeling my back and hips gyrate, faintly hearing the way in which my bones and joints scraped against each other until I mastered moving my hips femininely.*

6. Future Work and Considerations

While the crux of this paper focuses on the history of drag performance and the possibility to explore its legalization and rhetoric concerning the art form through a hermeneutic lens, drag is also about camp (exaggerated satire or media). A discussion about drag would be remiss without examining the body and space as a site for camp and the relationship that camp has with politicization. Further discussion on drag performance could explore this relationship as such discussion is beyond the current scope of this paper.

Additional further possibilities for exploration regarding the politicization of bodies can be found in similarities between drag performance and cosplay. Commonly found in fan communities to works of media in popular culture, cosplay is a kind of dress-up where people recreate various fictional characters as accurately as possible. Many communities form around people cosplaying certain fictional properties and is especially common for more popular properties (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc.). Cosplay communities are notorious for having members who are exclusionary or who disregard cosplays of people and bodies that do not fit how a character is portrayed and such practices are worth exploring within the wider context of politicization.

Butler's theory of gender performance failed to take into account the nuance that drag performance has through their classification of drag performers. Politicization is a core aspect to drag performance after the AIDS epidemic, and the body implicates space through association of what that body represents. Ultimately, if marginalization can be understood through a hermeneutic framework, then this would imply that all theories of subjection and subjugation that theorize about marginalization are hermeneutic frameworks.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude extends to The Journal of Somaesthetics editorial board and peer reviewers for their feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Allison Hammer, one of my mentors who contributed significant feedback that helped to develop this paper.

References

Andrew, S. (2023, April 29). The US has a rich drag history. Here's why the art form will likely outlast attempts to restrict it. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/style/article/drag-queen-us-history-explainer-cec/index.html.

Barthes, R. (1983/1984). *The fashion system* (2nd ed.). (M. Ward & R. Howard, Trans.) New York, NY: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1967)

Browne, K. (2007). Drag queens and drab dykes: Deploying and deploring femininities. In K. Browne, J. Lim, & G. Brown (Eds.), *Geographies of sexualities: Theory, practices and politics* (pp. 113-124). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Butler, J. (1990/2007). *Gender trouble.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Cooper, A. (2020). Another wig underneath. In H. Kempt & M. Volpert (Eds.), *RuPaul's drag race and philosophy: Sissy that thought* (pp. 105-116). Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.

D'Anella, T. (2023, June 6). Game and grog bar boards up windows ahead of possible protests. *NBC Right Now*. https://www.nbcrightnow.com/news/game-and-grog-bar-boards-up-windows-ahead-of-possible-protests/article_8e938abc-e972-11ed-9902-5f5372a038df.html.

Entwistle, J. (2001). The dressed body. In J. Entwistle & E. Wilson (Eds.), *Body dressing* (pp. 33-58). Oxford, England: Berg.

Halberstam, J. (2002/1998). *Female masculinity* (4th ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hilbert, J. (1995). The politics of drag. In C. K. Creekmur & A. Doty (Eds.), *Out in culture: Gay, lesbian, and queer essays on popular culture* (pp. 463-469). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hobson, K. (2013). Performative tensions in female drag performances. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, 12, pp. 35-51. Retrieved from https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1167&context=kaleidoscope

Knopp, L. (2007). From lesbian and gay to queer geographies: Pasts, prospects and possibilities. In K. Browne, J. Lim, & G. Brown (Eds.), *Geographies of sexualities: Theory, practices and politics* (pp. 21-28). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Lenora, J. (2023, July 29). Despite all the talk, no states have active laws banning drag in front of kids. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2023/07/29/1190306861/drag-bans-fail-lgbtq-first-amendment-prurient-arkansas-florida-tennessee-montana.

Onclin, H. (2020). The importance of being fabulous. In H. Kempt & M. Volpert (Eds.), *RuPaul's drag race and philosophy: Sissy that thought* (pp. 143-157). Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.

Price, K. (2018). Sexual justice. In *Reproductive politics in the united states* (pp. 88-115). doi: 10.4324/9781315169644-5.

Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press.

Shusterman Goes to Camp: An Ars Erotica of Somaesthetics in Drag Culture

Megan Volpert

Abstract: *This essay aims to begin patching a gap in the emerging field of somaesthetics, which suffers from a blind spot when it comes to queerness. Even when they occasionally gesture toward homosexuality as a part of global ars erotica, philosophers have ignored the virtues exemplified by drag cultural excellence. This essay deploys the framework established by* RuPaul's Drag Race *as a somatic lens through which campiness and queening provide analytical, pragmatic and practical conversation that is of substantial value in its contributions to the art of living one's best life.*

This essay aims to begin patching a gap in the emerging field of somaesthetics, which suffers from a blind spot when it comes to queerness. Even when they occasionally gesture toward homosexuality as a part of global ars erotica, philosophers have ignored the virtues exemplified by drag cultural excellence. Campiness and queening are a valuable locus for further analytical, pragmatic and practical conversation about the art of living one's best life.

1. Surveying the absence of queers

As a pioneer in somaesthetics, Shusterman may be straight, but at least he has not been so narrow. He's written in support of postmodern approaches to the aesthetic and even analyzed popular media forms of rap, techno and country music. And yet, aside from occasionally having to dip a toe into the steamy bathhouse waters of Foucault's personal kinks, Shusterman has left out performative manifestations of queerness in popular culture in the considerations of his own work.

Here's the only explicit mention of drag in Shusterman's work: "Judith Butler's arguments for the somatic performativity of gender parody (as in drag and cross-dressing) show how dramatically different aesthetic representations of female bodies can be used to transgress and subvert the conventional notions of gender identity, thus helping to emancipate women from the oppressive constraints that the ideology of a fixed and subordinate gender essence has imposed on them." That's from his book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and*

Somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2008, p. 90). Since it was published way back in 2008, we can offer him grace for that common elision there, that slide into the assumption that it's only women who get freed when we topple conventional notions of gender identity through the camp re-presentation of them. We know now that drag emancipates everybody, even cisgendered white male philosopher kings.

So Shusterman makes plain his allegiance—that he is with us, us the queers—through this isolated invocation of Judith Butler. But it's a book from 2008 citing a book from 1990, and RuPaul has won 24 Emmy Awards since then. Plus, we're here to engage with Shusterman's newest work, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (Shusterman, 2021). Within this new book, there are 47 mentions of homosexuality. Any wagers on how this compares to the number of mentions for prostitutes and courtesans? 78 courtesans and 30 prostitutes, so 108 mentions of people doing it for money compared to 47 mentions of people doing it for the ass.

A quick survey of stats within the wider terrain of somaesthetics fares no better than its founder. If you Google "somaesthetics," there are about 52,000 hits. Add "drag queen" to that and the count lowers to a mere 176 hits or .338% of total mentions in the field. A number of the coolest and most useful mentions may be left out of Google because it's not an avenue for searching the majority of academic journals. Any wagers on how many hits there are for "drag" within *The Journal of Somaesthetics* itself? Just one, and it's irrelevant but amusing: the phrase "drag everyone off to jail" in Crispin Sartwell's 2020 essay on "What the Drug Culture Meant" (Sartwell, 2020, p. 84).

The results might be less depressing if we went in search of hits for more mainstream categories—The L or the G or even the B, but we are here to spill the T, that is, to give voice to the experiences of trans folks and genderqueers and those others who cannot be bothered to conform to either heteronormativity or homonormativity. I've made a lifelong academic study out of my fandom for the fine arts of drag queening, because it is a culture that speaks to me as a gender non-conforming woman who is married to another gender non-conforming woman. We're not lesbians, we're queers. Drag queens are nearly all gay men and trans women, and although I do not place any of those three specific labels upon myself, I find that our mutual interests and concerns in life overlap a majority of the time, so that's the source of my enthusiasm for analyzing the types of performance in which they engage. There are experts in the comparatively more culturally obscure fine arts of drag kinging out there, but as I am not one of them, the kings will be left out of my essay. Yes, this ironically replicates part of the very absence that forms the basis for my critique. But the cup of somaesthetics will be fuller for its inclusion of queens and perhaps someone will follow me on behalf of the kings. After all, it takes all kinds of fruits to make a fruit cup and Beyonce wasn't built in a day.

Blessedly, the blind spot toward queerness at large has not resulted in steering somaesthetics in any direction that necessarily conflicts with queer theory. Instead, we have a bouquet of caveats that sweep this blind spot aside. We have a handful of "but unfortunately, our culture has a long way to go in respecting the rights and identities of queers" or other similar language. Thank you truly for your allyship, Richard. Now let's begin to plug this hole, ha ha ha ha, especially since drag queening culture fits clearly and easily within field of somaesthetics generally and your sense of the uses of ars erotica specifically.

2. Surveying the presence of queens

The analytical branch of somaesthetics can and should theorize drag queening by describing how the bodily practices associated with it function to construct a queer culture with attendant aesthetic and moral values that may often run counter to those of the heterosexual majority in-group. Drag opposes normativity and yet despite its useful modes of resistance, it establishes a normativity of its own in order to proliferate and advance its culture. Drag queens are not a new phenomenon, so Shusterman certainly could've included them in his study of antiquities. As a cluster of methodologies, drag is as old as civilization or sex itself. Here's a super brief history of some of the high points of drag queening across time all over the world.

One, ancient Greece: mimes in elaborate face paint who combined dance and audience participation to act out plays laid the foundation for camp aesthetics and genderqueer persona work. See especially Telestes, who was basically the first mime superstar and pioneered ways of mocking the gods as well as themes of love that would eventually yield burlesque. Two, harems in the Ottoman Empire of the 1300s: included not just women but also many male dancers who dressed as women, usually just as young and as highly skilled at belly dancing or playing instruments as the women. These koceks were in such high demand that there are reports of women in harems plotting to kill them to eliminate the competition. Three, Japanese kabuki theatre: originally starring women and eventually deemed too erotic for public consumption, men took over the art form in the 1600s and their approach to performing dramatic acts of femininity combined with delicately meaningful movement has been largely unchanged for four hundred years since, shifting the way we reflect on the history of geishaism itself.

Four, in Shakespearean theatre in England: men played all the iconic and queeny female roles like Cleopatra and Juliet because women weren't allowed to act on stage there until 1660. Cross-dressing was an explicit plot point in some of these stories, like the Viola character in *Twelfth Night*, generating a kind of meta-drag scene of layering where a man acted as a woman acting as a man. Five, Hindu Kathakali dances: since at least the 1700s, Indian folklore tales have been performed by men who train for years to master the art of "eye-dancing" in elaborate makeup with ornate costuming and intense choreography. Six, vaudevillian theater all over Europe and especially in British music halls toward the end of the 1700s. Seven, the Peking Opera in China, whose roles were all played by men until women were allowed onto the stage in 1912.

Eight, the so-called "Pansy Craze" in the early 1930s when men presenting as high femme in Jazz Age performances were considered the most glamorous and hedonistic of performers. See also: the Rocky Twins, a pair of Norwegian brothers who rose of drag fame in Paris and then toured all over the world with the stunningly extravagant costumes for their signature 1920s look. See also: a young Texan acrobat who began performing in drag as Barbette in 1919, beloved worldwide for daring physical feats who influenced the likes of such queer pioneers as Josephine Baker and Man Ray. And finally, nine, moving pictures became a thing: see Charlie and Sydney Chapman dragging it up in *The Masquerader* in 1913 or Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* in 1959. The modern history of drag begins in the Sixties, and we will pick up there in the next section of this talk.

No doubt everyone here understands drag as a performance art, but we must also answer for why it should be included in a symposium on ars erotica. The term "ars erotica" refers to the styles and techniques of lovemaking with the honorific title of art. We must determine in what sense the bodily practices of drag can be considered artistic in a manner that is equivalent or parallel or orbitally related to the styles and techniques of lovemaking, and trace how queening

contributes to the aesthetics and ethics of self-cultivation in the art of living.

First, there seems to be a presumptive understanding within studies of ars erotica that lovemaking is not a solo activity outside the realm of asceticism. It is usually categorized as a kind of interpersonal communication, as opposed to a more socially insulated opportunity for intrapersonal self-reflection. There are probably millions of people all over the world who either will not or cannot choose a sex life that engages another participant, and the values associated with this viewpoint should not be excluded from any serious study of ars erotica. Shusterman's latest book mentions masturbation eleven times, most often simply to gauge the extent to which it was explicitly forbidden or widely considered taboo. If no other part of ancient culture provides an adequate avenue for celebrating the physical pleasures available to the isolated self, then the revolutionary power of drag should be immediately clear.

Queening is first and foremost a masturbatory practice because it is a calling of body and soul that has nothing to do with finding an audience. To drag up and then later to de-drag is to spend all day making love to oneself. One is called to slip one's foot into a high heel for the first time, or one is called to slide into a corset and ball gown that have all the emotional and many of the physical qualities of medieval armor, or one is called to spend hours instinctively transforming one's face with make-up in the mirror, or one is called to move the weight of the world off one's shoulders by putting on a very heavy wig, and so on. These are acts that lay bare our naked selfhood, that allow safe spaces for experimenting with one's fundamental identity and values, with an escapism and hedonism and laughing lightness that provide the comfort and confidence necessary to face the rest of the world day after day. All over the world, there are people this very day sliding into their first pair of high heels. They may be six years old or sixty years old, and they may never feel safe enough to have an audience larger than their own conscience. The fact that they walk the runway alone should not be presumed to denigrate the validity or quality of their definitely very embodied self-cultivation in the art of living.

But of course, drag also operates easily within an interpersonal communications framework for ars erotica, wherein a queen finds herself in performance with an audience of at least one other person. The orgasmic currency of lovemaking is replaced by other exchange values like applause and tip money. Much of what Shusterman unpacks about the valuation of courtesans is just as applicable to the fine arts of queening. These two groups have generally cared about a lot of the same things—visual presentation of both look and movement, talented performance, witty improvisation skills, price tag, and the superior mood of a demonstrated ability to fulfill personal purpose. The work of queens and courtesans has often conveyed shared standards of campy excellence. So let's end this section of the talk with an obvious assertion: drag queens are sexy. Queening is often a turn on both to the people doing drag and to the people watching the drag show. Now we can really get into talking about the drag show.

3. Shante, you stay

Pragmatic somaesthetics urges us to move beyond the simple description of drag queening as connected to Shusterman's analysis of ars erotica, into territories where we can examine how the somaesthetic values of queening compare to those itemized in Shusterman's new book and critique examples of how best to meet these values. To some extent, the implication of this project is that homonormativity prescribes a more ideal form of living than heteronormativity, but let's not construe that as a ringing endorsement of norms themselves or of the gatekeeping or policing needed for their cultivation.

We can productively use Shusterman's contextualization of Islamic and Japanese ars erotica to select a paradigmatic set of drag queen examples. His understanding of these as substantively derivative or aggregated cultures that therefore produce more variety and complexity than their ancient source materials provides a clear path to the oeuvre of RuPaul Charles, a black gay American man born in 1960 who is not as old as queening itself but is undisputedly the most powerful conveyor of drag cultural values for his ability to choose a la carte lessons from all of drag history and synthesize the merit of these values in a way that effectively proliferates them in modern society.

Just as Muhammad is construed as the last and best messenger of Muslim virtues, RuPaul is widely worshipped as the last and best messenger of drag values. Like Islam, which relies on a combination of the main text of the Quran plus reports on Muhammad's sayings and actions as well as a large body of religious case law, RuPaul's multi-platform dominion includes a main text plus extensive web and social media presence as well as a large body of scholarship generated by fandoms of drag. The main text for our consideration is his reality television competition show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The show began in 2009 and in the fourteen years of its run so far, it has not only launched the careers of hundreds of drag queens to carry its messaging across the globe, but also spawned three additional American shows, countless one-off special programs, and eleven international shows in Canada, Belgium, Spain, France, Holland, Italy, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

RuPaul is only 61 years old—which makes him a relatively young media mogul and yet an ancient within queer culture, a true living ancestor who has survived tremendous hostility from society as well as the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century. As the sole judge of a long-running popular reality competition television show, RuPaul is the literal and explicit arbiter of what constitutes drag values. His lived experience of the logics of neoliberal capitalism and the shifting technologies of cultural inclusion have strongly influenced his sense of what drag queening can accomplish, and this informs his official "RUbric" for picking winners. So let us compare Shusterman's list of the somaesthetic values of lovemaking with RuPaul's *Drag Race* values.

The four primary categories RuPaul uses to evaluate drag queening are charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent—delightfully short-handed as CUNT values, and we can sort the majority of Shusterman's options into these four categories. His list includes beauty, grace, elegance, charm, refinement, courtesy, care, self-mastery, sensitivity to the feelings of others and harmony, and we'll consider them in that order.

RuPaul consistently judges physical beauty to be of very limited utility in the competition. Much of a queen's physical beauty is surfaced through make-up skills and expensive padding. One of his famous catchphrases is "we're all born naked and the rest is drag." Because drag queens work with and against their own bodies, generally to enhance any feminine features while masking their masculinity, any notion of "natural" beauty goes out the window and is replaced with consideration for how well a queen can manipulate her own body to pass as something she is not. Queens that easily pass for "real women" are the ones who explode the very notion that "woman" is a natural category, so passing is valued because deconstructing the gender binary is a mission of this competition.

And yet, when a queen achieves this extraordinary level of realness in her performance of female beauty, the common catchphrase on the show is "stop relying on that body." This means a queen is obligated to offer the world much more than stunning good looks. Beauty queens or body queens are respected for what they can do, but what they can do is considered the

lowest form of success on the show. There are two interesting sidebars here. One is the show's nuanced embrace of plastic surgery and body modification. For example, Michelle Visage's breast implant saga or Detox's recovery from a disfiguring car crash being construed as medical decisions to protect themselves, versus Trinity the Tuck's extreme makeover or RuPaul's own Botoxing being construed as personal style choices that harm no one. The other sidebar is the show's initial refusal to allow transwomen to compete. RuPaul said transwomen were basically too real as women to be classified as drag illusion, but he changed the show's policy of excluding transwomen in 2017 after being heavily criticized by the younger generation of queens and fans.

The values Shusterman refers to as grace, elegance, charm, and refinement can be bundled together under RuPaul's value of charisma. I've previously published about this as the terrain of Andy Warhol and the Factory superstars, several of whom were drag queens or transwomen and the majority of whom were queer, including Warhol himself. In 1987, RuPaul arrived in New York City just as Warhol was dying and thus never became one of his official superstars. But Warhol's understanding of "fifteen minutes of fame" and his methodologies for capitalizing on the currency of celebrity are a cornerstone of RuPaul's total media domination. RuPaul knows charisma when he sees it, but it can be difficult to objectively define. He finds grace in the smoothness of a queen's death drop into the splits on the dance floor. He finds elegance in a queen's choice of simple but expensive gown. He finds charm in a queen's nonverbal communication or micro expressions. He finds refinement in the clarity with which a queen steers her own total package of charisma or the instinctiveness with which she delivers on a challenge.

On the whole, RuPaul's understanding of star quality is firmly rooted in his own experience of rising to prominence through the acclaim of the MTV generation and has grown exponentially due to his instinctive embrace of the ideas coming out of New Media Studies that Warhol too would have loved if he were alive today. There has been criticism of RuPaul's use of his own music video successes as the primary lens through which to judge queens on *Drag Race*, most notably centered on the example of the rise and fall and rise of alternative country drag superstar Trixie Mattel and the unanticipated difficulties of mentoring drag pop star Adore Delano. Queens who plan to do something other than music when they exit the show also often face additional scrutiny from RuPaul, as he does not always see the value in more niche or modern career opportunities or trust that the pathways to success in these will be clear of major obstacles for his graduating queens.

Shusterman's next value is style, which RuPaul's calls uniqueness. These are equivalent, with the idea being that one is self-aware in holding an individual and specific viewpoint, which is then deployed in forms appropriate to the immediate context for an audience to appreciate. Style or uniqueness is unlikely to be copied by others either because of its fundamental inventiveness and outside-the-box thinking that no other queens could have anticipated or because it does something rather obviously iconic that most other queens would not be able to effectively pull off or sell to their own audiences for whatever reason. This includes the visual activism of wardrobe choices and any messages the queens wish to convey through fashion, but it also begins to get at the queer cultural centrality of a queen's general attitude.

These matters of temperament are actually the place where *Drag Race* perhaps diverges most interestingly from Shusterman's list of values. His ars erotica can bundle courtesy and care or sensitivity to the feelings of others into a total package of empathy that hinges on the value of self-mastery. Self-mastery involves awareness and then control or moderation of oneself to create the conditions of possibility for being considerate toward others. *Drag Race* usually declares one of the non-winners to be Miss Congeniality at the end of the season, emphasizing

that courtesy and care for others are indeed part of drag family values.

But RuPaul's understanding of self-mastery is a departure from the way this value is understood by the ancients, who largely judged self-mastery through the evidence of moderated actions. If you're not upsetting the apple carts of interpersonal communication or social contract, you've got self-mastery. But drag is usually excited to upset these apple carts. RuPaul does not encourage queens to exercise moderation as part of the mission of drag is to create space for maximalist free expression. For a queen to fail at self-mastery on RuPaul's terms, her actions must be stiff or frozen due to a lack of self-confidence. RuPaul refers to this as the inner saboteur, as one of our unhealthy and unhelpful internal guiding voices that needs to be overcome before we can truly love ourselves for who we are.

More to the point, RuPaul's explicit and constant reference to the value of nerve is set against the values of courtesy and care. Courtesy and care are earned in the world of *Drag Race*, not freely given from the start. Nerve is about boldness and bravery. This value necessarily stems from the fact that gay men and trans women have always been a globally marginalized group. It is bold to stand up for one's rights, it is brave to come out of the closet because it can still get you killed or fired or ostracized by mainstream society. A drag queen must develop nerve simply in order to draw breath and move about in the world, and to compete on an internationally beloved show like *Drag Race* with all the social media attention and financial pressures it brings certainly does take nerve.

This nerve often comes at the expense of other queens in the competition. Another catchphrase on the show is "this isn't RuPaul's best friends' race," meaning that at the end of the season there is only one official winner and sometimes the competitors will need to operate strategically against other queens who they may have long admired or have been friends with in real life outside the show. And most of all, nerve is on display through the library challenge, which is based on the fundamental drag queening practice known as reading or throwing shade. Queens read each other by passing amusing insults back and forth as a way of lightly hazing and then bonding with each other, to make fun of their own collective and common problems as well as to keep their insult skills sharp in case they are needed for deployment against harassment on the street. When a queen reads someone for filth, the objective of this most extreme form is to make the target feel like trash and utterly denigrate them to get them to shut up.

If reads can be said to fit into the value of courtesy and care, it is when a read takes the form of homage, as when a young queen must acknowledge a veteran queen's trademark moves or legendary status in the community to establish the basis of the joke. When a veteran queen reads a younger queen, she will usually do so with a professional or at least mothering tone, offering the joke as a way of genuinely workshopping with the younger queen and helping her to spot areas in her work that need improvement if she is going to grow up to be a truly great performer. Part of the beauty and relief of reading is that it is explicit and direct, whether the tone is serious and professional or campy and hilarious. Queens can scream out a read if they're in fighting mode or simply offer it as part of general conversation while everyone is backstage before or after a show, whereas shade is the type of trash talk that is whispered.

A queen who shades is casting a chilly vibe toward another queen, but in a manner that is indirect. The shady queen might not laugh when the targeted queen makes a joke, to indicate that the target isn't succeeding at being funny or isn't worthy of the shady queen's attention. A shady queen might complain about something general to no one in particular in the room, but in a way that everyone in the room knows there is only one queen who exemplifies the complaint. In this case, the targeted queen might ask, "is that a read?" This partly combats shade

with shade, insinuating that the original insult was so weak as to be barely perceivable as an insult. But it also often results in escalation of a situation because the targeted queen is asking for more direct criticism and possibly implying that the shady queen lacked the nerve to dish up a read because she wouldn't be able to withstand any reply. A shady queen is often a lonely queen or one with a strong inner saboteur, criticized for not having enough nerve, but she may nevertheless be commended for her talent in flying just under the radar of proper insult.

Talent is the fourth and final category of value for RuPaul and it is directly comparable with Shusterman's values of skill and intelligence. Some queens make their own wardrobe. Other queens can sing and dance. Some are good at impersonation or lip syncing. Others are good at reading or stand-up comedy. Every season of *Drag Race* offers about two dozen mini and maxi challenges to assess each of these skills in turn, and seldom has any queen swept a majority of challenges. An outlier here is BenDeLaCreme, sometimes referred to as BenDeLaChrist because she won 5 out of 6 maxi challenges in a row and then shockingly eliminated herself instead of another queen when she was given the opportunity. This decision faced mixed reactions as she consistently delivered talent that was extraordinary, yet her intelligence seemed to be lacking with such a strategy. Its valuation of uniqueness and nerve are clearer cut.

This was the second time DeLa competed for RuPaul, after she won Miss Congeniality on an earlier season. None of these queens exist in the vacuum of a single season of the show. They have often had long careers on stage before they appear on the show, and certainly all of them have many new opportunities and fandoms once they graduate. This would be a locus for examining Shusterman's value of harmony, which RuPaul would characterize instead as legacy. Both are talking about a unity within variety, a peaceability found within oneself and in relations with fellow citizens. To a limited extent, the competitive nature of *Drag Race* is fundamentally not conducive to harmony with other people.

That RuPaul chose this format to deliver the values of drag shows how his experience of the global fight for LGBTQ+ equality and his faith in market-based resolutions for this fight presume a high degree of hostile cacophony with which queens must engage if they are to survive and infiltrate or assimilate into mainstream society. This point is not made as a critique of RuPaul's clearly neoliberal viewpoint, but rather simply to label him as a pragmatist whose ends may justify his means. His interest in building a legacy that achieves long-term harmony between queers and the rest of the planet overrides any short-term interest he has in choosing a more harmonious television show format where queens don't need to fight each other. RuPaul's legacy rests on whether he has succeeded in proliferating the general aesthetic principles that govern the erotic art of drag queening, so we now turn to the practical branch of analysis in somaesthetics to examine the impact of *Drag Race* upon the world.

4. Now available on iTunes

Robin James has theorized extensively about how white supremacist patriarchy has become multi-racial, how the system has needed to become more flexible in order to move from Fordist capitalism to deregulation capitalism. This means that RuPaul will be embraced by the system for as long as his work aligns with the discipline of capitalism itself, where otherwise—as in the first twenty years of his career—he could be held off at the margins because he is Black and an empowered queen. At first glance, it seems like RuPaul's "gay agenda" should explode capitalist ideology as it deconstructs naturalist gender binarism. Indeed, this is still the main objection political and religious conservatives lob at *Drag Race*. But RuPaul responds to this with a simple

catchphrase, "Unless they're paying your bills, pay them bitches no mind."

His wild marketplace success proves this more crucial point: RuPaul has developed the reflective and corporeal practices of drag queening into a branch of somatic self-improvement and styled himself into a highly profitable new age "guRU" offering the somaesthetic as a tool for resiliency. The story of RuPaul is that he overcame social prejudice and discrimination to be successful and happy, that he is essentially resilient. Capitalism loves this narrative of resiliency because if one individual can overcome hardship then any individual can, and this denies any need to fundamentally change an oppressive system by making it seem instead as though some individuals are merely too melancholy to pull themselves up by their bootstraps like RuPaul did. Marginalization starts to look like the result of individual poor choices instead of an inherent injustice of the marketplace.

These considerations are the most prominent terrain for contemporary theorization of drag culture. Perhaps *Drag Race* is changing individual lives while reifying the assumptions that materially ruin those lives in the first place. Whether his methods will ultimately rack up more points for or against liberation of the LGBTQ+ community, and whether there is any genuinely solvent alternative to his methods remains to be seen. The extent to which RuPaul himself is aware of this dilemma, and whether he feels resourced or trapped by it, also remains to be seen. His campy catchphrase, "now available on iTunes" amusingly applied to a variety of things not available on iTunes, does indicate he has some appreciation for these critiques. Nevertheless, RuPaul makes an unironic truckload of real money off things he puts up for sale on iTunes.

Practically speaking, there are three avenues by which RuPaul has been able to proliferate drag values as a form of somatic self-improvement. That is, the foundational text of the television series *Drag Race* is broken up and broadly disseminated into mainstream culture in three modes: social media conversation, drag queening merchandise, and live events that combine fandoms with productization. Let's briefly examine how each of these three modes offers corporeal methods of creative care and fashioning of the self.

First, there is a vast network of groups online that extend discussion of the television show and all its component parts. Those component parts include RuPaul's personas as in-drag judge and out-of-drag host, the permanent panel of experts like Michelle Visage and Ross Matthews, the rotating cast of celebrity guests, all the competitors both in and out of drag, the actual competition challenges, and the brands who sponsor the show through prizes or provision of the material resources needed to execute the challenges. These components require a specialized vocabulary that has already often been in evidence during this essay. The massive community of people on the internet who are talking about *Drag Race* are thus given platforms upon which to become practitioners of drag through the extensive use of drag's unique language. The show also provides examples or demonstrations of how drag tools like make-up and fashion are best used, and then the fans practice using it on the internet by sharing their own ways of achieving similarly stunning looks. This then seeps out into mainstream culture, such that you can find people using catchphrases like "slay, queen" or tongue popping without having any understanding of the drag-related etymology but nevertheless circulating the drag-related values.

Second, for drag queening to be a career it must pay the bills, and so even the winner of the show each season must be able to sustain the monetization of her drag once the prize money has been spent. The most obvious money to be paid is for live gigs, but that's a lot of work when there are so many passive revenue streams to set up. Just like rock stars, touring drag queens mostly have music albums and tour t-shirts for sale. Many queens also set up accounts on Patreon, Cameo or Only Fans to provide exclusive and customizable content like a birthday greeting

video for a superfan. Some queens just slap their logo on everything from coffee mugs to throw blankets to stickers to notebooks and wait for the cash to roll in. A handful of queens launch a line of cosmetics or a fragrance. All these products contribute to the circulation of drag values and most of them are applied directly to the body of the fan.

And third, there are the live events. Drag queening is a performance art that of course necessitates a stage and an audience. That stage is commonly assumed to be at a gay bar late at night with a ten-dollar cover charge or possibly at a weekend brunch with a twenty-dollar ticket. But more often now, there are fifty-dollar tickets to a full two-hour variety or cabaret style show, with some of the most experienced and beloved queens like Sasha Velour raking in these ticket prices for solo performances. RuPaul himself has built an entire touring company for the *RuPaul's Drag Race Werq the World* show so that the top queens from the previous season's competition are immediately funneled into a year of tour work. He has also launched a *RuPaul's Drag Race Live* residency for top queens that runs five shows per week at The Flamingo in Las Vegas. Neither of these shows has any age restriction, so again we have the strong possibility of disseminating drag values even in cases where the audience is a six-year-old who has no idea what a drag queen is.

But the most impressive live event by far is DragCon, whose mission is to celebrate "the art of drag, queer culture and self-expression for all." The annual expo event began is Los Angeles in 2015, then it was followed by the launch of annual events for New York City in 2017 and for London in 2020. DragCon contains plenty of academic panels, all kinds of meet-and-greet opportunities, dozens of live performances and endless rows of merchandise for sale. These two-day spectaculars are full of artistry and activism. In 2016, the 200 vendors at DragCon LA raked in $2.3 million. In 2018, the two US DragCons topped 100,000 visitors and made over $8 million. RuPaul himself usually gives the keynote speech at these events and the theme is always related to self-love. DragCon has been compared to the Burning Man festival for its similarly radical and inclusive support for self-expression. Demographic studies of DragCon attendees reveal that its audience is only 40% male and 60% queer, evidence that RuPaul's values are circulating in mainstream society particularly by appealing to straight women.

5. Category is…Futurism

The survey of RuPaul provided by this essay is not even remotely exhaustive or comprehensive of his total body of work. To do a close reading of all of it and produce the Encyclopedia RUtannica would take a lifetime. Even if we were to accomplish that, drag queening is just the tip of the iceberg. It is absolutely the most obvious and low-hanging fruit for injecting queerness into somaesthetics. The study of drag queens should lead us to the study of drag kings. The study of drag as ars erotica should lead us to the study of cabaret, burlesque and stripping that points toward strong overlap between the fields of somaesthetics and performance studies.

This injection of queerness is itself only one of the injections needed. Differently abled bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me a cyborg somaesthetics of assistive technologies, deaf somaesthetics, blind somaesthetics. Old and aging bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me a decaying somaesthetics of chronic pain management, mobility somaesthetics, a somaesthetics grappling with memory loss. Neurodivergent bodies have also been held off at the margins. Show me an autistic somaesthetics, somaesthetics for highly sensitive people, somaesthetics for those with PTSD or ADHD or OCD.

All these types of bodies have always existed. Yet they are largely invisible in ancient ars

erotica, so if that's where somaesthetic study were to end, it ends with the increasingly narrow category of heterosexuals who are youthful and able-bodied. It's clear from Shusterman's pioneering work in this field overall that he hopes it will turn into a properly inclusive discipline capable of supporting wildly diverse kinds of practitioners. His newest book contributes a beautifully wide historical background to that project, and I hope this essay has provided some usefully modern updates that begin to make visible a few of the truly gorgeous ways queers have practiced the art of living our best lives.

References

Sartwell, Crispin (2020). "What the Drug Culture Meant." *The Journal of Somaethetics, 6*(2), 82-88. https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jos.v6i2.6258.

Shusterman, Richard (2008). *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge University Press.

Shusterman, Richard (2021). *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love.* Cambridge University Press.

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

Tibor Solymosi

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 phallocentric discourse of western philosophy. She encourages philosophers and non-philosophers alike to take up clitoridian[1] 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 phallocentrism 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, *phallocentrism* 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 heternormativity 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 phallocentric, and the heteronormative. Shusterman commits the phallocentrism 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 phallocentric 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 Œ, 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 Peformativity," 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 breech of nature/culture, per se, but in the very nature of spacetimemattering?* (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 *Œ* 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, *Œ*, 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 Œ 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 Œ 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 Œ. 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 Œ 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 Micorensia, 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 phallocentrism or the clitoridian. Nevertheless, the pragmatist notions of body-mind, soma, and Œ 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 Œ 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; Tschaepe, 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 Tschaepe's "Cruising Uncertainty: Queering Dewey against Heteronormativity" because their perspective has previously aligned with neuropragmatism (Tschaepe 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.

Tschaepe weaves together queer theory and Dewey's pragmatism via previous feminist pragmatists' efforts to bridge Dewey with feminist theory. Tschaepe 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. Tschaepe 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 Œ. 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 Œ 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 Œ, 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 Œ 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 Œ. 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 Œ, 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 Œ.

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 Œ 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 Œ 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 phallocentric.

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 Œ 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 Œ 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 Œ. 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 automatisms, Malabou writes:

> *The battle against passive automatism is achieved through creative automatisms. 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 Tschaepe'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 Œ 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 phallocentrism 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, Œ, 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 gential-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 Œ 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 phallocentric. If Malabou fails to identify herself sexually, does she commit the very erasure she aims to prevent? I struggle to imagine a phallocentric man writing, without consequence, that his phallic libido is not separate from the intellect. And yet, the phallologocentrism 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 Œ.

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, phallocentric 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 Œ 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). Œ'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 phallocentrism, 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 Œ.

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 Tschaepe 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 Œ 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 depositary 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.

References

Barad, K. (2012). Nature's queer performativity. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, No. 1-2: 25–53.

Dewey, J. (1922/1988). *Human Nature and Conduct*. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.) *The Middle Works of John Dewey, volume 14*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1925/2008). *Experience and Nature.* In J. A. Boydston (Ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, volume 1*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1929/1988). *The Quest for Certainty*. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, volume 4*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1938/1988). *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, volume 12*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1939/1988). *Creative democracy—The task before us*. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.) *The Later Works of John Dewey, volume 14*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Grimstad, F., Boskey, E. R., Taghinia, A., Estrada, C. R., and Ganor, O. (2021). The role of androgens in clitorophallus development and possible applications to transgender patients. Andrology. 9(6):1719–1728. Doi: 10.1111/andr.13016

Henning, B. (2023a). Where pragmatism gets off: Sexuality and American philosophy. *Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society, 59*(1), 1–9. doi: 10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.59.1.01

Henning, B. (2023b). The queer pragmatist and erotic concrescence. *Pragmatism Today, 14*(2), 49–58.

James, W. (1890/1950). *The Principles of Psychology, Volumes I and II*. Dover Publications, Inc.

Johnson, M. L., and Schulkin, J. (2023). *The Mind In Nature: John Dewey, Cognitive Science, and a Naturalistic Philosophy for Living*. MIT Press.

Johnson, M. L., and Tucker, D. M. (2021). *Out of the Cave: A Natural Philosophy of Mind and Knowing*. MIT Press.

Kennedy, J., and Pavličev, M. (2018). Female orgasm and the emergence of prosocial empathy: An evo-devo perspective. *JExpZool(MolDevEvol)* 330:66–75. DOI: 10.1002/jez.b.22795

Malabou, C. (2008). *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (S. Rand, Trans.). Fordham University Press. (Original work published 2004).

Malabou, C. (2019). *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains* (C. Shread, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 2019).

Malabou, C. (2022). *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought* (C. Shread, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 2020).

Prum, R. O. (2023). *Performance All the Way Down: Genes, Development, and Sexual Difference*. University of Chicago Press.

Schulkin, J. (2011). *Adaptation and Well-Being: Social Allostasis*. Cambridge University Press.

Shusterman, R. (2008). *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics.* Cambridge University Press.

Shusterman, R. (2021a). *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love.* Cambridge University Press. 10.1017/978051179188

Shusterman, R. (2021b). Pragmatism and sex: An unfulfilled connection. *Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society, 57*(1), 1–31. 10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.57.1.01

Solymosi, T. (2018) Flowers for Feynman: Natural piety and the aesthetics of experience in the experimental spirit. In J. Hanes and E. Weisman (Eds.), *The Role of Arts in Learning: Cultivating Landscapes of Democracy* (pp. 84–102). Taylor and Francis.

Solymosi, T. (2023). Neuropragmatic tools for neurotechnological culture: Toward a creatively democratic cybernetics of care. *Contemporary Pragmatism, 20*(1–2), 77–117. doi:10.1163/18758185-bja10059

Solymosi, T. (2024). Neuropragmatism, the cybernetic revolution, and feeling at home in the world. *Phenom Cogn Sci*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-024-09977-8

Sterling, P. (2020). *What is Health? Allostasis and the Evolution of Human Design*. MIT Press.

Tschaepe, M. (2013). Reconsidering philosophical questions and neuroscientific answers: Two pillars of inquiry. *Human Affairs 23*, 606–615, doi: 10.2478/s13374-013-0152-2.

Tschaepe, M. (2014). Neuropragmatic reconstruction: A case from neuroeconomics. In J. R. Shook and T. Solymosi (Eds.), *Pragmatist Neurophilosophy: American Philosophy and the Brain* (pp. 111–126). Bloomsbury.

Tschaepe, M. (2023). Cruising uncertainty: Queering Dewey against heteronormativity. *Pragmatism Today, 14*(2), 59–71.

White, F. (2022). Pleasure-producing human clitoris has more than 10,000 nerve fibers. *OHSU News*. https://news.ohsu.edu/2022/10/27/pleasure-producing-human-clitoris-has-more-than-10-000-nerve-fibers

Sapphic Erotica in Pole Dance: Manipulating the Phallus

Rowena Gander

Abstract: *From the perspective of a lesbian creator and performer, who has worked professionally in pole dance for ten years, I reflect on my acclaimed solo show, Barely Visible (2021), to highlight how my process of metamorphosising the symbolic and metaphorical phallus has allowed me to stand firm in my lesbian sexuality on stage. The text emphasises the empowering and erotic potential of a woman in charge and how expression of sexuality emerged, not because of stylised feminine aesthetic, but by the creative actions I took as a gay woman.*

The first thing you should know about me is that before I became a performance artist / academic / lecturer in dance, I was an erotic dancer (between the ages of 18-21, 2008-2011). I worked at several strip clubs across the UK, and some abroad. Now, a history of stripping would not ordinarily be the first thing I would tell a stranger about myself, but the weight of my autobiography has significant meaning towards my thinking as an artist and choreographer, and how, over the past ten years (2014-2024) I have approached working with the pole in innovative, creative and bold ways.

It was my first performance with the pole, *Does This Pole Make Me Look Straight* (2014), which I performed for my undergraduate degree in dance practices, that encouraged me to see the experimental potential of the pole, particularly regarding how it allowed me to express myself as a woman. Through analysis of my work, I have found much evidence of how I have been pushing back at my historically partial subordination, and how the actions I am now taking with the pole differ from the actions I took then at the strip club. Over time I have formed a personal resistance against a stylized feminine aesthetic, giving particular attention to the realisation that, instead of just being looked at as an object by men, and restricting my movement only to a sexual aesthetic, I can now speak to audiences with and through my body, and, in doing so, I can raise my voice as a woman. However, as evidenced in the humorous and sarcastic title of my first work above, the subjects I continue to speak about are relative to my sexuality and agency, which can be complicated because my work has always, in some way, linked back to a theme of sex. This leads me to the second thing you should know about me - I am a lesbian. From here forward, when I refer to lesbian, I explicitly mean "a woman who desires and/or wants to be desired by another woman" (Wang, 2014, p.61) whether that is in an erotic, emotional or physical manner.

By remembering comments from my more naïve engagement with the pole at strip clubs, such as ‘you can dance on my pole’ and ‘there is no way you are a lesbian if you can do that’,

I acknowledge that, on the surface, a lesbian dancing with a pole, can be a recipe for male attention because of the poles obvious phallic structure. So, each work I have made, I carefully and deliberately tried to find new ways to address and manipulate the pole, and to explore how I could bring a new meaning and intention to it -- meaning and intention that goes beyond the pole's stigmatic connotations. I mostly achieved this through countless hours of physical improvisation, manoeuvring the pole, and my body around and with it, exhausting as many options as possible. The results of my countless experiments led me to a series of full length works where I split the pole in half, I used it as a ballet bar to hang my body off, I signalled is as a weight on my shoulders, I hung it from a ceiling, I played catch with it, and I used it as a washing line.

In many ways, my work, made initially through the lens of an experimental choreographer, was rejecting the position of the pole in strip clubs, and saying, there is so much more possibility when dancing with this object. However, when I made *Barely Visible* (2021), a work based on common issues that lesbians face, where I felt confident enough to layer my artistic lens with my lesbianism, I saw clearly the anthropomorphic value of the pole as a man, and was audacious enough to use this to my advantage in my process, which, as I will uncover, blends themes of fetishism, castration, and object manipulation.

What my reflective analysis of *Barely Visible* will uncover is that, whilst there are few traditionally erotic connotations made with the pole via a sexual and stylised aesthetic, there are many erotic implications related to my choreographic actions as a gay woman and how I give meaning to the pole through the lens of my sapphic sexuality.

Figure 1

Barely Visible is an empowering physical solo performance that brings focus to common issues that lesbian women face, including sexualisation, objectification and (fe)male gaze. It incorporates the use of a 100 kilo pole and is semi-autobiographical in its content, meaning it combines and weaves my own experiences with those of other lesbian women.

Funded by Arts Council England, the work has toured nationally for four years (2021, -2024), and has received much critical acclaim. It has engaged a vast number of lesbian audiences in pre/post-show conversations and workshops on topics of power and sexuality. It has also been at the centre of my discourse at numerous academic conferences.

Before breaking down my lesbian coded way of working with the pole, of which I briefly outlined in the introduction, I offer a journal entry, that I have repetitively used to prepare for performance since I made the work in 2021. This short text, which has been edited to better align to the focus this paper, succinctly narrates *Barley Visible* from start to finish and is shared to give you a sense of my interaction with the pole.

> *The x pole lite stage is tipped sideways. I hide behind it, in the shadows, like a lot of gay women do in their day to day lives.*
>
> *After playing with my visibility, offering brief visuals of the extremities of my body, I emerge from behind it, only to be electrocuted to the voice of Margaret Thatcher in her section 28 speech "children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay".*
>
> *My body convulses as though it is stuck to an electrocution device.*
>
> *I detach and I use my strength to dynamically move the weight of the pole and its base around the stage, I see it as the weight of sexuality that I must carry and hold, as my body weaves through, over, with and around it.*
>
> *My actions turn the pole into a machine gun, a telescope, a seat, and a massive strap on, of which I have a moment of enjoyment playing with the audience (as if I am "free" to do so).*
>
> *The base of the pole is now a backdrop to my performance in a TV show "Bury Your Gays", which highlights the top ten lesbian deaths on TV in the past 50 years. I physically act out each death, the half pole becomes a knife, a guillotine, a piece of wood, a prison, and a windmill.*
>
> *The derogatory and persistent voices that are featured in the work "dyke", "dirty lesbian", "make a dirty work", hit me hard and my body reacts as though they are physically moving me.*
>
> *The comments push me to cover my face in fake dirt, construct the pole to its 3-meter length, and to climb to the top of it, shouting "is this fucking dirty enough?" – I then proceed to effortlessly manipulate my body around the pole as I tell the audience*

about awkward situations that I have repeatedly faced as a gay woman and how some situations make lesbians feel "dirty".

I move closer to the audience as I converse with them, and in doing so, I take time away from the pole, though it is still visible in the background. I play with the difficulties of femininity and the resistance some gay women feel with it, particularly when femininity signals a "readiness" for male attention or to "fit" into heteronormative standards of living - lipstick lesbian being a key example. I get drunk in a bar to handle the situational femininity and readiness for attention.

Back to the pole. It stands still as I try to dance to a purposely distorted version of Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" (2008) until, again, I become frustrated by the queer baiting aspect of the song, and the female voices "I'm not into women, but, I'd let you fuck me" and "my boyfriend doesn't care if I have sex with a women.. I just want to try you on". Like earlier, I see the pole as the baggage I carry with me as a gay woman, and I drag the 100-kilo pole across the stage.

I find peace in dancing with a red dress, as though it is a woman (recognising the gendered signals of a dress, like the gendered signal of the pole), and in doing so, the pole slowly begins to take on a new meaning. It becomes a source of male surveillance on my romantic enjoyment with women – my slow and soft movement with the dress is juxtaposed with steps that move sharply away from the poles dominant and erect position in space.

The male and female societal voices begin again, asking me personal questions about sex."How do you know you are a lesbian, if you haven't had sex with a man?" is the last question I hear before the pole changes fully establishes its meaning as a metaphorical man. It stands true to its phallic symbolism, allowing me to tell the story of a time I reluctantly had sex with a man "just to make sure" – as many gay women have done.

I slowly climb the pole with visible hesitation, and I make gestures with my hands to show my internal dialogue of "what the fuck am I doing?" I hold numerous uncompromising and challenging positions on the pole, like I am frozen, and not enjoying what is happening, whilst the persistent dialogue continues "it makes me so hard to think of you having sex with a woman" and "don't you just miss having a big strong man?" Considering I know how strong I am now, in comparison to the memory of the event this segment of the work refers to, that comment is the tipping point and is the one that reminds me that, no, I do not need a strong man for anything, especially not sex. As I recover my strength as a woman, I silence the voices by sourcing the right tools (Allen keys that I used earlier to construct the pole) detaching the length of the pole (or castrating the man) from its base.

I take the castrated pole to the audience, and I proceed to give them a mansplained tutorial about the pole and how they too, can deconstruct it -- "Ok, so, for those

> *of you who don't quite understand what's going on right now, I think I am going to break it down for you. This is a pole, it is about 3 meters in length, 20 kilos in weight, and it is covered with a black silicone coat. Now, who wants to touch it? […] I then split the pole into two much smaller pieces. And now that I have got these much smaller tools to play with, I think I am going to have some fun*"
>
> *Once I have fully signalled to the audience how the pole was used as a symbolic phallus, I proceed to parade and dance around the stage to the song "Short Dick Man" (1994) and in this dance, my choreographic actions metamorphosise the pole from crutch, microphone, barbell, hoover, majorette stick, aeroplane, ladder, and I lay it out on the floor and use it to frame a jumping game.*
>
> *When I leave the pole and enter its base, where the pole used to reside, I pull the Allen key out of my pocket, and I swing it around in circles near my vulva -- the last time I make phallic suggestion. I then remove the dirt and lipstick covered jeans and put the red dress on and in doing so, the castrated object is no longer dominant in the space. My body replaces it.*
>
> *I wear the dress, not as a token of femininity, but as though the red dress is a woman, and my wearing it means she is wrapped around my body. I stand in my sexuality with confidence, self-assurance, and strength, and I shut down the voices one last time.*

As shown in the pre-performance text above that I use as a tool to evoke the essence of the original work for consistency in my performance, the pole takes on many meanings throughout the work and how I physically operate the pole has given me a framework to re-position, re-frame and to take charge of the pole, and give it new meaning, in a way that aligns with my sexuality. The meanings produced in the work, which I will now reflect on and analyse, are contextually situated, and concern a myriad of themes including the anthropomorphic object in relation to fetishism / castration, lesbian interaction with dildos (due to the obvious phallic connection), and object manipulation. Based on the number of times I have performed the work, I also offer brief insight into the reception of *Barely Visible* and how audiences have received my actions, and how I feel being watched by them.

Figure 2 *Anthropomorphic Object / Fetishising the Pole*

Given the subtitle of this text and how I "manipulate the phallus", it is important to unveil the theoretical motivation behind my attention to this manipulation and how theory, however dated, has influenced my artistic choices. I have already noted the anthropomorphic value of the pole -- how I framed it with human characteristics and how, at times, I saw the pole as a metaphorical man. However, the framing of the pole as a man caused a ripple effect in my research which delved into fetishism and castration, which then led me to think about lesbian interaction with dildos. I knew that if I was parading around the stage with a pole that was split into "two much smaller pieces", I had to had to have clear motivation to do so. As a gay woman, I also had to have a strong argument prepared as to why I continue to dance with a phallic object, an object that is directly linked to the male gaze and has the potential to fetishise my female body, even though I do not desire men or their gaze.

Sigmund Freud's essay on *Fetishism* (1928) provided some answers to my questions, as well as giving me ample motivation to split the pole in to two. Fetishism, here, relates to an object that can elicit power over a person, either sexually or spiritually. Freud believed that a fetish was "a substitute for the woman's (mothers') phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego" (p.161). He poses the little boy as having the expectation that everyone has a penis, but when the boy finds out that women do not have a penis, he sees the woman as living with a body that is missing something. He then fears that his penis might be at risk of castration, so, to protect it and to settle some of the anxiety, the man adds something (a fetishized object that is not exclusive to phallic representation) to the female body. The fetish acts as an aversion to the vagina, which allows repressed castration anxiety to stay hidden for the male. What I found interesting was that rarely did a fetishist approach Freud to gain treatment about fetishist

interests, instead they would usually revel in delight that they had found such compensation to make up for lack in the female form. According to Dant (1996) any object can generate fetishism, but an object such as a high-heeled shoe becomes fetishized through its appearance because of its shape and extension it gives to the body. For instance, the shoe might represent a phallus, and if the shoe is worn by a woman, it fills the void of her "castration".

Given the historical use of the pole in strip clubs, like high heels, I saw the pole as an object that could also generate fetishism and fully understood why women dancing around it causes such arousal in men. However, rather than seeing myself as lacking something and attempting to ease a male onlooker's anxiety about my "lack", as I had done in those naïve dancing days, I looked at the pole and decided to "castrate" it. I pondered how if the "penis" (pole) was gone, which I completed through a simple deconstruction of the pole, using Allen keys and strength, then I would no longer have to deal with male surveillance on my lesbian sexuality, nor would I see myself as inferior to men. In *Barely Visible* there was a significant build to this moment that forcefully highlighted male commentary on lesbian sexuality -- 'don't you just miss dick though?,' 'can I watch / join in?' and 'can you even call it sex if there isn't a dick involved?' The comments persisted until the moment I detached the length of the pole from the base. It became silent and obvious that I did not require 'a big strong man' for anything, especially not sex.

Whilst I was confident in my actions of deconstruction and attaching subjective meaning to the pole, as I did in many of my previous works, I was still questioning why a lesbian would be dancing around the stage with a phallic object and thought that I might as well be dancing around the stage with a massive dildo or strap-on. I knew my own relationship with sex toys, and that of my lesbian friends, because we talk about it, but what was the academic dialogue on lesbians and dildos? According to Madraga et al., (2018) the dildo for lesbians can be a useful but optional object. It can be a norm for a lesbian woman, or it can be supplementary in the act of sex between women. The dildo's aesthetic, size, colour, and other visual characteristics depend on taste. The use varies and is also subject to preference. Furthermore, the meaning of the dildo is fluid, depending on how it is viewed, approached, and used. The appearance of some dildos can be 'life like' in that they were modelled to resemble a penis. However, most lesbians would reject this style and opt for a dildo that is less realistic (they come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colours, textures). What is evident in my academic reading, and in conversations with friends, is the 'you do you' mentality that is common amongst lesbians and how they do not have to feature in lesbian relationships. Given the evident construction, deconstruction and manipulation of the pole in my work, I see a similar 'you do you' mentality that adds to my choices and agency as a creator, and I also see the pole, like the dildo, as holding, "as much agency as the person who manipulates it" (Minge and Zimmerman 2009, p. 345) and I convey that the pole's meaning is contextually determined by my lesbian coded thinking.

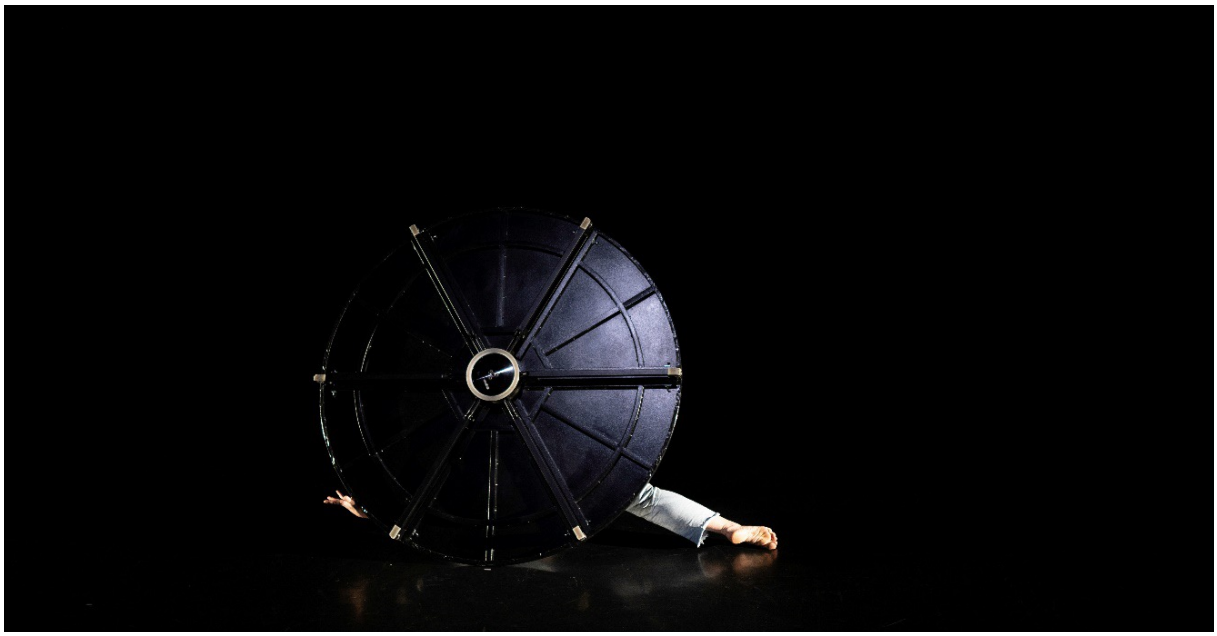

Figure 3 *Object Manipulation*

In the introduction and in the offering of my pre-performance text, I have given many examples on how I manipulate the pole to give it new meaning, and in doing so, I repetitively change the meaning of the pole for myself. When I see the pole as "just a metal pole" as Samantha Holland so aptly expressed in her book, Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment (2010, p. 178), then I can approach the pole in an almost childlike state, exploring it creatively, from a position of curiosity that is far removed from sex. I can simply ask what is possible – how long can I hold a certain position, what would this look like higher / lower on the pole, what happens if I fall against it, or fall without it / with it, how can I lift it, go under it, above it, around it, how long could I hold on with one hand, if it is possible to pull it, can I push it, roll it, move it, drop it?

As I write this, I see how important it was that I gave myself permission to play with the pole as 'just an object' without being attached to the cultural or aesthetic baggage it carries. My unapologetic and uncensored play with the pole, seeing it as, for example, a microphone, a prison, a set of skis, a washing line, or a climbing frame, allowed me to make an acclaimed work about sexuality, and not sex. The difference between the two, is that sexuality refers to the total expression of who I am, which is much more nuanced and complex than sex and the pleasure I gain from intercourse with women. To reiterate an earlier example, to dance with the pole in a 'sexy' way, to arouse and please the viewer, and thus relate it to eroticism and sex, can be restricted to a sexual aesthetic and is limiting for me as a creator and as a woman. However, when I consider the depths of my lesbian sexuality and how multilayered it is in relation to society's doubts and judgements, and how exploited I have felt because I am a gay woman, I see that I have been able to take on board sexualities' complexity with the pole because I had an arsenal of additional meanings and uses for it in my back pocket. I see my motivation to manipulate the pole in the way I have, as well as simultaneously rejecting and embracing the phallic nature of it, as a subverted and empowering way of fetishising the pole. I thus fully agree with researchers (Apter, 1991; Fernanez and Lastovicka, 2011) that fetishism is a form of magical thinking and how when an object comes into the hands of a consumer, it no longer has a universal status (or meaning) because its position changes depending on the subjective position of the buyer. When

the pole came into my hands as a lesbian woman, who has been on a mission to explore my sexuality and subjectivity through my work, I continually use the pole to elicit empowerment and agency and to defiantly reject my own objectification and raise the volume on my voice as a woman. Fetishism, then, or object manipulation, exampled by the way I use objects in my work, presents as "an ever-shifting form of specular mimesis, an ambiguous state that demystifies and falsifies at the same time, or that reveals its own techniques of masquerade while putting into doubt any fixed referent" (Apter, 1991, p.14). I manipulate the object to increase my mental and physical power over it, and when my actions are read and received by audiences in a way that I intended, it causes them to feel stronger, and seen and heard too.

Figure 4 *Audience and Performer Connection*

The themes in this text referred to so far have all come from the making and performing of Barely Visible, a solo show, which was received by 19 different audiences across the UK. 80% of those performances were followed by a post-show Q&A or an online survey where the spectator could share their experiences with me in more detail.

I drew many themes from audience commentary on the work, such as the impact of lesbian representation on stage, what it felt like for them to be seen and validated in such a visceral and visual way, as well as vast amounts of gratuitous comments stating a sense of kinaesthetic empowerment from watching my vulnerability turn into strength, but the data I share here shines a light on the empowering and erotic potential of a woman in charge and how it was not an overtly sexualised aesthetic that caused expression of sexuality in Barely Visible, but it was the creative actions I chose to take as a gay woman. Specifically, I share brief comments that exemplify how my choices regarding the anthropomorphic and fetishised value of the object, as well as my audacity to manipulate it, were received by viewers.

> "Rowena is power in her sexuality! This performance was limitless."

> "I have never seen a woman take control in the way that she did. I don't know, the way she played with the pole and took charge. Truly empowering. And sexy."
>
> "Even though she was vulnerable, she was always in control of the thing that seemingly caused her vulnerability. I admire the contrast and I wish I could be that strong".
>
> "The performer held the space in a strong and sexy way. The sexiness was not attached to the pole or pole dance culture in any way. She owned herself through her creativity!!!"

During the last performance of *Barely Visible* at The Lowry in Manchester, I was asked by an audience member, who had seen the work four times, how the work had developed since the first show. I told her that the content and choreography, as well as the text and sound, was all the same, but that the way I delivered the work was bolder, more intentional, and became more meaningful with each performance. It became more profound because my connections with gay women in the audience were more validating every time I performed the work. Additionally, each time I danced under the gaze of a lesbian audience, I felt more secure in my lesbianism and there was, for me, an eroticism to being looked at as I literally took charge of my sexuality on stage. I liked being the centre of visual attention of an appreciative dyke audience, having them experience my power, strength, vulnerability and control. I found moments of pleasure when women told me they were turned on by my ability to command the space and how I could use my body to express something they haven't yet been able to fully express for themselves.

I acknowledge that my audience was not always female and lesbian, but that did not matter to me, because I knew the work was educational and that it had the power to make me feel seen, without being consumed. I also knew from experience that as a gay woman I am always ready to deal with the male gaze because I do not desire it.

Throughout this text, I have offered an in-depth reflection on Barely Visible, a one-woman production that fetishises and manipulates a 100-kilo pole to express key elements of lesbian sexuality, including sexualisation, objectification and identity. By looking at my lesbian coded creative process, framing it with magical (Apters, 1991) and sexual (Freud, 1928) aspects of fetishism, I have detailed how and why I reject and metamorphosise the symbolic and metaphorical phallus, as well as conveying what such a process feels like for me as the creator. Whilst I present an eroticism in my thinking, I acknowledge the eroticism of my actions with the pole do not subscribe to a traditional and stylised sexual aesthetic that would be arousing for an audience. Instead, the eroticism, for me, and for the audience, derives from object manipulation, where I not only present the pole as a metaphorical man, but also as an objectified penis, a strap on, a dildo, and as something I can take or leave, make smaller / larger, or to simply just use as a toy that I can play with for my own enjoyment. To my knowledge there are no papers discoursing or describing lesbian sexuality in relation to pole dance and choreographic process. Thus, this text builds on existing knowledge of improvisation, pole dance, and lesbian sexuality in dance. I would like to see more work in pole dance that embraces the sexuality of the performer, without it having to align to a specific technical aesthetic.

Figure 5 Conclusion

References

Apter E. (1991) Fetishism in Theory: Marx, Freud, Baudrillard In *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France.* Cornell University Press. pp.1-14

Desmond, J. C. (2001) *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on & Off the Stage.* The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin.

Dant, T. (1996) Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects, *Lancaster University*, 44 (3), pp. 495-516

Freud, S. (1928) Fetishism. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* 9. Periodicals Archive Online, pp. 161-167

Fernanez, K. V. and Lastovicka, J. L. (2011) Making Magic: Fetishes in Contemporary Consumption. *Oxford University Press* [Online] 38 (2), pp. 278-299 DOI: 10.1086/659079[Accessed: 29/05/2019]

Holland, S. (2010) *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Madraga, M. and Nielsen, E-J. and Morrison, T, G. (2018) 'You Do You' Feminism: Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women's Perspectives on the Dildo. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22:1000–1018 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9507-5

Minge, J. and Zimmerman, A. L. (2009). Power, pleasure, and play: Screwing the dildo and rescripting sexual violence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(2), 329–349.

Wang, W. (2014) Lesbianism and Lesbian Theatre In *Comparative Literature: East & West,* 21 (1), pp. 113-123, DOI: 10.1080/25723618.2014.12015466

Interview

Ian Miles Gerson

Mark Tschaepe

In February, the artist, Ian Miles Gerson, was kind enough to grant me an interview at their studio in Houston. Their colorful, woven wearable art hang from the ceiling and the walls. Their worktables are covered with materials that Ian has rescued from bayous in Texas and Louisiana to use in their work. We chatted as their playful dog, Ozu, vied for attention. In our conversation that is transcribed below, Ian shared their insights about their work, queerness, and other concepts important to somaesthetics.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for clarity and continuity.

February 16, 2024:

Journal of Somaesthetics Can you just tell me a little bit about yourself, a little bit about who you are, what you do, and whatever else comes to mind?

Ian Gerson Sure, sure. Yeah, great to be with you today too. I am a visual artist. I work mostly with sculpture and installation, and I use found materials primarily. I'm from Houston and living in Houston now, though I spent many years outside of Houston in New York and other places. In my recent work I've been using ropes that I've found around Galveston Bay and the Houston Ship Channel. I've been weaving them with other materials such as emergency blankets and neon construction, netting, other found plastic and mesh, and personal clothing scraps, and kind of just other random things that I find, or not random, but other things that I find in the city, on the streets. I've been making a series of weavings and wearables.

JoS Somaesthetics is a way of looking at aesthetics that recognizes the body as having intention, as having intentional agency. And I remember when I first saw your work, I immediately thought of it as somaesthetic, as involving the body and its engagement with the world, rather than the body as passive or somehow as a bystander to the work, but rather very much engaged with it. And it seemed as though even when I was seeing your work in the gallery space that I read your work as being very mindful of the body and embodiment, especially but not limited to some of your work as wearables. And I was wondering what you could say about your work as somatic, as it relates to the body as an agent, not just as a thing, but to subjectivity.

IG Before making the wearables, the work had been a series of five by three-foot weavings that hang. I've been working now with them hanging not on the wall like a painting, but hanging off

the wall to call attention to their materiality and play with shadows. They're a physical entity. I mean, I think about them as bodies themselves, and they change over time, and that's kind of part of it. They begin to sag and shift and sometimes they look different from different angles, and I'm interested in that too. What's read differently from a different angle. There's text sometimes in them. I think about the surface. I think there's relationships to tattooing or piercing or hair. Yeah, I think about them as being a physical, bodily surface in a way. It's not representational. I mean, that's very abstract, but yeah, there's text in them that is sometimes more legible than other times and I'm interested in that idea of legibility or illegibility and also how that relates to subjectivities and who's legible to whom and in what context. I think about them as kind of a metaphor for transness., That is how I see them.

JoS Regarding legibility and transness, can you explain that a little bit further in terms of what you're thinking in terms of the work?

IG Yeah, I will use text that is intentionally fragmented or backwards or obstructed. I think the longer you spend with it, you might unfold, it might unfold. Sometimes it will never unfold to anyone and that's the intention and that's kind of to suggest that there's something written there, and I know what it says, but other people don't. Sometimes the longer you spend with it, you do make out a word. Depending on your familiarity with trans experiences… your familiarity with what I'm thinking about or writing about, you might be able to read it more easily. So, thinking about illegibility, I mean, I'm interested in illegibility kind of like as a tactic, as a protective strategy when thinking about identity. Protecting rather than exposing yourself, rather than being a marginalized subjectivity having to be performed or perform themselves for the dominant gaze. Playing with illegibility as a cover to conceal or as a protective strategy… if that makes sense.

JoS Yeah, it does, absolutely. So when you're talking about illegibility, especially talking about the sort of knowledge that it takes to translate whatever it is in the text or in the image or what have you, the idea of queerness comes to mind, the idea of queering language or language that has been queered. And just throwing out those terms to you, queer, queering, queered. I'd like to know what your thoughts are on those terms regarding the work that you're doing, the sculptures that you're making.

IG Yeah, yeah, I mean, I feel like they are. I identify with them and myself as being queer, of having actions that are queer. I think of the objects themselves. They're assembled from miscellaneous types of materials. Materials that are identifiable, but they come together, they're interwoven with each other, they create something else. So, there is a relationship to identity formation or to queer identity of what gets a symbol or thrown into the mix. What sticks, what moves away, what interacts or resonates with something else. I think their materiality has a queerness to it because of what it's made of. They're made of trash. They're made of things that don't have a lot of inherent value. They're made of things that are found, that are dirty, that are discarded, and then elevated. I want to think that they're elevated. I'm giving attention and care to them and putting them… yeah, bringing attention to them, to these materials that have been cast off. I think there's again another kind of thing to think about related to identities or subjectivities that have been cast off. Queer identities. I think that they like have a motion to them that is like queering. I think about the sculptures. They could be thought of as paintings. I think that's kind of queer. I think their form is queer… that means skirting away from fixed categories. Doing its own thing. I mean, that's how I think about queer, queering.

JoS So your idea of sort of the reconstruction of materials and the repurposing of them or taking what you know you're saying is often discarded as trash and creating this new identity reminds me of Muñoz's idea of disidentification that he talks about in his work. And I'm curious if there are specific works from what has become loosely known as queer theory that inform your work, that inform what you're doing with the work and your ideas in terms of the work.

IG I guess like starting with Muñoz, the idea of disidentification, also the book, *Cruising Utopia*, a lot of my work takes inspiration from queer nightlife and the energy of queer nightlife, and that book is a lot about queer nightlife. And Paul B. Preciado's work, *Testo Junkie* and their *An Apartment on Uranus* too. I've had a few two different shows that reference the titles. *Chronicles of the Crossing*. This show that I had was called *Crossing*, and that was thinking about their text. They're also making parallels between gender and migration and travel and fluidity. Yeah, so those two writers for sure. Halberstam too.

JoS One of the things that came out of your show last year was this notion of *tremble*. What is that? What is the idea of tremble?

IG I was introduced to the quote from Eduard Glissant's work. I was familiar with his work before about opacity and ideas of relation. In *Chronicles of Crossing*, Preciado mentions another idea that he wrote about called *un tremblement*—like the trembling with, tremble thinking or tremble. Tremble thinking is thinking that's opposed to the system or thinking that's opposed to the status quo. That is like queering, or that is queerness, or that is *transing*, or that is thinking that's opposed to hierarchical structures or gender categories or capitalism. That's how I think about it. Rather than a sign of weakness, it's strength, because it's shaking the system. I imagine cracks in a column or something like the tall pillars—white supremacy and capitalism—that there's small cracks in them and it compromises the strength and then eventually it crumbles. But it just starts from a small crack, which is the tremble. Preciado said the tremble of the voice on testosterone. The changing voice or that moment, that in between of transitioning.

JoS So, one aspect of somaesthetics is practical. It's the idea that our somatic engagement with the world has a practical element that we can apply to our lives to facilitate change to flourish. And I'm curious regarding your own work, what are the elements that you believe communicate anything about flourishing, with regard to a message or with regard to a feeling that the participant in your work can utilize for improving their own lives? I mean, what are some aspects of your work or what are some ideas within your work that have to do with the improvement of life?

IG I feel like the work itself has a kind of a celebratory feeling because of some of the reflective and neon materials. There's a looseness to the way that they're put together and this kind of playfulness. So, I think there is kind of like this upliftingness… I'm thinking about things like a lot of the materials are pulled out of urban waterways. So, I'm thinking about those waterways and what we've done to the land and what our relationship is to land. It's depressing to think about climate change, but that's where we are. We can't deny that. We can't erase that and totally transform it. We need to figure out how to navigate our future with where we're at. It's so complex. Coming to terms with how we got here and how do we think through that in a just way. How do we move forward and what does that look like and what changes do we need to make? All of that is heavy and serious, and then, but there is this celebratory element that I've been thinking about. *Trans* as a verb. I think it is something to look to, to think about how to move forward in this kind of climate apocalypse that we're in. I'm thinking about certain elements that could be found within a trans experience that could be taken as inspiration or looked to as far as

survival. Ideas about adaptability or non-binary thinking or non-linear thinking. Learning from the past or learning from Indigenous knowledge. Thinking outside of the binary. Resiliency, interconnection, and interconnected networks The weavings. They're interconnected materials that rely on each other. I feel like there is a hopefulness, and I think there is flourishing, to go back to the question. The work that is very make-do, making-do with what's there. So, I think that opens up a lot… is empowering. That's something that I've always liked about using found materials and trash materials is that it's potentially empowering for somebody to see it and be like, "oh, well, this is just this thing." This breaks down the mystique of making or of art. What could be possible with what's already around us. That idea within art, but also beyond that.

JoS Is there anything else that comes to mind regarding something that you want to make sure to communicate about your work?

IG Some of the material choices … like the emergency blanket material, for example That's used in a crisis scenario, or it provides warmth where warmth is needed, and often in situations where the cause of this need is completely man-made and avoidable. That object is like a survival object and then I manipulate it in ways … I cut it, cut them up and they dangle and they kind of become like a party decoration in a way, like party tinsel, which is not really what I'm using, but I think they begin to look so much like that. It becomes party tinsel in a way. I've been interested in that. Going back to queer nightlife stuff, queer nightlife as a refuge space … Like this blanket that provides warmth and safety and comfort and survival. A nightlife space is also a space that provides warmth and safety and survival. I think that similarly the construction netting, this neon construction netting and mesh has a relationship to queer club wear and nightlife and then it's also a safety tool in the world designating a space or a construction site.

JoS That's interesting. I know that there's been some work done on glitter for instance, and sort of the significance of glitter regarding the idea of fabulousness.

IG Yeah, as a sort of form of protection. Yeah, this feeling of home through certain spaces that are often seen, maybe from the outside as being merely for entertainment, but actually are much more than that with regard to the notion of community and home and security. What you're saying definitely resonates. I mean, I think also that that can become and I feel like I do this too, that it can become easy in a way maybe to glorify or only focus on like the positive there. I feel like utopia is this thing that we're reaching for and grabbing for. I think about where nightlife spaces are utopian or I can talk about them like that. But of course there are so many other issues that make them not utopian. They're not ideal perfect safe spaces that exist. What is safe space? They don't exist, or they exist outside of our world. There's a potentiality or like a magicness that can exist within those spaces. I think there are spaces that people can like dress how they want to dress and be how they want to be. I'm kind of let down that they can't in the daytime,.. in the straight world or whatever. They are real sites of refuge, but they're not without their issues.

When you said glitter, thinking about reflection or thinking about camouflage and anti-camouflage, I guess, like something that's eye catching versus something that blends in. On the way to the club, there's an element like you need to camouflage within the subway or whatever within the train. And then when you get there, I mean, anybody's look could be different, but potentially there's like this kind of like anti-camouflage thing of attention grabbing. Presenting. I'm interested in that idea about calling bright attention to something versus blending in or dissolving into the background.

JoS It brings us back to this idea of legibility that one might desire within a specific context, especially that transitory context going from one place to another—going from home to the club—of being illegible, of desiring this illegibility. But wanting or desiring that legibility upon entrance to the club. "Read me as I want to read," so to speak.

IG I think there's totally a relationship. Yeah, that's the protective strategy. I guess I'm kind of interested and I don't really have, this is not a fully formed thought… being camouflaged on the subway, that's a way of being illegible, a claim of illegibility, or being, being legible as something else. But I'm kind of curious if it's possible to use that… using the anti-camouflage to still play with illegibility.

…

The real me, the core me … my thought is, well, what even is that? Is there such a thing? I think not. We're always a different version of ourselves in so many different spaces. I've done workshops with young people before, with teens, one of the things, a prompt that I have with them thinking about mask making has been: who are you on social media, who are you in your bedroom alone, who are you around your parents, who are you around your friends? Those are different versions of the self. You accentuate different versions of yourself based on what you resonate against.

JoS The multiplicity of identities that we have rather than this notion of some core fixed, essential identity. Queering disrupts that notion of a fixed identity, right? The idea of disrupting that notion of some kind of essential identity that is somehow absolute.

IG Yeah, totally. It's like there isn't just one way to read a work in front of you. You read it based on how it impacts you or what mask you're wearing or something. It could be a mirror for a different mask or something.

Ian Gerson is a trans and queer interdisciplinary artist from Houston, TX. Working at the intersections of sculpture, installation, and community engagement, their recent work investigates climate injustices, trans consciousness, and queer longing. Ian has shared work throughout the US and Mexico including Art League Houston, BOX 13 ArtSpace, Galveston Artist Residency, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, The Bronx Museum, AIR Gallery, and Socrates Sculpture Park. Their work has been supported by grants and residencies including the 2022

Houston Artadia Award, A Studio in the Woods, Galveston Artist Residency, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, MacDowell, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. Ian holds an MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University and a BFA in Studio Art from UT Austin.

Book Review

On the Beauty of Tangoing

Review of *A Somaesthetics of Performative Beauty: Tangoing Desire and Nostalgia* by Falk Heinrich

Leena Rouhiainen

The Routledge Research in Aesthetics series has published a new and original volume that aims to apply the concept of beauty to the first-person experiences of dancing the Argentinian tango. This attempt by Falk Heinrich is novel. Typically, beauty has been considered to be involved in the appreciation of external objects. Therefore, philosophical aesthetics has mostly neglected investigating the aesthetic qualities of one's own movement and action and their potential for beautiful experiences specifically. The detailed analysis that the book offers extends the field of aesthetics, mainly in the areas of everyday aesthetics and somaesthetics, by scrutinizing the performative beauty of kinaesthetic awareness in one's own bodily actions. While taking tango dancing as its case study, the book argues that similar experiences of performative beauty detailed within it also belong to other bodily practices. Thus, this book should interest anyone studying the experiential qualities involved in their own performative bodily practices, as well as scholars working in the areas of dance, theatre, and performance studies, among others.

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce some of the main tenets of the book, which consists of eight chapters, each addressing a different aspect related to the objective of investigating and experiencing the beauty of tangoing. In addition to what is presented below, the book discusses the significance of practice, skill, rhythm, time, and music in tangoing, as well as the history and techniques of Argentinian tango.

In Chapter 1, *Preface and Introduction*, Heinrich criticizes aesthetics of mainly addressing the judgment of beauty of external objects in ways that bring action and movement to a halt, as a way of motivating his approach. He likewise briefly introduces his contemporary view of Argentinian tango as a social and ameliorative somatic practice. He himself is an ardent practitioner of this dance form and convincingly argues that in order to analyze the performative beauty of the experience of dancing tango, he needs to draw on his subjective experiences.

The main analysis begins in Chapter 2, *Preparing the Philosophical Dance Floor*, by arguing for pleasure as an embodied sentiment and the beautiful as both grounded in and transcending practical and theoretical insights. Here, the author draws informatively on insights from Plato, Baumgarten, Kant, and more recent thinkers to detail pleasure as a somatic reaction to beauty. He argues that we should investigate beautiful pleasure more closely. In doing so, he comes to

the conclusion that exploration is part of the process that leads to a beautiful experience. For him, beauty is paradoxically both a prepared and an unpredictable experience that unfolds as an experience of unity. Tango dancers practice their skills, and their intentional preparations work towards an anticipated outcome of pleasurable tangoing. Yet beauty is something that seizes or overcomes the dancer. This second chapter is one of the most cogently written and opens the perspective of the book well.

Chapter 3, *Methodological Dances*, focuses on the somaesthetic and autoethnographic methodology of the investigation. Heinrich notes that in appreciating the interdependence between practical and theoretical analysis, somaesthetics conceives aesthetics from the viewpoint of a practicing and experiencing subject. Correspondingly, the chapter addresses how engaging in social dancing positions Heinrich as an agential part of the event of tangoing without the possibility of adopting a critical distance in observing the phenomenon he is investigating. He discusses the necessity of first-person experience in somatic inquiry by underlining that embodied action includes reflection. He opines that aesthetic experience and aesthetic theory are different forms of observing the complex phenomenon that dancing Argentinian tango is, with its actual movements as well as space, time, and social interactions related performative structures. Heinrich turns to including autoethnographic diary entries on his experiences of dancing tango to account for them in his philosophical analysis. Here, he likewise introduces the notion of post-phenomenology as his main theoretical framework on bodily experiences. He describes this phenomenology as "a miscellaneous field made up of diverse thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Schmitz, proponents of enactivism, such as Nöe, Gallagher, and de Jaegher, and all those who discuss the phenomenological approach to artifacts and actions... with an emphasis on the individual's embedded and embodied being" (p. 63). Of these, it is Schmitz's thinking that is most prominent in the remaining chapters.

Freedom and Poiesis, Chapter 4, discusses the Kantian conception of the purposeless interplay of imagination and perception involved in aesthetic beauty by tying them to current discussions on the embodied nature of perception and cognition. Heinrich argues that "poiesis – making, creating, bringing forth as a result of some kind of agency – is the forgotten or rather sublimated twin of contemplation, and that only the constitutive pair of action and contemplation can empower Kant's free interplay" (p. 80). By combining pragmatic aesthetics with Kantian idealism, he goes on to claim that the interplay between imagination and understanding is not possible without bodily and motional perception, which also gives rise to potential actions. Heinrich points out that "pleasures or displeasures lie in the free interplay of exploration (productive imagination) and sense making (understanding), opening a space of possibility for actions that are not initiated by but folded into further aesthetic exploration" (p. 85). While tango dancers address their partners in intentional and purposeful ways to coordinate their movements, tango dancing is still an improvisatory form that is supported by the postures and dance elements that determine its style. The productive imagination that supports the creative aesthetic of tangoing is embedded in the exchange of energies and the expressed bodily intentions between the dancing partners. These importantly influence the kinaesthetic imagery which produces action possibilities. Heinrich opines that beautiful tangoing is to be found in the experience of the agential fusion of two dancing individuals, which implies that the dancing subjects relinquish their self-contained bodily agency. It is in the unfolding of the sense of being danced and the dancing happening without effort that holds the seed for beautiful pleasure to arise. This, in Heinrich's view, points to the poetic aesthetic involved in dancing tango.

Promises and Grace, Chapter 5, in turn discusses how Argentinian tango involves the promise of potential pleasurable experience and how this relates to the promise that is an integral part of the experience of the beautiful. Here Heinrich addresses the seldom-referred-to conceptions of the beauty and aesthetics of dance by Hogarts and Soriaus and ties them to Schmitz's notions of the felt or living body and vital drive. Heinrich writes that "I claim that only heightened self-awareness can yield aesthetic judgments of one's own movements...Skilfulness increases one's capability to submit to the dance by allowing the soma to create, act and react to relevant stimuli without volition. This creates the possibility of pleasurable self-awareness" (p. 113). He opines that in the effortless moments of dancing, it is the dance that is dancing the subject. At the same time, the dancer has the freedom to observe their dancing as a mindful following of their own dancing. He continues detailing how the soma creates, acts, and reacts through Schmitz's conceptions. The latter offers a phenomenological view through which dancing can be considered an energetic experience that does not differentiate movement from affection and emotion. According to Schmitz, the vital drive transgresses the body's physical limitations and involves the dynamics of contraction and expansion as well as incorporation and excorporation. Schmitz considers the felt body to be more like a fluctuating atmosphere that is brought about by contraction and expansion. In turn, perceived objects are felt as immanent parts of the felt body. This is incorporation. In the opposite, excorporation, the body impacts others and the environment. Heinrich writes that "the skilled dancer trusts their body's agential possibilities by allowing for, first, the felt contraction of incorporating the partner's and the nearby dancers' actions, and second, the expansion of their body by excorporating it into the space and into the partner, so to speak. This dynamicity sustains an immediate, somatic interaction between the dancers. The flow of movement is based upon the interplay between contraction and expansion and between en- and excorporation as the "vital drive" of tango. I experience the mere awareness of the seamless flow of contraction and expansion and of en- and excorporation as beautiful" (p. 122). Heinrich follows Schmitz's thinking according to which in beautiful experiences, there is an alignment by the subject with the beautiful object that becomes part of the experiencer's felt-body. Heinrich opines that beauty is thus a bodily feeling of both blissful expansion and excorporation into and a contraction and incorporation of the perceived. Heinrich thus describes "dancing tango as an interplay of contraction and expansion animating my movements as the result of the interaction between two dancers. Yet the experience of beauty is the awareness of this flow of interplays eliciting enjoyment. This enjoyment makes my Leib more expanded, lighter, as though floating in bliss" (p. 122). However, Heinrich ends this chapter with the note that this kind of beauty can only be a promise as it has already passed when realized. Beautiful experiences cannot be created by will; they are gifts and emerge by grace and surprise. The promise of tango is the promise of the re-emergence of beautiful experience.

Eros and Objectivization, Chapter 6, addresses the sensual and erotic aspects of tango and questions how a theory of performative beauty can integrate carnal and sensory desires. Heinrich turns to look at the terms agency and patiency by anthropologist Gell. He does this to surpass perceptual representation and discuss the experience of transcendence of the agential subject in dancing. Drawing from Sheets-Johnstone, he also introduces the notion of kinaesthetic melodies through which dancers can observe and be aware of their own and others' actions already on a bodily level. On this basis, he continues to argue that in dancing, aesthetic judgments are ongoing micro-regulations of one's own movement in relation to those of others and the environment. As patient, the related aesthetic awareness involves the dancer experientially following unfolding kinaesthetic melodies. As agent, the dancer's aesthetic

judgment either accepts or micro-modulates already initiated melodies. Thus, the somaesthetic awareness that Heinrich discusses is not merely passive observation but always already agency. He writes: "Expressed in the language of eros, dancing tango is a free interplay between desiring to move (with) the partner and being desired by being moved by the partner" (p.144–145). He further adds that: "Beautiful experiences are moments of somatic awareness of being moved: to be aware of oneself by being out of oneself is pleasurably erotic and life affirming" (p. 157).

Selections and Unity (Sensus Communis), Chapter 7, sums up the findings of the previous chapters, underlines the social aspects of tangoing, and aims to substantiate how somatic understanding lies at the root of common sense. Here Heinrich discusses Argentinian tango as a secular interaction ritual, in which the awareness of others through the interaction between dancing couples builds a transient experience of performative unity, *communitas*. He brings his insights to a conclusion by, among other things, noting that: "Performative sensus communis is not an empathic or anticipated aesthetic judgment but a feeling of unity created through selections by the members of the communitas. The awareness of the interplay between the dancing agent (the dancing couple I am a part of) and the community of all dancing agents contributes to my experience of the beautiful because the interplay creates a unity supporting the continuation of the milonga (*communitas*)" (p. 179).

Heinrich's is a rich and detailed analysis of tangoing that offers novel insight into the aesthetics of the beautiful. Despite its quite precise argumentation, what makes the book somewhat challenging is its eclectic theoretical framing that draws from classical Greek philosophy, idealism, pragmatism, phenomenology, enactivism, somaesthetics, new materialism, anthropology, and ethnography without much critical discussion on their relationships. This choice is obviously motivated by the aesthetic features that Heinrich considers relevant for clarifying the performative beauty of tangoing. The use of the author's autoethnographic diary entries to evidence and concretize the experiential qualities of tango dancing could have been expanded on and potentially offered clearer rationale for the eclectically framed conceptual analysis. The descriptions of dancing tango remain somewhat general and even repetitious. This continues until the final chapter, an informatively written appendix describing the main features of Argentinian tango in ways that support the insights and conclusions made in the previous chapters. Additionally, the volume only narrowly utilizes the potential phenomenology has to offer in relation to experiencing one's own body and engaging in bodily interaction with others. Contrary to Heinrich's views, several prominent phenomenologists detail intersubjective bodily interaction. Additionally, phenomenologically informed dance studies, where the lived moment of dancing has been actively discussed for several decades, could have supported and strengthened Heinrich's arguments. Against his claim that dance studies mainly focus on dance through external observation, in phenomenological dance studies, dancing has been analyzed as a form of thinking in movement, an experience of oneness, or that of being moved, for example. The writings of such authors as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Susan Fraleigh Horton, Jaana Parviainen, Philippa Rothfield, Susan Kozel, and myself could have offered better insight into how to utilize subjective and embodied experience as a basis for philosophical inquiry.

RELATE (Research Laboratory for Art and Technology), Aalborg University
Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Denmark

ISSN: 2246-8498